

Evaluation of Two Courses Included in English Translation B.A. Program; “Persian Writing” and “The Structure of Persian Language”: Iranian Students’ Views in Focus¹

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Abstract

Curriculum evaluation is of paramount importance in educational contexts. In this paper we intend to evaluate two courses *Persian Writing* and *The Structure of Persian Language*, included in the undergraduate program of English Translation, from the point of view of students and also to get a general image of the current status of teaching of these two courses. Students who had taken, or were taking, either one or both of these courses at state universities were asked to complete a researcher-made questionnaire survey which consisted of Likert-scale items, under four headings *the teaching of the courses, the teachers’ ability, materials and contents, and application in translation*, as well as open-ended ones, aimed at getting information about the teaching of the two courses. The results showed that the teaching of the two courses is too theoretical and mainly not informed by the real needs of translation students. Also, some suggestions are made for improving the teaching of the two courses, including a shift from theoretical to practical work and also establishment of a stronger link between the content of the courses and translation. The

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results of this study could benefit translation students, teachers, and material developers, among others.

Keywords: Persian Writing, the Structure of the Persian Language, Course evaluation, Content of the courses

Introduction

Doloughan and Rogers (2006, p. 39) point to the reciprocity of translation and writing, in which one "feeds into and nourishes the other" (as cited in Schrijver, 20014). Also, Newmark believes "All translation problems finally resolve themselves into problems of how to write well in the target language" (1988, p. 17). In the Persian milieu, too, mother-tongue education for translation students is highlighted (Khoshsaligheh, 2014; Razmjou, 2001; Mollanazar, 2003; Miremadi, 2003; Mirza-Ebrahim Tehrani, 2003; Rahimy, 2003). The courses Persian Writing (PW) and The Structure of Persian Language (SPL) are included in the undergraduate program of English Translation by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (2017) to train student translators in their mother tongue.

However, it has been found that these two courses had no significant effect on the quality of translation of undergraduate translation students (Fazel, Nejadansari, & Dabbaghi, 2020). This requires an evaluation to describe what happens and why this happens, and to state the possibility of something else to happen (Franke-Wikerg and Lundren, 1980, p. 148, as cited in Edström, 2008). This can lead to a better and more efficient use of resources and better satisfaction of translation job-market demands (see Salari and Khazae Farid, 2015; Schrijver, 2014).

Literature Review

Translation Competence

The multicomponential view of translation competence (Khoshsaligheh, 2014), or alternatively translator competence (e.g. Wu, Zhang, & Wei, 2019) dates

back to the 1970s (Pym, 2003). Translation competence began to be analyzed in translation studies in the mid-1980s, and became prominent in 1990s (Hurtado-Albir, 2015).

Oraki and Tajvidi (2020) analyzed the already present theories and information regarding the concept of translation and interpreting competence and concluded that among all definitions of competence, PACTE groups' (2000) definition with its sub-competences seemed to be more comprehensive than other definitions.

In PACTE's model (2011), translation competence comprises five sub-competences and a series of psycho-physiological mechanisms: bilingual sub-competence, extra-linguistic sub-competence, knowledge about translation, instrumental sub-competence, strategic sub-competence, and psycho-physiological components.

Bilingual sub-competence includes pragmatic, socio-linguistic, textual, grammatical and lexical knowledge required to communicate in two languages, but no distinction is made between receptive vs. productive knowledge. In contrast, in her *communicative competence in at least two languages*, Göpferich (2009) differentiates between reception and production; communicative competence in the SL is relevant for ST reception and TL competence determines the quality of the target text. TL receptive competence is also needed for "monitoring processes in which source-language units and target-language units are compared for semantic equivalence, for example" (p. 22). Based on the above, since translation first involves *understanding* the source text and then *producing* the target text, it can be suggested that producing a translation in the target language has a closer affinity to producing original texts in that language than reading texts in it in that they are both *productive*.

PW and SPL

The Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (2017, pp. 53–54) has assigned two credit units and a total of 32 hours to each of these courses.

The general objectives intended for the PW are to

- improve the skills of students in writing in Persian in different types,
- familiarize students with Persian orthography,
- familiarize students with different language styles, including formal, standard, etc.
- familiarize students with referencing and documenting; and
- practice writing in Persian

According to the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (2017, pp. 39–40) the general objectives of the course SPL are to

- familiarize students with the fundamentals of linguistics in the framework of Persian grammar;
- familiarize students with the methods of using the fundamentals of linguistics in samples of Persian texts; and
- encourage students to scientifically analyze Persian grammar.

