Exploring the Role of Translation in Communicative Language Teaching or the Communicative Approach

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Abstract
This study aims to investigate the perception of language teachers and their experience regarding the use of translation as a language teaching approach in Saudi Arabia. The study adopted a cross-sectional qualitative design to investigate the role of translation as a communicative approach in language teaching. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview with 20 professors and lecturers who were teaching at a university in Saudi Arabia. The interview results revealed that language translation strategy is effective in developing the necessary communicative ability among Saudi language learners. Also, the use of translation should be based on the skill set and competence level. It concludes that the judicious use of the translation should be practiced for Communicative Language Teaching.

Keywords
grammatical translation, language learning, language teaching, language translation, pedagogical translation

In the present cosmopolitan and multilingual societies, the strong presence of English language is an indispensable topic (Al-Sobhi & Preece, 2018). It has become a lingua franca in various countries where several programs have been initiated for making the language across the world parallel (Jenkins et al., 2017). The dominance of the language is evident from the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) report, which noted the presence of almost 1.5 billion English learners worldwide (Maharjan, 2017). In multilingual societies, communication competence is integral due to the increased cross-border exchanges and everyday communication, where interest in translation has emerged (Anderson et al., 2018). The globally escalated growth of the translation has also given rise to the recognition of progressive translator and interpreter training institutions (Kim, 2013). Not only this, but translation is also being adopted as a general strategy in academic language teaching. Global communication depends significantly on translation. One cannot think of news around the world without translation. Every important message is promptly and immediately translated into a myriad of languages so that information around the world is successfully conveyed. Thus, the communicative function of translation is undeniable, and translation, therefore, is unquestionably a useful process of transferring messages and information from one language to another (Anderson et al., 2018).

Evidence from the literature emphasizes the use of translation as a general language teaching strategy. For instance, Bagheri and Fazel’s (2011) study explored this strategy and its effect among the Iranian language students in terms of writing. It used the Liao (2006) method for data collection (questionnaire and interview guide) and revealed that Iranian students perceive the use of translation as effective in their language learning. Mahboob and Elyas (2014) and Alrabai (2014) supplement this statement and highlight that translation from Farsi language to English helps the students in understanding the contextual meaning, which in turn enables them to produce better and correct sentences in English.

Similar findings are drawn by Liao (2006) who initially studied the translation strategy for teaching. Some negative aspects pertaining to the students’ writing have also been studied by Bagheri and Fazel (2011). It highlights that many meanings of a similar term position translation as an erroneous strategy, which negatively impacts their language learning. Said’s (2016) study on the language learners of Sudan pointed out that students perceive translation as an effective strategy for promoting their language learning endeavors. Concerning this, Karimian and Talebinejad (2013) explored the use of the translation strategy among Iranian English learners. Using qualitative research design, the study found...
that translation as a learning strategy is used for memorizing and retrieving of English, comprehension of the language, self-assessment, as well as a communicative strategy for interacting with others in English.

Accordingly, the use of translation strategy is also viewed as an instrument that eradicates the anxieties and stress among language learning students and instills more confidence in them in terms of interaction (Hebbani et al., 2010). Use of the native language for learning English is found to be effective, which aids the students to comprehend the teacher’s instructions, enabling them to question in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes as well as improve their security sense related to the terms they are unaware of in English.

Previous studies provide conflicting results concerning the exploration of English translation among language learners. Bennui’s (2016) study validates that students prefer English direct composition to translation. Similarly, Lin et al. (2017) show that direct writing in English helps students develop their language writing skills more effectively compared with their practice of translating it in their language and then into the target language. Another major reason for such a negative attitude toward translation is the fact that it is closely associated with a traditional method known as the Grammar Translation Method which is primarily based on translation (Lee et al., 2015). In this method, translation is viewed as a major process that facilitates learning a foreign language. For the Arab regions, particularly Saudi Arabia, about 69% of the Saudi teachers make use of Arabic in their classrooms. The teachers perceive that the use of native language is integral for reducing the time consumed in the class (Alshammari, 2011). As a result of this practice, students lack the opportunities for practicing their language skills and developing their language competence, which is crucial for developing their English communicative skills outside the classroom. Al-Seghayer (2015) has highlighted various difficulties Arab students encounter while speaking English, one of which is their more inclination toward the use of Arabic as a formal language of communication. Integration of translation in language learning skill has been identified as a challenging factor for the teacher (Farooq, 2015; Javid et al., 2013).

