Utilizing prior language knowledge: A study of how Thai students translate unknown languages into English

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore how Thai university students applied their prior language knowledge when translating a text from Spanish, an unknown language, into English. The research involved a group of 34 students, whose second language was English, and their third language was French. The assessment of translated texts included quantitative analyses, such as measuring translation accuracy and conducting means comparisons, as well as qualitative investigations via post-task interviews. The results revealed that students with an intermediate level of proficiency in French achieved significantly higher translation accuracy compared to beginners. Insights gleaned from post-task interviews indicated that participants recognized similarities across lexical, phonological, and structural aspects among English, French, and Spanish. These findings highlight the cognitive advantages of exposing students to multiple languages and offer guidance to curriculum developers in higher education institutions seeking to cultivate multilingual graduates.

Keywords: English; French; language acquisition; language transfers; multilingualism; translation task.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the interest in multilingual language acquisition has increased, and countries has adopted multilingual policy; thereby buttressing the necessity for higher educational institutions to produce graduates who are proficient in multiple languages (Hanesova, 2022; Spinelli, 2015; Li, 2022; Hayakawa et al., 2022). Multilingual language acquisition aims to stimulate a more effective language-learning process. Learners are enabled to acquire multiple typologically related languages simultaneously and rely on the proximity between languages as a learning resource (Paquet, 2018; Woll & Paquet, 2021; Aziz et al., 2022).

Language proximity provides learners with similarities encompassing orthographic, morphological, syntactic, and phonological aspects, which serve as access points and bridges to unknown languages (Ringbom, 2007; Paquet, 2018; Woll & Paquet, 2021). These similarities encourage crosslinguistic transfers, broadly understood as the use of knowledge in one language to facilitate and make more effective the acquisition of another language (Tarlani-Aliabadi et al., 2022). When establishing transfers, learners draw upon their linguistic resources and instructors to facilitate and enrich their learning process (Paquet, 2018; Ovid et al., 2021; Pennelle et al., 2023). According to Ringbom (2007), a positive transfer is the establishment of formal and functional similarities between languages. Conversely, negative transfers have been defined as processes that impede comprehension (e.g., when false cognates lead to miscomprehension) or result in interferences and production errors (Selinker, 1969). In the field of multilingual language acquisition, transfers are now predominantly regarded as valuable resources rather than potential sources of interference (Ringbom, 2007; Woll, 2019; Woll & Paquet, 2021).

The learners' perception of proximity between aspects of different languages determines whether transfers are established or not. However, the perception of this proximity, and how it is interpreted, does not only depend on actual similarities and differences between languages (Odlin, 2003; Woll & Paquet, 2021) but also other factors such as learners' characteristics. In other words, the students' ability to rely on their linguistic repertoire to facilitate their learning process depends on their capacity to gain awareness of language proximity. Research has indicated that the perception of language proximity and similarity is contingent upon several factors (Kang et al., 2021).

Among these factors, research has shown that proficiency, frequency of use, and recency of learning the language that serves as a resource for deciphering the target language play an important role (Cenoz, 2013). Additionally, second language (L2) status also has an effect. Learners may occasionally choose their L2 as a source of transfers, even though they have a third language (L3) that is more similar to the target language, but in which they are less proficient (Mieszkowska & Otwinowska-Kasztelanic 2015). Conversely, learners having sufficient knowledge in an L3 that shares more similarities with the target language than their L2 tend to rely on their L3 for deciphering.

Additionally, research suggested that the cumulative language learning experience is a determinant in developing metalinguistic awareness and crosslinguistic learning strategies, which results in more effective transfers and learning. Woll (2019) suggested that the learners' use of metalinguistic reflection increases the likelihood of positive transfer. The Romance languages e.g., French and Spanish, share a degree of similarity owing to their common origin and Latin roots, which enable limited mutual intelligibility (also referred to as intercomprehension) (Candelier et al., 2012). Intercomprehension, or mutual intelligibility, refers to the speakers' ability to partially understand a foreign language without needing to learn it, using typological similarities with their native languages (L1s) (Gooskens & van Heuven, 2021).

