

Role of grammar translation method and textbooks in second language learning

Anil Kumar Swadeshi

Research Scholar
Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla

Abstract

In most of theoretical works on second language acquisition, the importance of grammar translation method in learning second language has been neglected. It is supposed to have more limitations as compared to its advantages. It is true that it has many limitations but still it plays a significant role in second language acquisition in certain language learning situations in the world where comprehensive and comprehensible input is not present in the communities and the second languages are more like foreign languages and are learned in the formal settings of classrooms only. In these situations second language is taught through grammar translation method and textbooks reading. The primary learning of second language takes place only through this since there is no other method. Therefore the role of grammar translation method and textbooks becomes more important than in the language learning situations where live input is present in the language community. Therefore there is an urgent need of understanding the proper relation of grammar translation method and textbooks to overcome the difficulties created by lack of input in such language learning situations.

Keywords: Grammar translation method, textbooks, second language learning, SLA, English as a second language

1. Introduction

According to Indian Constitution, English is a second language in India. There are only twenty two scheduled languages in Indian Constitution. Therefore we can think of situations where only those languages are spoken which are not listed in the Eighth Schedule of Indian Constitution. In most of these areas, comprehensive and comprehensible input which is required for learning English language is not available there. How do, then students learn English language in such language learning situations as there are no other methods of teaching English language? The teachers teach through textbooks with the help of grammar translation method. The teachers do not speak English language in the classroom. Whenever we think of second language or foreign language acquisition in such language situations, our attention goes to grammar translation method and textbooks as the students cannot read English newspapers and cannot watch English channels. In Grammar translation method, first of all, a rule or grammatical rule is taught to the students to make them learn it. The vocabulary in this method is taught through a bilingual list in which words are translated into the native language of the students or into the language in which the learners are comfortable enough to learn properly. The rules are also identified in the running discourse and attention to vocabulary is also given. Finally, they are provided with exercises on those rules and the vocabulary items which are earlier taught to them. Then they are allowed to speak through those rules and vocabulary items. Finally they have their textbooks to study at their homes and classrooms.

2. Evaluation of grammar translation method

A. Krashen's views on the requirement of optical input

If we examine the Grammar Translation Method on Krashen's schema of evaluation, the following issues emerge in context of Indian classroom:

- i. Grammar translation provides scraps of comprehensible input and the focus is completely on form and not on the meaning.
- ii. Recently new textbooks containing interesting stories are being taught but in general texts are unable to gain the attention of the students.
- iii. Grammar-translation is, of course, grammatically sequenced. In the textbook the main emphasis is to teach simple rules first and then the complex rules.
- iv. The input given through grammar translation is incomparable to the live talk of individuals.
- v. In grammar translation anxiety level is also raised for some students who are less inclined toward the study of grammar.
- vi. Grammar-translation makes no attempt, explicitly or implicitly, to help students manage conversations with native speakers.

B. Krashen's views on learning

There is a difference between acquisition and learning because all the rules that are to be learnt cannot be consciously taught. No linguist consciously knows all the rules of a language. A language has unlimited rules. As Krashen says:

"Grammar-translation implicitly assumes that conscious control of grammar is necessary for mastery. In other words, learning needs to precede acquisition. This assumption necessitates that all target structures must be introduced and explained. There is, therefore, no limitation of the set of rules to be learned to those that are learnable, portable, and yet to be acquired. There is no attempt to account for individual variation in Monitor use, nor is there any attempt to specify when rules are to be used, the implicit assumption being that all students will be able to use all the rules all the time".(Krashen 128-29)

According to Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982), formal languages learning environment have certain benefits even though they have so many limitations. First, speakers may modify their use of the new language through some of the low level rules they know. Thus when rules are learned correctly, conscious rule application may contribute to increasing accuracy in some situations.

Another benefit of conscious linguistic knowledge is that it satisfies the curiosity that many adult learners have about language. For those who have an interest in the structures they are learning, formal environments are stimulating and useful. There are other language learners who apparently do not entirely trust their subconscious learning abilities and who feel more comfortable if they know the rules and structures consciously. In many cases, such conscious awareness increases the feeling of control one has over the learning situation.

According to them, perhaps the greatest limitation of formal exposure to a language is the role that the conscious knowledge of rules seems to play in either the acquisition or the conversational use of the language. For example, most normal children are successful language learners, whether they are learning a first or second language. Yet, we know that they do not typically have a conscious grasp of rules they are acquiring. Similarly, adults normally use their first language fluently though with varying degrees of sophistication; probably only the linguists or grammarians among them could state many of rules they use when speaking or writing.

“Unfortunately, being able to recite rules does not guarantee a proficient use of the language. Despite painstaking efforts on the part of both teachers and students to consciously focus on the structures, rules and vocabulary of the target language, a minimum ability to communicate through the language still eludes most students who study foreign languages using traditional, formal methods”. (Dulay, Burt & Krashen 19-20)

Another limitation related to the natural environment has also been highlighted by Dulay, Burt and Krashen:

“A natural language environment appears to enhance the development of communication skills in second language in both foreign and host environments. Apparently, natural exposure to the new language triggers the subconscious acquisition of communication skills in that language”. (Dulay, Burt & Krashen 15)

If such are the limitations of grammar-translation method, then how does it work in the above mentioned settings? But the only way to learn second language in such settings is to use the advantages of the method.

