Translation Tasks And The Cognitive Processes They Generate: An Analysis From The Perspective Of The Output Hypothesis

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Abstract

This study investigates whether the cognitive processes outlined in the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1995) emerge during a translation task. The Output Hypothesis posits that language production fosters second language (L2)[1] learning by triggering three key functions: noticing gaps, hypothesis testing, and metalinguistic reflection. To examine this, participants worked in pairs to complete a translation task, which was recorded and analyzed to determine the extent to which these cognitive processes were activated. The findings indicate that the functions of output do not occur in isolation but rather in an interwoven and overlapping manner throughout task performance. These results suggest that translation tasks elicit cognitive processes that support language learning, reinforcing their potential as an effective pedagogical tool in L2 instruction.

Keywords: translation tasks, Output hypothesis, pedagogical translation, written tasks.

I. INTRODUCTION

From the extensive use of dictionaries and grammar for word-by-word translation, a key feature of the traditional approach—to the direct method, which eliminated translation in favor of immersive exposure to the target language, and subsequently to the communicative approach, discussions on the role of translation in L2 instruction have evolved alongside second language teaching methodologies. Due to prevailing conceptions about translation in foreign language education, both translation and, by extension, the use of the mother tongue gradually lost prominence and were largely excluded from L2 classrooms (Lucindo, 2006). The panorama has changed subtly by the advances in the discussions on the use of translation in the classroom, in L2 learning and teaching (BRANCO 2009). The advocators of translation - Balboni (2011), Branco (2009, 2011), Lucindo (2006), Santoro (2011), among others - argue that translation is increasingly recognized as a pedagogical tool that can contribute to L2 learning. According to Giesta (2011), it is essential for teachers to understand the historical trajectory of translation in L2 learning contexts, including its various conceptualizations, methodological applications, and justifications over time. This awareness enables educators to make informed pedagogical decisions regarding its implementation in the classroom.

Translation Studies is a relatively recent academic discipline that began to develop in Brazil in the 1980s (Pagano, 2001). A major milestone in its institutionalization was the establishment of the Translation Working Group within ANPOLL in 1986, followed by the creation of key academic journals such as Tradterm (1994) and Cadernos de Tradução (1996), which have since served as important forums for scholarly reflection and dissemination in the field (Frota, 2007).

Despite the lingering stigma surrounding translation in L2 teaching, contemporary discussions increasingly emphasize the need for structured didactic approaches, as its pedagogical value is now more widely acknowledged. From its outright rejection during the era of the Direct Method to its gradual reintegration into language teaching methodologies, as previously discussed, translation has seen a resurgence in L2 acquisition debates. However, empirical research on its actual impact in the classroom remains scarce.

II. THE OUTPUT HYPOTHESIS

Krashen (1981) argues that by the time output occurs, L2 acquisition has already taken place. In contrast, Swain (1985, 1995) posits that output plays an active role in facilitating language acquisition. While output can

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[1] Following Ellis (1994, 2005), the term second language will be used as umbrella term for second, foreign or interlanguage.

contribute to fluency through language practice (Swain, 1985), it does not necessarily lead to increased accuracy (Schmidt, 1992).

Beyond its general function as a means of practicing the language, Swain (1985, 1995) proposes three additional functions of output that are directly related to accuracy. These include the noticing/triggering function, the hypothesis-testing function, and the metalinguistic reflection function. The noticing/triggering function suggests that when learners engage in language production to achieve communicative goals, they may become aware of gaps in their interlanguage. As Swain (1985) states, "In producing the target language (vocally or sub-vocally), learners may notice a gap between what they want to say and what they can say, leading them to recognize what they do not know or know only partially" (p. 125). In this way, output serves as a mechanism for raising learners' awareness of the linguistic aspects they need to further develop in the target language.

The hypothesis-testing function proposes that language production represents learners' implicit hypotheses about how the target language operates. These hypotheses are not consciously formulated; rather, they are embedded in the learners' output itself. In other words, when learners produce language, they are making their best attempt at constructing grammatically and pragmatically appropriate utterances in the target language (Swain, 1985, 1995).

