Vocabulary-translation testing: Better options?

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Introduction
Vocabulary-translation testing in English language classrooms appears to be a major source of evidence that teachers collect for report card grades, yet these tests only measure some aspects of more general language skills needed for reading, writing, speaking and listening. The purpose of this paper is to convince readers that vocabulary translation tests should not be used in determining report card grades, to show that there are options to vocabulary translation tests, and to open the discussion as to whether there is a place at all for vocabulary-translation in the classroom.

Since the introduction of English into the public elementary school system in Switzerland, thousands of elementary and secondary school teachers have gone through both pre-service and professional development (PD) English language teaching courses over the past years at the Zürich University of Teacher Education (PHZH). In 2015, a small survey (58 percent response rate, 34 students) at the PHZH was carried out amongst student-teachers during fieldwork where they were asked: “What discrepancies have you encountered between what you are being told by English lecturers at the university and what practicing teachers (or your own experience) have told you?” The most frequent response (60 percent) was about vocabulary testing: “My school asks me to give a vocabulary-translation test every other week. This contradicts just about every principle we have been hearing about.”

Furthermore, of more than 60 classroom visits I made over the past three years, more than half of the teachers mentioned translation tests as being a useful form of assessment because “how else can learners be forced to study the words if there is no translation test?” or “the secondary teachers expect it, so I have to do it”. This information indicates that though it may not be the only way teachers are gathering evidence on learners in order to provide them with informal and formal feedback, vocabulary-translation testing is a common occurrence. The aim of this article is to re-think the practice.

Neither in the local English language textbooks used in elementary or secondary schools – such as the Klett Verlag’s Young World or Open World series, or the Lehmitte Verlag Zürich’s First Choice, Explorers, or Voices series – nor in the PD course content is there mention of using translation as a means of formal assessment (as seen in Figure 1).

Indeed, translation tests are discouraged by lecturers and multiple alternatives are usually suggested, such as ready-made test packs which measure more holistic performance in reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and various other performance assessment types such as book reviews or posters.

Why vocabulary-translation tests should not be used

The regional curriculum and local policies do not support vocabulary-translation tests
Swiss elementary and secondary school teachers in the eastern cantons are required to follow the current modern foreign languages (MFL) curriculum (Erziehungsdirektor-Konferenz Ostschweiz, 2010). This is based on the idea of promoting communicative competence whereby learners are to acquire basic skills in oral and written English in everyday situations. The curriculum sets standards (descriptors) in reading, writing, speaking, and listening from A1 (lower primary) to B1 (end of lower secondary). Translation as a skill is neither mentioned as an aim of English teaching nor as a means of learning. Strategy building, task-based settings, and meaningful homework are mentioned as means, and even if translation is a strategy, it is only one among many.

The English curriculum states that teaching and assessment are seamless in that assessment is ongoing and teachers do not always have to separate ‘testing’ situations and ‘learning’ situations as well as the idea that English language teaching and testing is to be task-based and content-based. Furthermore, assessing a learner’s language skill should be done through communicative situations that allow teachers to gauge a learner’s ability to communicate. Thus, aspects of language usage such as range, complexity, and accuracy of structures are to be integrated into assessments, and language skills are not to be tested in isolation, but rather in task-based situations.

Table: 7th Grade English language test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>German</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. to check</td>
<td>kontrollieren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. to bake</td>
<td>backen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. surgeon</td>
<td>die Operations person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. post office clerk</td>
<td>der Postler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. car mechanic</td>
<td>der Auto mechaniker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. ticket officer</td>
<td>der Bilet Verkenter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. student</td>
<td>der Schüler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. hairdresser</td>
<td>der Ffredor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. waitress</td>
<td>der Kellner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: 7th Grade English language test

In PD courses, input on selecting meaningful language to explicitly teach based on word frequency lists and corpora, or selection for transfer to different contexts or needs is also emphasized. A clear focus on strategies for studying meaningfully from word lists and word cards with more than translations on them is part of the course syllabus, and alternative models to both studying and testing (such as the Frayer model with space for a word’s definition, an example, a non-example, and a characteristic; interactive notebooks; portfolios; and other systems) are encouraged. Vocabulary ‘learning’ has its place – but in many forms, not just in one predetermined technique of word lists and translations. Yet, the idea that this is one way of how language should be learned and tested remains pervasive at both elementary and secondary-school levels.
Teachers are expected to provide ample opportunities for learners to demonstrate their learning through different means. The Zürich Board of Education explicitly states that teachers need to have enough information through formative measures to properly assess a learner, and that averaging tests scores are not to be done (Bildungsdirktion Kanton Zürich, 2007, p. 17).

