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Grammar Translation and Its Use in Present-Day China: Challenges and Issues

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ABSTRACT

A plethora of studies have been conducted on the grammar-translation method (GTM), whereas fewer researchers have examined textbooks in relation to it, especially in Chinese EFL contexts. This paper begins with a description of the historical background of GTM and its use in the current world, and then presents its major features and drawbacks. It then proceeds to look at a widely used Chinese university EFL textbook, which turns out to provide a basis for the application of GTM and reflect that this method is still being practiced in present-day China. Finally, this paper also attempts to analyze the reasons why China still adopts this traditional approach and to predict its future in China.

Keywords: The Grammar-translation method (GTM); features; drawbacks; textbooks.

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1. Introduction

In the field of language teaching, the role of grammar has attracted considerable attention from theorists and language practitioners. According to Mukalel (2005:40), “the medieval understanding of grammar as a universal phenomenon gave rise to the grammar-translation method which held the reins as the only teaching method for centuries together.” Trendak (2015) also claimed that grammar played a crucial role in the Grammar-translation method. However, there were periods during which the central role of grammar in language teaching was seriously questioned and de-emphasized, and in reaction to this, some language teachers began to seek alternative approaches to foster learners’ communicative competence (Purpura, 2004). Phung (2010) also mentioned language teaching methodology shifted away from GTM to communicative approaches because of increasing interactions among countries. Therefore, it can be seen that although GMT has been established as the mainstream pedagogical approach for a long time, it underwent a process of decline.

In spite of this, the grammar-translation method is still being actively used in some parts of the world, especially in EFL situations, for example, Adamson (1998) and Li and Yang (2018) stated that

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GTM has been persistently used in many Chinese EFL classrooms. Such a mismatch between theory and practice is clearly worth exploration. Since textbooks “provide a basis for the application of relevant pedagogical approaches” (Chang, 2004:41), the present study sets out to investigate the use of GTM in China by looking at the organization of a widely used English textbook in China and to find out the reasons why China still adopts this method, which is rarely conducted in Chinese EFL contexts.

In the following sections, I will first describe the historical background of GTM, its application, major features and drawbacks, and then discuss the use of GTM in China based on the analysis of a Chinese EFL textbook.

2. The background and current use of grammar translation

2.1 Historical background

Grammar translation, as Richards and Rodgers (2014: 6) suggested, can be defined as “a way of studying a language that approaches the language first through detailed analysis of its grammar rules, followed by application of this knowledge to the task of translating sentences and texts into and out of the target language”. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2013: 11) also provided a description of this method:

The grammar translation method is not new. It has 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 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 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 languages 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.

Compared with the modern approaches, for example, the direct method, structural, audio-lingual methods, the situational approach and the communicative approach, grammar translation is one of the most traditional language teaching methodologies since its origin can be dated back to the end of eighteenth century in Germany. Moreover, the primary purpose of devising the grammar-translation method was to meet the urgent need of a simple approach suitable for teaching Latin and Greek to school children and it is because of its suitability for group teaching in classrooms that grammar translation shows its superiority at the very beginning of its emergence. Subsequently, with the establishment of public examinations, priority has been given to the grammar-translation method in England of the 19th century (Howatt, 1984: 153).

Although GTM has gradually developed to be a popular and dominant language teaching methodology during the period from the end of the eighteenth century to the early of the nineteenth century, it was also faced with strong oppositions, especially in the late nineteenth century. Claude Marcel, for example, in 1867, proposed a “rational method” to suggest the abolishment of grammar translation (Fotos, 2005: 662). Richards and Rogers (2014: 7) also pointed out that “though it may be true to say that the grammar translation method is still widely practiced, it has no advocates”. Therefore, it seems clear that the use of the grammar-translation method has been a somewhat controversial issue for a long time.

