

Grammar Translation Method: A Case Study of Libyan EFL University Students

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طريقة الترجمة النحوية (GTM): دراسة حالة لطلبة الجامعة الليبيين في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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Received: 22-10-2025; Accepted: 02-01-2026; Published: 13-01-2026

Abstract:

The aim of the present paper is to examine to what extent the native language knowledge can be invested in EFL language teaching. It is hypothesized that native language competence can be manipulated as a key tool in teaching a foreign language. This is especially true when older (e.g., university) students are at a beginner level and they may need to refer to their mother tongue while learning a foreign language. Thus, it is undertaken in the present study to investigate the efficiency of the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) in English language teaching at university level in Libya. Ten students were selected, pre-tested, taught by the Grammar Translation Method, and finally post-tested. The post-test results show significant progress in students' scores. It is concluded that for low-level students, GTM can be used as a foundational tool to guarantee basic grammar and vocabulary as a starting phase.

Keywords: EFL; GTM; Libyan; University; English teaching.

المخلص :

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة مدى إمكانية توظيف المعرفة باللغة الأم في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وتقتضى الدراسة أن الكفاءة في اللغة الأم يمكن أن تُستثمر كأداة رئيسية في تعليم اللغة الأجنبية. ويُعد هذا الأمر صحيحاً بشكل خاص عندما يكون الطلاب الأكبر سناً (مثل طلبة الجامعة) في مستوى مبتدئ، حيث قد يحتاجون إلى الرجوع إلى لغتهم الأم أثناء تعلم اللغة الأجنبية. ومن ثم، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى التحقق في مدى فاعلية طريقة الترجمة النحوية (GTM) في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية على المستوى الجامعي في ليبيا. تم اختيار عشرة طلاب، وأجري لهم اختبار قبلي، ثم دُرِّسوا باستخدام طريقة الترجمة النحوية، وأخيراً أُجري لهم اختبار بعدي. أظهرت نتائج الاختبار البعدي تقدماً ملحوظاً في درجات الطلاب. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن طريقة الترجمة النحوية يمكن أن تُستخدم كأداة أساسية للطلاب ذوي المستوى المنخفض لضمان اكتساب القواعد والمفردات الأساسية كمرحلة أولية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، طريقة الترجمة النحوية، ليبيا، طلبة الجامعة.

1. Introduction

English language is an integral part of academic programmes at university level in Libya. Thus, university students are expected to have mastery over basic grammatical constructions and basic vocabulary before leaving university. Since grammatical competence is primarily important in the accuracy of sentences, it has always been undertaken by teachers and theorists to find how to best teach grammar in classrooms.

Although English language curriculum in Libya has undergone noticeable changes in the past forty years, the current English language teaching in Libyan universities as well as schools is still awaiting fundamental evaluation. Until this is objectively achieved, it would be possible therefore to review the educational system and recommend any possible amendments.

There is a number of teaching methods for English as a foreign language. One of these methods is the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) known as the traditional method.

1.1. The Grammar Translation Method

The Grammar Translation Method or the Traditional Method is a foreign language teaching technique which originally came from traditional methods of teaching Greek and Latin. The method focuses on teaching grammar rules and memorization of vocabulary and translating full sentences into native languages [1]. "Traces of this method can be found in some practices today, especially in courses where reading and translation are key skills to develop in order to take a proficiency test" [2]. In addition, the significance of native language knowledge in second language teaching lies in the fact that translation can effectively enhance accuracy in foreign language learning [3]. On this basis, it is reasonable to assume that a GTM approach is essentially important in English

language classrooms because the native language knowledge shapes and contributes to accuracy in the use of the target language. In other words, students think in their native language while constructing meaningful sentences. This can enhance learners' creativity using rules and vocabulary of the target language. Moreover, translation helps identify areas of error that result from negative transfer induced by the mother tongue. It is, therefore, very important that the use of translation is controlled and closely monitored in order to guarantee well-formed structures using appropriate vocabulary and to avoid fossilized errors that might result from negative transfer.

However, some drawbacks of GTM have been brought up to attention in previous literature [4-6]. For example, teacher domination makes class activities teacher-centered. Thus, the lack of teacher-student interaction might lead to a boring teaching atmosphere for students. Another drawback is that GTM, by definition, does not focus on communicative skills for students. This will result with students' inability to communicate confidently and fluently in the target language [7].

Although some negative effects may result from translation during the process of foreign language teaching, translation can play an active role in learning the target language [7-8]. The application of the Grammar Translation Method, therefore, encourages students to discuss the grammar and vocabulary they are studying. One may argue that, if such discussions within class activities are guided properly by teachers, they may contribute to confident and precise use of the target language [9]. In the present paper, we do not claim to argue against the assumed drawbacks of GMT. Rather, we intend to focus on using GTM for a foundational phase in the learning process. Once students make good progress in learning basic grammar and vocabulary they will be ready to move on to another phase that might include other appropriate teaching techniques.

