

GRAMMAR TRANSLATION METHOD: THEORY AND GUIDANCE FOR
CLASSROOM PRACTICE

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ABSTRAK

Meskipun sebagian ahli menganggap bahwa Grammar Translation Method bukan lagi sebuah metode pembelajaran bahasa yang sesuai untuk masa sekarang seiring dengan perkembangan teori bahasa dan teori pembelajaran bahasa, sebagian yang lain ternyata sebaliknya memperlihatkan kesesuaian metode ini dalam sisi: cara pandang siswa terhadap bahasa, budaya dan kepraktisan disamping tujuan-tujuan pembelajaran bahasa tertentu yang justru menuntut aplikasi metode sepenuhnya. Selain itu sebagian ahli juga melakukan modifikasi dan kombinasi terhadap metode ini sehingga memenuhi tujuan tertentu dalam pembelajaran bahasa di era modern. Metode ini lazim dikenal sebagai praktek pembelajaran tanpa teori belajar, mempersepsikan bahasa sebagai grammatika, bertujuan mengembangkan kemampuan siswa memahami bacaan, melakukan praktek penterjemahan, mengajar grammar secara deduktif diikuti oleh *fill in blank*, mengajar kosa kata dengan sinonim-antonim, kosa kata bilingual, cognate dan tidak mementingkan pengembangan kemampuan komunikasi lisan.

Keywords: grammar, translation, language

INTRODUCTION

Grammar Translation Method is the oldest method in the history of language teaching, used for teaching Latin and Greek in need for translating the Bible to spread Christianity around the world. GTM is the practice of language teaching used dominantly for much of the century (Nunan)¹, the way to teach classical language like Latin and Greek (Larsen-Freeman)², aimed to enable students read classical texts in Latin³, known to be as 'classical method' due to that reason⁴, and then shifted to be GTM since the mid of 1800s⁵. This method was originally established by the church some centuries after the death of Jesus Christ as teaching practice of Latin and Greek in

¹ Nunan, David (Ed). *Practical English Language Teaching*. Mc Graw Hill Inc: Boston, 2003, p. 5

² Larsen-Freeman, Diane. *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press. Oxford, 1986, p. 4

³ Loc cit

⁴ Loc cit

⁵ Sapargul, D. and V Sartor. *The Trans-Cultural Comparative Literature Method: Using Grammar Translation Techniques Effectively*. English Teaching Forum Journal. No: 3, 2010, p 27

order to spread Christianity to people around the world of by producing the Bible in variety languages.

This method spread from Europe to all over the world ever since. Particularly in America, introduction of this method signed by the publication of a book entitled "The Ciceronian or the Prussian Method of Teaching the Elements of Latin Language as Adapted to The Use of American School" by B. Sears in 1844. It was claimed to be the offspring of German scholars in language teaching which more emphasis on teaching everything about the language rather than the language itself. It contains guidance of instruction and source material of Latin.

After the death of the classic languages (Latin and Ancient Greek) and then the rise and dominance of English as international lingua-franca, the use of this method mostly turned to the teaching of English besides other languages. Prior to the 18th century, the translation of literary texts was the main method for studying foreign languages. This method dominated European and foreign language teaching from the 1840s to the 1940s, and in modified form it continues to be widely used in some parts of the world today.

Under the influence of World War II, GTM faced a lot of critics in the USA. Within the period, GTM was criticized mainly because it was unconcerned with students' oral communication skills, which was necessary for American Army before being sent to other countries. The army needs to communicate orally with the native people where they would be sent. As a matter of fact, GTM could not fulfill this necessity. As a result, Savignon (1991) states that in the late 1900s the tedious GTM lost popularity in the United States⁶. Under the condition, linguists and practitioners began the effort to seek other teaching practices which in turn founded the Direct Method in post war and depression era classroom in 1960s and Audiolingual Method (ALM) in the beginning of 1970s.

