

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF MENTAL TRANSLATION ON COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN ROMANIAN SCHOOLS¹

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Abstract

This research investigates the impact of mental translation on communicative language teaching and learning in Romanian schools. By examining the perspectives of teachers and students, the study explores how mental translation can enhance language processing, comprehension, and speaking abilities. Through qualitative and quantitative methods, including interviews and questionnaires with teachers and students of English, the research identifies key strategies and challenges associated with mental translation. The findings highlight the potential benefits of incorporating mental translation in language instruction to foster communicative competence and improve language acquisition. Recommendations are provided to optimize teaching methods and encourage innovative practices in foreign language education, ultimately aiming to enhance students' language learning experiences and outcomes.

Keywords: mental translation; communicative language teaching and learning; linguistic and communicative competence; language acquisition; elementary and secondary school students.

Introduction

Mental translation refers to the cognitive process by which individuals convert information from one language to another within their minds. This phenomenon is particularly significant in the context of second language acquisition and bilingualism, where it facilitates comprehension and communication. Mental translation involves several stages, including the recognition of linguistic structures, the retrieval of corresponding lexical items, and the reformation of these elements into coherent expressions in the target language. Research indicates that mental translation can enhance memory retention and understanding by allowing individuals to process information in a familiar linguistic framework (Kern, 1994). Moreover, it plays a crucial role in the development of language proficiency, as it enables learners to bridge gaps between their native and target languages (Paulsen Christensen, 2011). Understanding the intricacies of mental translation is essential for developing effective language teaching methodologies and improving translation technologies (Toma, 2024).

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In line with these research desiderata, the purpose of this research is to investigate the utilization of immediate mental translation based on communicative language teaching and learning. It aims to present methods to evaluate its utilization, determine the success of this approach, and assess its impact on the communicative abilities of students.

Proficient speakers of a foreign language can develop efficient language processing and other skills through speaking in that language. This research demonstrates that mental translation, used during speech, can facilitate the process of word generation and meaning preservation. It achieves this by enabling speakers to represent portions of foreign language dialogues that exceed cognitive limits in a familiar and memory-efficient format (Kern, 1994).

For this study, 20 Romanian teachers of English and 120 students of English, ranging from elementary to intermediate levels, participated by filling out individual digital questionnaires. These students were divided into three groups: high, moderate, and low speaking ability. Additionally, 20 teachers of English participated in interviews. The study identifies the various activities in which students who speak a foreign language depend on mental translation, examining both the functional benefits and nonfunctional drawbacks, as well as the strategic uses of mental translation.

The fundamental purpose of teachers who apply Communicative Language Teaching is to enable students to learn to communicate in the target language and to originate and exchange messages. To achieve this, students must understand linguistic values, forms, meanings, and functions. They must be aware that certain forms can be utilized to acquire specific positions and functions and that similar forms might occasionally serve multiple roles. (Cozma, 2019). Relevance is vital when selecting the most appropriate form among these alternatives, considering the social context, the conditions of the speakers, and their disposition. Furthermore, students must successfully mediate connotation and meaning with their interlocutors to fulfill their communicative requirements (Dos Santos, 2020).

Communicative classes, which lead to the acquisition of a foreign language and the mental processing of that language, bring together two significant human cognitive functions: mental translation and language acquisition. The hypothesis that language processing could affect the acquisition of a foreign language is investigated through mental translation, which is the capacity to instantly represent serial-order data and recent information in the learning process, as well as in the comprehension and rewording of sentences. It is suggested that elementary students may use mental translation less frequently, secondary students more regularly, and upper-class students occasionally as a tool for similarity, equivalence, and correlation.

There are a few linguistic conveniences neglected due to the impact of mental translation in foreign language classes. Its utility in Romanian middle schools has been seen as less beneficial over time, now only slightly considered effective for improving language mastery. Translation as a teaching method has been criticized throughout the 20th century. Objections to its purpose and function led to an attitude influenced by educational reasons, cognitive challenges, and issues. This mindset developed the idea that mental translation causes negative substitution or transfer between languages, even if it is the only process taking place. Students learning a language may experience frustration and boredom in classes with varying ability levels (Toma & Dejica, 2023).

1. The research objectives

We aim to investigate and analyze the findings, opinions, and estimations that teachers and students have regarding the mental translation method, as well as their skill in dealing with mental translation in their language learning practice. Another objective is to research the activities associated with mental translation that assist students in their strategy for language

acquisition. Additionally, the study aims to investigate the components and elements related to mental translation. These features and factors either assist or hinder students in their specific approach to language learning, allowing them to seek significant opportunities to engage with and practice the target language. Lastly, this study will explore the most significant issues in the use of mental translation by investigating key linguistic theories of communicative competencies proficiency. This is particularly relevant for young students of English to avoid the development of negative tension, limits, and inhibitions. The insights gained from this research will provide valuable understanding and guidance for improving language acquisition strategies (Lombaard, 2006).

