
**KEY CONCEPTS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS / CONCEPTOS
CLAVE DE LA LINGÜÍSTICA APLICADA**

***Translational writing* and its usefulness for incidental learning of
vocabulary**

***Escritura translaticia* y su utilidad para el aprendizaje incidental de
vocabulario**

Belén Ramírez Gálvez

Universidad de Sevilla

belen@us.es

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12795/elia.2018.i18.10>

There are not many studies which use the term *translational writing* (Bruton, 2006; Fageeh & Mekheimer, 2011) and the intention here is to give an exact definition of this term and explain its main differences with traditional translation as well as its applications in the field of EFL teaching.

In the practice of EFL teachers, the acquisition of vocabulary through reading comprehension is a controversial matter as such acquisition is not always easily accomplished. This task is even more difficult if the text is technical.

Most research on the learning of L2 vocabulary through reading focuses on the *intentional* learning of vocabulary which is defined as “any

activity geared at committing lexical information to memory” (Hulstijn, 2001: 271), but not on its possible *incidental* learning which is defined as “the learning of vocabulary as the byproduct of any activity not explicitly geared to vocabulary learning”, Mondria, 2003: 475). A general problem with the definition of incidental vocabulary is that this type of learning seems to occur “unconsciously”, but as Gass (1999) stated, defining incidental vocabulary as a ‘side-effect’ of another activity neglects the active role of the learner in that process. Therefore, incidental learning of vocabulary through reading is non-explicit yet conscious or, at least, it implies the learner’s attention whereas intentional learning of vocabulary implies explicit learning.

In the case of reading ESP texts, translation becomes a useful tool for incidental learning because it requires writing in an L2 and because it ‘pushes’ learners to use previously unknown vocabulary they encounter when they read. This is the main reason to use translational writing: The use of translation as a means, not an end, in the sense that students are neither trained to be translators nor is the resulting translated text the goal (Bruton, 2007). The process of translational writing is the result of reading comprehension becoming an L1 process writing activity, a translation which results from word-by-word reading. This process consists in the translation of specific sentences from an L2 text using reference skills (dictionaries or glossaries) to find the correct translation of key lexical items. These translations will be later rewritten taking into account the teacher’s corrective feedback.

The main differences between general L2-L1 translation and translational writing is that the latter would require the learner to pay attention to specific lexical items which need to be consulted in a bilingual glossary or dictionary and that the learner needs to rewrite the translations if the proper meaning is not produced. That is, the learner is forced to pay attention to specific lexical items which, otherwise, might go unnoticed.

The usefulness of translational writing is supported by a number of reasons. First, vocabulary learning is intrinsically different when reading technical (ESP) texts, for example, legal texts. That is, reading a legal text is impossible if the specific meaning of words is not clearly understood and the L1 equivalent is not found. A word-by-word reading is unavoidable because finding the approximate meaning through the context is not a

viable option; an exact meaning is mandatory. Second, it is extremely difficult to guess the meaning through the context when most high-frequency words which constitute the terms which allow comprehension of the text are not known. Carter and McCarthy (1988) found that if the frequency of unknown words is very high, learners are forced to a word-by-word reading and they infer the meaning from the word form and not from context. In the case of a specialized text, the possibility of ignoring the meaning of unknown words is impossible (Nation, 1990) as the comprehension of a technical text implies the learning of specific vocabulary. In addition, learning a word implies storing it, after being processed, in the long-term memory (Laufer, 2003); thus, the main goal of translational writing would be to store an unknown item which is being processed through translation.

The above goal of translating technical texts is connected to the fact that ESP learners read mainly to learn content, they do not typically read for general comprehension of L2 texts. In the specific case of legal texts, the reader does not normally read for pleasure or in order to learn an L2 but because they need to correlate specific words to their L1 counterparts as any misunderstanding of a word may bring about important professional consequences. Therefore, it is a common practice among legal practitioners to translate L2 texts they read.

