

A Contrastive Analysis of Out-of-Context Translation of Farsi Adjectives into English in EFL classrooms

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Abstract

This study aims to reveal the probable problems which may occur due to inadvertent translation of Farsi adjectives into English by teachers in EFL classrooms. Students, especially in lower levels, resort to their L1 to fill the gaps of their L2 knowledge. Non-native foreign language teachers some times give language learners the wrong impression that there are one-to-one correspondence equivalents in both languages without considering the non-compatibility of certain combinations such as noun+ adjectives. This problem manifests itself when teachers try to translate from their native language into English. For instance, the Persian adjective, /sädeh/, can be translated into “easy, plain, naïve and unskilled”.

The results of this case study revealed that out-of-context translations and providing only one equivalent for students without informing them on the importance of context in selecting the equivalents can be misleading.

Keywords: Contrastive analysis, Translation, Equivalent, Farsi (Persian) adjective

1. Introduction

In the English language, like any other language, there are words that co-occur with high frequency, and there are words which naturally do not co-occur. So the role of foreign language teachers is to raise awareness in learners that all types of combinations or collocations are not acceptable in English.

As a matter of fact, teachers can be claimed to be an essential part of education, as Finocchiaro and Bonomo (2006) referred to the role of teachers as vital to learning skills and habits (Moshayedi, 2009). They might be involved in different steps which students want to take. As an EFL teacher, one of the obsessions, particularly in lower levels, can be how to deal with the students' first language (L1). Some teachers do their best to encourage students to keep using English and not to switch to their L1. As a matter of fact, there are various approaches towards using L1 in EFL classes. Some approaches which embrace structural linguistics state that L1 is interfering and should not be used in classrooms, whereas some other theories such as Counseling-Learning theory emphasize on the necessity of L1 in classes, and claim it is impossible to expect learners to leave their L1 background behind (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Cook (2001), For instance, set out three reasons against using L1 in classrooms embracing Krashen's acquisition theory, which claims the process of L2 learning assimilates the process children pick up their L1 (Beressa, 2003). On the other hand, Beressa (2003) mentioned that L1 is like a scaffold for building up L2; therefore, translation is a tool to fill the gaps.

One of the shortages which beginners of English suffer lies within the realm of vocabulary. Liach and Gallego (2009) stated knowing a fairly big number of vocabulary is quintessential in learning L2. In this respect, facing a problem, beginners tend to resort to their L1 lexical system and they inevitably rely on translation (Hayati & Shahriari, 2010), firstly due to the lack of knowledge in English and secondly in order to make sure they are conveying or comprehending the correct message. However, as Hayati and Shahriari (2010) mentioned it distracts them from paying attention to contextual clues. In fact, when they start to produce English, they may ask a word in their L1 and want their teacher to give its equivalent in English, which demands teachers to enter the realm of translation. This translation can be to some extent problematic because some words may have more than one meaning or even different parts of speech in different contexts.

The aim of the present study is to contrastively study the problematic differences between some Farsi adjectives and their English equivalents (strong version of CA) to show the differences in meaning when teachers translate the Farsi adjectives into English without considering the context. It also intends to reveal the small nuances between words can be misleading too (moderate version of CA).

As a matter of fact, the researchers put 30 adjectives under study, but to put it in nutshell, they present some of the adjectives as exemplary.

2. Theoretical Framework

Contrastive analysis (CA), which is "largely associated with language teaching" (Ziahosseiny, 1999, p.5), has some implications in "the ways of expressing the same meaning in different languages" (p.9). In other words, CA concerns comparing two or more languages to "determine both the differences and similarities between them" (Keshavarz, 1999). Stern (1983) said CA did not aim to present a new method of teaching, but to describe across two languages and it can be useful for learning problems.

The strong version of CA claims to predict the difficulties of learning L2; it only describes the errors which are caused by L1 interference, and believes the more different the items of two languages are, the more difficult they are for learners. The moderate version which was brought up by Oller and Ziahosseiny (1970) considers both interlingual and intralingual errors and believes minimal differences are more problematic (Ziahosseiny, 1999; Keshavarz, 1999).