Earlier research in the Arab World has revealed that the limited opportunities for direct communication impede the communicative competence among the Arab learners (Alrabai, 2014; Al-Seghayer, 2014; Hamad, 2013; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Similarly, Alrashidi and Phan’s (2015) research has indicated that language learners in Arab lack the intrinsic motivation for practicing English language learning skills, which are combined with their lack of language learning skills which impacts their learning outside the classroom. Thirusanku and Yunus’s (2014) study also highlights that with the development ventures which are taking place in the region, it is integral that effective teaching skills are practiced.

The study found that despite having a conducive language learning context, various Arab students are unable to communicate freely in English for various factors, for instance, learners’ limited knowledge of the English language, and lack of confidence and motivation. The practice of translation is also found arguing with Al-Musawi (2014) which highlights that the translation approach does not fall consistent with the English communicative method either, which rejects the idea of translating the English language into the native language for learning the target language. Considering the different opinions related to the translation as a use of language learning approach, this study seeks to explore the use of translation strategy for learning (EFL from the perspective of the teachers in Saudi Arabia.

The rationale for undergoing research in Saudi Arabia is based on noticeable English use in Saudi Arabia (Al-Seghayer, 2015). With the instigation of the Saudi Vision 2030, the efforts have further proliferated for achieving sustainable advancement and modernization in the region, which leads to its economic, educational, and political development (Vision, 2030). The vision promotes the enterprises and their associated personnel with the skill of communicating the vision idea and meaning with the globalized world. This entails developing a comprehensive understanding of the English language and a profound command of the international language for communicating. Similarly, some research has pointed out that various problems are encountered by the Arab learners in terms of speaking, given their limited exposure to the target language (Jdetawy, 2011; Mourtaga, 2011; Ur Rahman & Alhai, 2013). For instance, Al-Seghayer’s (2014) research demonstrated that Arab students lack the opportunity for learning English communicative strategy due to limited natural interaction resources. Therefore, integration of the language may prove to be beneficial in advancing their English language competence level.

Consequently, the study particularly focuses on the exploration of how translation can help with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) or the Communicative Approach. To be more specific, the discussion throughout the article will be restricted only to how translation can be usefully and pragmatically applied in CLT. Also, it investigates the impact of translation on language learning and teaching career. It is well established that the use of the Communicative Approach is based on the view that anything is possible in a language class if useful and effective. Therefore, translation can be one of the useful tools that may be used in CLT. This study aims to create an improved learning environment by examining the CLT-based language learning techniques among language learners from the perspective of the teacher.

Conceptual Framework

CLT first appeared in the late 1960s (Nagalakshmi & Rajaram, 2016). The emergence took place as a response to Progressivism, a philosophical idea that is centered on the
learning of the student’s role from that of a receptive individual to an active participant (Savignon & Berns, 1984). Howatt (1987) contributed to the concept of CLT by providing a clear and complete distinction between language teaching using structured communication and using the spontaneous discovery of the language itself. The teacher makes use of translation in language clarification in CLT; it is important to analyze the methodological procedure involved in CLT. The methodological framework is found in Littlewood (1981, p. 86), which is given in Figure 1 (Appendix B).

This diagram clarifies the fact that structures are taught along with functions in CLT. Clarifying the structure of the task for the language is fruitful if the explanation or demonstration is fully clear to the learners. A teacher may attempt to explain rules in English considering that his students will understand it. If meta-language is beyond learners’ understanding level, the explanation is practically useless. In the Communicative Approach, forms and functions are usually explained after the main activities. Sometimes, language tasks come before the main communicative tasks as warm-up activities. Language functions and forms sometimes, however, are not clear to learners if explained in the target language. If students are not clear about language clarification made by the teacher, they may not be able to use it properly. Even though they manage to use them, some patterns remain blurred to many elementary learners. In that case, the teacher can explain the concept in learners’ native language. If the teacher does not know learners L1, he or she can nominate a fast learner to explain it to the rest of the learners. In that case, learners’ native language plays a significant role.

