

The Use of Translation within Communicative Language Teaching in an EFL Context: Theoretical Foundations and Framework for Practice Activities

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Abstract

Since the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) the use of translation in EFL classes has been regarded as a pedagogical crime, as translation connotes the old Grammar Translation Method. However, not only is translation still used in a number of countries as a teaching and learning tool, but it remains true that even teachers who claim to use CLT, occasionally, if not often, make valuable use of translation to sort out some classroom teaching and learning issues.

The aim of this paper is to explore the rationale for using translation in the CLT framework and subsequently propose some teaching activities that can fit in it. A survey was used to collect 11 teachers and teacher trainers' opinions as to whether translation should be used or not in the context of CLT, in an EFL environment. The results showed that the majority of the respondents are in favor of the integration of translation within the framework of CLT. As a result, the author puts forward key guidelines that may shape up the limits of this project where translation will operate as the fifth macroskill, in addition to the four traditional ones.

Key words: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), macroskill, Translation, back-translation, EFL.

1 Introduction

Since the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the use of translation in EFL classes has been regarded as an outdated teaching technique as it connotes the old Grammar-Translation Method. However, not only is translation still used in a number of countries as a teaching and learning tool, but it remains true that even teachers who claim to use CLT, occasionally, if not often, make valuable use of translation to sort out some classroom teaching

and learning issues. First and foremost, it seems to be worthwhile to define the key concepts: Grammar Translation Method (GTM), Translation, and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

Grammar-Translation Method, which held sway in the past, basically focused on teaching L2 grammar rules with illustrative examples that learners would imitate by translating L1 decontextualized sentences in L2. It also focused on bilingual word lists learning and reading passages with a predominance of accuracy over fluency. In other words, this method focused more on learners' ability to analyze the language rather than on their ability to use it. In contrast, Communicative Language Teaching, which has been the orthodoxy in ESL and EFL context from the 70s until today, aims at developing learners' ability to communicate in L2, focusing on fluency, problem-solving and information-gap activities that engage learners in group work. As for translation, it is defined as a process whereby an original source text (ST) in a source language (SL) is rendered into a target text (TT) in a target language (TL) (Munday2012:8). This activity happens to be a real-life one which is widely practiced in everyday transactions, either in written form, or in spoken form known as interpretation. The issue at stake here is how possible it is to integrate such an activity in an L2 learning context in a way that fits in some of the characteristics of CLT.

So, the aim of this paper is to explore the rationale for using translation in the context of CLT and subsequently propose a framework for teaching activities that can be in line with its basic principles. Based on the key role that translation plays in Second Language Acquisition and its extensive use in socio-cultural, economic and political communication, it should naturally and logically fit in the Communicative Language Teaching paradigm which equally and primarily claims to be real-life focused.

Our aim here is to find preliminary answers to the following questions:

- 1) Do EFL teachers often or occasionally use translation during their lessons?
- 2) In what way(s) do EFL teachers think translation can fit in CLT principles?
- 3) What translation activities/task can they suggest within the CLT paradigm?

2 Literature Review

Research suggests that L1 has always played a key role in L2 acquisition. This belief was at the core of research in Contrastive Analysis which posits that differences between L1 and L2 being the cause of L2 learning difficulties, an analysis and focus on those differences would be of help to the L2 learner (Selinker and Susan M.Gass 2001:72). However, other studies proved that the transfer from L1 to L2 is not the only cause of deviant forms, but that trials and errors are part of the normal process of language learning as shown by the learner's intermediate language known as interlanguage (Corder 1967:167; Ortega 2009:32). Still, while L1 may not be the only source of difficulties, it is now widely recognized that L1 may impact negatively or positively L2 acquisition by slowing down or accelerating the rate of acquisition (Ortega 2009:35). For example, it is established that when L1 and L2 are typologically similar, this is more likely to induce a faster rate of acquisition than otherwise. In this regard, Hui, addressing the role of L1 in L2 in a bilingual education context, states that skills such as reading and writing strategies acquired in L1 are transferable in L2 learning (Hui:100).

