

Grammar translation method essay sample



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The Grammar Translation Method and the Communicative Approach have both played important roles in grammar teaching. Which is better, the Grammar Translation Method or the Communicative Approach? This paper aims to compare the controllability and feasibility of these two approaches and find out which one is more suitable for grammar teaching in Taiwan. Two classes were selected and taught by the Grammar Translation Method and the Communicative Approach respectively. The college admission test showed that they share a similar level of the overall English proficiency before the intervention. The pre-test demonstrated that there wasn't any distinction between the two classes in their grammatical competence. The post-test embodied that there was significant difference in their grammatical competence between the two classes. The scores of the students in the Experimental Class were higher than that in the Control Class. The result showed that grammar teaching in the framework of the Grammar Translation Method is better than the Communicative Approach. Nevertheless, the Communicative Approach emphasizes fluency and the Grammar Translation Method is concerned with accuracy. Fluency and accuracy are the target for English learning. So the best way to improve the situation is to combine both methods in teaching English Grammar.

Keywords: Grammar translation method, Communicative approach,

Grammar teaching

1. Introduction

1.1 The current situation of grammar teaching for English majors in colleges
Curricula for English Majors require that grammar teaching should be arranged as part of the program. As one of the required courses, grammar has been taught to English majors in universities and colleges for years. It is

known that “ grammar is a set of rules that define how words (or parts of words) are combined or changed to form acceptable units of meaning within a language” (Penny, 2000). Guaranteeing the accuracy of the sentences mainly depends on the learner’s mastery of grammar. Grammar, which is an indispensable part of a language, is so important that the teachers and students have always attached great importance to grammar teaching and learning. For the above-mentioned reasons, how to make grammar teaching and learning effective and efficient is an important task for both English teachers and researchers.

Although college English teaching and learning research in Taiwan has undergone great changes during the past decades. The current grammar teaching in colleges is still characterized by the adoption of the traditional teaching method, which is known as the Grammar Translation Method. With this model, language structures are presented by the teacher, then practiced in the form of spoken or written exercises, and then used by the learners in less controlled speaking or writing activities. Although the traditional grammar teaching method helps improve the students’ mastery of the grammatical rules, the students cannot use these rules flexibly and appropriately in communication. That is to say, the traditional grammar teaching method has its disadvantages which prevent the students from developing their communicative competence. Firstly, the traditional grammar teaching method is teacher-centered. As a result, the majority of the classroom time is spent on the teachers’ elaborate explanation of English grammar rules, while all the students are either listening or taking notes.

Thus little attention is paid to the development of English communicative competence. The students accept the English knowledge passively in the procedures set ahead of time by English teachers step by step. There is little use of the English language. The typical exercise is to translate sentences from English into Taiwanese or vice versa, to fill in the blank with a proper word and to correct errors in a sentence. So the students lack English communicative opportunities. Secondly, memorization and rote learning are the basic learning techniques, which cannot help to arouse students' interest, build their self-confidence or improve their communicative strategies in English learning and even makes them fear English grammar learning. An alternative to the traditional grammar teaching method is the Communicative Approach. The Communicative Approach makes language teaching as in real-world situation. Grammar learning is emphasized by communication through the approaches of 'learning by doing', through students' participation or co-operative completion of teaching tasks between or among students and teachers, then grammar can be acquired naturally by learners.

1. 2 Significance of the research

For decades, English grammar teaching in Taiwan has been greatly influenced by some traditional teaching methods, such as the Grammar Translation Method, the Direct Method, and the Audio-Lingual Method. The Communicative Language Teaching or Communicative Approach was introduced into Taiwan in the late 1970s. Fostering the communicative competence is its central goal. Communicative competence is concerned not only with what is grammatical but what is appropriate in a given social situation. Hymes (1972) proposes that language should be taught in

communicative situations in order for learners to achieve communicative competence. Learners should not only be equipped with language knowledge, but also be capable of appropriately using the foreign language in various situations. However, it has been gradually assumed among the scholars and teachers in Taiwan that communicative competence makes the ultimate objective of English Language teaching, and the Communicative Approach, if completely and well conceived, does not involve the rejection of grammar. On the contrary, it involves recognition of its central mediating role in the use and learning of language (Widdowson, 1978). What English language teaching in Taiwan counts is to make a good negotiation between the traditional and modern teaching method; to make a proper conception of communicative competence and develop a flexible communicative way to formal instruction in the classroom.