1.2. Statement of the problem

It is undertaken in the present study to examine the validity of GTM as a foundational tool in teaching English to Libyan university students. Crucial to the present experiment, the sample of students being investigated can be defined as adult university learners with poor knowledge of English. At the College of Industrial Technology (CIT) in the city of Misurata, students are required to master basic grammar and vocabulary for technical English. They are expected to write concise laboratory demonstrations and reports. Given the short duration of the course (three-month semester), it is assumed that their mother-tongue competence – an existing language knowledge- might be manipulated in order to enhance the process of English language learning. These students are mature and educated. It is, therefore, assumed that an ideal situation is that they deal with formal demonstrations of English grammar with reference to Arabic grammar and translation. In addition, for learning new vocabulary the students are expected to successfully rely on translation and memorization of word lists. Thus the present study undertakes to investigate to what extent GTM might be appropriate for teaching basic English to Libyan university students.

2. Method

2.1. Subjects, data collection and analysis

The current research investigates students' progress in learning English for engineering after the application of the GTM at CIT, bearing in mind the short length of time GTM was implemented. Ten students were pre-tested to determine their level in English as a baseline before the experiment took place. For a three-month semester GTM was implemented. Class activities included passage translations, demonstrating grammatical rules, and reading comprehension. Students were encouraged to memorize lists of vocabulary and their meanings in Arabic. Students were also prompted to use these words in the grammatical structures they have learned. In addition, students were trained to compare new English rules to Arabic rules via deductive tasks. This was primarily to encourage students to combine words into higher-level structures, i.e., phrases and sentences. Once students felt confident with producing simple short sentences, they were prompted to write larger composition texts (e.g., short and simple paragraphs about the topics that were covered in class). After a three-month semester of the application of GTM, a post-test was carried out to determine the progress made by the students.

After data collection was completed, the scores were visualized and analysed using Excel to find out if the students have made significant progress. A paired t-test was carried out for the two sets of data (the pre-test as a control and the post-test as an experimental condition). The next section presents the results of the data analysis in relation to the research question. As was stated above, the present experiment is to investigate to what extent GTM might be appropriate for teaching basic English to Libyan university students.

3. Results

Overall, the general trend in the data as illustrated in (Figure 1) shows that students' scores reflect remarkable progress after the implementation of GTM. In other words, post-test results for students' scores show the highest score was achieved by one student (coded as MD) who made a 70% increase, i.e., from 20% in the pre-test to 90% in the post-test. The next highest increase in score was made by three students (coded as Amb, AE and AG) who made approximately a 40% increase in their post-test scores, compared to pre-test scores. One student's score (coded as IM) increased by about 30 % while another student (coded as SS) made as little as 16% increase. One student (coded as MDq) increased in the post-test from almost zero to 10 marks. The three remaining students showed a decrease in marks in the post-test when compared to the pre-test. It is worth noting that these three students exhibited a much lower level in English than their colleagues in general. Possibly these three students require special attention and need to be taught separately.

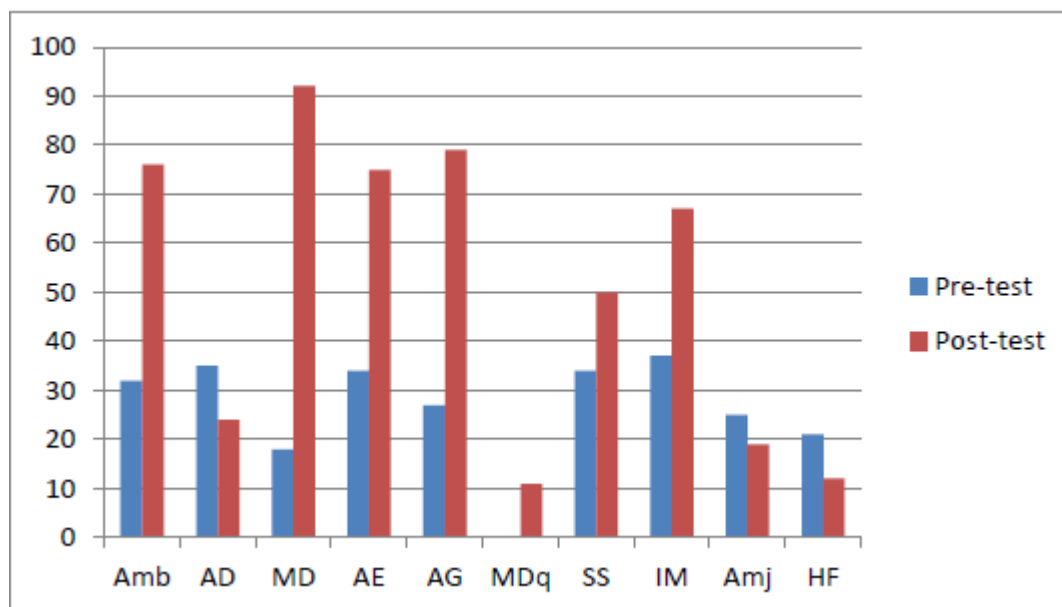


Figure 1: Students' marks in the pre-test compared to those in the experimental post-test.