Although CLT implementation has been highlighted in foreign languages by previous studies (Fadilah, 2018; Rahman et al., 2018), the outcomes of the studies cannot be generalized for the teaching of Arab language across various regions, such as the two languages are based on different language phenomena in terms of special phonetic expressions and linguistic codes. The tone of the languages varies according to the difference in the lexical tones (Al-Nasser, 2015). The difference in the tones impacts the meaning of the individual character which makes translation difficult (Alzahrani & Ali, 2016). Similarly, the written structure of both languages varies, which further amplifies the language translation challenges (Shalhoub-Awwad & Leikin, 2016). As a result of this, the learners can deduce the meaning of a word based on their interpretation, which impacts the meaning of the translated sentences (Albirini et al., 2011).

In terms of communication, the English and Arabic linguistic differences give rise to several errors of language learners. For instance, the English sounds such as /p/ and /v/ that are generally spoken as /b/ and /f/ in Arabic have no presence in the Arabic language (Alrabai, 2018; Ashour, 2017; Javed, 2013). This mispronunciation may lead to the occurrence of embarrassing and uncomfortable situations particularly when interacting with native speakers takes place. For example, the Arab speakers may replace the words park, van, and vast with bark, fan, and fast. Similarly, the teachers should encourage the language learning students to listen to authentic English for developing correct speaking competence regularly. The review highlights that teaching English to Arab students is different compared with other language students.

Method

Study Design

In this study, cross-sectional study design is employed for evaluating the effectiveness of translation in the Communicative Approach in Saudi Arabia. For examining the effectiveness of the translation approach, a qualitative study approach is employed, which assists in collecting data in a natural setting without causing any interruption which allows collecting valid and accurate data. Moreover, the qualitative nature assists in enriching the results as the collected data are comprehensively evaluated, supporting drawing a holistic conclusion. The study is primarily conducted in the Department of English at King Khalid University in Saudi Arabia.

Study Sample

In this study, 20 professors and lecturers are recruited who teach at a university in Saudi Arabia. These teachers used the Grammar Translation Method and were involved in much translation throughout their schooling. The sample for this study is recruited using a purposive sampling method. This sampling method is selected as it allows collecting the data from the participants who possess the relevant skills essential for deriving the particular response to the formed study question. The rationale behind the selection of the sample is because these teachers are experienced in many translation activities. Their exposure to the translation activities makes them more likely to be aware of the effect or influence of translation on their learning and teaching strategies.

Data Collection

In this study, data are collected using a semi-structured interview approach. As the participants are English teachers, the interview is conducted fully in English. The selection of this interview design is because it enables the researcher to explore different viewpoints of the participants, providing valuable insights into the addressed research problem. Moreover, this strategy also sheds light a new perspective on it. Also, the results are found to be credible as they are concluded from the responses gathered from multiple authentic parties. The questionnaire is proofread by two professors to ensure its validity and reliability.
Data Collection Procedure

To evaluate the impact of translation on the communicative capability of the language learners, the researcher initially sent an email to the respective participants. The email contained the details about the study scope, its objectives, and protocols, which outlined that the interview would be conducted in English. After receiving a positive response, the researcher designed a questionnaire (Appendix C) with interview questions that were sent through Google forms. Initially, demographic details of the participants are asked, following which the questions related to translation and its use as a communication strategy for language learners were explored. Two aspects of the questions are explored, that is, translation in the aspect of CLT, and translation and language learning. Before the interview, permission is also sought from the participants for recording the data both electronically and in a journal, which reduces the probability of self-fabricating the data.

Data Analysis

The data collected in this study are based on thematic analysis. After each interview, the researcher creates a note for the gathered data, expanding the knowledge. For sustaining the anonymity of the participants, a number in the range from P01 to P20 is allotted to the participants. Moreover, the interpreted data are coded based on the revealed answers provided. The collected information is stored on the laptop which was encrypted with a password to limit access to it. Along with it, a date is projected for the destruction of the collected information. It is worth mentioning that all interview questions are answered in English.

