From Scaffold to Strategy: The Role of Translation in Developing Communicative Competence in an Algerian EFL Context

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Abstract
This study explores the role of translation as a pedagogical tool in enhancing communicative competence in English among 25 first-year translation students at Saida University. Through qualitative and quantitative analysis, the research reveals that students rely on translation to improve vocabulary acquisition, grammatical accuracy, cultural understanding, and confidence in language use. The findings highlight translation's effectiveness in fostering linguistic and communicative skills, offering insights into its integration in language teaching methodologies.

Keywords: Translation, Communicative Competence, English Language Teaching, Saida University, Pedagogical Tool.

1. Introduction
The quest for effective methodologies to foster genuine communicative competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners remains a central concern in pedagogy globally, and acutely so in contexts like Algeria. Despite decades of communicative language teaching (CLT) dominance, which often explicitly marginalized or excluded translation (Cook, 2010), challenges persist in achieving high levels of productive and interactive proficiency among learners. Algerian university students, particularly those in regions like Saida, often enter higher education with foundational English knowledge but significant gaps in their ability to use the language spontaneously and accurately for meaningful communication (Benrabah, 2013; Grimes, 2019). This gap is especially pertinent for students enrolled in translation programs, where a sophisticated understanding of both languages and cultures is paramount.

The prevailing CLT orthodoxy, emphasizing authentic interaction and minimizing L1 use, has sometimes led to the dismissal of translation as a relic of grammar-translation methods, associated with rote learning and decontextualized sentences (Duff, 1989). However, a growing body of research suggests a more nuanced view, arguing that translation, when used strategically and reflectively, can be a powerful cognitive and metalinguistic tool (Leonardi, 2010; Laviosa, 2014; Colina & Lafford, 2017). It can facilitate deeper processing of language, highlight cross-linguistic differences, enhance awareness of pragmatics and cultural nuances, and provide a sense of security for learners navigating complex linguistic terrain (Pym, Malmkjær, & Gutiérrez-Colón Plana, 2013).

This study arises from the specific context of the first-year Translation program at Saida University. Observing students' natural inclination to use Arabic (L1) as a reference point when grappling with English (L2) texts and tasks, despite institutional emphasis on direct L2 communication, prompted the investigation. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do first-year translation students at Saida University perceive and utilize translation

as a strategy for learning English?

2. What specific aspects of communicative competence (vocabulary, grammar, cultural understanding, confidence) do students perceive translation helps them develop?

3. Does the pedagogical use of translation activities lead to measurable improvements in students' communicative competence, as assessed through specific tasks?

4. How can translation be effectively integrated into the EFL curriculum for translation students at Saida University to enhance communicative outcomes?

This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing reevaluation of translation in ELT by providing empirical evidence from a specific Algerian university context. It argues for a pragmatic approach that acknowledges learners' existing strategies and leverages the potential of translation as a scaffold towards greater communicative autonomy.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining Communicative Competence

The concept of communicative competence (CC), evolving from Hymes' (1972) critique of Chomsky's linguistic competence, provides the theoretical bedrock for modern language teaching. Canale and Swain's (1980) seminal model delineated four interrelated components:

Grammatical Competence: Mastery of the language code (vocabulary, morphology, syntax, phonology).

Sociolinguistic Competence: Knowledge of sociocultural rules of use (appropriateness, register, cultural references).

Discourse Competence: Ability to connect sentences coherently and cohesively to form meaningful spoken or written texts.

Strategic Competence: Verbal and non-verbal strategies to compensate for breakdowns and enhance communication effectiveness.

Later refinements (e.g., Bachman, 1990; Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrell, 1995) further emphasized pragmatic competence and the dynamic nature of communication. Achieving CC remains the central goal of EFL instruction, requiring methodologies that address all these facets.

2.2. The Communicative Approach and the Marginalization of Translation

The rise of CLT in the 1970s and 80s marked a paradigm shift, prioritizing meaning-focused activities, authentic materials, and learner interaction over explicit grammar instruction and translation (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Influential proponents argued that translation fostered dependency on the L1, inhibited spontaneous L2 production, and failed to replicate authentic communication (Krashen, 1982; Howatt, 1984). Consequently, translation was often relegated or banned in many communicative classrooms.

