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The Trans-Cultural Comparative Literature Method: Using Grammar Translation Techniques Effectively

This article describes the Trans-Cultural Comparative Literature Method, an innovative way to use literature to teach advanced English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. This method originated from the authors' discovery of common themes and points of view as they compared Turkmen and English literary texts. While the method employs activities associated with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), it also borrows from techniques associated with the Grammar Translation Method (GT) by focusing on grammar, vocabulary, and limited translation exercises during cultural comparisons of literary texts.

Although GT is a widely criticized method, students from some cultures prefer its teacher-centered activities, which include vocabulary drills and the memorization of grammatical rules in a setting that deemphasizes spoken interaction in the target language (the language being learned).

However, since speaking the target language is such an important skill, we have devised a method that melds some of these favored GT techniques with interesting cultural activities that promote meaningful communication among English language learners. This adaptation of GT fits with CLT because translation and the study of grammar and vocabulary are not done in the traditional tedious way; instead, GT techniques are connected with relevant and engaging cultural activities that inspire students to communicate ideas and apply their critical thinking skills outside the classroom.

In this article we will explain how our method combines GT and CLT techniques in a lesson plan that engages students with activities that compare and contrast themes and cultural aspects found in two literary texts: one text (already translated into English) from the country where EFL is being taught and another from a country where English is spoken.

The Grammar Translation Method

Prior to the 18th century, the translation of literary texts was the main method for studying foreign languages. The Classical Method, as it was originally called, underwent a name change in the mid-1800s and was thereafter known as the Grammar Translation Method (GT). GT was criticized because it was unconcerned with students' oral communication skills. As a result, in the late 1900s the tedious GT method lost popularity in the United States (Savignon 1991). Simply learning how to translate and recite rules was insufficient for learners who recognized the value of oral communication in the target language.

GT was teacher-centered, which limited interaction and spontaneous creativity. Teachers used GT to focus students' attention on grammar and vocabulary by having them read and translate target language texts; it was assumed that this process would allow students to gain an understanding of the grammar of their own native language (Larsen-Freeman 2000). Examining grammatical structures and deducing rules was also considered an excellent mental exercise that would help students grow intellectually by broadening their language, history, and literary knowledge. However, the classical target language texts were often difficult because they were written in nonstandard language and presented as a linguistic exercise with no attempt to include themes, style, or culture into the lesson.

However, GT is still popular in some places, and is considered a good method for individuals who want to be translators and are not concerned with knowing how to speak or pronounce the target language. It is also still used in many EFL settings where students like a teacher-centered method that includes the intensive study and memorization of grammar rules and vocabulary.

Communicative Language Teaching

Traditional foreign language teaching was also teacher-centered and leaned heavily on the study and memorization of structural forms of the language being learned (Celce-Murcia 1991; Morrow 1981). The CLT approach arose in response to criticism of methods that did not prepare students to communicate effectively or to thoroughly learn the language. Numerous alternate methods appeared on the scene in the 1960s and 1970s that in one way or another tried to encourage authentic communication and improve language teaching. Finally, in the 1980s, a single communicative approach known as CLT was born (Nunan 1991, 2003).

Many researchers performed groundbreaking work and research on CLT in the classroom and highlighted the importance of real life communication needs (Canale and Swain 1980; Nunan 1991, 1993, 2003; Savignon 1991, 1997). Today CLT represents a wide variety of learner-centered methods that prepare students to interact with authentic language in real life situations and settings, where they acquire true communicative competence that includes a mastery of grammar, discourse, language style, and verbal and nonverbal strategies. Vocabulary and grammar are generally not drilled and memorized, but are instead acquired through communicative interactions and tasks that are meaningful and relevant to the English learner. In addition, because of its focus on authenticity, CLT prepares students for the linguistic challenges they encounter outside the classroom (Savignon 1991). Today, group work, task-based projects, and other communicative classroom activities are a trend among teachers and administrators who use CLT (Celce-Murcia 1991; Nunan 1991; Yalden 1983).

Resistance to Communicative Language Teaching

It has also been noted that, for various reasons, CLT methods are sometimes difficult to apply in certain areas outside of the Western world (Ellis 1996; Leung 2005; Nunan 1993, 2003; Savignon 1991). For instance, many Asian students and nonnative EFL instructors actually prefer GT because it fits their cultural mores (Amengual-Pizarro 2007; Chen 2003; Savignon and Wang 2003). According to Savignon and Wang (2003), Taiwanese students are resistant to CLT and prefer GT methods; because CLT negatively affects the students' attitudes, this impacts successful language learning, which depends on a positive attitude.

The authors found a similar attitude among our Turkmen students, as many lack confidence in speaking English. However, at

the same time they did want speaking practice. This led to the idea to incorporate some GT techniques into the CLT curriculum, with the goal of encouraging the students to practice their oral skills in a non-threatening manner.

