



Jordanian EFL Students' Strategies in Translating English Proverbs

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Abstract

Translating proverbs has its special problems and many scholars agree that the best translation is giving a target language proverb which has the same figurative interpretation as the source language one. The present paper aims at investigating how successful Jordanian students of English as a foreign language (henceforth, EFL) are in translating English proverbs into Arabic. Moreover, it also attempts to find out if gender or university major has an effect on their performance. The subjects were 163 students, both male and female. They were either English Language and Literature majors or Translation majors. The research instrument was a test in which the subjects were asked to translate twenty English proverbs. Findings of the study showed that both Translation students and English Language and Literature students performed well in translating proverbs. The main strategy used among subjects was translating a source language proverb into a target language proverb. Both females and males showed comparable results though females did a little better. And the difference in the academic major had no significant effect on their translation since the two groups performed equally well. The paper concludes that the subjects' success in translating a proverb into a proverb is an indication that learners of English realize that this is the best translation strategy in the case of proverbs. It recommends that EFL teachers and curriculum planners should draw learners' attention to Arabic proverbs corresponding to English ones as part of the teaching process.

Keywords: proverbs, translation strategies, English-Arabic translation, EFL, Jordanian university students.

Introduction

Before going into the central issue of our discussion, a word on the nature of proverbs is in order. Though proverbs constitute an essential part of the repertoire of speakers of any language, their definition remains a source of dispute among scholars whether they be linguists, anthropologists, folklore experts, etc. Dabaghi *et al* (2010: 807) are of a similar opinion and agree that "the definition of a proverb has caused scholars from different disciplines much chagrin over the centuries... from Aristotle to the present time". Nevertheless, many of these scholars agree that proverbs are short linguistic expressions of public wisdom known by many native speakers and used in types of situations where they do not necessarily fit the literal linguistic context they are used in. Their interpretation is not literal but is a matter of social agreement (Ntshinga 1999) and, therefore, this interpretation is usually described as figurative (Nida 1990:151). Norrick (1985:1) calls this socially accepted meaning "standard proverbial interpretation (SPI)", which is not different from saying that the interpretation is not literal. The SPI of the following proverbial expressions from English, German and French (cited in Baker 1992:68-9) is the same although the literal meaning involves carrying coal in the English version, owls in the German version and water in French together with the appropriate, different objects associated with the different contexts:

1. a. To carry coals to Newcastle.
- b. Eulen nach Athen tragen ('To carry owls to Athens')
- c. Porter de l'eau a la riviere ('To carry water to the river.')

The present authors can add the Arabic proverb in (1.d) used in Jordan and Palestine which involves grapes in the context of a Palestinian town famous for producing grapes:

1. d. yibii' il-'inab 'a-hil HalHul
to-sell the-grapes to-people Halhoul
'To sell grapes to the people of Halhoul.'

Speakers and writers alike 'decorate' their texts with proverbs in the same way they use idioms, clichés, and other fixed expressions. Proverbs, being part of traditional statements seem to represent traditional wisdom and as such they save their users the need to defend their position since these proverbs carry the weight of that tradition (El-Yasin and Al-Shehabat 2005: 162).

Proverbs in EFL classes

This study seeks to shed light on the importance of proverbs in classes of English as a Foreign Language (henceforth, EFL). Proverbs deserve special attention (see Mieder 2004: 9) because, as fixed expressions, whose learning as whole chunks makes them similar to single lexical items, idioms and collocations, they comprise an important part of the vocabulary of any language (Akbarian 2010: 222). Moreover, not only the full form of a proverb is important to learn, but the use of part of a proverb is also of special interest especially that truncated proverbs are very common in people's speech (El-Yasin and Al-Shehabat 2005:162) and should therefore be incorporated in a good curriculum (Can 2011: 163). Without mastering these expressions, then, a learner lacks in his competence (Gozpinar, 2014: 616); learning them "is helpful in expressing oneself by using figurative language," as Litovkina puts it (cited in Hanzén 2007: 9). With such considerations in mind, one should think that no properly designed EFL course can afford to ignore proverbs.

