



THE CONTINUED USE OF GTM IN INDIAN CLASSROOMS: A CASE OF EASE OVER EFFECTIVENESS

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Abstract:

Gouin's Series Theory of Language Acquisition, based on his own miserable failure to learn German through the Grammar Translation Method, is a very strong argument against this most commonly employed conventional pedagogy that unnecessarily complicates what should be a simple, enjoyable process. The story goes that Gouin spent a whole year in Germany with the aim of learning the art of conversation in German, all the while closeted in his study, learning by rote thousands of verb forms and vocabulary words.

KEYWORDS: *Grammar Translation Method , enjoyable process, Language Acquisition.*

INTRODUCTION

He shunned all outside company to be able to devote most of his waking time to the study of the German language. One might today wonder what made him do exactly the opposite of what was almost a guarantee to picking up a new language – why did he not just step out and mingle with the populace? The answer perhaps lay in the nineteenth century overemphasis on theory. Gouin's misplaced confidence in theory probably came in the way of effective second language acquisition – German, in his particular case. Needless to say, the Frenchman returned to his native France a year later, disillusioned and effectively monolingual, only to be stumped by the discovery that during his absence his three year old nephew had become fluent in French.

DISCUSSION

The Series Method: The linguist in Gouin wondered how a mere child could surpass his own substantial intelligence and acquire a language so comprehensively despite zero grounding in either grammar or vocabulary. Based on his observations, he theorized that the language one uses is related to one's actions at the time of utterance. This led to what is known as the Series Method, which attempts a recreation of conditions in which children learn a first language. The aim is to teach the second language in exactly the same manner of learning employed in the acquisition of the first language. To elaborate, the teacher does an activity – say, walking to the door – and simultaneously verbalizes the process of walking to the door: "I walk toward the door. I draw near to the door. I draw nearer to the door. I get to the door. I stop at the door" (Brown, 44). The same sentences were then used with a different form of the same verb or adjective or adverb, thus teaching different forms of a sentence (interrogative, imperative, exclamatory, etc.), degrees of comparison, vocabulary, and other components necessary for effective communication in the target language.

Gouin entertained no doubt that his Series Method was the key to learning a second language successfully. Of course, it is immediately clear that the Series Method is open to a multitude of criticisms, the most obvious being that not all vocabulary is enactable. Even that which is, is not

necessarily so within a classroom situation. Clearly, Gouin's approach to the problem may not have been completely unquestionable. However, what does remain unquestionable is his experience in Germany, which brought home the fact to him that GTM is an entirely flawed pedagogy, and that a better approach to language learning had to be formulated.

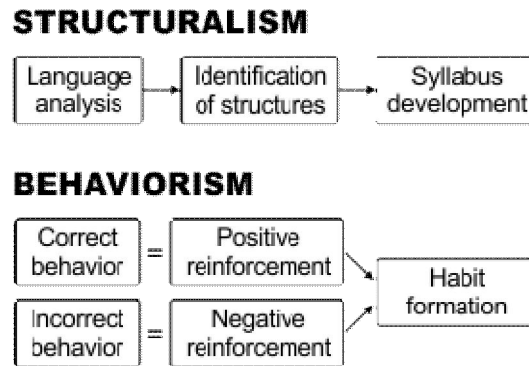
The evidence against GTM is overwhelming and the method has been replaced in many places all over the world. Many theories are a direct reaction to GTM, Gouin's Series Method being only one such example. In this paper, more theories which were a reaction against, or at least a direct antithesis to GTM will be discussed (not necessarily in chronological order), and the intriguing question of why Indian schools and colleges continue employing the method in a denial of other, more effective methodologies will be explored.

The Direct Method: Berlitz and de Sauzé advocated the Direct Method which immediately succeeded GTM in popularity and was a more comprehensive approach to learning a foreign language. Also known as the Natural Method in a slightly altered avatar, it advocates learning the second language in an imitation of first language learning, disallowing any scaffolding from L1. It is argued that this is the natural way humans learn any language the world over. A child does not have the benefit of any scaffolding when it learns its native language, and thus the mother tongue is largely redundant in second language acquisition. The Direct Method also advocates gaining oral proficiency before going on to reading and writing, as the tools employed in learning these skills necessarily entails a use of the native tongue. Instead, the method relies on a step-by-step progression based on question-and-answer sessions which begin with naming common objects and going on to more complicated syntactic structures. Once communicative competence in the target language is developed, the same language may then be used to grapple with written text.

