

Umut Alintas

Nicolaus Copernicus University

**A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF THEME-BASED INSTRUCTION AND
GRAMMAR-TRANSLATION METHOD IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG
LEARNERS**

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Introduction

The Grammar-Translation Method is an approach to language teaching/learning in which the main focus is on the literature and grammar of the target language. The Grammar-Translation Method facilitates learning through translation from a mother tongue to a target language. It, thus, emphasizes mastery of grammatical rules and knowledge of vocabulary. However, hardly any attention is paid to the content and communication in the aforementioned approach. The lessons are teacher-centred and students lack an active role in the classroom. Therefore, one may assert that the Grammar-Translation Method, which is predominantly text-based, is an efficient way of learning vocabulary and grammatical structures. In most cases, the teacher gives instructions and grammatical explanations in a student's native language. Additionally, there is little or no attempt to teach pronunciation. Theme-based instruction, however, is an approach to language teaching/learning in which various curriculum areas are connected and integrated within a theme. Theme-based instruction aims to prepare students to learn a language while using the context of any subject matter. Furthermore, the contents and grammatical structures are placed in order around the chosen topic and the lessons demand performing tasks on particular themes in the classroom. Therefore, theme-

based instruction aims to implement a diversity of skills and content by compounding curriculum areas around a topic.

At the same time, theme-based instruction provides an extensive repertory of sources, exercises for pupils of all levels, including pair and group work. Topic work is a way of organizing children's language learning around topics or themes of interest to the children (Moon 118). Implementing theme-based instruction assists young learners to acquire grammatical and functional structures in context. A topic-based/task-based approach is founded on the simple fact that it is the learner who organizes the process of learning and the teacher's role is only to facilitate this process (Bourke 8). Theme-based instruction allows for making lessons contextualized and making the learning process more straightforward. In such a way, the teacher can create meaningful contexts, which enable pupils to acquire different skills and practice in various discourse types.

As Brown (236) argues, the major principles underlying theme-based learning are:

- automaticity,
- meaningful learning,
- intrinsic motivation,
- communicative competence.

As opposed to Theme-Based Instruction, the Grammar-Translation Method is descriptive and normative. The major criticism of the practice is that language development is dependent on rote memory rather than perceptual advancement. However, language rules are often complex to interpret without understanding the processes by which the rules are formed.

Theme-Based Instruction and Grammar Translation Method in EFL Classes

Implementing theme-based teaching provides authentic and motivating uses of the English language and fosters critical thinking among young learners.

Moreover, it is seen as crucial to students' development in English since it offers a professional organization, including a long list of activities related to all areas of the curriculum under one theme. By way of explanation, themes integrate listening, reading, speaking and writing and provide content, context and purpose. Predominantly, themes help students be more active in the classroom on the grounds that it seems interesting and students become more willing to participate in the activities or discussions. As Mumford states,

this method of teaching links curriculum strands and capitalizes on children's interests, creating a sense of purpose and community in the classroom. By building on their interests and life experiences, young people's attitudes, skills and knowledge are developed in meaningful ways. Inquiry and communication are activated by a desire to know more, resulting in enthusiastic participation in the learning process. (4)

Even though reading and writing are the central pragmatic objectives; little, if any, systematic attention is paid to speaking or listening skills. Richards and Rodgers (3-4) summarize the principal characteristics of the Grammar-Translation Method as follows:

- The goal of foreign language study is to learn a language in order to read its literature or in order to benefit from the mental discipline and intellectual development that result from the foreign-language study. It hence views language learning as consisting of little more than memorizing rules and facts in order to understand and manipulate the morphology and syntax of the foreign language.
- Reading and writing are the major focus; little or no systematic attention is paid to speaking or listening.
- A vocabulary section is based solely on the reading texts used and words are taught through bilingual word lists, dictionary study and memorization.
- The sentence is the basic unit of teaching and language practice. Much of the lesson is devoted to translating sentences into and out of the target language and it is this focus on the sentence that is a distinctive feature of the method.
- Accuracy is emphasized.
- Grammar is taught deductively—that is, by presentation and study of grammar rules, which are then practiced through translation exercises.
- The student's native language is the medium of instruction

