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The significance of developing reading skills in translator and language teacher training

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Abstract

In certain domains, such as translating AR3 and language teaching, appropriate reading comprehension and interpretation of written texts is essential; therefore, in the training process for these professions, the development of reading skills and reading strategy awareness should not be neglected. The purpose of this study is to examine the reading habits and strategies of a group of Hungarian first year translation and interpretation students, most of whom are also language teacher trainees when working with texts written in English. Their reading strategy awareness is measured with an instrument; their reading comprehension performance is assessed with the help of the reading comprehension part of a standardised test; correlation is measured between their reading comprehension level and their ability to translate an English text into their native language. The results show that students' reading comprehension skills are not always on the required level and their reading level significantly influences the ability to translate texts into Hungarian.

Keywords: Reading comprehension, reading strategies, reading for translation.

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1. Introduction

In our gradually globalising world, situations requiring intercultural communication are becoming more frequent. Intercultural communication skills, language skills and the ability to translate are prerequisites of professional development and success. In certain professions such as translating, interpreting or language teaching these skills are indispensable. The target group of this study consists of first year students who study translation and interpretation at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania and most of them take part in language teacher training as well. They intend to work in these professions because they are interested in languages and open to other cultures and they would like to become intercultural mediators, helping others to cross language barriers. Our students' native language is Hungarian, and as future translators they train to work with three languages (Hungarian, Romanian—the official language of the country and English).

In these professions, all language skills (listening comprehension, reading comprehension, speaking, writing, translating and interpreting) are essential. However, based on our experience, some of our students are struggling with English, even though the entrance examination criteria are that their level of English should be B2 or above. At the entrance examination, their grades from their High School Diploma are accepted, but we found that these certificates do not always show the students' current and real level of English.

This study focuses mainly on the target group's reading habits, reading skills and awareness of reading strategies because these may affect significantly their future performance as translators and language teachers. A translator must comprehend source texts perfectly in order to translate them appropriately, and language teachers must be aware of how reading skills and strategies can be developed in the language teaching and learning process. We conducted this survey and assessment in order to analyse our students' needs and weaknesses in order to improve the quality of the curriculum and the training process; therefore, our results and conclusions refer strictly to the target group and cannot be considered relevant for translator training or language teacher training departments of other institutions.

The target group's reading habits were surveyed with the help of a questionnaire and their reading strategies awareness when reading academic materials or textbooks written in English were measured with an instrument developed by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002). Their reading comprehension skills and translation skills were assessed with a test and correlation was also measured between these two skills.

2. About the measured skills and strategies

2.1. Reading comprehension—definitions, skill development and assessment

Based on the principles of communicative language teaching, skills such as reading comprehension are taught and developed with an integrative approach, mainly because when we communicate we use more than just one skill. However, in the literature, language skills are often described and discussed separately. There have been more attempts to classify them. Bardos (2000) proposes a classification where skills are divided into three levels and each of these levels incorporates the previous one: the level of understanding (listening and reading comprehension); the level of conveying or communicating messages (speaking and writing) and the level of mediation (translation and interpretation). This model suggests that reading comprehension is an essential basic skill necessary for the development and practice of other skills.

Reading comprehension has been studied from different viewpoints and approaches by teachers, linguists, psychologists, sociologists and educationalists; therefore, it has several definitions and it would be difficult to synthesise them. Reading is a highly complex process and it involves the coordination of 'phonological, semantic, syntactic, morphological, pragmatic, conceptual, social,

affective, articulatory and motor systems' (Wolf, 2007, p.223). Jozsa and Steklacs (2009, p. 366) pinpoint that the social dimension is gaining more importance in defining reading comprehension, which refers mainly to constructing meaning through interaction in given situations. From a functional approach, the understanding of the text targets the purpose of reading, which is acquiring information or experience and it often involves mental imagery and other creative processes. The RAND Reading Study Group defines reading comprehension 'as the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. (…) Comprehension entails three elements: the reader who is doing the comprehending, the text that is to be comprehended and the activity in which comprehension is a part. In considering the reader, we include all the capacities, abilities, knowledge and experiences that a person brings to the act of reading. Text is broadly construed to include any printed text or electronic text. In considering activity, we include the purposes, processes and consequences associated with the act of reading. These three dimensions define a phenomenon AR5 that occurs within a larger socio-cultural context that shapes and is shaped by the reader and that interacts with each of the three elements' (Snow, 2002, p. 11). McNamara (2007) states that 'comprehension refers to the ability to go beyond the words, to understand the ideas and the relationships between ideas conveyed in a text' (p. xi).

