

Chapter 27

Revisiting the Classical Method in Language Education: Grammar Translation Method (Gtm)

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INTRODUCTION

Methodology is one of the most significant considerations in language education. Methodology in its simplest definition refers to a combinations of decisions about how to teach language effectively and how to organize contents of a syllabus for best learning results. The Classical Method, Grammar Translation Method (GTM) constitutes a backdrop against the consideration for the evolving of language learning. My interest in GTM came about as a result of its changing position as a methodology in the language teaching context. GTM is one of the most traditional methods which originated in the practice of teaching Latin and Greek (Larsen-Freeman,2000; Chang, 2011). GTM has lost some of its previously attributed prestige as the changing times called for more modern teaching practices. Despite the loss of its higher prominence GTM continues to be used in various teaching contexts. Language educators continue to use GTM despite backlashing it for being out-of-date. This dilemma in teacher responses towards GTM made me inquire this topic. The use of GTM continues with some alterations in language teaching practice, which is different from its original conceptualization. Because GTM continues to be used in language teaching contexts to a considerable extent, it is necessary to study GTM in light of historical background. We need to look at GTM with critical lenses to remove irrelevant aspects, identify useful facets and modify it for today's teaching practices. This study carries out a literature review looking at the emerging views about GTM and placing GTM methodology in a historical and cultural context with up-to-date techniques and principles.

Significance of the Research Inquiry

Significance of GTM as a research topic stems from its relevance to today's language teaching practices. Turkish language teaching context also utilizes some aspects of GTM. Language teaching has always been important for Turkey. According to Solak and Bayar (2015) teaching of English slowly increased with the westernization efforts of Turkish Republic. In time, popularity of English teaching increased due to globalization of Turkey since we engage in much more frequent technological and trade exchanges with other countries (Doğançay- Aktuna, 1998). Hence, English teaching and effective ways of teaching will continue to be an important consideration for the Turkish context. Despite being the first language teaching methodology, GTM continues to be discussed in modern day language teaching practice. Many countries continue to use GTM methodology in teaching English. GTM is not as popular as some other trendy methodologies. Nevertheless, several cultural contexts continue utilizing GTM for language teaching purposes. For instance, countries that teach English as a

Foreign Language (EFL) utilize it more often than countries that teach English as a Second Language (ESL). This is due to the absence authentic English speaking communities in countries where English is not the language of the dominant culture. According to Khan & Mansoor (2016) absence of English speaking communities is a reason why learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts find it incompatible to learn English with other more modern methodologies such as (Direct Method) DM or CLT (Communicative Language Teaching). Several language contexts use GTM principles even when they identify themselves with more modern methodologies such as CLT. “It is the oldest method, used for learning foreign languages but still widely used, so its importance cannot be denied” (Khan & Mansoor, 2016, 23). A large number of educators and researchers who oppose the principles of GTM, continue using several aspects of GTM in their teaching. This double position - loathing GTM but still embracing its techniques- intrigued me to inquire this methodology in its historical context. Looking at the historical positioning of GTM as well as the realities of today will allow us a new look into GTM’s place in language teaching today.

Historical Background of GTM as a Methodology

GTM is the oldest method known as the Classical Method whose methodological significance cannot be denied. In the 1500’s, Latin was the most widely studied foreign language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Chang, 2011). Learning Latin was a prestigious undertaking. Foreign language learning was also considered to improve mental faculties. Those who learn a second language thought to be become intellectually sophisticated. Latin was the language of government, academia, and business. Originally, the goal of GTM was to enable language learners to read and appreciate foreign language literature, which is why reading and writing skills were prioritized over other skills (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Khan & Mansoor, 2016). Also, learning another language through GTM thought to improve one’s proficiency in their mother tongue. Thus, language learning was a gain in itself. Oral communication was not an important consideration for language learning. In the late 18th Century GTM became the main methodology to be used in foreign languages at national high schools in Germany and other European countries. GTM was also known with the name Grammar School Method or the Prussian Method.