The student's native language is maintained as a reference frame for the acquisition of a second language. Language learners are inactive in language

learning; hence, they cannot improve their English skills properly. Compared to Theme-Based Instruction, the Grammar-Translation Method focuses on translation from the target language and memorizing new vocabularies. Even though the Grammar-Translation Method was the principal method in Europe in the 19th century and is seen as outdated at the moment, it is still commonly used in many EFL settings. Eastern European countries, Asian countries, African and Middle Eastern countries use the Grammar-Translation Method a lot in their classrooms. One of the Asian countries, which use the Grammar-Translation Method a lot in EFL settings, is Japan. Kirkwood explicitly summarizes the reason why the Grammar-Translation Method is still quite prominent in Japanese EFL settings as follows:

Historical factors have played a major role in why grammar-translation is still so prevalent in the Japanese education system, but history is not the only reason for this method's continued popularity. Some of the advantages of the GTM make it especially useful in the context of a Japanese classroom. For example, Japanese class sizes tend to be large meaning that logistically, communicative group or pair activities are more difficult to set-up and to facilitate. Also, traditionally, Japanese teachers' instruction style is very much like a formal 'lecture' where the teacher stands at the front of the class and simply presents the information to be studied. (5)

One may find similar results in the People's Republic of China where the Grammar-Translation Method has been widely used in EFL settings. The classes are teacher-centred, students cannot be autonomous and lessons are devoted to reading and vocabulary activities. The role of Chinese teachers is to explain reading texts word by word and sentence by sentence. Consequently, students are supposed to understand grammar in detail with the help of reading activities. Furthermore, students are required to recite relevant grammar rules and memorize their meanings. Since the classes are focused on the Grammar-Translation-Method, no context is created for the acquisition of the vocabulary activities. Students are not able to practice the recently-learned vocabularies and improve their speaking skills. This problem is caused due to not only the Grammar-Translation-Method but also the number of pupils in the classrooms.

The Difference between Theme-Based Instruction and Grammar-Translation Method in Terms of Coursebooks

Young learners are in the stage of cognitive development which indicates that they acquire through hands-on activities. The teacher's role is to make pupils active rather than passive. In other words, they need to be engaged in activities and use language to accomplish the tasks. Accordingly, coursebooks used in EFL settings are crucial to the development of students. On the one hand, theme-based teaching enables contextual support in the classroom and coursebooks designed according to the outcomes of theme-based instruction provide authentic contexts through which students learn effectively. On the other hand, the Grammar-Translation Method is more helpful to increase reading and vocabulary skills. Considering the fact that the classes are conducted in a mother tongue, coursebooks may not match up in different cultures. One of the disadvantageous outcomes of teaching the lessons in L1 is that students do not have the possibility to familiarize themselves with the target language in terms of culture and traditions, even though learning about culture is crucial to learning a language. The Grammar-Translation Method and similar methods fail to meet this criterion. Some coursebooks have both L1 and L2 sentences but even if coursebooks are solely in English, the teacher is the one who translates them into the target language. They also include long, elaborate explanations of the intricacy of grammar, which sets out rules for putting words together, and instructions often focus on the form and inflection of words. In various coursebooks used to implement the Grammar-Translation Method, little attention is paid to the content of texts. Furthermore, they are generally treated as grammatical exercises. In addition, they are not related to real-life contexts. Often the only exercises are to translate disconnected sentences from a target language into a mother tongue. One of the drawbacks of implementing the Grammar-Translation Method is that it requires extensive memorization. Students are required to memorize words and learn about the

grammar rules in the target language. On the other hand, in theme-based instruction, students are supported by their teacher throughout the learning process and students learn from one another and assist their classmates throughout the learning process. Seeing the acquisition as a discovery process, young learners should be allowed to figure out how the language works. In comparison to the Grammar-Translation Method, theme-based teaching encourages mistakes in the classroom. Pupils are free to make errors and they are the ones who will restructure their emerging language system.

Consequently, in order to summarize the positive outcomes of implementing Theme-Based Instruction one might check the following what offered by (Moon 132):

- Create a real need and desire to use English
- Provide exposure to varied and meaningful input with a focus on communication
- Create a friendly atmosphere in which pupils can take risks and enjoy their learning
- Provide opportunities for children to experiment with their new language
- Provide plenty of opportunities to practice and use the language in different contexts
- Provide feedback on learning
- Help children notice the underlying pattern in language

Methodology

This study aims to investigate the response of students to theme-based instruction and the Grammar-Translation Method. The English curriculum in Turkish public schools is chiefly composed of grammar-related activities. Hence, one may say that the curriculum is focused on the Grammar-Translation Method. The students who study at public schools cannot improve their listening and speaking skills properly. Moreover, the lessons are teacher-centred; therefore, students cannot be autonomous and improve their social skills. At the same time, private language schools have their own curricula, lesson plans and activities prepared by headteachers. Furthermore, language

schools are more flexible in relation to the choice of a teaching/learning approach for young learners.