Swain (1985, 1995) also identifies a third function of output, namely metalinguistic reflection, which is associated with explicit hypothesis generation. Unlike the hypothesis-testing function, which operates at an implicit level, metalinguistic reflection occurs when learners consciously engage in discussions about language structure and use. This function is particularly relevant in classroom settings, where learners communicate not only to convey meaning but also to reflect on and discuss how the target language works. When learners engage in these discussions, they generate explicit hypotheses about language, reinforcing their linguistic awareness. In this sense, this third function of output serves a metalinguistic purpose.

It is important to highlight that the Output Hypothesis does not diminish the role of input in language acquisition; rather, it complements and reinforces input-based approaches (Izumi & Bigelow, 2000). According to Swain (1985), output enables learners to move beyond semantic processing, which is predominant in comprehension, toward grammatical processing, which is necessary for accurate production.

Izumi and Bigelow (2000) further argue that comprehension relies on multiple sources of knowledge, including linguistic input, contextual information, and the listener's or reader's background knowledge, encompassing both semantic and pragmatic understanding. This means that a learner can often comprehend a written or spoken text without fully grasping all words and syntactic structures. However, language production presents a different challenge. When producing language—whether spoken or written—the individual must actively generate the message, encode grammatical and syntactic structures, and articulate or transcribe the intended output. In this sense, output shifts the learner from predominantly semantic processing, characteristic of comprehension, to syntactic processing, which is essential for production.

Swain (1985) argues that output enables learners to move from predominantly semantic processing, characteristic of comprehension, to full syntactic processing, which is essential for accurate language production. Izumi and Bigelow (2000) further emphasize that comprehension relies on multiple sources, including linguistic input, contextual cues, and the listener's or reader's world knowledge, encompassing both semantic and pragmatic dimensions. As a result, it is often possible to understand a text without possessing complete knowledge of all its lexical and syntactic elements.

However, language production operates differently. When producing a spoken or written text, the learner must actively construct the message, encode grammatical and syntactic structures, and articulate or transcribe the intended output. In this sense, output shifts the learner from the predominantly semantic processing involved in comprehension to the more syntactically oriented processing required for production.

As highlighted in the introduction, translation is recognized as a form of language production (Santoro, 2011). Therefore, the present study aims to examine whether translation tasks engage learners in the cognitive processes outlined in the Output Hypothesis, specifically noticing gaps, hypothesis testing, and metalinguistic reflection.

III. METHOD

Objectives
General objective
The general objective of the study is to investigate if the cognitive processes described in the functions of the Output Hypothesis emerge during a translation task.

Specific Objectives:
a) Investigate the occurrence of noticing gaps during translation tasks.
b) Investigate the occurrence of hypothesis testing during translation tasks.
c) Investigate the occurrence of metalinguistic reflection during translation tasks.

Research questions
Seeking to achieve these objectives, the following questions guide the study:
a) Will participants notice gaps in their L2 when performing translation task?
b) Will participants formulate hypothesis when performing a translation task?
c) Will participants engage in metalinguistic reflection when performing a translation task?

Participants and context
   The participants of the study were eight students of *Undergraduate Degree in English Language and Literature (Teacher Education) at the Federal University of Ceará, Brazil.* The proposed task was carried out at a time other than the university regular teaching time. After agreeing to participate in the study, all of them signed a Free and Informed Consent Term to formalize the participation.
   As for the level of English proficiency, the students in this study are English V and English VI students, respectively, regarding the semester they are studying. These students are expected to master the Independent User level B1 to B2 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages-Learning, Teaching, Evaluation.[2]
   The eight participants' ages ranged between 20 and 50 years old. Participants were identified by the letter P and numbers, respectively. For the generation of data, participants translated the task in pairs, they chose their peers and were thus denominated as follows:

Dyad 1: P1 and P2
Dyad 2: P3 and P4
Dyad 3: P5 and P6
Dyad: P7 and P8

   Due to space constraints, the present article will present the analysis of dyad 1. Data of the other dyads will be published elsewhere.

Instruments
   The instruments used in this study included a biodata questionnaire to assess participants' profiles, a narrative text to be translated, and a post-task questionnaire aimed at evaluating participants' opinions and difficulties encountered during the translation task. The task consisted of translating a narrative based on a sequence of images, which will be fully described in the next subsection.