The definitions mentioned so far refer to the reading process in one's native language, which helps us acquire knowledge and information related to various fields. Reading in a foreign language is more complicated, it also depends on the reader's language proficiency, cultural competence, background knowledge and area of interest. Bardos (2000) describes four levels regarding reading in a foreign language: the level of physically recognising the letters; recognising, decoding the meaning of the word; the level of understanding the meaning of the word considering the grammatical aspects as well; and the level of text interpretation, including reaction.

Developing second language reading skills is a challenging task for teachers. There are various principles and instructional approaches that may be useful. Grabe (2014) suggests that the curriculum should be based on the objectives of the teaching process and the students' needs using effective, plentiful, interesting, and varied reading resources and teaching materials. He proposes the following developmental goals: promoting word recognition skills; building an abundant recognition vocabulary; practicing comprehension skills; building awareness of discourse structure; promoting strategic reading; practicing reading fluency; developing extensive reading; developing motivation and combining language learning with content learning.

Assessing reading comprehension is also a challenging task because, in the process of reading, the interaction between the text and the reader can be influenced by several factors, such as the genre of the text, the reader's language skills, motivation, attitude, background knowledge and the available time. Reading comprehension tests should take these factors in consideration and use authentic texts, which should be convincing and realistic, even if they are not perfectly authentic, and they should motivate the readers to read the text in a similar way as they would do in real life. Communicative tests builders generally take into consideration the purpose why people read in real life and choose the texts and related tasks accordingly.

2.2. Reading strategies

Reading strategies may considerably influence comprehension. Reading in the native language and foreign language has also been studied with different approaches. Toth (2006, p. 457) states that in the process of creating meaning, the reader formulates predictions and hypotheses regarding the probable continuation of the text, draws conclusions, assumes temporary meanings, follows their validity, makes corrections if necessary, overcomes eventual difficulties in comprehension, for example, by trying to guess the meaning of unknown words from the context. Hence, as Zsigmond and Porsche (2009) also declared, reading can be regarded as a problem-solving process, in which we use different techniques and strategies for a better understanding. Jozsa and Jozsa (2014, p. 70) believe that experienced readers possess more strategies and they can use them flexibly according to the

characteristics of the text before during and after the reading process. Steklacs (2009) also states that experienced readers possess a wide amount of knowledge, they are motivated and able to use more strategies, choosing the most appropriate ones in order to comprehend the text more adequately.

But what is a reading comprehension strategy? According to Graesser (2007) *'reading comprehension strategy* is a cognitive or behavioural action that is enacted under particular contextual conditions, with the goal of improving some aspect of comprehension' (p. 6). In order to measure the use and awareness of reading strategies, Mokhtari and Reichard (2002) developed a questionnaire for readers in native language which was further developed by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002) to measure English as a Second Language students' awareness and perceived use of reading strategies defined as 'mental plans, techniques and actions taken while reading academic or school-related materials' (p. 2). We used this instrument in our survey.

2.3. Reading for translation

When we translate, messages have to be conveyed from the source language (SL) into the target language (TL), and in order to accomplish this task appropriately, advanced reading skills are necessary. According to Newmark (1988), 'the work of translating a text starts with its analysis, first of all with a careful reading'. You begin the job by reading the original for two purposes: first, to understand what it is about; second, to analyse it from a translator's point of view, which is not the same as a linguist's or literary critics. You have to determine its intention and the way it is written for the purpose of selecting a suitable translation method and identifying particular and recurrent problems' AR4 (p. 11). Newmark states that both general reading and close reading are essential in order to understand a text appropriately. Close reading helps the reader to discover the main concepts, the essential ideas of the text and for this, it may be necessary to find and consult other sources of information as well. Close reading means that any challenging words, terms or expressions have to be looked up, and their meaning must be clarified.