The Intercomprehension-based pedagogy, as developed in the Common European Framework for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures (Candelier et al., 2012) defined intercomprehension pedagogy as teaching practices specifically designed to help learners perceive and rely on underlying similarities between typologically related languages, and thereby facilitate and enhance their learning process. It defined intercomprehension pedagogy as teaching practices specifically designed to help learners perceive and rely on underlying similarities between typologically related languages, and thereby facilitate and enhance their learning process.

The Eurom-5 course (Bonvino et al., 2011) is an example of the application of intercomprehension-based pedagogy. It was designed to enable learners to simultaneously develop their comprehension skills in five Romance languages, namely French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and Romanian, and direct learners' attention toward lexical and structural resemblances among these languages.

Analyzing how plurilingual learners utilize their previously acquired linguistic knowledge and engage in crosslinguistic transfers can be undertaken by investigating translation and inferencing from an unfamiliar language (Gibson & Hufeisen, 2003). Mieszkowska & Otwinowska-Kasztelanic (2015) investigated how individuals proficient in Polish and possessing an advanced level of English as an L2, along with various L3s, including Germanic and Romance, deciphered a text in Danish, a language unknown to them. The findings indicated that the language primarily used as a resource at the lexical level was their L2 (English), while Polish remained unused, potentially due to the typological disparity between Polish and Danish. Smidfelt (2018) examined the intercomprehension strategies employed by Swedish university students when reading Italian, an unknown language for them. The research indicated that even a participant without prior exposure to a Romance language accurately inferred words, predominantly relying on their familiarity with English, which shares root vocabulary with Italian.

Ayob & Omidire (2021) in their studies, reports on utilizing storyboards to explore learners' perspectives and emotions in a study that uses translanguaging as an intervention with Grades 5 and 6 learners in two schools in a South African township. This method helped children express their emotions and feelings on an individual personal storyboard paper. Furthermore, Smidfelt & Van de Weijer (2019) examined the utilization of previously learned languages by Swedish upper-secondary students. They explored this phenomenon during the translation of a text from an unknown language into their L2 (English) or L3 (Spanish or French). The findings demonstrated that having knowledge of an L3 related to an unknown language was perceived as advantageous for translation and correlated with higher accuracy in the translation process.

However, the number of research focusing on learners whose L1 is typologically distant from the target language, yet whose L2 or L3 shares some degree of similarity with it, remains limited. Furthermore, there is a lack of investigation into the conditions under which these students can become aware of the similarities between their L2 or L3 and the target language, and how they can effectively leverage these similarities. No related research has been identified within the context of Thai higher education, where the demand for multilingual speakers is on the rise.

1.1. Purpose of study

The present study aims to address this gap by examining the case of Thai students at an international university in Thailand, whose L2 is English and L3 is French. The students were tasked with utilizing their proficiency in their L2 and L3 during the translation of a text from Spanish, an unknown language for them, into their L2. The study aimed to address the following questions:

1. Are the participants in the study, whose L1 is distant from the target unknown language, capable of perceiving similarities between this language and their L2 and L3?

2. What languages from their repertoire did participants in the study predominantly use as a source of transfers during the translation task?
3. What crosslinguistic transfers established by participants during task completion reveal about the inferential process of translation of an unknown language?

The research objectives were then formulated as follows:

1. To measure and compare the translation accuracy scores of participants based on their level of proficiency in their L3.
2. To determine which languages among their L2 and L3 participants have chosen as the primary resource for establishing transfers.
3. To identify and analyze the crosslinguistic transfers and reasoning that occurred during task completion.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Research design

The study employed a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were collected through the measurement of the translation accuracy score of participants. Qualitative data were then collected through post-task individual interviews to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the quantitative findings.