The translation task
   The task involved a sequence of eight images (Appendix A) accompanied by a written narrative in Portuguese, which depicted the events illustrated in the pictures. The sequence portrayed a scene in a restaurant where a couple was having dinner when the wife began arguing with her husband, leading him to imagine various ways in which he could respond rudely. Students were presented with the set of images and the corresponding narrative in Portuguese, after which they were instructed to translate the story into English.
   The use of picture-cued narratives has been widely endorsed in task-based research. The specific task employed in this study has been extensively validated in previous investigations (D'ELY, 2006; GUARÁ-TAVARES, 2009, 2016), which substantiates its application in the present research. It is also important to note that this study received approval from the Research Ethics Committee (CEP/UFC).

Data Collection Procedures
   The translation task was recorded in audio, followed by the transcription of the collected data. The task was conducted in a room provided by the university, with participants acting voluntarily and signing a declaration of participation. Data collection with the dyads occurred asynchronously, meaning that each pair of participants was scheduled for different days and times.
   During the application of the translation task, only the two students remained in the room to prevent external interference. Each pair was allocated a controlled time of 30 minutes to translate the narrative text. Participants were instructed not to erase any mistakes they might make but instead to underline them and continue with the activity. The entire translation process was recorded to assess whether participants engaged in gap perception, hypothesis testing, and metalinguistic reflection.
   At the end of the task, a post-task questionnaire was administered to gather participants' perspectives and identify any challenges they encountered during the activity. Subsequently, the audio recordings were transcribed, and the generated data were analyzed. It is important to emphasize that time was not a fundamental

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[2] Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001).

variable in task performance, as the primary focus of this study is the process rather than the outcome. That is, the final translated product is not within the scope of this study; rather, the focus is on the translation process as it unfolded within the stipulated time, a fact that was previously clarified to the participants.

IV. Data Analysis

As previously mentioned, data analysis was conducted after the transcription of the audio recordings. During the transcription process, observations were made regarding whether students identified gaps (such as uncertainties, doubts, or realizations that they lacked knowledge of certain aspects of the task), formulated hypotheses to address these uncertainties, and engaged in metalinguistic reflection throughout the task.

In analyzing the data, an initial point of observation is that the three functions of the Output Hypothesis (hereafter OH) do not appear in a linear sequence, occurring one after the other. Instead, they seem to emerge in parallel during the translation task. As a result, there is an overlap of functions and a simultaneity of occurrences, which will become evident throughout the analysis. For organizational purposes, the data will be presented in excerpts.

Table 1 - Dyad 1

Excerpt 1:
12 P1 - we do the scratch and then I'll do the official.
13 P2 - "celebrating ::::: our anni :::: see :::: sary"
14 P1 - because you say you're already married; you're already referring to
15 wedding, yeah?
16 P2 - yeah.
17 P1 - so, anniversary is better.
18 P2 - I don`t think there is another anniversary. It is usually marriage-
19 related.
20 P1 - to marriage, yes, yes, right. So-
21 P2 - so, Celebrating our anniver :::, anni, anni, anni :: ver ::: sary. Ok that
22 an "r" here. Is it with you? "V-e"? Is it correct? [anniversary?]
23 P1 - yes, "v-e". --- Shall I?
24 P2 - and maybe I should be writing as well, at the same time.
25 P1 - this is gonna be the - This is going to be the -
26 P2 - ok, let's do this at the same time.
27 P1 - ok, "Celebrating our anniversary". Double "n", yes?
28 P2 - yes, double "n". (...)

Source: data of the study

As shown in Table 1, the initial perception of gaps is related to lexical issues, as illustrated in Excerpt 1. Participant P2 repeats the word anniversary with a tone of uncertainty. The dyad encounters an initial lexical gap regarding whether the appropriate term for marriage in the title should be anniversary or wedding. This doubt is quickly resolved through collaborative negotiation. P1 formulates a hypothesis by stating: "Because you say anniversary, you are already referring to wedding, yeah?" (Excerpt 14). At this moment, we observe a type of production that elicits feedback, as described by Swain (1995). Shortly thereafter, P2 expresses a second uncertainty regarding the spelling of the same word. The doubt concerns whether it is spelled with the letters v-e and whether there is a double n. This issue is promptly resolved within the dyad.