One factor that militates in favor of the introduction of translation in CLT is that translation is all-pervading in sociocultural interactions. In this respect, Stibbard argues that "translation is a natural, useful and essentially communicative activity, which general learners of the language will have to perform, whether or not they have had any formal training as translators or interpreters" (Stibbard 1994:9). Similarly, Carreres posits that given that translation takes place in the real world, it is "intrinsically and extrinsically linked to a communicative purpose" (Carreres 2006:5). In the same fashion, Pariente-Beltran (2006:30) argues that "if we consider translation to be a communicative activity, then, translation, as the conveyance of meaning among 2 or more languages, should also be considered a communicative activity." So, if translation is that much used in day-to-day communication, then it seems to be logical to give it the place it deserves in L2 classroom, given that a classroom is nothing but a microcosm of society at large. Consequently, Larsen-Freeman suggests that a "judicious use" of students' L1 should be allowed even within the context of Communicative Language Teaching (Larsen-Freeman 2000:132). In other words, using translation in a reasonably balanced and purposeful way should not be at odds with CLT even if it exclusively focuses on developing L2 fluency in class.

The belief that translation should naturally fit in L2 is supported by empirical studies targeting both learners and teachers. These studies suggest that both teachers and students believe that the use of translation can be of help in the EFL classroom. Jingxia investigated Chinese students and teachers' attitudes towards code-switching to Chinese in EFL classes, using questionnaires and classroom recordings (Jingxia2010:13). The subjects were 261 undergraduates with different majors from 3 Chinese universities, and 60 teachers. The results showed that 80% of the teachers and 66% of students viewed code-switching positively (21). In the same fashion, Kavaliauskiene (2009:7) examined 55 ESP students' perceptions of the use of L1 in classroom, using a 1 to 5 Likert scale questionnaire. The respondents consisted of 3 groups of students specializing in psychology, social work and penitentiary law. The findings indicated that all the students and especially the less proficient ones were for occasional use of L1 in EFL classes.

Nazary also explored 85 Iranian university students' perceptions of the use of L1 in their classes. The students were surveyed by means of a questionnaire. But in contrast to the studies previously described, the subjects on the whole were reluctant in adhering to the use of L1 in class. However, 72% showed their preference for bilingual teachers (Nazary2003:147). According to the researcher, the reason for this reluctance is "likely due to their teachers' insistence on not using the L1 and identifying it as a hindrance for language learning"(148). Such an interpretation of the students' reluctance in the use of L1 shows the extent to which teachers may contaminate learners with their own teaching beliefs, even though the learners themselves may genuinely have a different opinion.

Research has also shown that some types of classroom translation activities are valuable L2 learning tools if used purposefully and meaningfully. Kim reports her experience with 20 native Korean freshman and sophomore English majors to whom she taught process writing with multiple drafting for 3 semesters. At some point in the program, she realized that the students were not making any significant progress in composition skills as their final drafts proved not to be better than their first ones. As a result, Kim decided to use translation purposefully to raise their awareness on writing as an act of communication with special focus on the audience. She started with a "self-translation" task which consisted in students' translating their final drafts into Korean and reflecting on their observations. According to the researcher, most of the students

recognized that the task served as eye-opener on their flaws in L2 (Kim2010:4). But Kim went a step further with a “collaborative grammar-translation” task. Unlike the first task, in the collaborative grammar-translation task, students worked in pairs translating each other’s drafts. Then, the translated versions were given back to their writers. Finally, students discussed their problems of miscommunications caused by inaccurate linguistic forms. As a result of this experience, Kim concluded that “students’ first language, especially for low level EFL learners, can be a vital resource if used wisely for specific goals”(6). Similarly, Kavaliauskiene’s study, which we have discussed earlier, resulted in his designing a learner-centered and awareness-raising translation activity known as back-translation activity, which consisted in having students translate different texts from L2 to L1, working in pairs. Then, different pairs exchanged their translated texts, which they had to translate back into L2. Then, they discussed any register as well as form-related problems that they came across in the process. From the two studies described above, it seems to be clear that translation can be used in a more interactive and purposeful way, which is way far from the traditional Grammar Translation Method.