Participants

The questionnaires are filled out by twenty-five fifth-grade students. All of the participants are studying at Turkish public schools and attending a private language school in Turkey. These students are carefully selected, as all of their English proficiency is A1 according to the CEFR (Common European Framework). They learn English with the Grammar-Translation Method in the public school with the same coursebook, i.e., *Happy English*. The coursebook with which lessons are taught in the language school is *English Know-It-All*, designed in accordance with Theme-Based Instruction. *English Know-It-All*, which is the main coursebook, is the principal reference book used in the classes. Additionally, headteachers and other teachers prepare their activities to support the coursebook. On the other hand, the coursebook used in Turkish public schools, which is *Happy English*, is supported by numerous reading and vocabulary activities. No additional materials are required for use in Turkish public schools.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study adopts a quantitative approach. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the students are asked to participate in both questionnaires online. The initial questionnaire gathers data relating to the students' learning experience through the Grammar-Translation Method and Theme-Based Instruction. The following questionnaire intends to collect further information regarding their perceptions of the different coursebooks participants use in public schools and the private language school. Both questionnaires aim to encourage students to reflect on their feelings towards the two different learning approaches. Appropriately formulated questions prompted them to broaden their views on this learning experience.

A five-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) is used to assess the participants' reactions to the study (see Table 1 and 2 in Results and Discussion section). Students' responses match their perceptions of their learning experience and their motivation to learn through Theme-Based Instruction.

Results and Discussion

Students' Perceptions of their Learning Experience

The results of the first questionnaire indicate that the Grammar-Translation Method is demotivating in the learning process. As far as the participants are concerned, the units should have a relevant theme and they hold the belief that they are more engaged in learning when they are familiar with the context. In addition, participants feel that the use of L1 in EFL settings is not beneficial. The results of the questionnaire clearly show that English should be used actively in classes. A significant number of participants hold that adequate attention is not paid to listening and speaking activities in Turkish public schools. The lack of speaking and listening activities prevents participants from practicing recently-learned vocabularies. However, at the language school, they communicate in L2, as the lessons are contextualized and have real-life themes. As far as the participants are concerned, the lessons are teacher-centred in public schools; thus, students cannot be autonomous and they are not given enough chance to be active during classes. Learning vocabulary traditionally is not suitable for young learners and students deem that the memorization method is not beneficial for them. Nevertheless, theme-based instruction provides relevant themes in which students can practice and reinforce these new vocabularies through listening activities. According to the participants' perception, lessons and the syllabus at public schools are exam-focused. Teachers provide lexical items that are asked in the exams but most of these vocabularies are not relevant on a daily basis. However, the classes participants

have at the language school, the syllabus of which is designed according to the theme-based instruction, presents them real-life contexts.

Table 1. The results of the first questionnaire.

Statement	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
1. Classes are more pleasant when supported by a theme.	4.6	5	0.69
2. Coursebooks we use at the public school are beneficial. They are essential to learning English.	2.44	3	1.16
3. I am more motivated when the teacher does not speak in my mother tongue. It is more useful to listen and speak in English in the classroom all the time.	4.16	4	0.67
4. Learning grammar in traditional ways is not helpful. I prefer to learn grammar and vocabulary in a context/theme.	4.04	4	1.03
5. Themes are relevant to my daily life. These themes help me to remember the recently learned vocabulary. Moreover, it gives me the chance to practice them in speaking activities.	4.44	5	0.75
6. Learning grammatical functions and memorizing vocabularies in the lessons are crucial for my skill development.	2.24	2	1.03
7. Classes at the public school are teacher-centred, and we do not get the chance to speak. Lessons are chiefly vocabulary and grammar-focused.	4.6	5	0.48
8. The EFL education I receive at the public school is exam-focused; hence, the teacher prepares us for the upcoming exam(s), which are related to grammar and vocabulary.	4.32	5	0.83
9. The EFL education I receive from the language school is real-life-focused. We can connect vocabulary and themes with real-life situations.	4.44	4	0.63