What is called grammatical competence has been regarded as a significant component of learner's communicative competence by many linguists (Stern, 1992; Richards, 2004). In addition, the ups-and-downs of ELT in Taiwan in recent decades has given us reflection on it. Many Taiwanese scholars and experts have discussed and confirmed the possibilities of the combination of the Grammar Translation Method and the Communicative Approach and there is a growing comeback of the role of grammatical instruction in the classroom. Based on the notion of communicative competence and the significant role of grammar teaching, this paper aim to find out which one (Communicative Approach and Grammar Translation Method) is more suitable for grammar teaching in College education in Taiwan.

2. Literature review

2. 1 Grammar teaching

2. 1. 1 Definition of grammar

In the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English with Taiwanese Translation, grammar is referred to as “ study or science of, rules for, the words into sentences (syntax), and the forms of words (morphology)”. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines grammar as “ the study of use of the rules by which words change their forms and are combined into sentences.” In fact, grammar is “ multi-dimensional” (Batstone, 1994) and has multi-meanings. It is generally thought to be a set of rules for choosing words and putting words together to make sense. Every language has grammar. It has been held that if a language is a building, the words are bricks and the grammar is the architect's plan. One may have a million bricks, but do not make a building without a plan. Similarly, if a person knows a million English words, but he doesn't know how to put them together, then he cannot speak English (Brumfit, 2000). In other words, grammar is a framework to describe languages.

2. 1. 2 Principles of grammar teaching

Looking at what principles can guide us in the teaching of grammar. Both Hedge and Thornbury (2001) give us some worthy answers. Hedge (2000) considers that the presentation of grammar to learners should facilitate learning in many ways: It can provide input for noticing output and accurate forms of English; it can present high-frequency grammatical items explicitly to speed up learning; it can provide information about the communicative use of language structures by contextualizing them in spoken and written

form; it can give information implicitly through exposure to examples or explicitly through instruction on the stylistic variation of language form.

Thornbury (2001) summarizes some rules of thumb about the teaching of grammar: (1) the Rule of Context—teaching grammar in context, i. e. teaching grammatical forms in association with meanings (The choice of one grammatical form over another is always determined by the meaning the speaker or writer wishes to convey); (2) the Rule of Use—teaching grammar in order to facilitate the learners' comprehension and production of real language, rather than as an end in itself; (3) the Rule of Economy—to fulfill the rule of use, be economical (economizing on presentation time in order to provide maximum practice time); (4) the Rule of Relevance-teach only the grammar that students have problems with (starting off by finding out what students already know, and don't assume that the grammar of English is a wholly different system from the learners' mother tongue); (5) the Rule of Nurture—teaching doesn't necessarily cause learning—not in any direction (rather than occurring as flashes of insight, language learning is more often than not a process of gradual approximation.

Instead of teaching grammar, try to provide the right conditions for grammar learning); (6) the Rule of Appropriacy—interpret all the above rules according to the levels, needs, interests, expectations and learning styles of the students (Giving a lot of prominence to grammar, or it may mean actually teaching grammar at all—in any up-front way). Ellis defines the definition of grammar teaching from a broad sense: Grammar teaching involves any instructional technique that draws learners' attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either to understand it

metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it (Ellis, 2006). 2. 2 A brief survey of Grammar Translation Method

2. 2. 1 The history of Grammar Translation Method

In the Western world, “ foreign” language learning in schools was synonymous with the learning of Latin or Greek. Latin, thought to promote intellectuality through “ mental gymnastics”, was only until relatively recently held to be indispensable to an adequate higher education. Latin was taught by means of what has been called the Classical Method: focus on grammatical rules, memorization of vocabulary and of various declensions and conjugations translation of texts, doing written exercises. (Brown, H. D., 1994) As other languages began to be taught in educational institutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Classical Method was adopted as the chief means for teaching foreign languages. Little thought was given to teaching oral use of languages. After all, languages were not being taught primarily to learn oral/aural communication but to learn for the sake of being “ scholarly” or, in some instances, for gaining a reading proficiency in a foreign language. Since there was little if any theoretical research on second language acquisition in general, or on the acquisition of reading proficiency, foreign languages were taught as any other skill was taught. In the nineteenth century, the Classical Method came to be known as the Grammar Translation Method.

Grammar-Translation Method began in Germany, or more accurately, Prussia, at the end of the eighteenth century and established an almost impregnable position as the favored methodology of the Prussia Gymnasien <https://assignbuster.com/grammar-translation-method-essay-sample/>

after their expansion in the early years of the nineteenth century. The origins of the method do not lie in an attempt to teach languages by grammar and translation, these were taken for granted anyway. The original motivation was reformist, the traditional scholastic approach among individual learners in the eighteenth century had been to acquire learners a reading knowledge of foreign languages by studying a grammar and applying this knowledge to the interpretation of texts with the use of a dictionary. Most of them were highly educated men and women who were trained in classical grammar and knew how to apply the familiar categories to new languages. However scholastic methods of this kind were not well suited to the capabilities of younger school pupils and, moreover, they were self-study methods which were inappropriate for group teaching in the classroom.