Ethical Consideration

Before the interview, a written copy of the study is sent, and approval is acquired from the Institute’s Ethical Board in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, written consent is also attained from the participants after communicating the study scope and its objectives. The researcher communicates the right of withdrawal to the participants, which can be used at any point in the research, along with the right to confidentiality as well as anonymity. In addition to this, in case of ambiguous statements, the researcher contacts the participants through mobile calls to further enlighten the statements.

Results

The findings of the interviews are divided into two parts. The first part comprises the demographic details of the participants, whereas the second part is composed of the responses which highlight the effect of translation on the student’s communicative ability.

Demographic Details

The participants’ demographic details are demonstrated in Table 1 (Appendix A). It shows that most of the teachers were males (75%) as compared to females (25%). The interviews also revealed that language teachers were mostly aged between 28 and 33 years (30%), followed by age group 34 to 41 years and above 41 years, that is, 35%. The educational details of the participants showed that 60% of the participants had completed their masters, followed by 40% of the participants with a PhD. The teaching experience showed that 60% of participants had 11 to 15 years of teaching experience, and 40% had more than 15 years of experience.

Thematic Analysis

The responses of the participants are divided based on the themes which emerge as per their responses. Three themes were pre-specified, pre-decided, and pre-categorized in the interview prior to conducting the instrument, that is,

- Language teaching in general;
- Translation and CLT;
- The effect of translation on language learning in class.

The questionnaire was designed based on the determined themes. This helped the researcher to direct the interview in line with the determined themes. This also made the categorizing of the responses easier, eventually assisting the better and comprehensive analysis of the research problem.

Theme 1: Language teaching in general. The responses revealed that the majority of the teachers perceived translation as an effective strategy for language teaching. Participants spoke in favor of using translation in language teaching. One teacher, for instance, responded that “Incidental and wise use of translation helps the students to effectively understand subtle concepts.” Another participant revealed that the translation approach facilitates language learning. One interviewee stated that “translation enhances knowledge and skills associated with the target language.” The language teachers showed that translation aids in engaging students and deriving the relevant input by stating, “With translation, comprehensible input can be facilitated if the translation is involved in teaching.” Neutral response from the participants was also achieved, which showed that the use of translation strategy is based on the student’s skill set. One statement revealed it more clearly: “It all depends who the students are and what their level of proficiency is.” One professor declined the use of language translation approach, stating that “Learning a foreign language should not rely on constantly translating from one code to another unless the translation is taught as a skill.” The interview indicated that the competence level of the teacher also plays a key role in the use of language
translation skills. A professor stated that “Once the lessons are well prepared, it should rarely be necessary to translate anything into the native language of the learners.”

Eight teachers emphasized that the decision of the teacher is crucial for the use of the language translation strategy, which must be comprehensively evaluated. In this regard, one respondent stated, “The language teacher should know when, why and how to use translation in the EFL classroom.” The interview showed that translation helps the teacher in making the students understand the need for undergoing a study. One of the professors responded, “When we, as a language teacher, cannot find any way to make the meaning clear, the use of translation becomes a compelling need.” The responses showed the significance of the translation when the language grammar is being taught, where the use of translation is justified. This is highlighted in the statement of a lecturer, “to make clear the differences between the grammar of the students’ native language and the target language, translation is necessary.” The findings highlight the need for integrating translation to enhance deep language knowledge and skills.