2.2. Participants

The data for this study were gathered in 2023 at an international university in Bangkok, Thailand, where English is both taught and used as the medium of instruction (excluding foreign language and law courses). Participants were selected in an undergraduate international Bachelor of Arts program. A purposive sampling technique was utilized, mainly based on the number of semesters they have studied French (regardless of what their major was). The total sample was 34 students (27 female and 7 male), aged from 18 to 23. The first criterion for the selection was Thai must be their L1, English must be their L2, and French their L3. Their English proficiency was confirmed either by their IELTS test results (minimum level 5) or by the successful completion of the English course offered by the university corresponding to level B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). As the scope of the study was limited to Thai speakers, foreign students were excluded from the sample, as well as students who had learned Spanish before.

17 students who had studied French for only one semester were recruited in the first group (hereafter referred to as Group 1). They were recruited among a total of 30 students and represent therefore 56.67% of this subpopulation. All of them were beginners in French and had undergone 24 class hours of instruction in the language at the time of the study. None of them had any prior exposure to French before the beginning of the semester of the study, thus ensuring they possessed a uniform level of proficiency. 17 other students who had studied French between 3 and 4 semesters were recruited in the second group (hereafter referred to as Group 2). They were recruited among a total of 27 students and represent therefore 62.96% of this subpopulation. All of them had completed a minimum of 135 class hours of French since the beginning of their studies and had an intermediate level in French (equivalent to A2+). Among all the participants, five had studied Chinese, three, Japanese, Korean, and one, German, which are languages typologically distant from Spanish.

The selected participants were invited to complete a questionnaire to provide information regarding the following aspects of their linguistic profile:

1. Their self-assessed proficiency in L2

2. Their self-assessed proficiency in L3

3. Their frequency of use of their L2 outside the classroom

4. Their frequency of use of their L3 outside the classroom

5. The other languages they speak or have previously learned.

The participants' self-assessed proficiency in their L2 and L3 was measured using an ordinal scale ranging from 1 (beginner) to 5 (advanced). The frequency of use of their L2 and L3 outside the classroom was also measured using an ordinal scale ranging from 1 (never or rarely) to 5 (every day). Table 1 provides an overview of the linguistic profile of the participants.

Table 1
Participants Linguistic Profile

	Group 1 (N=17)		Group 2 (N=17)	
	Means (min-max)	SD	Means (min-max)	SD
Number of years of study of L2	6.71 (6-8)	0.59	6.47 (6-7)	0.51
Number of semesters of study of L3	1 (1-1)	0	3.47 (3-4)	0.51
Self-assessed proficiency in L2	3.64 (3-4)	0.49	3.65 (3-4)	0.49
Self-assessed proficiency in L3	1.12 (1-2)	0.33	2.76 (2-4)	0.56
Frequency of use of L2 outside the classroom	3.76 (3-5)	0.56	3.65 (3-5)	0.61
Frequency of use of L3 outside the classroom	1.29 (1-2)	0.47	1.65 (1-2)	0.49
Number of languages learned or being learned	3.18 (3-4)	0.39	3.47 (3-5)	0.72

2.3. Data collection instruments

A text in Spanish was used for the translation task. Spanish was chosen because it possesses a strong typological similarity with French, both being Romance languages, and has vocabulary roots in common with English, due among other factors to the influence of Latin. The choice of this language allowed us to investigate whether students choose English or French as the main source for crosslinguistic transfers based on their proficiency in these languages.

The text consists of 12 sentences (60 words, 45 different lexemes). Five lexemes appear several times in the text under different forms, e.g., *es* ('is') and *soy* ('am') which correspond to the verb *ser* ('to be'), or *mi* and *mis* which are respectively the singular and plural form of the possessive adjective associated with the first person ('my,' in English). The composed forms, e.g., "se llama" (to be called) were considered as one word. The text was created by the researcher and aligns with level A1.1 of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), to ensure that all the participants knew in both English and French the words necessary for translating the text. It includes nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and conjunctions such as *y* ('and') and *que* ('who'/'that'). The text is provided below along with the English translation.