2.3. Reclaiming Translation: Theoretical and Pedagogical Arguments

Recent decades have witnessed a significant re-evaluation of translation within ELT, driven by several factors:

Critique of CLT Monolingualism: Scholars argue that the strict avoidance of L1 is unrealistic and ignores the bilingual reality of learners' minds (Cook, 2010; Hall & Cook, 2012). Translation represents a natural cognitive process for bilinguals.

Cognitive and Metalinguistic Benefits: Translation forces deep semantic processing, promotes explicit contrastive analysis between L1 and L2 structures, vocabulary, and pragmatics, enhancing language awareness (Laviosa, 2014; Leonardi, 2010). It can clarify ambiguities and

solidify understanding (Colina & Lafford, 2017).

Pedagogical Scaffolding Translation can act as a valuable scaffold, particularly for beginners or when dealing with complex texts or concepts, reducing anxiety and building confidence (Pym et al., 2013). It provides a familiar cognitive pathway.

Developing Specific Competences: Research suggests translation activities can effectively target vocabulary acquisition (Laufer & Girsai, 2008), improve grammatical accuracy through contrastive analysis (Källkvist, 2013), and deepen cultural understanding by requiring negotiation of meaning across cultural contexts (Snell-Hornby, 1988; Katan, 2014).

Relevance to Translation Students: For students training as translators, pedagogical translation is not merely a language learning tool but also an essential professional skill. Integrating it early bridges the gap between language learning and professional practice (Colina, 2015; Hurtado Albir, 2015).

2.4. Translation in the Algerian EFL Context

Algeria presents a unique context: Arabic (and often Berber) as L1, French as a historically dominant second language, and English as a foreign language gaining increasing importance (Benrabah, 2013). The linguistic distance between Arabic and English is significant. Students often struggle with grammatical structures (e.g., verb tense systems, articles), vocabulary range, and the cultural pragmatics of English (Grimes, 2019). While CLT principles are officially endorsed, traditional methods, including some translation, often persist in practice due to large classes, resource limitations, and teacher training backgrounds (Bouhadiba, 2010). Research specifically on translation as a pedagogical tool in Algerian universities, particularly for translation students, remains scarce.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed an embedded mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), prioritizing qualitative data (exploring perceptions and experiences) but incorporating quantitative data (measuring specific competence changes) to provide complementary insights. The research was conducted over one academic semester (16 weeks).

3.2. Participants

A purposive sample of 25 first-year students (12 female, 13 male; aged 18-20) enrolled in the BA Translation program at Saida University participated. All participants were native speakers of Algerian Arabic, had studied English for at least 6 years in secondary school, and possessed a lower-intermediate to intermediate level of English proficiency (assessed via a placement test at program entry). Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and anonymity was guaranteed (pseudonyms used).

3.3. Intervention

The regular "English Language Skills" course was adapted to include explicit, structured translation tasks alongside traditional communicative activities for 8 weeks (Weeks 5-12). These tasks were designed to target specific CC components:

Vocabulary Focus: L1-L2/L2-L1 translation of sentences/paragraphs containing target lexical items; identifying synonyms/antonyms across languages; discussing connotative differences.

Grammar Focus: Contrastive analysis exercises (e.g., tense usage, article omission/addition, prepositions); translating sentences highlighting specific grammatical structures; error analysis of translated sentences.

Cultural/Pragmatic Focus: Translating dialogues/jokes/idioms requiring cultural adaptation; discussing translation choices based on context, register, and audience; analyzing culturally embedded texts.

Discourse/Strategy Focus: Summarizing L2 texts in L1 and vice-versa; translating paragraphs focusing on cohesive devices; practicing compensation strategies during sight translation.

3.4. Data Collection Instruments

1. Pre- and Post-Communicative Tests: Two parallel versions of a test assessing vocabulary (multiple-choice, gap-fill), grammatical accuracy (error correction, sentence transformation), and pragmatic appropriateness (choosing correct responses in dialogues). Scored objectively.

