

## MENTAL TRANSLATION AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Adriana TOMA, Daniel DEJICA

West University of Timișoara, Politehnica University Timișoara, Romania

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to present a series of analytical considerations concerning the use of mental translation in communicative teaching and learning English as a foreign language. The main part of the article focuses on the literature review concerning the impact of mental translation method on students' language acquisition level during their English learning practice. The existing research on this topic has shown that learners use mental translation as a strategy to compare and establish similarities and differences between their first language and the foreign language. Learners create a translational field where they store the results of the similarities and differences between their native language and the foreign language. These mental translation results become some procedural knowledge, stored in their long-term memory. While communicating in a foreign language, learners automatically reuse the information previously stored in their translational field. The last part of the article contains some directions of research in relation to the use of mental translation in communicative language learning and teaching.

**Keywords:** mental translation, translational field, foreign language acquisition, communicative language teaching strategies, communicative language learning strategies

### 1. Communicative teaching and learning strategies

It is a general fact that language is a system of mental representations, grammar and human behaviour which can be analysed according to the theories of interaction and thinking. Language can also be viewed as a known system of rules and conventions mutually intelligible to all representatives of a civilisation, which provides with both freedom and creativity in its achievement. When speaking, people are able to share knowledge and ideas, communicate with others in any circumstances and in a wide range of living contexts. Philips (2007:26) specified that "Speaking is an interactive process constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing". Speaking is a productive oral competence relying on producing systematic verbal affirmations to express meaning and messages.

In recent times, foreign language teaching strategies have substantially developed, and their evolution involved numerous changes (Dejica et al. 2016), the most significant ones relying on the perspective about learners. The teacher-centred version – with the teacher placed in the centre of activity, playing the essential roles in the foreign language class – was replaced by the student-centered approach, which displays a multitude of changes and advantages. Since nowadays teacher training programs might not include a segment that attempts to raise teachers' awareness of promoting multilingual pedagogies in the classroom (Bernaus et al., 2007, Schissel et al., 2018), much relies on teachers' empirical awareness.

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach gives priority to communication and essential life circumstances. When applying CLT, teachers are expected to involve their students in real-life communicative scenarios. The CLT-based method put forward by Richards (2007) implies the use of two techniques: functional communication and social interaction. Functional communication relies on work-based activities, following instructions, while social interaction consists of some activities such as simulation, role play, dialogue, debate, brainstorming, discussion, information gap, and storytelling. Both techniques are aimed at involving the learners in speaking the language in the communication process.

Role play and information gap facilitate communicative language learning by involving and encouraging students to use the foreign language in an interactive way. Jolliffe (2007:57) explains that "Communicative Language Teaching is an approach which refers to a diverse set of principles that reflect a communicative view of language learning and that can be used to support a wide variety of classroom procedures". As such, CLT aims at improving communicative, rather than linguistic abilities, through speaking, through exchanging meaningful information with others, and through communicative practice in a foreign language.

Of all the other abilities needed used in CLT, the ability to speak and communicate in a foreign language has recently been perceived as the most appealing one. Speaking is regarded as a communicative competence in which learners exchange information while also receiving information from listeners. Jefferson (2007:41) considered that "Speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of context", while Johnson (2001) explained that speaking is the process of expressing thought, idea or feeling in the form of spoken language.

Based on the previous definitions, speaking is the process of conveying meaning and significance, expressing ideas and beliefs and feeling through verbal utterances at any circumstances and in different contexts. To conclude, speaking skill refers to learners' ability to perform and share meaning through the knowledge of a foreign language system in the form of oral activity that has been acquired by practice or training and using previously acquired knowledge, and is essential in communicative language teaching and learning.

## **2. CLT in the Romanian context**

For numerous economic and historic reasons, English has become the main language of communication language in many social and professional contexts (Grigoras & Dejica, 2023). There is a real necessity for both proficiency in English and for language work practice all over the world. In recent times, it has become a major subject in schools and in many cases, it has been regarded as a required qualification to apply to higher education and licence or as a must for a successful career. In line with these global realities, the age to acquire English proficiency has been lowered in many Romanian public or private educational institutions.

