

[DOI: 10.20472/IAC.2018.038.009](https://doi.org/10.20472/IAC.2018.038.009)

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FOCUS ON FORM IN TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING TO IMPROVE TRANSLATION SKILLS

Abstract:

Focus on Form is one of several teaching methodologies in Task-Based Language Teaching, which mainly concentrates on communicative class setting. This study examines students' skills in Thai to English translation after implementing Focus on Form in Task-Based Language Teaching, and the students' feedback regarding the development of translation skills following this method. The target group was comprised of 40 third-year English-major students at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University. The experiment consisted of 5 three-hour lessons focusing on form in Task-Based Language Teaching. The data were collected through a Thai to English translation test, a Thai to English translation evaluation form and a student's opinion questionnaire. After implementing this method, the students' translation capabilities reached a satisfactory level of 65.16%. The students' opinions toward the teaching method were positive. The results of this study demonstrated the benefits of employing a form-focused approach in a classroom setting, and exhibited factors that affect students' translation capabilities.

Keywords:

Translation, Task-Based Language Teaching, Form-focused instruction, Focus on Form

Introduction

In a world where English is a dominant language, translation has become tremendously important. Translation is therefore one of the compulsory courses in the University's curriculum for English major students in non-native English speaking countries. In Thailand, all English major students must pass a translation course before graduation. Translation skills play a vital role in students' career choices, and most importantly, in their daily lives.

Translation means to render a text that is in one particular language to another language. It's the accurate transference of information in order to represent the original document to the target document (Kroulek, 2016). In order to produce a good translation, students need to develop excellent knowledge of both the source language(s) and, most notably, the target language.

One major challenge to teach translation to English major students at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University (CMRU) is that they have low English proficiency. The majority of them are from rural areas and have just started studying English more intensively at the University. When studying Thai to English Translation, which requires significant knowledge of English, students seem to be discouraged and lack strong commitment to academic excellence.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an approach which is adopted to solve students' translation problems. Nunan (1999) defined task-based language learning as "an approach to the design of language courses in which the point of departure is not an ordered list of linguistic items, but a collection of tasks". The focus of TBLT is providing learners with the language components and forms that they need in order to accomplish particular real-world tasks. Translation is, therefore, beyond accuracy. A translator has to make the target text sound appropriate and natural. Farahzad (1992) suggested that two main features were to be considered when scoring each unit of translation, namely "accuracy": the translation should convey the information in the source text (ST) precisely, i.e. the translation should be close to the ST norms; as well as "appropriateness": the sentences should sound fluent and native and be correct in terms of structure. Thus, in order to be proficient in translation, CMRU students should understand the English language in a communicative context and reach the next stage, where they can produce appropriate and natural Thai to English translation.

"Focus on Form" instruction was first introduced for teaching grammar. Long & Robinson (1998, p. 23) defined "Focus on Form" as an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features—by the teacher and/or one or more students—triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production". Doughty (2003) distinguishes between "focus on forms" and "focus on form" in second language instruction. "Focus on forms" is the deliberate teaching of grammar in order to produce understanding of the grammar, in the hope that it would allow the language learner to use the form correctly. "Focus on form", on the other hand, refers to bringing grammar to the attention of language learners as part of the communicative language practice. It is generally conceded that focusing on grammar for grammar's sake does little to contribute to correctness during communication, while making ESL learners aware of structures as part of the communicative language practice can contribute to the development of greater

accuracy during communication. As Long (2012) noted, “focus on form” refers only to form focused activities that arise during, and embedded in, meaning-based lessons; they are not scheduled in advance, as is the case with focus on forms, but occur incidentally as a function of the interaction of learners with the subject matter or tasks that constitute the learners' and their teacher's predominant focus.

In order to contribute to the development of communicative abilities, which will ultimately be beneficial to translation, the “focus on form” type of ESL grammar instruction can be applied in a classroom in three possible ways. First, direct ESL grammar instruction may help raise learners' awareness of forms which they do not notice, when reading or hearing them, so learners may learn to recognize the features and may look out for them in the future (Ellis, 2000). Second, it may serve as a memory device, helping ESL learners remember how to produce a particular form until they can produce it automatically. Third, ESL grammar instruction can be a means for “flooding” learners with examples of a form which occurs infrequently, giving them more intensive practice with a form that they may not encounter in everyday speech, except once every week or so (Graham and Brigham, 2013).

The use of “focus on form” in “Task-based Language Teaching” was therefore implemented in the Translation 1 course, not only to improve the students' translation skills, but also to encourage and motivate them to love translation.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were

1. To study students' translation skills from Thai to English after the use of “focus on form” in Task-Based Language Teaching.
2. To assess students' feedback regarding the development of their translation skills after the use of “focus on form” in Task-Based Language Teaching.

Research Methodology

1. Target group

The target group was comprised of 40 third-year English major students who were enrolled in Translation 1 (ENG 3219) at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University.