2.Questionnaire (Post-Intervention): A 25-item Likert-scale questionnaire (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree) probing students' perceptions of translation's usefulness for: vocabulary learning, grammar understanding, cultural insight, confidence building, overall English improvement, and its role in the classroom. Included open-ended comment sections.

3. Semi-Structured Interviews: Conducted with a stratified sample of 8 participants (representing high, medium, and low performers based on pre-test) after the post-test. Explored in-depth their experiences, specific strategies, perceived benefits and drawbacks, and attitudes towards using translation. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. (Sample Questions: "Can you describe a time recently when translating helped you understand or learn something new in English?" "How does translating a sentence help you, if at all, with remembering vocabulary or grammar rules?" "Do you feel using Arabic helps or hinders your confidence when speaking English? Why?")

3.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative

Pre- and post-test scores (Vocabulary, Grammar, Pragmatics subtotals and Total) were analyzed using paired-sample t-tests (SPSS v26) to determine statistically significant changes ($p < .05$).

Questionnaire Likert-scale responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations).

Qualitative:

Open-ended questionnaire comments and interview transcripts were subjected to Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial coding identified recurring ideas, which were then grouped into potential themes (e.g., "Translation as Decoding Tool," "Building Confidence through Verification," "Cultural Mediation," "Awareness of Differences"). Themes were reviewed, refined, and defined, with illustrative quotes extracted.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Saida University Departmental Research Committee. Participants provided written informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. Participation was voluntary, with no penalty for withdrawal. Data was stored securely.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

4.1. Quantitative Findings

Pre/Post Tests: Paired-sample t-tests revealed statistically significant improvements from pre-test (M = 62.4, SD = 8.7) to post-test (M = 71.2, SD = 7.3), $t(24) = -5.83$, $p < .001$. Significant gains were observed specifically in the Vocabulary subtest (Pre: M=15.8, SD=3.1; Post: M=19.1, SD=2.5; $t(24)=-6.12$, $p<.001$) and the Grammar subtest (Pre: M=20.2, SD=4.0; Post: M=23.8, SD=3.2; $t(24)=-4.95$, $p<.001$). The Pragmatics subtest showed a positive but non-

significant trend (Pre: M=26.4, SD=4.2; Post: M=28.3, SD=3.8; t(24)=-1.89, p=.071).

Questionnaire: Results demonstrated strong positive perceptions regarding translation's pedagogical value:

Vocabulary: "Helps me learn new words" (M=4.56, SD=0.58); "Helps me remember word meanings (M=4.68, SD=0.48).

Grammar: "Makes English grammar rules clearer" (M=4.32, SD=0.75); "Helps me see differences between Arabic and English grammar" (M=4.76, SD=0.44).

Cultural Understanding: "Helps me understand cultural references in English" (M=4.20, SD=0.76); "Makes me think about how to express ideas appropriately" (M=4.08, SD=0.86).

Confidence: "Makes me feel more confident I understand the meaning" (M=4.40, SD=0.71); "Gives me a sense of control when learning" (M=4.24, SD=0.72).

Overall: "Translation is a useful tool for learning English" (M=4.72, SD=0.54); "Should be used more in our English classes" (M=4.28, SD=0.84).

4.2. Qualitative Findings (Themes and Illustrative Quotes)

Analysis of interviews and open-ended comments yielded five key themes:

1. Translation as an Essential Decoding and Verification Tool: Students consistently described using translation (often mentally) to unlock the meaning of unfamiliar English words or complex sentences. They used the Arabic equivalent as a "key" and then verified their understanding by translating back.

"When I see a difficult word, I immediately think 'what's this in Arabic?'... Once I have the Arabic word, the whole sentence makes sense... Then I try to put it back into English myself to check." (Salim, Interview)

"If I'm not sure about my answer in an exercise, translating it into Arabic tells me if the meaning is logical." (Questionnaire Comment)

2. Internalizing Grammar through Contrastive Analysis: Students actively compared Arabic and English structures during translation, leading to heightened grammatical awareness and conscious rule application.