In Romania, the past decades witnessed a change in the way English has been taught, from an independent school subject focusing extensively on the use of the grammar method, to a multidisciplinary subject which aims at developing communicative language skills. This switch brought many changes, involving the use of novel English language teaching strategies, approaches or methods, closely related to the students'

expectations and needs, including but not limited to the use of extracurricular training courses, international educational projects and educational agreements between schools all over the world providing students with communicative experience and foreign language practice. The issue of interdisciplinarity has been explained by Sandra J. Savignon, who states that

“Communicative language teaching derives from a multidisciplinary perspective that includes, at the least, linguistics, psychology, philosophy, sociology, and educational research. The focus has been the elaboration and implementation of programs and methodologies that promote the development of functional language ability through learners’ participation in communicative events.” (Savignon 2002: 4)

### 3. Mental translation and CLT

Mental translation may play an important part in the acquisition of a foreign language. It might be regarded as a rapid way of information processing and storing with an important impact on how foreign English speakers process, decode and create messages in English. Connected with cognitive psychology, mental translation may be considered as an approach to human cognition, informing how instant memory functions, how new information is achieved, analysed and switched from one language to another, and last but not least, how students learn, exchange information and interact by using their formerly acquired knowledge. From an educational point of view, translation was used by teachers as a teaching technique. Mental translation has almost the same characteristics, apart from the fact that it occurs in the mind of the learner.

The use of mental translation in relation to communicative language learning was approached by several scholars, including Chamot (1987), Kern (1994), Cohen (1995a), Cohen and Hawras (1996), Jiang (2004), and others.

Chamot (1987) considered translation a useful strategy in foreign language acquisition; according to him, “learning strategies are techniques, approaches or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content area information” (Chamot 1987: 73). He regarded translation as part of an ordinary and not well-defined strategy or transfer “using previously acquired linguistic and/or conceptual knowledge to facilitate a new language learning task” (Chamot 1987:77). Even if translation was labelled in one form or another as a “language learning strategy”, it was not properly studied.

Kern (1994) defined mental translation as the “mental reprocessing of second language words, phrases, or sentences in the first language forms” (Kern 1994: 442).

Cohen (1995b) asserted that speakers of two or more languages automatically and involuntarily switch from one language to the other. In a further study, Cohen and Hawras (1996) stated that mental translation eases comprehension in a foreign language and that that translation helps the advanced learners more than those with intermediate language level.

Similarly, Jiang (2004) stated that highly fluent speakers continue using their first language concepts in the foreign language use.

Other scholars, including O’Malley et al. (1985) and O’Malley and Chamot (1990) in their research on strategies used in the second language learning, introduced twenty-six strategies divided into the following categories: cognitive, metacognitive, and social. In their categorization, mental translation coexists with the group of cognitive strategies, and it is defined as the moves necessary to learners to improve their second language

comprehension and acquisition. According to them, mental translation consists of a multiplex cerebral activity characterized by the mental transfer from the foreign language to the first language or from the first language to the second language on a sequence from conscious and voluntary to unconscious and involuntary.

Even if the role of mental translation in CLT is generally acknowledged, it is difficult to say, however, to what extent mental translation itself contributes to the effectiveness of language acquisition. Up to our knowledge, research has not provided us with any substantial clues as to how the actual process of translation is carried out in language learning, nor whether or not such process enhances or inhibits language acquisition.

There are theoretical discussions in the direction of thinking straight by way of a foreign / second language as contrary to mentally translating into the first language, and therefore to produce a useful and proficient conversation in which the first language translation might literally be constructive for specific language learners throughout elementary and intermediate levels of language study. While studying English and during the language use process, the main aims are to achieve fluency and to convey the meaning successfully, and hence learners are encouraged to use mainly the target language to think and mentally organize their ideas.

A few linguists whose research explore foreign language teaching and learning claim that the easiest way for students to take native-like mastery of a foreign language is to try to think in the foreign language they learn, instead of translating or retrieving the knowledge into their first language or into another language they previously studied. There is also an intuitively based supposition that it is helpful for foreign language learners to think straight through the language they learn rather than to mentally translate back to their first language. Therein, Duff claims that "translation was traditionally accused of being uncommunicative, boring, pointless, difficult and irrelevant" (Duff, 1989, p. 3)

Nowadays, language teachers tend to discourage students from mentally translating, so that the students themselves might reach the feeling that the first language or foreign-language thinking might be unfavourable to the language learning process. The controversy refers to the fact that by thinking in the foreign language, students may gain proficiency in becoming informally correct in that language. The more they think straight through the foreign language, the better the results are. Halliday (2007) claims that "one can make positive use of the students' mother tongue; and in such cases to neglect it may be to throw away one of the tools best adapted to the task in hand" (Halliday, 2007, p. 161).

To think in a foreign language, in the case of beginners, would imply expressing thoughts (either silently or aloud), not necessarily referring to non-spoken thoughts such as pictures, images or symbols. The expanse and essence of thinking in a foreign language could modify from essential, casual, quick thoughts, possibly either just a word or two, to more considerable, expanded, intense, more cognitively sophisticated ones, depending both on the character and value of the language learning atmosphere such as a second language versus a foreign language learning situation and on the level to which the learner has gained proficiency in the foreign language acquisition.

