

The Role of Grammar-Translation Method in Enhancing EFL Learning Skills

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Abstract:

People intuitively have the ability to learn many different languages throughout several different ways and techniques. Therefore, there are different methods that refer to how one can learn foreign languages; one of these is the Grammar Translation Method (GTM).

Simply, the (GTM) is a method of teaching foreign languages where students learn grammatical rules and then apply those rules by translating sentences between the target and the native languages. The main goals of this method are to enable students to read, understand and translate written texts in the source language, and to further students' general intellectual development.

Thus, the main objective of using of (GTM) in EFL class is to learn another or a second language through developing reading and writing skills, learning new vocabulary and grammatical structure, and improving translation practice as its main procedure.

However, this paper investigates the use of Grammar Translation Method (GTM) in foreign language learning; its features, advantages and disadvantages, principles and techniques. It also aims to show its role in learning new vocabularies, understanding the content of a text, and developing language learning and translating skills.

Keywords: Grammar-Translation Method, Advantages, Disadvantages, Translation, EFL learning skills.

Introduction

Latin and Ancient Greek are known as "dead" languages, though people are no longer speak them for interactive communication. Yet they are still considered as important languages to learn (especially Latin) for the sake of gaining access to classical literature, and until recently, for the kinds of grammar training that is highly important in any education study.

Latin has been studied for centuries to learn how to read classical Latin texts, understand the fundamentals of grammar and translation, and know more about the foreign influences Latin has had on the development of other European languages. And the method used to teach it, came to be known as the Classical Method which is now more commonly known in Foreign Language Teaching areas as the Grammar Translation Method.

In the western world, "foreign" language learning in schools was synonymous to the learning of Latin and Greek. In addition, Latin was taught by means of the classical method, focuses on grammatical rules, memorization of vocabulary and conjugations, translation of texts, and doing written exercises (Brown, 1994). The GTM was adopted as the chief means for teaching FLs. It arisen from the practice of teaching Latin which widely studied FLs due to its importance in government academia and business. The students had learned Latin for the purpose of communication, but after its declination the purpose of learning it in schools has changed. Modern languages were taught at schools side by side with GTM (New York Science Journal, 2012:5).

It is worth mentioning that this method has still survived (alongside with the other more modern and 'enlightened' methods) and is essentially the most developed method for the study of "dead" languages. It involves little or no spoken communication or listening comprehension. Besides, it is still used for the study of 'alive' languages requiring competence in terms of reading, writing, structure, speaking, listening and interactive communication. (Richards and Rodgers, 1986:4)

It is worth looking at the objectives, features and typical techniques commonly associated with the Grammar Translation Method, in order to both understand how it works and why it has considered as an acceptable and recommended language teaching method in many countries and institutions around the world.

Objectives

The purpose of the GTM is to help students read and understand foreign language literature (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Most teachers who employ it to teach English would tell their students that the most fundamental reason for learning the language is to give learners access to English literature, develop their minds through foreign language learning, and to build in them the kinds of grammar, reading, vocabulary and translation skills necessary to pass a variety of written tests required at different School levels.

Besides, some other teachers tell their students that it is the most effective way for "global communication" by starting with the key skills of reading and grammar. While others would say it is the "least stressful" for students because almost all the teaching occurs in L1 and students are rarely called upon to speak the language in any communicative fashion.

GTM as a Means for EFL Learning Skills

The use of grammar translation method in EFL class aims at giving students access to English language literature (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). It is an adequate way of learning vocabulary and grammatical structures. Language learning would be easier when students focus on the rules of grammar, the features of L1 and L2, hence translating correctly. Through the mastery of the two languages, learning is facilitated when Language skills and practice are provided and used appropriately to make communication accurate and meaningful. Students' reading and writing skills will be developed, as well, in this method. Added to that, practicing various translating tasks will supply them clarity, improve their accuracy in the target language and raise their awareness and

independent study (Fish, 2003). As Vienne (1998) also points out that this awareness will be raised not only at the levels of L1 and L2, but also at the cultural level.