As can be seen from this literature review, both learners and teachers think that L1 can be of great help to learning L2, which is in line with research in Second Language Acquisition that posit that L1 can impact positively L2 acquisition in terms of rate of acquisition and the transfer of skills acquired in L1(Ortega2009:35). Furthermore, with regard to the classroom activities, it has been proven that translation can be used purposefully and communicatively to raise students’ awareness on their problems in writing skills. Additionally, these tasks make use of authentic materials, are interactive and learner-centered, thereby complying with some of the key principles undergirding Communicative Language Teaching. However, it seems to be obvious from this literature review that translation tasks based on speaking, reading and listening skills are pretty scarce, if not inexistent. Consequently, more work needs to be done towards developing translation activities that can enhance listening, speaking and reading skills as well. The recent comeback of the L1, a neglected resource thus far (Atkinson1987:3), on the ESL/EFL scene is actually the result of a paradigm shift from indirect and direct approaches to a constructivist paradigm whereby both L1 and L2, together with the teachers and learners and any other mediational means, work holistically in a complex but dynamic and creative way (Puren1995:7; Machida2008:3). Additionally, connectionist models posit that bilinguals store L1 and L2 vocabulary in the same area in the brain, so much so that “L1 is thus considered to assist

learners' comprehension of L2 by creating more network nodes (ideational representation and words) in their long term memory" (Machida2008:3; Macaro 2003:80).

3 Main body

3.1 Rationale for the study

The main reason behind the choice to investigate the issue of a possible integration of translation in CLT is that today, even though more and more EFL teachers claim to teach in accordance with the principles of this orthodoxy, the reality is that, on the ground, there seems to be a gap between what they claim to be doing and what they are actually doing. The fact of the matter is that a great number of EFL teachers still use translation, at least once in a while, in their classes but just feel some kind of complex in recognizing it for fear of being castigated as outdated. Under such circumstances, investigating the issue will certainly trigger off a more reflective approach to the question, which will hopefully result in removing the complex that teachers have developed for using translation in their classes. In order to find more about what teachers think about translation in their classes, a small scale study targeting 11 EFL teachers was conducted.

3.2 Data collection

In order to find answers to these questions, 11 teachers and teacher trainers having EFL experience were surveyed with a questionnaire. EFL teachers were exclusively targeted as they are more likely to be speakers of students' L1, a situation which naturally lends itself to the temptation of translating. 8 out the 11 participants are from Cote d'Ivoire and the 3 other participants are from USA, Indonesia and South Korea. It is noteworthy to specify that the respondent from the USA taught for 6 years in South Korea and 2 years in Saudi Arabia. In South Korea, he had to make use of bilingual course materials sometimes, a factor which made me retain him in the group of EFL teachers even though he is not an L1 speaker. The respondents who are not from Cote d'Ivoire are currently enrolled for the Master's TESL program at ISU. Similarly, 3 of the Ivorian respondents are currently enrolled in Master's programs in St Michael's College, Vermont. Overall, the teaching experience of the participants is 17 years on average. The questionnaire consisted of 2 main *Yes/No* questions followed each by complementary answers in case the choice was *Yes*. For example, the first question *Have you ever used translation in your EFL (English as a Foreign Language) class?* was followed by *if yes in 1, specify in which situation(s)*(Question2). The second *Yes/No* question (Question 3)

asked respondents if they think translation can fit in the CLT and if *Yes*, they should specify if it should be used as a teaching aid/method, a learning aid or both (Question4). Finally, they were asked to suggest 1 or 2 translation activities/tasks in case they answered *Yes* to 3 (Question5). The questionnaire was emailed to respondents who are outside Terre Haute.

3.3 Demographic information and findings

The results are presented on two tables. *Table1* presents demographic information about the participants. It displays the total number of participants, their country of origin, and the average of their years of teaching experience as well the types of school they taught in, along with the levels of classes they held. As previously indicated, the majority of participants, that is 8 out of 11 (70%), are from Cote d'Ivoire, and the remaining 3 (30%) are from the US, South Korea and Indonesia. The average of their years teaching experience is 17, which indicates that they are highly experienced teachers in the field of EFL. The participants from Cote-d'Ivoire are mostly high school teachers, some having become in-service teacher trainers or inspectors. The participants from US, Indonesia and South Korea have taught graduate students, vocational school students and middle school, respectively.