(1) *Mi nombre es Lola.* (2) *Tengo veintidós años.* (3) *Soy de Madrid, pero vivo en Barcelona.* (4) *Estudio idiomas extranjeros en la universidad.* (5) *Tengo un hermano que se llama Pedro.* (6) *Tiene veinticinco años.* (7) *Mi padre es arquitecto.* (8) *Mi madre es médica.* (9) *Tengo un gato. Se llama Mimi.* (10) *Es pequeño y blanco.* (11) *Me gusta ir al cine con mis amigos.* (12) *También me gusta jugar al voleibol y fútbol.*

(1) My name is Lola. (2) I am twenty-two years old. (3) I am from Madrid, but I live in Barcelona. (4) I study foreign languages at university. (5) I have a brother who is called Pedro. (6) He is twenty-five years old. (7) My father is an architect. (8) My mother is a doctor. (9) I have a cat. Its name is Mimi. (10) It is small and white. (11) I like going to the cinema with my friends. (12) I also enjoy playing volleyball and football.

A post-task interview questionnaire was designed to identify what languages, among their L2 and L3, students had chosen as the main resource for establishing transfers, and to identify crosslinguistic transfers and reasoning participants used when translating the text. The following interview questions were formulated, based on Gibson & Hufeisen (2003):

1. Did your previous languages help you complete the task? Which one helped you the most? Can you provide examples?
2. Were you helped by something else (for example, the context or words that you already knew)? Can you provide examples?
3. What was challenging when translating the text? Can you provide examples?

These questions were followed by more specific questions on the translation process of the interviewee, e.g., "How did you guess the meaning of this word?"

2.4. Procedures

The data collection was implemented at a different time for both groups of students, at the end of a class. For each group, the process was the same and consisted of three parts. The first part was the completion of the translation task. Participants were given instructions to individually translate as many words as they could. In cases where they weren't sure about a word's meaning, they were encouraged to make guesses based on contextual clues. They were also suggested to identify parts of speech corresponding to the words in the text, e.g., nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Finally, they were requested not to use electronic devices or machine translation software or collaborate with partners. The procedure took approximately twenty minutes. At the end, participants were given a correct translation of the text in English.

Interviews were conducted individually immediately after task completion, or on the same day, based on the availably of the participants. The researcher conducted the interviews. Each interview lasted approximately five minutes. They were recorded and then transcribed.

2.5. Data analysis

For research objective 1, the translation accuracy was analyzed through descriptive statistics. The overall percentage of correctly translated words was calculated. For both tasks, the accuracy was scored out of 60 (the number of words in the text in Spanish) and then converted to percentage.

When rating the translation accuracy, the researcher used a translated version of the text in English but accepted alternative translations provided they were also correct. To ensure reliability, the researcher requested another instructor to evaluate the accuracy of a randomly selected sample of 10 translations and then compared the scores, which were the same. The most frequent errors made by both groups of students were also identified and classified. An independent samples test was then conducted to compare the means of the two groups, and the effect size was calculated.

For research objective 2, which consisted of identifying languages students had chosen as the main resource for establishing transfers, the researcher analyzed the transcription and classed the students as follows based on their answers:

1. Only French was used as a resource for translation.

2. French was mainly used as a resource for translation.

3. English and French were equally or almost equally used as a resource for translation.

4. English was mainly used as a resource for translation.

5.   Only English was used as a resource for translation.

To ensure reliability, the researcher requested another instructor to validate the analysis of a randomly selected sample of 10 transcriptions. The results were then compared and found to be the same. A Chi-square test of independence was then conducted to determine if there was a significant association between participants' level in L3 (A1+ for Group 1 or A2+ for Group 2) and the language selected as a resource for translation.

For research objective 3, thematic content analysis was employed to process the data. The thematic analysis aimed to provide a deeper understanding of how participants utilize their prior languages to translate the text and shed light on the transfers and reasoning they applied during the intervention. Transfers were coded and categorized. The same validation process as for objective 2 was conducted. In this study, 'transfer' refers to all metalinguistic reasoning through which participants, by comparing or contrasting the target language with their L2 or L3, facilitated and enhanced the translation process. This category includes activities such as identifying perceived resemblances, recognizing cognates, and all forms of conscious crosslinguistic connections.

