"BUT I KNOW THE WORD IN ENGLISH, JUST NOT IN GERMAN!" - THE UNFAIRNESS OF VOCABULARY - TRANSLATION TESTING AND LISTS

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Abstract:
Due to convenience and expectations from parents, learners and other levels of schooling, Vocabulary-translation lists and test tests are one of the most frequent teaching and testing formats used in Swiss primary and lower secondary schools. This style of testing in ELT is, however, is fraught with problems ranging from the unfairness to learners who do not speak the local language (here German) at home, to the measures of what constructs are actually being assessed through such tests. Such tests are a frequent topic of discussion and discord in pre and in-service teacher training. In this paper, reasons for not using such tests and suggestions for alternative list forms and test types serving similar purposes are presented.

Keywords: vocabulary, translation, teacher training

1. Introduction

Despite the fact that the Swiss public school ELT curriculum and report cards (primary and lower secondary) are based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) which promotes what learners "can do" in a language through communicative language teaching and assessment practices, the majority of Swiss primary and lower secondary school learners are confronted with lists of English words and translations to be memorized and graded and used for report card information (see Figure 1). There are perhaps advantages to using such systems, yet there are many more reasons for not using such measures and this is the target of our exploration here. Suggestions for teachers wanting to work with lists and alternatives to vocabulary translation tests for regular testing and quizzing will be provided as these are of benefit in the ELT classroom.

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Figure 1: Typical vocab-translation test in Swiss schools, English to German

2. Reasons for using vocabulary translation

The topic of vocabulary teaching is a core component at the Zurich University of Teacher Education both pre and in-service teacher training. Over the years, reasons teachers and students have provided for using vocabulary translation lists and tests have been the following:

- Parents and learners expect them.
- Teachers from other levels expect them (e.g. primary teachers use them to prepare learners for secondary school instruction).
- Learners can put effort into them and can actually see a result (in other domains it's not as clear); this is motivating [for who stand no chance otherwise].
- They're easy to correct.
- "I never thought about NOT using them – how else do you test vocabulary?"
- The score helps to determine report card grades.
- How learners perform on these is an indication of how they're doing generally.
- They're there (word lists at the ends of books, online from other teachers, Quizlet units, etc.).
- They are concrete homework and study material.
- They help the teacher know what the learners know.

Some of these points could be valid - it could well be that vocabulary knowledge, as demonstrated through translation tests, correlates with learner performance in English more generally; but that said, so could other measures such as labelling a picture. Such lists do force noticing language, but then the translation into the local language is not necessary – weekly spelling bees would lead to the same. Perhaps such lists are useful for less commonly used languages in Switzerland, but English is a language learners are confronted with on a daily basis, they are constantly exposed. Perhaps such techniques do help learners expand their language skills quickly - but so would memorizing a role

play or a poem, and such lists tell us nothing about how well the learners can use the words. More arguments for and against such lists can be found in Sonbul and Macis (2021) but the stance here is that there are more reasons to not use such lists with Swiss learners than there are to use them. The following points elaborate upon why such tests and lists as seen in Figures 1 and 2 do not provide proper use of instructional time and energy and Appendix 1 provides a more general list of questions for use in teacher training that can lead to an in-depth discussion on this topic.

3. Why such vocabulary-translation lists and tests should not be used

The following eight arguments speak against using vocabulary-translation tests in the mainstream ELT classroom in a setting in a context where learners are, through media, regularly exposed to English.

3.1 Such lists and using them as tests do not show what learners can do in the language
The language of the CEFR (on which the local curriculum is based) is written in "can do" formulations and "can translate" is not included. The role of translation is elaborated upon in the Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020) but the insinuation having learners roughly paraphrase or summarize a text in the local language that is provided in the target language and is at a higher level than the learner is at. Nowhere is literal translation or translation of words mentioned.

Teachers should keep in mind that the target words should help the learners to do something in the language; at the A2 level it might be to retell a story, compare or describe pictures, state likes and dislikes, give and follow instructions or directions. These actions require full sentences and some sort of production in a context. Thus, if teachers want learners to something with the language they're learning, it is mostly not translating. The vocabulary is in the "doing" and this doing is also the basis for report card grades, not the "knowing" of single words. Memorizing a model product would be more valuable than memorizing a list of words on the topic and the corresponding local language.