Teaching literature in second language classrooms.

Even though some GT techniques may be popular, EFL teaching methods require more than the presentation of grammar and vocabulary lessons; they must also stimulate multicultural awareness and critical thinking skills that students need to become fluent, successful English speakers who can handle advanced communicative activities.

Classical and modern literature has often been overlooked in the EFL classroom, especially regarding advanced EFL students. Research on the benefits of literature in language teaching extends back to the 1980s, when it was recognized that literature is a conduit for improved critical thinking skills (Oster 1989). According to Van (2009, 7), literary texts are effective in promoting English language development in all four skills "through interaction, collaboration, peer teaching, and student independence." Other scholars have also remarked on the effectiveness of using novels as teaching tools in the ESL classroom (Paran 2008; Yahya and Rahim 2009).

Guidelines for the Trans-Cultural Comparative Literature Method.

The host English instructors in Turkmenistan and the American guest instructor developed their ideas for this method by comparing similar genres and themes in stories, poems, and novels in the Turkmen and English languages. We often found striking similarities and differences, such as in the way a hero was portrayed or a story was told. We also discovered that we could use these comparisons to teach our students much more than the English language because in addition to learning new words, idioms, and grammar, our students were able to obtain valuable and interesting cultural insights. When one sees the interaction that results from students analyzing two culturally different texts similar in structure, the importance of using literature as a classroom activity is obvious.

This method does not simply compare two texts; rather, it explores worldviews using information and knowledge of literary structures that appeal to and stimulate our students. The Trans-Cultural Comparative Literature Method focuses on grammar and vocabulary, but also allows students to analyze and compare culturally diverse points of view, perspectives, and ways of describing the world through a basic literary analysis of each text.

Following are some important guidelines for using this method:

- Due to the fact that literature requires advanced linguistic and cognitive skills, the Trans-Cultural Comparative Literature Method is recommended for high-intermediate and advanced students.

- Students examine two literary texts that have similar features, one from the host country where EFL is being taught and the other from an English-speaking country. To complete the activities, teachers must find English translations of the host-country literary texts, and this can be difficult. For example, since few English translations of Turkmen literature currently exist, it was necessary to translate the Turkmen texts in advance. We also decided to write some new Turkmen stories in English to add to the choice of available reading materials.

- Choosing the correct text is very important for purposes of interest, relevance, and language level. We began with short poems and moved on to the short story, and we have plans to present excerpts from novels and even stories written by students.

- The comparative literature method can be extended to a plethora of genres, including music, social networking sites, and specific websites from English-dominant countries and non-English-speaking countries. Other social topics are also amenable to this method, such as religion (comparing the beliefs of two different religions) or identity issues (comparing the nomadic versus the urban lifestyle). In fact, this method can be applied to any English teaching situation where it is possible to analyze cross-cultural differences.

- Co-teaching by a native speaker of each language is highly recommended. This provides indispensible informants who can decipher some of the cultural concepts that appear in the literature of each country.

- The activities presented here took several class periods. Since it is time-consuming for students to achieve the necessary degree of familiarity with the literary texts, we recommend that teachers calibrate the time they have available and adjust the activities accordingly.

Using the Trans-Cultural Comparative Literature Method with poetry.

For this activity the Turkmen teachers chose an English translation of a poem written by Turkmenistan's well-known national poet, Maktunguli, and the American teacher chose a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the noted American transcendental poet. Both poets have national stature in their respective countries, lived in the same era, and address similar themes in their poems. For example, both poets had written poems about nature; in fact, the title of both poems was "Nature" (Природа).

In the following lesson plan, techniques from both GT and CLT work together to facilitate speaking in English.

Step 1: Before reading
1. Print out vocabulary lists and highlight the significant grammar points in the two poems.
2. Check student knowledge of English by having them identify grammatical structures and define vocabulary.
3. Have students generate sentences using the poems' grammar and vocabulary to establish comprehension and build background knowledge.

Step 2: Reading
Students do a close reading of both poems.

Step 3: After reading
1. The co-teachers mediate a class discussion about elements of both poems, including theme, rhyme, style, symbolism, and metaphor.

2. Give students a handout with the following questions, ranging from easy to difficult:
   - Compare the word count of both poems.
   - Compare the parts of speech. Does one poem use more adjectives?
   - Does one poem use more verbs?
   - Does one poem use more adverbs?
   - Does either poem rhyme?
   - Do the poems have similar grammatical features? How are they different?
   - Which poem appeals to you?
   - Can you identify a metaphor?
   - Can you identify a symbol?
   - Is this symbol the same for both cultures?
3. Students form pairs and work together to answer the questions.
4. If students are advanced enough, the pairs can translate some lines of the English poem into their native language.
5. The student pairs take turns presenting their translations to the class. Teachers ask the following questions: Why did you choose this word? Can this be said easily in your language? Can you translate this symbol literally into your language?
6. The whole class chooses the best translations from among all those presented.

