

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 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. 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 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. 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. 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 steamboat men ____ 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 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 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.

The Direct Method Introduction

As with the Grammar-Translation Method, the Direct Method is not new. Its principles have been applied by language teachers for many years. Most recently, it was revived as a method when the goal of instruction became learning how to use another language to communicate. Since the Grammar-Translation Method was not very effective in preparing students to use the target language communicatively, the Direct Method became popular. The Direct Method has one very basic rule: No translation is allowed. In fact, the Direct Method receives its name from the fact that meaning is to be conveyed directly in the target language through the use of demonstration and visual aids, with no recourse to the students' native language. We will now try to come to an understanding of the Direct Method by observing an English teacher using it in a scuola media (lower-level secondary school) class in Italy. The class has 30 students who attend English class for one hour, three times a week. The class we observe is at the end of its first year of English language instruction in a scuola media. Experience The teacher is calling the class to order as we find seats toward the back of the room. He has placed a big map of the USA in the front of the classroom. He asks the students to open their books to a certain page number. The lesson is entitled 'Looking at a Map.' As the students are called on one by one, they read a sentence from the reading passage at the beginning of the lesson. The teacher points to the part of the map the sentence describes after each has read a sentence. The passage begins: We are looking at a map of the United States of America. Canada is the country to the north of the United States, and Mexico is the country to the south of the United States. Between Canada and the United States are the Great Lakes. Between Mexico and the United States is the Rio Grande River. On the East Coast is the Atlantic Ocean, and on the West Coast is the Pacific Ocean. In the east is a mountain range called the Appalachian Mountains. In the west are the Rocky Mountains. After the students finish reading the passage, they are asked if they have any questions. A student asks what a mountain range is. The teacher turns to the

whiteboard and draws a series of inverted cones to illustrate a mountain range. The student nods and says, 'I understand.' Another student asks what 'between' means. The teacher replies, 'You are sitting between Maria Pia and Giovanni. Paolo is sitting between Gabriella and Cettina. Now do you understand the meaning of "between"?' The student answers, 'Yes, I understand.'

Reviewing the Techniques Are there answers to the 10 questions with which you agreed? Then the following techniques may also be useful. Of course, even if you did not agree with all the answers, there may be some techniques of the Direct Method you can adapt to your own approach to teaching. The following expanded review of techniques provides you with some details, which will help you do this.

- **Reading Aloud** Students take turns reading sections of a passage, play, or dialogue out loud. At the end of each student's turn, the teacher uses gestures, pictures, realia, examples, or other means to make the meaning of the section clear.

- **Question and Answer Exercise** This exercise is conducted only in the target language. Students are asked questions and answer in full sentences so that they practice new words and grammatical structures. They have the opportunity to ask questions as well as answer them.

- **Getting Students to Self-correct** The teacher of this class has the students self-correct by asking them to make a choice between what they said and an alternative answer he supplied. There are, however, other ways of getting students to self-correct. For example, a teacher might simply repeat what a

student has just said, using a questioning voice to signal to the student that something was wrong with it. Another possibility is for the teacher to repeat what the student said, stopping just before the error. The student then knows that the next word was wrong.

- **Conversation Practice** The teacher asks students a number of questions in the target language, which they have to understand to be able to answer correctly. In the class we observed, the teacher asked individual students questions about themselves. The questions contained a particular grammar structure. Later, the students were able to ask each other their own questions using the same grammatical structure.

- **Fill-in-the-blanks Exercise** This technique has already been discussed in the Grammar-Translation Method, but differs in its application in the Direct Method. All the items are in the target language; furthermore, no explicit grammar rule would be applied. The students would have induced the grammar rule they need to fill in the blanks from examples and practice with earlier parts of the lesson.

- **Dictation** The teacher reads the passage three times. The first time the teacher reads it at a normal speed, while the students just listen. The second time he reads the passage phrase by phrase, pausing long enough to allow students to write down what they have heard. The last time the teacher again reads at a normal speed, and students check their work.

- **Map Drawing** The class included one example of a technique used to give students listening comprehension practice. The students were given a map with the geographical features unnamed. Then the teacher gave the students directions such as the following, 'Find the mountain range in the West. Write the words "Rocky Mountains" across the mountain range.' He gave instructions for all the geographical features of the United States so that students would have a completely labeled map if they followed his instructions correctly. The students then instructed the teacher to do the

same thing with a map he had drawn on the board. Each student could have a turn giving the teacher instructions for finding and labeling one geographical feature.

- **Paragraph Writing** The teacher in this class asked the students to write a paragraph in their own words on the major geographical features of the United States. They could have done this from memory, or they could have used the reading passage in the lesson as a model.