2.2 The current use of grammar translation

With the emergence of a wide range of modern approaches, especially communicative approach, nowadays grammar translation is frequently referred to as an outdated teaching method and seems to have been replaced by these comparatively new teaching methodologies. However, it appears that this method is far from being dead and still being used actively in some parts of the current world, which probably can be sufficiently illustrated by Fotos’ (2005: 662) statement that “the grammar-translation method became the major language teaching pedagogy in Europe and North America for a 100-year period from the 1840s and to the 1940s, and continues to be used today, primarily in the foreign language or EFL teaching situation”. Litz (2005) also mentioned that the grammar-translation method was the dominant methodology in Korean educational system for many

language classrooms in Korean were teacher-centered and language learning generally was the outcome of rote memorization and practice. According to Shannon (2006), the focus of most English classes in Taiwanese schools is primarily on reading and writing skills and the dominant approach used by Taiwanese EFL teachers is the traditional grammar-translation method. Hoelker et al. (1997) stated that driving grammar translation is Japan's history although it faced challenge in the final years of twentieth century. Moreover, Rao (Jin, Singh and Li, 2005) indicated that the English learning strategies used by Chinese students mainly focus on reading and writing, grammar and translation, and memorization of vocabulary. Thus it can be seen that grammar translation still plays a very important role in ELT of Asian countries although its use in European countries seems to become more limited in recent years.

However, regarding why the grammar-translation method prevails in these countries, the reasons may be varied according to different educational and social environments. Perhaps one feature that most of these countries have in common is that they have a centrally controlled educational system and nationwide examinations usually designed to test learners' knowledge of vocabulary, grammatical rules and translation skills, which to some extent may influence the way of language teaching and learning.

3. The features and drawbacks of grammar translation

3.1 The major features

Above all, it is not surprisingly that the grammar-translation method puts much emphasis on grammatical rules, vocabulary and reading but pays little attention to pronunciation and communicative skills, for as we can see, the grammar-translation method was originally devised to teach Latin and ancient Greek, the languages that actually nobody speaks.

Another major feature of GTM is the use of the native language to explain the target language. Usually in a grammar-translation class, teacher and learners speak their first language at least most of the time and produce very little target language, and new vocabulary lists are often presented together with the explanations in the native language for the native language reference system is believed to be capable of enhancing learners' understanding. Therefore, considering the fact that the native language is used as a medium to facilitate the target language learning, it cannot be denied that translation seems to play a paramount role in grammar-translation classes although Howatt (1984:131) claimed that "grammar and translation are actually not the distinctive features of GT, since they were already well-accepted as basic principles of language teaching".

What's more, it seems that grammar translation actually involves a teacher-centered teaching approach, that is to say, teacher usually plays a dominate role in a grammar-translation class to explain the grammatical rules and translate the target texts and sentences, while students tend to act as passive receivers.

3.2 The drawbacks

There is no doubt that the grammar-translation method can benefit learners to some extent, such as helping students to improve the accuracy and adapting them to more complicated academic tasks. Harvey (1985: 185) suggested that understanding the grammatical system can lead to more effective use of the language. However, it would be true to say that the grammar-translation method still have many problems.

Primarily, one problem is that with the development of economy and the increase of international trade, so far the grammar-translation method can hardly meet learners' increasing needs and expectations of improving their listening and speaking abilities. Based on the Krashen's Monitor theory, too much focus on accuracy possibly can make learners overmonitor their target language output, especially oral output, and therefore impede the improvement of their communicative competence. Thus currently some modern approaches such as communicative language teaching can be seen to have been applied in many English language classrooms for the purpose of compensating the deficiency of grammar translation.

Furthermore, it seems that some controversies about this approach partly result from translation—an indispensable technique in grammar-translation classes because whether translation should be used in the ESL/EFL classroom still is a debated issue. For example, Kasmer (1999) stated that

some teachers and researchers assumed that translation should not be used in English teaching because the use of the native language would certainly reduce the output in the target language, which according to Swain (Fotos, 2005: 666), is an essential component for second language acquisition. Moreover, it is possible that to some extent translation interferes with learners' thinking in target language, that is to say, learners are very likely to be influenced by their first language when producing the target language. However, there are some researchers who do believe a reasonable use of the L1 is beneficial. Cook (Kasmer, 1999) for example, claimed that teachers should make use of the L1 instead of separating it from the L2. Therefore, it would be true to say that the grammar-translation method is being questioned due to the uncertainty of the role of translation.