Starting from the criticism on GTM in USA and enormous efforts in searching alternative methods in the latter periods, linguists and practitioners worldwide views GTM has lost its fame and influence in language teaching nowadays. Among the

⁶ Savignon, Sandra J. *Communicative Language Teaching: State Of The Art*. TESOL Quarterly 25 (2): 1991, p. 77

Besides the preference of students in some parts of the world to GTM and the ease of using this method, application of GTM in recent language teaching can also be appropriate with certain specified objectives. Dehghani indicates that GTM is still applicable at least for some specific purposes in teaching a second language¹⁴. This method is certainly appropriate to be used for students who need ability in reading, writing and translating and lesser need on oral communication. Additionally, Page (2011) states that choosing a method of teaching or learning English as a Second Language (ESL) mainly depends on the goals of the student¹⁵. She points out that no teacher should rely solely in certain methods when teaching. He or she can change or combine strategies on the shake of students' need.

In conclusion, in spite of the criticisms GTM it is still a valuable treasure in language teaching and used in some parts of the world. It is not easily vanished without lost. This method is appropriate in appropriate contexts, goals and objectives. The use is remained and absolutely possible in the future. It is the teachers who will consider, analyze and choose methods or strategies on the shake of need in their teaching contexts. And so, this paper is guidance for teachers of English to practice this method in their classrooms when the need is suitable.

DISCUSSION

Grammar translation method (GTM) is a grammar based method which promotes grammar mastery and translation ability as the main features in teaching and learning a target language. This method, according to Richard-Amato is one of the grammar based approaches beside Audiolingualism, the Direct Method and Cognitive-code¹⁶, extension of the approach used to teach classical languages to the teaching of modern languages (Celce-Murcia)¹⁷, based on explication of grammatical rules and extensive practice in doing translation from the first to target language and vice versa

¹⁴ Dehghani, Yafar. *Teaching compound verbs in second language learning using grammar-translation method*. DFSL School of Languages RAAF Williams Base, Laverton, 3027, Victoria: 2009, p. 1

¹⁵ Page, Kara. *The ESL Grammar Translation Method*, 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.e-how.com>, Saturday, July 13, 2012 at 10.23. AM

¹⁶ Loc cit

¹⁷ Celce-Murcia, Marianne. *Teaching English as Second or Foreign Language*. Newbury House: New York, 1991, p. 6

(Nunan)¹⁸, of which goal is to produce students who could read and write in the target language (Richard-Amato)¹⁹. In brief, GTM teaches grammar and translation, and develops reading and writing skills.

GTM is also addressed as classic language teaching method. It can be explained in two points of view. First, this method was originally used for teaching classic dead languages—Latin and Greek. Second, it views language as grammar. It is to say that view on language as grammar patterns is the traditional perception about language. This distinctive feature distinguishes GTM from the recent approaches which attribute language with communication.

In spite of the judgments, Howatt perceives grammar and translation as actually not the distinctive features of GTM, since they were already well-accepted as basic principles of language teaching²⁰. According to him, the new thing in GTM was the use of invented, graded structures rather than authentic literary texts in order to make language learning easier. Contrary, most linguists and practitioners today address these features to be belonging to GTM.

Grammar, the main jargon of this method is attributed to be as 'forms' and 'structure'—syntactic and structural systems of the language. In this view, grammar covers either the structural system words to form correct phrases and sentences (generally perceived as 'grammar') or morphemic organization to construct words (morphology).

1. Language theory

In the view of GTM's advocates, language is grammar, and is superior to spoken language. Larsen-Freeman (1986) points out that in GTM, literary language is considered superior to spoken language and is therefore the language that student should study²¹. While grammar deals with a large repertoire of structure which describes the correct way human use language, resulted in GTM, in which the process of language teaching considered as an effort to make the learners obtain grammar with all of its

¹⁸ Op cit, p. 332

¹⁹ Richard-Amato, Patricia A. *Making It Happen: From Interactive to Participatory Language Teaching*. Longman: London, 2003, p. 16

²⁰ Op cit, 131

²¹ Op cit, p. 6

complicated details. In short, in GTM, teaching and learning language is teaching and learning grammar.

2. Learning theory

Although the advocates of this method identify language as grammar and they make the structures as subject matters in language teaching, they do not have any basic theory on how language should be taught and learned. Richards and Rodgers point out that there is no literature that offers a rationale or justification for it or that attempts to relate it to issues in linguistics, psychology, or educational theory²². And so, this method has been passed through generations without fundamental learning theory rather than just old tradition and convention in language teaching, in which teachers teach language by the way the previous teachers did.