What initially manifests as a perception of gaps simultaneously constitutes a hypothesis-testing process. According to Swain (1995), any linguistic production by the learner can be understood as a hypothesis about how the language functions. At this stage, we observe another instance of production embedded within multiple functions, in which feedback is actively sought. Furthermore, in the same excerpt, it is possible to observe a metalinguistic reflection, in: "14 P1 - because you say anniversary, you are already referring to 15 wedding, yeah?"; "18 P2 - I don't think there is another anniversary. It is usually marriage-; 19 related. "

Excerpt 2:

Table 2 – Dyad 1 excerpt

122 P1 - Ok, perfect! Occasion with two "c" or just one?
123 P2 - two.
124 P1 - That`s perfect.
125 P2 - We can officialize.
P1 - Yeah, officialize. And "they decided to go out for dinner.
127 P2 - Is it a double "n"?
128 P1 - Yeah, double "n".
129 P2 - "to celebrate this occasion".
130 P1 - ok, cool. Full stop.

Source: data of the study

As shown in Table 2, lexical gaps once again emerge when participants express doubts regarding the spelling of certain unfamiliar words. In Excerpt 2, for instance, uncertainties arise concerning the spelling of the words occasion and dinner. Implicit in this segment is a hypothesis-testing process, as P1 and P2, by responding to each other's questions, confirm or adjust their initial assumptions regarding the correct spelling.

Additionally, this excerpt provides a clear example of metalinguistic reflection, as participants revisit a previously discussed doubt concerning the spelling of the word dinner, an issue already addressed in the preceding excerpt (Excerpt 1). This recurrence suggests an ongoing cognitive engagement with linguistic forms throughout the task.

Excerpt 3:

Table 3 - Dyad 1 excerpt

248 P1 - smoothly, when the wife…
249 P2 - when the wife.
250 P1 - when the wife stroke up a lon ::::: g conversation trying…
251 P2 - have not "comma"? We have to decide.
252 P1 - yes, I am terrible with collocations.
253 P2 - yeah, trying -
254 P1 - trying to discuss their, trying to discuss their relationship :::: -
255 talking about their relationship, comma!
256 P2 - their relationship.

Source: data of the study

As shown in Table 3, P1 identifies a gap: 248 P1 – smoothly, when the wife…At this point, P2 repeats the last sentence produced by P1. Subsequently, P2 engages in hypothesis testing: 250 P1 – when the wife starts a lon:::::g conversation trying…

Following this, P2 expresses uncertainty regarding the use of a comma. However, this doubt is promptly resolved, indicating that both participants actively engage in hypothesis testing throughout the interaction. This exchange exemplifies how linguistic uncertainties are negotiated and resolved collaboratively within the dyad.

Excerpt 4:

Table 4 - Dyad 1 excerpt

60 P1 - a couple was, a :::
61 P2 - celebrating their :::?
62 P1 - 25th?
63 P2 - anniversary?
64 P1 - Yes, was ::: "doing"?
65 P2 - Yeah, "I was doing it", we can not translate that right to that. (xxx)
66 So, "once upon a time there was a couple celebrating their wedding," I
67 would say that - their 25th wedding, -
68 P1 - Yeah.
69 P2 - or their 25th anniversary.
70 P1 - they were turning, maybe? No, right?
71 P2 - the turning is when you`re actually celebrating the age, but the year
72 is years of marriage.
73 P1 - yes -
74 P2 - I would say: Once upon a time a couple was - I don`t know! - a
75 couple was celebrating their 25th anniversary. I would say that.
76 P1 - Yes, I agree.

Source: data of the study

In Excerpt 4, P1 identifies a gap: P1 – A couple was, a :::. P2 then completes the sentence with an interrogative intonation: 61 P2 – Celebrating their :::?

P1 implicitly appears to agree with P2, as he continues the sentence based on P2's hypothesis. However, P1 simultaneously introduces a new gap by formulating a follow-up sentence in an interrogative form: 62 P1 – 25th?