Translators read SL texts with different purposes and motivations than ordinary readers. As Hatim and Mason (1990) stated it they "are 'privileged readers' of the SL text. Unlike the ordinary ST or TT reader, the translator reads in order to produce, decodes in order to re-encode. In other words, the translator uses as input to the translation process information which would normally be the output and therefore the end of the reading *process*. Consequently, processing is likely to be more thorough, more deliberate than that of the ordinary reader" (p. 224).

Danks and Griffin (1997) claim that 'the translator is working on various possibilities for translation at the same time that he or she is comprehending the source text. The search for optimal translations may indeed facilitate the comprehension of the source text, just as improved comprehension of the source text facilitates translation' (p. 174). Washbourne (2012) delineates six basic reading methods for translation and explains their purpose: '*skimming* (pre-reading; gaining global familiarity with or first impression of a text; choosing a text; using parallel texts and background texts); *scanning* (attesting term candidates or collocations); *exploratory reading* (between skimming and close reading; reading published translations to gain a global understanding or a familiarity with new information); *close reading, rereading* ('reading to write'; reading and annotating, finding patterns, multiple strategic readings of a source text […]); *reading to integrate* […] (creating a single organising frame (compare–contrast, problem–solution) across multiple texts); *revision reading/spot reading/proofreading* (unilingual re-reading/comparative re-reading, work of self and others') (pp. 45–46). Some studies focused on the relations between reading comprehension and translation, and in most cases, a significant correlation was found between them (Pham, 2017).

3. The instruments used in the survey

With the help of a questionnaire, we asked general information about the students' self-rated level of English; other foreign languages that they studied; how and where they learned English; whether

living in a bilingual region helped them in learning English (their native language is Hungarian but the official language of the country is Romanian); which task they would find the most difficult at an English language examination (reading comprehension, writing, use of English, listening comprehension or speaking); which language learning activity they consider the most useful in preparing them for their future career (reading, listening, speaking, writing, grammar, vocabulary or translation activities). Related to reading, we asked how difficult it is for them to comprehend texts written in English compared to texts written in their native language, Hungarian; how frequently they visit libraries (the library of the University or others); and what type of texts they usually read in English.

Students' perceived awareness of reading strategies and the frequency of use of these strategies when reading textbooks or academic texts related to their studies were measured with the help of the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) designed by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002). SORS can help students develop a better awareness of their reading strategies if the questionnaire is also discussed with them after they have completed it. They may realise that there are strategies which they have not used before but could be helpful in improving their reading efficiency.

The instrument consists of 30 questions and it has to be answered by using a five-point scale ranging from 'I never do this' to 'I always do this'. The chosen number shows the frequency of the use of a certain strategy—the higher it is, the more frequently the respective strategy is used by the respondent. SORS measures three different categories of strategies. Global reading strategies (GLOB) are planned, intentional techniques, measured with 13 items: *I have a purpose in mind when I read; I think about what I know to help me understand what I read; I take an overall view of the text to see what it is about before I read it; I think about whether the content of the text fits my reading purpose; I review the text first by noting its characteristics like length and organisation; when reading, I decide what to read closely and what to ignore; I use tables, figures and pictures in text to increase my understanding; I use context clues to help me better understand what I am reading; I use typographical features like boldface and italics to identify key information; I critically analyse and evaluate the information presented in the text; I check my understanding when I come across new information; I try to guess what the content of the text is about when I read; I check to see if my guesses about the text are right or wrong.* Problem solving strategies (PROB) refer to procedures and actions used by readers while working with a text, measured with eight items: *I read slowly and carefully to make sure I understand what I am reading; I try to get back on track when I lose concentration; I adjust my reading speed according to what I am reading; when text becomes difficult, I pay close attention to what I am reading; I stop from time to time and think about what I am reading; I try to picture or visualise information to help remember what I read; when text becomes difficult, I reread it to increase my understanding; when I read, I guess the meaning of unknown words or phrases.* Support strategies (SUP) are actions which may help the reader in comprehending the text, measured with nine items: *I take notes while reading to help me understand what I read; when text becomes difficult, I read aloud to help me understand what I read; I underline or circle information in the text to help me remember it; I use reference materials (e.g., a dictionary) to help me understand when I read; I paraphrase (restate ideas in my own words) to better understand what I read; I go back and forth in the text to find relationships among ideas in it; I ask myself questions I like to have answered in the text; when reading I translate from English into my native language; when reading I think about information in both English and my mother tongue.*