The annals of contrastive analysis and classrooms' translation abounds with studies on different aspects of language, such as grammar, vocabulary, adjectives, etc. since considerably long time ago, for instance, Keyvani (1977) worked on English and Persian sound patterning; Kujoory (1978) did a contrastive analysis of culture in literature; Jafarpur (1979) investigated the Persian and English articles; Newman (1988) analyzed the contrasts between the collocation related to cooking and dressing in Hebrew and English; Mirhassani (1989) contrastively analyzed the verbs in Persian and English; later in 2000, he put the Persian and English adjectives under study.

In 1999, Fallahi studied future forms of verbs in English and Persian and said as the simple form of future, "In Persian, verb stems have a double semantic load", which show both the word meaning and action time. He stated that simple future in Persian is formed by adding *Xah*, which means "to want" in English, "using the present inflectional ending" to the beginning of the base verb. However, in English 'will' should be added to the base verb (p.58). This form can carry two functions: predictive and impersonal. He studied different future making forms and found out sometimes lack of corresponding of one form in one language can be a source of language interference, such as "be about to+ infinitive" which is absent in Persian (p.67).

Wang and Wen (2002) investigated adjective errors of Chinese learners and figured out that "62% of errors were due to transfer in language, 28% were due to transfer between languages" (Abbasi & Karimnia, 2011, p.529). This study can reveal the significant role of overgeneralization and transfer of first language in learning an L2.

Abbasi and Karimnia's study (2011) supported the idea that interlingual errors are the most common ones, because learners' knowledge of target language is not sufficient, and they have to resort to their L1. Vahid Dastjerdi and Shekary (2006) investigated the poetic genre in translation of three Persian poems and found cross-linguistic differences related to simplification, explicitation, normalization, transitivity, and nominalization.

Karimi (2006) provided some examples of equivalents in English and Persian and stated that providing good equivalents and translation requires meeting a lot of factors such as syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and cultural systems of both languages. Perpetuating contrastive analysis studies, Khodabandeh and Tahririan (2007) analyzed the Persian and English online newspapers to identify the differences and similarities between the headlines.

In their study, Laufer and Girsai (2008) investigated the differences among three ways of teaching vocabulary and concluded that contrastive analysis incorporating with translation can be the most effective one for students to recall the new words. However, the lesson in their study was text-based and could provide the context for the learners. Their study investigated the effect of contrastive analysis and translation activities on acquisition of single words and collocations. It suggested that such activities are important in L2 teaching but at the same time the communicative goals should be achieved too.

Machida (2008) reported the results of bringing text translation into an advanced L2 program concluding that the root of the large proportion of the errors in translation is the vocabulary problems.

Gholami (2009) also stated that one of the problematic areas of learning a language is that of vocabulary. Some of the problems can be due to polysemy, or in other words due to multiplicity of meaning for one word. She believes teaching which is reliant on translation is less likely to bring about good communication and it may lead to some semantic mistakes. Apart from that; Keshavarz (1999) referred to Brown's (1987) hierarchy of difficulty in which *split*- one item in native language has two or more equivalents in target language- is the most difficult one.

Since collocations, both idiomatic and non idiomatic, are a problematic area for learners, this study tries to contrastively analyze the non-compatibility of certain combinations of nouns with adjectives when translated from Persian into English.

3. Method

3.1 Selection of Adjectives

The adjectives which were selected for this study were derived from the texts translated from Persian into English by EFL learners. The selected adjectives have at least two equivalents in English. Bilingual dictionaries were helpful to choose the appropriate adjectives with more than one meaning.

3.2 Procedure and Instruments

Listing 30 Persian adjectives which seemed to have more than one equivalent in English, the researchers hired The Aryanpur Progressive Persian-English Dictionary to confirm that the selected adjectives can be translated in more than one way into English. Among the adjectives, such as (پخته، راحت، حساس زرننگ، ساده، سخت، آبی، بزرگ، عقب افتاده، چینی، باردار، خام) some were selected randomly to be presented as examples for this study. However, it seems the results could be generalized for the other Persian adjectives with more than one equivalent.

Each Persian adjective with some or all of its equivalents followed by the related examples, extracted from the mentioned Persian-English dictionary, were listed. Then the researchers selected one of the equivalents as the prototype, i.e., they considered one of them might be more likely to be given as the first equivalent by teachers. Next, they replaced all the equivalents with the prototype in the given examples to see the compatibility of certain combinations. To do this, they employed the monolingual English dictionary- Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of current English- to check different meanings of the prototype and also Oxford Collocations dictionary for checking whether they collocate.