The Grammar-Translation Method was an attempt to adapt these traditions to the circumstances and requirements of schools. Its principal aim was to make language learning easier. The central feature was the replacement of traditional texts by exemplary sentences. Grammar-Translation was the offspring of German scholarship, the object of which, according to one of its less charitable critics, was “ to know everything about something rather than the thing itself” (W H. D Rouse, quoted in Kelly 1969).

2. 2. 2 Previous Related Researches into Grammar Translation Method The related researches are as follows:

(1) Stern, H. H. (1992) in his book “ Issues and Options in Language Teaching” indicates “ a contrastive analysis, just as the comparative linguistics studies, is indeed very important for the second language learner. Therefore translation in one form or another can play a certain part in

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language learning”. (2) Brown H. D. (1994), in his *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, states “ It does virtually nothing to enhance a student’s communicative ability in the language.” (3) Cunningham, C. (2000) in the paper “ Translation in the Classroom- a Useful Tool for Second Language Acquisition” indicates “ while there may indeed be some negative effects from using translation, there is a place in the learning environment for translation. Translation can contribute to the students’ acquisition of the target language, at all levels”.

(4) Austin J Damiani (2003) in his paper “ The Grammar Translation Method of Language Teaching” states “ As a teacher, I liked using the grammar translation method because I could assume the intelligence of my students; I could talk to them like the intelligent people that they are, and we could talk about the grammar and vocabulary that I was teaching. In another method, I would have had to use simple language and familiar phrases to communicate in the target language, and even then, I could not be sure that my students knew and understood what it was that they were saying.”

2. 3 The positive views on the Grammar Translation Method

Duff, unlike the behaviorists, has a positive view of the role of the learner’s mother tongue in second language acquisition. He says that our first language forms our way of thinking and, to some extent, shapes our use of the foreign language (choice of words, word order, sentence structure, etc.). Translation helps us understand the influence of one language on the other, e. g., areas of potential errors caused by negative transfer from the first language. Fully aware of the interference, students will try to avoid making such errors when performing in the second language. When errors do occur,

the students will be able to explain why and try not to make the same mistakes again.

Chellapan (1982) in his paper “ Translanguage, Translation and Second Language Acquisition”, points out: “ Translation can make the student come to closer grips with the target language. A simultaneous awareness of two media could actually make the student see the points of convergence and divergence more clearly and also refine the tools of perception and analysis resulting in divergent thinking.” A contrastive analysis, as in the comparative linguistics studies, “ is indeed very important for the second language learner. Therefore, translation in one form or another can play a certain part in language learning” (Stern, 1991). By adopting a contrastive study approach, similar to the interlineal translation employed in comparative linguistics, pedagogical translation would not only help reveal the structural features of L2 by means of L1 and expose the similarities and differences on various linguistic levels between the two languages to the learner, but by representing these structures of L2 in way to adapt to the norms of L1, produces a readable TT (Target Text) for the learner’s easy reference.

2. 4 Communicative Approach (CA)

In contrast to the Grammar Translation Method is the “ revolutionary” Communicative Approach, which shifts attention from language competence to communicative competence. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) originated from Europe, with the increasing interdependence of European countries in the 1960s. CLT spread into Taiwan in the late 1970s, and has been applied in both advanced and fundamental education up to the present. Both American and British proponents now see it as an approach

that aims to (a) make communicative competence as the goal of language teaching and (b) develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills. “ The Communicative Language Teaching stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use English for communicative purposes and attempts to integrate such activities into a wider program of language teaching” (Howatt, 1984). According to this approach, teaching and learning are for communication. It presupposes that language always occurs in a social context, and it should not be divorced from its context when it is being taught. Learning in order to communicate is now commonplace.

2. 4. 1 The background of Communicative Approach

In 1971 a group of experts began to investigate the possibility of developing language courses on a unit-credit system, a system in which learning tasks are broken down into “ portions or units, each of which corresponds to a component of a learner’s needs and is systematically related to all the other portions” (Va Ek & Alexander, 1980). The group used studies of the needs of European language learners, and in particular a preliminary document prepared by a British linguist, Wilkins (1972), which proposed a functional or communicative definition of language that could serve as a basis for developing communicative syllabuses for language teaching. Wilkins’s contribution was an analysis of the communicative meanings that a language learner needs to understand and express. Rather than describe the core of language through traditional concepts of grammar and vocabulary, Wilkins attempted to demonstrate the systems of meanings that lay behind the communicative uses of language.