2.6. Ethical considerations

Necessary permissions for data collection were obtained before the study. Participants were briefed on the research objectives and assured that the collected data would be solely used for the study's purposes and anonymized. Their informed consent was obtained, and it was communicated to them that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

3.   Results

3.1. Research Objective 1

The first objective of the study was to measure and compare the translation accuracy scores of both groups of students. The overall means of accuracy for the participants in Group 1 was 71.47 % (SD = 8.5), while it was 84.31 % (SD = 9.07) for the participants in Group 2. Within Group 1, the range of accurately translated words spanned from 53.33% to 80.33%, whereas in Group 2, it extended from 70% to 100%. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the means of the two groups. The *t*-statistic was -4.26, with df = 32 (p < .05). The effect size for the difference between the groups was calculated using Cohen's *d*, resulting in a value of 1.46, which is considered a large effect. Results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Statistical Comparison of Translation Accuracy Scores

	N	Mean	SD	T	Sig. (Two-tailed)
Group 1	17	71.47	8.5	-4.26	.000
Group 2	17	84.31	9.07		

In summary, the results revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Specifically, Group 2 exhibited a higher mean score for translation accuracy compared to Group 1. These findings indicate that participants in Group 2 achieved a notably higher level of translation accuracy than those in Group 1, with a large effect size.

It is worth noting that there was important variability between translation accuracy scores within both groups, as there was a difference of 27 points between the lowest and highest scores in Group 1, and 30 points in Group 2.

The words that were systematically accurately translated are the words that bear a similarity with their English and French translations, such as *mi*, *arquitectos*, and *médicas*. Conjunctions and prepositions such as *y*, *de* or *que* were transparent for most of students in the Group 2, but not for students in Group 1. Table 3 shows the frequent errors and omissions for both groups of students.

Table 3

Most Frequent Translation Errors and Omissions

	Group 1		Group 2
Translation errors	*n* (%)	Translation errors	*n* (%)
Hermano	15 (88.24)	*Hermano*	14 (82.35)
Extranjeros	15 (88.24)	*Extranjeros*	13 (76.47)
Veintidós	13 (76.47)	*Gato*	11 (64.71)
Años	13 (76.47)	*pero*	7 (41.18)
Omissions	*n* (%)	Omissions	*n* (%)
Blanco	14 (82.35)	*También*	15 (88.24)
Pequeño	14 (82.35)	*Pequeño*	9 (52.94)
También	13 (76.47)	*or*	7

The words that exhibited the highest frequency of mistranslation or omission were those that bore no resemblance to either English or French, did not provide morpho-lexical clues, and lacked sufficient context for precise interpretation. Notably, the term *hermano* ('brother,' Fr.: *frère*) emerged as the most frequently mistranslated word. In this instance, while the context enabled participants to infer that it referred to a person, the absence of morpho-lexical indicators prevented accurate inferences, leading to translations such as 'boyfriend' or 'friend' in multiple instances. The word *también* ('also,' Fr.: *aussi*) was among the most frequently omitted. This omission may be explained by the lack of morpho-lexical clues and the difficulty of recognizing it as an adverb, given its placement at the beginning of the sentence. These observations were further corroborated by the data obtained from post-task interviews.

3.2. Research Objective 2

The second objective of the study was to identify what languages, among their L2 and L3, participants had chosen as the main resource for establishing transfers. The results indicated a clear variation between both groups of participants. Most participants in Group 2 relied mainly or only on French, while participants in Group 1 relied mainly on English, as shown in the contingency table below.

Table 4

Participants Choice of Language as Resource for Translation

Group	Only French	Mainly French	French and English	Mainly English	Only English	Total
Group 1	0	0	3	7	7	17
Group 2	13	4	0	0	0	17
Total	13	4	3	7	7	34

A Chi-Square test was employed to examine whether there was a relationship between the participants' proficiency in their L3 and their selection of a specific language as a resource for translation.