As there seems to be relatively little analytical research in this area, it could be only speculated that as to the degree to which non-native speakers' thoughts are in the second language and the efficiency of "thinking in the second language" as opposed to thinking in the first language. Considering that most non-native speakers of a language need complete comprehension of that foreign language, it is obvious that their second

language thoughts may be spread only by an intern language. Widdowson states that learners “cannot be immunized against the influence of their own language, (...). There is bound to be contact and (...) language learning is indeed of its nature, in the same degree, a compound bilingual experience” (Widdowson, 2003, pp. 151–2).

As foreign language learners need to have a necessary level of language proficiency in order to formulate their thoughts in that language, they need to perform in that language in order to acquire the ability to think in it. In order to get mental expressions accomplished straight in a foreign language, learners are needed to acquire a specific functional level with reference to terminology and form since some levels of thinking might be more involving than others for specific language learners. Nevertheless, while valid efficiency in a language might intensify the possibility that thinking in that language will result, it is not the case to conclude this to be the case. It can happen that learners with reduced proficiency in a foreign language, could build conversational messages in that language. The progress in the interlanguage, the second / foreign language thoughts will mostly rely upon the exchange of a language learner’s academic and social background, language experience, knowledge of the required topic area, and other factors. The real picture of verbalized ideas while performance of the foreign language assigns, then, is most probably one of constant cross-language exchange, maybe less, while the learner turns into a confident proficient speaker of that language. Language learners vary in their cognitive characteristics, their approaches for language study and language application, and their kind and degree of motivation for language acquisition. There are situations when the employment of mental translation might literally prove to be a successful way in language study and language use among the numerous strategies, It might also be taken into consideration the fact that whether learners could be more attentive to the use of mental translation, they could activate it as another more practical method for learning and acquiring a foreign language. Mental translation here can represent a type of casual translation directed by inexperienced common language speakers.

For young language learners, especially beginners, there will be a predisposition to engage in mental translations more. It partly depends on the learners’ learning style options. Speakers might need to mentally translate as long as they are analytic and want to analyse material and discriminate one structure from another. They may also need to have connection with a specific notion before shifting to another one. Mental translation might supply a practical logical tool and support a learner establish a connection. Learners sometimes might feel more comfortable to translate in their heads while communicating in a foreign language. This way they manage to open themselves and become more adaptable to perceptive instants and permit the development of any translation criterion that appears to function.

Learners may tend to make use of mental translation when their mother language and the foreign language they are learning seem to be similar to each another, as mental translation merely emphasizes some fields of contrast between the two languages (the target language and the mother or source language) and translate certain key structures especially because the languages are highly different with reference to those constructions. In such circumstances, translating might help them emphasize the contrasts and similarities, and acquire them adequately during the language acquisition process. Dulay pointed out ‘learners’ first languages are no longer believed to interfere with their attempts to learn second language grammar’ (Dulay et al., 1982, p. 5).

Before communicating in a foreign language, learners might try to consider translations of specific words or key sentences which may highlight certain key grammatical features. While speaking, learners may find it favourable to survey their production through bearing in mind the translation correspondents for specific fundamental structures.

While learners may reckon that after communicating, there is no necessity to design, this may simply be a great time to retrieve what they mentally decoded and translate back a few items in order to check if they operated with them properly. Most likely they would do that automatically so it is recommended that learners should try to do it more exactly and explicitly while speaking.

Whether learners identify themselves choosing low-level terminology, it might make them consider the key words and structures they could use whether they were to say the items in their native language, and then look for similar words and structures in the target language. Malmkjaer (1998) states that "translation might profitably be used as one among several methods of actually teaching language, rather than as a mere preparation for an examination" (Malmkjaer, 1998: 9)

While learners might try to keep a barrier between their languages and attempt to think entirely in the target language while listening to oral foreign language, the opportunities are for that they will once in a while look for correspondents in their mother language. Consequently, they might try to perform mental translation of important words and structures in order to help store the items in the memory shield. While most young learners might use mental translation for several tasks, it is not clear how systematic and practical they are in their use of translation.

#### **4. Conclusions and directions of research**

Analysing the influence of the first language in the foreign language learning could reveal new aspects beyond those previously mentioned by researchers and teachers. The mental translation strategy starts as a comparing and contrasting strategy carried out with the purpose of identifying the similarities and the differences between the first language and the foreign language at all linguistic levels.

The learners build their translational field, and it is in this area they store the result of the linguistic comparisons they made. The mental translation strategy remains active while the linguistic similarities and differences are provided. The use of the mental translation strategy becomes automatic, and it constitutes a product. The mental translation product, consisting of the stored linguistic items and features in the translational area, turns into a procedural inventory, supplied in the long-term memory; the learners will naturally restore and recall the information from their translational area to communicate in the foreign language.