At this point, P2 expresses uncertainty regarding whether to use 25th anniversary or 25th wedding. P2 attempts both forms and, through collaboration with P1, eventually reaches a conclusion. The fact that P2 repeats both structures while questioning P1 suggests an effort to translate the spoken sentence into a written form, indicating a moment of linguistic uncertainty. This instance simultaneously reflects hypothesis testing and metalinguistic reflection.

According to Swain (1993), such occurrences demonstrate that learners draw upon their existing linguistic knowledge to generate new understandings or reinforce prior knowledge. In this sense, as argued by Swain (1993, 1995), the "reprocessing" of language production can serve as a mechanism for second language acquisition.

Excerpt 5:

Table 5 - Dyad 1 excerpt

194 P2 – Tudo parecia correr bem. Everything seemed to be running —
195 seemed to be running smoothly. Yeah. Do you agree with that?
196 P1 – Yes, I do. Everything seemed to be running smoothly -
197 P2 – But, but, however.
198 P1 – However. Good. However, the wife started a -
199 P2– Because when you say however, tudo parecia correr bem, no
200 entanto ((pausa)) Esse mais aqui tá mesmo que contrapondo, né esse
201 mais aqui?
202 P1 – Yes, it seems (xxxx) ((ambos falam ao mesmo tempo))
203 P2 – however, what do you think? No entanto, que o "however" dá o
204 contraste.
205 P1 – yeah.
206 P2 – por que esse mais aqui é dando o "contrast". Porque assim -
207 P1 – ok. And everything seemed to be running smoothly, when -- isn`t
208 it?
209 P2 – when, when -
210 P1 – because it`s such a different idea for however. It seemed like, you
211 know?
212 P2 – hã-hã.
213 P1 – it seemed like it was running smoothly. It seemed to run smoothly
214 -
215 P2 – when, I think when is better.
216 P1 – when, the wife started -
217 P2 – the wife or the spouse. Sabia que "spouse" também pode ser
218 usado?
219 P1 – It`s good.
220 P2 – Né? Por que "the wife"-
221 P1 – Spouse is for men and women, right?
222 P2 – É. Por que aí fica--- é nem sei.
223 P1 – Because if you say spouse, we don`t know which one.
224 P2 – Leave the wife.
225 P1 – When the wife started a lon:::::g -
226 P2 – started a -
227 P1 – We can use a stroke up! Is that good?
228 P2 – I think so.
229 P1 – When the wife stroke up –

Source: data of the study

In Excerpt 5, a discussion emerges regarding the semantic function of the conjunction but in the translation of the sentence: "Everything seemed to go well, but the wife began a long conversation trying to discuss the relationship with her husband." As the discussion unfolds, P2 expresses uncertainty about whether to use but or however, indicating both gap identification and hypothesis testing. P2 highlights the contrasting nature of however, while P1 disagrees. Ultimately, they decide that when is the most appropriate option. The repetition of "when" in the excerpt suggests that hypothesis testing was employed until they arrived at the expected outcome, demonstrating deeper engagement with the discussion through metalinguistic reflection.

Once again, it is evident that the functions of output do not emerge in isolation but rather tend to overlap and occur simultaneously. At line 194, P2 produces the phrase "Everything seemed to be running" and seeks P1's confirmation regarding the translation. P1 promptly agrees, and later in the dialogue (line 207), P1 revisits the phrase, this time reversing the dynamic by seeking P2's confirmation: 207 P1 – Ok. And everything seemed to be running smoothly, when – isn't it?

V.   Results And Discussion

Based on the analysis presented, we will now discuss the findings in relation to the research questions that guided this study.

1. Do participants perceive gaps in their interlanguage?

The data indicates that participants perceived gaps during the translation task. This perception manifested both directly and indirectly—through explicit questions posed to their partner as well as through prosodic cues, such as hesitation or rising intonation, signaling uncertainty. In writing, these gaps became evident in the blank

spaces left by participants, reflecting moments of lexical or syntactic hesitation. When one participant exhibited uncertainty, the other often attempted to provide an answer based on their own linguistic knowledge or sought external resources, such as a dictionary.

Overall, the perception of gaps was predominantly related to spelling and lexical choices. It is noteworthy that, due to the written nature of the translation task, participants were particularly attentive to lexical and orthographic accuracy. This suggests that the nature of the task itself generated specific types of gaps, particularly orthographic doubts, which are more characteristic of written production. Despite explicit instructions emphasizing that the focus should be on completing the task rather than on error avoidance, participants still demonstrated a concern with correct spelling.

