

A REVIEW OF THE CONTRIBUTION TO SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: A CASE-STUDY OF THE GRAMMAR TRANSLATION METHOD AND THE AUDIOLINGUAL METHOD

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Received: 2018-04-28

Revised: 2018-04-16

Accepted: 2019-08-03

ABSTRACT

The process of second language acquisition (SLA) was governed for a long time mainly by two approaches in language learning: namely grammar translation method (GTM) and audiolingual method (ALM). Even though they belong to different time periods and they characterize different contexts of learning, they both still could be applied successfully to a classroom environment nowadays. This paper provides some pedagogical implications and insights both for new and experienced teachers in the industry. As this paper argues, both methods have their own advantages and disadvantages and perhaps a balance between the two would be the desired model, especially with reference to Thailand. Moreover, there are various ways to measure the effectiveness of each one, which will subsequently inform teachers of how to approach their lessons both from a theoretical and a practical perspective better.

Keywords: audiolingual method, grammar translation method, second language acquisition

INTRODUCTION

At large, SLA refers to the study of how individuals and groups are learning a language that is subsequent to their mother tongue (L1) as well as the contentious forces and dynamics at work involved in the process of learning that additional language. The additional language or the target language is usually referred to as the second language (L2) despite the fact that it actually could be the third, fourth, or tenth language to be acquired (Pongpuen, Kimura, Kijpoonphol & Anupan, 2018).

In order to understand how SLA works, one needs to examine how both L1 and L2 co-interact and mutually influence and reinforce one another in the process of the acquisition of the L2. For that reason, it is essential that one acknowledges first the inter-dependent and inter-twined nature of their relationship. It is important then to consider the role of teaching methodology in terms of facilitating the process of acquisition better from a practical perspective, irrespective of many factors that could affect this process in a negative way, such as L1 interference, for example. Thus, one needs to implement the appropriate theoretical model that will help learners avoid mistakes existing between L1 and L2 and, eventually, become proficient in the L2.

In light of this, the following academic article will examine critically the influence of two different principles in the field of SLA: namely the GTM and the ALM as key methods in the study of language. This article will also present various views and opinions in favour of the strengths and weaknesses of these two approaches to the study of language. As this academic article will argue, awareness of both of them might facilitate the theory and practice of SLA better, especially in the case of Thailand.

FRAMEWORK ANALYSIS

The GTM

From the late eighteenth century until the 1960s, language learning in a lot of countries was dominated by the GTM. This method was firstly applied to classical Latin and Greek and then to modern foreign languages. In essence, this method focused on the “rote study” of the structures and grammatical rules of the L2 (Munday, 2008: 7-8). The proponents of this method argued that translation exercises and the mastery of vocabulary knowledge were essential for the study of L2 (Mart, 2013).

Nevertheless, the GTM lost popularity with the rise of the direct method of communicative approach to English

language teaching in the 1960s and 1970s. This method considered spoken forms more important than written forms and abandoned translation as a primary mode of language learning (Munday, 2008: 8).

Audiolingualism

The theory of language underlying Audiolingualism was influenced from a view proposed by American linguists in the 1950s, known as structural linguistics. Structural linguistics had developed as a reaction to traditional grammar. Structuralists argued that people learnt to speak before they learnt to read or write and, thus, speech had a priority in teaching a language (Richards & Rodgers, 1987).

Subsequently, these theories of language learning led to the emergence of Audiolingualism or the ALM. It has its roots in behavioural psychology or behaviourism that studies all aspects of human behaviour and learning, including language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 1987).

In the context of language learning, its key propositions are as follows:

➤ Phrases are memorized and repeated until one has acquired the ability to have the right pronunciation, intonation and oral proficiency in L2 (Bortolin, 2014).

➤ Learning a foreign language is, thus, a process of “mechanical formation

habit”. Good habits happen as a result of giving correct responses rather than making mistakes (Richards & Rodgers, 1987).

