The Effect of Individual Differences on Iranian Learners’ Translation Strategy Use in EFL Learning

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Abstract
The present experimental study aimed to explore learners' attitudes towards using translation strategies and the effect of two variables of individual differences, risk taking and tolerance of ambiguity, on translation strategy use. The participants of the study were 120 EFL learners homogenized through Oxford Placement Test. They received three questionnaires of translation strategy use, risk-taking and ambiguity tolerance. All questionnaires were in Likert-scale and their internal consistency was calculated using Cronbach's alpha. By analysis of Chi-square (goodness of fit), the attitudes

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of learners towards using translation strategies were measured. In order to determine the effect of risk taking and ambiguity tolerance on translation strategy use, two independent samples t-test were run. The findings show that participants had positive attitude toward using translation strategies. The results also show negative effect of risk-taking on translation strategy use. In other words, risk-averse learners were found to use translation strategies more than risk-takers. Findings of the study on the effect of ambiguity tolerance on translation strategy use show that this individual characteristic had no effect on learner's translation strategy use in EFL learning.

**Key Words:** Translation Strategy, Risk-takers, Risk-averse Learners, Tolerance for Ambiguity.

1. Introduction

Controversy still surrounds the use of translation in EFL learning. Some language teachers conceive it as a way to improve learners’ comprehension and learning, while others prohibit the use of translation strategies in the class. The former group bases their argument on the findings that show translation is employed as a regularly used cognitive strategy (11.3%, as reported by Omalley et al. 1985), as an effective tool in learning vocabulary (Prince ,1996) and as a beneficial help in essay writing (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992). What these researchers believe is that strategic learners can make intelligent use of their L1 skills to learn a new language (Liao, 2006). The latter group argues that by thinking in the target language students are more likely to become fluent and accurate in the language they are acquiring and that direct use of L2 may block interference from their L1. However, such an assumption appears to lack empirical support (Liao, 2006).

Although numbers of scholars have considered using translation in language teaching, very little attention has been specifically given to student perspectives and their individual differences, that is,
students’ use of translation as a learning strategy and effects of learners’ characteristics such as risk-taking and ambiguity tolerance on the situation. EFL learners and teachers have different perspectives toward translation and its use in teaching and learning activities. While most teachers ignore the role of translation in EFL learning, learners insist on using translation in their learning (Marti Viano & Orquin 1982).

Therefore, a gap seems noticeable between what teachers perceive as important and what learners consider to be helpful for their teaching and learning activities. It appears that learners very often use translation as a learning strategy to comprehend, remember, and produce a foreign language.

Although some studies carried out on the effect of individual characteristics on the process of translation (Reiss, 2000; Müller, 2007), there have been no comprehensive research study on the effect of individual differences on translation use as a cognitive strategy, specifically in learning situations. Each group of learners may use different learning strategies based on the degree of risk taking and ambiguity tolerance. Investigation of the issue may reveal if there is any effect of these individual differences on EFL learners’ translation strategy use and show which group of learners with specific individual characteristics has the positive or negative attitude towards using translation strategies.

Ambiguity tolerance, as one of the individual differences, is defined as perception of inadequate information to clearly understand stimuli that means a range of reactions which extends along a continuum from total agreement to total disagreement (McLain, 1993). As McLain states, the common feature of any ambiguous stimulus is a lack of information, which makes stimuli be perceived as new and unfamiliar, unpredictable, and too complex to understand. Ambiguous situations are common in language learning situations. This is simply because both linguistic input and cultural knowledge are very likely to
represent one of the ambiguous situations. For example, in the simplest sense when students encounter new lexical and grammatical structures, they often face shortage or even lack of information, multiple meanings, vagueness, and so on (Grace, 1998). Apart from linguistic forms and text structures, which students are supposed to tackle for successful comprehension of texts, they often have to carry on with their incomplete background knowledge (Alderson, 2000) and compensate for the lack of essential elements to complete the task of comprehension (Grabe & Stoller, 2002).

Furthermore, people from different cultural backgrounds bring different outlooks and habits to the language learning environment, which entails establishing shared meanings. Making sense of different cultural standards can also cause ambiguity (Lustig & Koester, 1993), and increase the cognitive load of learning which may negatively influence reading comprehension which can be considered as a negative effect of ambiguity tolerance on reading skill (Alptekin, 2006).