Moreover, student's comprehension is promoted when practicing translation in foreign language learning process. For, the GTM is the most useful for students' second language acquisition in the way that it increases their use of figures of speech, enrich their own vocabulary and improve the ability of interpretation to produce similar texts, if not exactly identical (Hell, 2009, p. 9).

Features of the GTM

According to Prator and Celce-Murcia (1979:3), the key features of the Grammar Translation Method are as follows:

- 1- Classes are taught in the mother tongue, with little active use of the target language.
- 2- Much vocabulary is taught in the form of lists of isolated words.
- 3- Long elaborate explanations of the intricacies of grammar are given.
- 4- Grammar provides the rules for putting words together, and instruction often focuses on the form and inflection of words.
- 5- Reading of difficult classical texts is begun early.
- 6- Little attention is paid to the content of texts, which are treated as exercises in Grammatical analysis.
- 7- Often the only drills are exercises in translating disconnected sentences from the target language into the mother tongue.
- 8- Little or no attention is given to pronunciation.

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Merits and Demerits

The GTM has been practiced and survived so long because of its important merits. There are classes with a large number of students. So, GTM with its focus on teacher-centered is effective and appropriate. In addition, translation, as its major technique, into L1 with accuracy in understanding synonyms helps explain the meaning and remove the misunderstanding.

Moreover, translation technique saves time when translating from L1 to L2, the meaning, words, and phrases of the TL would also be clarified. So teachers who are not fluent in L2 can teach via the GTM. Furthermore, teachers are less challenged because their students already understand and will have no problems in responding the comprehension questions asked by the teacher in the first language. So the teacher will be able to decide whether the students have learned and understand what they were taught or not (Marks, 2008).

On the other hand, the GTM has its demerits. For speaking and understanding are the key skills for learning modern languages rather than reading and writing skills. Whereas GTM favors written than spoken language. However, the GTM uses a graded grammatical syllabus and then the students must accumulate and have an accurate command of each item in the syllabus. Here is the very big demerit of this method especially for those who want to start using the language straight away.

Learning foreign languages nowadays, should be best practiced, experienced and exercised, compared to GTM that uses conscious memorization of grammatical rules or vocabulary. Added to that, in this method, both the teacher and the students only interact in their mother tongue without allowing the students to interact with each other. Students should have the ability to co-operate and establish their self-confidence when conversing in and outside the class.

Currently, translation as the main technique of the GTM, is not considered as a good strategy to learning foreign languages. For it does not allow fluency and communicating through language use (Newson, 1998). Therefore, it is not advisable when not allowing students to be exposed to the target language. Translation is a useful tool in an EFL environment (Ellis, 1992; Ur, 1996). Stern also (1992) stresses that translation is a very effective way in language learning. It helps students to realize the similarities and differences between L1 and L2, when encountering difficulties of whatever kind. This is a good way to understand the language system better through comparing the target language and their native language.

Principles and Techniques

The main principles of the GTM are:

- 1- The most important purpose of learning a language is to be able to read written literature.
- 2- The primary skills are reading, little attention is given to speaking and listening, and non to pronunciation.
- 3- The GTM class is a teacher- centered; the teacher is given the authority inside the class.
- 4- The main target of the method is to enable students to translate the SL and TL into one another by finding the equivalent words of the SL to the TL ones.
- 5- The ability to communicate in the TL is not the main aim of language instruction.
- 6- Attention should be drawn to the similarities and differences between the SL and TL to facilitate learning. (Larsen, 2011:21)

Here are the most important techniques of the GTM:

- 1- Translation of Literary Texts:

Students have the ability to translate reading passages from the TL into the SL. The reading passage often provides the focus for vocabulary and grammatical structures in the passages are studied in the subsequent lessons. The passage is taken from some work of the TL literature, or a teacher may write a passage includes particular grammar rules and vocabulary. Thus translation may

be written or spoken or both. The students should translate the difficult words in a way that shows they understand their meaning.