Though Berlitz and de Sauzé never claimed originality in the development of their theory, it did enjoy its moment in the sun because one of the most motivating features of this method is that the new learner can start using the second language almost immediately. It also underwent a spate of reinventions under different names because of its elementary simplicity and in particular because it delivered results. It should be emphasized here that the method relies on directly representing an experience into a linguistic construct rather than relying on abstractions like translation, memorizing grammar rules and learning vocabulary outside its context. All these, according to the Direct Method, are not only needless diversions, but are definite hindrances to the acquisition of a good oral proficiency. In saying this, Berlitz and de Sauzé's theory can certainly be seen as a rebellion against the traditional GTM.

Behaviorism and Structuralism: Skinner's theory of 'operant conditioning' has its roots in the idea that learning results from a change in overt behaviour. When this theory is applied to language acquisition, it means that language is learnt by emitting an utterance (operant), which is reinforced by a response by another (consequence). Depending on whether the consequence is positive or negative, the behaviour is repeated or avoided. Repetition then leads to habit formation. This idea gave rise to the Audiolingual Method – the first serious challenge to GTM. Typically, students of the Audiolingual Method of learning a second language would receive various linguistic stimuli and were expected to respond to them. If the response was correct, they would be rewarded; if it was incorrect, there was no reward. Given that humans' ability to use a language stems more from habit than the active use of what Krashen called the Monitor Mechanism (to be discussed later in this paper), Skinner theorized that the 'consequence' of a learner's utterance promotes habit formation which is so essential to articulation. The theoretical support to the Audiolingual Method also comes from structural linguists. To a Structuralist, language was no longer seen from a diachronic perspective; it was a set of abstract linguistic units that made up the language system. Structuralism respected the complexity and plurality of different languages, and understood that the structure of English itself (without correlation to Latin) was multifaceted, and needed to be approached as such. Thus came about the practice of introducing target language vocabulary in context and making ample use of visual aids. Surface forms of language

and individual structures were presented one at a time and practiced in a series of repetition drills. Visually, Structuralism and Behaviorism can be represented thus (Brisk, 45):



Once again, significantly, the proponents of the Audiolingual Method as well as Structuralism believed that grammar explanations should be minimal or nonexistent, for students will learn grammatical structures by inductive analogy (Taber, cf paragraph 16). Needless to add, both these theories are clearly a criticism of the Grammar Translation Method.

Universal Grammar: Noam Chomsky, one of the most quoted linguists of all time, propagated a revolutionary theory by asserting that humans possess a unique prior knowledge of Universal Grammar, which is the ability of the human brain even at its earliest stage to process syntax in a way that understanding and usage of linguistic structure becomes an innate process. Ausubel said it more simply by theorizing that the most important factor influencing language learning is what the learner already knows (Bowen: 42). In other words, grammar, as the overarching structure of language, is an innately possessed knowledge which finds expression when a child learns to produce sounds and acquires vocabulary. Chomsky argues that there is an enormous gap between the linguistic stimuli to which children are exposed and the rich linguistic knowledge they attain at a very young age. The phenomenon is easily explained by the knowledge of Universal Grammar. Chomsky was talking about first language acquisition when he mentioned Universal Grammar, but he came to influence many second language acquisition theories as well.

Chomsky's theory came in for some criticism because the sample size of languages employed in his study was very small and, being Anglocentric, it smacked of Linguistic Imperialism. It was certainly true that Chomsky treated English as a monolithic structure; all the same, he became immensely influential in linguistics with hundreds of different languages today receiving at least some attention within Chomskyan linguistic analyses. The most appealing factor in his theory was perhaps the freshness of approach, which essentially lacked a rigid paradigm of language learning and did away with cumbersome grammatical rules. To those discouraged by them, Chomsky was saying that they already had sufficient grammar. Further engagement with it was neither required nor helpful. It was a clear revolt against the overemphasis on grammar and the methodology that relied on it for purposes of second language acquisition.

The Silent Way: This method, developed by Caleb Gattegno, required the teacher to take on a distant role in the classroom, thus allowing students of ESL to interact with each other and 'discover', rather than 'learn', the intricacies of language. The three pillars on which the edifice of this approach rests are that effective learning happens faster when a learner discovers rather than remembers or repeats, that visual aids are imperative to language learning, and that problem-solving is a critical component of second language acquisition. The Silent Way, as the name suggests, banks heavily upon the teacher's

silence. This, according to the proponents of the method, facilitates the learner to produce as much language as possible.