3.2 Vocabulary-translation lists do not reflect what teachers know about what it means to know a word
When teaching pre and in-service teachers about what it means to know a word, basic categories such as connotation, form, denotation, part of speech, spelling, pronunciation, register, and more are often responses to the question "what does it mean to know a word". If teachers introduce new words through these contexts, with these angles, then they can expect the children to USE and note down the words in similar ways, and a simplistic translation is not enough to satisfy the definition of what it means to "know" a word.

3.3 Vocabulary-translation does not reflect what is known about introducing and teaching new words

Similarly to the previous point, when introducing words, there are a range of options that include translation but are not limited to translation. Teachers can point to the object or show the picture, act out the word, describe a context or personal situation where the word is encountered, define the word or say what it is or is not. These options provide the learners with more input in the target language, which is valuable for learning and these techniques can be used by the learners themselves as repetition activities (e.g. one says a word, the other defines it). This supports the use of multiple senses and channels to introduce words (e.g. Macedonia and von Krigstein, 2012) and not just introducing words with one channel, e.g. just the picture, but with two or more - the picture and a gesture (see Altalhab, 2019 or Andrä, et al., 2020) and having the learners repeat or play games using these techniques. Thus, if words are being introduced with more than just the translation, then they should be tested in a more open manner than just eliciting the translation.

3.4 Using vocabulary-translation tests does not respect what is known about how long it takes to learn a word

Learning to use words does not happen overnight and it takes multiple encounters to understand a word and subsequently use it in an appropriate and accurate context. As Gass, Behney and Plonsky (2020) summarize: "*Vocabulary learning is incremental, in that it doesn't happen instantaneously, but is a recursive process. Vocabulary learning is affected by factors such as frequency of encounters with new words, use of strategies for learning new words, visual enhancement of words in text, and type of activity*" (p. 266). It is difficult to put a time-stamp on how long it takes but often the classroom situation is to work with a unit containing a list of words to be learned by the end of the unit, and the three to four weeks of two to three lessons a week of the target language does not provide enough contact to support a multimodal learning and production of words. Better would be to have open assessment tasks where words from previous units can be showcased through some communicative task and new words perhaps used, but not necessarily.

3.5 Translation of word lists does not do justice to the benefits of the lexical approach or focus on multiword expressions

There is support (see Christiansen and Arnon, 2017) for teaching language in chunks or multiword expressions such as "It could be"" or "here or there?". One part of such a phrase triggers the other and contexts trigger whole expressions. Vocabulary translation lists, even with the occasional formulaic combination, do not trigger enough in the mind of the learner. The prompt of a situation in the target language, or testing language through other contexts that elicit and trigger this language, is more representative of doing something in the language and supportive of such an approach than breaking language down into simple word lists. Such "chunking" also provides more exposure.

3.6 Vocabulary-translation lists do not support having learners study in a meaningful way

Whilst the exact purpose (to consolidate knowledge? to practice skills?) of homework might be relatively subjective and disputed, no one will argue the end-goal: to be able to use the target language. As we have already seen, using a language is not just knowing the translation. Thus, if we consider what we know about meaningful homework and connect that to the research supporting the importance of self-testing (e.g. Dunlosky, 2013) or the research on desirable difficulties, then the teacher's job is to provide the learners, especially young learners, with techniques and tools for learning. An example would be to use different styles of word lists or cards and teach different activities (such as teaching the look, say, cover, write, check for a word list connected to a story, or having learners write rebuses to share with one another in class the next day, or have learners write the definition on one card and the word on the other for a memory game). These different styles and activities provide not only more than the translation, but valuable experiences and techniques for future reference that help learners to become self-sufficient, independent life-long learners.

3.7 Translation of word lists does not "measure" enough subskills and is unfair to non-local language speakers

In looking at Figure 1, we see a context where the child was a native speaker of English in a Swiss English classroom and penalized for their German language skills, which is unfair to the 30% of the Swiss population that does not speak German at home (though not necessarily English). Even if the teacher were not to have subtracted points for the incorrect German spelling, the question remains as to the value of what is being measured – German here, not English in the English lesson. We do not know if the child can use the word in a sentence or if they would use the words in the right contexts. If we look in the other direction, from German to English as in Figure 2, we do not know, for the blank words, if the child (here again a native speaker of English in a typical Swiss classroom) doesn't know the German word or the English one. The information we get from such tests does not provide us with insight into the knowledge of the learner.