➤ Explaining grammar is “kept to a minimum” and vocabulary is rather taught in context (Bortolin, 2014).

It could be argued that both the GTM and the ALM have their own strengths and weaknesses when it comes to learning L2. The following section will explain in more details the strengths and weaknesses of each approach in context.

CONTENT

The Strengths of the ATM when Compared to the GTM

It could be argued that the ALM could prove more effective in exposing students to the correct sound and pronunciation in the L2. Thus, this method is quite effective in promoting fluency and oral proficiency in the L2.

Moreover, it could be assumed that it is a faster or more instantaneous way of learning since it relies on memorization and the automatic reproduction of the correct forms. As a result, it has a more immediate effect and is more effective for every-day communication. In contrast, the GTM is often taught out of context and it does not always guarantee that the speaker would be able to

apply their grammatical knowledge to any given social situation or setting.

In light of this, recent studies done in Thailand suggest that as a result of the application of the ALM, students' performance in the area of listening and speaking activities was found to have improved. Thus, their post-test scores greatly improved as a result of the application of this particular method. Moreover, learners stated that they enjoyed participating in classes where this method had been applied and they also expressed the view that they had become braver and more confident in terms of speaking English (Chunsuvimol, Boonpok & Charoenpanit, 2017).

Furthermore, the results of another recent study conducted in Thailand suggest that the ALM, in particular, also helps Thai learners memorize dialogues and vocabulary patterns and structures more easily, and they can later on apply that knowledge (and skills) better when communicating with foreigners in English. Moreover, as the study found, participants shared that they were "happy" and "eager to learn English" as a result of the application of the ALM (Kunnu, 2017).

The Weaknesses of the ALM when Compared to the GTM

Despite promoting fluency in the L2, it could be argued that the ALM does

not necessarily guarantee autonomy and independence in processing the L2. If one does not possess knowledge of grammatical structures, then one could not be unique and creative enough in processing the L2.

As a result, the ALM could be quite restrictive in terms of guaranteeing creativity, individuality, uniqueness, autonomy and independence in processing the language. In contrast, the GTM might prove more useful since it enables the speaker to employ various grammatical structures to express precisely what they mean. Perhaps, the GTM then should precede the ALM. It makes complete sense to assume that it is always better for one to familiarize themselves with the structures of the L2 first before they start practicing listening and speaking.

In light of this, recent studies done in Thailand suggest that, as a result of having been applied, the GTM was found to be quite effective when teaching students the correct use of grammar and also in terms of their vocabulary development. In this regard, Sittirak (2015) argues that when taught through appropriate classroom activities, such as for example through translating long lyrics, the GTM could prove highly efficient in terms of helping students eventually improve their grammar and expand on their vocabulary.

Thus, the ALM might not always be that helpful, because it ignores knowledge and understanding of grammar when learning the L2. It solely relies on the memorization and automatic reproduction of forms in the L2 seen as a habitual action. One could argue that people should not be thought of as passive recipients and learners of language expressions, but as active and conscious inventors and innovators in the process of second language development. Thus, Audiolingualism might not necessarily prove to be a helpful language learning theory in the long term.

In this regard, Liu and Shi (2007) argue that the GTM is still widely practiced nowadays, because there is “no inherent contradiction” between the instruction of grammar and the application of communicative approaches when learning a language. The authors further explain that explicit grammar instruction can actually complement communicative language teaching as it raises learners’ “conscious awareness” of the forms and the structure of the L2. Thus, the L1 can function as a reference system and help learners avoid misunderstandings in the process of acquiring the L2. Moreover, as the authors argue, implementing translation as a practice technique could put the learner into an

“active problem-solving situation” in the process of SLA.

Judgement

In a local Thai context, when compared with each other, as previous studies above have suggested, both the GTM and the ALM have proven successful when applied to SLA. A relevant question that might emerge, therefore is, which method might prove more efficient in the acquisition of L2 in the long run, especially with regard to Thailand.