The approach of the Silent Way is highly structural, with language being taught through sentences in a sequence based on increasing grammatical complexity. However, the structural patterns of the target language are only 'presented' by the teacher with the help of visual aids, and syntactic rules of the target language are learnt inductively by the learners. The operative word once again will have to be 'inductively', because it assumes the ability of a language learner to make sense of the tangle of newly learned words and recognize the pattern behind them to be put to future use. Since the teacher is 'silent', it follows that the method does not believe the direct teaching of grammatical rules to be particularly beneficial. The teacher's 'interference', in fact, is considered detrimental. He or she is just a facilitator who only intervenes if a student veers too far off course. The objective is to make learning automatic by encouraging students to discover, rather than memorize, the lexicon and prescriptive rules of the target language. Thus it might be said that the pedagogy of the Silent Way is a direct anti-thesis of GTM, and thus a reaction against it.

The Monitor Model of Language Acquisition: Things came full circle in 1983 for second language learning theories with the publication of Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terell's *The Natural Approach*. The nebulous experimentation that started with the Series Method and took various forms that advocated lesser grammar teaching and more inductive learning became a crystallized construct in Krashen and Terell's theory. It advocated the creation of a non-risky environment by introducing low-level interpersonal communication skills while desisting from any form of active teaching. Students are encouraged to express their thoughts, opinions and feelings in the target language; yet, the scaffolding advantage of the native tongue is not entirely denied. Of course, the facilitator only communicates in the target language. Krashen and Terell further explain their theory through what is known as the Monitor Model of Language Acquisition which finds its base in a set of five hypotheses.

The Acquisition vs. Learning Hypothesis: To begin with, the theory emphasized the need to distinguish between the subconscious process of first language acquisition in children from the conscious process of language learning in adults. The hypothesis states that while first language is a matter of acquisition, the second language is acquired through conscious learning. Depending on first language acquisition technique for second language teaching is, according to this theory, quite fruitless.

The Natural Order Hypothesis: Krashen and Terell argued that morphemes are acquired in a specific order, '-ing' being the first acquired morpheme in English. (This could perhaps explain the excessive use of continuous tenses among novice Indian speakers of English!) Repeated and consistent exposure to the target language ensures the learning and subsequent acquisition of more complex forms.

The Monitor Hypothesis: From the point of view of the present paper, this hypothesis is of particular importance. It holds that acquisition, not learning, is responsible for fluency. In other words, the study of grammar and acceptable syntactical structures is more a hindrance than help in the initial stages of language learning. The knowledge of rules functions as a monitor mechanism that checks for accuracy by taking the code through the three-step process of planning, editing and correcting code, thus slowing down articulation. Naturally then, as a pedagogy, the Grammar Translation Method is particularly susceptible to an overreaction from the monitor mechanism because of its insistence upon the application of precise syntactical rules. An unfortunate but expected result of the employment of GTM is the induction of anxiety in a new learner of English. The monitor mechanism slows down articulation; slower articulation increases anxiety; anxiety puts the monitor mechanism into overdrive and so on. The vicious circle can only be broken if the learning process is made less prone to stress which is such an integral part of GTM. Krashen and Terell completely rubbished the emphasis on teaching rules before teaching the language. In their scheme of things, it was akin to putting the horse before the cart.

The Input Hypothesis: The Monitor Hypothesis stated what kind of input to avoid. The Input Hypothesis deals with the problem of what kind of input actually assists in the acquisition of language. It asserts that, having begun with very basic inter-personal communication, students should be exposed to language that is slightly beyond their grasp. With the help of the corpus of knowledge of the target language already acquired, the learner will also be able to acquire new vocabulary or syntax. For example, if only one unknown word is introduced in a sentence which is otherwise comprehensible to the learner, there is a good chance that the word will become comprehensible through inference. Similarly, known structures will assist in the acquiring of unknown ones if they are only slightly altered from familiar ones.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis: The fifth and last hypothesis is once again of particular relevance to this paper. It states that certain negative emotions like anxiety, self-doubt and even something as mundane as boredom can and does interfere with the process of second language acquisition. In the learner, these factors act as a filter that keeps out the most daunting or plain boring inputs given by the teacher. Thus, since effective input is low, it hampers efficient acquisition of a second language. For obvious reasons, this is a very familiar situation in a GTM classroom. Firstly, the learner is discouraged to use the language independently until a certain level of acquisition is reached. The impatience this triggers soon overflows into boredom. Secondly, the task of applying tedious and precise rules is quite daunting, and since errors are frowned upon, the method also induces anxiety.

