

Challenges of Integrating Translation into Communicative Language Teaching: Lived Experiences of English Teachers in an Indonesian Islamic Primary School

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Abstract

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The integration of Translation into Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has regained attention in multilingual and religiously oriented educational contexts. In Indonesian Islamic primary schools (Madrasah Ibtidaiyah), English teachers regularly move between English, Indonesian, Arabic, and local languages, creating tension between communicative ideals and classroom realities. Yet little is known about how teachers themselves experience this tension. This study explores the lived experiences of English teachers at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Raudhatul As-Salimy, Koto Tengah, Tilatang Kamang, Agam Regency, in integrating translation into CLT. Using a Qualitative Phenomenological Design, data were generated through Semi-Structured Interviews, Classroom Observations, And Document Analysis involving five purposively selected teachers. The findings reveal four interconnected challenges: Ideological Tension Between CLT Principles And Translational Necessity, limited competence in using translation strategically as pedagogical scaffolding, institutional pressure from an Islamic curriculum that prioritises Arabic and religious subjects; and minimal student exposure to English beyond the classroom. The study shows that translation is not experienced merely as a teaching shortcut, but as a context-driven response to Communicative Breakdown, Curricular Pressure, And Learner Need. It concludes that translation can function as a legitimate scaffold within CLT when used reflectively. These findings have implications for teacher education and curriculum design in Islamic primary education.

Abstrak

Integrasi terjemahan ke dalam Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) kembali mendapat perhatian dalam konteks pendidikan multibahasa dan berbasis keagamaan. Di Madrasah Ibtidaiyah di Indonesia, guru

bahasa Inggris kerap berpindah antara bahasa Inggris, Indonesia, Arab, dan bahasa daerah, sehingga muncul ketegangan antara idealisme komunikatif dan realitas kelas. Namun, masih sedikit penelitian yang menelaah bagaimana guru mengalami ketegangan tersebut. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman hidup guru bahasa Inggris di Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Raudhatul As-Salimy, Koto Tangah, Tilatang Kamang, Kabupaten Agam, dalam mengintegrasikan terjemahan ke dalam CLT. Dengan desain kualitatif fenomenologis, data diperoleh melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi kelas, dan analisis dokumen terhadap lima guru yang dipilih secara purposif. Temuan menunjukkan empat tantangan yang saling berkaitan: ketegangan ideologis antara prinsip CLT dan kebutuhan translasi; keterbatasan kompetensi dalam menggunakan terjemahan sebagai scaffolding pedagogis; tekanan institusional dari kurikulum Islam yang memprioritaskan bahasa Arab dan mata pelajaran keagamaan; serta minimnya paparan bahasa Inggris di luar kelas. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa terjemahan tidak semata-mata dipahami sebagai jalan pintas mengajar, melainkan sebagai respons kontekstual terhadap kebuntuan komunikasi, tekanan kurikulum, dan kebutuhan belajar siswa. Oleh karena itu, terjemahan dapat berfungsi sebagai penyangga yang sah dalam CLT jika digunakan secara reflektif.

INTRODUCTION

The role of Translation in second and foreign language education has long been contested. For much of the twentieth century, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) positioned Translation as pedagogically incompatible with the goal of developing authentic communicative competence, largely because it was associated with the Grammar Translation Method, which prioritised form over meaning-making (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). This view has been progressively challenged over the past two decades as researchers have demonstrated that translation, when deployed purposefully, can enhance vocabulary retention, develop metalinguistic awareness, and scaffold comprehension for learners with limited target language exposure (Cook, 2020; Laviosa, 2022).

The tension between translation and CLT becomes particularly pronounced in Islamic primary school contexts in Indonesia. Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, as state-accredited Islamic elementary schools, operate under a dual curriculum that demands competence in English as a global language alongside Arabic as the language of religious instruction (Musthafa & Hamied, 2021). Teachers in this setting navigate competing linguistic demands from students who are, in many cases, simultaneously acquiring Indonesian, a regional language such as Minangkabau, Arabic, and English. In this multilingual landscape, complete avoidance of translation is not only impractical but arguably pedagogically counterproductive.

