The Grammar–Translation Method: A Tale of the Unexpected

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Abstract

The history of English Language Teaching methodologies is a tale of ambition and accomplishment. Along this path, English language education worldwide has witnessed the implementation of the different methods and approaches that the literature of foreign language learning/teaching has developed and elaborated, moving from the most ancient classical method, the Grammar-Translation Method, to the most recent one, Communicative Language Teaching, or CLT for short. Yet, an exhaustive survey of the different methods and approaches would be well beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, the focus will be on one of the most controversial classical methods which has dominated foreign language education more than a century and a half, and despite the many criticisms has produced excellent results and high academic standards compared to CLT, with its imperialist dimension and would be 'one-size-fits-all' approach, which in the opinion of many long-experienced ELT teachers, 'failed to deliver the goods'. The method

in question is the Grammar–Translation method.

Key words: grammar, translation, use/usage

1. **Introduction**

The Grammar–Translation Method originated in Prussia in the mid–19th century; it was the offspring of the German scholastic philosophy, and was therefore first known in America as the Prussian method. It dominated the field of foreign language learning for more than a century. Earlier in the twentieth century this method was used for the purpose of helping students read and appreciate foreign language literature, and grow intellectually. It is still acknowledged as the most popular method and is still widely used in many parts of the world. In this very specific context, one can note day-to-day practice shows that traditional methods continue to prevail despite the progress achieved in methodology. It seems, therefore, that the methodological routine continues more than ever as it is subject to a superficial coating of new labels whose philosophies are only rarely internalized by teachers.

2. **Survival of Grammar–Translation Method**

Brown (1994) attempts to explain why the Grammar Translation Method is still 'alive and kicking' in many countries worldwide by stating three main reasons:

1. This method requires few specialized skills on the part of the learner.

2. Grammar rules and translation tests are easy to construct and can be objectively scored.

3. Many standardized tests of foreign languages still do not attempt to test communicative abilities, so students have little motivation to go beyond

grammar analogies, translations and other written exercises.

These reasons, among a few others, still perpetuate the use and consolidate, so to speak, the deep anchoring of the oldest classical teaching method in the field of foreign language learning despite the many criticisms that have been made explicitly to it. This confirms the adage that "old habits die hard", so do the classical methods, not least the Grammar Translation Method.

3. Focus on Grammar

As its name suggests, it leans heavily on the formal description of the target language and upon exercises of translation into and out of the native language. Needless to recall the term native language is used here to refer to the French language. It aims at inculcating the learner with a wide range of lexical items, mainly literary terms. The learner is supposed to memorise the grammatical rules and their exceptions, as well as paradigms and vocabulary list by heart, As Brown (1994) posits, focus on grammar, memorization of vocabulary and of various declensions and conjugations, translation of texts are at the core this method.

In the Western tradition learning foreign languages, or what used to be called then, les langues vivantes was equated with learning Latin and to a much lesser extent Greek. Paradoxically, these classical languages, from a sociolinguistic standpoint labelled 'dead languages' based on the fact that they lack a living community used them as L1 for their everyday communicative purposes, were thought to develop logical thinking, to promote intellectuality and to lead "to the 'mental dexterity' considered so

important in any higher education study stream" (Orrieux, 1989, p. 79). This classical method, however, is not without its critics. The criticisms come mainly from two directions. First of all, the systematic and formal description of the target language does not enable the learner to use the language appropriately in communicative situations, but rather to learn and accumulate a passive knowledge of the language. As it has been clearly stated, "Knowledge about language may be beneficial in its own right as providing an intellectual exercise; this does not necessarily determines its place, or even determine that it has a place in a language course" (Halliday, 1964, p. 255).

Thus learning a language is not just a matter of acquiring a set of rules and building a lexicon. It is how well the learner can use the language, and not how much he knows about it that matters most in the context of foreign language learning. In this respect, Alexander (1967) draws an analogy between a language learner and a pianist, he notes and concludes that:

> Learning a language has much in common with learning a musical instrument. A student who has learnt a lot of grammar but who cannot use a language is in the position of a pianist who has learnt a lot about harmony but cannot play the piano. The student's command of a language will therefore be judged not by how much he knows but how well he can perform in public (p.vii).