**Theme 2: Translation and communicative language teaching.** The study participants responded positively toward the use of translation as a communicative strategy. They highlighted the need to use it judiciously as evident from a statement, “Communicative Language Teaching, as a method of language teaching, does not prohibit the use of translation in the EFL classroom, but insists on the judicious use of translation in the process of teaching.” Another participant indicated another strategy for the translation, stating, “teachers should help students know what to say, how to say it, and in which situation the use of translation may make them communicatively competent.” The role of translation as a meaning-producing agent was also shown, for instance, “By the use of translation, the teacher can clarify language functions, encourage students to communicate.” Another stated, “I see it as an advantage. If the students know the translation into their native language, communicative competence will automatically follow” whereas others stated that “It tells the difference between L1 and L2 in terms of grammar.” Response from a lecturer viewed it as a good idea for improving the communicative ability of the student and stated that “It is a good idea to involve students in the translation of real-life texts. This makes them more exposed to language in reality.” However, one response showed its disadvantage such as “Translation and grammar distract language learners from interacting naturally in communication.”

**Theme 3: The effect of translation on language learning in class.** The effect of translation as a language learning strategy has also been noted by the participants. The responses showed both positive and negative opinions. One participant stated his positive experience: “It does not have much of a negative effect on me. During my schooling, teachers used to follow the GT method where a large part of teaching was based on translation.” Another participant stated that “Translation helped me a lot to develop correct grammar,” whereas another stated that “It has strengthened my writing and basic grammar.” The overall responses showed that translation could be used to comprehend but not to learn a language. Some participants expressed their negative opinions, stating that “It hinders the student for enhancing their fluency on the target language.” One interviewee stated that “in our time most of the lesson was devoted to translating sentences into and out of the target language which had a negative impact on the learning process.” The personal characteristics were also perceived to impact the language learning of the students. For instance, response of the teacher revealed, “I or students at that time, also felt shy to use the target language.” The translation may help to understand the text, but for language learning, it creates a barrier for the language learner. “Language embodies the culture, and translation of a foreign concept is almost impossible in its true sense.” The inadequate expression is also viewed to impact the learning using the translation as the learning strategy: “Translation does not give the exact expression used in the target language” and that “Translating into L1 as a method of teaching may not be an idealistic approach.”

**Discussion**

The overall findings of the interviews show that an attempt at translating into learners’ first language is logical when it comes to teaching a foreign language (in its structural sense and devoid of its culture). The interview findings highlight the significance of translation which is corroborated by earlier studies, which demonstrated the effectiveness of the translation in communication in another language (Alharbi, 2015). The results reveal interesting findings showing that any efficient language teacher who came across the Grammar Translation Method, eventually, now, has managed to become a very expert user of English and an expert teacher. The results show that in developing countries like India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, Grammar Translation Method was the only method used in schools and colleges in the 1970s and 1980s (Rahman et al., 2018; Shah et al., 2018).

The findings of this study position translation as a positive approach to language learning and show that it helps students in understanding the meaning behind each sentence, improving the language outcomes. The study by Bagheri and Fazel (2011) and Farooq (2015) endorses the findings showing that translation improves the language learning skills of the language learning students. Similarly, several other studies have concluded similar results for developing language competence (Bagheri & Fazel, 2011; Karimian & Talebinejad, 2013; Said, 2016).

The findings of this study highlight that theories and hypotheses do not often reflect reality. The translation may have a negative impact on learning, but the effect usually does not last long. It gradually wears off once a learner or a
user is properly exposed to real-life English. Adil’s (2019) recent study shows that “The use of learners’ first language must be fully controlled by the teacher in such a way that the classroom still has the target language environment” (p. 182). The study shows that the use of translation is dependent on the language competence and level of the learners (Adil, 2019). In a practical sense, it seems better to avoid translation in class. In general, translation apparently prevents learners from thinking in the target language. It all comes down to where and when one can make use of translation in a language class. Previous studies have also supported the research findings concluding that it saves a lot of time that a teacher spends on giving instructions (Al-Musawi, 2014). A lesson, no matter how communicative, interesting, and effective, may lead to complete failure if instructions do not properly sink in. At the same time, in CLT, a teacher usually explains language points after each activity. Again, all learners must understand what it is that their teacher is trying to explain. The same applies to the teaching of lexis, where, instead of just relying on Concept Checking Questions (a preferred approach), a teacher can make use of translation in learners’ L1. However useful translation may be in CLT, a teacher needs to be careful about the amount and frequency of translation used in class. Whimsical use of translation in class may lead to demotivation among learners and excessive dependence on L1 in learning a foreign language. Although translation itself (as a separate skill) is labeled as a cognitive activity (Albir & Alves, 2009), such excessive dependence on translation, particularly in language learning, can be a barrier to critical thinking and cognitive development required for successful language learning. Along with four skills, “thinking in the target language,” which has always been an undermined skill, is another one for proper language development (Albirini et al., 2011). Therefore, learners should be able to understand all concepts associated with language learning through only the target language.