Despite a growing body of literature on CLT implementation in Indonesian schools, research on the specific challenges faced by Islamic school teachers who integrate translation into their English instruction remains sparse. Most existing studies focus on urban secondary or tertiary contexts (Susanti & Wahid, 2022; Zein, 2019), leaving the experiences of primary school teachers in Islamic rural settings largely unexamined. The present study addresses this gap by investigating the lived experiences of English teachers at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Raudhatul As-Salimy Koto Tangah, Tilatang Kamang, Agam Regency.

Moreover, Phenomenological Inquiry is particularly suited to this investigation because it foregrounds the subjective meaning that participants assign to their professional experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than measuring outcomes, this study seeks to understand how teachers perceive, interpret, and navigate the contradictions they encounter when attempting to implement CLT while simultaneously relying on translation as a communicative scaffold. The central research question guiding this study is: what challenges do Islamic teachers of young learners experience when integrating translation into Communicative Language Teaching at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Raudhatul As-Salimy?.

The theoretical framework anchoring this study draws from two converging bodies of literature. The first is the pedagogical turn in translation studies, which reconceptualises translation not as a failure of target language use but as a

legitimate cognitive and communicative strategy within multilingual repertoires (House, 2020; Laviosa, 2022). The second is scholarship on CLT adaptation in non-Western and resource-constrained contexts, which recognises that local sociocultural conditions invariably shape how teachers interpret and enact communicative principles (Hu, 2021; Nguyen, 2022). Together, these perspectives provide a productive lens through which teacher challenges can be understood as contextually embedded rather than as individual pedagogical deficiencies.

METHOD

This study employed a Qualitative Phenomenological Design following the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach (Smith et al., 2022). IPA is appropriate when the researcher seeks to understand the lived, first-person experience of participants within a specific context and aims to give voice to how individuals make sense of significant personal and professional phenomena. The phenomenological stance allowed the researcher to bracket prior assumptions and attend closely to the meaning structures that participants articulated through their accounts.

The research site was Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Raudhatul As-Salimy, located in Nagari Koto Tengah, Tilatang Kamang subdistrict, Agam Regency, West Sumatra, Indonesia. The school was selected through purposive criterion sampling because it represents a typical rural Islamic primary school operating under the integrated Islamic curriculum mandated by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, while simultaneously teaching English as a compulsory local content subject from Grade 1.

Next, participants comprised five English teachers (pseudonyms: Ustadzah Rani, Ustadzah Fitri, Ustadz Hendra, Ustadzah Mira, and Ustadzah Yuni) selected on the basis of three criteria: 1. Active Teaching Of English at the primary level for a minimum of Two Years; 2. Direct Responsibility for delivering CLT-informed instruction, and 3. Self-Reported use of translation as part of their instructional practice. The sample size is consistent with IPA conventions, where depth of analysis is prioritised over breadth of representation (Smith et al., 2022).

Moreover, data were collected through three complementary instruments. First, Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews were conducted individually with each participant. Previously, the researcher had asked the participants if they would be willing to voluntarily participate in interviews and provide accurate data related to the study. Then, interviews were implemented each lasting between 45 and 75 minutes, Audio-Recorded with Informed Consent, And Subsequently Transcribed Verbatim. The Interview Guide was organised into four clusters of guiding questions and follow up probes focusing on 1. Participants' Understandings of CLT, 2. Classroom Situations that Triggered Translation, 3. Institutional and Curricular Pressures Shaping Instructional Decisions, also 4. Reflections on Teaching Young Learners in A Multilingual Islamic Environment. Representative questions included: "In what situations do you decide to translate during an English lesson?", "How do you understand translation in relation to CLT?", and "What kinds of school or parental expectations influence your language choices in class?" To support content adequacy, the interview guide was developed directly from the research questions and aligned with the IPA emphasis on lived meaning before the fieldwork began. Second, non-participant classroom observations were conducted during a two-week fieldwork period across the English lessons handled by the five participants, covering repeated class meetings at the class levels assigned to each teacher and generating approximately 15 hours of field notes. Observation records documented lesson stages, teacher talk, instruction-giving, student response patterns, code-switching episodes, translation triggers, and the immediate pedagogical function of each translational move. Third, relevant documents including lesson plans, school curriculum guides, and the national Islamic primary school curriculum framework were analysed to contextualise participants' accounts.