The Research Hypothesis was stated as follows: There exists an association between the student's proficiency level in L3 (A1 or A2+) and their selection of a language as a resource for translation. The Null Hypothesis H_0 was formulated as follows: There is no association between level in L3 and selection of language, signifying independence between these variables. The calculated χ^2 was 7.64 with the probability .000 (<.01) which led to the rejection of H_0 and acceptance of H_1.

In summary, the results showed a significant association between participants' proficiency level in their L3 and their choice of language as a resource for translation at the 0.01 level of significance. These findings suggest that proficiency may play a pivotal role in predicting learners' capacity to recognize similarities between languages.

3.3. Research Objective 3

The third objective of the study was to identify and analyze transfers established by participants during task completion. It was aimed to better understand the processes used by participants in both groups to translate the text, the errors they made, and how they mobilized their prior language knowledge.

The thematic analysis of the transcription allowed for the identification of transfers and reasoning made by participants during the translation task. The identified transfers and reasoning were divided into the 10 following categories:

1. Positive transfers based on lexical and phonological resemblances between English and Spanish.
2. Positive transfers based on lexical and phonological resemblances between French and Spanish.
3. Positive transfers are based on syntactic and morphosyntactic resemblances between English and Spanish.
4. Positive transfers are based on syntactic and morphosyntactic resemblances between French and Spanish.
5. Accurate use of contextual clues.
6. Negative transfers based on lexical and phonological resemblances between English and Spanish.
7. Negative transfers based on lexical and phonological resemblances between French and Spanish.
8. Negative transfers are based on syntactic and morphosyntactic resemblances between English and Spanish.
9. Negative transfers are based on syntactic and morphosyntactic resemblances between French and Spanish.
10. Inaccurate use of contextual clues.

It is worth highlighting that in both groups, the occurrence of negative transfers was limited, whereas positive transfers enabled all participants to gain at least a basic comprehension of the text. Furthermore, the interviews conducted with participants indicated that all of them effectively relied on context and transparent words to decode the text. Table 5 reports the use of these different types of transfers and reasoning for both groups.

Table 5
Transfers and Use of Contextual Clues

	Group 1	Group 2
	n (%)	*n* (%)
Positive transfers based on lexical and phonological resemblances between English and Spanish.	17 (100)	1 (5.88)
Positive transfers based on lexical and phonological resemblances between French and Spanish.	3 (17.65)	17 (100)
Positive transfers are based on syntactic and morphosyntactic resemblances between English and Spanish.	17 (100)	4 (23.53)
Positive transfers are based on syntactic and morphosyntactic resemblances between French and Spanish.	1 (5.88)	17 (100)
Accurate use of contextual clues.	17 (100)	17 (100)
Negative transfers based on lexical and phonological resemblances between English and Spanish.	0	0

	Group 1	Group 2
	n (%)	*n* (%)
Negative transfers based on lexical and phonological resemblances between French and Spanish.	0	0
Negative transfers are based on syntactic and morphosyntactic resemblances between English and Spanish.	6 (35.29)	0
Negative transfers are based on syntactic and morphosyntactic resemblances between French and Spanish.	1 (5.88)	5 (29.41)
Inaccurate use of contextual clues.	0	0

3.3.1. Transfers based on lexical and phonological resemblances between English or French and Spanish.

The results indicated that the positive transfer number was high in both groups, especially the number of lexical and phonological transfers, which suggests that both English and French can be used as a bridge towards Spanish. In both groups, students made accurate inferences regarding the meaning of words by relying on the perceived resemblances between their L2 or L3 and Spanish.

As anticipated, participants in Group 2 established lexical transfers for more words compared to those in Group 1. This outcome aligns with the greater lexical similarity between French and Spanish when contrasted with English and Spanish. The following words illustrate this difference: *vivo* ('live,' Fr.: '*vis*'), *Blanco* ('white,' Fr.: '*blanc*'), and *amigos* ('friends,' Fr.: '*amis*'). The excerpts below show examples of transfers based on lexical and phonological resemblances.

