

# ROUTLEDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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**See also:** Acquisition and teaching; Dictionaries; Generative principle; Grammar-translation method; Language awareness; Linguistics; Pedagogical grammar; Reference works; Universal grammar

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## Grammar-translation method

A method of teaching a 'Modern Foreign Language' which was developed in Europe and dominant in the eighteenth till nineteenth century, the grammar-translation method was based on the

method of studying Latin and Greek adopted by Europeans in the Middle Ages. The language teaching method emphasised the teaching of formal grammatical rules and translating foreign language written texts into one's **MOTHER TONGUE** with detailed grammatical analysis. It is the earliest and the traditional method of foreign language teaching, employed mainly when studying and reading academic literature. It was initially called the Grammar method and could also be called the Translation method, Classical method, Traditional method or Reading method.

The procedures of the Grammar-translation method typically involve:

- A summary of the main content of the text using the mother tongue so that learners can get a general idea of what they are going to learn. This is the first step of explaining, understanding, analysing and translating the foreign language text.
- Explain the language points and literal meaning of the difficult words and each sentence with grammatical analysis and translation into the mother tongue. Language teaching proceeds with rules of formal **GRAMMAR**, isolated **VOCABULARY** items (usually the new and difficult words and expressions), application of grammatical rules to the explanation, and analysis of the paradigm text and translation.
- Reading and translating the whole text into the mother tongue, and a final summary of the text also in the mother tongue.
- Questions and answers, **READING** and **WRITING** practice and **EXERCISES**. These mainly focus on the application of grammatical rules, the translation of the new and difficult words and expressions and typical sentence patterns into the mother tongue and, at the advanced level, vice versa.
- In the whole process of using the method to teach a foreign language, the mother tongue has always been used as a **MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION**, emphasising the reading and writing aspects of the foreign language being taught without paying much attention to the **SPEAKING** and **LISTENING** (Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 3-4).

The Grammar-translation method was first adopted by Europeans in the Middle Ages when

Latin and Greek were learned and taught. In fact, Latin and Greek dominated the school curriculum at the time and this situation continued till the end of the eighteenth century. The actual purpose of language learning was to train the 'faculties' of the brain, and produce scholars. The learning of a foreign language was considered an intellectual discipline. People were of the opinion that Latin and Greek were the repositories of ancient civilisation. A major part of the curriculum and time in schools were devoted solely to achieving the goals of Latin/Greek teaching/learning. It was considered a matter of prestige to know the two languages.

Because the so-called 'superior' languages like Latin and Greek were taught through the Grammar-translation method only, it became very natural that, when students began to learn a modern foreign language and when the teaching/learning of a modern foreign language first became popular, the same language teaching method was imitated, since the basic goal was not communication but translation of the foreign language into the native language – or vice versa. Furthermore, there was no other foreign language teaching method generally known at the time (Howatt, 1984: 131). **TEXTBOOKS** were prepared to teach 'modern languages' on similar lines to those of Latin and Greek. In such books, grammar rules are introduced at the beginning, followed by written exercises and a bilingual vocabulary list. At the end of the vocabulary list, construction of sentences and later paradigm texts are taught with grammatical analysis, followed by translation. Each grammatical point is explained in detail and illustrations are given in plenty. The students are expected to memorise the rules of grammar (Rivers, 1972: 16).

Criticisms of the Grammar-translation method by language teaching theorists focus on its emphasis of the mental, intellectual, disciplinary and memorisation orientation while ignoring the speaking and listening communication aspect of the foreign language being learned/taught. **RIVERS** (1972: 17–18) observes that, in the Grammar-translation method, little stress is laid on accurate **PRONUNCIATION** and intonation. Communication **SKILLS** are neglected; there is a great deal of stress on knowing grammatical rules and exceptions, but little training in using the language actively to

express one's own meaning even in writing. The language learned is mostly of a literary type, and the vocabulary is detailed and sometimes esoteric. The average student has to work hard at what he considers laborious and monotonous core vocabulary learning, translation and endless written exercises, without much feeling of progress in the mastery of the language and with very little opportunity to express themselves through it.

**STERN** (1984: 456) explains the reasons for the failure of Grammar-translation method and summarises four defects:

- 1 overemphasis of grammar rules;
- 2 limitations of practice techniques;
- 3 sheer size of the memorisation;
- 4 lack of coherence with language facts.

**HAWKINS** (1987: 129) mentions Ticknor, a professor of modern languages at Harvard, USA, who already criticised the Grammar-translation method during the course of his lectures on *The Best Methods of Teaching the Living Languages* in 1832 and who observed that spoken and active methods were best: they should begin in early childhood; and grammar should not be introduced until age 13.

In spite of vehement criticisms of the method, the very fact that it continued over a long period of time as a preferable way and is still being partly used by some foreign language teachers suggests that not only no alternative better than the Grammar-translation method was available to teachers, but it also has some valuable points we should learn from even today. It can increase reading comprehension and make the comparison of the differences between the foreign language being learned/taught and the mother tongue. It has a less strict requirement of the qualifications and competencies of the teacher to enable them to teach the foreign language. Large-size foreign language classes can be taught with the method. As support for the Grammar-translation method, Chastian (1971: 59) observes that Grammar-translation teaching satisfied the desires of the traditional **HUMANISTIC** orientation which placed primary emphasis on the belles-lettres expressed in the language.

In the early nineteenth century, notions about the view of language, language learning and language teaching were moving towards reform.



The Grammar-translation method, after a long period of domination, was challenged by the forces of reform at the end of the century, as a more rational and more practical approach (Howatt, 1984: 129). The Grammar-translation method itself also underwent many changes and improvements, combining some points from the other foreign language **TEACHER METHODS** such as the **DIRECT METHOD**. The **REFORM MOVEMENT** was the result of this. Foundations were laid for new approaches towards language teaching/learning methods. However, traces of the Grammar-translation method can still be found in the reading method and cognitive method.

**See also:** BICS and CALP; Grammar; History: the nineteenth century; Learning styles; Reform Movement; Teaching methods; Translation; Untutored language acquisition

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## Group work

The interest in group work as a means of supporting foreign language learning developed in the early 1970s, and later became prominent as one of the methodological devices that typified many interpretations of **COMMUNICATIVE** approaches to teaching. In many countries the impetus came from experiences in mainstream schooling, particularly at **PRIMARY** level, and the early interest was simply in finding means of increasing student talking time. An issue that has always been prominent is that of how to control or to promote both the quantity and the quality of each group member's contribution (Long and Porter, 1985). An important distinction to be drawn is between working *in* a group and working *as* a group. Working in a group is mainly a matter of location. Students are sitting in a common area but can be pursuing independent activities, or can be working on the same task but with no impetus for everyone to participate. On the other hand, working as a group presupposes a task in common, some interaction amongst group members, and in the most powerful of cases a task which obliges each member to make a contribution. More refined accounts have been developed, investigating different types of challenge and interaction and the value that each has for learning (Long and Porter, 1985; Pica and Doughty, 1985; Foster, 1998).

Communication games and problem solving activities for groups of learners were created from the late 1970s onwards to set up reasons for oral interaction amongst students, and were seen by many as a particular hallmark of communicative teaching (Byrne and Rixon, 1979). Oral interaction is important in group work, in most cases at least, at some stages in an activity, but **SKILLS** other than speaking can also be exercised. For example, jigsaw listening activities depend on the individual efforts of members of the group to comprehend the content of a listening passage before they can discuss their results. The above devices, and many other successful group work tasks, depend upon an