This is another way of saying that we learn to do things by doing

them, and this applies no less to language learning than to playing the piano. Overall, informed teachers should be aware of the fundamental and seminal distinction between language *use* and language *usage*. Widdowson (1978) defines *use* as being the manifestation of our knowledge of the language system to achieve some kind of communicative purposes; and *usage* as the manifestation of our knowledge of the language system.

4. Importance of Grammar

Although it is generally agreed that grammar has its due value in the process of language learning, the place of grammar in the language teaching process has always been controversial. Some language teachers take this idea further so to posit that it is a truism to assert that grammar represents the skeleton of a language, to use Crystal's (1997) metaphor. In clearer words, this means that grammar is part and parcel of the teaching process. A sound knowledge of grammar represents an asset of paramount importance to the learner, and it therefore deserves its fair share of attention in the language classroom. In lines with such view, Cunningsworth contends that "Few, if any, writers on language learning would disagree that the internalisation of grammar rules is central to language learning and that any teaching programme which omits grammar is not really teaching language in the full sense of the word". (Cunningsworth, 1987, p. 18). As for Rivers, another authority on foreign language teaching, she argues that grammar represents "the framework within which language operates" (Rivers 1991: 3). Drawing an analogy between the grammar of a language and a 'boneless chicken', ironically she responds to an interviewer's

question on the importance of grammar in the language learning process, as well as to those who de-emphasize it by '…saying that we don't need to teach grammar … is like saying that you can have a chicken walking around without bones'. (Rivers quoted in Benmoussat 2003, p. 16).

Yet, it is widely recognized that an over–emphasis on grammar rules renders language learning routinized and boring, and this can have a detrimental effect on the process of learning. Put differently, the use of isolated, out–of–context sentences can negatively impact the learning process as it reflects a de–contextualized use of language. However, it suffices to say that teachers are well–informed to account for the specificities of the teaching situation, and well–aware to know what their learners needs are, what their interests and worries are, what should be done

to get around the failures, and ultimately to contribute to a better change and to fruitful innovation in language teaching. This is the rationale of one's acting as agents of change.

5. **Focus on Translation**

It is commonly agreed that translation is a well-established discipline in its own right, and as such it should be taught separately as it presupposes a through linguistic knowledge of both the source and target languages. As Halliday (1964) posits:

> Translation is, in fact, an extremely complicated and difficult task. It is far from being the simple, obvious exercise it is sometimes described to be. In its usual form it is more appropriate to the advanced stages of a university special course, when the

literary and historical styles are being studied, than to the early stages of acquiring practical skills in a foreign language (p. 268).

Experience has shown that, when translation becomes a means of teaching, it may cause confusion and may lead to a word–for–word exchange which can do great harm to the language learning process. This has led proponents of the communicative language teaching/testing to convincingly assert that the use of the mother tongue is counter–productive and the use of translation in the language classroom can do more harm than good to the learning process (Carreres, 2005).

However, some leading applied linguists, such as Stern and Cunningham, do not totally play down the role of translation in a language course in teaching and testing. Stern (1992) note that a contrastive analysis between L1 and the target language is indeed very important for the language learner. Therefore translation in one form or another can play a certain part in language learning. Likewise, Cunningham (2000) recognizes that while there may indeed be some negative effects from using translation, there is a place in the learning environment for translation. Therefore translation can contribute to the student's acquisition of the target language at all levels.

6. **Translation**: **A Curse or a Blessing**

To launch into a debate about using or not using the mother tongue in an EFL teaching/testing environment is far beyond the scope of the present research work. Admittedly, the issue is problematic and has always had a divisive effect among teachers. It

seems there is a never-ending debate about its use. For a decade or so, since the advent of the direct method in the late 1960s till the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching in the late 1970s, translation, as an aid to teaching and learning, was banned from language classrooms. Ironically, it became an outlaw in the field of language teaching, not least EFL. Nonetheless, since then, positive attitudes towards translation and the use of the mother tongue have started to develop and discussions and arguments have emerged arguing that translation is a legitimate pedagogical tool and it deserves to be rehabilitated (Widdowson 1978; Harmer 2001; Ellis 1992; Ur 1996). At its best, most authors agree that translation is most useful as a quick and easy way to present the meaning of words and contextualized items, and when it is necessary to draw attention to certain differences that would otherwise go unnoticed.