He described two types of meanings: notional categories (concepts such as time, sequence, quantity, location, frequency) and categories of communicative function (requests, denials, offers, complaints). Wilkins later reviewed and expanded his document into a book called *Notional Syllabuses* (Wilkins, 1976), which had a significant impact on the development of the Communicative Approach. The Council of Europe incorporated his semantic/communicative analysis into a set of specifications for a first-level communicative language syllabus. The threshold level specifications (Va Ek & Alexander, 1980) have had a strong influence on the design of communicative language programs and textbooks in Europe. The work of the Council of Europe; the writings of Wilkins (1976), Widdowson (1999), Brumfit (2000), Keith Johnson (1999), and other British applied linguists on the theoretical basis for a communicative or functional approach to language teaching; the rapid application of these ideas by textbook writers; and the equally rapid acceptance of these new principles by British language teaching specialists, curriculum development centers, and even governments gave prominence nationally and internationally to what came to be referred to as the Communicative Approach. Although the movement began as a largely British innovation, since the mid-1970s the scope of CA has expanded widely.

2. 4. 2 Reasons for the Communicative Approach not suitable for Taiwanese college students
2. 4. 2. 1 The negative views on the Communicative Approach
Widdowson (1999) says that “ learners do not very readily infer knowledge of the language system from their communicative activities.”“
Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) values, among other things,

learner-centeredness, which is, giving the learners more responsibility and involvement in the learning process. This is often achieved through discovery learning activities and through group work as opposed to the traditional teacher-fronted lesson. CLT also takes a relatively relaxed attitude towards accuracy in the belief that meaning takes precedence over form. Finally, CLT has inherited the humanist view that language is an expression of personal meaning, rather than an expression of a common culture. Such notions, it is argued, derive from very Western beliefs about education and language. Its critics argue that CLT is an inappropriate methodology in those cultural contexts where the teacher is regarded as a fount of wisdom, and where accuracy is valued more highly than fluency” (Thornbury, S., 2003).

The Communicative Approach has come under attack from teachers for being prejudiced in favor of native-speaker teachers by demanding a relatively uncontrolled range of language use on the part of the student, and thus expecting the teacher to be able to respond to any and every language problem which may come up. In promoting a methodology which is based around group and pair work, with teacher intervention kept to a minimum during, say, a role-play, the Communicative Approach may also offend against educational traditions which it aimed to supplant. The Communicative Approach has sometimes been seen as having eroded the explicit teaching of grammar with a consequent loss among students in accuracy in the pursuit of fluency” (Harmer J., 2003).

According to Ma Yinchu and Huang Jinyan (1992), its other demerits also deserve our attention: (1) It makes greater demands upon the professional training and skill of the teachers. The teacher has to know when to take part

and when to stand aside. In terms of preparation and professional skill in knowing when and how to guide or leave the students alone, it demands very much more energy and adaptability from the teacher. The teacher also needs to be more confident in using the foreign language. (2) It does not offer the teacher the security of the textbook. Whereas, with more traditional approaches, it is enough for the teacher to follow the textbook, here it is necessary for him to select, adapt and invent the materials he uses. (3) Because it appears to go against traditional practice, it often meets with opposition, especially from older teachers and learners (Ma Yinchu & Huang Jinyan, 1992).

Also, according to Xu Yingcai (1991), language is like an ocean consisting of, so to speak, so many syntactic and lexical details as well as so many functional and notional possibilities that obviously no second language learner is able to cover them all in his or her study. This is especially true of the students trained under the Communicative Approach, since they are bound to sentences' particular functions. Thus, they are sometimes unavoidably required to express what they have never come across in their study. In this case, they are forced to create something of their own. As they lack the knowledge of grammar, they are likely to make grammatically incorrect sentences. Therefore, the Communicative Approach encourages some grammatical inaccuracy. In addition to the above-mentioned disadvantages, direct correction of speech errors is usually avoided if they do not seriously affect the communicative purposes.

This kind of practice may lead to fossilization of learner's errors. 2. 4. 2. 2

The Reasons for the Communicative Approach is not accepted by Taiwanese

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college students Nevertheless, the application of the communicative language approach in Asia countries hasn't provided expected results. Burnaby and Sun's study (1989) claimed that teachers in China found it difficult to use communicative language approach because of the class sizes, resources and equipment. Sano et al. (1984) point out that the participants in the study did not feel a pressing need to use English, so that the goal of communicative competence seemed too distant for them. Ellis (1994), who studied communicative language approach in Vietnam, also confirmed that the class size, grammar-based examinations, and lack of exposure to authentic language as constraints on using communicative language approach.