3. Principles

Teaching languages in the frame of GTM is based on a number of principles. Larsen-Freeman lists the principles as follows:

- A fundamental purpose of learning a foreign language is to read its literature.
- An important goal is for students translate text from one language to another.
- The ability to communicate in the target language is not a goal
- The primary skills to be developed are reading and writing. Little attention is given to speaking and listening, and almost none to pronunciation.
- The teacher is the authority in the classroom. It is important that students get the correct answers; the final correct answers are from the teacher.
- It is possible to find native language equivalents for all target words.
- Learning is facilitated through attention to similarities between the target language and the native language.
- It is important for students to learn about the form of the target language.
- Deductive application of explicit grammar rule is a useful technique.
- Language learning provides good mental exercise.
- Students should be conscious of the grammatical rules of the target language.

²² Richard, Jack C. and Theodore Rodgers, *Approach and Methods In Language Teaching*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001, p. 3

Wherever possible, verb conjugations and other grammatical paradigms should be committed to memory.²³

4. Characteristics

Brown lists 8 characteristics of grammar-translation method²⁴, meanwhile Richards and Rodgers record 7 features²⁵, which a number of them principally similar. Combination and explanation to each item are as follows:

- 1) Classes are taught in students' mother tongue, with little active use of the target language.
- 2) Much of vocabulary is taught in the form of list 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 focuses on the form and inflection of words.
- 5) Reading difficult classical texts is begun early.
- 6) Little attention is paid to the content of the 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 to no attention is given to pronunciation.
- 9) Accuracy is emphasized.
- 10) Teacher plays central role in the classroom.
- 11) There is no attention to students' feeling.

5. Goal and objectives

In the earlier centuries, the main use of this method was for translating the Holy Bible from the Greek and Latin to other languages in order to fulfill the will of the church to spread Christianity to different speaking societies. However, after the dead of real life use of Latin and the domination of English as the most widely used language in the world, this method is applied for teaching English to the speakers of

²³ Dianne Larsen-Freeman, *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 17

²⁴ Brown, Douglas, *Teaching By Principles: An Interactive Approach To Language Pedagogy*, Longman: London, 1994, p. 53

²⁵ Op cit, p. 5-6

other languages. In the next turn, replacing the Bible's written texts, the materials involved in teaching language with this method covers the other kinds of literatures in formal schools such as history, literary works, social and cultural texts, and so on.

The goal of this method in the latter periods is for helping students comprehend the written literature of the target languages (Larsen-Freeman, 1986)²⁶, and to develop students mind (TESOL)²⁷. The advocates believe that the successful means for achieving comprehension is by mastering structures and vocabulary of the language. Mastery in these linguistic aspects facilitates the students in reading comprehension and translation. On the other hand, analyzing the grammatical structures and other comprehension gathering processes are believed to enrich students' mind.

By grading a certain amount of texts and grammatical features inside, it can be generated some objectives: 1) to make students understand certain form, and 2) to enable students comprehend the targeted text, 3) to enable students to translate texts which contains the form, and 4) to enable students master a certain number of new vocabulary used in the specified subject matter. It is to say that a teacher for each subject matter has to provide texts with specified grammatical features and new vocabularies to be used in the classroom.

Obtaining the goal and objectives, language structure syllabuses are employed. It consists of grammar points sequenced in certain ways (usually from simpler or easiest forms/sentences to more complex ones), as lesson topics to be learned along the course.

6. Focus on language skills

Appropriate with goal and objectives above, language skills focused in this method are reading comprehension and writing skill. For getting the idea from reading texts, students are ordered to translate them into their mother tongue besides writing down answers to reading comprehension questions. Ability in translation and reading comprehension is facilitated by their understanding about the grammatical features inside and vocabulary mastery.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 9

²⁷ TESOL, *TESOL Activity Design*, 2010, p. 32. Retrieved from tesol-wikispaces.com on June 13, 2012 at 10 o'clock AM

Writing skills developed not only in target language but also writing in the native language. Writing in the target language is conducted by giving the students task to make a composition related to certain topic which often related to the topic of the lesson. Besides, writing in the mother tongue is developed in the process of translation, in which the students translate the texts from the target language to their native language in grammatically correct manner. The texts translated should be in equivalent structure and vocabulary with the source language. As an excess of learning the source language form, the students are also hoped to have more awareness and understanding about the structure of their own language (Larsen-Freeman)^{2R}.