There are different ideas with regard to usefulness and inclusion of Persian studies for translator training (see Rahimy, 2010; Khoshsaligheh, 2014; Sohrabi, Rahimi, & Arjmandi, 2015; Khoshsaligheh, Moghaddas, & Ameri, 2019; Beikian, Ketabi, & Hesabi, 2020). However, in a quasi-experimental study, Fazel, Nejadansari, and Dabbaghi (2020) found no significant effect of the two courses on the overall quality of translation. Just the number of correct verb forms (Ellis and Yuan, 2004) showed a difference: the groups which had taken either or both of the above courses had meaningfully more correct verb forms in their translations than the group which had taken none of the courses.

Via this research we aimed to see the picture from translation students' point of view. The following research questions were raised to compare PW and SPL courses:

RQ1: Is there a statistically significant difference between the ideas of each pair of the three groups of student participants who have taken PW, SPL, or both with regard to the variable *method of teaching*?

RQ2: Is there a statistically significant difference between the ideas of each pair of the three groups of student participants who have taken PW, SPL, or both with regard to the variable *teachers' ability*?

RQ3: Is there a statistically significant difference between the ideas of each pair of the three groups of student participants who have taken PW, SPL or both with regard to the variable *application in translation*?

RQ4: Is there a statistically significant difference between the ideas of each pair of the three groups of student participants who have taken PW, SPL or both with regard to the variable *materials and contents*?

Also, we wanted to see the current status of the education of the courses PW and SPL from the points of views of students and identify their strong and weak points.

Methodology

Participants

The statistical population of this study was all the undergraduate students of English translation at around 21 Iranian state universities and schools of humanities. This study was conducted with 481 undergraduate students of translation from 13 state universities during the period from April to November 2018.

These participants were invited on the basis of convenience of inclusion/participation. The universities where completed questionnaires from students were collected were University of Birjand, Jahrom University, Chabahar Maritime University, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Arak University, Zabol University, University of Zanjan, Imam Khomeini International University, Vali-e-Asr

University of Rafsanjan, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, University of Kashan, and University of Isfahan.

The Procedure of the Study

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five students from Amin Institute of Higher Education, a non-state university in Isfahan. Six guiding questions were used to facilitate and stimulate interviews. During the course of the interviews new questions were raised.

Next, the questionnaire survey was drafted on the basis of data from interviews. This survey comprised 32 Likert-scale items which fell into 4 sections, namely method of teaching of the two courses PW and SPL, the ability of teachers of the two courses, materials and contents of the courses, and application of educational content in the practice of translation. There were also 12 open-ended items.

After that, the opinions of two experts with years of experience in teaching different translation courses were obtained on the questionnaires and some modifications were made accordingly in terms of rewording some items, changing the grouping of some items, omitting some items, etc. This way the validity of the questionnaire was ensured.

Later, the questionnaire survey was piloted in two classes at one of the state universities in Iran. It was revealed that one item was not understandable to participants and hence was omitted. No other problems were identified. The data from the piloting stage was also included in the main data. Omitting this data would result in missing valuable information from one state university. Finally, the questionnaire survey was administered. Students who had taken either PW or SPL or both took the survey. A total of 481 completed questionnaires were received. Out of

these, 4 were excluded by the data analyst for statistical reasons. Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire was above 0.85.

Findings and Results

The Quantitative Section

The Likert-scale part of the questionnaire required students to check the appropriate box under the columns *completely agree*, *agree*, *no idea*, *disagree*, and *completely disagree*, to which values of 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 were assigned respectively. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of variables.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for Variables*

Variable	Mean	SD	Min.	Max
Method of Teaching	3.279	0.629	1.22	5.00
Teacher's Ability	3.718	0.762	1.33	5.00
Application in Translation	3.564	0.662	1.5	5.00
Materials and Contents	3.661	0.793	1.00	5.00

Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was used to indicate the type of distribution of the variables.

Table 2. *Statistics of Kolmogorov–Smirnov Test*

Variable	Z-score of Kolmogorov–Smirnov test	p-value
Method of Teaching	1.139	0.149
Teacher's Ability	2.026	0.001

Application in Translation	1.552	0.016
Materials and Contents	1.806	0.003

Given the results of the above analysis, only for the method of teaching the p-value is larger than 0.05. Hence this variable follows a normal distribution but others don't.