To sum up, it can be said that the Monitor Model does not advocate teaching a second language through rules that unnecessarily clutter a learner's mind and only succeed in confusing the learner, thus breeding anxiety. On the other hand, it believes that allowing a learner to experiment with the language in a relaxed atmosphere while raising the level of challenge slightly with each successive achievement will deliver results. Once again, the authority of GTM as a pedagogy of language acquisition is seen to be challenged.

ANALYSIS

The theories discussed above are by no means a comprehensive list of SLA theories that advocate less grammar and more exposure to the L2 in a natural fashion. Many others like Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning, Total Physical Response, Communicative Method, etc. remain unexplored in this paper because the purpose was simply to build a case against GTM. That purpose, hopefully, has been served.

But is GTM such a villain as is being made out in this paper? Well, not really. It is necessary to understand the context in which the method gained popularity and remained an infallible method for nearly four centuries. The purpose of GTM never was to build oral communicative proficiency – its focus was entirely different. During the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, learning a second language usually meant learning a classical language like Greek or Latin. The aim was the study of rhetoric, and thus the approach was something that aided the aim. The study of grammar and syntax, and translation exercises combined with learning a large amount of target language vocabulary by rote was the order of the day, because it served to get a scholarly command over the written word. Oral communication was an area that remained largely neglected for the sole reason that literary texts were studied not for their aesthetic appeal, nor for encouraging oral production, but as models for rhetorical composition. Languages were not being taught to learn oral/aural communication, but to learn for the sake of being 'scholarly' or ... for reading proficiency (Brown: 15).

Today, however, the needs of students no longer require scholastic aptitude for English. Good oral communication has become the gate-pass for many lucrative jobs in today's globalized economy. Thus, students seek not literary genius, but communicative competence. Effective as GTM was in classical learning, it has served its purpose and is no longer a method that caters to current needs. Since necessity is deemed the mother of invention, it is a sign of the shift in requirement that second language acquisition theories started reinventing themselves every few years when the instructional objective

became oral competence. SLT theory remained static for nearly four centuries before that, since GTM was effective in what it then sought to deliver.

However, this also raises the question as to why the average Indian student is not proficient at least in reading and writing even though GTM supposedly aids these skills. The answer lies in the Indian approach to GTM in recent years. Ever since, as a national policy, it became important that students pass their examinations at least up to HSC, the syllabus of English was progressively watered down. Texts prescribed are hardly classics, translation no longer forms a core area of study, vocabulary learning is cursory, and the grammar included in the syllabus is of a most elementary nature. Thus, the tools required for reading and writing skills were taken away from students in the interests of more widespread literacy. Unfortunately, they were never replaced with the tools required for oral proficiency. The result is a horde of graduates and even post graduates who are unable to write even simple grammatically correct constructions. Neither do they qualify for jobs that require a good command over spoken English.

CONCLUSION

Finally, the issue of why GTM is still prevalent in India despite its obvious disadvantages needs to be addressed. The uncomfortable answer is perhaps the ease with which the present diluted form can be implemented. All through an academic year an undergraduate student is expected to study no more than 6-8 English essays or short stories, 4-6 simple poems and some grammar exercises. Moreover, the unwritten code dictates that questions in the examination should preferably be asked only from the corpus found in notes available in the market. Finally, the passing percentage is pegged at 30-35%. Thus, a student need only master roughly a third of his or her slim volume of notes and can reasonably expect to pass the examination. The entire arrangement is rather convenient for the teacher, as it theoretically raises the percentage of students successfully clearing the English examination. And yet, English is often called a 'killer subject' because so few students actually do clear the subject. The situation is telling indeed.

Gouin can be forgiven for believing that he could learn to converse in a second language exclusive of contact with the spoken form. After all, it was the 19th century – heydays still for GTM. However, with so much evidence that GTM as a system of instruction fails to address oral communication, a serious rethink on English syllabi and pedagogy is urgently needed. There is no doubt that theories advocating zero contact with grammar for fear of intimidating students may perhaps be an extreme stand, and introduction of a little discipline in the use of language may actually facilitate learning. However, there is also no doubt that GTM is the other extreme, often impractical in its emphasis on grammar. Of course, the diluted version of GTM followed in India today is neither here nor there.

Just like someone who wishes to learn swimming must enter the water before conquering it (trying to learn the strokes by the poolside and expecting to float at first go would be laughable!) the best way to learn English would be a combination of the two extreme ends. It would be best to allow students to begin to converse regardless of errors, and, as they progress, make certain syntactic patterns obvious to them. Done in a non-threatening environment, this is sure to deliver results. The eclectic approach takes the best that theorists have to offer and incorporates it with techniques that work (Widdowson: 386).

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