Figure 2: Vocab-translation test, German to English

Furthermore, often in such tests, specific words are tested, and alternatives not accepted (e.g. "to choose" is not accepted when the word in the coursebook was "to select"). These sorts of tests encourage the use and measure of the wrong constructs and do not always measure what they purport to measure.

3.8 Translation of word lists promotes the selection of the 'wrong' words

As shown in the examples provided in Figures 1 and 2, often the vocabulary-translation lists provided to the learners are semantic clusters, or lists of words on the same topic and with the same part of speech (e.g. all the colors or professions). Researchers such as Aslihan and Kesli Dollar (2014) have shown that such lists are not conducive to learning or long-term memory. Clusters, or lists, of unrelated (different parts of speech and topics) or thematic lists (same topic, different parts of speech) (see Figure 3) are better for long-term memory as the learner has to work to put the context onto the words.

Furthermore, such semantic sets often do not represent other criteria such as the usefulness of the word, the fact that it is not a cognate to the local German (thus needs noticing), the frequency of the word in everyday language as an indication of usefulness (the term "life expectancy" is not overly important for a nine-year old child in this case, nor is it a frequently used expression in general), its "fun-factor" or other selection criteria that might be used for the target age group. Thus, these lists do not encourage an appropriate selection of words to learn explicitly.

Figure 3: An example of different clusters taken from a story

Semantic cluster	Unrelated cluster	Thematic cluster
tree	to swing	tree
apple	branch	to climb
branch	when	shade
trunk	shade	to pick apples
leaves	happy	an old stump

4. Conclusion

It could be that there are other reasons for not using vocabulary-translation tests such as the idea that non-native speakers of the local language are generally more meaning-driven than monolinguals (Parkinson and Dinsmore, 2019). It could be argued that such lists do increase exposure, but so do many other, more useful activities such as reading or listening to a podcast and such alternative activities provide more opportunity for self-determination of the learner to choose what they want to read or listen to than being told to memorize such lists. And self-determination is conducive to learning.

4.1 Alternatives to …. vocabulary-translation lists

The lists in the back of many coursebooks make a useful reference for learners to look up words they do not understand and continue on with the exercise at hand. Yet they are often not useful for testing and for learning the vocabulary in a meaningful, sustainable

way. There is value to "learning systematically" and there are, luckily, some alternatives for teachers who are not quite ready to get rid of the lists.

For example, a list sort that respects the idea that vocabulary learning requires input on multiple channels would be the Frayer (1969) model which can be adapted for vocabulary use. When learners create their own models, or fill in the information on a list (Figure 4) or create a card with the information on it (Figure 5), they are active in many aspects of vocabulary learning as they have to describe, draw, rewrite the word, write the word in all languages known, and through this activation, they not only learn the word, but much more. When they use these cards or list, they can use them for self-testing by covering columns or the word in the middle, for playing games like "Snap" in pairs or for randomly choosing words or cards and recreating the context. These ideas strengthen memory connections.

Figure 4: Frayer model list

A search online for "interactive vocabulary notebooks" or "foldables" and "flippables" for learning vocabulary also leads to creative, multi-modal ways of learning that are especially useful for public school children. Flash card tools such as Quizlet also offer fields for definitions and pictures, and the games that can be generated from this input lead to more reading and writing than just the word and its translation.

