

# ***A Review of Research on the Role of Translation in Second Language Acquisition***

**Xin Huang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

*<sup>1</sup>Institute of European Languages and Culture, Zhejiang International Studies University,  
Hangzhou, Zhejiang, 310023, China*

*a. 21020202017@st.zisu.edu.cn*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** The central aim of this review is to explore the significance of translation within the process of acquiring a second language. This will be achieved by examining existing relevant research. The findings suggest that incorporating translation can result in favorable outcomes, enhancing vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and writing proficiency among second language learners. However, it's important to recognize that an overreliance on translation might hinder the overall learning journey of second language learners. Therefore, it's crucial for learners of a second language (L2) to thoughtfully assess the advantages and disadvantages of incorporating translation as a learning strategy in a foreign language. Furthermore, they should determine the suitable contexts in which this approach is appropriate, utilizing it with prudence and careful consideration. Similarly, educators should exercise prudent judgement and offer suitable guidance in their teaching methods, aiming to expedite students' mastery of the foreign language in a more efficient and effective manner.

**Keywords:** translation, second language acquisition, first language

## **1. Introduction**

Acquiring a second language is an intricate and multifaceted procedure influenced by various elements like individual distinctions, exposure to the target language, and instructional approaches. Furthermore, the utilization of translation as an educational aid has long sparked debates among educators and researchers. Some contend that it fosters excessive reliance on translation. Conversely, advocates of translation underscore its significance in bolstering vocabulary acquisition, grasping reading comprehension, and fostering writing proficiency.

Through a synthesis of prevailing scholarly works from figures like Guy Cook, Christiane Nord, and David Atkinson, and guided by Functional Translation Theory, Translation as a Transitional Tool Theory, and Interactional Theory (the latter two theories derived from a consolidation of existing literature), this literature review aspires to delve into the role of translation in the process of acquiring a second language. Moreover, it seeks to provide insights into the effective amalgamation of translation into classroom practices.

## **2. Theoretical Perspectives**

### **2.1. Functional Translation Theory**

In the late 1970s, certain German translators pioneered the introduction of functionalist approaches to translation in Germany [1]. The development of this approach can be roughly divided into four stages, marked by pivotal theories including Kantharina Reiss's functional classification for translation critique, Hans Vermeer's skopos-theorie and its extensions, Justa Holz-Mantari's theory of translation action, and Christiane Nord's fusion of function and loyalty [2].

According to this framework, translation is regarded as a "purposeful activity" [3]. The process of translation engages a proficient practitioner in the domain of intercultural communication, recognized as the translator, who takes on the role of a content originator with the intent of fulfilling a specific communicative objective. Communication transpires through a medium and within contexts that are temporally and spatially confined. The characteristics and manner of human interaction are contingent upon the distinct circumstances of each situation and can be altered through interpersonal exchanges. Situations are not universally uniform, but rather are influenced by the cultural backdrop within which they emerge, thus shaping the context [4].

In the realm of second language acquisition, learners are required to grasp how to engage in communication across diverse cultural settings and comprehend the cultural distinctions inherent in various languages. Translation serves as a means to facilitate this, as underscored by the Functional Translation Theory. This theory accentuates that translation entails more than just linguistic conversion; it extends to encompass cross-cultural communication. Moreover, the Functional Translation Theory can be employed to elucidate learners' inherent translation tendencies during the language acquisition process. This lays a foundation for the subsequent discussion of the Translation as a Transitional Tool Theory.

### **2.2. Translation as a Transitional Tool Theory**

Numerous scholars propose that translation can serve as a facilitative mechanism in the transition from the first language (L1) to the second language (L2) within the realm of second language acquisition. Angeles Carreres and Guy Cook, among others, contend that learners can employ their native language as an intermediary to aid in comprehending the semantic nuances of the target language during the learning process. More precisely, translation can be conceptualized as a mode of linguistic mediation, encompassing a spectrum of interlinguistic actions that entail the conveyance of meaning from one linguistic realm to another [5]. The role of translation in the process of language acquisition bears substantial significance, contributing to the cultivation of language consciousness and proficiency. Recognized for its pedagogical efficacy and educational desirability, translation aligns with the requirements of students in the current globalized and culturally diverse society [6]. It functions as a viable platform for students to not only learn a secondary language, or potentially multiple languages, but also to discern the cultural disparities between L1 and L2. This approach allows learners to enhance their grasp of L2 by juxtaposing the structural, syntactic, grammatical, and characteristic facets of L1 and L2.

### **2.3. Interactional Theory**

In his 1987 publication, David Atkinson delves into the prospective merits of translation as a vehicle for classroom interactivity [7]. The author underscores the potential advantages of incorporating translation as a tool to amplify students' comprehension and adeptness in the target language within the confines of the classroom milieu. Translation can function as a valuable interactive instrument, fostering active engagement among learners during dialogues and

communication sessions involving both the educator and peers. Moreover, advocating the practice of swiftly conducting mental translations of essays or completing fill-in-the-blank exercises to verify the absence of logical inconsistencies in both languages adds another layer of utility to translation in educational settings [7].