2. Research rationale

The focus of this research study is on mental translation and the acquisition of foreign languages. It highlights the fact that very little research has been conducted to investigate the impact that mental translation has on the acquisition of the necessary linguistic competences and skills, which can occasionally serve as beacons and indications of the level of foreign language acquisition. To introduce some communication tasks, it will make use of mental translation to determine its effectiveness and its impact on students' ability to communicate. This research incorporates significant findings from research in this area, as well as its implications, pedagogical inputs, and contributions to language learning and teaching (Oxford, 1990; Nation, 2001; Chamot, 2005; Ellis, 2008; Rozenfeld, 2017). Additionally, it focuses on effective and successful procedures currently being utilized in this area of research, essential to the development of foreign language learning processes.

3. Research questions

In relation to the objectives of our study, three main research questions may be formulated: (1) Is there a place in the repository of communicative language teaching and learning that is correct and solid for mental translation?, (2) Does mental translation contribute significantly to the accomplishment of language ability?, and (3) Does the utilization of mental translation have any impacts or outcomes that are more strategic than those of other methods?

Providing a straightforward response to these research issues is not an easy endeavor; in fact, it is unlikely that there are solutions that the majority of scholars studying foreign language acquisition would agree upon. Foreign language acquisition initially formed and evolved as a topic of study within the disciplines of linguistics and psychology, as well as within the subfields of applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and social psychology.

There are comparable differences in what is centered and prioritized by academics, mainly considering the following fields:

- Linguistics: Emphasizes the characteristics of the contrasts and concordances in the languages being taught, as well as the linguistic capacities (governing knowledge) and linguistic performance (substantial outcome) of learners at various levels of foreign language acquisition (Ellis, 2008).
- Psychology and Psycholinguistics: Focus on the mental or cognitive processes involved in learning, as well as the illustration of language in the human brain structure (Kroll & De Groot, 2005).
- Sociolinguistics: Pinpoints alternation in learners' linguistic performance and broadens the subject of study to communicative competencies (controlling knowledge that is important for language usage or practical proficiency) (Hymes, 1972).
- Social Psychology: Places emphasis on group-related phenomena, such as individuality and social interest, as well as the communicational, interactional, and larger social situations and settings of learning (Gardner & Lambert, 1972).

4. Research methodology

The current study utilizes both qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a more in-depth understanding of the mental translation challenges that English teachers encounter when instructing middle school pupils. We decided to use mixed research methods (Wisdom & Creswell, 2013) since combining both methods offered a more complete understanding of the research problem by capturing the richness of qualitative data and the statistical rigor of quantitative data and allowed us to explore the complex phenomena on mental translation from multiple perspectives.

To attain the desired outcomes and understand the issues raised, it was necessary to understand the social aspects present in the lives of Romanian instructors and shed light on the personal teaching techniques that Romanian teachers of English employed when instructing high school pupils. Therefore, the study compared the professional credentials and teaching methods of teachers of varying ages, from various schools, and with a wide range of teaching experiences, as well as examined characteristics pertaining to their teaching settings. By investigating the experiences, views, practices, and concerns of English teachers, the study aimed to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Significant opinions and conclusions were revealed that may be valuable for creating and advancing future language teaching and learning methods. These approaches are based on a connection and comparison between languages through mental translation. Additionally, the study analyzed and considered the strategies utilized by individuals learning a foreign language, with the sole goal of acquiring paradigmatic information regarding their speaking comprehension practice and experience. As a result, the study gathered the students' clear explanations of how they more easily comprehend and enhance their acquisition of foreign languages.

With the help of digital interviews, 20 Romanian English teachers who had been working in schools in the Arad district were questioned about their experiences teaching English. The questionnaire consisted of nine questions focusing on the respondents' previous language teaching experiences and the students' language learning and competency. A qualitative study approach was utilized to investigate the values, attitudes, views, feelings, and behaviors of both students and instructors regarding language. In addition, the study used quantitative analysis, involving a total of 120 middle school pupils and 20 Romanian teachers of English. The questionnaires given to the students contained either ten or seven components, each assigned to one of the following five categories or determinants: (a) the students' experience with English school projects; (b) the educational support provided by the school; (c) the curriculum schemes; (d) the impact of quick mental translation on students' language progress; and (e) the overall satisfaction of both students and teachers with language learning.

To collect, generalize and compare the findings, we used Google Forms. The language of both surveys and interviews was English – however to maximize the results and ensure that the surveys are entirely understood by younger students, we recommended that Romanian (or a mother tongue) be used in the case of surveys applied to students with basic English skills. Every ethical consideration was considered; hence, protocol forms were required to be filled out by each respondent to obtain either parental approval or their own agreement, ensuring confidentiality was maintained.

