

The Effect of the Grammar Translation Method on Libyan Secondary School Students' Communicative Competence

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effect of the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) on the development of communicative competence among Libyan secondary school students. Despite global shifts toward communicative and skills-based approaches in English language teaching, many Libyan schools continue to rely heavily on GTM. The study employs a mixed-methods design incorporating speaking performance tasks and a student perception questionnaire. The participants were 45 third-year secondary students from two public schools in Msallata city: Rabia Al-Adawya Secondary School for Girls and Othman Al-Gezany Secondary School for Boys. Data analysis revealed that while students demonstrated relatively strong grammatical accuracy, their fluency, interaction, and overall communicative competence were limited. Questionnaire findings further indicated students' dissatisfaction with the lack of speaking opportunities and their strong dependence on translation. The study concludes that GTM contributes to grammatical knowledge but fails to adequately develop communicative competence. Pedagogical implications and recommendations for integrating communicative practices into Libyan EFL classrooms are discussed.

Keywords: Grammar Translation Method, communicative competence, EFL, Libyan secondary schools, applied linguistics.

INTRODUCTION

English has become a global language essential for academic, professional, and intercultural communication. Consequently, English language teaching has increasingly emphasized communicative competence rather than mere grammatical knowledge. However, in many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, including Libya, traditional teaching methods such as the Grammar Translation Method remain dominant.

In Libyan secondary schools, English instruction often focuses on grammatical explanations, memorization of rules, and translation between English and Arabic. While this approach may support reading comprehension and grammatical awareness, it raises serious concerns regarding students' ability to communicate orally in English. Graduates frequently complete secondary education with limited oral communication skills, which affects their academic and professional prospects.

This study seeks to examine the effect of using the Grammar Translation Method on students' communicative competence in Libyan secondary schools, using empirical data from Msallata city.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Overview Of English Teaching In Libya

English language teaching in Libya has undergone several phases influenced by political, social, and educational changes. English was introduced as a foreign language during the mid-20th century and gradually became a compulsory subject in public education [4, 14]. However, periods of political isolation and curriculum disruption negatively affected the continuity and quality of English language education, limiting exposure to international pedagogical developments [20]. As a result, English instruction in Libyan schools has

traditionally emphasized reading, grammar explanation, and translation rather than communicative use of the language.

For decades, English teachers in Libya relied heavily on traditional methods such as the Grammar Translation Method (GTM). This reliance was reinforced by limited access to teacher training, lack of exposure to modern pedagogical approaches, large class sizes, and assessment systems that prioritized written examinations over oral performance [19]. Consequently, students often completed secondary education with limited communicative ability despite years of formal English study.

The Current English Curriculum In Libyan Secondary Schools

In recent years, the Libyan Ministry of Education has introduced curriculum reforms aimed at improving English language teaching outcomes. One of the most notable developments is the adoption of the Garnet English textbook series for secondary schools. The Garnet curriculum is theoretically grounded in communicative language teaching principles and seeks to integrate language skills, promote learner interaction, and develop real-life communicative competence [13].

The Garnet series emphasizes integrated skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and encourages the use of pair work, group activities, and contextualized language tasks. In principle, the curriculum aligns with 21st-century language education goals, focusing on communication, critical thinking, and learner-centered instruction [16].

Curriculum–Practice Mismatch In Libyan Classrooms

Despite the communicative orientation of the Garnet curriculum, classroom implementation in many Libyan secondary schools remains largely traditional. Teachers often focus on explaining grammatical rules, translating texts into Arabic, and preparing students for written examinations [4, 19]. Speaking activities suggested in the textbook are frequently skipped or minimized due to time constraints, exam pressure, and teachers' limited confidence in implementing communicative methodologies. This mismatch between curriculum design and classroom practice has created a gap between intended learning outcomes and actual student performance.

The Grammar Translation Method

The Grammar Translation Method is one of the oldest approaches to language teaching. It emphasizes the explicit teaching in grammatical rules, vocabulary memorization, and translation. According to Richards and Rodgers [17], GTM prioritizes accuracy over fluency and written language over spoken interaction. Although GTM can enhance learners' understanding of grammatical structures, critics argue that it neglects the communicative function of language and fails to prepare learners for real-life communication.

Communicative Competence

The concept of communicative competence has evolved significantly since Hymes [12] first challenged Chomsky's notion of linguistic competence. Canale and Swain [6] further operationalized this framework, identifying four key components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. While this model remains a cornerstone, Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell [8] proposed a more integrated pedagogical model. Research consistently suggests that an overemphasis on grammatical competence in isolation stifles the development of other dimensions, particularly sociolinguistic and strategic competencies, which are essential for real-world fluency [7, 18].