### **3. Empirical Research**

#### **3.1. Vocabulary Acquisition**

Translation functions as a conduit, aiding learners in expanding their lexical repertoire by aligning words familiar in their mother tongue with their equivalents in the target language. Drawing from the research conducted by Peter Prince, this study centered on comparing context-based learning with translation-based learning in acquiring second language vocabulary. The participant pool comprised 48 students registered at the University of Montpellier, undergoing English studies spanning five to eight years. English constituted a mandatory component of their university curriculum. The study encompassed the administration of a vocabulary list followed by subsequent testing. The study's findings underscored that participants mastering the second language exhibited a greater propensity to retain words when exposed to the translation approach, in contrast to the contextual approach [8]. Evidently, this underscores how translation empowers learners to effectively garner and commit vocabulary to memory within the target language.

#### **3.2. Reading Comprehension**

Comprehending second language texts presents a multifaceted undertaking, requiring learners to grasp sentence structures, discern vocabulary nuances, ascertain chapter coherence, and navigate various intricacies. Through the avenue of translation, learners can unravel the essence of the original text with the assistance of their native language, thereby fostering an enhanced comprehension of the material. Richard G. Kern conducted an investigation involving fifty-one intermediate-level French students, meticulously categorized into high, middle, and low proficiency groups. This inquiry aimed to dissect the participants' reading processes through think-aloud interviews as they engaged with French texts [9]. Foremost among translation's practical advantages, as gleaned from participant remarks, is its capacity to underpin meaning comprehension and facilitate the amalgamation of fragmented information that would otherwise be conveyed in a secondary language. Furthermore, it could be contended that when students engage in a profound analysis of the significance of a second language text during reading, they are likely to exhibit elevated levels of memory retention in their primary language, regardless of the challenges they encounter in producing the secondary language [9].

Additionally, a study by Nada Bin Dahmash delved into the utilization of Google Translate software by second language learners. The researcher employed qualitative research methodology, orchestrating focus group interviews and semi-structured discussions with a cohort of 23 students from King Saud University. The study's findings illuminated that the application of Google Translate by English language learners streamlined their grasp of unfamiliar vocabulary, consequently augmenting their proficiency in reading [10].

#### **3.3. Writing Development**

Previous studies have underscored the merits linked to possessing elevated writing competence in one's native language, as it positively impacts the caliber of compositions crafted in a secondary language [11]. In a study conducted by Hiroe Kobayashi and Carol Rinnert, an analysis was undertaken on the English essays authored by 48 university students hailing from Hiroshima

University in Japan. These students had undergone a minimum of six years of English language study. The researchers sought to juxtapose the disparities between two distinct writing methodologies: first, drafting in Japanese and subsequently translating it into English, and second, directly composing in English. By subjecting the test outcomes to statistical scrutiny, it was ascertained that, on the whole, the translated written pieces garnered superior ratings compared to those composed directly in English.

Furthermore, the investigation unveiled that students at lower proficiency tiers would extract greater advantages from the approach of translated writing. The study posits a positive correlation between the extent of competence and the efficacy of this intervention. Specifically, it indicates that students possessing lower levels of proficiency stand to gain amplified benefits from the intervention [12]. Leveraging the first language offers numerous students the opportunity to delve deeply into subjects at their individual cognitive and intellectual capacities. Particularly, individuals endowed with limited proficiency in their secondary language may accrue benefits from partaking in the process of generating and scrutinizing ideas within their primary language. This is especially pertinent during the preliminary phases of pre-writing and planning when comprehending meaning through composing in the secondary language may be challenging [12]. Thus, the role of translation in second language acquisition assumes significance in augmenting learners' proficiency in writing in their secondary language.

### **3.4. L2 Learner's Over-reliance on Translation**

Despite the manifold advantages of employing translation as an educational aid, the overreliance of second language (L2) learners on translation in subsequent stages hinders the authentic acquisition of the target language. In a study undertaken by Hiroe Kobayashi and Carol Rinnert, encompassing a cohort of 48 university students participating in English writing, it was observed that an undue reliance on the native language could impede the proficiency of L2 learners in composing in the secondary language. Furthermore, a subsequent survey administered to advanced-level students unveiled that around 76% of them generally perceived their original writing to outperform their translated compositions [12]. Additionally, researchers deduced a positive correlation between the inclination of higher-proficiency students to generate more awkward structures and transitional difficulties in their translated renditions, alongside an augmentation in syntactic intricacy [12]. Hence, for higher-proficiency learners, the employment of translation as an intermediary tool in mastering a second foreign language may impede the genuine acquisition of the language. An excessive reliance on translation may lead learners to miss out on direct interaction with the target language during input exposure, consequently curtailing their language acquisition.

## **4. Conclusions**

In summation, the role of translation in the acquisition of a second language remains a subject of widespread contention. Nonetheless, a thorough examination of existing scholarly works has underscored the significance of translation in bolstering vocabulary acquisition, bolstering reading comprehension, and enhancing writing skills in a secondary language. It serves as a potent transitional mechanism facilitating L2 learners in bridging the gap between their native and target languages. Moreover, it acts as a dynamic interactive tool fostering communication within the second language learning environment. However, this dual-edged aspect warrants consideration, given that L2 learners may potentially over-rely on translation, potentially impeding their familiarity with the secondary language to an extent that complete acquisition becomes challenging. Thus, it is anticipated that in the future, educators will strike a more harmonious balance by

intertwining translation with alternative pedagogical approaches. This endeavor aims to leverage the merits of translation while diminishing the dependency of L2 learners on this tool.

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