

The Grammar-Translation Method and the Use of Translation to Facilitate Learning in ESL Classes

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Abstract

Translation is a useful device in the learning process of ESL learners; furthermore, it is an aid to enhance foreign language proficiency. It has a facilitating function in the comprehension of the foreign language. The Grammar-Translation method has a supportive role in foreign language learning, and allows students to notice the differences and similarities between L1 and L2 that will make the students understand the language system better.

Keywords: The Grammar-Translation Method, Translation, Comprehension, Accuracy

Introduction

The purpose of the grammar translation method was to help students read and understand foreign language literature (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). It was an efficient way of learning vocabulary and grammatical structures. Through focusing on the rules of the grammar of the target language students would recognize the features of two languages that would make language learning easier. A significant role of this method is translating one language into the other. In this method mastery of the grammatical rules and vocabulary knowledge are emphasized; therefore. It has been hoped that learning is facilitated. In order to communicate accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately skills and practice students need are provided using the grammar translation method (Fish, 2003). Reading and writing are the primary skills students develop in this method; moreover, translation activities will supply students clarity and they will have the opportunity to improve accu-

racy in the target language. When students can cover form and meaning their language awareness will raise, and they will enhance their abilities to study independently (Fish, 2003). Vienne (1998) also points out that translation activities will raise awareness not only of the mother tongue and the foreign language, but also of the two cultures.

Translation in foreign language learning process promotes understanding. The Grammar-Translation method has been considered useful for students in second language acquisition in that it enriches one's vocabulary, increases the number of figures of speech one can use, develops the ability of interpretation, and through the imitation of the best writers it makes us able to produce similarly good texts, because translation forces us to notice such details as would escape the attention of a simple reader (Hell, 2009, p. 9).

The use of grammar-translation method in ESL classes will enable students to discuss Austin J Damiani (2003) in his study "The Grammar Translation Method of Language Teaching" writes "as a teacher, I liked using the grammar translation method because I could assume the intelligence of my students; I could talk to them like the intelligent people that they are, and we could talk about the grammar and vocabulary that I was teaching. In another method, I would have had to use simple language and familiar phrases to communicate in the target language, and even then, I could not be sure that my students knew and understood what it was that they were saying."

The Use of Translation to Facilitate Learning

The use of translation in foreign language learning

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has been considered detrimental as it does not allow the achievement of fluency and foster communicative language use (Newson, 1998); therefore, it has been mostly avoided. It has been thought that students will learn better if they are given maximum exposure to the target language. The Grammar-Translation method has been criticized for not giving the enough opportunity to students to get involved in the target language. Translation is a useful tool especially in an EFL environment (Ellis, 1992; Ur, 1996). As Stern (1992) stresses translation holds an important place in language learning. In order to let students realize difficulties in language learning, translation is a useful resource in that students can see the similarities and differences between L1 and L2, and they can understand the language system better. Through comparing the target language and their native language they may use the target language effectively.

Alan Duff (1996) is of the opinion that translation is a natural and necessary activity. He points out that the use of translation shapes our way of thinking and to some extent our use of the foreign language. He says that “translation helps us to understand better the influence of the one language on the other, and to correct errors of habit that creep in unnoticed” (p.6).

Providing students accurate translation of an English word will help them understand quickly, and they can acquire the target language with ease. Avoidance of translation in learning process may hinder the comprehension of the foreign language. The lack of comprehension will not bring about achievement.

Translation makes the learning meaningful, and students become active participants in the learning process. Danchev (1983, p.35) lists the benefits of translation as: 1) natural and easy comparison between the target and the native language, thus facilitating faster decoding of difficult target language structures and elements; 2) quick and effective comprehension control; 3) to overcome and neutralise native language transfer. In order to perform an activity understanding of the instructions is significant, and translation is a useful tool to verify the comprehension of these instructions. As Harmer (1991, p.240) suggests: “to get a translation of these instructions to make sure the students have understood”.

Anne D. Cordero states that translation is not as the exclusive foreign language course in a student’s language program, but as a skills course among diversified options. When properly developed and taught,

it can maintain and strengthen its own vital role, while contributing to the development of other skills and consequently to a higher overall competence. Translation is thus conceived as an end desired in itself and as a method of furthering proficiency in the foreign language. (1984, p.351).

Alan Duff (1996, p.7) argues that “translation develops three qualities essential to all language learning; accuracy, clarity and flexibility. It trains the learner to search (flexibility) for the most appropriate words (accuracy) to convey what is meant (clarity)”. These qualities are important factors in foreign language learning process as they will contribute to better understanding.

Difficulties in foreign language learning through translation will get clear, and students will have more chance of grasping how the target language works. Chellapan (1982, p.60) points out: “Translation can make the student come to closer grips with the target language. A simultaneous awareness of two media could actually make the student see the points of convergence and divergence more clearly and also refine the tools of perception and analysis resulting in divergent thinking.”

The use of translation is thought to be independent of the four English skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), but Malmkjaer argues that without these skills translation is not possible and writes: “in fact dependent on and inclusive of them, and language students who are translating will be forced to practice them” (1998, p.8).

Vermes (2010, p. 91) is of the opinion that there is no fundamental reason for the exclusion of translation in foreign language learning, and concludes that translation involves interaction and cooperation between people, which makes it a potentially very useful device in foreign language teaching.

Conclusion

The use of translation will contribute to the use of the target language effectively. Learning gets meaningful via translation, and better comprehension promotes foreign language proficiency. The Grammar-Translation method is useful because learning process is clearer, thus accuracy will be acquired by students.

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