The students' reading comprehension level was measured with two tasks from a B2 level European consortium for the certificate of attainment in modern languages (ECL) sample test. On this level, examinees are expected to understand specific information and to recognise the purpose and tone of texts taken from different sources such as newspapers, magazines, formal letters, etc. The first task consisted of a gapped text and students had to match the right part to each gap from a given list, which contained more possible answers than the missing amount. In the second task, 10 questions had to be answered, based on a given text, using no more than seven words in each answer. In ECL exams, each skill (reading, listening, writing and speaking) is allocated 25 points; hence, the achievable

maximum score is 100. Candidates who reach a minimum of 60% overall in the four skills pass the exam successfully. With the help of these tasks, we measured whether our students' reading skills correspond to the expected B2 level. We also examined whether their performance in these tasks correlates with their performance in translation. The students' translation skills were assessed with a task in which they had to translate three paragraphs (approximately 200 words) chosen from the second text of the reading comprehension text. We used a 1 to 10 scale to score their performance. The evaluation process was based on the following criteria: correct transfer of information from the source text; appropriate choice of vocabulary and style in the TL; appropriate use of grammar, spelling, punctuation and syntax.

4. The results of the survey

Our target group consisted of 42 first year translation and interpretation students (most of them also teacher trainees) at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Faculty of Technical and Human Sciences. They answered the questions and completed the reading and translation test.

Based on their answers they may be considered experienced language learners because all of them have studied Romanian, the official language of the country and English as a foreign language. 93% of the respondents have also studied other foreign languages (Danish, German and Spanish). Their high school final exams included two language exams (one in Romanian and one in a foreign language, which was English for the majority of our respondents), and 10 students also possess international language certificates in English; therefore, we can assume that they are aware of their language proficiency level and their strengths and weaknesses.

They gave various answers related to how and where they learned English. Most of them studied it at school (90%), but they also mention other ways, such as individual studies; with the help of television; reading books, magazines in English; using the Internet, social media and playing video games; studying with the help of a private tutor. Regarding their self-rated level of English, 35.5% of the respondents master the language on advanced (C1) level, 21.5% on upper-intermediate (B2) level, 33.5% on intermediate (B1) level and 9.5% on pre-intermediate (A2) level. Based on these answers, 43% are not on the ideal level for their studies.

Twenty-seven students believe that living in a bilingual region helped them in learning English. The reasons they mentioned are the following: if they already know two languages, it is easier to learn a third; there are similarities between English and Romanian vocabulary and grammar; they have already developed a language learning method, so it was easier when they started to study English. Fifteen students declared that living in a bilingual region did not help them in learning English. The reasons they gave are the following: they started to learn English sooner than Romanian; they live in a town where the majority of the people speak Hungarian not Romanian; they could not find any similarities between the two languages.

Regarding the most difficult task in a language examination, 48% of the students chose listening comprehension, 31% writing, 12% speaking and only 9% chose reading comprehension. This confirms our experience that reading activities are fairly popular among students and when their language skills are assessed, the majority of students achieve higher scores in reading comprehension and speaking than in listening comprehension and writing.

Even though they consider reading comprehension a relatively easy tasks compared to the others, the majority (76%) of the students declared that they find it more difficult to understand texts written in English than in their native language, 9.5% stated that they find it significantly more difficult and only 14.5% claimed that they understand texts written in English almost as easily as in Hungarian, which would be the ideal and expected performance in case of a translator or language teacher.