4.2 Alternatives to… vocabulary-translation tests

The downside of vocabulary-translation is clear. Yet there is clear evidence that frequent testing IS good for learning (see Öncül, 2017, or Wahyuningtyas, and Wulandari, 2017 or Dunlosky, 2013). Luckily, there are numerous item types and simple tests that focus on vocabulary that do not take a lot of time from the teacher and serve a better purpose.
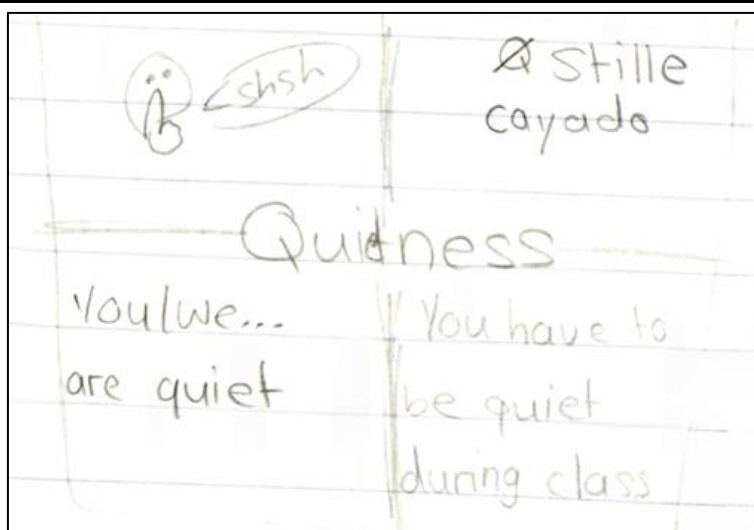
Figure 5: Frayer model card

For example, weekly small [pop] quizzes might include:

- Multiple Choice – find synonym, find right word or definition
- Gap filling - (first letter given / number of letters shown / word bank or not)
- Labeling – same picture from book
- C-tests – *Tomorrow is going to b_ a great d_ _!*
- Completion – *When you are hungry, you…..*
- Matching - (Words with meanings; pictures)
- Editing – *I went to the zoo to buy apples!*
- Picture descriptions – *Use [at least 5/these] words [from unit] to describe…*
- True / False – *You swim in an iceberg.*
- Learner-made questions
- Game observations - Dice games and other performance assessments that teachers can take ones on as learners perform
- Changing modes - take a listening transcript done the week before and use it for a reading quiz (underline all the words that show someone is happy).

These item types require more reading, writing, listening or even speaking which are the skills being focused on in communicative language teaching, not translation. Generally, small tests are useful as they are extrinsically motivating, and at the same time, they break the learning down into smaller parts so learners can see their success, which is one of the main advantages of vocabulary-translation tests. Using such weekly quizzes is motivating, and then instead of larger unit tests, a focus on products could be made. And in the case that the larger unit test is still used, these item types provide exposure to the item types learners might encounter on the unit test.

5. Conclusion

Vocabulary-translation tests are not necessary when teachers want to focus on communicative skills in their classrooms and there are few arguments that actually speak

in favor of them in the Swiss primary and lower secondary classroom. Whilst translation in and of itself can be a potentially interesting and enriching activity, the over-focus on vocabulary-translations tests is unfair to how language is best taught and to many of the learners taking such tests. There is enough for teachers to do without having to use vocabulary-translation tests, thus: A focus on richer, more authentic language teaching and assessing moments would provide a focus on more valuable communicative skills in the ELT classroom.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author
Laura Loder Buechel has been a teacher trainer in Zurich for over twenty years. She is originally from the US and holds an undergraduate degree from LaSalle University in Philadelphia, her MA from Northern Arizona University and her PhD from the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. Her main joy in life is practicing what she preaches. She is an editor of Babylonia, the Swiss journal of language teaching and learning (https://babylonia.online/). You can read more about her work here: https://phzh.ch/personen/laura.loder.

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Appendix 1: Questions used in Teacher Training

1) What does it mean to "know" a word?
2) If we are testing through translation, then how are we teaching? Is that the right way?
3) WHY do teachers give word lists and translations and test in the same way? Are there better alternatives? What do vocabulary translation tests actually measure?
4) Where is «vocabulary» in combination with «reading», «writing», «speaking» and «listening»?
5) How important is it to track exactly which words we have taught and which structures when the curriculum is based on "skills"? (E.g. A2.1 speaking "können in alltäglichen Situationen mit einfachen Worten Informationen austauschen und einholen (z.B. Rollenspiel, Gruppenarbeit) [can exchange and obtain information in everyday situations using simple words (e.g. role play, group work)]).
6) How important is it to be «systematic» in terms of vocab teaching when there are millions of words?
7) How can learners practice studying vocabulary? SHOULD they do this? What can you teach in class that will help at home or in the future?
8) If you provide the kids with "immersion" or a rich exposure / input, you will lose control of what they learn - but is that so bad?