In addition, data analysis followed the IPA protocol outlined by Smith et al. (2022), proceeding through five iterative stages: 1. familiarisation through repeated reading of transcripts, 2. initial noting of observations, associations, and emerging meanings, 3. development of emergent themes for each participant, 4. cross-case pattern analysis to identify shared experiential themes, and 5.

production of a coherent thematic account supported by verbatim excerpts. Member checking was conducted by returning summary findings to participants for verification. Researcher positionality was addressed through reflexive memo-writing throughout the study, acknowledging the researcher's background as a bilingual educator in a similar institutional context.

Most importantly, Ethical Clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional authorities. To protect confidentiality, the school's name is listed as it appears in official records with the explicit permission of the principal, while the identities of all teachers have been anonymized using pseudonyms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of interview transcripts, classroom observations, and document review yielded four superordinate themes representing the core challenges participants encountered when integrating translation into CLT instruction. These themes are presented below with supporting evidence and discussed in relation to existing scholarship.

Ideological Tension Between CLT Ideals and Translational Practice

All five participants articulated a recurring sense of professional dissonance rooted in the gap between their training in CLT principles and the translational realities of their classrooms. Ustadzah Rani described this tension clearly: "I was taught that the target language should dominate the classroom. But when I see thirty children staring blankly at me, I cannot just continue in English. I translate, and immediately, the lesson moves." This account reflects what Cook (2020) describes as the "purist fallacy" in CLT, whereby wholesale rejection of the first language prevents teachers from using the most efficient cognitive pathway available to young learners.

Classroom observations corroborated this finding. In all observed sessions, teachers shifted to Indonesian or Minangkabau at moments of perceived communicative breakdown, vocabulary introduction, or instruction-giving. These shifts were rarely accidental; participants described them as deliberate and context-sensitive decisions. Nevertheless, participants simultaneously expressed

guilt about these decisions, suggesting that their teacher education had internalised a normative view of CLT that stigmatises any recourse to the students' first language. This finding resonates with Nguyen (2022), who documented similar guilt-laden translanguaging among Vietnamese primary teachers shaped by monolingual CLT norms.

The Islamic institutional context added a further ideological layer. Participants noted that parents and school leadership broadly valued Arabic over English, and that any suggestion of mixing languages was read through a religious rather than a pedagogical lens. Ustadz Hendra observed: "Parents accept Arabic being mixed with everything. But if I mix English with Indonesian in my class, some parents think I am confusing the children." This asymmetry in community attitudes toward different languages in translation created a unique pressure not typically documented in mainstream CLT research.

Limited Pedagogical Competence in Strategic Translation Use

A second prominent challenge concerned the participants' limited preparation for using translation as a deliberate scaffolding tool. While all five teachers used translation regularly, their accounts revealed that this use was largely reactive and spontaneous rather than planned. Ustadzah Fitri admitted: "I translate when I feel I have to. I don't have a system for when it is the right moment and when I should push the students to stay in English." This reactive pattern suggests that translation, despite being a common classroom practice, had not been integrated into participants' pedagogical repertoire as a principled strategy.