RQ1

Levene's test was used to answer this question.

Table 3. *Test of Equality of Variances of Scores of Method of Teaching*

Variable	Levene's F-score	Degree of Freedom 1	Degree of Freedom 2	Meaningfulness (p-value)
Method of Teaching	0.863	2	474	0.423

Levene pre-supposition of equality of variances in groups is verified for the variable *method of teaching* (the level of meaningfulness is above 0.05).

Table 4. *Descriptive Statistics of the Variable*

Variable	Group	Mean	SD
Method of Teaching	GW	3.246	0.666
	GS	3.244	0.677
	GSW	3.298	0.606

Table 5. *The Results of Analysis of Variance with Regard to Method of Teaching*

Source	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean of Squares	F-score	Level of Meaningfulness	Effect Size (eta squared)	Statistical Power
Group	0.307	2	0.154	0.387	0.679	0.002	0.112
Error	187.945	474	0.397				
Total	188.252	476					

There is not a significant difference between the ideas of GW, GS, and GSW participants with regard to *method of teaching* ($p>0.05$).

RQ2

Because the distribution of the variable *teachers' ability* is not normal, Kruskal-Wallis test is used for this question.

Table 6. *Descriptive Statistics of the Variable*

Variable	Group	Mean Rating
Teachers' ability	GW	216.16
	GS	255.55
	GSW	239.74

Table 7. *The Results of Kruskal-Wallis Test with Regard to Teachers' Ability*

Variable	Chi-square Statistic	Degree of Freedom	Level of Meaningfulness (p-value)
Teachers' ability	3.446	2	0.179

Given the level of meaningfulness 0.179 of the Chi-square statistic, there is no meaningful difference between the ideas of GW, GS, and GSW participants with regard to teachers' ability ($p>0.05$).

RQ3

Because the distribution of the variable *application in translation* is not normal, Kruskal-Wallis test is used for this question.

Table 8. *Descriptive Statistics of the Variable*

Variable	Group	Mean Rating
Application in Translation	GW	256.54
	GS	237.46

GSW	235.15
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Table 9. *The Results of Kruskal-Wallis Test with Regard to Application in Translation*

Variable	Chi-square Statistic	Degree of Freedom	Level of Meaningfulness (p- value)
Application in Translation	1.485	2	0.476

Given the level of meaningfulness 0.476 of the Chi-square statistic, there is no meaningful difference between the ideas of student participants with regard to the application of the content of these courses in translation ($p > 0.05$).

RQ4

Because the distribution of the variable *materials and contents* is not normal, Kruskal-Wallis test is used for this question.

Table 10. *Descriptive Statistics of the Variable*

Variable	Group	Mean Rating
Materials and Contents	GW	181.28
	GS	281.59
	GSW	240.65

Table 11. *The Results of Kruskal-Wallis Test with Regard to Materials and Contents*

Variable	Chi-square Statistic	Degree of Freedom	Level of Meaningfulness (p-value)
Materials and Contents	22.108	2	0.001

Given the level of meaningfulness 0.001 of the Chi-square statistic, there is a meaningful difference between the ideas of groups of participants with regard to materials and contents ($p < 0.05$). In order to know between which groups the difference between the ideas of students is, the Mann-Whitney U test is run between pairs of groups.

Table 12. *The Results of Mann-Whitney U Tests for Pairs of Groups*

Variables	Mann-Whitney U Statistic	Wilcoxon Statistic	Z-score	Level of Meaningfulness
Ideas of GW with those of GS with regard to <i>Materials and Contents</i>	2139.500	5065.500	-4.251	0.001
Ideas of GW with those of GSW with regard to <i>Materials and Contents</i>	8712.000	11638.000	-3.523	0.001
Ideas of GS with those of GSW with regard to <i>Materials and Contents</i>	11548.000	59753.000	-2.633	0.008

Table 12 shows that there is a meaningful difference between each pair of participant groups with regard to the materials and contents of the two courses ($p < 0.05$). In order to see more clearly what is covered as materials and contents in the teaching of the two courses, we have to look at the qualitative section of the questionnaire.