Excerpts:

Group 2-Participant 3: *The professional words were easy to understand, especially when I tried to pronounce them. For example, 'arquitecto' is 'architect,' and 'medica' looks like "medical", so I guessed it was a profession related to a hospital.*

Group 1-Participant 5: *First, I didn't understand the words 'voleibol' and 'fútbol' until I said them aloud. And then it made sense, and I can also understand 'jugar'.*

The second excerpt suggests that spelling differences may have posed a challenge to achieving positive transfers, but that pronunciation played a crucial role in surmounting this challenge. In this regard, the transfers can be regarded as stemming from phonological resemblances. Furthermore, the excerpt revealed an inference made based on contextual clues, as it was the comprehension of *voleibol* ('volleyball') and *fútbol* ('football') that enabled the learner to accurately translate *jugar* ('to play').

3.3.2. Transfers based on syntactic and morphosyntactic resemblances between English or French and Spanish.

Transfers based on syntactic and morphosyntactic resemblances between participants L2 or L3 and Spanish occurred in both groups. The similarity between the structures of sentences in both languages was leveraged by all students. All of them were able to recognize *es* as the verb 'to be'. Participants in Group 2 were also able to recognize in composed forms, such as *se llama* resemblance with the pronominal French verbs, where *se* may refer to the object of the verb.

The excerpts below show examples of inferences based on syntactic and morphosyntactic resemblances.

Excerpts:

Group 1-Participant 6: *I understand "Mi nombre es Lola" because I know Lola is a name, and the sentence looks like the same in English.*

Group 2-Participant 1: *Mi" and "Mis" look like "my". So, I thought they added "s" because the next word is plural, like in French*.

Group 2-Participant 5: *I think the structure of the sentence is very much like French. For example, "se llama" is similar to "s'appeler"*.

3.3.3. Inferences based on contextual clues.

When translating the text, participants in both groups relied heavily on contextual clues, especially the city and person names, e.g., *Lola*, *Madrid*, *Barcelona,* and *Mimi*, which enabled them to make accurate inferences, as shown in the following excerpts.

Excerpts:

Group 2-Participant 8: *When I can understand a word in the sentence then I can understand the other words. I guessed Mimi was an animal because of its name first, and also because I can understand "Blanco*"*.

*'white,' *blanc* (Fr.).

Group 2: Participant 6: *Some things I can understand in the context like "Lola" and "Madrid" and "Barcelona" is about where she lives. With the context, I can guess more easily.*

3.3.4. Negative transfers

There were no negative transfers based on lexical and phonological resemblances between English or French and Spanish, despite the presence of false cognates in the texts. For instance, the word *nombre* (meaning 'name') is a false cognate of the French word for 'number.' 'Gato,' while similar to the French word 'gâteau' ('cake'), did not result in negative transfer. This indicates that participants in Group 2 effectively used context to make accurate inferences. However, 'gato' was occasionally mistranslated as 'dog,' which also stresses the role of context.

Concerning negative transfers based on syntactic and morphosyntactic resemblances, a few instances were identified, particularly within Group 2. For example, the word 'también' posed challenges. The confusion stemmed from the absence of morpho-lexical clues to infer its meaning, and from syntactic interference, as in French, the translation 'aussi' is typically used after the verb, rather than at the beginning of a sentence. Also, unlike in English and French, the subject can be omitted at the beginning of a sentence, which creates inaccurate inferences, e.g., in one occurrence, the word *pero* ('but') in front of the verb *vivo* in Sentence 2 was translated as a first name.

4. Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to evaluate and compare the translation accuracy scores of two student groups, categorized by their proficiency level in their third language, French. In doing so, the study intended to address a broader question: 'Can learners, whose native language is significantly different from a target, unknown language, perceive similarities between this language and their L2 and L3?' The results suggest a positive answer to this question. The fact that participants in both groups achieved translation accuracy scores above 50 percent indicates that, even with no prior exposure to the target language, they were able to effectively engage in the translation task, using their prior language knowledge.