2.2 Carroll’s Views

Carroll’s (1967) survey of college language majors was one of the first studies to demonstrate the superiority of a natural over a formal language environment for L2 acquisition. Similar findings are reported by Saegert, Scott, Perkins and Tucker (1974), who surveyed 114 students at the American University in Cairo, Egypt, and 71 at the American University in Beirut, Lebanon. Results from “immersion program” research also confirm the efficacy of the natural environment for language acquisition. Immersion programs were designed for students who speak a “majority language” (such as English in the United States) as their first language and who wish to learn the “minority language” (such as Spanish in the United States) as a second language.

2.3 Rod Ellis’s View

Researchers have studied what impact teaching has on L2 learning. Rod Ellis has considered three branches of this research. The first concerns whether teaching learners grammar has any effect on their interlanguage development. Do learners learn the structures they are taught? The second draws on the research into individual learner differences. Do learners learn better if the kind of instruction they receive matches their preferred ways of learning an L2? The third branch looks at strategy training. Our major concern is with the first kind of research. According to Rod Ellis are two key questions on the basis of pedagogical background:

- I. Does form-focused instruction work (i.e. do learners learn what they are taught)? And assuming a positive answer to (I),
- II. What kind of form-focused instruction works best?

2.4 Teresa Pica’s Views

In one study, Teresa Pica compared three groups of L2 learners- an untutored group, a tutored group, and a mixed group (i.e. one that had experienced both instruction and naturalistic learning). She found that the accuracy order of a number of grammatical features was broadly the same in the three groups, suggesting that instruction had had little overall effect.

But in the settings I am talking about here this must be noted down that all the students of such language learning situations are not able to acquire English language. Only the brilliant students acquire it. This acquisition is the outcome of the grammar translation method and the

study of textbooks only as there are no other methods of teaching and they cannot learn through Natural Approach since the situations lack enough input.

3. Importance of Textbooks in Second/Foreign Language Learning

Textbooks are the basics of schools education in India. They occupy major place in the curriculum of school education. They are essential for second language acquisition in schools. The teaching in India starts through textbooks only. If we carefully observe the textbooks of NCERT, we find most of the textbooks contain lessons and followed by exercises, through which the whole teaching-learning activity proceeds. Most of the NCERT language textbooks contain stories, essays, poems etc. Text books provide outline of the whole syllabus which is to be taught to the students. These are based on the systematic structure of the framework. Without these the whole teaching-learning activity will reduce to nothing or disorder. They tell us about the major and minor points of the content for giving enough emphasis on them accordingly. The teacher acts as a felicitator and guide to the students. They are free from the worries of preparing content to the students since preparation of content is a tedious and time consuming task. Hence the readymade material in the textbooks saves the time of the teachers as well as students since they don't have to run here and there at the time of examination. They find all the material compiled at a place. Even the methods of testing the students and the questions are given in the textbooks. All kinds of questions consisting of yes/no questions, wh-questions, matching type questions, true and false questions, fill in the blanks etc. are incorporated in the textbooks, although the teachers are free to frame their own questions. They maintain uniformity of knowledge to all the students. So they are free to concentrate on the content rather than the process of making the content.

The good textbooks are teacher supportive also. They support the teachers of second language, since the meanings of difficult words are given in the books. In most of questions few solved questions are also given so that teachers could better understand the method and instruct the students properly. The references (including websites) for further knowledge and understanding are also provided in the textbooks. They are students friendly also. Depending on the level of the students, the textbooks are prepared. They are supported with pictures, diagrams, tables, cartoons etc. to draw the visual attention of the students. They are made more attractive so that they can cast their effects on them. In stories also, on each page a picture related to the story is given so that they remain attentive and curious to learn more.

Prof. Jack C. Richards talks about the following advantages and disadvantages of the textbooks in language learning programs.

- i. They provide syllabus and structure to the program.
- ii. They help standardize interaction.
- iii. They maintain quality of the material.
- iv. They provide a variety of learning resources including workbooks, CDs, Videos, cassettes, CD ROMs etc.
- v. They are efficient i.e. they save teachers' time.
- vi. They provide effective models and input for language learning.
- vii. They can train teachers if they don't have adequate training.
- viii. They are visually appealing.

The disadvantages are:

- i. They may contain inauthentic language.
- ii. They may distort content.

- iii. They may not reflect students' needs.
- iv. They can deskill the teachers.
- v. They are expensive.

Finally I conclude that textbooks are too important for the teachers as well as for the students to make teaching-learning efficient. Even having such disadvantages we cannot ignore their importance in language learning although for learning a language comprehensive, comprehensible and live input is required which does not come from the textbooks.

4. Conclusion

From the above discussion we conclude that grammar translation method and textbooks both play a significant role in learning second language or foreign language in language learning situations where comprehensive and comprehensible input is almost absent in the language community and the learners are unable to learn in the live English conversation. The people living in such language communities only talk in their own languages (native languages) and not in English, which is more like a foreign language. As grammar translation method and textbooks are not live media of learning languages hence the learners learning through these take much time in learning English language as compared to learners who learn English language in English language community through Natural approach. Their proficiencies may be low as compared to live language learners. Therefore there is an urgent need to help change such language learning situations as only brilliant and intelligent learners are able to acquire basic language skills through grammar translation method and textbooks and most of the learners end up with frustration and anxiety.

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