

# The Grammar-Translation Method

## 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 language<sup>1</sup> 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.

## Experience

As we enter the classroom, the class is in the middle of reading a passage in their textbook. The passage is an excerpt entitled 'The Boys' Ambition' from Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*. Each student is called on to read a few

<sup>1</sup> The term *target language* is used to refer to either a second or a foreign language that is being taught. Since many students are plurilingual or multilingual already, the term 'second language' does not make sense, nor does the term 'foreign language' because often the study of language is taking place within a locale where it is spoken, not in some 'foreign' country. The term 'target language,' therefore, though not without problems, seems an acceptable compromise.

lines from the passage. After he has finished reading, he is asked to translate the few lines he has just read into Spanish. The teacher helps him with new vocabulary items. When the students have finished reading and translating the passage, the teacher asks them in Spanish if they have any questions. One girl raises her hand and says, 'What is paddle wheel?' The teacher replies, '*Es una rueda de paletas.*' Then she continues in Spanish to explain how it looked and worked on the steamboats which moved up and down the Mississippi River during Mark Twain's childhood. Another student says, 'No understand "gorgeous".' The teacher translates, '*primoroso.*'

Since the students have no more questions, the teacher asks them to write the answers to the comprehension questions which appear at the end of the excerpt. The questions are in English, and the students are instructed to write the answers to them in English as well. They do the first one together as an example. A student reads out loud, 'When did Mark Twain live?' Another student replies, 'Mark Twain lived from 1835 to 1910.' '*Bueno,*' says the teacher, and the students begin working quietly by themselves.

In addition to questions that ask for information contained within the reading passage, the students answer two other types of questions. For the first type, they have to make inferences based on their understanding of the passage. For example, one question is: 'Do you think the boy was ambitious? Why or why not?' The other type of question requires the students to relate the passage to their own experience. For example, one of the questions based on this excerpt asks them, 'Have you ever thought about running away from home?'

After one-half hour, the teacher, speaking in Spanish, asks the students to stop and check their work. One by one, each student reads a question and then reads his or her response. If the answer is correct, the teacher calls on another student to read the next question. If the student is incorrect, the teacher selects a different student to supply the correct answer, or the teacher herself gives the right answer.

Announcing the next activity, the teacher asks the students to turn over the page in their text. There is a list of words there. The introduction to the exercise tells the students that these are words taken from the passage they have just read. The students see the words 'ambition,' 'career,' 'wharf,' 'tranquil,' 'gorgeous,' 'loathe,' 'envy,' and 'humbly.' They are told that some of these are review words and that others are new to them. The students are instructed to give the Spanish word for each of them. This exercise the class does together. If no one knows the Spanish equivalent, the teacher gives it. In Part 2 of this exercise, the students are given English words like 'love,' 'noisy,' 'ugly,' and 'proudly,' and are directed to find the opposites of these words in the passage.

**Exercise 2A**

These words are taken from the passage you have just read. Some of them are review words and others are new. Give the Spanish translation for each of them. You may refer back to the reading passage.

ambition	gorgeous
career	loathe
wharf	envy
tranquil	humbly

**Exercise 2B**

These words all have **antonyms** in the reading passage. Find the antonym for each:

love	ugly
noisy	proudly

**Figure 2.1** An example of a Grammar-Translation exercise

When they have finished this exercise, the teacher reminds them that English words that look like Spanish words are called **cognates**. The English ‘-ty,’ she says, for example, often corresponds to the Spanish endings *-dad* and *-tud*. She calls the students’ attention to the word ‘possibility’ in the passage and tells them that this word is the same as the Spanish *posibilidad*. The teacher asks the students to find other examples in the excerpt. Hands go up; a boy answers, ‘Obscurity.’ ‘*Bien*,’ says the teacher. When all of these cognates from the passage have been identified, the students are told to turn to the next exercise in the chapter and to answer the question, ‘What do these cognates mean?’ There is a long list of English words (‘curiosity,’ ‘opportunity,’ ‘liberty,’ etc.), which the students translate into Spanish.

The next section of the chapter deals with grammar. The students follow in their books as the teacher reads a description of two-word (phrasal) verbs. This is a review for them as they have encountered phrasal verbs before. Nevertheless, there are some new two-word verbs in the passage the students haven’t learned yet. These are listed following the description, and the students are asked to translate them into Spanish. Then they are given the rule for use of a direct object with two-word verbs:

If the two-word verb is separable, the direct object may come between the verb and its particle. However, separation is necessary when the direct object is a pronoun. If the verb is inseparable, then there is no separation of the verb and particle by the object. For example:

John put away his book.