7. Learning experience

Learning in GTM involves a number of techniques for teaching variety features of the targeted language; the classroom processes reveals the following characteristics:

- Learning are conducted in students' mother tongue
- Students are asked to translate texts from one language to another
- Students study grammar deductively; that is, they are given the grammar rules and examples, and then are asked to apply them to other examples
- They also learn grammatical paradigms such as verb conjugations
- They memorize grammar and native language equivalents for target-language vocabulary words

Abdullah points out the main principles on which the grammar translation method classroom process is based as follows:

- Translation interprets the words and phrases of the foreign languages in the best possible manner.
- The phraseology and the idioms of the target language can best be assimilated in the process of interpretation.

- The structures of the foreign languages are best learned when compared and contrast with those of first language.²⁹

The learning experience is implied in the application of the following techniques and procedures in the classroom process. Larsen-Freeman (2000)³⁰ lists a number of techniques applied to teach language features and skills in subsequent lessons, explained as follows.

1) Techniques

a. Translation of a passage

Students are given a passage to be translated. The goal of this method is to be able to read and translate literary masterpieces and classics (Administrator, 2009).³¹ In the latter application, the material can be to science and culture and even a number of sentences (Brown, 1994)³², or created by the teachers themselves.

The passage provides the focus for several classes: vocabulary and grammatical structures in the passage to be studied in subsequent lessons. The passage can be taken some works in the target language, or teacher can carefully have designed it to involve certain structure and vocabulary. As exception to the common vocabulary which can be represented with equivalence, idioms and the like should not be translated literally, but rather in a way that shows their understanding the meanings (Larsen-Freeman)³³.

b. Reading comprehension questions

Some questions are presented following the targeted passage in order to guarantee that the students can totally comprehend them. These questions made to make students reveal the necessary information within the passage. The questions are divided into several groups with different characteristics

²⁹ Abdullah, Sayeh. S, *A Contrastive Study of the Grammar Translation and the Direct Methods of Teaching*. A paper presented in 3rd International Conference on Business, Economics, Management and Behavioral Sciences (ICBEMBS'2012) January 26-27, 2012 Hong Kong (China), p. 125

³⁰ Op cit, p. 20-21

³¹ Administrator, *The Grammar Translation Method*. Retrieved from www.wikipedia.com on July 2012

³² Op cit, p. 53

³³ Op cit, p. 19

and comprehension levels and type. Larsen-Freeman (2000) groups the questions as: (1) questions that ask for information contained within the reading passage, (2) questions that requires students to make inferences based on their understanding of the passage, and (3) questions that requires students to relate the passage to their own experience.³⁴

c. Antonyms, synonyms and context analysis

Integrated with the reading activity, students are examined in their understanding about words meaning. Larsen-Freeman indicates three ways by which students are given task to identify meanings of words, they are: (1) students are given one set of words and are asked to find antonyms in the reading passage, (2) students could also be asked to find synonyms for a particular set of words, and (3) students might be asked to define a set of words based on their understanding of them as they occur in the reading passage.³⁵

d. Cognates

Students are challenged to identify words in their mother tongue which possess close phonological and morphological aspects with the unknown words that they found in the targeted language. Because it is possible that words are adopted or adapted from the target language by certain rules of adoption and adaptation, which make them possess corresponding characteristics. This technique is known as cognates, which help students identify meanings of words without consulting dictionary, in case that both languages share cognates.

e. Deductive application of rule

Grammar is taught deductively, from rules to applications. The formula of the grammar is presented first, and then followed with examples. After the explanation of the grammar form had been clear to the students, the teacher asks the students to make other examples.

f. Fill in the blanks

³⁴ Loc cit

³⁵ Loc cit

Teacher checks students' comprehension on the targeted grammar form by presenting questions with 'fill in the blank' to be filled with appropriate answer based on their understanding on the structure rules or new vocabulary. They fill in the blanks with new vocabulary items or with items of a particular grammar type, such as subject, verbs, preposition, conjunctions, and adverbials and so on. The exercise covers all relevant knowledge/ domains which represent mastery of the targeted grammar, includes the exceptions.