The use of translation in the present study is justified by the fact that it is the standard interpretation of a proverb that carries the communicative load and, therefore, the literal meaning and the grammatical structure become less important than the communicative import. This is in line with what Ababneh (in press) found about Jordanian EFL teachers when she stated:

The method most used [...] in teaching proverbs was giving the Arabic equivalent. This sounds normal since the emphasis in teaching is on communicative competence of learners which can be enhanced by relating to their previous experience embodied in their knowledge of their native culture.

Asking EFL students to translate helps to assess the extent of their knowledge of English proverbs in addition to their strategies of translation which is an indication of their proficiency in English. Such assessment is certainly vital in planning this component of their EFL classes.

This paper is an attempt at finding the extent to which Jordanian students succeed in translating English proverbs into Arabic, their mother tongue, and identifying their strategies in doing these translations. Moreover, the sex of the subject and their university major will be checked as to whether they have any effect on their performance.

The Study

The subjects of the study were purposefully chosen from the students registered in the Summer Semester of the Academic Year 2014/2015 in three different advanced courses given at the Department of English Language and Literature and the Department of Translation at Yarmouk University. The mother tongue of all the subjects was Arabic.

The sample consisted of 163 students: 93 English Language and Literature majors and 70 Translation majors. Of these students 28 were male and 135 female as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Subjects' major and gender

	English Majors	Translation Majors	Total
Males	12	16	28
Females	81	54	135
Total	93	70	163

The main instrument of the study was a test of translation in which the students were asked to translate 20 English proverbs into Arabic in half an hour. Translating from Arabic into English would have been much more difficult for these native speakers of Arabic and would have been so full of mistakes that they would make no sense; they would not have given enough data to discuss. Probably only experienced, professional translators could be asked to translate in the opposite direction, that is, from mother tongue to foreign language. But the performance of those translators would be outside the scope of our paper.

The subjects were told that the purpose of the test was to find out how much they knew in the field of proverbs and that their performance would remain confidential like any class test would be. They were asked to give their names to enable their instructor to reward those who perform well by giving extra credit in evaluating their class participation. This was hoped to encourage them to take the test more seriously.

The material for the test was based on the proverb appendix of Ba'albaki's English-Arabic dictionary, *Al-Mawrid*, (1999) which gives the English proverbs together with their Arabic equivalents when these equivalents exist. Two proverbs in two different languages were considered equivalent for the purposes of the present work if they were used in similar situations regardless of their literal interpretations, i.e. the proverb's SPI was the criterion for determining equivalence. All the English proverbs included in the test had Arabic equivalents which were used as guidelines in our correction process.

The papers were corrected to find out answers to the questions of the study, namely, (i) To what extent are Jordanian EFL students able to translate English proverbs to Arabic correctly? (ii) What strategies do they use in their translation of these proverbs? (iii) Are there any significant differences between students' translating proverbs that could be attributed to the difference in their university academic major (English Language and Literature vs. Translation)? and (iv) Are there any significant differences between students' proverbs translating that could be attributed to the difference in their gender (male or female)?

The researchers classified the outcome of the different translation strategies used by the subjects into five categories: Correct, Minor Modification, Translating Meaning, Literal Translation, and Wrong Translation. Based on research in the field, it is assumed that translating a source language (SL) proverb into a target language (TL) proverb with the same SPI is the best a translator can do (Dabaghi *et al* 2010:813). Therefore, the first strategy in which the subjects gave an Arabic proverb with the same SPI as the English one was considered "Correct" and was given one full point. The second category comprised those translations which gave a proverb but with minor modification in the Arabic form. This was given half a point. So (2.a) was given one point as a translation of (2.b) and (3.a) was given half a point as a translation of (3.b).

2. a. maa (laysa) kullu maa yalma'u ðahaban

not (not) all that glitter gold

'Not all that glitters is gold.'

b. 'All is not gold that glitters.'

3. a. al-wiqayah xayrun min qinTaari 'ilaaj

the- prevention better than kantar cure

'Prevention is better than a kantar [a weight unit] of cure.'

b. An ounce of prevention is better than a ton of cure.'

