
A Comparison of Grammar-Translation and Communicative Methodologies

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Teaching methods employed by different EFL/ESL teachers vary widely, which may cause some observers to wonder if the teachers are on different roads to the same goal, or if they are headed in opposite directions. Two methodologies often discussed in regard to language teaching are the grammar-translation and communicative styles. (It should be noted that few teachers use either of these methods exclusively or in their pure forms. Rather, most teachers would find themselves somewhere on a continuum between the two philosophies.)

The purpose of this paper is to provide examples and a brief analysis of the aforementioned teaching philosophies. It is hoped that this paper will provide a framework that will be useful for teachers in their academic discussions, curriculum planning, and hopefully, in executing their own classroom lesson plans.

First, I will describe a grammar-translation classroom in which the instructor is teaching a specific grammar structure. I will then follow that description with a brief analysis of his teaching philosophy. Then, using the same format, I will describe a classroom in which the teacher is teaching the

same grammatical structure, but employing communicative methods. It too will be followed by an analysis.

The Grammar-Translation Classroom:

The teacher begins class by telling the students in their native language to turn to page 56 in their textbooks. The students do so. There, they find a neatly written paradigm carefully describing sentences using both the past continuous and simple past structure. It reads as follows:

The Past Continuous and the Simple Past Tense

The past continuous shows an action that was in progress in the past.

Form the past continuous with **was** or **were** and the present participle.

I was sleeping at ten o'clock last night.

Use the simple past tense to show an action that occurred one time and then stopped.

The telephone rang at ten o'clock.

Use the past continuous and the simple past tense to show one event interrupting an action in progress.

action in progress (past continuous)

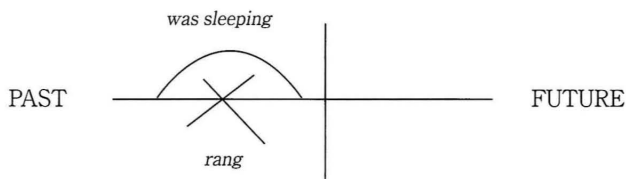
I was sleeping.

one event (simple past tense)

when the telephone rang.

The teacher reads the “grammar box” in English and then proceeds to explain it and give examples mostly in the students’ native language. Next, he draws another paradigm that he feels will surely give the students a clear understanding of what the structure entails.

I was sleeping when the telephone rang.



The teacher continues with a number of examples:

The man was eating when the woman came in.

The dog was barking when then neighbor called.

Students are then asked to turn to page 57 where they will find 25 fill-in-the-blank sentences for them to complete. For example:

1. The doctor (read) _____ when the nurse (ask) _____ him a question.
2. The woman (look) _____ at the map when the man (cough) _____.

After students have had sufficient time to fill in the blanks, the teacher asks students one by one to read their sentences. A few are asked to write their answers on the board. After some minor corrections, the teacher is convinced that he has taught the students this necessary grammatical structure.

Next, he asks the students to turn to page 58 in their textbook and to do some “writing”. Students are required to translate sentences given in the book into English using the new structure. For example:

1. ブザーが鳴ったとき、私は新聞を読んでいた。
(*I was reading the newspaper when the doorbell rang.*)

2. メアリーが助けを求めたとき、ドンは夕食をつくっていた。

(*Don was cooking dinner when Mary asked for help.*)

When they are finished, he discusses the answers and then announces that there will be a test next week similar to the activities done today. He then states that they will now proceed to the next grammar structure.

Analysis:

In this classroom, the teacher does not use English to give directions or explain the grammar structure. He believes that the structure must be clearly understood by the students and that their native language is the best vehicle for doing this. Using the target language might confuse them. The only English he uses is when reading the sentences or rules as printed in the textbook.

The teacher focuses heavily on the textbook and only rarely creates unique handouts or supplementary materials. He uses ample paradigms, charts, and examples. Throughout the explanation of the structure, the teacher uses grammatical jargon which the students are expected to understand.

The examples, fill-in-the-blank, and translation exercises that he uses rarely have any context. That is, they do not relate to anything the students have seen, done, or read about. The students have no real-world experience on which they can apply the target structure. This is not a concern to the teacher because he is convinced that the structure's form itself is of the utmost importance.

Finally, the teacher announces that a test will be given next week. This

test will undoubtedly be exactly like the exercises they have done in class.

For this teacher, the question, “What is your ultimate goal?” may bewilder him. The goal for him is obvious: to learn the grammatical structure. The teacher may sincerely believe that the stated grammar structure is an important one, but it is the learning of the grammar rule itself, that is the point. Its application is not of primary concern.

