

Realities or farce of criticisms of grammar translation: The german experience in Nigeria

Emeka C. Ifesieh

Department of Languages and Linguistics
Delta State University, Abraka
Delta State, Nigeria

Abstract

Translation is a humanistic enterprise used in language pedagogy. However, applying translatorial action process in language teaching, otherwise known as grammar translation (GT) approach has come under serious criticisms ranging from methodological lapses – abandonment of the primacy of oracy in language teaching to quasi- or non-actualization of the objectives of the language teaching and learning – acquisition of native-like language processing speed by the learner coupled with semantic dislocations due to source- and target language mismatches arising from incomprehension of use variations of the two languages in contact. Using unobtrusive observation, interactions with the teachers and learners of German (in the only three Nigerian universities where students are graduated in B.A. German), documentations on foreign language teaching and the contrastivist's viewpoint to evaluate the learning of German, one notices that there is avalanche of evidence in support of the effectiveness of GT approach for German learning in Nigeria. Subsequently, through deductive argumentation, it is demonstrated that GT is evidently necessary for the development of cognitive strategy in the language learning and speaks for maximal development of linguistic competence and performance. Therefore, GT approach is represented as a viable approach to the foreign language teaching and learning in Nigeria.

Keywords: *grammar translation, native-like language processing speed, unobtrusive observation, deductive argumentation, development of cognitive strategy*

Introduction

Translation is a sophisticated humanistic operation geared towards recapturing a source language (SL) text with a synonymous target language (TL) text. This definition emphasizes that translation should take proper cognisance of both the structure and concepts found in the SL text which should be recaptured in the TL text with synonymous structures and concepts (Ajunwa 1991:13; Bassnett 1996:2; Catford 1965:1).

Translation being a humanistic enterprise is artistic and this feature of translation places it at a vantage position for both linguistic and pedagogical development. As an instance, whereas teaching is defined as an art of creating conditions in the mind of the

learner, which enables him to internalize or acquire some skills and specialized knowledge, learning is the process of acquisition of knowledge, skills and experience that are impacted by the teacher. Sequels to that, for effective learning, two stages apply: 1. ability to assimilate information given by the teacher; 2. ability to methodically reproduce the acquired knowledge, if otherwise, learning cannot be said to have taken place.

What GT does is to locate both teaching and learning within the purview of the translatorial action process. Subsequently, acquiring the four basic skills in two languages which include; reading and writing, listening and speaking are essentially insufficient for a maximal communicative competence. A language teacher, who applies GT approach should possess certain professional translator's skills:(a) sensitivity for spoken and written language, that is, he should have the ability to discriminate nuances of the language of habitual use and to write elegantly, neatly, plainly, tersely and naturally in a number of stylistic registers; (b) a wide knowledge of language and culture of habitual use including land marks and basic institutional facts and terminologies to describe and categorise linguistic terms; (c) a good knowledge of the topics under discourse and (d) knowledge of two or three foreign languages and cultures. It has been discovered that the more technical the text is, the less important the knowledge of foreign language and its culture. Therefore, technicality of text is in inverse proportion to the cultural and linguistic knowledge.

GT was used in teaching Greek and Latin languages in the 18th and 19th centuries. It is still used to teach the languages as evident in the Department of Classics, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. Its use for teaching the languages gave rise to the method being called the classical method, because the two languages are called classical languages (Kim 2008; Zhou and Niu 2015; Xia 2014). The origin of GT is not located in the efforts to teach languages via grammar learning and translation exercises. Rather, the original idea was to reform the traditional grammar approach to suite the requirements of pedagogy (Mondal 2012). However, GT has come under heavy criticisms on the basis of its techniques: 1. it is more teacher centred than the student; 2. emphasis is on reading and writing, not on performance, which is the primary application of language; 3. medium of teaching is predominantly mother tongue, not the target language; 4. sociocultural factors are not catered for using the method and 4. it makes learners think in the mother tongue instead of in the target language (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Jewad and Verma 2014; Ahmad and Rao 2013). Richards and Rodgers (2001) suggest that GT is a method without theory in domains of linguistics, psychology and education. Sequel to that, this article sets out to demonstrate that GT is not as bad as described, for it is still a vital method in foreign language teaching and learning in Nigeria, e.g., German.

