

Analysis of the Features of the Grammar-Translation Method—Based on the Teaching Background in China

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Abstract: In modern times, many people think the Grammar-Translation Method has been completely out of date, but the fact is that many teachers in elementary and secondary schools in China are still using this method and some of them can achieve good results. Thus, although there are some disadvantages of this method, the Grammar-Translation Method must have some features that are still practical and beneficial. This article will give an analysis of the beneficial features and negative features of this method mainly based on the present background of language teaching in China, and explore some other ways to improve GTM as well.

Keywords: Grammar-Translation Method; Foreign language teaching methodology; Exam-oriented education

1. Introduction

It is known that the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) was first used in the teaching of the classical languages, Latin and Greek. GTM is a traditional teaching method, which focuses on the second language (L2) grammar and the medium of this instruction is using first language (L1). This teaching method is not new and many Chinese students have experienced it a lot. In order to explore the features of GTM and make use of its advantages better, let's analyze the beneficial features and negative features of GTM in some specific cases.

2. The Grammar-Translation Method's Beneficial Features

2.1 High efficiency

Although earlier in this century, GTM was used with the purpose of helping students read and appreciate foreign language literature, it is found quite efficient to learn a new foreign language in a short period of time by many language learners.

In China, many English majors in universities are supposed to learn a second foreign language, usually French or Japanese. They usually just have one or two classes each week but in only two years they need to be able to read some short passages and understand most dialogues in French or Japanese. The fact is that most of the students still choose the Grammar-Translation Method. Some of them even try to find some materials to translate or copy and recite the grammar summarized by others. Although they are language majors and they have all complained about GTM when they were in elementary and secondary schools, but they invariably choose this method again when they need to learn the second foreign language. For them, the summarized syntax rules are really useful actually.

In the regular teaching process of GTM, students are given a grammar rule and asked to apply the rule to the examples on their sheets and practice it again and again. Through practicing, students can master the use of the vocabulary and syntax in a short period of time and it's not easy for them to forget what they have learned as soon as they put down the textbook. When high efficiency is pursued in learning a foreign language, GTM can be a good choice.

2.2 Emphasis on deductive application of grammar rules

As for grammar teaching, GTM emphasizes on deductive application of grammar rules a lot, which is consistent with the learning mode of Chinese students.

Chinese education has been exam-oriented for a long time. Although the experts in language teaching and learning are always emphasizing the importance of creativity and some teachers are indeed trying to change their notions, the truth is that the exams are still playing an important role in Chinese education. Besides, it is known that students and teachers in China are really good at

summarizing the rules of the things they have taught or learned. They prefer to use mind maps and tabulation to organize everything well and make a list of the steps to solve every problem. This is the mindset of Chinese students and many teachers are guiding their students to do like this as well.

For example, in traditional class using GTM, when a teacher want to teach the students how to analyze a syntax and understand a long sentence with so many clauses, he or she will try to make a list showing the universal steps: first get rid of the complement to avoid being destructed, next find the subject in the main clause, then find the object after the predicate...When the teacher is making the list, the students are also working hard to copy the steps wrote on the blackboard. After that, the students are asked to apply this rule to the next exercises and in the following exams.

There is doubt that this pattern of learning and teaching is too rigid and may keep the creativity of students within limits. But actually, the root cause is the teaching and learning style formed by the exam-oriented education system in China, which has existed for such a long time. They study math and physics in this way and also want to apply this learning mode to foreign language teaching and learning. That's why English teachers can apply GTM to the students so easily.

All in all, we have to admit that one of the features of GTM—emphasizing on deductive application of grammar rules—is highly consistent with the teaching and learning mode of Chinese teachers and students now, which can bring some convenience indeed but limit the creativity as well. After all, it takes a long time to change everyone's traditional notions of the exam-oriented education and the thinking mode of Chinese students.

2.3 Emphasis on the comparison of different languages

In the GTM, the teaching and learning process is facilitated through much attention to similarities and differences between the target language and the native language. The same situation also takes place when learners are learning the second foreign language using GTM. This feature can show an advantage especially when the learner's first language system has been fully constructed.

When using GTM to explain the structure of general questions in English to primary school students, teachers in China always give instructions like this: “ In Chinese, we all know that when we want to turn a declarative sentence into a question, we just need to add the character ma and change the full stop into a question mark. However, in English, when you want to ask a general question, you need to put the copula at the beginning of the sentence and invert the whole sentence. The words' order of Chinese and English questions is reversed and you have to remember this rule.” Although the comparison seems a bit complex, the students do master the usage of general question in English without being engaged in the foreign language environment, or acquiring the thinking mode of the foreign language. In this process of learning, the difference of words' order between Chinese and English is emphasized by GTM. As long as the students know the difference, they can create new sentences in the target language based on the language system they already have. Similarly, using GTM helps language learners to learn another foreign language and add it to the ones they already know.

From these above, we can see that GTM can help students form the whole language system by emphasizing the comparison of different languages.

3. The Grammar-Translation Method's Negative Features

3.1 Little attention given to speaking and listening

In GTM, literary language is considered superior to spoken language. Vocabulary and grammar are emphasized but there is much less attention given to speaking and listening.

In China, the less attention given to speaking and listening has caused a well known phenomenon called “dumb English”. Deeply affected by this, many Chinese students can just understand the passages on their exam papers and choose the right answers to get the high marks. But many students are afraid to speak English aloud and can't organize any complete sentence when given a topic of speech. This phenomenon also takes place when it comes to listening. In some provinces in China, the listening test is not contained in The National College Entrance Examination before 2022. So the students really lack the training in this area. After entering the universities, the students from those provinces just find the listening test of CET-4 catastrophic.

Fortunately, many experts and teachers have already realized this problem and we are all making efforts to reduce the occurrence of the “dumb English” phenomenon. In traditional classes using GTM, most of the interaction in the classroom is from the teacher to the students. There is little student initiation and little student-student interaction. But now, teachers always encourage the students to form some groups and use English to discuss the materials, which can help them improve their speaking and listening skills.

3.2 Evaluation based mainly on tests

In GTM, writing tests about the translation between students' native language and the target language or vice versa are often used. The evaluation of the teaching and learning is mainly based on tests.

As time passes, the types of the questions in the tests are getting more complex. To test students' ability to apply the grammar rules they learned in different contexts, various types of questions are put on the exam papers, such as translation of a passage, reading comprehension questions, fill-in-the-blanks and forming sentences with words. No matter what the type is, the answers of the questions are always determined already. It's the teacher who have the right to decide whether the students' answers match the standard answers and point out the mistake directly or give a cross on the paper to inform the students that they have done wrong. The unilateral judgment from teachers may cause too much pressure to students and as time passes. The students may have a notion that the purpose of learning a language is to get high marks in their exams. Over time, too much attention to the exams will make students ignore some values of the language itself and also reduce students' interest in learning language.

To solve this problem, other ways of evaluation should be added. The teacher can sometimes give chances to students to speak and let them share their findings and critical thinking of the reading materials in groups on the stage. The group presentation and participation may be added to the evaluation. As long as the evaluation system is fair and considerate enough, GTM can also be integrated with other teaching methods and import diversified ways of evaluation.

4. Conclusion

In a nutshell, although GTM has some disadvantages, it doesn't mean that this teaching method has been completely useless. The three features on the positive side—high efficiency, emphasis on deductive application of grammar rules, emphasis on the comparison of different languages—still have unique values today and can benefit some students. With the progress of teaching theories and teaching equipment, the application of integrated teaching method is a trend. In this modern times, GTM can also adopt some advantages of other teaching methods and make use of its unique advantages to bring benefits to teachers and students.

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