The randomly selected adjectives are as follows:

ساده /s ädeh/ عقب افتاده /æghæbōftādeh/ سبک /sæbōk/ سنگین /sængin/ خودکار /khōdkār/ مشکل /mōshkel/ مصد نوعی /mæsnoo'i/

The selected prototypical equivalent for each of them is following:

ساده /s ädeh/: easy

عقب افتاده /æghæbōftādeh/: retarded

سبک /sæbōk/: light

سنگین /sængin/: heavy

خودکار /khōdkār/: automatic

مشکل /mōshkel/: difficult

مصد نوعی /mæsnoo'i/: artificial

4. Analysis and Results

Different translations of the adjectives and the examples are following. The researchers' prototype is the first one.

1. ساده /s ädeh/

a.Easy: An easy mathematical problem
b.Plain: A plain dress.
c.Na ĩve: A na ĩve inexperienced boy.
d.Unskilled: An unskilled worker.

If a student wants to use any of the above adjectives but does not know how to say, he may ask his teacher “what is /sädeh/ in English?”. If the teacher inadvertently gives only one of

the adjectives without asking about the contexts the student wants to use the adjective in, translation problems start to turn up. In this case L1 can be considered interfering too.

At this step, we imagine the teacher's answer to the above question is "easy". Substituting the bold adjectives with "easy", we can find out how trouble making it would be.

b: An easy dress.
c: An easy inexperienced boy.
d: An easy worker.

*Obviously "an easy dress" cannot get across the meaning of "a plain dress". Therefore, using the teacher's translation which translated **sādeh** into **easy** is problematic here because it cannot convey the student's meaning.*

*Also in the second example, **easy** cannot carry the same meaning as **na'īve** and this may eventuate to miscommunication. However, this sentence is not meaningless like the last one, because according to the third definition of **easy** in Oxford dictionary, it can make sense; that is, it can mean an inexperienced boy who is open to attacks.*

*In the third example **easy** does not convey the meaning of **unskilled** either, but it is not senseless. Considering the fact that these are suggestive and can differ in real contexts, based on the definitions of the word **easy** in the Oxford dictionary, the meaning of this example can be "A worker who is pleasant and friendly", but not unskilled. So, although not senseless, it may bring up some miscommunication.*

2. عقب افتاده /æghæbōftādeh/

a.Retarded: A retarded child
b.Backward,Underdeveloped: A backward country
c.Overdue: Overdue rent money

For this example, we assume "retarded" as the prototypical equivalent, i.e., we reckon if a student asks the meaning of /æghæbōftādeh/, the first word which may be provided is "retarded". Substituting the bold adjectives with "easy", we can have the following results:

b: A retarded country
c: Retarded rent money

For the first example, according to the definition in the Oxford dictionary, "retarded" means 'less developed mentally than is normally for a particular age'. Since mental development cannot be defined for a country, we can construe it as a wrong transfer of one translation to an inappropriate context.

The same problem is clear in the second example too. We cannot use an adjective which refers to lack of mental progress for money.

3. سبک /sæbōk/

a.Light: A light suitcase
b.Undignified: The undignified behavior of that drunken man
c.Nimble-handed: A nimble-handed man
d.Relieved: At times, weeping gives a person relief
e.Easy: Easy work and good salary is rare

At this step, we will replace the adjectives which mean / sæbōk / with *light* as the assumed prototype to figure out differences in meaning in different contexts.

b.Undignified: The light behavior of that drunken man
c.Nimble-handed: A light man
d.Relieved: At times, weeping gives a person light

It seems, based on the definitions of "light" in the Oxford dictionary, light cannot be congruent in "b" and also it cannot be collocated with "behavior" according to Oxford Collocations dictionary.

In example "c", the substitution of "nimble-handed" with "light" changes the meaning totally. The new sentence can refer to the weight of the man not to his agility.

Turning the next sentence, which like the other examples is extracted from **The Aryanpur progressive Persian-English dictionary**, to the new one requires changing the verb as well because "light" is an adjective and "relief" is a noun. So the new sentence with "light" may be like this: At times, weeping **makes** a person **light**, which is not collocated properly in English.