The Arabic proverb closest in SPI to (3.b), and which would be given one point, is (3.c):

3. c. dirham wiqaayah xayrun min qinTaari 'ilaaj
 dirhem prevention better than kantar cure
 'A dirhem of prevention is better than a kantar of cure.'

(A dirhem is about 3 grams, a kantar 55 kilograms.)

No points were given to a translation which gave the meaning of the Arabic proverb but not in the form of a proverb since this would ignore the figurative interpretation. Such a 'translation' is not really a translation; it is an explanation or paraphrase. A literal translation, like giving the meaning, ignores the figurative aspect of proverbs and, therefore, like a wrong translation, was also given no points. Table 2 summarizes the results of the test giving the frequencies of the different strategies used by the respondents.

Table 2: Translation and strategy of the two majors and the two genders.

		Correct	Minor Modification	Translating Meaning	Literal Translation	Wrong Translation
English Majors	Male	173 (14.4)	11 (1)	11 (1)	11 (1)	34 (2.8)
	Female	1207 (14.9)	104 (1.3)	70 (0.9)	47 (0.6)	192 (2.4)
Translation Majors	Male	207 (12.9)	22 (1.4)	9 (0.6)	5 (0.3)	77 (4.8)
	Female	765 (14.2)	53 (1)	28 (0.5)	32 (0.6)	202 (3.7)
Total	Male	380 (13.6)	33 (1.2)	20 (0.7)	16 (0.6)	111 (4)
	Female	1972 (14.6)	157 (1.2)	98 (0.7)	79 (0.6)	394 (2.9)

The figures in parentheses represent the average number of test questions answered in the relevant category. In other words, this figure represents the average points earned out of 20. For example, the 12 English major male students gave 173 "Correct" answers. A full mark would be 240 (12 students multiplied by 20 questions). This group then has averaged a grade of 14.4 out of 20, or 72%. If we add their "Minor Modification" result, this will earn them another half point for their average one answer in this category. Their total performance adds up to 14.9 out of 20 (75%). Collapsing the "Correct" column and the "Minor Modification" column, allotting the former one point for each answer and the latter half a point shows that English majors have scored 15.6 points out of 20 (that is, 78%), translation majors 14.5 points (72.5%). Males in the two groups combined have scored 14.8 points (74%), females 15.2 points (76%).

These numbers indicate that English Language and Literature students performed a little better than Translation students, but not significantly; the two performed equally well. In the same way, female students performed a little better than male students, but again not significantly. The important indication was that both majors and both genders got grades ranging between 72% and 78%, a result which would be ranked as "good". That is, the subjects realize that the best way to translate a proverb is by finding a target language proverb which is used in circumstances similar to those in which the source language proverb is used (that is, a proverb's SPI is what counts) and that explains their success in the test.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite the size of the sample within a limited population, a number of conclusions can be drawn from the study. These conclusions include that (i) Translation students and English Language and Literature students perform well in translating proverbs which shows that they have a good knowledge of English proverbs; (ii) the main strategy students used in translating proverbs is translating a source language proverb into a target language proverb with the same standard proverbial interpretation; (iii) the two groups performed equally well with little difference in their results despite the difference in academic major; and (iv) females and males demonstrated comparable results although females did perform slightly better.

Based on the arguments presented in this study, it is recommended that proverbs be given a considerable share of the vocabulary component of an EFL curriculum due to the important role they have in the learner's ability to express themselves and understand the target language culture.

In the context of Arabic, it is recommended that Jordanian, as well as other Arabic-speaking EFL students, be given equivalent Arabic proverbs when they are taught English proverbs. This is due to the importance of proverbs in the learners' competence beyond mere translation as there are cultural aspects that are involved in the proverbial interpretation. That is, the literal interpretation of proverbs becomes secondary, which allows the interpretation for social and cultural considerations. The translation method of teaching and learning seems to be appropriate in such a case since the whole proverb is in fact a chunk of language much like a single vocabulary item, an idiom or any fixed expression whose internal, linguistic structure is less important than its overall standard interpretation.

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