2. Instruments

- 1) The experimental instruments were 5 three- hour lesson plans using “focus on form” in Task-based Language Teaching.
- 2) The data were collected from the following sources:

- (1) a written Thai to English translation test that aimed to assess students' translation skills in lexical, sentence and paragraph levels. Students translated 15 short excerpts (1.5–3 lines per excerpt) from various sources such as brochures, newspapers, magazines and websites. The students were allowed to consult dictionaries. Three specialists in translation (translation and English instructors) were asked to assess the validity of the test content. The students' written tests were graded by 2 specialists using the same rubric, evaluating accuracy and appropriateness.
- (2) a Thai to English translation evaluation form with details for each criterion.

Table 1: Thai to English translation evaluation form

	1.5	1.0	0.5	0
Accuracy	Flawless rendition of the original passage.	Mostly accurate rendition of the original passage. Some parts may show signs of misunderstanding	Translation consists primarily of loose paraphrasing based on general knowledge of the text, showing frequent or large gaps, or completely missing the point.	Translation as a whole makes little sense.
Appropriateness	No evidence of misunderstanding of syntax or vocabulary. Sounds fluent and native.	Some problems with syntax and/or vocabulary. Sounds natural except in difficult syntactical constructions.	Significant problems with English syntax and/or vocabulary throughout. Some attempt to reflect stylistic features of the original text.	Little sense of style; word-for-word translation which often makes poor sense in English.

- (3) a questionnaire which contained open-ended questions to gather information about students' feedback on translation improvement and factors that affected their translation.

3. Data Collection Method

This study used a posttest only design. The data collection process started with the researcher implementing the three-hour lesson plans using “focus on form” in Task-based Language Teaching in translation classes for five weeks. At the end of the fifth week, the students were asked to answer the questionnaire. The following week the students did the Thai to English translation test. Subsequently, two specialists graded the written tests using the provided rubric for accuracy and appropriateness.

The collected test scores were analyzed using mean, percentage and standard deviation. The questionnaires were then analysed using qualitative data analysis techniques.

Results and Discussion

1. Students’ translation skills from Thai to English after the use of “focus on form” in Task-based Language Teaching.

Table 2: Mean, SD, percentages and quality level for the students’ English-to-Thai translation tests

Number of students	Full score	Mean	S.D.	Percentage	Quality Level
41	45	29.32	3.56	65.16	Satisfactory

After implementing the method, the students’ Thai to English translation abilities were at the satisfactory level (65.16%).

The results imply that the use of “focus on form” in Task-based Language Teaching helps students to reassess their knowledge of English grammar, which is necessary for their translation. The result relates to Wachira Daniai’s (2011) study which found that knowledge of English grammar is very important to students’ translation. Even though they know the meaning of the words and can select the right vocabulary, they still have problems with English structures and cannot translate accurately. Moreover, the study indicated that the students had little knowledge of basic grammar, and if they had not been pointed out the grammatical errors in their translation, they wouldn’t have understood the source text. Despite the fact that translation should place focus on the meaning not forms, implementing “focus on form” in teaching translation, in this research, helped the students improve their forms through communicative task-based teaching activities. This approach encourages students to learn grammar in a more meaningful context and to adjust their language, while focusing on meanings (Chomraj Patanasom and Angkana Tongpoon-Patanasom, 2012).

2. Students’ feedback regarding the development of translation skills after the use of “focus on form” in Task-based Language Teaching.

The students' perception was that using the method enabled them to improve their Thai to English translation skills as they had been working in groups throughout the study. This provided them the opportunity to share and broaden their translation experiences. This outcome is aligned with Roskosa and Rupniec's (2016) and Zainudin and Awal's (2012) studies, which found that the use of group work in the process of translation was a successful way of diversifying the process of translator training. This is due to the fact that group translation facilitates the development of translator's experience, skills and language competency. Group work also encouraged discussion on translation work and enabled the students to understand the source text better before translating it. The class discussion focused on the errors found in the peers' work and their translated text and further helped the students learn about various translation errors and how to better their own translation.

In addition, this experiment used texts from various fields, illustrations, and roleplays as part of the activities to promote the students' understanding of roles, moods and feelings of the interlocutors. These stimulated their imagination and enhanced their creativity in translation. This result is aligned with Grassilli's study (2014), which indicated that the act of translating and the creative process are virtually inseparable, a fact that is especially true in literary translations. In addition, this finding also agrees with Holst's (2010), which found that many different purposes and audiences of translations offer great opportunities for translators to be creative when translating. Holst states that context variables can influence the execution of translations – and thus, also the degree of creativity. This can be concluded that the activities made the students feel more positive when they were translating dialogues and, simultaneously, increased creativity which helped them improve their language and employ appropriate language structures.

Conclusion

A focus on meaning alone is insufficient to improve students' translation abilities. Utilizing meaning-focused lessons, and a variety of pedagogic procedures allow students to pay attention to linguistic elements, in context, when experiencing problems as they work on communicative tasks. Translation skills should therefore be improved by the use of "focus on form" in Task-based Language Teaching for students with low proficiency and learning motivation. The instructor has to place effort in selecting interesting and meaningful source texts from different fields in order to encourage students to translate in a communicative way. Pair work and group work are necessary to benefit them by sharing their ideas and translation experience. If the method can be implemented in other translation classes, it will certainly lower students' translation errors and will strengthen their overall competencies.

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