Methodology

Both the teachers and learners of German were interviewed and interacted with at the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Oyo state; University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu state and Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun state to ascertain their views as regards the

teachers' impression of and learners' responses to the use of English (Nigeria's official language, which is also considered a near mother tongue to Nigerians) in teaching German, both in the classroom and in some pen and pencil tests at the nascent level of the language learning. Unobtrusive observations were also made on the learners' reactions vis-à-vis the language of classroom instruction. Language theories, published documentations on foreign language teaching/learning and the contrastivist's viewpoint were used deductively to re-examine the possible vivacity and effectiveness or otherwise of the GT as regards the teaching and learning of German. German is chosen as a model example because it is seen as being more foreign than French in the Nigerian linguistic ecology. Illustratively, French is studied in both the primary and secondary schools in Nigeria; it is even written at both General Certificate Examination {(GCE) (ordinary level)} and Joint Admissions and Matriculation Examinations (JAMB) in Nigeria, unlike German; French is the second official language of Nigeria. Besides, many African countries use French as their official language. Nigeria is also surrounded by French speaking countries, which exert francophone effect on her.

The use of GT in teaching German in the three Nigerian Universities

Interview Question (for both teacher and learner): Should German classes be delivered in English or German?

Response Report: Virtually all the students from the three universities said that they would prefer the teaching of German in English most especially in the early years of the language learning. The students at the University of Ibadan specifically mentioned that using German to teach German may begin at three hundred level (300 Level). However, they also said that there should be translation of what is said in German into English from time to time to aid comprehension. The students even said that they cogitate in English. Therefore, explaining difficult words, phrases and clauses in the near mother tongue would aid comprehension and relaxed learning.

A lecturer narrated an incident that happened at the University of Ibadan, Ibadan between 1994 and 2000, when he was a student of German at the University of Ibadan, Ibadan. The lecturer said that fifty-nine (59) of them were admitted to study German in the then Department of Modern European Languages, now Department of European Studies, in 1994/1995. The admission exercise was later converted to 1995/1996 academic year due to Academic Staff Union of Universities' (ASUU) nation-wide strike, which caused a loss of an academic session. During his years of B.A. German studies, he and his class-mates had only Germans, with an exception of a Ghanaian, as lecturers. They all dispensed their language instructions in German. The experience was very de-motivating. Only few students appeared to understand what the teachers said to them in the class, the rest did not at all. The consequence was catastrophic. The situation was aggravated by rumours that there would no longer be any cultural immersion in Germany in the third year. The third

year cultural immersion programme of the course was to offer the students an opportunity to interact with the original speakers of the language in the German homeland. The catastrophe was that a great preponderance of the students applied for change of course. Some opted for Linguistics; some others went into Philosophy; yet another group went into Communication and Language Arts. Sequel to that, in their two hundred level (200 Level), the number of the students shrank from fifty-nine (59) in one hundred level (100 Level) to twenty-two (22), i.e., the German unit of the Department lost thirty-seven (37) students to some other disciples in the Faculty of Arts. The situation grew worse in the three hundred level (300 Level) as nineteen (19) students abandoned the programme for some other ones within the Faculty leaving behind only three (3) students. Only the remaining three (3) students graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in German in the set.

Interview Question (for the learner): Do you think that the teachers engage the students in a way that they learn the foreign language effectively?

Response Report: Most of the students at the three Universities responded variously that their teachers gave them written assignments on German. They also mentioned that at the entry point of the study, they knew no German, but at the exit point, i.e., at the graduation level, they not only could usually understand German, but also command proficiency in it. The main text book used for German grammar was *Themen neu aktuell* (Aufderstraße et. al. 2012) in the three universities. Nevertheless, they usually did textual analyses (whereby they noticed a lot of differences between English and German grammar), German economic geography, politics, civilization and culture. They also read German novels, dramas and poems. Generally, the interviewees said that there were many things to memorise: German lexical items and their English synonyms, set phrases in the two languages, use variations in the two languages; sometimes they engaged in drama performance in German and inter-university debates in German (usually sponsored by Goethe-Institut, Lagos, i.e., the German Cultural Centre in Lagos, Nigeria). Learning German in the Nigerian linguistic situation required heavy memorization and a great deal of concentration. Examination questions were all in German, but for a few exceptions at the nascent level of the B.A. German programme, i.e., at one hundred level (100 level).

Discussion

The use of GT approach in teaching German in the three Nigerian Universities has more values than valleys. For instance, it may lead to false notion of semantic synonymy. Secondly, there might be a de-motivating difficulty of translating from Nigerian English (L₁) to German (L₂) due to the reinforcement of reliance on processing via the L₁ thereby strengthening the L₁ interference which may have a detrimental effect - the acquisition of native like processing speed and skill irrespective of the parameters of L₂.

Nevertheless, the two pit-falls have solutions: correct lexical resemblance is attained through continual appraisal; linguistic interference is reduced relatively to the barest minimum through a greater exposure to the structures of the language.