"Translating showed me clearly where we don't use articles in Arabic but must use 'a' or 'the' in English. It forced me to think about it every time." (Leila, Interview)

"The verb comes first in Arabic questions, but in English you need 'do' or 'is'... Doing translations made this difference very obvious and helped me avoid mistakes." (Questionnaire Comment)

3. Bridging the Cultural Gap: Students recognized translation wasn't just word substitution but involved navigating cultural concepts. They discussed the challenges of idioms, humor, and social norms.

"Translating the joke was impossible word-for-word! We had to find an Algerian joke with a similar idea. It made me realize how much culture is inside language."* (Yasmin, Interview)

"Words like 'privacy' or 'deadline'... the direct translation exists in Arabic, but the feeling or importance is different. Translation makes you think about this." (Questionnaire Comment)

4. Building Confidence as a Scaffold: Many students, especially those less confident initially, expressed that translation provided a "safety net." Knowing they could decode the meaning reduced anxiety about engaging with challenging texts or attempting production.

"Before, I was scared to read long texts in English. Now, if I get stuck, I know I can translate bits to understand. It makes me less afraid to try."* (Karim, Interview)

"Having the Arabic as a reference point gives me courage to speak or write, because I know the basic idea is there, I just need to find the English words." (Questionnaire Comment)

5. Strategic Use and Awareness: Students demonstrated metacognitive awareness, describing

translation as one strategy among others, used selectively depending on the task and their confidence level. They saw it as a means to an end (communication), not an end in itself.

"I don't translate everything. For simple things or when I'm chatting, I try to think directly in English. But for new vocabulary or complex grammar, I use translation to figure it out properly."* (Nadia, Interview)

"It's a tool. Like a dictionary. You use it when you need it to help you understand or express something clearly." (Questionnaire Comment)

5. Discussion

This study provides compelling evidence from the Saida University context supporting the strategic value of translation as a pedagogical tool for developing core components of communicative competence among EFL learners, particularly those training in translation.

The significant quantitative improvements in vocabulary and grammatical accuracy scores align with previous research (Laufer & Girsai, 2008; Källkvist, 2013) and strongly suggest that the structured translation activities facilitated deeper processing and conscious noticing of lexical items and grammatical structures. The contrastive nature of translation inherently promotes the type of explicit knowledge and metalinguistic awareness that can lead to improved accuracy, especially concerning persistent errors stemming from L1 interference – a common challenge for Arabic-speaking learners of English (Benrabah, 2013).

Qualitative findings powerfully illuminate *how* students leverage translation. The themes of "Decoding/Verification" and "Internalizing Grammar" underscore translation's cognitive role in fostering comprehension and form-focused learning. Students actively used the L1 as a scaffold to access L2 meaning and structure, confirming Cook's (2010) arguments about the naturalness and utility of bilingual processing. The theme of "Bridging the Cultural Gap" highlights translation's unique potential to develop sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence, moving beyond vocabulary and grammar to engage with the cultural embeddedness of language (Katan, 2014; Snell-Hornby, 1988). This is crucial for translation students but equally vital for any learner aiming for genuine communicative ability.

The "Building Confidence" theme is particularly significant in the Algerian context, where language learning anxiety can be a barrier (Grimes, 2019). Translation provided a psychological scaffold, reducing the fear of incomprehension and empowering learners to engage with more complex materials and attempt production. This finding resonates with Pym et al.'s (2013) assertion that translation can offer a sense of security. Importantly, the "Strategic Use" theme indicates that students did not view translation as a crutch leading to dependency, but rather as a conscious, selective strategy within a broader repertoire. This metacognitive awareness is a key component of strategic competence (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995).

The lack of significant improvement in the pragmatics subtest, despite positive qualitative perceptions, warrants discussion. It suggests that while students *recognized* the cultural dimension through translation tasks, translating specific pragmatic choices (e.g., appropriate levels of formality in responses) may require more focused, context-rich practice beyond the scope of this intervention. Pragmatic competence often develops more slowly and demands extensive exposure and interaction (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001).