The Qualitative Section

The findings of the open-ended items will be provided in three major streams:

The Content of the Courses PW and SPL

The Current Content

PW respondents indicated that writing and editing, the use of Persian words instead of foreign ones, ways of developing a text, paragraph writing, essay writing, letter writing, report writing, punctuation, grammar, cohesion and coherence of texts and referencing, among other things, were covered in their PW classes. SPL respondents indicated that syntax; grammar; compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences; sentence structure; phonetics; punctuation and different types of texts were some of the contents covered in their SPL classes.

What Should Have Been Included

In a separate item, some PW participants asked for editing and punctuation, studying translated texts, comparing good and bad translations in Persian, creativity in writing, and more practical work. Some SPL respondents indicated that teaching Persian syntax and grammar, studying the differences between the structures of Persian and English contrastively, and studying translated texts were needed to be covered in classes.

What Was Irrelevant

PW respondents indicated that teaching poetry and literary devices, making posters, focusing on writing different texts, method of writing obsolete words correctly, letter writing, and writing biographies and resumes were irrelevant. SPL respondents believed that phonetics, history of languages and Persian, and drawing tree diagrams for sentence structures were irrelevant topics and activities covered. In both, students complained about the theoretical nature of the courses, and wanted the content to be related to translation.

Textbooks and Resources

The top 5 resources covered in PW classes were a) the teacher's pamphlet or one the contents of which were collected from several books (118 cases, 24.7%), b) *Writing and Editing* (2016¹) by Sami'i Gilani (48 cases, 10.1%), c) *Persian Writing* (2003) by Servat (46 cases, 9.6%), d) *Let's Don't Write Wrongly* (1991) by Najafi and *A Guide to Editing* (2000) by Gholamhossein-Zadeh (20 cases, 4.2%), and e) *Teaching Editing and Correct Writing* (2015) by Zolfaghari (5 cases, 1%)

The 4 top resources covered in SPL classes were a) *The Structure of Persian Language* (2007) by Afrashi (197 cases, 41.3%), b) the teacher's pamphlet or one the materials of which were collected from several books (65 cases, 13.6%), c) *Description of the Grammatical Structure of Persian Language* (2019) by Bateni (18

¹. The publication data is based on publishers' information on their websites.

cases, 3.8%), and d) *The History of Persian Language* (1994) by Bagheri (2 cases, 4.2%).

Overlapping between the Contents

125 PW respondents (26.2%) indicated that some of the contents covered in this course overlapped with the contents of other courses in their program. The top 5 courses the contents of which overlapped with those of PW were a) General Persian (12 respondents, 2.5%), b) General Linguistics (8 respondents, 1.7%), c) The Structure of Persian Language (8 respondents, 1.7%), d) Essay Writing (5 respondents, 1%), and e) A Contrastive Study of Sentence Structure in Persian and English (4 respondents, 8%).

As for SPL, 177 respondents (37.1%) indicated that there was some overlapping. The top 5 ones the contents of which overlapped with those of SPL were a) General Linguistics (28 respondents, 5.9%), b) Phonetics (20 respondents, 4.2%), c) Morphology (12 respondents, 2.5%), d) Persian Writing (8 respondents, 1.7%) and e) A Contrastive Study of Sentence Structure in Persian and English (6 respondents, 1.3%).

Discussion

The Quantitative Section

As can be seen in Table 2, the mean rating for research variables measured around 3.5. This shows that these courses need a serious reconsideration since students don't think highly of these courses.

The results for RQ1 to RQ3 showed that there was not a significant difference between the ideas of participants with regard to the method of teaching, teachers' ability, and application in translation. Hence these two courses have been almost the same in terms of their inability to satisfy the needs and expectations of translation students.

However, according to Table 11, the results for RQ4 indicated that GW had the lowest mean rating of the three groups. Further analyses showed that each pair of the three groups of participants had meaningfully different ideas with regard to materials and contents. Each of the courses has had its own strengths and weaknesses. We will get to this in greater detail below.

The Qualitative Section

A comparison between the materials covered in classes and the course syllabi (Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, 2017) shows high degrees of compatibility for PW and SPL. However, there were some topics/exercises which were not much related to translation, such as making posters and Persian calligraphy, the inclusion of which need to be reconsidered in the future for better use of the resources and improvement of the education. For some other activities, like drawing tree diagrams for students, students should be made aware of its use in translation.