Moreover, the repetition of doing grammatical exercises and memorizing vocabulary is very likely to demotivate learners. Many students have reported that they often felt frustrated in grammar-translation classes for memorizing isolated words usually took long time and turned out to be fruitless. Therefore, it seems that the grammar-translation method probably is less effective than it is supposed to be, because as Gardener (Benjamin, 2003) pointed out, motivation and attitude determine the extent to which individuals actively involve themselves in learning the target language .

In addition, in grammar-translation classes, the main resource for language teaching is textbooks. Mindt and Kennedy (Hwang, 2005) stated that "a comparative study of authentic language data and textbooks for teaching English as a foreign language has revealed that the use of grammatical structures in textbooks differs considerably from the use of these structures in authentic English". As we can see, perhaps there is a discrepancy between the grammatical structures taught in class and the structures that learners would like to use in real life.

Last but not the least, considering the dominant role that teachers play in grammar-translation classes, it would be true to say that students may depend too much on teachers' instructions which work against learner autonomy. Moreover, it should be pointed out that in traditional grammar-translation classes, teachers tend to provide the same grammatical input to all of the learners and individual teacher-learner interactions seldom take place, therefore, it seems that there is an assumption underlying the grammar-translation method that no individual differences, such as learning styles and aptitudes, exist among learners.

4. Teaching materials and the grammar-translation method

4.1 The role of the textbook in ELT and its relation to teaching methodology

It is generally accepted that the role of materials (textbooks) is of great importance in the EFL/ESL classroom. Hutchinson and Torres (1994: 315), for example, stated that "the textbook is an almost universal element of [English language] teaching...No teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has its relevant textbook". Cunningsworth (McDonough and Shaw, 2003: 59) also suggested that many teachers used published course materials at some stage of their teaching career. Actually, it is undeniable that nowadays textbooks are widely used as the core materials in English teaching classrooms and most classroom teaching is mainly textbook-based although rigid adherence to a single textbook may not fit students' individual needs and interests. For example, according to Jazadi (2003), 67 percent of the 106 Indonesian teachers investigated in his study reported that they used the prescribed textbooks most or all time in their teaching.

The prosperity of textbook market probably can be best reflected by the following statistics. For instance, Sheldon (Crawford, 2008: 81) claimed that in the United States alone, there were more than 1,600 ESL textbooks offered by twenty-eight publishers. Pennycook (Gray, 2002: 155) also mentioned that annual sale of British ELT textbooks was between 70 and 170 million pounds.

Using textbooks seems to have many advantages. For example, textbooks can provide guidance and supports for teachers, especially inexperienced teachers and compared to teacher-produced materials, they can help to make lesson planning be a more labour-saving and relatively easier job to do. Moreover, published course materials are believed to be more reliable than teacher-produced materials for they also involve the ideas and decisions of many other experts in the field. Not surprisingly, however, some criticisms have also been raised. For example, textbooks are considered to inevitably carry preferences and biases of their authors (Litz, 2005). Littlejohn (1992:84) also expressed a negative view that textbooks "reduce the teachers' role to one of managing or overseeing

preplanned events”. Nevertheless, the fact is that textbooks are still used widely, especially by those teachers whose only desire is to complete the syllabus and meet all the objectives.

Additionally, in view of the role of textbooks in language teaching and learning, there is a need to explore its relationship with language teaching methodology. It seems that textbooks may have two-sided effects on teaching methodology. On the one hand, teachers and teacher trainers may try integrating innovative teaching techniques into their classroom practice because the textbooks they used are based on these new approaches; on the other hand, “the textbook may essentially determine and control the methods, processes and procedures of language teaching and learning” (Litz, 2005:6). Therefore, it would be true to say that whether a new teaching method is implemented in a country and whether it is dominant can be observed by analyzing the theoretical basis of its current textbooks.