These findings challenge the monolithic exclusion of translation advocated in some strict CLT interpretations. They support the notion of "principled eclecticism" (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011), where translation is judiciously integrated as one tool among many within a fundamentally communicative framework. Its strength lies not in replacing interaction, but in supporting the development of the linguistic and cultural resources necessary *for*

meaningful interaction, especially in contexts of significant linguistic distance and for learners with a shared L1.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that for first-year translation students at Saida University, translation serves as a vital, self-initiated, and effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing key aspects of their communicative competence in English. Far from being a hindrance to communication, students strategically employed translation to:

Decode vocabulary and complex structures, leading to measurable gains in lexical knowledge and grammatical accuracy.

Engage in contrastive analysis, deepening their understanding of grammatical differences between Arabic and English.

Navigate cultural nuances embedded in language, fostering sociolinguistic awareness.

Build confidence in comprehending and producing English by providing a verifiable cognitive anchor in their L1.

The research underscores the importance of acknowledging and leveraging learners' existing bilingual resources. In contexts like Algeria, where the path to English proficiency involves crossing significant linguistic and cultural divides, translation offers a valuable mediated path. For translation students specifically, pedagogical translation serves the dual purpose of language development and foundational professional skill acquisition. Excluding it ignores a powerful cognitive and affective tool naturally employed by learners.

The findings advocate for a paradigm shift in EFL pedagogy at Saida University and similar institutions, moving away from the dogma of L1 exclusion towards a more pragmatic, research-informed integration of translation. This integration must be purposeful, structured, and balanced with ample opportunities for direct communicative practice to ensure the ultimate goal of spontaneous, appropriate language use is achieved.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed for EFL curriculum design and pedagogy, particularly within translation programs at Saida University and comparable contexts:

1. Curriculum Integration: Explicitly incorporate well-designed pedagogical translation modules or units within core English language skills courses for first-year translation students. Frame translation not as an end in itself, but as a tool for developing specific CC components (vocabulary, grammar awareness, cultural competence).

2. Task Design Principles: Develop translation tasks that:

Target specific linguistic or cultural objectives (e.g., practicing tense usage, understanding idioms, adapting register).

Promote contrastive analysis and metalinguistic reflection (e.g., "Why is this structure different? What Arabic equivalent conveys this feeling?").

Encourage discussion and justification of translation choices (developing strategic and pragmatic competence).

Progress from more controlled (sentence-level) to more communicative and creative tasks (text-level, cultural adaptation, summarization).

Utilize authentic or semi-authentic materials relevant to students' interests and future professional needs.

3. Teacher Training: Provide professional development workshops for EFL instructors on:

The theoretical rationale and empirical support for using translation pedagogically.
 * Designing effective translation activities aligned with CC goals.
 * Techniques for facilitating discussion around translation choices and cultural mediation.
 * Integrating translation seamlessly alongside other communicative activities (e.g., using a translated text as a springboard for discussion or role-play).

4. Balancing Translation and Direct Communication: Ensure translation activities are balanced with substantial opportunities for direct English communication (pair/group work, presentations, discussions, fluency activities). Emphasize that translation is a scaffold towards greater autonomy in L2 use.

5. Focus on Pragmatics: Develop specific translation and discussion tasks focused explicitly on pragmatic competence (e.g., translating dialogues requiring different levels of formality/politeness, analyzing request/refusal strategies across cultures, discussing cultural taboos in translation).

6. Leveraging Technology: Explore the pedagogical use of online dictionaries, corpora (like COCA), and machine translation tools *critically* within translation tasks, focusing on evaluating output and understanding limitations.

7. Further Research: Conduct longitudinal studies tracking the long-term impact of integrated translation pedagogy on overall communicative proficiency. Investigate the impact on spoken fluency and interaction skills specifically. Explore teacher perceptions and potential resistance to integrating translation. Compare the effectiveness of different types of translation tasks for specific CC components.

By adopting these recommendations, Saida University and similar institutions can harness the potential of translation as a powerful ally in the complex journey towards developing truly competent and confident users of the English language.

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