2- Cognates:

Students are taught to confess cognates by learning the spelling or sound patterns that correspond between the languages. The students are also asked by their teachers to memorize words that have meanings in the TL different from those in the SL. This technique is useful in languages that share cognates.

3- Deductive Application of Rules:

First of all, grammar rules are presented by the teacher to the students with different examples. Second, exceptions to each rule are noted. Third, when the students understand a rule, they are asked to apply it to some examples.

4- Using words in sentences:

Students make up sentences by using new words in order to show that they understand the meaning and use of a new vocabulary item.

5- Memorization:

Students are given lists of vocabulary words belong to the TL. Then the teacher gives them lists of their native language equivalents and asks to memorize them. Students are also asked to memorize grammatical rules and paradigms.

6- Composition: Students are given a topic to write about in the TL. The topic is based on some aspects of the reading passage. However, the students are asked to prepare a docketed of the reading passage instead of creating a composition. (Larsen, 2011: 20-21)

Translation and EFL Learning

Translation is a useful device in the learning process of ESL. Furthermore, it is an aid to enhance foreign language proficiency. It has a facilitating function in the comprehension of the foreign language. The Grammar-Translation method has a supportive role in foreign language learning, and allows students to notice the differences and similarities between L1 and L2 that will make the students understand the language system better. In foreign language learning process students are provided with accurate translation of an English word. This will help them understand quickly, and acquire the target language easily. Any avoidance of translation in the learning process may not lead to the comprehension of the foreign language, which will prelude the achievement of the process goals.

Translation has a meaningful function in the FL learning process, and students become active participants in the learning process. Danchev (1983, p.35) lists the benefits of translation as: 1) natural and easy comparison between the TL and SL; 2) quick and effective comprehension control; 3) to overcome and neutralize SL transfer. To perform an activity, understanding of the instructions is significant, and translation is a useful tool to the comprehension establishment of these instructions. As Harmer (1991, p.240) suggests: “to get a translation of these instructions to make sure the students have understood”.

Alan Duff (1996) states that translation is a natural and necessary activity. To him translation shapes our way of thinking and our use of the foreign language. He says that “translation helps us to understand better the influence of the one language on the other, and to correct errors of habit that creep in unnoticed” (p.6).

Alan Duff (1996, p.7) also argues that “translation develops three qualities essential to all language learning; accuracy, clarity and flexibility. It trains the learner to search (flexibility) for the most appropriate words (accuracy) to convey what is meant (clarity)”. These qualities are important factors in foreign language learning process as they will contribute to better understanding.

The use of translation is thought to be independent of the four English skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), but Malmkjaer (1998, p.8) argues that without these skills translation is not possible and writes: “in fact dependent on and inclusive of them, and language students who are translating will be forced to practice them” .

Anne D. Cordero (1984, p.351) states that translation is not as the exclusive foreign language course in a student’s language program, but as a skills course among diversified options. When properly developed and taught it can maintain and strengthen its own vital role, while contributing to the development of other skills and consequently to a higher overall competence. Translation is thus conceived as an end desired in itself and as a method of furthering proficiency in the foreign language.

Vermes (2010, p. 91) is of the opinion that there is no fundamental reason for the exclusion of translation in foreign language learning, and concludes that translation involves interaction and cooperation between people, which makes it a potentially very useful device, in foreign language teaching.

Conclusion:

The Grammar-Translation Method has been used by language teachers for many years. Long ago, it was called the Classical Method since it was first used in the teaching of the classical languages, Latin and Greek (Chastain, 1988). In the earlier stage of this century, this method was used for the purpose of helping students read and appreciate foreign language literature and is still used as an effective means of learning foreign languages. The use of translation, on the other hand, will contribute to the use of the target language effectively. Learning becomes meaningful when translating from the native language, and better comprehension promotes foreign language proficiency. Using the Grammar-Translation method in the FL class is useful because learning process would become clearer, thus develop accuracy by students. It is hoped that, through the study of the grammar of the target language, students would become more familiar with the grammar of their native language and that this familiarity would help them speak and write their native language better.

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