These findings align with Swain's Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1995; Swain & Lapkin, 1995), which posits that language production triggers the noticing of gaps. In other words, when engaged in a translation task, participants encountered linguistic challenges that prompted them to reflect on their knowledge, recognize their limitations, and become aware of linguistic gaps—whether in comprehension, vocabulary, or grammar. This recognition of gaps, in turn, may foster a heightened awareness of their learning needs in the second language (L2).

2. Do students test hypotheses? If so, in what contexts do these occur?

The data suggests that hypothesis testing was a recurrent strategy throughout the translation task. As observed in the analysis of excerpts, hypothesis testing frequently occurred when participants attempted direct translations. In these instances, they would propose a translation and subsequently reformulate it, often repeating the sentence with an alternative construction. This process of modification or "reprocessing" is indicative of hypothesis testing, as participants actively refined their linguistic output.

Additionally, hypothesis testing was evident when participants verbalized a sentence in the L2 and subsequently sought confirmation from their partner, using expressions such as "Is this correct?" or "Is it this or that?". These moments illustrate an overlap between implicit hypothesis testing and explicit metalinguistic reflection, as participants not only formulated and tested linguistic hypotheses but also engaged in collaborative discussion to verify their choices.

In line with Swain's (1995) perspective, hypothesis testing was particularly observable when participants expressed doubt about their own linguistic output. According to Swain, errors in production indicate that learners are actively formulating hypotheses about how the language functions. Every utterance or written production represents a working hypothesis about the L2. Furthermore, as Swain argues, erroneous production often elicits feedback, which may prompt learners to modify or "reprocess" their output, thereby engaging in metalinguistic reflection.

The translation task also served as a diagnostic tool for identifying areas of difficulty. The linguistic uncertainties exhibited by participants provided valuable insights into their specific learning needs, offering guidance for future instructional interventions. These findings support Swain's argument (Swain, 1995; Swain & Lapkin, 1995).

Another important aspect to consider, as highlighted by Swain and Lapkin (1995), is that "although no one has yet shown, directly, that these reprocessed responses are kept in the learner's interlanguage, the assumption is that this process of modification contributes to the acquisition of a second language." This perspective was corroborated by the participants in the post-task questionnaire, as they reported that the reflections prompted by the task were beneficial to the translation process.

Given the results of this study, we argue that translation tasks facilitate the activation of the functions outlined in the Output Hypothesis. In this regard, we conclude that the translation task employed in this study effectively triggered cognitive and linguistic processes that are considered beneficial for L2 acquisition. This finding supports the argument that translation tasks have the potential to foster language learning.

VI.   Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study reinforce the potential of translation as a pedagogical tool in foreign language instruction, particularly in fostering metalinguistic awareness, hypothesis testing, and linguistic reflection. Below, we outline key pedagogical implications. First, translation tasks are tools for enhancing metalinguistic awareness since they encourage learners to consciously reflect on their language use, leading to a deeper understanding of grammatical structures, lexical choices, and syntactic patterns. Therefore, incorporating translation tasks into language teaching can help students develop greater awareness of L2 structures, facilitating long-term retention and accuracy in language production. Second, translation tasks are pedagogical tools for encouraging collaborative learning, since they promote dialogue between learners, allowing them to negotiate meaning, test hypotheses, and provide peer feedback.

VII.   Conclusion

Despite its limitations, particularly the small sample size and the focus on a single translation task, this study provides evidence that translation tasks engage learners in cognitive and metalinguistic processes that are conducive to L2 learning. The findings support the argument that translation, when used pedagogically, can serve as an effective means of fostering linguistic awareness, promoting collaborative learning, and enhancing language acquisition through hypothesis testing and gap perception.

Thus, this study reinforces the relevance of translation as a didactic tool in foreign language teaching. Future research could explore the impact of translation tasks on different proficiency levels, as well as their effectiveness in comparison with other task-based learning activities. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide further insights into whether the benefits observed in short-term translation exercises contribute to long-term improvements in L2 proficiency.

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