Previous Studies

In the Arab world, Al-Seghayer [3] found that heavy reliance on grammar limited students' oral proficiency. Similarly, Alharbi [2] reported that students taught through GTM demonstrated strong grammatical knowledge but weak interaction skills. In Egypt, Ahmed [1] concluded that students lacked fluency, while Hassan and

Ali [10] found that learners expressed high anxiety due to overemphasis on accuracy. Research in Jordan by Bataineh [5] revealed that teacher-centered instruction failed to promote interaction.

Beyond the Arab world, Demir and Yavuz [9] in Turkey and Hu [11] in China reported comparable results, highlighting that exam-oriented grammar instruction negatively affects learners' communicative competence and pragmatic language use.

Overall, these studies indicate that while grammar-focused approaches may enhance linguistic accuracy, they are insufficient for developing communicative competence. The lack of empirical research conducted in the Libyan context highlights the significance of the present study, which seeks to fill this gap by providing data-driven evidence from Libyan secondary schools.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of communicative competence among Libyan secondary school students taught through the Grammar Translation Method?
2. How does the Grammar Translation Method affect different components of communicative competence (fluency, accuracy, interaction, and comprehensibility)?
3. What are students' perceptions of the Grammar Translation Method in relation to their speaking ability?
4. Are there differences in communicative competence between male and female students taught through GTM?

Research Objectives

The present study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To investigate the overall level of communicative competence among Libyan secondary school students taught through the Grammar Translation Method.
2. To examine the effect of the Grammar Translation Method on specific components of communicative competence, namely fluency, grammatical accuracy, interaction, and comprehensibility.
3. To explore students' perceptions of the Grammar Translation Method and its influence on their speaking ability and classroom participation.
4. To identify possible differences in communicative competence between male and female students taught through the Grammar Translation Method in Libyan secondary schools.
5. To provide pedagogical recommendations for improving English language teaching practices in Libyan secondary schools in line with communicative curriculum goals.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of GTM on communicative competence.

Participants

The participants comprised 45 third-year secondary school students selected via convenience sampling from two public schools in Msallata city: Rabia Al-Adawya Secondary School for Girls (n = 23) and Othman Al-Gezany Secondary School for Boys (n = 22). This sampling method was chosen due to the accessibility of the

participants and their representative nature of the Libyan EFL context. All participants had approximately eight years of formal English education, primarily delivered through the Grammar Translation Method (GTM).

Research Instruments

Speaking Test (Communicative Competence Task)

A structured speaking task was administered to assess students' communicative competence. The test consisted of three parts: personal introduction, picture description, and opinion expression.

Personal Introduction (1–2 minutes)

Picture Description (daily life context)

Short Opinion Question (e.g., school subjects, future plans)

The task was adapted to the Libyan secondary school context and aligned with the national curriculum.

Table 1 Components of the Speaking Task

Task Component	Description	Time Allocation
Personal Introduction	Students introduce themselves and talk about school	1–2 minutes
Picture Description	Students describe a picture related to daily activities	2 minutes
Opinion Question	Students express opinions and justify them	2 minutes

Speaking Assessment Rubric

The speaking performance was evaluated using an analytic rubric adapted from Canale and Swain's [6] communicative competence model.

Table 2 Speaking Assessment Rubric

Component	Description	Score Range
Fluency	Ability to speak smoothly with minimal hesitation	1–5
Grammatical Accuracy	Correct use of grammatical structures	1–5
Interaction	Ability to respond, initiate, and maintain conversation	1–5
Comprehensibility	Clarity and intelligibility of speech	1–5
Total Score	—	20

An analytic rubric based on communicative competence components was used to score students' performance: fluency, grammatical accuracy, interaction, and comprehensibility.

Questionnaire

A 12-item Likert-scale questionnaire was administered to examine students' perceptions of GTM and speaking opportunities.

Response scale:

Strongly Agree (5) Agree (4) Neutral (3) Disagree (2) Strongly Disagree (1)

Table 3 Questionnaire Focus Areas

Section	Focus
A	Grammar instruction and translation
B	Speaking practice opportunities
C	Confidence in oral communication
D	Perceived effectiveness of English lessons.

Reliability And Validity

To ensure the instrument's internal consistency, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated. As shown in Table 4, the student questionnaire yielded an alpha value of .81, which indicates a high level of reliability for the purpose of this study [15].

Table 4 Reliability Statistics

The questionnaire demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .81).

Instrument	Cronbach's Alpha
Student Questionnaire	0.81

An alpha value above 0.70 indicates acceptable reliability.