In so far, then, we have seen that translation can be viewed as a 'curse' doing much harm than good to the learning process or a 'blessing in disguise' if exploited rationally, judiciously and optimally. Yet, a discussion of translation pedagogy would lead us to mention a seminal distinction between pedagogical translation and real translation. According to her, the types of translation differ at the levels of the function, the object and the addressee of the translation. As regards function, pedagogical translation, through translation activities, can serve as a device to improve the learner's language proficiency. It has a three-fold aim: it gives the learner and the teacher the opportunity to practise, consolidate and test the language knowledge respectively. While in real translation, the

translation activities do not serve as a tool but are the goal *proper* of the translation process. The object of real translation is to convey a message of some sort, i.e. information about reality, contained in the source language, whereas in pedagogical translation it is the message, i.e. information about the learner's level of language proficiency. As for the addressee, in real translation it is a target language audience, i.e. a reader in search of information about reality, while in pedagogical translation, the addressee is the teacher or the examiner. In sum then, we can speak about real translation only if the aim of translation is to develop translation skills, conversely, we can speak about pedagogical translation only if the goals of translation activities are devised to develop learner's language proficiency.

7. School Translation Vs. Professional Translation

In the same line of thought, Gile introduced the dichotomy of school translation and professional translation. He defines school translation as the writing of texts "following lexical and syntactic choices induced by the source-language text" (Gile, 1995, p. 22), as opposed to professional translation, in which the content of the text is the reader's goal. Put simply, in school translation, the focus is language–oriented, while in professional translation, the focus is content–oriented. Schäffer (1998) suggests that a distinction be made between translation for foreign language purposes, that is, "reproducing the message of the ST [source text] while paying attention to different linguistic structures", and translation for professional purposes which denotes "text reproduction for specific purposes" Schäffer (1998,

pp. 131-2). Closely related to the difference between the two types of translation, it is worth noting Dollerup's distinction. In "foreign-language acquisition, [sic] many texts tend to be isolated fragments, because they are used to check student mastery of specific features (vocabulary, syntax, etc.), whereas texts in translation classes are coherent, run-on texts" (Dollerup, 2005, p. 81).

To link theory to in-class practice, it is worth mentioning Richard and Hall's series of ELT textbooks, the French mandated textbooks that were actually used in many France's former colonies during the 1960s and are still used in many parts of the world. They are, *par execellence*, illustrative examples of ELT textbooks that draw on the principles of the Grammar-Translation Method. The series in question consists of the following textbooks: *Anglais Seconde Langue, Classe de Quatrième*, (1960), *Anglais Seconde Langue, Classe de Troisième* (1961), *L'Anglais par la Littérature, Classe de Seconde* (1962), *L'Anglais par la Littérature, Classe de Première* (1963) and *La Vie en Amérique : 1ère ou Classes Terminales* (1963). Needless to recall, despite what negatively has been said about this classical method, it proved very efficient at different levels of language usage, and stood the test of time.

8. Conclusion

It is commonly agreed that the subsequent set of methods and approaches came as a direct reaction against the inherent shortcomings of the Grammar-Translation Method. They were introduced to actually remedy the teaching situation at two fundamental levels: substitution of explicit formal grammar teaching by language contact, and

translation activities by language use. English language teaching methodologies has been elaborated and developed mainly in the English-speaking countries of the 'West' and is not a 'one size fits all', in other words, it does not fit the needs of the rest of the world. The notion of appropriate methodology has led to the emergence of the concept of 'post-method era'. This pedagogic trend has in part freed ELT professionals, not least teachers, from many of the constraints of the concept of method and led to new practices conducive to new options responsive to the requirements of a more globalized world. To wind up, it is truism, to assert that in the Algerian context, the Communicative Language Teaching is now combined to the Competency Based Approach, the method which puts the learner in a problem solving situation and enhances him to learn the basic elements of the systemic form of the target language. This adopted combination, being made possible by the designation of new textbooks, grows to be efficient and successful to some extent when being compared to the former one which turned to be negative while prevailing for many years in Algerian the educational system.

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