GT is still being used in many parts of the world today for teaching foreign languages besides its use in teaching German in Nigeria, for instance, in Taiwan and Kunas, it is used in teaching English (cf. Dagalienè 2012; Chang 2011). In China, there is a strong resistance against the communicative language teaching. The traditional GT approach is preferred for teaching English (Penner 1995). This is because GT being structured and predictable can give students sense of confidence and attainment. It is suited for teachers whose command of L₂ is limited. Teachers whose command of L₁ is the same with his pupils tend to use GT approach since they understand the language specific problem of their students. In Nigeria, most teachers of German employ the GT method since the functional approach is usually very frustrating to the learners as typified in University of Ibadan, even the native speakers who teach the language in the country have been constrained to adopt GT approach. GT is used in books for self-study.

Noticing, as observed by the students is very essential in foreign language learning. It marks the turning point in the language learning process. Noticing refers to the set of procedure whereby the learner comes to the consciousness that a structure in the L₁ works differently in the L₂ system. Noticing is tremendously promoted via the GT approach (Conti 2016).

Discussing GT from the contrastivist's viewpoint

Involving GT in pedagogy has diverse implications: contrastive linguistics is invariably ingrained in language teaching and learning. This is because in translating a text from L₁ to L₂, the structures of L₁ are observed to see how lexical categories are combined to form syntactic structures and weighed with the ones of the L₂. Given this as the case, the meaning of GT can be extended to include linguistic enterprise aimed at reproducing inverted two valued typologies, which is founded on the assumption that languages can be compared (James 1980: 3). GT therefore helps one to come to grips with the structures of both L₁ and L₂. It can equally be remembered that contrastive analysis has a psychological basis—that is, prior learning affects subsequent learning and this leads to the hypothesis of 'transfer', which consist one of the most important concepts in the theory and practice of education. The hypothesis of transfer implies that gains made in one skill, for example, text translation will affect gains in other skills for example, correct functional use of language. GT therefore touches beyond the text being rendered from L₁ to L₂ in the learning situation to touch the psychological and cognitive abilities of the language learner. Therefore, the criticism that GT does not have a psychological basis cannot be sustained.

GT is like teaching a language wholly. In whole language approaches, children are encouraged to write even before they can read words because of the belief that writing develops from scribbling to invented spelling, then to mature writing (Stahl and Miller

1989:88). The point being pursued here is that GT involves writing which will develop gradually as the learner keeps on applying himself to the language learning situation. GT is akin to the traditional approach to language learning, in that it shares the same underlying presupposition that the surface structure of a text manifests its content (meaning) and imitating this surface structure by translating it into grammatically correct target language units guarantees the preservation of content. Nevertheless, this underlying presupposition may not be totally factual. In Palmer (2002) it is read that the same symbol may have different meaning associations in different languages. In addition to the immediate previous, lexical meaning may not always correspond on one to one equivalent. Some dictionary meanings do not describe exactly what the word stands for, (Wierzbicka 1996). For instance, dictionary definitions may consist of only the tacit knowledge of the symbol, which may not denote the exact meaning of the symbol. Ogden and Richards (1946: 10-12) stipulate that there is no direct relationship between an object and what it symbolizes. This claim suggests that what may constitute the tacit knowledge of a thing in one culture may be different in another culture. Besides, human imperfection cannot be totally excluded in the identification and naming of symbols. So, there is a tendency to name a symbol inappropriately, thereby creating a meaning problem. Perhaps, this might lead to the sharpest criticism on GT since it pursues more often than not the surface lexical synonymous meanings in the TL text. By implication, GT may lead to a false notion of equivalence. However, it can be asserted that continual reappraisal to rediscover symbolic meanings can adequately take care of this flaw.

Furthermore, in GT, there is what Feuerstein in relation to the theory of cognitive development call “Mediated Learning Experience (MLE)”. MLE is said to occur when an individual, typically, a child is shown or taught cognitive methods for interpreting information, for solving problems or for learning something. For example, in interacting with a child, an adult illustrates the usefulness of categorising a particular piece of information and then goes on to demonstrate a technique for doing it (Savell, Twohing and Rachford, 1986:384). Feuerstein’s cognitive theory of MLE asserts that children can learn from interacting with the environment, but emphasizes the essence of the mediation of the child’s learning by adults (i.e. teachers). The mediation, which must be guiding, encouraging, supportive enhances the child’s cognitive abilities. The enhancement of a child’s cognitive abilities can have a snow balling effect in that with the abilities enhanced, the child is capable of learning additional and even more complex cognitive operations and strategies.