On the one hand, it might largely depend on the learning context and what students’ needs are at the time: thus, as to whether students need to be taught grammar mostly if they lack those skills or whether emphasis should be placed on communicative skills or fluency throughout the lessons if students’ skills in that area are poor, respectively. Alternatively, perhaps a balance between both approaches could be achieved as to maximize the levels of students’ learning progress and learning potential. Here, it is worth examining what teachers’ perceptions and views are related to this issue.

In this regard, a recent study conducted in Thailand found that the integration of both the GTM and the ALM indeed helped improve learners’

communicative skills. Thus, Prasansaph and Lateh (2018) found that when learning through the integration of both the GTM and the ALM via a Facebook application, Bangkok public taxi drivers' performance levels in terms of speaking greatly improved and, moreover, they expressed high levels of satisfaction of learning using that particular method.

In another recent study again conducted in Thailand, as themselves participants in the study, teachers expressed the view that "integrative teaching" could work quite efficiently at times. Thus, they stated that at times it worked extremely well if all skills were taught simultaneously, even within a single lesson. They further explained that while the focus was on communication, grammar was taught implicitly and pronunciation was emphasized in the lessons. Thus, they held the view that teaching all four skills in a single lesson or applying an integrative approach could work really well at times (Soongpankhao, 2016).

Perhaps an efficient way to measure the effectiveness of each method both from a theoretical and a practical perspective is through classroom-based action research and, especially, classroom observation. Such methods will largely enable teachers to observe the learning environment and

further explore and examine aspects of teaching and learning related to both the ALM and the GTM in more depth, and apply measures and action to change and improve the learning environment, accordingly.

In a recent study conducted in Thailand, an English lecturer shared his suggestions and findings as a result of classroom-based action research and, in particular, classroom observation. Thus, Mr. Tassev asserts that after having observed his students and their learning experiences in the classroom, he found that it all depends on what the learners' needs and levels are at the time and, accordingly, the teacher has to make a decision about which approach or strand should be given a higher priority over others in terms of practice and time throughout the course or the lesson. Thus, if, for example, one notices that students' skills in terms of fluency in English are poor, one should then emphasize on improving their fluency in the L2 and apply the appropriate communication methods and techniques. Respectively, if the teacher notices that students' grammar and writing skills are bad, he/she should then aim at targeting those particular skills and spend more time on form-focused instruction (Tassev, 2014).

Alternatively, one could also measure the effectiveness of both methods through

assessing the levels of students' performance and, in particular, through pre-test and post-test scores after both methods have been integrated in lesson planning and course materials. Students' scores will, thus, reveal how effective each method is and, respectively, what the strengths and shortcomings of each method are both from a theoretical and practical perspective.

In addition, one could elicit from students which method they might prefer again after each method has been applied to teaching and integrated in lesson planning and course materials. Students' perceptions and attitudes, thus, might play a significant role in determining the strengths and weaknesses of each method.

CONCLUSION

In sum, it could be concluded that both approaches to SLA are important. For example, the GTM is useful for building grammar skills, enhancing vocabulary development as well as improving translation skills in the process of SLA. The ALM in its own right is important for promoting accurate pronunciation, listening and comprehension skills as well as promoting oral proficiency

or fluency in the L2, in general. A recurring theme of this paper is that one should not be favoured at the expense of excluding the other. Ideally, they should go hand in hand if possible and an integrative approach might prove the most successful in a classroom environment, which is at times the case in Thailand as previous studies suggest. It is all a matter of how you go about teaching them both.

In addition, as stated above, the effectiveness of each method could be measured through classroom-based action research and, in particular, classroom observation. The teacher then would be able to notice the areas where students' skills are poor and focus on improving those particular skills by applying either method, respectively. Once again, it largely depends on what students' needs and levels are at the time and this should be the starting point in the process of how the teacher plans his/her lessons, prepares lesson and course materials and, lastly, goes about planning which between both methods to implement and apply that would suit students' best interests both from a theoretical and a practical perspective.

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