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The Grammar-Translation Method

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Introduction

The Grammar-Translation Method is not new. It has had different names, but it has been used by language teachers for many years. At one time it was called the Classical Method since it was first used in the teaching of the classical languages, Latin and Greek. Earlier in the 20th century, this method was used for the purpose of helping students to read and appreciate foreign language literature. It was also hoped that through the study of the grammar of the target language¹ 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. Finally, it was thought that foreign language learning would help students grow intellectually; it was recognized that students would probably never use the target language, but the mental exercise of learning it would be beneficial anyway. Let us try to understand the Grammar-Translation Method by observing a class where the teacher is using it. The class is a high-intermediate level English class at a university in Colombia. There are 42 students in the class. Two-hour classes are conducted three times a week.

Principles

1 The class is reading an excerpt from Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*. A fundamental purpose of learning a language is to be able to read literature written in it. Literary language is superior to spoken language. Students' study of the target culture is limited to its literature and fine arts. 2 Students translate the passage from English into Spanish. An important goal is for students to be able to translate each language into the other. If students can translate from one language into another, they are considered successful language learners. 3 The teacher asks students in their native language if they have any questions. A student

asks one and is answered in her native language. The ability to communicate in the target language is not a goal of language instruction.

- 4 Students write out the answers to reading comprehension questions. The primary skills to be developed are reading and writing. Little attention is given to speaking and listening, and almost none to pronunciation.
- 5 The teacher decides whether an answer is correct or not. If the answer is incorrect, the teacher selects a different student to supply the correct answer or the teacher herself gives the right answer. The teacher is the authority in the classroom. It is very important that students get the correct answer.
- 6 Students translate new words from English into Spanish. It is possible to find native language equivalents for all target language words.
- 7 Students learn that English ‘-ty’ corresponds to -dad and -tad in Spanish. Learning is facilitated through attention to similarities between the target language and the native language.
- 8 Students are given a grammar rule for the use of a direct object with two word verbs. It is important for students to learn about the grammar or form of the target language.
- 9 Students apply a rule to examples they are given. Deductive application of an explicit grammar rule is a useful pedagogical technique.
- 10 Students memorize vocabulary. Language learning provides good mental exercise.
- 11 The teacher asks students to state the grammar rule. Students should be conscious of the grammatical rules of the target language.
- 12 Students memorize present tense, past tense, and past participle forms of one set of irregular verbs. Wherever possible, verb conjugations and other grammatical paradigms should be committed to memory.

There were other activities planned for the remainder of the week, but in this book we will follow the practice of not listing an observation unless it leads to our discovering a different principle of the method.

Reviewing the Principles The principles of the Grammar-Translation Method are organized below by answering the 10 questions posed in Chapter 1. Not all the questions are addressed by the Grammar-Translation Method; we

will list all the questions, however, so that a comparison among the methods we study will be easier for you to make.

1 What are the goals of teachers who use the Grammar-Translation Method?

According to the teachers who use the Grammar-Translation Method, a fundamental purpose of learning a language is to be able to read literature written in the target language. To do this, students need to learn about the grammar rules and vocabulary of the target language. In addition, it is believed that studying another language provides students with good mental exercise, which helps develop their minds.

2 What is the role of the teacher? What is the role of the students? The roles are very traditional. The teacher is the authority in the classroom. The students do as she says so they can learn what she knows.

3 What are some characteristics of the teaching/learning process? Students are taught to translate from one language into another. Often what they translate are readings in the target language about some aspect of the culture of the target language community. Students study grammar deductively; that is, they are given the grammar rules and examples, are told to memorize them, and then are asked to apply the rules to other examples. They also learn grammatical paradigms such as verb conjugations. They memorize native language equivalents for target language vocabulary words.

4 What is the nature of student–teacher interaction?

What is the nature of student–student interaction? Most of the interaction in the classroom is from the teacher to the students. There is little student initiation and little student–student interaction.

5 How are the feelings of the students dealt with?

There are no principles of the method which relate to this area.

6 How is the language viewed?

How is culture viewed? Literary language is considered superior to spoken language and is therefore the language the students study. Culture is viewed as consisting of literature and the fine arts.

7 What areas of language are emphasized?

What language skills are emphasized? Vocabulary and grammar are emphasized. Reading and writing are the primary skills that the students work on. There is much less attention given to speaking and listening. Pronunciation receives little, if any, attention.

8 What is the role of the students' native language?

The meaning of the target language is made clear by translating it into the students' native language. The language that is used in class is mostly the students' native language.

9 How is evaluation accomplished?

Written tests in which students are asked to translate from their native language into the target language or vice versa are often used. Questions about the target culture or questions that ask students to apply grammar rules are also common.

10 How does the teacher respond to student errors?

Having the students get the correct answer is considered very important. If students make errors or do not know an answer, the teacher supplies them with the correct answer.

Reviewing the Techniques Ask

yourself if any of the answers to the above questions make sense to you. If so, you may choose to try some of the techniques of the Grammar-Translation Method from the review that follows. On the other hand, you may find that you agree very little with the answers to these questions, but that there are still some techniques from the Grammar-Translation Method that you can usefully adapt. Below is an expanded description of some of these techniques.

- **Translation of a Literary Passage** Students translate a reading passage from the target language into their native language. The reading passage then provides the focus for several classes: vocabulary and grammatical structures in the passage are studied in subsequent lessons. The passage may be excerpted from some work from the target language literature, or a teacher may write a passage carefully designed to include particular grammar rules and vocabulary. The translation may be written or spoken or both. Students should not translate idioms and the like literally, but rather in a way that shows that they understand their meaning.
- **Reading Comprehension Questions** Students answer questions in the target language based on their understanding of the reading passage. Often the questions are sequenced so that the first group of questions asks for information contained within the reading passage. In order to answer the second group of questions, students will have to make inferences based on their understanding of the passage. This means they will have to answer questions about the passage even though the answers are not contained in the passage itself. The third group of questions requires students to relate the passage to their own experience.
- **Antonyms/Synonyms** Students are given one set of words and are asked to find antonyms in the reading passage. A similar exercise could be done by asking students to find synonyms for a particular set of words. Or students might be asked to define a set of words based on their understanding of them as they occur in the reading passage. Other exercises that ask students to work with the vocabulary of the passage are also possible.