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Volume 35, numéro 3, septembre 1990

La traduction dans le monde hispanolusophone

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/004519ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/004519ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (imprimé)

1492-1421 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Valdivieso, C. & Fuenzalida, C. (1990). Reading Comprehension in a Second Language by Higher Education Students: the Role of Translation. *Meta*, 35(3), 582–585. <https://doi.org/10.7202/004519ar>

# READING COMPREHENSION IN A SECOND LANGUAGE BY HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS: THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION

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Easy reading in a second language has shown a definite influence on the academic performance of higher education students. Various research projects carried out at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile have reported, first, a high percentage of foreign language reading material in course bibliographies and second, a scarce reading of it by students. Almost half of the subjects interviewed in one of those research projects stated that they were not satisfied with the way they faced the task of reading texts written in a second language. They said this was a tiring and time-consuming task. When there is such poor reading comprehension in a second language even if the reader is familiar with the subject itself, difficulties arise.

According to information provided by the *Book Acquisition Section of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile*, publications in languages other than Spanish account for 54% of annual acquisitions, and this figure is expected to rise.

This percentage agrees with the ratio for books written in a second language included in the bibliographies of different programs at the above-mentioned university. Recent studies have shown that texts in foreign languages account for approximately 50% of total bibliography in programs connected with the Social Sciences, and around 62.5% in those related to the Natural Sciences, Physical Sciences, Applied Sciences and Medicine. In all Faculties, English is the language of most textbooks and in some cases it is the only foreign language considered in bibliographies.

This situation forces students to read an important portion of course contents in books and publications written in a language other than their own, as it is shown in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
Ratio for books written in a foreign language included in bibliographies of Pontificia Universidad Católica students during one term.

<b>Mean</b>	43.65
<b>Standard deviation</b>	29.74
<b>Total students interviewed</b>	1.068

Most students interviewed reported that reading in a second language represented a great difficulty for them, yet they were fully aware that complying with the obligatory bibliography was directly related to a better academic performance.

First year students read a very small percentage of those books written in a foreign language that are included in course bibliographies (from 50% to less than 33%). This percentage increases among last year students because they say that mastering contents included in the bibliography becomes more and more compulsory to get a satisfactory performance.

Most students said that they do not read foreign language publications because their poor knowledge of the foreign language does not enable them to make an efficient reading. Students from Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile were required to rate themselves on a 1 to 7 scale and the results are shown in Table 2.

**TABLE 2**  
Student self-rating on foreign language reading ability (on a 1 to 7 scale).

<b>Mean score</b>	4.33
<b>Standard deviation</b>	1.55
<b>Total students interviewed</b>	1.026

Even students belonging to groups with a satisfactory evaluation in the second language test, which is mandatory in the above-mentioned university, have stated that reading in a foreign language represents for them a tiring and time-consuming task.

In some areas, students interviewed reported preparing translations and sharing Spanish summaries of foreign language texts in an attempt to satisfy reading requirements in a given course. Specifically, a study conducted at the Translation Department with students of three different programs, namely, Journalism, Psychology and Business Administration, revealed the relative importance of the three already-mentioned statements that account for a scarce use of foreign bibliography, i.e., reading in a foreign language is time-consuming, there is a poor knowledge of a foreign language among students and the use of summaries prepared in Spanish becomes a satisfactory alternative to reading texts in a foreign language. Results are shown in the following table.

**TABLE 3**  
Reasons for a scarce use of foreign bibliography.

	<b>Journalism</b>	<b>Psychology</b>	<b>Business Administration</b>
Alternative	%	%	%
Reading in a second lang. is time-consuming	40.9	54	78.6
Poor knowledge of the second lang.	50	68	62.2
Reading texts in a second language way be replaced by Spanish summaries	72.7	90	51

Translation of the foreign language bibliography is chosen as the best alternative to solve reading difficulties by 74.3% of all students interviewed, including those with a high evaluation in the mandatory second language test.

Translation as a way of solving the problem of access to information in a foreign language is considered with even greater enthusiasm by the Faculty. Its members consider it an immediate and concrete solution. In some cases, they have reported their own translating into Spanish of some texts they have thought essential for an adequate development of their courses.

For our research work, we reviewed the literature appearing in two computerized data bases: ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) and LLBA (Language and Language Behavior Abstracts). The descriptors used were: second language, reading comprehension and Higher Education. Under the three descriptors together, we found only one study addressing the relationship of those variables. That only study was conducted in Nigeria and it found several causes of difficulty in interpretation. It also uncovered some implications in teaching. This scarcity of studies reveals, in fact, the need for research on reading comprehension in a second language.

This necessity becomes urgent at the higher education level. There are several reasons for this: first, university considered in its very nature; second, the great number of students who need access to information in a foreign language. Certainly, this is not a problem to be analyzed by English-speaking countries. It is a research subject to be approached by countries using scientific literature in a language other than their own.

Almost all countries in our Latin American community are flooded by an increasing number of publications written mostly in English. In the area of scientific and technologic innovation, our countries are clearly dependent. Delayed access to information produced by developed countries increases the cultural, social and economic gap prevailing between Latin American countries and the industrial world. This situation is even more critical since we are referring to the highest level of education in a country, universities. Their contribution to the development of a nation has no parallel.

As it is impossible to leave aside all information in a foreign language, translation appears to be a workable solution. Through four research projects carried out at the Translation Department of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, the role of translation was studied in connection with this problem. Since students have reported their own translating into Spanish, in full or summary form, in order to understand what they read, it is clear that translation has a role in this issue. But it cannot be left in the amateur hands of students; it must be approached in a systematic way in order to keep the linguistic and cultural tradition of our language (Spanish). We consider two possible solutions. First, a course on basic translation techniques aimed to very specific groups of students belonging to a definite program and facing a definite syllabus. Second, the translation of certain texts, considered essential for a program and carried out by professional translators.

We think that both alternatives will contribute to a better comprehension of textbooks, will give students access to a wide range of information and, eventually, will result in a more satisfactory academic performance.

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