What is the source of this belief that forms and rules should be emphasized over the application and functionality of a language? Some believe that this philosophy stems from the teaching of Latin and Greek as intellectual disciplines rather than as living languages. In other words, when these classical languages died and had limited use in daily lives, studying them was seen as an intellectual pursuit, not as a means of communication. Some language historians have thus concluded that this philosophy has continued in the grammar-translation method.

The validity of this connection can be debated, but there does seem to be some similarities between grammar-translation and the teaching of classical languages. For example, there is a focus on language analysis, which can sometimes be meticulous and elaborate. Teachers of this method may argue that they are merely being thorough and that their students are being trained to be accurate. But in the case of teaching a living language, there is the possibility that the students’ language may become stilted, artificial, and generally unusable in everyday situations.

The grammar-translation style reflects a deductive philosophy that is common in classes around the world. Deductive learning is described by Wilga M. Rivers as “Moving from the statement of the rule to its application in the example”. (*Teaching Foreign Language Skills*, pg. 25). We saw this in our classroom example. The teacher began with the rule and proceeded from

there.

The learning that students do in this classroom can be described as passive. In such cases, the students may acquire a fairly high level of reading, but writing will be limited to translation and dictation—both of which are non-communicative skills. They have not been trained to express their thoughts in essay form. In addition, the students will have great difficulty orally producing unique, personal thoughts on any range of topics. When they do attempt to speak, their pronunciation and intonation may make them unintelligible. This is due in part to the fact that their teacher has not given them many instructions in the target language, so they've had very little listening practice. In short, communication skills have been neglected.

Another problem with the emphasis on passive learning is that some students find the method tedious and boring and may become unmotivated—obviously, a serious problem. They cannot see much purpose in a language that does not allow them to communicate. This is especially acute in a world where people travel more and where the “global community” is already a reality. Students are no longer happy *knowing about* a language; they want to *use it*.

Regarding the teacher's role in all of this Wilga M. Rivers is rather harsh:

The [Grammar-Translation] method is not too demanding on the teachers; when they are tired, they can always set the class a written exercise. The techniques...can be used with large groups who listen, copy rules, and write out exercises. Much of the correction can be done by the students themselves in class, as the teacher discusses the correct version of an exercise, dictation, or translation which has been written on the board. It is

easy to make tests which are similar to the work that has been done in class and to assign grades for these. Teachers do not need to show much imagination in planning or teaching their lessons, since they usually follow the textbook page by page and exercise by exercise. (*Teaching Foreign Language Skills*, pg. 31).

An anecdote: Once, while taking the train to Tokyo, a university student asked me if he could practice some English with me. He told me that his professor had asked all the students to write a paragraph about themselves in Japanese. The professor collected the papers, translated the paragraphs into English, and then required the students to memorize the English paragraph word for word. This memorized speech is what the student wished to share with me.

Looking off into the distance, he began his speech with a rat-a-tat-tat rhythm: "My name is Keisuke. I am from Yokohama. I love soccer. I have three members in my family...." At this point, I interjected, "How long have you played soccer?" He looked at me a bit puzzled. "What?" he asked. I repeated my question. After struggling with an answer, he again looked away and began his speech once again. "...I am studying environmental studies. I..." Again, I interrupted, "How did you become interested in that?" He turned to me with a panicked look. I clearly wanted a conversation from him, not a speech. I was forcing him to communicate details, clarifications, and feelings rather than recite a memorized (and uninteresting) presentation. For this, he was not prepared.

The Communicative Classroom:

The teacher greets her students and explains that they are going to have some fun today. Since she is using only English, her sentences are simple forcing her sometimes to repeat herself. She passes around a large cup that has a number of folded slips in it and asks students to draw one out. The slips are numbered and have simple instructions on them. For example:

1. Sneeze.

1. Sleep at your desk.

2. Raise your hand.

2. Walk across the room.

3. Come into the room.

3. Look at the map.

She then asks, "Who has number 1?" Two students raise their hands and are asked to come forward. She asks, "Do you know what 'sneeze' means?" The students say, "Yes." Next, she instructs the other student to sit at a desk at the front of the room (facing the class) and to pretend to sleep. After 10 seconds or so, she asks the other student to sneeze. As the class laughs at the pantomime, the teacher writes on the board:

Ryosuke was sleeping when Noriko sneezed.