g. Memorization

The students are ordered to memorize grammar and vocabulary in the matters. Vocabulary materials are presented in the form of lists of target language words and their native language equivalents. Besides, grammar rules are given in the form of descriptive process of sentences' construction and words conjugations.

h. Use words in sentences

Besides equivalent list of words in native and target language, the other process to memorize vocabulary is by asking students to use words in many sentences. The use of the words must be logically appropriate, besides to enhance their memory and to assure that they understand the meaning of the words.

i. Composition

After a subject matter, had been learned, the students often ordered to make a composition related to the subject matter by using their own words. The teacher gives the students a topic to write about in the target language, based upon some aspect of the reading passage of the lesson. Sometimes, instead of creating a composition, students are asked to prepare a precise of the reading passage.

2) Learning procedures

A typical procedure of GTM presented by Larsen-Freeman (2000)³⁶ is explained as follows:

- i. The class reads written text in the target language, each student can read aloud few lines of the passage
- ii. Students translate the passage from the target language to their mother tongue from the few lines they have read, at this time the teacher help them with new vocabulary items
- iii. The teacher asked the students in their native language if they have any questions, students ask questions and the teacher answers the question in their native language
- iv. Students write out the answers to reading comprehension questions, if the answer is not correct, he may ask someone else to give correct answer. If however, the answer is still not correct, the teacher gives the correct answer from him/herself.
- v. The teacher presents new words that are introduced in the passage, and asks the students to translate them into their mother tongue.
- vi. Teacher gives grammar rules and gives examples
- vii. Based on their understanding of the rules and the examples, students are asked to apply them in other sentences by using the new words
- viii. The teacher asks the students to memorize the grammar rules and new vocabulary
- ix. Write a composition in the target language about a topic related to the reading passage
- x. Take a quiz on the grammar and vocabulary of the chapter.
- xi. Teacher asks students to translate a paragraph in their mother tongue into English.

³⁶ Op cit, p. 13-17

8. **Material development**

Based on the characteristics, principles and other features of GTM explained in the previous sections, typical materials in GTM should involve the following:

- Classic or teachers made passages which contains the targeted form
- Reading questions related to the passage
- List of new vocabulary involved in the subject matter
- Clear statement of the targeted grammar point
- Definition of the grammar point which covers its kinds and usage
- Descriptive presentation of the grammar rules
- Examples which covers complete aspect of the grammar domains
- Sentence translation exercise which includes complete aspect of the targeted grammar mastery
- Fill in blank exercise which represent complete aspects of the targeted grammar mastery

9. **Evaluation**

There are two aims of evaluation in GTM; ability to translate texts and to understand structure rules. Fulfilling these aims, the students are ordered to translate passage to their mother tongue and fill in the blank structure test. The evaluation includes the following:

- Translation exercise
- Reading comprehension
- Applying grammar in new sentences
- Fill in blank exercise for grammar and vocabulary mastery
- Composition

CONCLUSION

Grammar Translation Method is a language teaching method which was originated by the Church to translate the Holy Bible from Ancient Greek and Latin to other languages, dominated European and world language teaching from 1940s to 1940s, was challenged by other methods in 1960s, and is still used in the language teaching in many parts of the world for certain purposes. Theoretically described that

this method has no learning theory; views language as grammar and classic texts as high value texts; is purposed to help students comprehend text; develops reading comprehension through reading questions and translation; teaches grammar deductively and followed by fill in blank exercises; teaches vocabulary through synonym, antonym, cognates, context analysis and bilingual vocabulary; develops writing skill through translation and composition; and has no effort to teach oral communication.

Materials in this method should include clear statement of the targeted grammar, definition which includes its kinds and usage, list of new vocabulary involved in the subject matter, descriptive presentation of sentence formation, examples which covers complete aspect of the form's domains and their translation, fill in blank exercise which covers complete aspect of the form's mastery, sentence translation exercise which includes complete aspect of the form's mastery, classic or teacher's made passages which contains the targeted form, and reading questions related to the passage.

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