Students were in favor of topics/exercises which could improve their translation. Even it seems that the syllabi for PW and SPL (Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, 2017) are not developed on the basis of needs of translation students since no specific mention is made of either translation or comparisons between TTs and STs. These are geared towards Persian knowledge and skills, but not possibly of the nature and as required in translation contexts. It is up to teachers to clearly establish such a relationship. It seems that some of the topics/exercises arise from teachers' liking, such as practicing calligraphy; their perceptions of the needs of students; or their own educational background, as especially around 12.7% of respondents indicated that their teachers had studied translation and 62.8% indicated their teachers had studied Persian literature, linguistics, etc.

Some respondents complained that the materials were taught theoretically. This led them to feel the course was boring and useless in translation. Respondents No. 77 and 78 called for projects, respondent No. 107 called for more exercises in SPL, and respondent No. 231 called for more translation practices for PW.

The problem of overlapping could be handled to a great extent by first, a reconsideration of the course syllabi, second, teachers' sticking to these syllabi, and third, explaining to students, metacognitively, that they should not treat overlapping with distaste. It might be a good idea to make the students aware that avoiding overlapping is neither totally possible nor desirable. It can be used as a means of strengthening learning.

Some students had no idea of the way the two courses would be useful in translation. As some of them were offered these courses early in their program, their idea might have originated from their not having felt the need for these materials. Offering these courses in higher semesters can be useful in that students feel their needs in translation and can better see the possible relationship between the course contents and practical translation.

Conclusion

In this study we aimed to get a general understanding of the current status of the teaching of the courses PW and SPL and compare the ideas of GW, GS, and GSW participants with regard to these courses.

A few points should be made with regard to the results and the interpretation of them. First, since we used convenience sampling, not all universities were represented in the participants. Second, the 477 participants were not of even distribution from the universities. One reason was that participation was not mandatory, and a second reason was that in one university the head of the Department of Translation Studies asked for the construction of an online form. From

two classes only around 8 students participated. This decreased the rate of participation. Hence, our results should be considered simply informative and not representative of all the population.

Third, the current researchers indeed leave room for the reservation that they have no idea of the effectiveness of the materials students were taught. Respondents mostly provided their views with regard to the teaching of the courses rather than their own learning. They could have simply put the blame on the teachers. Fourth, the students who were interviewed for making the survey should have been from a state university as were the main participants. Fifth, with more experience in designing and administering surveys, better and more exact data could be obtained. This is considered a preliminary move in this direction.

However, despite its weaknesses, this research adds to our understanding translator training. It is hoped that this study receives the attention of teachers, researchers, educational policy-makers, and providers of languages services, e.g. managers of translation offices. This lays the foundation for a modification of the courses based on an understanding of them from students' point of view.

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چکیده

ارزیابی برنامه درسی اهمیت زیادی در بافت‌های آموزشی دارد. ما در این مقاله قصد داریم دو درس کارشناسی مترجمی انگلیسی یعنی ساخت فارسی و نگارش فارسی را از دید دانشجویان ارزیابی نماییم و تصویری کلی از وضعیت کنونی آموزش این دو درس بدست آوریم. از دانشجویانی که حداقل یکی از این درس‌ها را گذرانده یا در حال گذراندن بودند خواسته شد نظرسنجی-پرسشنامه‌ای محقق‌ساخته را جواب دهند که متشکل از گویه‌هایی در مقیاس لیکرت، تحت بخش‌های اصلی آموزش دو درس، توانایی استادان، مطالب آموزشی، و کاربرد در ترجمه، و نیز مواردی تشریحی، با هدف کسب اطلاعات درباره آموزش این دو درس، را پاسخ دهند. نتایج نشان داد که آموزش این دو درس بسیار نظری و عمدتاً فارغ از نیازهای واقعی دانشجویان ترجمه است. پیشنهادهایی هم برای بهبود آموزش این دو درس مطرح شده است، مانند تغییر از کار نظری به عملی و نیز برقراری پیوندی محکم‌تر بین محتوای دروس و ترجمه. نتایج این تحقیق می‌تواند برای دانشجویان ترجمه، مدرسان و تهیه‌کنندگان مطالب درسی سودمند واقع شود.

واژه‌های راهنما: نگارش فارسی، ساخت زبان فارسی، ارزیابی درس، محتوای درس

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