

THE GRAMMAR–TRANSLATION METHOD IN THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE TEACHING: TRADITION, CRITIQUE, AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

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Abstract

The grammar–translation method (GTM) is one of the oldest and most enduring approaches in the Russian language teaching. Rooted in classical education, it prioritizes grammatical accuracy, translation skills, and reading comprehension through the systematic use of learners' native language. Despite sustained criticism for its limited attention to communicative competence, the method continues to influence language pedagogy, particularly in academic, philological, and translation-oriented contexts. This thesis examines the theoretical foundations, instructional principles, strengths, and limitations of the grammar–translation method, while also reconsidering its potential role in modern the Russian language education. The analysis demonstrates that, when applied selectively and in combination with contemporary approaches, GTM can remain pedagogically meaningful.

Keywords: Translation-based learning, traditional language methods, reading comprehension, native language use, language pedagogy, form-focused instruction, second language acquisition.

Introduction

The history of foreign language teaching is characterized by continuous methodological shifts reflecting changing views on language, learning, and communication. Among the earliest and most influential approaches is the grammar–translation method, which dominated language instruction in Europe from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century. Originally developed for teaching Latin and Greek, the method was later transferred to modern foreign languages and institutionalized within formal education systems.

Although modern communicative paradigms have largely displaced GTM as a dominant methodology, its principles persist in many classrooms worldwide [1]. Understanding the grammar–translation method is therefore essential not only from a historical perspective, but also for evaluating its ongoing pedagogical relevance. This article explores GTM as both a



product of its time and a method whose elements continue to shape contemporary language teaching practices.

Theoretical Foundations of the Grammar–Translation Method

The grammar–translation method is grounded in a rationalist view of language learning, according to which mastering grammatical rules and lexical equivalences leads to language proficiency. Language is treated primarily as a system of forms rather than as a tool for communication. Consequently, learning is viewed as a cognitive process involving analysis, memorization, and logical reasoning [2].

As described in **Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching**, GTM assumes that explicit knowledge of grammar enables learners to read and translate complex texts accurately. Instruction typically proceeds deductively: grammatical rules are explained in the learners' native language, followed by written exercises designed to reinforce these rules.

Core Principles and Classroom Practices

The grammar–translation method is characterized by several stable instructional features. First, the native language plays a central role as the medium of instruction and explanation. Second, reading and writing skills are emphasized, while listening and speaking receive little attention [3]. Third, translation exercises—both from the target language into the native language and vice versa—serve as the primary means of practice.

Typical classroom activities include the analysis of literary texts, memorization of vocabulary lists, and the application of grammatical rules through sentence translation. According to **Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching**, accuracy is valued over fluency, and errors are treated as signs of insufficient rule mastery rather than as natural stages of language development [4].

Strengths and Pedagogical Value

Despite sustained criticism from communicative and interactionist perspectives, the grammar–translation method possesses a range of pedagogical strengths that explain its longevity and continued use in formal educational settings. One of its most significant advantages lies in the **systematic development of grammatical competence** [5]. By foregrounding explicit rule explanation and controlled practice, GTM enables learners to build a clear and structured understanding of the target language's morphosyntactic system. This is particularly valuable for students who benefit from analytical learning styles and for those operating within academically rigorous environments.

Another important strength of the grammar–translation method is its contribution to **metalinguistic awareness**. Learners are encouraged to reflect on language as an object of study, comparing structures of the target language with those of their native language. Such contrastive analysis not only deepens grammatical understanding but also sharpens learners' sensitivity to semantic nuance, syntactic variation, and lexical equivalence. This aspect is especially relevant in translation studies, philology, linguistics, and literary analysis, where precision and interpretative accuracy are paramount [6].



The method also plays a crucial role in fostering **advanced reading comprehension skills**. Through sustained engagement with authentic or semi-authentic texts—often of literary or academic value—learners develop the ability to process complex sentence structures, recognize stylistic features, and interpret meaning beyond surface-level understanding. This strength makes GTM particularly effective in higher education contexts, where reading scholarly texts in a foreign language is a central academic requirement.

Additionally, the consistent use of the learners' native language provides **psychological and instructional stability** [7]. Abstract grammatical concepts, stylistic distinctions, and culturally embedded meanings can be explained with clarity and precision, reducing misunderstanding and learner anxiety. In educational contexts where class sizes are large, instructional time is limited, or teachers share the learners' first language, this feature significantly enhances instructional efficiency.

Criticism and Methodological Limitations

The primary criticism of the grammar–translation method concerns its neglect of communicative competence [8]. Learners trained exclusively through GTM often demonstrate strong grammatical knowledge but struggle to use the language spontaneously in real-life situations. Oral proficiency, pragmatic awareness, and listening comprehension remain underdeveloped.

Modern theorists argue that language acquisition requires meaningful interaction and contextualized use. From this perspective, GTM is seen as insufficient for meeting the communicative demands of contemporary societies. Nevertheless, as **Understanding Language Teaching: From Method to Post-method** suggests, the problem lies not in the method itself but in its rigid and exclusive application [9].

Conclusion

In recent years, there has been a growing tendency to reassess traditional methods within eclectic and post-method frameworks. Rather than rejecting GTM entirely, educators increasingly advocate for its selective integration with communicative, task-based, and technology-enhanced approaches [10].

When used strategically, grammar–translation techniques can support form-focused instruction, enhance reading literacy, and strengthen learners' awareness of cross-linguistic differences. In higher education, especially in translation studies and comparative linguistics, GTM remains not only relevant but indispensable.

The grammar–translation method occupies a complex position in the history and practice of the Russian language teaching. While it no longer serves as a comprehensive solution for developing communicative competence, its intellectual rigor and focus on linguistic form continue to offer valuable pedagogical insights. A balanced approach that integrates the strengths of GTM with communicative methodologies allows educators to address diverse learning objectives more effectively. Thus, rather than viewing the grammar–translation method as an obsolete relic, it should be understood as a foundational component of a flexible and context-sensitive language teaching repertoire.



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