Regarding the frequency of students' visits to libraries, 33% answered that they never use them, 60% use them occasionally and only 7% answered that they visit libraries regularly, which may raise

further questions about the availability of the necessary materials our students need for their studies, but it may also suggest students' preference for online sources. Another reason may be their limited interest and motivation in consulting a wider recommended literature regarding a certain subject besides the course materials made available by their teachers. The answers given to the next question may also explain why they do not use libraries regularly. Regarding the type of texts they read in English, 88% of the respondents stated that they read for entertainment, they prefer literature, mainly novels and short stories, online and print media, while only 12% read academic texts written in English (articles, textbooks, essays and monographs).

The respondents had to choose two activities from a list of seven (grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, speaking, writing and translation exercises) which they find the most useful in developing the necessary language skills for their future career. The most rarely chosen activity was reading (3%), which may result from the fact that the students already feel confident in comprehending written texts, but it may also suggest that they are not aware of the benefits and importance of further developing their reading skills and acquiring wider knowledge through reading.
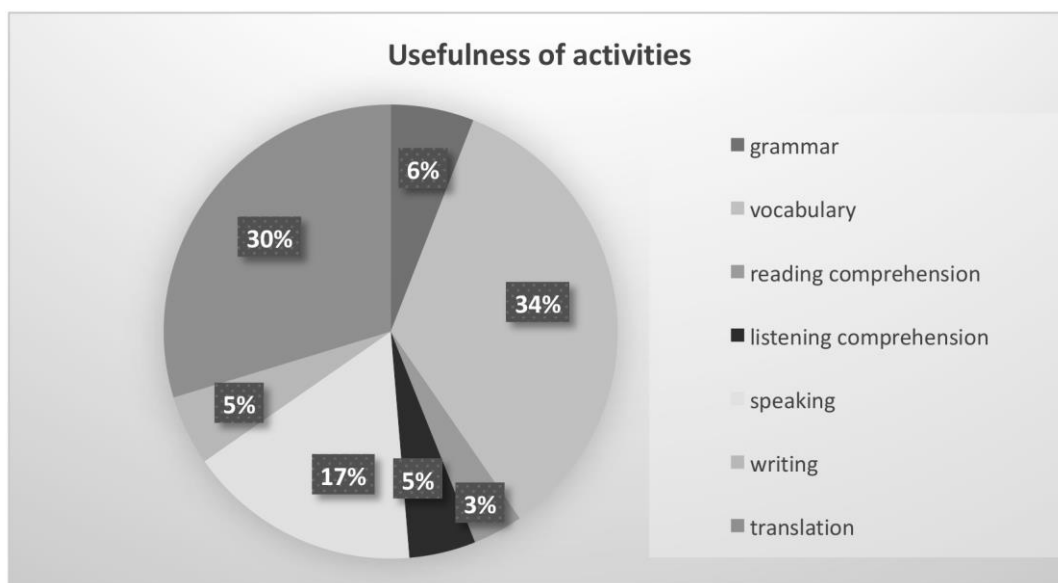

Figure 1. Usefulness of language learning activities

The next set of 30 questions measured students' perceived use and awareness of reading strategies when reading textbooks or academic texts related to their studies. The score averages were interpreted for each category of strategies (GLOB, PROB and SUP) separately and for the whole instrument according to the levels suggested by the authors (Mokhtari and Sheorey 2002) who developed the instrument: High = mean of 3.5 or higher; Moderate = mean of 2.5 to 3.4 and Low = mean of 2.5 or lower.

The results show that the majority of the respondents are aware of the usefulness and importance of GLOB strategies and they use most of them as often as necessary in order to comprehend academic texts and school materials more efficiently. Only one of them showed a lack of awareness of these techniques:

Table 1. Awareness of GLOB strategies

Mean	Number of respondents	%
High	20	47.62
Medium	21	50.00
Low	1	2.38

Based on the given answers, the vast majority of the students (92.86%) are aware of using PROB strategies as well while reading academic texts or school materials, and they use them frequently. None of them showed a lack of awareness of these strategies.

Table 2. Awareness of PROB strategies

Mean	Number of respondents	%
High	39	92.86
Medium	3	7.14
Low	0	0

Based on the answers, students seem to find SUP Strategies less important than the other two categories. The reason for this may be that they are experienced readers and therefore they do not need to use these strategies as frequently as the ones from the previous categories.