**Pedagogical Implications**

In a practical sense, translation can play a significant role in language teaching. As far as CLT is concerned, there is not enough coverage of translation activities in class. The study also recommends that the instruction should be given in the native language of students for achieving the desired objectives. It is because long instructions do not often easily sink in if the language learners are at the beginning stages. These beginners require explanation in their first language, which improves the achievement of the task outcomes. Moreover, a teacher can also use translation as a part of the course for motivating and energizing the students, particularly for the ones that lack proper language competence. The teachers using the translation approach in language teaching can help, advice, and inspire the one to gradually change the classroom environment to a favorable one, where students are motivated to communicate in the target language. The study findings also suggest that the students should be given tasks for following certain authentic online platforms like BBC World Service, CNN, and more for learning the speaking and conversational style of the language. It stresses that the language teaching institutes should focus on the teachers’ pre-service and in-service to experience and train them for integrating communicative experience into their language teaching.

**Conclusion**

At this juncture, the study concludes that translation, no matter how useful, must be handled carefully. Frequent or whimsical use of translation may lead to a lack of interest in the target language. Moreover, it may enhance the excessive or sole dependence of translation in learning something new. Such dependence leads to a lack of ability to think in the target language and therefore may affect learners’ cognitive skills, which can be enhanced only using the target language. There should not be any doubt about the fact that translation can be a very useful tool that helps with CLT. In other words, the study concludes that the teacher can judiciously depend on translation to make successful learning. For instance, translation makes teachers’ instructions simpler and easier. Thus, the study concludes that effective decision-making should be practiced by the teacher for determining the use of the translation approach in teaching. The study recommends that teachers and institutional collaboration are vital to promote and sustain collaboration, change, and innovation.
Appendix A

Table 1. Demographics.

| Variable                      | Participants (n = 20) |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
|                               | F        | %     |
| Age, years                    |          |       |
| 28–33                         | 6        | 30.0  |
| 34–41                         | 7        | 35.0  |
| >41                           | 7        | 35.0  |
| Gender                        |          |       |
| Female                        | 5        | 25.0  |
| Male                          | 15       | 75.0  |
| Educational level             |          |       |
| Masters                       | 12       | 60.0  |
| PhD                           | 08       | 40.0  |
| Teaching experience, years    |          |       |
| 2–5                           | 0        | 0.00  |
| 6–10                          | 0        | 0.00  |
| 11–15                         | 12       | 60.0  |
| >15                           | 8        | 40.0  |

Appendix B

Figure 1. CLT methodological framework.
Note. CLT = Communicative Language Teaching
Appendix C

Questionnaire

Exploring the Role of Translation in Communicative Language Teaching or the Communicative Approach

Dear colleagues

Below is a questionnaire that would help me collect some qualitative data for my above titled research paper. Please take 5 to 10 minutes of your time to answer the questions. I can assure you that the responses will be kept confidential and used only for the research purpose. Thank you in advance for your help.

Regards
XXXXX

PART 1: Teachers’ general views on the use of translation in language teaching

What is your general impression about translation in language teaching?

PART 2: Practical application of translation to CLT

Does translation help with the Communicative Approach to teaching? If yes, how would you make effective use of translation in Communicative Language Teaching?

PART 3: Impact of translation on language learning and teaching

1. How does “translation” affect language learning in class?
   ○ It has no negative impact at all.
   ○ It has a negative impact on learning process.

2. Based on your schooling experience, give your reasons behind your choice above.

3. Do you think that the translation tasks you did in class have adversely affected your teaching career? Why or Why not? (This question may be invalid if you have chosen the first option)

Thank you for your valuable time

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