

# ***The Grammar - Translation Method***

***By :***

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## ***. Introduction***

As the names of some of its leading exponents suggest (***Johann Seidenstucker, Karl Plotz, H. S. Ollendorf, and Johann Meidinger***), Grammar translation was the offspring of German scholarship<sup>2</sup>, the object of which according to one of its less charitable critics, was "to know everything about something rather than the thing itself" (W. H. D. House, quoted In Kelly 1969: 53).

Grammar Translation was in fact first known in the United States as the Prussian Method. (***A book by B. Sears, an American classics teacher, published in 1845 was entitled The Ciceronian or the Prussian Method of Teaching the Elements of the Latin Language [Kelly 1969].***)

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 Classical Method since it was first used in the teaching of the classical languages, Latin and Greek. Earlier in 20th century, this method was used for the purpose of ***helping students read and appreciate foreign language literature***. It was also 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.

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.

Grammar Translation 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. At its best, as Howatt (1984) points out, it was not necessarily

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<sup>1</sup> Dianne Larsen –Freeman, Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching, Oxford University Press, 1986, p.4 -17

<sup>2</sup> J. C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers, Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 3-5

the horror that its critics depicted it as. Its worst excesses were introduced by those who wanted to demonstrate that the study of French or German was no less rigorous than the study of classical languages. ***This resulted in the type of Grammar-Translation courses remembered with distaste by thousands of school learners, for whom foreign language learning meant a tedious experience of memorizing endless lists of unusable grammar rules and vocabulary and attempting to produce perfect translations of stilted or literary prose.*** Although the Grammar-Translation Method often creates frustration for students, it makes few demands on teachers. It is still used in situations where understanding literary texts is the primary focus of foreign language study and there is little need for a speaking knowledge of the language. Contemporary texts for the teaching of foreign languages at college level often reflect Grammar-Translation principles. These texts are frequently the products of people trained in literature rather than in language teaching or applied linguistics. ***Consequently, though it may be true to say that the Grammar-Translation Method is still widely practiced, it has no advocates. It is a method for which there is no theory. 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 theory [2, p. 3].***

In the mid and late of 19<sup>th</sup> century opposition to the Grammar-Translation Method gradually developed in several European countries. This reform movement laid the foundations for the development of new ways of teaching languages and raised controversies that have continued to the present day.

### ***Initial Principles of Grammar-Translation Method***

This has been just a brief introduction to the Grammar-Translation Method, but it is probably true that this method is not new to many of you. You may have studied a language in this way, or you may be teaching with this method right now. Whether this is true or not, let's have some observations about the Grammar-Translation Method, identifying principle characteristics of that method.

- ***A fundamental purpose*** of learning a foreign language is to be able to ***read its literature***. Literary language is superior to spoken language. Students' study of the foreign culture is limited to its literature and fine arts.
- ***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.

- ***The ability to communicate*** in the target language is ***not a goal*** of foreign language instruction.
- 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 very important that students get the correct answer.
- It is possible to find ***native language equivalents*** for all target language 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 an explicit grammar rule is a useful pedagogical technique.
- ***Language learning*** provides good mental exercise.
- Students should be conscious of ***the grammatical rules*** of the target language.
- Wherever possible, verb conjugations and other grammatical paradigms should be ***committed to memory***.

### ***Reviewing the Principles***

The principles of the Grammar-Translation Method are organized below by answering the ten questions. 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 will be easier 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 foreign 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 a foreign 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 he says so they can learn what he knows.

#### ***3. What are some characteristics of the teaching/learning process?***

Students are taught to translate from one language to another. Often what they translate are readings in the target language about some aspect of the culture of the

foreign 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 foreign 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 language viewed? How is culture viewed?***

Literary language is considered superior to spoken language and is therefore the language 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 to the target language or vice versa are often used. Questions about the foreign 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 don't know an answer, the teacher supplies them with the correct answer.

***Some Considerations about the Initial Techniques of  
Grammar-Translation Method***

There are some useful techniques associated with the Grammar-Translation Method. 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 (Allen 1983).

- **Cognates**

Students are taught to recognize cognates by learning the spelling or sound patterns that correspond between the languages. Students are also asked to memorize words that look like cognates but have meanings in the target language that are different from those in the native language. This technique, of course, would only be useful in languages that share cognates.

- **Deductive Application of Rule**

Grammar rules are presented with examples. Exceptions to each rule are also noted. Once students understand a rule, they are asked to apply it to some different examples.

- **Fill-in-the-blanks**

Students are given a series of sentences with words missing. They fill in the blanks with new vocabulary items or with items of a particular grammar type, such as prepositions or verbs with different tenses.

- **Memorization**

Students are given lists of target language vocabulary words and their native language equivalents and are asked to memorize them. Students are also required to memorize grammatical rules and grammatical paradigms such as verb conjugations.

- **Use Words in Sentences**

In order to show that students understand the meaning and use of a new vocabulary item, they make up sentences in which they use the new words.

- **Composition**

The teacher gives the students a topic to write about in the target language. The topic is based upon some aspect of the reading passage of the lesson. Sometimes, instead of creating a composition, students are asked to prepare a precis of the reading passage.

**p.s.**

It does virtually nothing to enhance a student's communicative ability in the language.

On the other hand, one can understand why Grammar Translation is so popular. It requires few specialized skills on the part of teachers. Tests of grammar rules and of translations are easy to construct and can be objectively scored. Many standardized tests of foreign languages still do not attempt to tap into communicative abilities, so students have little motivation to go beyond grammar analogies, translations, and rote exercises. And it is sometimes successful in leading a student toward a **reading** knowledge of a second language.