Thus, ongoing assessments should take these points into consideration, and report card grades must also be a reflection of the context in which grades are assigned and based on performance in reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities. The newly suggested report cards (Arbeitsgruppe der Kommission Volksschule, 2015) go a step further and ask teachers to report learners’ CEFR levels and to provide formal information in comment form instead of simply as a number grade which is what teachers have been expected to do, but not report as such, up to now. Even if vocabulary testing were considered one part of language knowledge, it only measures aspects of either reading comprehension (translating from English to German) or spelling (translating from German to English), and thus does not support the idea behind the communicative classroom in the sense that teachers can see how the learners are using the words to negotiate meaning.

**Vocabulary-translation tests do not measure what is behind the four skills**

Swiss teachers are expected to assess learner reading and listening comprehension and spoken and written production. This entails knowing what the constructs, or subskills, behind each of these skills are (e.g., when testing reading, gist, detail, and inference can be measured). When learners translate from the target language into the local language (see Figure 1: English into German), what is being measured is local language (German) knowledge, not foreign language (English) knowledge. How does the teacher know if the learner actually understands and can actively use the English word unweilig in a sentence or conversation, and did not just memorize the list with strategies not related to comprehension, such as visual techniques (like word shapes)? In a personal example in French, my daughter had to know arm was bras, and she remembered that both contained an ar. Three weeks later she could not remember what arm in French was. The point is that testing like this does not force learners to learn to use the words and the language around the words, such as ‘J’ai doux ...’ (‘I have ...’). Similarly, in translating from the local language (German) to the target language (English), perhaps spelling can be assessed but not comprehension or other productive subskills, such as accuracy, range, or ability to get a message across. A translation is only a small indication of learners actually being able to use a word or apply it to an appropriate context. As Amsler (2016) states: ‘Assessment needs to be balanced and not concentrated on only formal aspects. Teachers should stay away from single-word, isolated, non-contextualized vocabulary tests ...’ (p. 10).

**Leaders learn to study in ways that are not conducive to learning**

When teachers assign individual vocabulary items to be translated and memorized, they are often not asking learners to use the word in a meaningful context surrounded by other words and by associations. The study habits a learner develops in this way are limited to memorizing, the only connection being the word in another language.

**Conclusion**

Being able to use words and expressions associatively — in gap-fills, in reading about situations and writing reactions, or in presenting a role-play to the class — are richer ways of measuring reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills than simple translation tests. It is not expected to take vocabulary-translation tests in traditional ways, they may learn to study differently and develop a wider range of study habits (Buechel, 2016). Encouraging the use of regular classroom activities or formats for teaching and assessment purposes has the consequence that learners would have to work on a short dialogue or text for homework rather than study a list of words. In this way, they would be more focused on the entire phrase of the expression such as ‘I really like apples’ to communicate a message than the individual words (like, apples, really), and this supports curricular aims and meaningful learning.

**Alternatives to vocabulary-translation tests**

The following alternatives provide a basic overview of task types that are often used for classroom activities. These can also be used for short quizzes which might replace vocabulary-translation tests. With added language or pictorial complexity, these activities can also be used for more advanced learners. Different task types can be used in multiple ways to measure different aspects of word knowledge (parts of speech, collocations) and usage (spelling, context, comprehension).

**General Considerations**

Knowing an English word in the first years of English language learning in the Swiss public schooling context is by no means like knowing a word in one’s mother tongue at advanced phases — learner knowledge demonstrated on a test has to reflect what was done in class without penalizing those who have less exposure. Furthermore, it is important in assessment that what is being measured is clear to the learners. For example, in a gap-fill it could be that if a word is spelled incorrectly (e.g. instead of yellow), then the answer is considered correct for reading because the learner identified the missing word from the context, but incorrect for spelling. Thus, teachers should indicate what exactly is being assessed (both spelling and reading in this case).

With any of these examples, learners can be asked to prepare the activity as homework so it can be used in class. In this way, the teacher can use the learner-produced materials for assessment purposes. For example, if the learners are asked to draw pictures with a certain lexical set, they can swap pictures in class and label each other’s pictures as an assessment. On a more advanced level, they can write their own texts and gap words.

**If learners are always asked to go via the local language to access the foreign language, they are limiting the associations they might have and ignoring other triggers for a specific expression.**

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**ETAS Journal 34/3 Summer 2017**
The learner-created gap fills can be analyzed and corrected by the teacher (thereby assessed for comprehension of key words and any other writing features), and then used in class. Learners can be asked to write or say true/false statements about specific words (e.g. A cat is a piece of furniture, or the content of a text, and the teacher can assess the learner’s sentence for accuracy and fluency and the listener’s reader’s comprehension by guessing the word/content correctly – an activity supported by the curriculum as it better measures more holistic skills.