There are three reasons why communicative approach is not accepted by Asian students. (1) According to Larson-Freeman (1986), the most obvious characteristics of CLT is that everything that is done with a communicative approach. In CLT, There is supposed to be a variety of activities which provide students opportunities to practice communicating meaningfully in different contexts. Nevertheless, students in Taiwan intend to associate games and similar activities with entertainment and are skeptical of their use as learning tools. Students, Published by Canadian Center of Science and Education who have learned English in a teacher-centered approach, have been used to attending classes on reading and grammar structures. It is not unusual to have questions like " Could you explain the sentence for me, Could you translation this sentence into Chinese?", " Why is the past perfect tense used here?" Students are eager to understand every word in the context and special grammar structure. As a result, most of the time is spent

on the teacher's elaborate explanation of language points and little attention is paid to the training of students' communicative competence.

(2) Communicative competence is essential for those who want to study in an English-speaking country. Lu (2004), a high school teacher who applied the communicative approach in his class, points out that the communicative approach cannot be used in China because living in China and hearing and speaking Chinese all day, thinking in English is impossible as few people have opportunities to interact with foreigners. The situation is same here in Taiwan; most of the students do not need to use English except in the English class and most of the students in universities have never had a chance to visit any English-speaking countries so that they have little knowledge about English let alone the culture of English-speaking countries. If the teacher insists on asking the students to discuss or speak out without letting them understand the cultural aspects of the language they are supposed to use, it is unlikely for students to communicate freely in class.

(3) The communicative approach might have been proved to be the best way of training students in ESL learners. However, it doesn't meet the needs of learners in distant lands, who learn English for a different purpose and who have no hope of ever visiting the target country and no desire to adopt the target culture. 3. Methodology

3. 1 Purpose of the Experiment

The following are concrete descriptions of all the purpose for the experiment:

The first research aims to discover whether learners in the experimental class can make a significant progress in grammar learning after experiencing

an experimental semester. The second research is designed for the purpose of seeing through the experimental semester whether learners in the experimental class can make more progress in grammar learning than those in the control class. The third research aims to find out whether the Grammar Translation Method is more effective in improving learners' learning confidence, and motivation than the Communicative Approach?

3. 2 Subjects

In the experiment, two classes were selected from Applied Foreign Language Department as the Experimental Class and Control Class. The achievement of the college admission test showed that they share a similar level of the overall English proficiency. The two classes were taught by the Grammar Translation Method and the Communicative Approach respectively, and they both have grammar lessons three times a week. 3. 3 Instruments and the Design

(1) Pre-test: Pre-test is used to test the subjects' grammatical competence before the experiment. The testing paper for the pre-test includes 50 multiple choices with a full mark of 100. If the student gets one of them correct, he/she will get 2 marks. Otherwise, he/she will get 0. The contents of the testing paper include the following grammatical items: No. 1-10 are to test the subjects' imperatives; No. 11-20 are to test the subjects' passive voice; No. 21-30 are to test the subjects' attributive clause; No. 31-40 are to test the subjects' non-finite verbs; No. 41-50 are to test the subjects' subjunctive mood.

(2) Post-test: Post-test is used to test the subjects' grammatical competence after the experiment. The testing paper for the post-test includes 50 multiple choices with a full mark of 100. If the student gets one of them correct, he/she will get 2 marks. Otherwise, he/she will get 0. The contents of the testing paper include the following grammatical items: No. 1-10 are to test the subjects' imperatives; No. 11-20 are to test the subjects' passive voice; No. 21-30 are to test the subjects' attributive clause; No. 31-40 are to test the subjects' non-finite verbs; No. 41-50 are to test the subjects' subjunctive mood.

(3) Questionnaire: The questionnaire used after the teaching experiment is to explore students' attitude and reaction to the teaching approach they receive during the year. It includes some multiple-choice questions. The questions are about the students' opinions about grammar learning and teaching, their English grammar learning interest, motivation and confidence after the experiment. Before students answer the questions in the questionnaires written in English, the teacher and author will explain the questions carefully to guarantee that the students have a thorough understanding of the questions and the results will reflect the thought of students truthfully. The questionnaires will be completed by all the subjects, 42 from experimental group and 44 from control group. After the completion of the questionnaires, the data will be collected and analyzed.