In the 19th Century, GTM started to be used in the teaching of modern languages such as German and French, and later it is used in the teaching of English. The goal was to enable language learners develop an ability to read foreign language literature through a laborious study of culture and literature of the target language community. Of course, culture, referred to the art and literature of the target language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). This is because GTM views literary language superior to the spoken language. Language was not learned as a communicational tool; learning a new language was beneficial as a mental exercise. In this conceptualization, GTM presupposes a deductive study of grammar by teaching grammar rules followed by practice of these rules (Kong, 2011; Khan & Mansoor, 2016). Grammar learning includes memorization of grammatical paradigms such memorization of verb forms and verb conjugations. Memorization is not limited to grammatical structures. There is also extensive learning of vocabulary by heart. Foreign language vocabulary lists with their native language equivalents were mastered. Apart from extensive reading practices, considerable

translation exercises were practiced from mother tongue to target language (L1-L2) and vice versa. Historically, it was the development of industrialization, which created more opportunities for communication among European countries and consequently created the need for using alternative methodologies (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This inquiry is a literature review, which tries to locate GTM in its sociocultural context. This inquiry looks at the most prevalent principles of GTM as part of the analysis of the methodological framework. Going over the principles of GTM gives us a fuller picture of GTM discourse. These most prominent of characteristics of GTM are highlighted from various articles and books collectively as they were synthesized in light of GTM inquiry:

a. Extensive use of mother tongue in teaching

Students are expected to use L1 and are taught in their mother tongue for the majority of the time. L2 use by the instructor is limited and learners are rarely called on to speak in L2. This language choice is promoted by some as ease of learning while perceived as hindrance to language proficiency by others.

b. Vocabulary teaching in the form of lists (isolated word lists)

Vocabulary is generally taught as word lists with their L1 equivalents. This was also an integral part of the language learning process. This was criticized for being inauthentic vocabulary learning by the opponents.

c. Detailed grammatical explanations as part of teaching

Grammar rules are the starting point of GTM teaching. Learning rules by heart is called upon similar to vocabulary learning. Opponents did not support deductive grammar instruction and was considered it a tedious activity.

d. Detailed teaching of word formations such as inflection of words

Different forms of words/ word formations as well as different forms of tenses are learned by heart. Memorization was considered a significant part of the language learning process.

e. Reading of challenging texts such as Classical texts

Teaching effective reading skills is a priority for GTM. Different types and levels of reading are engaged. Different levels of reading, such as literal reading vs figurative reading/deeper level of readings are some of the reading practices that can be carried out in GTM.

f. Translation of texts or parts of texts

Translation is a key aspect of GTM practice, which are practiced at all levels of language learning in GTM. Similar to other aspects of GTM, this is supported and opposed by different parties.

g. Little attention directed to Speaking and Listening skills

Writing and reading skills are prioritized, and consequently, speaking and listening skills are not considered important for GTM.

h. Little or no attention paid to pronunciation

Because speaking skill is not a priority in GTM, no attention is paid to pronunciation.

The above characteristics and more aspects of GTM are explained in more detail in the following section. GTM classroom techniques give more information about GTM and is useful in having a closer look at the GTM dilemma today.

Techniques of Grammar Translation Method (GTM)

a. Translation of a literary passage

A passage or part of a passage is translated from L2 to L1 / L2 to L1. The passage choice is determined in terms of specific vocabulary or grammatical structures which were previously learned or to be learned.

b. Reading comprehension questions

Students answer reading comprehension questions to illustrate their understanding. There could be questions with different degrees of evaluation (i) deductive answers found in the passage; (ii) inferences to be deduced from the reading passage; (iii) relating the information in the passage to the lives of students in the real life (only some instructors use this third aspect of reading comprehension exercise)

c. Antonyms, Synonyms, & Cognates

Students are asked to find the antonyms, synonyms and cognates of a random set of words or a set of words chosen from a reading comprehension passage.

d. Deductive Explanation & Application of Rules

Grammar / Structural rules are explicitly taught and examples are given for the specific grammar point(s) and consequently, students are asked to apply these rules in various exercises.

e. Fill in the Blanks & Use of Words in Sentences

Missing words are given to students to fill in with appropriate vocabulary or grammatical items taught previously. Students are given previously learned vocabulary to use in sentences to show their understanding of the word.

f. Composition

Students are given a topic related to the comprehension passage they studied in class (or a random topic) and as a next step they are asked to create a composition. Writing skill is significant part of the teaching, so several writing exercises are practiced.

g. Memorization

Lists of target language vocabulary are memorized as well as grammatical rules to be learned by heart. Memorization is an indispensable part of this methodology.