*or*

John put his book away/John put it away.

*but not*

\*John put away it.

(because 'put away' is a separable two-word verb)

The teacher went over the homework.

*but not*

\*The teacher went the homework over.

(because 'go over' is an inseparable two-word verb).

After reading over the rule and the examples, the students are asked to tell which of the following two-word verbs, taken from the passage, are separable and which inseparable. They refer to the passage for clues. If they cannot tell from the passage, they use their dictionaries or ask their teacher.

turn up	wake up	get on	take in
run away	fade out	lay up	
go away	break down	turn back	

Finally, they are asked to put one of these phrasal verbs in the blank of each of the 10 sentences they are given. They do the first two together.

- 1 Mark Twain decided to \_\_\_\_\_ because his parents wouldn't let him get a job on the river.
- 2 The steamboatmen \_\_\_\_\_ and discharge freight at each port on the Mississippi River.

When the students are finished with this exercise, they read their answers aloud.

At the end of the chapter there is a list of vocabulary items that appeared in the passage. The list is divided into two parts: the first contains words, and the second, idioms like 'to give someone the cold shoulder.' Next to each is a Spanish word or phrase. For homework, the teacher asks the students to memorize the Spanish translation for the first 20 words and to write a sentence in English using each word.

In the two remaining lessons of the week, the students will be asked to:

- 1 Write out the translation of the reading passage in Spanish.
- 2 State the rule for the use of a direct object with two-word verbs, and apply it to other phrasal verbs.
- 3 Do the remaining exercises in the chapter that include practice with one set of irregular past participle forms. The students will be asked to

memorize the present tense, past tense, and past participle forms of this irregular paradigm:

drink	drank	drunk
sing	sang	sung
swim	swam	swum
ring	rang	rung
begin	began	begun

- 4 Write a composition in the target language about an ambition they have.
- 5 Memorize the remaining vocabulary items and write sentences for each.
- 6 Take a quiz on the grammar and vocabulary of this chapter. They will be asked to translate a Spanish paragraph about steamboats into English.

## Thinking about the Experience

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 us see what we have learned about the Grammar-Translation Method. We are able to make a number of observations about the class we attended. Our observations will be listed in the left column; from them we will try to identify the principles of the Grammar-Translation Method. The principles will be listed in the right column. We will make our observations in order, following the lesson plan of the class we observed.

Observations	Principles
1 The class is reading an excerpt from Mark Twain's <i>Life on the Mississippi</i> .	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 <i>-dad</i> and <i>-tad</i> 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.	<b>Deductive</b> 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.

- **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 Rules**

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 Exercise**

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 précis of the reading passage.

## Conclusion

You have now had an opportunity to examine the principles and some of the techniques of the Grammar-Translation Method. Try to make a connection between what you have understood and your own teaching situation and beliefs.

Do you believe that a fundamental reason for learning another language is to be able to read the literature written in the target language? Do you think it is important to learn about the target language? Should culture be viewed as consisting of literature and the fine arts? Do you agree with any of the other principles underlying the Grammar-Translation Method? Which ones?

Is translation a valuable exercise? Is answering reading comprehension questions of the type described here helpful? Should grammar be presented deductively? Are these or any of the other techniques of the Grammar-Translation Method ones which will be useful to you in your own teaching? Which ones?

## Activities

### **A** Check your understanding of the Grammar-Translation Method.

- 1 It has been said that the Grammar-Translation Method teaches students about the target language, but not how to use it. Explain the difference in your own words.
- 2 What are the clues that this method had its origin in the teaching of the classical languages, Latin and Greek?

### **B** Apply what you have understood about the Grammar-Translation Method.

- 1 Think of a particular group of students you have recently taught or are currently teaching. Choose a reading passage from a literary work or a textbook or write one yourself. Make sure it is at a level your students can understand, yet not at a level that would be too simple for them. Try translating it yourself as a test of its difficulty. Identify the vocabulary you would choose to work on. Plan vocabulary exercises you would use to help your students associate the new words with their native language equivalents.
- 2 Pick a grammatical point or two contained in the same passage. Provide the explicit grammar rule that relates to each one and give some examples. Design exercises that require your students to apply the rule to some different examples.

## References/Additional Resources

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