| Country | Information | Number | Years of teaching experience on average | Teaching environment | Classes /levels |
|---------------|-------------|--------|---|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| Cote d'Ivoire | | 8 | 12 27 13 8 19 25 31 15 | EFL | High School |
| USA | | 1 | 8 | EFL | Graduate students in South Korea |
| South Korea | | 1 | 17 | EFL | Middle School |
| Indonesia | | 1 | 17 | EFL | ESP in vocational school |
| Total | | 11 | 17 on average | | |

Table1: Demographic information about respondents

Table2 analyzes questions 1 and 3 in terms of the *Yes/No* responses along with subsequent complementary responses in case of *Yes*. From this chart, it can be observed that, regarding

Question1, 9 out 11 (81.8%) recognized having used translation in their teaching against 2 (8.2%) who said the opposite. Their complementary responses revealed that they have used translations in the following situations: explaining a reading passage, explaining culture-oriented vocabulary, explaining marked L2 grammatical structures, testing and test instructions. Regarding Question3, 10 out 11 (90.9%) stated that they think translation can fit in CLT. As for their responses to the first complementary question to Question3, 1 respondent reported using translation as a teaching method/aid (a), 3 as a learning aid (b) and 6 as both teaching method and learning aid (c). The second complementary question provided responses that can be categorized in 2 groups: The first group concerns the use of translation as an aid to make explicit culture-bound L2 vocabulary or to elucidate grammatical differences between L1 and L2, and as an aid in test directives. We can also put in this category, suggestions of using translation to explain a reading passage with a high lexical density. As for the second category, it is characterized by real life-oriented activities in speaking or writing that involve information gaps that need to be bridged by the learners. For example one respondent suggested the following simulation activity: *As a journalist of Radio Cote d'Ivoire, you interview the King of Abengourou about the celebration of the yam festival. As you are having the interview in French, a colleague of yours does the interpretation in English for the BBC listeners.* Such an activity is interesting in the sense that it implies a role-play of a real-life communicative situation involving a real need for information from L1 to L2. A no less interesting translation activity is suggested by another respondent as follows: *Your best friend has a driving license school. He receives a road regulations document in French. Help him/her get the English version of the following: 1. Cédez le passage 2. Voie à sens unique 3. Passage à piétons 4. Chaussée glissante.* Like the first activity, the one above suggests a situation whereby the need to translate a written document for a given purpose may arise. Another activity proposed by the same respondent is equally interesting and is worded as follows: *Your sick uncle forgot how to take his pills the instructions for use of which are written in English. Read the leaflet inside the medicine box and translate it into French for him: The usual dosage is ½ to 3 tablets daily. Swallow the tablets with about half a glass of water immediately before meal. If you experience mild signs of hypoglycemia such as weakness, sweating, hunger pangs, dizziness, trembling, eat or drink something sweet.* As can be seen, such a simulation activity has real-life significance and definitely portrays translation as it happens in actual life, that is, translation as a means to solve human communication problems.

Another respondent suggested the following activity which could be interesting if more specifics, such as the direction and context of the translation, are brought to it.

First step: Give students a paragraph in Translation.

Second step: Let them make a conversation based on the translation.

Third step: Let them role-play their conversations.

| Answer Question | # Yes | # No | If yes to 1 (*2) | If Yes to 3 (*4) | If Yes to 3(*5) |
|--|---------------|--------------|--|-----------------------------|---|
| 1. Have you ever used Translation in your EFL class? | 9 (81.8%) | 2 (18.2%) | Situations: -explaining reading passage -explaining culture-oriented vocabulary -explaining marked L2 grammar -test item/ directives | | |
| 3. Do you think the use of translation can fit in CLT? | 10 (90.9%) | | | a. 1 b. 3 c. 6 | 1. Writing involving information gap L1 to L2 or vice versa 2. Simulation speaking activities L1 to L2 or vice versa 3. problem grammar equivalence L2 to L1 4. Culture-bound phrases (idioms, proverbs) |

Table 2: Responses to survey

Note: The numbers in parenthesis () with asterisks (*) are the actual numbers on the survey answer sheet.