Ambiguity tolerance has been found effective in foreign language learning in many research studies. Ehrman and Oxford (1990) as well as Nishimo (2007) found the effect of high ambiguity tolerance on the preference for guessing from context. Lori (1990) found that ambiguity tolerance correlated significantly with English achievement, Arabic achievement, self concept, and overall school achievement. The results also showed that tolerance of ambiguity correlated significantly low with attitudes toward learning English as a foreign language. Tolerance of ambiguity has also been shown to be related to achievement in listening comprehension and imitation tasks (Naiman et. al.1978) and reading comprehension (El-Koumy, 2000; Kondo-Brown, 2006 Lori, 1990). Kondo- brown (2006) identified avoidance of ambiguity as a factor in her search for affective variables in reading ability. Correlational analysis revealed a close relationship between ‘ambiguity tolerance and intrinsic motivation. She stated, “Only those with higher intrinsic orientation are more likely to work
at reading Japanese. These students are also more likely to be tolerant of ambiguity in learning Japanese and adopt analytical approaches in studying kanji “(p.63). This was somehow in line with what Chapelle (1983) described as longer endurance on tasks when students had higher levels of ambiguity tolerance.

Risk-taking, another variable of individual differences, is defined as eagerness to try something novel and different without putting the primary focus on success or failure regardless of embarrassment in learning (Brown, 2001). Because of a strong intention of achieving success on learning, language learners are willing to absorb new knowledge from their teacher. The easiest way to interact with teachers is to take the risk. Although it may be too awkward to make a mistake, a good learner should require this trait to succeed in second language acquisition. Brown further intends that “interaction requires the risk of failing to produce intended meaning, of failing to interpret intended meaning, of being laughed at, of being shunned or rejected. The rewards, of course, are great and worth the risks” (p.11). In other words, risk-taking is a crucial interactive process to learn a language in the ESL/EFL classroom.

Hofstede (1997) conducted comprehensive studies on the effect of cultural dimension in many countries. He reported:

Iran's highest ranking of Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) indicates the society’s low level of tolerance for uncertainty. In an effort to minimize or reduce this level of uncertainty, strict rules, laws, policies, and regulations are adopted and implemented. The ultimate goal of this population is to control everything in order to eliminate or avoid the unexpected. As a result of this high Uncertainty Avoidance characteristic, the society does not readily accept change and is very risk adverse.(para.4)

Risk taking has been shown to be related to class proficiency and class participation (Ely, 1989). Risk-taking learners participate more in the classroom, and, consequently, they may increase their language
proficiency, especially if it is considered that language proficiency appears to increase remarkably by more use of the language.

Skehan (1989) noticed that within the TESOL field, risk-taking has been seen, in situations that involved social interaction, as likely to increase opportunities to hear language and obtain participation. Risk-takers were not afraid to get involved in any kind of interaction with others, to speak language, and use output and engage in functional practice because they preferred what they wanted to say without worrying about the small details or errors. A risk-taker is more likely to be the one who takes his existing language system to the limit. Such a learner is more likely to change and more resistant to fossilization.

Considering the importance of translation strategy in any language learning situation and the effect of individual differences on various components of second language learning, this study aimed at investigating learners’ translation strategy use in order to see whether learners had positive or negative attitudes toward using translation in their EFL learning. Also two variables of individual differences were studied under the question of whether they had any effect on learners’ strategy use or not. In this study learners’ degree of ambiguity tolerance and risk-taking were measured, and their effects on translation strategy use were investigated. In other words, the study sought to see whether groups of risk-takers and risk-averse learners along with those with high and low tolerance for ambiguity had different attitudes towards using translation strategies or not.

The present study attempted to provide plausible answers to the following questions:
1. Do EFL learners make use of translation strategies in learning English?
2. Does risk-taking have any effect on learner’s Translation strategy use?
3. Does ambiguity tolerance have any effect on learner’s Translation strategy use?
2. Methodology

2.1. Participants
The participants of the study were 120 Iranian learners of English, whose age ranged from 15 to 25 years with the average of 22.4 years, and, who were studying at intermediate level in 4 classes. Intermediate classes were chosen to focus on learners at their mid level of English proficiency to be more representative of learners who are moderately proficient in their English skills. They were homogenized through an Oxford Placement Test (OPT) by selecting those whose scores on the test were one SD\(^1\) above and one SD below the mean. Males and females were equally represented; none of them had any experience of being in English speaking countries. Participants had not been exposed to the target questionnaires and none of them had any experience of translation professionally or academically. Brief instruction was given exactly before the questionnaires were given to participants.