4. خودکار /khōdkār/

a. Automatic: Light, **automatic** weapons

b. **Ballpoint** pen

Using the word 'automatic' when some one wants to ask for a pen is clearly disastrous, and also replacing the adjective by which the speaker or reader wants to refer to some automatic device with ballpoint pen can be obviously misleading. Therefore, if we substituted automatic with ballpoint pen in the example above, the result would be: Light, ballpoint pen weapons, which by far is misleading.

5. سنگین /sæŋin/

a. Heavy: **Heavy** machine gun.

b. Burdensome:
Burdensome responsibilities

c. Dignified: A **dignified** and respectable man

d. Hard; Heavy: **Heavy** snow/ (ear) **hard** of hearing

Replacing the adjectives above with heavy, we may have the following results:

b. Burdensome:
Heavy responsibilities

c. Dignified: A **Heavy** and respectable man

d. Hard; Heavy: **Heavy** snow/ (ear) **heavy** of hearing

In the table above, the first and the third examples of substitution of **heavy** seem to keep the meaning and they are still clear to be understood. However, it is not the case about the second and the fourth ones. In the second one, heavy can refer to the man's weight not to his dignity, and in the fourth one, heavy cannot be collocated with "**of hearing**".

Besides, it is possible and necessary to change the adjectives which students need to the most appropriate one in English. For instance a student may ask for the word /sæŋin/, but if the teacher knows the context, he can give another word which is more English. Imagine a student wants to say “This responsibility is so burdensome”. As he is a beginner, he may ask for the English equivalents of **responsibility**. Imagine he has asked all the words and wants to fill the adjective gap, so he asks for the word /sæŋin/ and if the teacher says **heavy** straightforward, the sentence will turn to: “This responsibility is so heavy”, which does not sound English. In this case, if he knows the context, he can say difficult which means hard in English not heavy. This can reveal the necessity called for equivalents provision.

6. مشکل/mōshkel/

Some Persian adjectives can be more troublesome in translation due to their duplicity of parts of speech, /mōshkel/ is a case in point which can be used as both noun and adjective. This can stress the awareness of context as a means to provide a right part of speech. As a noun, it can be translated as: “problem, hurdle, difficulty, distress, and hassle” and as an adjective the following words can be its English equivalents: “difficult, hard, abstruse, severe, tough, troublesome, problematic”. The tables below present two examples of when /mōshkel/ is a noun and two examples of when it is an adjective.

a. Difficulty: If you have any difficulty , let me know
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b. Problem: No problem is unsolvable

c. Hard: A hard exam

d. Abstruse: Mathematics is abstruse

Accordingly, when a student asks his teacher for an English equivalent for /mōshkel/, he might mean to use either the noun form or the adjective form. If he wanted the noun and the teacher gave him the adjective equivalents, the sentences above may change to:

c. Hard: A difficulty exam

d. Abstruse: Mathematics is difficulty

*Considering **difficulty** as the prototypical noun form, we can conclude the sentences above cannot be grammatically correct, because in both cases, after a noun and after the verb to be, we need adjectives. However, if a student asks for the noun equivalent but provided with adjective, the following mistakes are likely to be made:*

a.Difficulty:If you have any hard , let me know
--

b.Problem: No hard is unsolvable

*In these examples, the nouns were substituted by **hard** as the assumed prototypical adjective, but clearly; a noun is required for these sentences to be grammatically correct.*

مصنوعی. /mæsnoo'i/

a.Artificial: Artificial smile

b.False: false teeth

c.Fake: Fake beard

d.Synthetic: Synthetic silk

*Besides some adjectives like /sädeh/, which can have different denotations, some adjectives can suggest mostly the same meaning in different texts such as /mæsnoo'i/ which can suggest the idea of “man-made” in most cases. Therefore, it most comes to the collocation rather than grammar and vocabulary. In all the examples above, a student may be provided with the word **artificial**. Semantically, all the examples make sense with **artificial** and even some teachers may ignore the matter of go-togetherness because of stressing communication rather than native- like speech. But mis-collocating adjectives and nouns can reveal lack of language knowledge and this is one of teachers' duties to redress the problematic areas. So, teachers had better know the context before giving the equivalents to students and they had better correct the collocation problems like **artificial teeth**, into **false teeth** although it does not interfere communication.*

5. Discussion

The goal put forward by this study was to reveal that teachers' out of context provision of English adjectives in response to students' request for translation of their Farsi adjectives into English could be misleading. To fulfill this purpose, some Farsi adjectives with some of their equivalents went under study as exemplary. In this study, the researchers tried to predict the probable mistakes which direct translation may cause, considering some aspects of strong CA. They also intended to show that when words share some features apart from their differences, mistakes are likely to happen, like when a Farsi word can have more than one meaning with differences in application; in this case, they picked up moderate version of CA to state nuances can be problematic too.