4.2 An English textbook used in current China and grammar translation

In this section, I will look at a popular college English textbook *New Horizon College English: Reading and Writing (Volume 2)*, which is used widely as the intensive reading textbook for first-year non-English majors in current China. The 3rd edition of this book was first published in 2017 by one of the largest academic book publishers in China—Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

The book consists of eight units and each unit mainly includes two texts. Exercises of these texts comprise pre-reading activities, reading skills, reading comprehension, language focus, structure analysis and writing, and translation. Compared with previous textbooks, this book seems to have designed a variety of exercises, and to encourage teachers to have their individualized pedagogic design. For example, questions in the parts of ‘Understanding the text’ and ‘Critical thinking’ can help teachers apply interactive teaching methods; the elements of foreign cultures are integrated into translation exercises so that students can make a comparative study of Chinese and English language and culture while translating one language into the other. In spite of this, we can see that words and expressions account for the majority of the exercises, including ‘Word building’, ‘Words in use’, ‘Expressions in use’, ‘Banked cloze’, and ‘Sentence structure’, which seems to show that the emphasis of this book is laid on grammar and vocabulary rather than communicative skills and that teaching grammatical rules and translating sentences are two important activities still practiced in class. Therefore, it would be true to say that this textbook roughly follows the grammar-translation method.

When dealing with texts, teachers are also very likely to translate difficult English sentences into Chinese and give a detailed explanation of grammar points, because it is difficult for them “to leave the security of the traditional methods and take the risk of trying new unfamiliar methods” (Li, 2001:155). Luo and Xing (2015:147) also said that the traditional grammar-translation method are more helpful in preparing students for grammar-based examinations.

5. Grammar translation in China

As Ng and Tang (1997) mentioned, in the early years of the “Four Modernization” programme, the grammar-translation method has been adopted in China for the purpose of cultivating interpreters and training technology specialists to read English documents. So far it can be seen that the grammar-translation method still has its own position in English language teaching of China, although “the GTM has been widely criticized over the past decades for its focus on word/sentence level meanings, its extensive use of the L1, and its failure to provide opportunities for the development of the English communicative skills increasingly needed in a global society” (Fotos, 2005: 666) and many new teaching methods have emerged in language classrooms in the last a few decades. The possible reasons are as follows.

Above all, the use of GTM in China is partly due to its national English syllabus because it can undoubtedly help to implement the old syllabuses which put its focus on learners’ grammatical abilities rather than communicative skills. For example, the first national English syllabus for primary and secondary schools was issued after the Cultural Revolution with the aim of developing students’ reading and self-learning abilities (Ng and Tang, 1997). However, with the need of increasing contact and cooperation with western countries, the syllabus on English language teaching has been revised constantly and great importance has been gradually attached to the development of learners’ communicative competence. Thus, with the reform in syllabus design, it seems that communicative approach was suggested to replace the traditional grammar-translation method and became popular

among language teachers and teacher trainers. Moreover, the superiority of communicative approach have been testified by some research on language teaching methodology, for example, in a comparative study of traditional grammar-translation approach and communicative approach, Jin, Singh and Li (2005) indicated that the communicative group outperformed the grammar-translation group in almost every aspects, including vocabulary. However, it should be pointed out that many problems have been found in the process of trying to implement the new syllabus. For example, communicative activities are relatively time-consuming in class; students have low motivation to get involved in these communicative situations; in rural areas no equipment can be used to train students' listening abilities; not many English language teachers themselves are very confident English speakers. Therefore, at the time of facing all of these problems and the unsatisfying outcomes of communicative language teaching methodology, grammar translation seems to be a comparatively better choice that many teachers are very likely to resort to.