To statistically examine the general pattern shown in (Figure 1), a paired t-test was carried out for students' scores in the first and second semesters.

Table 1. Results of t-test comparing students' scores for both the pre-test and the post-test.

Difference Scores Calculations

Pre-test

N_1 : 10

$df_1 = N - 1 = 10 - 1 = 9$

M_1 : 26.3

SS_1 : 1132.1

$s^2_1 = SS_1 / (N - 1) = 1132.1 / (10 - 1) = 125.79$

Post-test

N_2 : 10

$df_2 = N - 1 = 10 - 1 = 9$

M_2 : 50.5

SS_2 : 8794.5

$s^2_2 = SS_2 / (N - 1) = 8794.5 / (10 - 1) = 977.17$

T-value Calculation

$s^2_p = ((df_1 / (df_1 + df_2)) * s^2_1) + ((df_2 / (df_2 + df_2)) * s^2_2) = ((9/18) * 125.79) + ((9/18) * 977.17) = 551.48$

$s^2_{M1} = s^2_p / N_1 = 551.48 / 10 = 55.15$

$s^2_{M2} = s^2_p / N_2 = 551.48 / 10 = 55.15$

$t = (M_1 - M_2) / \sqrt{(s^2_{M1} + s^2_{M2})} = -24.2 / \sqrt{110.3} = -2.3$

The p-value is ($p < 0.05$).

Results in (Table 1) show that, generally, the increase in scores that took place in the post-test after implementing GTM, when compared to those in the pre-test is significant ($p = .05$). These results suggest that the application of the Grammar Translation method has positively contributed to the learning process and consequently helped students make significant progress in learning English grammar and vocabulary. These results introduce an answer to the research question in that they provide experimental evidence for the validity of GTM as a foundational tool in teaching English to university students in Libya.

4. Discussion

The results reported in the present paper provide evidence that the application of The Grammar Translation Method may contribute to significant progress in learning basic English grammar and vocabulary for (mature) Libyan university students. Thus, through teaching grammar, students were given the means to construct well-formed sentence structures. Students mainly relied on demonstration of rules in Arabic and translation. In addition, students were also encouraged to memorise word lists. In other words, students were prompted to learn English vocabulary in terms of grammatical categories (as demonstrated in Arabic grammar). For example, a crucial class activity was that new words must be memorized on the basis of their grammatical categories, for example, whether a word is a noun, a verb, an adjective or an adverb. Within a given sentence, a noun, for example, can be a subject or an object. In other cases, a noun can precede another noun to function as an adjective (e.g., a car engine). Thus, word lists were memorized on this basis, and students were asked to think and combine these words into sentences. After a short period of learning (as short as three months), students became able to rely on memorized words and rules to construct sentences and phrases. In other words, students showed progress in constructing sentences based on the grammatical functions of the words. For example, they demonstrated ability in using a noun as a subject preceding the verb, as an object following the verb, and in some cases as a noun preceding another noun and functioning as an adjective to modify another noun. Additionally, students became reasonably able to use an adverb to modify a verb or another adverb. Importantly, the class activities including demonstrating grammar and new vocabulary were carried out in Arabic.

Although these students studied English for six years before entering university, they should be regarded as absolute beginners. This is because their commands in English were very low. It is worth noting that, after a short period of time (duration of the experimental semester) students showed some mastery of grammar and vocabulary. These findings are consistent with the view that translation helps students to identify areas of potential error, i.e., negative transfer which can be avoided when performing in the target language. Thus, it is observed here that teaching English to beginners through the use of translation may facilitate the learning process. Although many argue against the GTM in that it neglects teaching communicative skills, we do not claim to argue against these drawbacks. On the contrary, we argue that native language knowledge can be implemented as a foundational teaching approach for mature university students. This is mainly to equip students with minimal grammar and vocabulary. Once students achieve minimum grammar and vocabulary, classroom procedure may shift to another appropriate technique. Thus, the implication of the present study is that GTM can help students develop basic grammar and vocabulary as a starting phase.

5. Conclusion

The importance of grammar is that words can be combined into larger meaningful constructions, i.e., phrases, sentences and paragraphs. For students to be able to grasp the basic grammatical knowledge of the target language, they can benefit from existing, i.e., native language grammatical competence. The present paper presents experimental evidence that the GTM is a suitable method for teaching basic grammatical and vocabulary knowledge Libyan students at university levels.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author(s) declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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