With no further explanation, the teacher asks, "Who has number 2?" The next two students come up, the teacher checks to make sure they know the vocabulary, and finally, they act out their pantomime. The teacher again writes the correct sentence on the board. After the fourth pantomime, the teacher says to the class, "OK, it's your turn. You try to write out the sentence this time." Before each remaining pantomime, the teacher writes

any new vocabulary words the class may need. For example: sneeze, cough, yawn, etc. (She knows this is an excellent way for them to learn new vocabulary words.) The students watch the pantomimes and write their own sentences at their desks.

As the activity continues, the students know exactly what to do and the activity moves quickly. When there are no more pantomimes, the teacher asks the students to put their sentences up on the board. She reads each one out loud, makes any corrections and underlines the past continuous verbal phrases: ...was cutting..., was talking..., ...was drinking..., etc. She also circles the simple past verbs: ...threw..., ...shook..., ...gave..., etc.

She then asks the students to turn to page 56 in their textbooks. She reads the neatly written paradigm to them, pausing occasionally to point out that they have already been practicing this grammar structure on the board. It's old news.

Next, the teacher passes out a story she wrote about her best friend.

I will never forget the day I met Mary. I was sitting at my desk in biology class, when she walked in. She sat next to me, said "hello" and we began to talk. We discovered that we had many of the same hobbies and interests. We talked and talked. We were still talking when the teacher began the class. Eventually, he asked us to be quiet or leave the room. We were so embarrassed, but we have been friends ever since that day.

She reads the story to the students and then asks them to find and circle the grammar structure they have been working on. After discussion, the teacher gives them a homework assignment.

HOMEWORK: Write about the first time you met your best friend. Be sure to use the past continuous and simple past structure at least once in your story.

During the next class, she will have her students read their stories to a partner and then ask the partners to ask questions about the story. Next, she will collect the homework and ask students to tell their story to a new partner—this time without reading.

Analysis:

In this classroom, the teacher is not so concerned with tests or memorizing formal grammar rules. Her ultimate goal is the application of the structure in all areas of her students' English experience. She wants them to use this structure as they attempt to express themselves and understand others. "Communication!" is her answer to the question, "What is your ultimate goal?"

The teacher begins her class without even mentioning the word "grammar", but rather the word, "fun" is used. She uses only English since it provides her students with the experience of hearing the target language. The grammar activity has a game-like feel to it with slips of paper and pantomime. The students may be confused at first, but the teacher does examples and the students quickly catch on. The pantomimes provide examples that seem personal to the students because they are watching their classmates and then writing sentences using their names. In other words, the teacher has provided a strong context for her students for the grammar

structure.

The students are active in their learning. They are watching, acting, listening, sharing, and writing. She has included more than just writing; she has also included listening, speaking (in the homework), reading and vocabulary.

Teachers who use communicative methods want to provide realistic situations that allow students to internalize the language and to become communicatively functional. Precision and errors are not given the attention they might be given in a grammar-translation class, but students have the perception that they are using English as it is meant to be used. Students in these classroom have heard the target language used continually and have grown more accustomed to its sounds and rhythms. The skill areas (reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, vocabulary) are all combined and reinforce each other. Because the language seems usable, the students are motivated and eager to try out their skills.

For the teacher, communicative methods can be rewarding and enjoyable. But executing this style of lesson plan can be challenging. As Bowen, Madsen and Hilferty state in *TESOL: Techniques and Procedures*:

As impressive as these [communicative] methods sound, they are not easily implemented. Lack of teacher training and materials, the relatively unstructured coursework, unrealistic requirements for lesson preparation, exacting requirements for teacher expertise in the foreign language, exhausting drains on teacher energy during lesson presentations—these and other limitations often caused frustration and exhaustion among early adherents [of the communicative style of teaching]. (page 25)

Conclusion:

The communicative style of teaching has long been established as a superior method of teaching English and other languages for the purpose of communication. It provides a flexible framework where many diverse techniques can be applied according to a teacher's unique abilities and imagination. This is, perhaps, one of its greatest strengths.

And yet, the grammar-translation method is still used in many classrooms. In part, this may be due to a lack of clearly stated curriculum goals set up by an institution. Programs that do not have clearly outlined objectives may neglect the communication aspect of language. This is particularly true if test-taking skills are emphasized over communication because they are needed in order to pass various exams. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, some teachers are not comfortable with this style because they have had little exposure to it.

As the need for good communication skills becomes increasingly important, it would be beneficial for institutions of learning to establish goals and objectives that will promote real-world communication skills in their classrooms. Likewise, teachers should seek training that will help them meet the communicative needs of their students.

References:

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