Despite the stigma attached to the use of GTM as an outdated methodology, instructors utilize GTM in their teaching practices in Turkey. Instructors criticize lack

of communication in the GTM framework, but they continue using GTM because it allows several unique practical advantages in teaching. Continuing popularity of GTM requires looking at advantages and disadvantages of this methodology. The following section includes most significant pros and cons associated with GTM methodology:

Pros and Cons of Grammar Translation Method (GTM)

Because the goal of language learning is not based on oral communication, majority of the language instruction and interaction takes place in the mother tongue. Use of mother tongue has been perceived by some as advantageous whereas for others it is unfavorable. From a modern perspective, L1 focus of GTM is criticized because of not responding to global needs of the world (Chang, 2011). One of the challenges of GTM is that despite its usefulness in the past contexts, it does not respond to some of the needs and demands of today's world. Global world of today requires use of English both in written and oral communication as opposed to the written focus of the previous times (Kong, 2011). Because there is too much reliance on L1, L2 proficiency suffers from this dependency. L2 is used to a very limited extent, which is seen as detrimental for the overall language proficiency. According to this view, L2 should be used as much as possible for higher language proficiencies. Cooperative learning, which is a popular concept of today's classroom, is not encouraged in the GTM practice. However, interaction is key to language learning and should be encouraged in the language classroom.

Other perspectives focused on the positive impact of L1 use in the language classroom. Khan & Mansoor (2016) argues that GTM eradicates the anxiety stemming from all English instruction. They claimed that L1 use positively reacts with the language anxiety and speaking anxiety of language learners. Various studies on anxiety found out that anxiety affects language learning negatively (Young, 1986; Liu, 2006). Using L1 in class creates a peaceful context for language learners suffering from language anxiety. Also, crowded classrooms of today, especially public schools can utilize GTM because communicative language teaching practices of other methodologies consume a lot of time and energy and are mostly inapplicable in large classrooms. GTM is a cost effective approach in crowded classrooms and practitioners reluctantly accept. When student-centered language teaching is not possible, GTM proves to be a second best alternative. Another advantage of GTM is effective use of time and energy (Khan & Mansoor, 2016). Liberal use of L1 (mother tongue) minimizes the possibility of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. In other methodologies, with the persistence of avoiding L1 (mother tongue) use, sometimes enormous time is spent to explain the simplest terms. Direct Method is an example to this ideology, because students are expected to conceptualize the new terms without the influence of L1. In some cases, however, despite spending several minutes for the explanation of a concept in L2, but, we still cannot make sure that our learners understood it correctly especially if it is an abstract concept, whereas it would be very easy and effective to use L1 (mother tongue) instead.

GTM holds traditional student and instructor roles in the learning context. Instructor is authoritative and dominant in the teaching process. S/he is the provider of knowledge for students. Information flows in one direction which is from the teacher to the student. Students, on the other hand, are obedient and passive, and follow the instructions of the teacher. Because GTM is a teacher-centered language teaching

methodology, students are not encouraged to be active in the learning process. This unfortunately causes a passive position for learners which is in contrast with the initiative taking required in language learning. This has the risk of turning language learning into a silent internal learning practice. Another risk of utilizing GTM is its tendency to turn language experience into a monotonous teaching method due to one-way knowledge flow from the instructor to students. Also, speaking and listening skills are not prioritized in GTM praxis which may result in limited ability in spoken language. Students have limited to none speaking practice because focus is on reading and writing instead. These outcomes were acceptable in the original GTM context, but is in conflict with the demands of today.

Translation activities are an important part of language teaching in GTM framework. Translation and grammar are the main transactions of GTM classroom. Language teaching heavily relied on language forms and structures as well as translation of texts from L1 (mother tongue) to L2 (target language) and vice versa. Khan & Mansoor (2016) suggests that translation is a valuable tool for language teaching because of its positive consequences for learner reading proficiency. Unlike the opponents of GTM, they see translation as an enriching activity for other skills. Before translation of a text, one should engage in careful reading practices and analyze the text in terms of ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’. Thus, translation can transfer to other skills positively because it requires a deeper level reading proficiency during the process of translation. It provides higher linguistic awareness, which goes beyond skimming, scanning or literal reading of daily reading practices. Khan & Mansoor (2016) also highlights that GTM’s popularity is also a direct result of their examination system in Pakistan which accords with GTM applications. This is similar to the Turkish educational scene which utilizes GTM for centralized assessment purposes.