5. Research results

Even if this research may not have uncovered significant meaning that would lead to a change in the views held by educators involved in communicative language teaching and learning, we believe that it would increase awareness regarding mental translation. It may succeed in persuading educators to rethink the conventional teaching methods and practices

they have been using for a long time and urge them to experiment with new assignments, activities, or communicative initiatives. Similarly, even if a survey of the specialized literature reveals that teachers usually have negative opinions towards the use of mental translation when teaching foreign languages, our findings contradict this claim, especially in the case of early-stage learners, where mental translation is used quite frequently. The main findings are synthesized in what follows:

- Mental translation is frequently conducted by Romanian language learners for various reasons, including comprehension, memorizing, and generating English.
- The absence of suitable instructional strategies and resources makes teaching English one of the most challenging subjects and favours the use of mental translation.
- Language activities appear to inspire and motivate advancements in communication, with mental translation being undertaken while speaking.
- The cognitive and social types of knowledge are utilized in the teaching methods and procedures by the referent teachers, strongly related to the competence of speaking.
- Learners' perspectives and acknowledgment of mental translation have been shown to be more positive and favorable, clearly explaining how they quickly understand and acquire foreign languages better. This demonstrates no significant difference between learners at lower and higher levels.
- Despite claiming to employ various modern instructional strategies and materials, the teachers who were questioned continued to struggle in the classroom. In particular, teachers who worked with younger students or those with lower proficiency levels did not have favorable attitudes or views towards using entirely the communicative method, favoring the use of mental translation.
- The research establishes a correlation between teachers' understanding of both types of language teaching and learning systems in Romania, related to mental translation, and students' motivation.
- Some teachers may not have sufficient practical knowledge and may not have mastered their speaking abilities. There was a substantial association between the tactics and approaches used in the classroom and the pupils' level of language proficiency.
- Teachers with more teaching experience encountered fewer challenges in teaching communicative language without using any form of translation during their lessons. Statistics show a connection between teachers' teaching experience and the amount of direct contact they have with native speakers to acquire an appropriate level of language fluency. Additionally, there is a correlation between instructors' ability to provide instant translations for their students. It was discovered that the difficulty of teaching poems to high school pupils increased in proportion to their lower level of fluency.

6. Research recommendations

The current research demonstrated that the teacher's position is not only difficult but also demanding regarding communicative language education activities. Taking into consideration the results of the current research, we may formulate several tentative suggestions to assist in resolving issues and improving communicative language competence, which also involve the use of mental translation.

- *Identify specific learning strategies:* It is essential to identify the precise learning strategies employed by school trainees to acquire English language skills. This understanding can guide effective teaching methods.
- *Contrast strategies of successful and less successful trainees:* Teachers should contrast the strategies utilized by successful trainees with those used by less successful ones.

Educators must be willing to adapt their teaching strategies and use materials that allow trainees to become familiar with proven effective language learning techniques.

- *Encourage contextual comprehension:* To prevent learners from improperly transferring concepts from their first language, teachers should encourage students to understand the connotation of words and phrases outside their native language context.
- *Utilize reputable learning resources:* During foreign language instruction, teachers should use reputable and high-quality learning resources to deepen and expand students' vocabulary and lexical knowledge.
- *Foster student confidence:* Educators should foster their students' confidence in their ability to communicate in the target language by offering guidance and demonstrating compassionate teaching behaviors.
- *Anticipate student needs and expectations:* By anticipating and considering students' needs and expectations during the pre-planning stages of lessons, language instruction can be more effective and tailored to individual learning preferences.
- *Provide motivation and encouragement:* It is important to motivate and encourage students when they submit creative projects, helping them to enhance their language proficiency and sustain their progress.
- *Balance lesson goals with student interests:* When setting language objectives, teachers should balance lesson goals with the interests and motivations of their students, ensuring that the learning experience is engaging and relevant.
- *Emphasize mental translation:* To help students absorb complex material, performing mental translation while learning a foreign language may be crucial. This practice can also aid comprehension and retention.

7. Research limitations and challenges

Mental translation was investigated in this study from two distinct perspectives: one of foreign language teachers, and one of students of English. Despite being time-consuming and having restricted interpretations, we consider that the research is exploratory rather than in-depth. We identified three main limitations. First, the research was carried out among Romanian teachers and students of English in a district located in the western part of the country. We believe that the study may be replicated in different parts of the country or even in different countries so as to investigate and compare multiple perspectives, attitudes, and challenges regarding the use of mental translation. Second, for this study we used mixed research methods, based on questionnaires and interviews. We propose that additional research be conducted to gather data from lessons based on real-life situations and to monitor teachers and classes for a better understanding of how mental translation is used in real time in English classes. Last but not least, additional variables may be used in future studies, such as “number of work hours at school” or “fatigue” to identify if there are any differences in terms of practicing mental translation between teachers who teach longer hours and those who teach fewer hours.

Conclusion

Given that the purpose of this study is to investigate the influence that mental translation has on the communication abilities of language learners and teachers, it is important to take a more in-depth look at enhancing productive language skills. The results of the interviews revealed that the mental translation technique is beneficial in fostering essential communication competence among those learning Romanian as a second language. It is important to note that the involvement of mental translation should be contingent upon the ability set and level of competence. In conclusion, it is recommended that reasonable efforts be made with mental translation to ensure that communicative language instruction is carried out most effectively.

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