

When One is Not Enough: Translation Rating and the Assessment of Partial Word Knowledge

ABSTRACT

An important requirement in foreign language incidental vocabulary acquisition research is accurate assessment of partial word knowledge. Open-format L1 translation tests are increasingly used for this purpose. What level of precision is appropriate in the translation rating procedure? To answer this question, we analyze experimental data from a read-and-test study. We rate the pretest and posttest translations on an eleven-level scale. Through an approximation process, we derive equivalent binary, three-level, and six-level data. We apply the Mann-Whitney *U* Test to each of the four data sets (eleven-level, binary, three-level, and six-level) to identify the words for which subject knowledge improvement reached significance. Using the original, eleven-level data as a standard, we show that binary and three-level rating lead to false positives and false negatives. We draw two conclusions. 1. Not all partially correct translations deserve equal credit. 2. Multi-level rating is a more precise measure of translation accuracy than binary and three-level rating. We discuss practical rating issues and the advantages of using a pretest and posttest as opposed to a posttest only.

Key words: incidental vocabulary acquisition, English for specific purposes, partial word knowledge, translation rating, vocabulary assessment

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An important requirement in foreign language incidental vocabulary acquisition research is accurate assessment of partial word knowledge. Open-format L1 translation tests are increasingly used for this purpose. What level of precision is appropriate in the translation rating procedure? To answer this question, experimental data from a read-and-test study are analyzed. The pretest and posttest translations are rated on an eleven-level scale. Through an approximation process, equivalent binary, three-level, and six-level data are derived. The Mann-Whitney *U* Test is applied to each of the four data sets (eleven-level, binary, three-level, and six-level) to identify the words for which subject knowledge improvement reached significance. By using the original, eleven-level data as a standard, it is shown that binary and three-level rating lead to false positives and false negatives. Two conclusions are drawn: 1. Not all partially correct translations deserve equal credit; and 2. Multi-level rating is a more precise measure of translation accuracy than binary and three-level rating. Practical rating issues and the advantages of using a pretest and posttest as opposed to a posttest only are also discussed.

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(*Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 5th Ed., p. 39)

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