In GT the teacher functions as an adult mediator in a classroom situation. His presence and leading role in the learning situation helps the child to become more aware of his cognitive processes and abilities. This implies that through the GT, learners exhibit increase in their meta-cognitive activities. An increase in meta-cognitive awareness, in turn would be expected to afford the child a greater control over his cognitive exercises and thus greater consistency with respect to the patterning of his cognitive processes.

Furthermore, Stones (1968:70) states that “our use of language also enables us to set up relationships between concepts”. In agreement with this, words which are real concrete phenomena are used to stand for abstractions. Therefore, both spoken and printed words are real physical stimuli, which elicit responses either from the reader or the hearer. Thus when two words are juxtaposed, two concepts are juxtaposed to create another concept. For example, when the words ‘tragic’ and ‘occurrence’ are brought together, the two concepts combine to make a third. However, it is not every combination of two or more words create a third. Words are combined according to grammatical conventions. For example the words ‘honesty’ and ‘long’ do not combine to form a third. The reason being that honesty cannot subcategorise for ‘long’. Subcategorization refers to the features which specify the restrictions on the choice of lexical items within a syntactic domain (Ndimele, 1999:171; Haegeman, 1993:32- 34).

Subsequently, the symbolic properties of language which enable the complex relationships between concepts to be established via the subcategorization frame increase the complexity of man’s linguistic environment enormously. This is because the most important part of man’s learned behaviour consists of learning adequate responses to complex verbal stimuli from people. With this assumption, it can be seen that the most important influence in child’s adaptation to life in society is his interaction with adults. Children may learn concepts from other children especially those who are older and have acquired the concepts themselves. Children also need experience of the real world, if they are to form concepts. However, neither of these will necessarily ensure that children form adequate concepts. Consequently, contact with adults will almost certainly be the most influential factor in the formation of children’s concepts. Adults are very important in the child’s educational world as a mediator because adults generally use language of conceptual nature and will explain the meaning of words to children as practiced in GT. Therefore, one can infer that concepts are developed from childhood to adulthood through learning and experience. By and large GT speaks powerfully for vocabulary acquisition and concept formation.

In GT approach, the language learner implicitly conforms to a system that relates sounds to meanings. This has traditionally been called the grammar of the language. In writing or understanding German for example, the language user adheres to the conventions of the German language, about which combination of words convey which meanings. ‘Hund’ means ‘dog’ and ‘das ist ein Hund’ means ‘that is a dog’. These conventions are said to describe the grammar of German. The rules for German, for example, have the capability of ‘generating’ all the legitimate sentences of German and no illegitimate ones. They can generate *die Sonne scheint*, but not *scheint Sonne die*. Grammar encompasses syntax-- the way words combine to form correct sentences; phonology — the sounds and their structures and semantics — the meaning of words and sentences. Invariably, GT approach in language acquisition is an all-embracing method. Since this approach is very informative; students in an attempt to learn so much at a time may

become frustrated and depressed on account of the complex demand placed on them by the grammar of the language. The mediator, the teacher has a role to play in this regard. He has the responsibility to break down the learning activities into small units so that the students can cope with the demands of the learning activity.

According to Clark and Clark (1977:298), “nativists propose that language acquisition is the result of innate capacities specific to language and is thus found only in human beings. Empiricists, on the contrary propose that language like other skills is learned as a result of experience”. Language acquisition has long been viewed as a process of imitation. Children learn to speak in the popular view by copying the utterances heard around them and by having their responses strengthened by the repetitions, corrections and other reactions that adult provide. This theory fails to explain certain grammatical irregularities noticeable in children’s language; such as *wented, eated, hited, oxes, taked, mouses, sheeps*. Evidently, children could not have learned these forms by a process of imitation. Evin-Tripp (1964:163-189) found that children’s imitation never contained new structures. When children at two-word stage tried to imitate longer utterances, they typically produced only two-word sentences for example:

a) Adult: I’ll make a cup for her to drink

Child: Cup drink

b) Adult: Mr. Kunha will try

Child: Kunha try

Children usually retained only the most recent, stressed, content words and omitted all the elements like articles, prepositions and auxiliary verbs that were absent from their own utterances. That is, when children imitate, they tend to be very systematic about what they imitate. Rather than trying to reproduce all they hear, they seem to put each utterance through some kind of ‘filter’ that corresponds to what they themselves already know about the structure of the language. Imitation is used primarily for the acquisition of vocabulary; children imitate new words. Imitation, therefore, does not seem to involve a mechanism through which children might learn to produce more complicated sentences. The collapse of the imitation theory of language acquisition led to intense investigation of the innateness theory. It was argued that children must be born with an innate capacity for language development. The human brain is ‘ready’ for language, in the sense that when children are exposed to speech, certain general principles for discovering or structuring language automatically begin to operate. These principles constitute, according to Crystal (1997:234) a child’s Language Acquisition Device (LAD). The child uses its LAD to decipher the meanings of utterances heard around it, deriving from this ‘primary linguistic data’, hypotheses about the grammar of the language — what the sentences are and how they are constructed.