Table 3. Awareness of SUP strategies

Mean	Number of respondents	%
High	15	25.71
Medium	24	57.14
Low	3	7.14

The score averages for the whole instrument and group means for the three strategies show that the students possess the necessary reading strategies for efficient comprehension of textbooks or academic texts related to their studies:

Table 4. Averages for the whole instrument

Mean	Number of respondents	%
High	22	52.38
Medium	19	45.24
Low	1	2.38

Table 5. The group's means for the three strategies and the overall mean

GLOB	PROB	SUP	Overall
3.41	4.04	3.30	3.54

We were also interested in the most frequently and most rarely used strategies from each category. The most frequently used ones proved to be the following: *I use tables, figures and pictures in text to increase my understanding* (GLOB strategy, mean: 4.17); *I try to get back on track when I lose concentration* (PROB strategy, mean: 4.38); *I use reference materials (e.g., a dictionary) to help me understand when I read* (SUP strategy, mean: 3.79). The most rarely used ones were the following: *I critically analyse and evaluate the information presented in the text* (GLOB strategy, mean: 2.69); *I stop from time to time and think about what I am reading* (PROB strategy, mean: 3.69); *I ask myself questions I like to have answered in the text* (SUP strategy, mean: 2.64).

After the students completed the survey, the items from the SORS were discussed with the group in order to increase their understanding of the reading process and their awareness of reading strategies. We encouraged them to use any of the strategies they had not used before but would consider useful in order to comprehend texts more efficiently in the future.

Based on the results of the reading comprehension tasks AR5, 35 students (83.33%) achieved the necessary minimum 60% or higher score corresponding to B2 level, while seven students' (16.66%) performance was weaker. The first task, where they had to read a gapped text and find the right part to each blank space from a given list, proved less difficult for them than the second one, where they had to read a text and answer 10 questions using maximum seven words in each answer. 50% of the students managed to answer all the questions correctly in the first task, while none of them could be

awarded the maximum score for the second task. The unacceptable answers given in this task indicate that students failed to understand and interpret correctly certain parts of the text.

For the translation task, four students (9.52%) were awarded 10 points, but there were other 19 acceptable translations (45.23%) awarded with 8, 8.5, 9 or 9.5 points, without considerable misinterpretations of the source text. Therefore, it can be said that a total of 23 students (54.76%) produced acceptable translations. Works awarded only with 6, 6.5, 7 or 7.5 points (19 students, 33.3%) contained misinterpretations of certain phrases or sentences, which affected the overall meaning of the passage. One student (2.38%) received 5.5 points, she produced an unacceptable translation containing several misinterpreted phrases and sentences, which significantly altered the overall message and meaning of the target text.

A strong correlation (r = 0.710) was found between students' scores achieved in the reading comprehension test and the translation task. The correlation between the results of the second reading comprehension task and the results of the translation task was stronger (r = 0.676) than the correlation between the results of the first reading comprehension task and the results of the translation task (r = 0.489). This confirms our assumption based on experience that students' reading comprehension skills in English influence the ability to translate texts into Hungarian, and it confirms that reading comprehension influences translation performance.

5. Conclusions

The survey revealed and confirmed some potential issues which should be addressed in the future regarding the teaching–learning process and curriculum development. These are the following: some of the students should be helped to improve their language skills and reach the performance level which is expected from a translator or language teacher; they should be encouraged to read diverse texts in English, not only genres written for entertainment but also read works related to their studies (articles, textbooks, essays and monographs); they must be aware of the importance of reading comprehension skills and strategies in translation and language teaching, and these skills must be further developed if necessary; the set of questions from the SORS may be used to increase students' awareness of reading strategies and their deeper understanding of the reading process.

The survey confirmed our assumption that students' reading comprehension skills in English influence their ability to translate texts into Hungarian. As a further step of this study, we intend to examine whether there are any relations between our findings and students' reading comprehension level in their native language and their problem-solving skills. The methodology of measuring reading comprehension in native language and problem-solving skills have already been developed and applied by our colleagues at Sapientia University (Pletl, 2018; Harangus, 2018), therefore, we will be able to use their results, compare it with the results of this study and analyse possible connections and correlations between the aforementioned skills.

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