4 Conclusions and ideas for future work

Our study shows that the majority of the EFL respondents, regardless of their origins have used translation in their classes (81.8 %). In addition, they think translation plays an important role in L2 learning and that it can be integrated in the CLT paradigm. They have also attempted to propose activities that they think can be useful in L2 classroom. While most of their suggestions may not comply with Communicative Language Teaching principles, 2 simulation activities involving information gap writing or speaking activities are worthy to note. This is the evidence that if L2 teachers take time to reflect on how best to judiciously integrate translation in their teaching, they can come up with learner-centered activities that can be motivating to the learners.

The study seems to be consistent with most of the empirical studies in the sense that the majority of the subjects believe that translation is important. However, the study does not show examples of activities such as back-translation tasks as experimented by Kim and Kavaliauskiene. But, activities such as the ones which consist in simulating a real-life situation in which the need for translation naturally arises may be a motivating factor in using translation meaningfully in the L2 context. However, at this stage, can we go as far as to claim that based on our study, translation can be judged worthy of fitting in Communicative Language Teaching?

Given the small size of the participants with its subsequent limited number of activities provided, we should be cautious in stating that translation fits in CLT a hundred percent. However, when we consider back-translation activities such as the one carried out by Kim that involves not only student-student interaction but also information gaps, there seems to be a good reason to think that CLT and Translation are not mutually exclusive, in contrast to what is commonly believed. In other words, meaningful translation exercises in L2 classes reinforce not only learners' vocabulary and grammar but above all, raise their awareness of "communicative and pragmatic competence" in the foreign language (Pariante-Beltran 2006:15; Widdowson1978:179). In this regard, the 3 activities suggested by my respondents, equally involving student-student interaction in simulated real-life situations, are rather encouraging.

Consequently, a larger scale study involving a greater number of EFL teachers is more likely to yield more significant results. Future studies could still involve both teachers and students in opinion survey, but could focus more on collecting tasks and activities integrating the four traditional skills (Listening, Speaking, Writing, Reading) in a way that can be

communicative and pedagogically enjoyable and fun. As Carreres (2006) suggests, on grounds of the abundant literature in favor of introducing translation in L2, the current concern seems to have shifted from “whether translation can and should be taught at all” to “how we can best teach it”(15).

The reflection raised by this study deserves to be continued with the involvement of colleagues in the EFL field. As a national coordinator for English in-service teacher training in Cote d’Ivoire, we are in the right position to initiate the debate so that a compromise is reached on how best to integrate translation in the teaching of English. For more than two decades, the orthodoxy in this country has been officially CLT, but in fact, experience has shown that a great number of teachers still use translation in their lessons. In this case, the challenge ahead will consist in how best to use translation once in a while in a way that is communicative and fun for the learner, which raises the question of the extent to which it can be incorporated as a teaching methodology in the national curriculum (Machida2008:13).

To keep up with the reflection of how best to integrate translation within CLT, the following three guidelines could shape up and vivify future reflection.

The first guideline is to clearly lay down the principles of what is meant by CLT and clearly identify those aspects of translation that can fit in and those that cannot. For example, the idea that the use of L1 must be systematically banned in CLT should be excluded from any tentative compromise, should it be given a chance of feasibility. In this regard, aspects such as student-student interaction in a process of problem-solving through bridging information-gaps seem to lend themselves to integration, especially when we consider the natural use of translation. Another argument that research has often put forward here is that occasionally using the learner’s L1 will make him feel more secure, which subsequently may remove their L2 anxiety, thereby creating a stress-free atmosphere favorable for learning (Krashen1985:100). In this respect, translation has proved to be of more benefit to the weaker learners (Puren1995:8; Kim2010:6).