The role of incidental learning of vocabulary in translational writing is important as some research suggests that translation might be an effective cognitive strategy for L2 vocabulary learning (Grellet, 1991; Hummel, 1995; Laufer & Schmueli, 1997; Prince, 1996). The type of translation in this case is not translation of lists of words but contextualized translations containing key lexical items (taken from the texts they read) as they imply more “involvement load” (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). That is, translational writing requires learners to read and translate so that they should spend more time finding the meaning of specific items; translation of full sentences in itself is not the main goal. Learners’ involvement would be higher as there are two important tasks involved: One is checking the correct meaning (with the help of teacher’s written corrective feedback of various types and help from consulting glossaries or dictionaries) and retaining that meaning that has been determined (through subsequent rewritings).

More specifically, Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) proposed that it is possible to induce more incidental vocabulary retention by designing tasks to meet different criteria: Need, search and evaluation. Thus, for example, a task can create the appropriate context for the learner to have the need for a particular item, or to have to search for the meaning of that item or to have to evaluate the different choices of meanings for that item. These three variables are taken into account in translational writing. The students have to translate an L2 text (need), they have to look up items they do not know with the help of a glossary (search) and they have to evaluate the different choices offered and the teacher's corrections to their translations. The subsequent rewritings of translations done require the learners to use the lexical items they have encountered and there is no possibility of avoiding a focus on these particular items. Therefore, translational writing allows the learner to acquire lexical items from translating the texts, from referencing lexical items and from receiving various types of corrective feedback.

Another reason for choosing translational writing is that there are some studies which correlate incidental learning of vocabulary with certain written corrective feedback given (Bitchener et al., 2005). According to these studies, there are more possibilities for that learning to occur if the learners focus their attention on the translation of specific lexical items from the text and they receive corrections on those specific items; they would need to rewrite such items or look them up in a dictionary or glossary. Those rewritings would account for two different variables affecting incidental learning of vocabulary: frequency of encounters with the term (Nation, 1990) and different written corrective feedback offered to learners.

With respect to the frequency of encounters with lexical items, translational writing also plays an important role because learners have to make use of those items on various occasions (translating again if the item they choose is not correct) and also, because the translation would reduce the incidence of avoidance of key items and would also benefit unconscious and beneficial encounters.

In sum, translational writing can be defined as a useful tool for improving incidental learning of vocabulary when reading technical texts by creating a context in which learners are forced to pay attention to key

terms because they need to find the proper translation for them taking into account both reference skills and teacher's corrections.

As a result of the above, the use of translational writing as a teaching aid for the acquisition of vocabulary should be promoted not only among ESP learners, but also among general EFL learners whenever the goal of that use is not translation in itself but incidental learning of vocabulary from L2 reading. McDonough (2002) shows that FL students very often favor translation tasks, and that she as a teacher rarely used them, but appreciated them when she came to learn a foreign language.

In addition, translational writing would be another vehicle to enrich awareness of new vocabulary, not only because it promotes learner's task involvement, but also because the teacher's role is not as essential as it usually is. Some of those reasons were argued by some researchers in favor of the use of translation both in general contexts (Duff, 1989) and in ESP contexts (Duff, 1989) although, as Avand (2009) states, there is a need for more research on the use of translation in the subfield of ESP. Furthermore, there is a need for a reappraisal of the use of translation in EFL teaching: Translational writing would account for another technique to evaluate L2 reading comprehension as EFL readers might benefit from a typical activity of ESP readers.

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Belén Ramírez Gálvez (M.A. TESOL, University of London and PhD, Applied Linguistics, University of Seville) is an associate professor at the University of Seville. She has published a variety of articles on TEFL methodology, identifying problems related to the use of dictionaries. She has also given talks in the use of journals for writing. Currently, her research interests center on the incidental learning of vocabulary in EFL contexts.

First version received: November, 2018

Final version accepted: December, 2018