With regard to the results of this study, which were in line with the outcomes of some other studies (e.g., Gholami, 2009), firstly we can say there are some differences between the Farsi adjectives under-study and their English equivalents in different contexts, and we are not able

to use the equivalents without having some knowledge of the compatibility of certain combinations. For example, although /s ädeh/ in Farsi can be translated into *easy*, *plain*, *na'ive*, and *unskilled* in English and it can be used in all three meanings in Farsi, its assumed prototypical translation, *easy*, cannot be used in all the contexts that /s ädeh / can be used in. So, it is so lax of us to use *easy* for a person's shirt which is plain.

Secondly, although translation is a means to help students learn vocabulary contextually (Laufer and Girsai, 2008), it also seems to be misleading and potential to lead to miscommunication when it is out of context (Gholami, 2009). Therefore, as Karimi (2006) stated it requires so many factors such as syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and cultural systems of both languages to provide right equivalents and translation, and teachers cannot translate vocabulary only by their dictionary knowledge, as we proved that context, parts of speech and collocation should be taken into consideration. In addition, in line with Brown's (1987) hierarchy of difficulty levels, the difficulty level of *split* was presented in this study. That is when Farsi speaking students ask their teachers for English equivalents of adjectives and their teachers provide them with an individual word, they may misuse the teachers' answer in an inappropriate context. It occurs since many Farsi adjectives can have more than one English equivalent and it is on the teachers' shoulders to make students aware of this multiplicity of the way a word can be translated. For instance, if a student asks his teacher for the English equivalent of / səbök / when he wants to talk about a person's behavior, teacher's translation of / səbök / into *light* without asking about the student's intended meaning could cause miscommunication.

To prevent such problems, teachers should consider many factors in their translation. First of all, they had better not give a direct out of context translation of vocabulary when they do not know what exactly their students want to say. At first, they should detect their meaning and then provide them with translation. However, teachers should mention the fact that this translation may not be appropriate in other contexts. Providing an example of wrong usages could be complementary.

Teachers can also ask students to express themselves in English and only stop for the word they do not know. In this case, if they ask for the English equivalents, teachers would do better, since the context is already there.

In addition, teachers can teach students to use monolingual dictionaries. So if their teachers translated /s ädeh/ into *easy*, they would look it up in an English monolingual dictionary to peruse different possible situations in which *easy* can be used.

Another method teachers can employ to help learners is to provide them with opposites. For instance, when they want to translate a Farsi adjective like /s ädeh/ to *easy* in English, they had better mention this word is opposite of *difficult* or *hard* and in other contexts we may not be able to use it. Therefore, if in a context, /s ädeh/ is opposite of *luxurious*, students may hesitate to use *easy*.

In addition, this study can be to some extent against the word to word translation method via dictionaries because it believes in multiplicity of equivalents for words, which stand out

considering the context. It also draws students' attention to this fact that the first equivalent in dictionaries is not always the best or the one and only. In this case, students might be encouraged to read the examples given in dictionaries to find the appropriate context for using the very adjectives.

In conclusion, in EFL classes, particularly in beginning levels, students may use their native language in order to ask for help. When they do not have enough vocabulary, they demand their teachers to provide them with English equivalents of Farsi words (adjectives), and they may think substituting the given equivalents with their Farsi adjectives can be always appropriate, while as it was shown, this process should be accompanied by context provision to be congruent, in line with Karimi (2006). Teachers can employ different methods to fulfill this purpose, such as giving opposites, teaching students to use monolingual dictionaries, asking about their intended meaning, and having them speak in sentences and ask only for gaps. Besides, a growing knowledge of acceptable collocations will build associations which give learners clues about compatibility.

As a matter of fact, teachers can give feedback and correct students as they make a mistake, but sometimes, they retain these translations and misuse them when they use the language independently. Therefore, it seems to be important to warn them about the dangers of such direct word-to-word translations.

So the role of foreign language teacher is to raise awareness in the learners to realize the non-compatibility of certain adjectives with nouns in the target language.

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