The second guideline would be to consider translation as a macro-skill in its own right in the EFL context, in addition to the four traditional ones (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing). The advantage of this approach would be the possibility to naturally design learning tasks that

could integrate these different skills. Campbell, after developing insightful arguments in favor of the integration of translation in EFL classes, concludes that “in countries outside the EFL centers of influence, teachers can afford to be bold about finding innovative ways to incorporate translation in EFL,” arguing that “there is nothing to lose, and much to gain when we acknowledge the fifth macro-skill”(Campbell 2010:14). What he actually means by “EFL centers of influence” are countries such as Britain, The US and Australia who control the EFL publishing industry with its corollary of Big Business, which makes them perceive translation primarily as something that would jeopardize not only their power status position, but also their businesses. Regarding this state of affairs, Auerbach(1993:2) rightly argues that the issue of using translation in ESL/EFL classes is not just a pedagogical matter but “a political one, and the way we address it in ESL instruction is both a mirror of and rehearsal for relations of power in the broader society.” Taken as a macro-skill *per se* in the EFL context, translation from L2 to L1 and *vice versa* could smoothly be integrated to Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing just as this happens in real life. An illustration would be for example simulating a bilingual secretary receiving a spoken or written message in English, taking notes and translating it to his boss. Such activities are definitely different from the traditional Grammar Translation Method which had no other objectives than systematically translating grammar rules and vocabulary as a teaching method.

The third guideline that can effectively back up future reflection over the issue of translation in EFL context is to open the debate with practicing teachers in order to give them the opportunity to see for themselves the pros and cons of introducing translation in their teachings. As pointed out earlier, there has been so much publicity about CLT that any teacher will claim to be an advocate of it even if they do not practice it in reality. So the idea is to see to what extent both practicing teachers, teacher trainers and inspectors can come together and reflect, in a responsible way, on what aspects of translation can be integrated in CLT and what aspects can be left out. Such an in-depth assessment of the situation in the light of the basic principles undergirding CLT can result in a compromise which is likely to remove the complex of inferiority that some EFL teachers have developed vis-à-vis the use of translation. For example, organizing seminars and workshops that involve both teachers and teacher trainers in reflecting over the rationale behind integrating translation to CLT and developing learning tasks and

activities in this regard will undoubtedly give EFL teachers more confidence in using translation in their classes.

To conclude, let us say that translation and CLT are not mutually exclusive. There is a midpoint whereby they can be integrated for the benefit of EFL learners. Through this paper, we have tried to figure out the extent to which this is feasible, for example by considering translation as a macroskill in its own right which can naturally fit in an integrated skills lessons in the framework Communicative Language Teaching. So, Campbell is definitely right when he suggests EFL teachers should be bold enough to dare take the initiative in this project, despite knowing that such a stance will not automatically earn the go-ahead of those who have no interest in seeing it happen.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to my translation class instructor, Florence Mathieu Conner, who introduced me to Translation Studies and helped me with insightful advice in writing this paper.

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Appendix: Sample completed questionnaire

Questionnaire

Aim: The aim of this survey is to collect data for research purposes. Please, answer based on your teaching experience and beliefs.

Name(optional) OUATTARA ADAMA MAMADOU **Country of origin:** COTE D'IVOIRE **Teaching experience (in years):** 12 years **School:** LYCEE MODERNE ADJAME HARRIS

Classes taught: 6 ème – 2nde C – Tle A

Current title/status: teacher

1. *Have you ever used translation in your EFL (English as a Foreign Language) class? (circle your choice)*

Yes No

2. *If yes in (1), specify in which situation(s):*

I confess I scarcely use translation in general schools. But I often use it in technical schools in many forms. Either written or in role plays. Creating real life situations in which students play the role of an interviewer who conducts the interview with a non native speaker and another student trying to translate.

3. *Do you think the use of translation can fit in the Communicative Language Teaching? (CLT)? (circle your choice)*

Yes No Not sure

4. *If yes to (3), specify if it should be used as a: (circle your choice)*

a. Teaching method/aid
 b. Learning aid
 c. Both

5. *If yes to (3), suggest 1 or 2 translation activities/tasks that can fit in CLT*

ACTIVITY 1: As a journalist of radio Cote d'Ivoire you are to conduct an interview of the KING of ABENGOUROU about the celebration of the yam festival. As you conduct the interview in French, one of your neighbors translates the Kings' saying in English for BBC listeners.

ACTIVITY 2: Your sick uncle forgot how to take his pills which indications are written in English.

Read the leaflet inside the medicine box and translate it into French for your uncle.

The usual dosage is ½ to 3 tablets daily. Swallow the tablets with about half a glass of water immediately before a meal. If you experience mild signs of hypoglycemia such as weakness, sweating, hunger pangs, dizziness, trembling, eat or drink something sweet.