Finally, lexical sets are best learned when they include different parts of speech, short multi-word expressions (Colice-Murcia, 2007; Kremmel, Brunfaut, & Alderson, 2015) and thematically unrelated words. For example, if there is a unit on bridges in the world, learners might be asked to learn made of, located in, quite beautiful, the longest, and a few items of their own choosing. Though it is often recommended to test in the same context as was taught, really knowing words means being able to use them in different contexts, so a short vocabulary quiz of this language might use an open prompt about, “A day in my life…” where certain language is expected and where the target language is to be spelled and used correctly, but also where other elements of writing are measured (such as text mechanics, organization, and so on).

**Suggestion 1: Picture prompts**

In this basic activity, take any picture or scene the learners are familiar with, such as a hidden-images picture or a ‘Wimmelbild’. To assess production, beginning learners can be asked to label (orally or in writing) the picture with at least two verbs (swimming, playing), four nouns (river, girl, tree, raft), three adjectives (red, yellow, fun), spelling, and word choice and range can be assessed. All learners can be asked to write short sentences, with a certain structure (there is/isn’t/there are) or as an open text where range and accuracy of the sentence structures and word usage can be assessed. More advanced learners can be asked to summarize the content of a previously read text through a picture prompt.

To assess comprehension, teachers can read/write sentences and learners number the answer on the picture, for example Number 1: There is a child in a yellow bathing suit playing in the river. Learners have to understand child, yellow, bathing suit, and river to find the right person. Complex pictures increase child, yellow, bathing suit, and river to find the right person. Complex pictures increase the difficulty. Learners can also be asked to create such statements themselves. Through picture prompts, the same and even more features of language knowledge can be elicited and assessed, and learners react more enthusiastically towards a good picture than to restating a list of words.

Learners can simply use a word list (Figure 2) provided by the teacher or negotiated in class as a learning tool, but also for assessment purposes. The word list shown in Figure 2 can be adapted by having fewer columns for younger learners or more columns (with antonyms or synonyms) for more advanced learners. As an assessment, learners can be provided a blank template to fill in (with the English word provided) to measure their comprehension (reading) and production (writing).

In many cases, vocabulary assessment is more about the setting than the activity itself – declaring the activity as an assessment where the teacher walks around and takes notes, and where learners have to show mastery – can bridge teaching and assessing. If provided with the list of words and no other columns, learners can:

- Categorize and list the words in some way that makes sense and their neighbor can guess the categories (reading comprehension).
- Describe the word/expression or use it in a sentence where it’s been gapped/beeped out, and learners have to write it down on a sheet of paper or on their mini whiteboards (listening/spelling).
- Write true/false statements with the word’s definition (reading/writing).
- Use the word/phrase or combination of phrases in a sentence or a dialogue (writing/speaking).
- Play silent Pictionary where one learner reads the word and draws it, and the other writes it (reading/writing).

**Figure 3** shows a simple dice game that can be used with a list of words as both an introductory activity and then later as a formal assessment as the teacher observes the learners and takes notes on their performance (or compares performances from the introductory to the final game).

Learners work in pairs with their list. One learner thinks of a word, rolls the dice and does what is said. Different numbers measure different skills (such as comprehension or simple spelling) for the one doing and the one guessing. There are multiple adaptations that can be made based on the age and level of learners, such as, for more advanced learners, being asked to provide a dictionary definition.

These ideas show that any general teaching activity can be used to assess vocabulary, and if learners create the activities themselves or for homework, then they are also studying the word meaningfully and then testing in contexts that show they can use the words, not just know the words. Furthermore, these activities test reading, writing, speaking, and listening, categories used on school reports.

**Conclusion**

Though it could be argued that vocabulary translation lists or tests are useful for pre-teaching the language of a unit or simply as means of studying, this article illustrates reasons not to use translation.
tests as formal measures and encourages teachers to also rethink using them as an explicit teaching strategy in the first place. Teachers can encourage learners to gain a deeper knowledge of vocabulary (using words actively, knowing synonyms and antonyms, and how to transform words) by steering away from using vocabulary-translation tests and asking learners to show comprehension and usage of vocabulary through richer reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities. These more holistic activities are expected in the curriculum and by Ministries of Education.

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With the prevalence of vocabulary-translation tests in the public school classroom, it is worth thinking about how even the smallest quizzes and tests can be made to reflect the requirements of communicative language teaching, and encourage using the language for purposes other than translating. Even if they are doing more extensive and meaningful tasks, teachers do not have to feel that they need to break down the language into lists to be tested traditionally. Testing can also be formally evaluating any performance from labelling a picture to writing an essay to performing a role-play. It is important for teachers to get away from testing if learners know words towards if they can use words.

References
http://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01467

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