Additionally, it was observed that participants with an intermediate level of proficiency in French translated the text more accurately compared to those at a beginner level. This is consistent with previous research (Mieszkowska & Otwinowska-Kasztelanic, 2015; Smidfelt & Van de Weijer, 2019), which

acknowledges the value of prior language knowledge for acquiring additional languages and sees in interlinguistic proximity a resource for facilitating the comprehension and acquisition of unknown languages.

This can also be seen as an indication of the participants' metalinguistic awareness and their readiness to engage in multilingual language acquisition by drawing upon their L2 and L3. Past studies (Jessner, 2006; Woll, 2019) have suggested that individuals who speak and learn three or more languages often demonstrate an elevated level of metalinguistic awareness. This heightened awareness is a predictor of their ability to establish positive language transfers (Woll, 2019).

The second objective of the study was to determine which languages among their L2 and L3 students had chosen as the primary resource for establishing transfers. The findings indicated that the choice of language was mainly related to their proficiency level in L3, and suggested that in Group 1, participants' L2 held dominance over their L3, even though their L3 has a higher proximity with the target language than their L2. These findings highlight that learners' ability to recognize similarities between languages, especially their L3, is influenced by their proficiency in that language. It also implies that as learners become more proficient in their L3, they become better at perceiving linguistic resemblances.

Furthermore, this finding aligns with the idea that the perception of linguistic proximity is not an automatic process (Odlin, 2003; Woll & Paquet, 2021); participants must possess a minimum level of proficiency in their L3 to effectively discern and leverage similarities with the unknown language. Otherwise, it appears they rely on their L2, even though it has lower typological proximity. These finding hints that typological similarity may be a less significant predictor of crosslinguistic transfers and translation accuracy than proficiency level and that other factors, such as metalinguistic awareness, cumulative language learning experience, duration of learning, and frequency and recency of language use of L2 and L3 are at play, as it was suggested by Cenoz (2013) and Woll (2019). The interplay of these different factors can also account for the variability in translation accuracy scores observed among students in both groups. The nature of the present study as well as the limited number of participants prevented a thorough exploration of these factors and their impact. However, this represents an avenue for future research.

The third objective of the study was to identify and analyze the crosslinguistic transfers and connections that participants established during task completion. The results revealed the participants' ability to utilize lexical, phonological, and syntactic similarities between the languages in their repertoire and the unknown language to translate the text. Furthermore, the findings showed that participants leveraged contextual cues regardless of their group. This finding aligns with results reported by Gibson & Hufeisen (2003) then corroborated in further research (Smidfelt & van de Weijer, 2019), where contextual cues were found to be, in some instances, more significant than cognate similarities for learners. Finally, it was observed that in both groups, the occurrence of negative transfers was limited, whereas positive transfers enabled all participants to gain at least a basic comprehension of the text. This observation aligns with the notion that multilingualism serves as an advantage in language acquisition rather than a potential source of interference (Ringbom, 2007).

5. Conclusion

It's important to acknowledge that the findings of this study may have limited generalizability due to its design and the relatively small number of participants. Nevertheless, these findings indicate that Thai students can effectively utilize their L2 and L3 to decipher an unknown language, even when their L1 is typologically distant from the target language. These results highlight the value of multilingual

competence and suggest that individuals can enhance their language-learning abilities through engaging in language acquisition.

Language educators can incorporate the findings of this study into their teaching methods. For example, they can emphasize the benefits of multilingualism, explicitly encourage students to draw upon their existing language knowledge, and look for similarities when learning a new language. The task implemented holds the potential for raising students' awareness of the advantages of possessing knowledge of multiple languages when learning another typologically related foreign language.

Additionally, language programs and curricula can consider the benefits of exposing students to multiple languages. Offering opportunities for students to simultaneously learn languages with varying degrees of typological similarity can broaden their language skills and metalinguistic awareness. It can also provide new perspectives for higher educational institutions aiming to produce graduates who are proficient in multiple languages.

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