This finding aligns with Laviosa's (2022) argument that teachers need explicit preparation in what she terms "translation literacy," defined as the capacity to deploy translation as a metacognitive and comprehension tool at pedagogically appropriate moments. The absence of such preparation in participants' pre-service training was a consistent theme across interviews. Document analysis of the school curriculum confirmed that no formal guidance on translation use in English instruction appeared in any of the lesson plan templates or curriculum guides available to teachers, meaning that decisions about

if and when to translate were left entirely to individual professional judgment without institutional support.

Classroom observations further illustrated this gap. In several instances, translation was used so immediately after a new vocabulary item was introduced that students had no opportunity to engage in meaning-inference strategies, a process that research consistently identifies as beneficial for vocabulary acquisition in young learners (Massaro, 2021). The speed and automaticity of these translation episodes suggested habituated rather than considered practice.

Institutional Pressure from Islamic Curricular Demands

A third challenge arose from the structural demands of the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah curriculum, which requires substantial instructional time for Quran recitation, Islamic jurisprudence, and Arabic language learning alongside the national curriculum subjects. Participants reported that English instruction was typically allocated two 35-minute periods per week, a figure significantly below the contact time regarded as necessary for meaningful CLT implementation (Musthafa & Hamied, 2021). Within this constrained time, the pressure to cover prescribed material left participants with little room for the extended communicative activities that CLT approaches typically require.

Ustadzah Mira articulated this constraint with particular clarity: “With only two periods a week, if I want the children to actually talk to each other in English, the lesson is over before we have even started. I use translation because it is faster. I need to cover the material.” This account illustrates how institutional time constraints can push teachers toward efficiency-maximising strategies, of which translation is among the most immediate, even when these strategies may limit communicative language development over time.

The dual language curriculum of the Madrasah also created spillover effects on students’ cognitive resources. Several participants noted that on days following intensive Arabic instruction, students demonstrated lower attentional capacity for English activities. Ustadzah Yuni described: “After two hours of Quran memorisation in the morning, the children come to my class tired. Their brains are full. If I try to do a communicative activity entirely in English, they shut down. A

quick translation gets them back into the lesson.” This testimony highlights a dimension of Islamic educational contexts, the multi-script, multi-language cognitive load on young learners, that is rarely addressed in CLT scholarship situated outside such contexts.

Students’ Minimal Target Language Exposure Beyond the Classroom

The fourth challenge concerned the extremely limited English input that students encountered outside the classroom. In the rural Tilatang Kamang context, English is absent from most aspects of students’ daily lives. Participants reported that few households had internet access sufficient for English-language media consumption, that no English-language books or materials were available in the school library, and that most students’ home environments were entirely Minangkabau-speaking. In this context, the two weekly English periods represented the totality of students’ target language exposure.

This finding has direct implications for the viability of CLT in such settings. CLT theory implicitly assumes a degree of target language immersion or rich input from the environment, conditions that are simply unavailable in many rural Indonesian Islamic school contexts (Zein, 2019). When students enter a CLT-oriented classroom with no prior English input, teachers face the choice between communicative integrity and communicative accessibility. Participants consistently described resolving this dilemma in favour of accessibility, using translation to build the minimal linguistic foundation upon which communicative activities could subsequently be built.

This finding connects to broader discussions in EFL scholarship about the distinction between “CLT as an ideal” and “CLT as it must be practised” in resource-limited, low-English-input environments (Hu, 2021). Participants’ accounts suggest that they had arrived at pragmatic, context-sensitive solutions to this gap, even if they lacked the theoretical vocabulary to frame their practice as principled adaptation rather than deviation. Supporting learners with translated meaning at entry-level phases before transitioning to communicative tasks aligns with contemporary scaffolding theory (Gibbons, 2021), a theoretical grounding that was not available to participants through their training.