Data Collection And Analysis

Speaking performances were audio-recorded and scored by two raters. Descriptive statistics were calculated using mean scores and standard deviations. Questionnaire responses were analyzed quantitatively, while open-ended responses were thematically analyzed.

RESULTS

Speaking Test Results

Students' speaking performance revealed uneven development across communicative competence components. Grammatical accuracy received the highest mean score, whereas fluency and interaction were the weakest components.

Table 5 Mean Scores of Communicative Competence Components (n = 45)

Component	Mean	Standard Deviation
Fluency	2.31	0.67
Grammatical Accuracy	3.84	0.59
Interaction	2.18	0.72

Comprehensibility	2.76	0.64
Overall Score	11.09 out of 20	-

Interpretation

Students achieved higher scores in grammatical accuracy, while fluency and interaction recorded the lowest means, indicating limited communicative ability despite grammatical knowledge.

Comparison by School

Minimal differences were found between the two schools.

Table 6 Mean Speaking Scores by School

School	Mean Score	SD
Rabia Al-Adawya (Girls)	11.42	1.88
Othman Al-Gezany (Boys)	10.76	2.01

Differences were minimal and not statistically significant.

Questionnaire Results

Students overwhelmingly reported limited speaking opportunities and heavy reliance on grammar and translation.

Table 7 Students' Perceptions of English Instruction

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree
Lessons focus mainly on grammar	78%	11%	11%
Translation is used frequently	82%	9%	9%
I have enough speaking practice	18%	22%	60%
Grammar helps me speak fluently	64 %	20 %	16 %

Qualitative Findings

Three main themes emerged: dependence on translation, fear of grammatical errors, and desire for communicative practice.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that reliance on the Grammar Translation Method leads to strong grammatical knowledge but weak communicative competence. Students' low fluency and interaction levels reflect limited exposure to meaningful oral communication. These results are consistent with previous studies conducted in similar EFL contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

The study highlights a pedagogical mismatch: while GTM equips students with 'linguistic knowledge,' it fails to provide them with 'communicative ability.' This suggests that the current reliance on GTM functions as a barrier to the successful implementation of the Garnet curriculum.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study have several important implications for English language teaching, curriculum implementation, teacher education, and educational policy in Libya. Given the clear gap between curriculum objectives and classroom practices, the following recommendations are proposed.

First, English language teachers in Libyan secondary schools should gradually move beyond exclusive reliance on the Grammar Translation Method and adopt a more balanced instructional approach. While grammatical explanation remains important, it should be integrated with communicative activities that encourage students to use English meaningfully. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate pair work, role-plays, short discussions, and information-gap activities that align with the speaking tasks suggested in the Garnet curriculum. Such practices can help reduce students' fear of making mistakes and increase their confidence in oral communication.

Second, greater attention should be given to the effective implementation of the Garnet curriculum. Although the curriculum is communicatively oriented, its potential is often underutilized in classroom practice. Teachers should be supported and encouraged to fully implement speaking and interaction activities rather than skipping them due to time constraints or exam pressure. School administrators can play a key role by monitoring curriculum implementation and ensuring that communicative objectives are not overshadowed by an excessive focus on grammar and translation.

Third, teacher training and professional development programs should prioritize communicative language teaching methodologies. Many English teachers in Libya were educated through traditional methods and may lack confidence in managing communicative classrooms. In-service training workshops should focus on practical classroom techniques, lesson planning for communicative purposes, and strategies for managing large classes while sustaining student interaction. Strengthening teachers' methodological competence is essential to achieving the communicative goals of English education.

Fourth, assessment practices in Libyan secondary schools require reconsideration. As long as examinations focus primarily on grammar, translation, and written skills, teachers and students will continue to prioritize these areas. Introducing oral assessment components, such as speaking tests or continuous assessment of participation, would encourage both teachers and learners to value communicative competence. Aligning assessment methods with curriculum objectives is crucial for meaningful educational reform.

Finally, educational policymakers should recognize that improving students' communicative competence requires systemic support. This includes providing up-to-date teaching resources, reducing class sizes where possible, and ensuring alignment among curriculum design, teacher training, and assessment systems. Long-term planning and sustained investment in English language education are necessary to prepare Libyan students to meet the communicative demands of higher education, employment, and global interaction.

Limitations And Future Research

The study was limited to two schools in one city. Future research should involve larger samples and experimental designs.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in this study was voluntary. Students were informed of the purpose of the research, and oral consent was obtained before data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, and no identifying information was disclosed.

Ethical Approvals

I confirm that ethical approval was obtained for this research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their confidentiality was strictly maintained.

Conflicts Of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Data Availability

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request

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