2.2. Instruments
This study involved four sets of tests concerning risk-taking, ambiguity tolerance and translation strategy use as well as an OPT. First, OPT was used in order to homogenize learners based on their English language skill. In order to measure two variables of individual differences, two sets of questionnaires, one for measuring ambiguity tolerance and the other for measuring risk taking of learners, were used. Test of tolerance for ambiguity developed by McLain (1993) contained 22 items. Test of risk-taking which contained 26 items was developed by the Education and Training Organization of Iran, Counseling and Psychological Center. For strategy use measurement, the Inventory for Translation as a Learning Strategy (ITLS\(^2\)) which contained 28 items was used (Liao, 2006). All of the Questionnaires were translated to Persian in order to help all students

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1. Standard Deviation
2. Inventory for Translation as a Learning Strategy
read and answer the tests adequately. All questionnaires were in Likert scale. The internal consistency of all questionnaires was calculated using Chronbach’s alpha by the SPSS \(^1\)version 17 and validity of the questionnaires was determined by experts. Reliability of all tests was ranged from 0.83 to 0.88.

2.3. Procedures

The experimental research was conducted in Gooyesh English language institute in Tehran. There were 4 classes at intermediate level, all of which were selected with the total number of 120 students. The participants were homogenized through OPT with one SD above and below the mean. The instruction and the time for answering each test were clarified, and then the three sets of tests of ambiguity tolerance, risk-taking and translation strategy use were given to them. Beforehand, a pilot study was conducted in order to learn about the clarity of instructions and questions, and effectiveness of data gathering and procedures. Participants were divided into two groups of risk-taker and risk-averse based on the criteria score designed by the test developer, which made those with scores higher than 100 to be risk-takers and those with scores below 70 to be risk-averse learners. For the last research question, the same population was divided into two groups with high and low ambiguity tolerance based on the criteria of scores one SD above and below the mean. In other words, it was decided to exclude participants whose scores were between one SD above and below the mean. In this study, data gathered from four sets of questionnaires was analyzed by means of two quantitative analyses, chi-square and independent samples \(t\)-test. Chi-square (goodness of fit) was used in order to examine the first research question, which investigated learners’ translation strategy use. Independent samples \(t\)-test was used to examine the second and third

\(^1\)Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
research questions, which addressed the effect of risk-taking and ambiguity tolerance on learners’ translation strategy use.

3. Results

Table 1 shows the frequency of responses at each level started from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Observed and Expected Frequency in Translation Strategy Use</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observed N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the analysis of translation strategy use, frequency of each scale was measured. As shown in Table 1, about 40 percent of response levels were chosen agree by the participants. Forty-seven percent of responses shows positive attitude of learners toward translation in both scales 4 and 5 totally.

Chi-square was performed to investigate the differences of participant choices of each level response regarding their translation strategy use in order to address the first research question.
Table 2: Chi-Square-Test Statistics of Translation Belief

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Scores translation belief For chi-square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chi-Square</td>
<td>1652.842a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Df</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asymp. Sig.</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 2 shows, analysis of Chi-square (goodness of fit) indicates that the difference between response levels at level response 4 (agree) is significant, $\chi^2 (4, n=2128) = 1044.105, p = .000$.

To examine the second research question, participants were divided into two groups of risk-taker and risk-averse based on the criterion presented before. Descriptive group statistics were measured. Table 3 shows the mean differences for risk-taker and risk-averse groups.

Table 3: Translation Strategy Use in Risk-Taker and Risk-Averse Group Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Translation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy Risk-avere</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>121.17</td>
<td>18.525</td>
<td>3.382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Takers</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>84.50</td>
<td>24.376</td>
<td>4.450</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the results in Table 2 show, risk-averse learners have a higher mean than risk-takers. The independent samples $t$-test reveals the difference between groups of risk-takers and risk-averse learners is significant, $t (58) = 6.56, p = .000$.

In order to examine the third research question, participants were divided into two groups with high and low ambiguity tolerance. Table 4 shows the mean differences for high and low ambiguity tolerance groups.
Table 4: Translation Strategy Use in High and Low Ambiguity Tolerance Learners Group Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group ambiguity tolerance</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Ambiguity Tolerance</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>110.47</td>
<td>27.286</td>
<td>7.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High ambiguity Tolerance</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>109.27</td>
<td>24.458</td>
<td>6.315</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The mean score of low ambiguity tolerance group, which is 110, is slightly higher than that of high ambiguity tolerance group, which is 109, as shown in Table 3. An independent-samples $t$-test was carried out using the scores of ambiguity tolerance and translation strategy use. The independent samples $t$-test reveals the difference is not significant, $t(28) = .127, p = .900$.