Lack of communicational focus in GTM has been a target of criticism. Modern day expectations view interaction as an indispensable part of language learning. GTM demands that students analyze language instead of using it (Celce-Murcia, 2001: 6). Modern language teachers argue that learners should learn the language instead of learning about the language. They accept that GTM was highly valued in its historical context, because studying another language was a different experience then. It was perceived as a prestige. It was not a necessity in the modern sense. People attained a new language to improve mental capacities and create intellectual growth and so on. With this in mind, GTM is conceptualized as an out-dated methodology. The argument pro and against GTM will continue for a long time, and language teachers should look a GTM with a holistic approach.

RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

This literature review about the GTM methodology aimed to inquire the position of GTM in the language teaching world today. We explored relevant and outdated aspects of the GTM. Also, this inquiry delved into why some aspects of Advantages and disadvantages of this methodology are highlighted. This research inquiry came up with some discussion points that can count shed light into the continuing dialogue of GTM in the language classes despite the changing conditions of teaching.

Pervasiveness of GTM and Ease of application in the language teaching context: GTM methodology is practical and easy to apply in the language learning contexts. Novice teachers as well as seasoned teachers find it useful to utilize some GTM techniques in their teaching practices. Thus, applicability of its principles makes it suitable for their classroom contexts. This could be explained by selectively applying aspects of GTM as opposed to in its totality.

GTM is in accordance with the centralized educational practices in Turkey: Context is very important in our methodological choices. Turkey is a country, which is governed by centralized teaching practices. Our teaching contexts are determined by a top-down decision mechanism in syllabi and course content. Similarly, our assessment is determined with standardized exams governed by the Ministry of Education. With this in mind, GTM style teaching affects our classroom practices and provides a fertile ground for the evaluation of learning. Instructors teach to the curriculum and aim to prepare students for the centralized tests that determine their future options. These make GTM an ideal fit for our teaching practices.

Teaching to the exam with GTM model of teaching: Language teachers share their goal of communicative based teaching. Changing goals of language teaching make communication an important language goal. Outside of higher education, the class curricula is predetermined. Also, centralized exams determine which schools learners will attend. Performance in these exams are more important than the ability to speak English. These tests do not include evaluation of communicational skills or oral performance. Teachers feel obliged to teach to the book and to the centralized exam in order to better serve their students. So, theoretically, these teachers might support providing an oral approach in their language classes, but they feel obliged to follow a test based teaching style in practice. This is an important point to consider for educators and higher authorities because their methodological choices will determine educational decisions for our learners.

Expectations of the Global World vs Local Realities of Turkey: The globalized world requires that more and more people learn English as a foreign language. The new world order requires some level of English literacy. Individuals need to reach available information via multiple channels (e.g. the internet). Also, people from diverse geographies and cultural backgrounds interact with each other more frequently today than ever before, which requires some communicational proficiency in the English language. Local realities of Turkey are influenced to some extent from these global changes. However, local realities of regions are not highly influenced from these decisions.

Less qualified English instructors prefer GTM style of Teaching: There are many English teachers with varying degrees of language proficiency. More proficient teachers take more risks and experiment with innovative teaching strategies. Less proficient language teachers prefer to stick to the curriculum without much adaptation strategies. This also implies the need for carrying out screening and encouraging continuous job training and lifelong learning options, which will benefit the teaching and learning processes.

CONCLUSION

In a changing world, it is undeniable that we need to change our language teaching practices. Beyond the technological innovations, we need to reconsider the language

teaching methodologies we utilize for language teaching. Regardless of which methodology we utilize, we need to continue interrogating our teaching practices and try to improve our practices. This inquiry focused on the history of the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and its changing position in the language teaching world. Looking at the origins of language teaching provided awareness into the of changing priorities of GTM Methodology. Pros and cons of GTM are highlighted to depict that some aspects of GTM can pass the test of time with suitable alterations for better language teaching practices. In short, we will continue our scholarly discussions about the GTM methodology and utilize it for effective teaching practices in the Turkish context.

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