From a phenomenological perspective, participants did not experience translation merely as a methodological technique; they experienced it as a situated act of care, rescue, and responsibility. When learners appeared confused, silent, or cognitively overloaded, translation was interpreted by teachers as the quickest way to restore shared understanding and keep the lesson socially intact. In this sense, translation was not described as a rejection of communicative pedagogy, but as a practical attempt to preserve the possibility of communication under conditions in which exclusive target-language use would have produced exclusion rather than interaction. The lived meaning of translation for these teachers, therefore, was deeply relational: it functioned as a bridge between pedagogical ideals and the moral obligation to make learning accessible to children, a reading consistent with the phenomenological focus on meaning-making in experience (Smith et al., 2022) and with scaffolding perspectives on temporary linguistic support (Gibbons, 2021).

These experiences also shaped participants' professional identity in important ways. Rather than seeing themselves as "failed CLT teachers," participants positioned themselves, often implicitly, as mediators between competing demands: policy and practice, English and local languages, communicative aspiration and learner comprehension, as well as secular curricular expectations and Islamic institutional priorities. Their professional self-understanding emerged not from strict fidelity to a method, but from their capacity to negotiate these demands responsibly. What appears superficially as inconsistency in classroom language choice is, phenomenologically, evidence of identity work: teachers continually redefined what it means to be a competent English teacher in a Madrasah Ibtidaiyah context marked by curricular compression, multilingualism, and uneven language exposure (Hu, 2021; Musthafa & Hamied, 2021).

The recurrent guilt expressed by participants also carries important psychological meaning. This guilt did not simply indicate lack of skill; rather, it revealed the tension between an internalised ideal teacher image, shaped by monolingual CLT discourse, and the contextual self that had to respond to actual

learners in real time. In other words, participants felt guilty not because translation was pedagogically useless, but because they had learned to associate “good teaching” with maximal English-only practice. Their accounts suggest that the emotional burden of guilt arose when institutional realities forced them to act against that idealised image, even when doing so clearly helped students. Interpreted in this way, guilt becomes a sign of unresolved professional contradiction rather than personal deficiency, echoing Nguyen’s (2022) account of guilt-laden first-language use, and it points to the need for teacher education programmes that legitimise principled, context-sensitive multilingual pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study has documented the lived experiences of five English teachers at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Raudhatul As-Salimy, revealing four interconnected challenges in integrating translation into CLT: ideological tension rooted in monolingual CLT norms, limited pedagogical preparation for strategic translation use, institutional pressure from the Islamic dual curriculum, and students’ severely limited target language exposure beyond the classroom. These challenges do not exist in isolation; they form an interlocking system of constraints that shapes every instructional decision teachers make in this context.

The study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that challenges the binary opposition between translation and CLT, demonstrating instead that translation, when reflectively deployed, can function as a context-sensitive scaffolding tool that enhances rather than undermines communicative language development. The specific contribution of this study lies in its foregrounding of the Islamic educational context, a setting in which multilingual complexity, religious curricular obligations, and rural resource constraints converge in ways that generic CLT frameworks have not adequately addressed.

Several implications follow from these findings. For teacher education programmes, curricula should incorporate explicit instruction in strategic translation use, equipping pre-service and in-service teachers with the conceptual tools to make principled, context-sensitive decisions about when and how to use

the first language in CLT classrooms. For curriculum designers at the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Education, the English syllabi for Madrasah Ibtidaiyah require adaptation to reflect the realistic instructional conditions of Islamic primary schools, including adequate contact time and guidance on translational scaffolding as a legitimate pedagogy. For school leadership, creating communities of practice in which teachers can discuss and reflect on their translational decisions without stigma may strengthen professional agency and pedagogical confidence.

Finally, the scope of this study is limited by its single-site design and small participant group, reflecting the depth-oriented priorities of IPA methodology. Future research should extend this investigation across multiple Madrasah Ibtidaiyah in different regions of Indonesia to assess the transferability of these themes. Longitudinal studies tracking how teachers' translation practices evolve with professional development would also add valuable insight. Comparative research between Islamic primary and secular primary school contexts could further illuminate the specific role that religious curricular obligations play in shaping teachers' instructional choices.

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