Furthermore, the English tests in China may also result in the adoption of grammar translation for these tests mainly focus on grammar and vocabulary, and learners have to take the tests at almost every stages of their learning process. For example, junior high school students have to participate in senior high school entrance examination; the senior high school students have to take the national college entrance exams; university students also need to sit for the national college English tests. Therefore, considering the importance of these public English exams, it would be true to say that they will certainly influence the way of language teaching because most teachers tend to give the priority to preparing their students for these examinations instead of their need to use the language for communication. Moreover, these public English tests probably have an impact on learners' needs and expectations about the English class. Usually those students who take examinations very seriously are very likely to expect teachers to explain grammar points and vocabulary instead of organizing communicative activities. For instance, one of my Chinese students believed that group discussions and communicative activities were not as helpful as learning vocabulary, and therefore he often chose to memorize vocabulary or read articles alone while his classmates participated in group activities. In addition, it should be pointed out that in accordance with the new syllabus, the listening part is increasing in the recent tests for the purpose of testing learners' communicative competence. Nevertheless, reading, grammar and vocabulary still take up a significant part of the tests. Therefore, it seems that if the exam system cannot be changed, there is little possibility that teacher will shift away from using the grammar-translation method.

Moreover, English language teaching in China is almost textbook-based. The wide use of grammar-translation textbooks in China is one possible reason for the use of grammar translation approach, since as Litz (2005) put it, textbook can essentially determine language teaching methodology. With regard to the selection of textbooks, it would be true to say that while in the past all the schools have to use the ministry-prescribed textbooks, nowadays more and more secondary schools and universities are entitled to choose the textbooks according to the special needs of their own students. Nevertheless, grammar-translation textbooks are still their preferences because passing examinations is the first priority.

Additionally, another possible reason which should not be ignored is that in Chinese culture, the role of teacher is usually regarded as an all-knowing input provider, which seems to coincide with the teacher-centered approach that grammar translation involves. For example, according to Cortazzi and Jin (1999), many Chinese students regard teachers and textbooks as the authorities, so they are accustomed to learning through attentive listening and accepting the knowledge from the teacher and the textbook uncritically. Moreover, they further reported that "Chinese students hesitate to express their thinking because their culture of learning includes the notion that one cannot really create or contribute something new until one has mastered the field or relevant techniques" (Cortazzi and Jin, 1999: 215). Moreover, it should be pointed out that considering the size of language class in China, it is hard for Chinese teachers to shift from such kind of teacher-centered teaching approach to a more learner-centered teaching approach like communicative language teaching. For instance, one teacher reported that "we have fifty students in a class, and if each student speaks one sentence, it will take up the whole lesson" (Ng and Tang, 2005).

Now we can see that the adoption of the grammar-translation method in China is a complex issue. There is a tendency that this method will possibly continue to be used in this country in the near future, but it would be true to say that grammar translation will probably lose its dominant role and share its priorities with some comparatively new methodologies, such as communicative approach. So far, many researchers believe that the combination of grammar translation and communicative language teaching are suitable for many learners. Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell (1998), and Ellis (2002, 2003) (cited in Fotos, 2005:668), for instance, have indicated that both grammar explanation and communicative activities are necessary for the comprehension of target language. Therefore, it seems that grammar translation and its modifications will continue exerting an influence on the way of language teaching and learning in different forms.

6. Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, it can be seen that the grammar-translation method has not been banned in the present-day China for various reasons although it was under harsh criticism, for as Strevens (Endley, 2006) noted, no any single method could be successful in all circumstances. The analysis of GTM in this paper probably suggests the current trends in ELT methodology and a better choice for language teachers in the near future should be to combine different teaching methodologies to meet learners' needs in different situations instead of using a single method, and therefore some 'outdated' teaching methods, such as GTM, probably can still be actively used in the form of such kind of combination approach.

Language policy, which can strongly influence classroom language teaching practice, cannot just make explicit recommendations for using a prevalent approach. Instead, social factors need to be taken in account when making a policy regarding methods. Since a good language policy should be appropriate for the local context, pedagogical approaches should also be adapted to the varying sociocultural and educational contexts of ELT.

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