Happy English is the main coursebook used in EFL settings in Turkish public schools. It is designed by the Basaran Publishing for implementing to the 5th-grade students. After careful examination of the units and the possible outcomes of the coursebook, one may assert that it is the coursebook focused on the Grammar-Translation Method. The teacher's manual does not provide enough activities for a teacher to involve students in lessons. Even though the coursebook is designed in accordance with the Common European Framework, the activities and units are not relevant to the students' level of English. In addition, teachers use L1 during lessons and students cannot get acquainted with L2; therefore, they cannot hear and acquire the correct pronunciation of lexical subjects. On the other hand, *English Know It All*, the content of which is highly appropriate for Theme-Based Instruction, has themes and relevant tasks in each unit. Furthermore, *English Know It All* provides speaking and listening activities, with which students can both practice their listening skills and learn the correct pronunciation of the target words. *English Know It All* fosters the active participation of students; thus, they can become autonomous.

Table 2. The results of the second questionnaire.

Statement	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
1. <i>Happy English</i> provides numerous vocabulary activities but it does not provide speaking and listening activities through which we can practice what we acquired.	4.4	5	0.69
2. <i>Happy English</i> focuses much on memorization but it does not help us pronounce those words with listening activities.	4.16	4	0.78
3. Units of <i>Happy English</i> are not coherent, and they do not blend. We cannot connect the vocabularies from one unit to the other.	3.96	4	0.77
4. <i>English Know It All</i> is a favourable coursebook. The themes and activities are motivating me.	4.28	5	0.87

5. <i>English Know It All</i> helps me to enhance my listening and speaking skills. Themes are quite helpful to learn vocabulary and to practice them in speaking.	4.24	4	0.81
6. <i>English Know It All</i> does not provide direct grammar. First, it enables us to get familiar with the themes. Then, while doing listening and speaking activities, we practice grammar. Grammar is supported by listening and speaking activities	4.32	4	0.73

Conclusion

This article concludes with the observation that the Grammar-Translation Method is not considered to be a suitable learning method for young learners. Participants deem that memorization and translation from English into a mother tongue are not helpful to their learning process. Moreover, participants believe that it is more suitable to learn vocabulary in a theme in which they can practice new words along with speaking and listening activities. As stated in the article, even though the Grammar-Translation Method is outdated, it is still quite prevalent in numerous EFL settings. In particular, Asian and Middle Eastern countries still teach English with the Grammar Translation Method. Those students have challenges with the pronunciation of recently learned vocabulary and struggle to use them in sentences. Moreover, enough attention is not paid to speaking activities and students fail to practice four skills of English. However, when lessons are designed according to Theme Based Instruction, students are able to learn in a selected context. The coursebooks used in Turkish public schools are based on the learning outcomes of the Grammar-Translation Method. Thus, the activities are focused on vocabulary and reading. The EFL settings are chiefly teacher-centred and students do not have the chance to be active in the classroom.

On the one hand, the syllabus designed with the Grammar-Translation Method prepares students for the upcoming exams through rote learning, not

acquisition. On the other hand, Theme Based Instruction provides real-life contexts in which students learn grammar, vocabulary and improve their speaking and listening skills in selected themes. From the participants' point of view, *English Know It All* makes the learning process more straightforward and efficient. Furthermore, *English Know It All* links the recently learned themes with the previous ones.

One may assert that the Grammar-Translation Method should not be used with young learners of English. Providing grammar in a context is considered more advantageous and suitable for the needs of modern EFL settings. Topic-based language teaching stimulates inquiry and communication by the desire for learning, which results in enthusiastic participation in the learning process. In short, one can say that theme-based learning is in accordance with the pupils' natural way of learning and provides meaningful and motivational use of language for students. Ultimately, theme-based instruction facilitates learning vocabulary in a context. It enables language learning through expanding communication and it assists pupils to learn discourse skills as well.

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Abstract

Theme-based instruction indicates acquiring language, along with language skills, in a precise context. To the greatest extent, theme-based instruction approaches make learning considerably distinctive from traditional teaching approaches, e.g., the Grammar-Translation Method, since it implements a real-world application in which learning takes place. Therefore, pupils are able to use their experience to make real-life developments and obtain knowledge in a given context. This paper aims to compare the

aforementioned approaches in terms of language acquisition, the development of both listening and speaking skills and the students' autonomy. It also provides a brief overview of the Grammar-Translation Method and Theme-Based Instruction and demonstrates examples of the implementation of the Grammar-Translation Method in Asian countries. Furthermore, this article reports the results of two questionnaires conducted in Turkey concerning the Grammar-Translation Method and the Theme-Based Instruction.