4. Discussion

The result of learners’ translation strategy use indicated that learners were in favor of using translation strategies in their second language learning. This finding is contrary to that of Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992), which reported that 77% of Japanese learners in the study tended to think in English when writing and use direct composition writing from English, rather than transfer from Japanese into English. Also the result of the study is contrary to Huang and Tzeng’s (2000), which showed that only 11% of advanced English proficiency learners used translation as a learning strategy to improve their reading skills. However, their study was conducted with advanced learners, and it may have reported different results if less proficient learners were chosen to study. Medium use of translation was also reported by Liao (2006) in his descriptive analysis of learners’ tendency to use translation strategies. In spite the mentioned studies, learners still show the tendency to use translation strategies either
implicitly or explicitly. Therefore, this issue should be considered more seriously. In spite of the fact that CLT considers to be the dominant approach against GTM, the attitudes of learners shows to be in favor of using translation strategy in EFL learning.

Analysis of the data for the effect of risk-taking and ambiguity tolerance on learners’ translation strategy use confirmed that only risk-taking had an effect on learners’ translation strategy use. This indicates that high risk-takers used translation strategies less than risk-averse learners. If we assume risk-takers as being eager to try out new information intelligently regardless of embarrassment in linguistics (Brown, 2001), we can consider risk-takers as a type of learners who are willing to learn and use target language without transferring it into their mother tongue for the sake of embarrassments or complexities involved. On the other hand, risk-averse learners mostly avoid uncertain situations and try to re-check their learning with their mother tongue even if it takes more time and effort; as a result, they might use translation to compensate their uncertainties.

The study showed there was no difference between those with high and those with low ambiguity tolerance in their translation strategy use. Those with low tolerance for ambiguity are expected to be in favor of using translation in their EFL learning because they consider English as a novel and unfamiliar context compared with their mother tongue; conversely, students with high ambiguity tolerance are expected to feel more comfortable with learning a new language without mediation of L1 (Ely, 1995). Although the significant effect of ambiguity tolerance on learners’ translation strategy use was rejected, it does not mean that ambiguity tolerance has no effect on other aspects of EFL learning. For instance, Chapelle’s (1983) study indicated that an individual's ambiguity tolerance was related to his progress in some aspects of L2 learning. Naiman et. al. (1978) and Lori (1990), also, identified a positive relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and English achievement. Furthermore, the effect of ambiguity tolerance on guessing from
context was shown by Ehrman and Oxford (1990). Nishimo (2007) reported a similar effect of ambiguity tolerance on the use of dictionary in extensive reading. In the same line, Kondo-Brown (2006) reported a close relationship between ambiguity tolerance and intrinsic motivation as affective variables in reading ability. In sum, effect of ambiguity tolerance seems better to be investigated in relation to a the variety of learning strategies and personality traits in order to have a better understanding of the effect of this trait on major learning strategies.

Investigating the effectiveness of Risk-taking and ambiguity tolerance in learners’ translation strategy use might give the impression that some personality factors are effective in using strategies and some are not. The present study shows learners’ strategy use is highly affected by their degree of risk-taking which shows some variables of individual characteristics are extremely effective on some of the strategies used by learners. Translation strategy can be used frequently in the class by the learners without the teacher’s knowledge. If the teachers know about the diversity of personality factors and their effect on the use of different learning strategies, they could shape their teaching approach in a way to be more collaborative to learners’ needs.

5. Conclusions
The study indicated that EFL learners made use of translation strategies in learning English. Also, the study reported that risk-taking affected translation strategy use significantly in the way that risk-averse learners used translation strategies more than risk-takers. Analysis of the data on the effect of ambiguity tolerance on translation strategy use indicated that ambiguity tolerance had no effect on learners’ translation strategy use. As a result, the study reported one variable to be significantly effective in translation strategy use, whereas it reported the other variable of individual differences not to be effective.
An important next step in this research agenda is to increase the
size of the population under study or to investigate different regions of
the country in order to have a better picture of learners’ translation
strategies and the effect of risk-taking and ambiguity tolerance on them.
Another future step might be to increase the number of individual
differences under study. It would have given us a better image of the
effect of individual differences on learners’ translation strategy use if we
had addressed more variables of individual differences in a way to create
a whole picture of personality traits of the learners.

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