Nevertheless, if learners cannot reach the similarities and equivalences in the translational area, they will rely on the mental translation strategy once more so that to compare the first language and the foreign language in order to provide new similarities and differences. The automaticity might end whether there was a considerable switch in the repetitiveness of contact connection or use of the second language.

The comparison between the foreign language and the first language establishes an aware linguistic perception of the foreign language as well as of the first language. In a specific way, it might reveal the fact that a polyglot speaker relies on the foreign languages he previously studied while studying and learning a new foreign language.



The similarities and differences between a foreign language and the first language have already been stored in the memory. The mental translation strategy might compare the first language and the third foreign language once studied and the second language and the third language once acknowledged. The learner starts adding the results of these linguistic equivalences and differences to their translational field. Next the late comparisons can be stored in long-term memory.

To communicate in a foreign language, the learner will once more retrieve the knowledge from their larger translational area. In the learner's memory there will be a space partitioned by both languages, the translational field, but the first language and the foreign language could have liberated room in the learner's brain.

If further research certifies that mental translation has an important role in learning a foreign language, then teachers and learners should agree that mental translation must not be fought against, as linguistic comparisons happen by any means.

## References

1. Bernaus, M. et al. 2007. *Plurilingual and Pluricultural Awareness in Language Teacher Education*, ECML, Council of Europe, Strasbourg
2. Chamot, A. 1987. *The learning strategies of ESL students*. In A.Wenden & J. Rubin, (Eds.), *Learner strategies in language learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
3. Chamot, A.U. & Kupper, L. 1989. *Learning strategies in foreign language instruction*. *Foreign Language Annals*, 22, 13-24.
4. Cohen, A. D. 1995a. *The role of language of thought in foreign language learning*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Nessa Wolfson Memorial Colloquium, Philadelphia, PA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 393 301)
5. Cohen, A.O. 1995b. *In which language do/should multilinguals think?* *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, (2)
6. Cohen, A. D., & Hawras, S. 1996. *Mental translation into the first language during foreign-language reading*. *The Language Teacher*, 20(2), 6-12.
7. Dejica, D. & G. Hansen, P. Sandrini, I. Para (eds.) 2016. *Language in the Digital Era. Challenges and Perspectives*. Warsaw/Berlin: DeGruyter.
8. Duff, A. 1989. *Translation in Language*. Oxford University Press. New York Oxford
9. Dulay, Burt & Krashen. 1982. *Language two* Oxford University Press. New York Oxford
10. Halliday, M.A.K. 2007. *Language and Education*. In Webster, J.J. (ed) *The Collected Works of M.A. Halliday*. London/ New York: Continuum.
11. Grigoras, C.P. & D. Dejica. "Teaching EFL to the Digital-Born Generation. Challenges and Expectations" in *Professional Communication and Translation Studies* 6/2203, Timisoara: Editura Politehnica.
12. Jefferson, A. 2007. *Making Students to Be Brave Speak*. New York: Prentice Hall International ELT.
13. Jiang, N. 2004. *Semantic Transfer and Development in Adult L2 Vocabulary Acquisition*. In P. Bogaards, & B. Laufer (Eds.), *Vocabulary in a Second Language* (pp.101-126). Amsterdam: John Benjamins
14. Johnson, K. 2001. *An introduction to foreign language learning and teaching*. Essex: Pearson Education Limited
15. Jolliffe, W. 2007. *Cooperative Learning in the Classroom*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
16. Kern, R. G. 1994. *The Role of Mental Translation in Second Language Reading*. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 16(04):441 – 461
17. Malmkjaer, K. et al. 1998. *Translation & Language Teaching: Language Teaching & Translation*. Manchester, UK. St. Jerome Publishing

18. O'Malley, J. M. et al. (1985). *Learning Strategies Used by Beginning and Intermediate ESL Students*. *Language Learning*, 35, 21-44.
19. O'Malley, J.M., & Chamot, A.U. 1990. *Learning strategies in second language acquisition*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
20. Philips, J. 2007. *Speaking Technique*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.
21. Savignon, S. 2002. *Communicative Language Teaching: Linguistic Theory and Classroom Practice*.  
[https://www.academia.edu/7630071/E\\_D\\_I\\_Interpreting\\_Communicative\\_Language\\_Teaching](https://www.academia.edu/7630071/E_D_I_Interpreting_Communicative_Language_Teaching)
22. Richards, R. 2007. *Everyday Creativity and New Views of Human Nature: Psychological, Social, and Spiritual Perspectives*. American Psychological Association, Washington DC.
23. Schissel, J.L. & H. De Korne, M. López-Gopar. 2018. Grappling with translanguaging for teaching and assessment in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts: teacher perspectives from Oaxaca, Mexico, *Int. J. Biling. Educ.*
24. Widdowson H.G. 2003. *Defining Issues in English Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press