The innateness theory presupposes the existence of universal grammar in the child’s internal make-up. According to Malmkjaer (2002:288) “principles of universal grammar

are available for the child at the onset of the acquisition process and guarantee that child's grammar will fall within the boundaries of a natural language". Earlier, Borer and Wexler (1987) mention that the universal grammar is genetically programmed to become operational at different, determined stages, rather like other aspects of human development. The innateness theory, therefore, is the mother of the other theories of language acquisition such as cognition - linguistic structures will emerge only if there is an already established cognitive foundation; for example, before children can use structures of comparison (for instance, this toy is bigger than that) they need to first develop the conceptual ability to make relative judgements of size, and input - many parents do not talk to their children in the same way they talk to other adults. The utterances are considerably simplified, especially with respect to their grammar and meaning. There is also expressive or affective element in the parental language use for children.

In GT approach adult teacher demonstrates a problem and indicates how that problem can be solved. His demonstrations are to be imitated by the learners of the language thereby lending support to the imitation theory of language acquisition. In GT approach the adult teacher's language (his input) in the language learning situation is usually the one of guarding, protecting, and neither prescriptive, categorical nor interfering as this could hinder, annihilate or destroy interest in the language learning exercise (cf. Froebel, 1887:7; Rogers, 1961:276). Since the teacher distances himself a bit from the learning atmosphere in GT, it is possible to assume that the learner initiates the path which the learning process must follow. Under this approach, teaching is not exclusively seen as telling. Invariably, the child is deliberately located in a problem solving situation with the belief that learning is most likely to follow when a person finds himself in the sort of dilemma represented metaphorically as a parting of ways. The teacher's role of guarding and protecting lends support to input theory of language acquisition.

Although universal grammar principles known as Chomskian nativism (innateness theory), which views disposition to language acquisition as a genetic endowment and functionalism, which sees the same as resulting from the need to convey social meaning (Cook 2000:118-119) can be used to argue against GT approach in language acquisition since the current belief suggests a combination of nativism and functionalism to channel students attention on meaning and communication rather than on form as this will stimulate subconscious acquisition of the language system. Translation which implies a conscious knowledge of two language systems and deliberate deployment of both is not among the practices compatible with this belief. However, translation is a cognitive exercise which improves with consistent practice and learning. In GT approach, the language learner is engaged in a rigorous linguistic experimentation in pursuit of synonymous meanings and senses in the target language. In the course of the linguistic experimentation, he makes notices and observes his successes and failures. He observes the areas where the source language is similar to the target language and vice-versa. This personal experience which exposes him to the universality of human language is in line with the theory of universal

grammar; that is, the nativists' theory. The principles and parameters which the language learner observes in the linguistic experimentation further expose him to the pragmatic natures of the two languages in contact. Taba and Elkins (1968:66) note that "a continual appraisal of progress (in language learning) is almost an absolute necessity... it is never completed". It has to be done over and over again at every step of instruction. Through the nonstop linguistic experimentation, the language learner develops a cognitive strategy for the language acquisition. Gagne (1977:35) notes that "... most important kind of capability learned by human beings is called a cognitive strategy; these are skills with which learners regulate their own internal process of attending, learning, remembering and thinking". Cognitive strategy is independent of content and generally applies to all kinds. For example, if learners have improved their strategies of attending one kind of cognitive strategy, the strategy will apply to the learning of any subject regardless of contents. This being the case, one can say that a relatively complete expansion of GT approach includes a functional and dynamic approach to language learning. Implicitly, GT and the other major approach to language teaching, the functional approaches have common denominators, viz: development skills in comprehension, communication via oracy, reading and scribbling as the goals of teaching (Penner 1995; Ting 1987).

Conclusion

Even though GT is not currently quite popular among language education theorists, it has not outlived its usefulness. The language education theorists keep on emphasizing the functional aspects of language in pedagogy to the detriment of form which is the basis of the afore-mentioned. That notwithstanding, it is evident that a thorough grasping of the form will generate an excellent functional and communicative competence in language. Consequently, the advocacy for a maximal resuscitation of GT approach in language learning stands.

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