Step 4: Preparing a presentation
1. Divide the class into two or more groups, depending on the size of the class. (In our case, the class consisted of 12 to 15 students, and we divided the class into two groups.)
2. Student groups use their knowledge of the two poems to prepare a presentation about their analysis of each text undertaken in Step 3.
3. Each group has one class period to meet in a separate room or another appropriate space. Providing tea and treats or other refreshments may help students relax.
4. Each group works in English and discusses the poems' themes, symbols, adjectives, or some other element.
5. Each group chooses a single topic and writes their ideas with colored markers on big sheets of poster paper.

Step 5: Presenting the results

Students take turns presenting results. For example, in our class the first group wrote adjectives from the poems that described "nature" on the poster paper; each group member chose an adjective and talked about the word. Around each adjective, synonyms were displayed with examples in sentences. The second group spoke about symbols in the poems, and their posters merged words with visual images by displaying imaginative pictures of what the students thought the symbols in both poems conveyed.

Step 6: Pairs fill out comparison chart

1. After the presentations each student from Group 1 pairs up with a student from Group 2.
2. The new pairs work together to fill in a chart of the two poems side by side, listing and answering the questions that were presented in Step 3.
3. Student pairs survey each other about the following questions:

   - Which poem had more difficult vocabulary?
   - What did you notice about the word order in each poem?
   - What symbols are in each poem?
   - What metaphors are in each poem?
   - Which poem did you like the best? Why?
   - Will you read other poems by this poet?
   - Do you read poetry often?
   - What subjects are best for poetry?

Step 7: Whole class discussion

To wrap up, the co-teachers lead an open discussion about the environment (because the poems were about nature) and culture. This can lead to interesting discussions. For example, when one student claimed that capitalist societies did not support poets, we discussed the role of the poet in society. We also asked students if politics affected poetry.

Step 8: Homework

1. For homework, we assigned students to work together in groups of three to conduct research on one of the following topics:

   - What subjects do poets write about?
   - Are poets political or apolitical?

- If poetry is sung, is it still poetry?
- How many different styles of poetry can you find on the Internet? Who is a poet you admire?

2. The small groups presented their findings in three- to five-minute talks during the next class.

Using the Trans-Cultural Comparative Literature Method with a short story

The poetry sessions worked well, so we moved on to the short story genre. We decided to compare two short stories: an English translation of "The Velvet Rose," by Arabov Kurbanov, and "The Summer of the Beautiful White Horse," by William Saroyan. Both stories deal with the importance of family and neighborly relationships. Both stories also present similar cultural aspects—the difference between stealing and borrowing, and obligations one has to family and community.

As with the poetry lesson plan, the following steps use techniques from both GT and CLT to facilitate speaking in English.

Step 1: Before reading

1. Discuss grammatical aspects that are highlighted in the texts, including parallel structures, past tense verbs, and capitalization. This is important because our students must take an assessment exam that requires them to identify grammar, including parts of speech, verb tenses, and punctuation.
2. Pass out vocabulary lists and quiz students using CLOZE exercises.

Step 2: Reading

Students do a close reading of the short story, paying attention to the grammatical aspects that are marked in the text.

Step 3: After reading

1. The co-teachers mediate a class discussion about elements of both short stories, including style, symbolism, and metaphor.
2. Conduct a comprehension check with an open book quiz.
3. Students form pairs and analyze the short stories for additional literary concepts of theme, setting, plot, and characters.
4. Divide the class into two groups and hand out the following list of questions:

- Who is the hero?
- How old is he or she?
- Who are the other characters?
- What roles do the characters play?
- What happens in the story?
- What metaphors and symbols can you identify?
- Which story is longer?
- Which story is more interesting to you?
- What are the messages, themes, and lessons in the story?
- What is the predominant grammatical tense in the story?

5. Students use the questions to compare and contrast the elements in both short stories.

Step 4: Preparing a presentation

Student groups develop and present the story to the class. For example, in our class one group acted out the story using some dialogue from the text; they had drawn a horse, and they moved it around to different areas on a poster as the story progressed. The second group presented their story in frames with colorful pictures, and each team member spoke about the frame that he or she was holding.

Step 5: Summarizing and discussion

1. After the presentations students work in small groups and use handouts to review and summarize the main literary points that have been discussed.
2. Because the short stories contain more information than the poems, we conducted a third review, this time of grammar, vocabulary, and literary points, such as symbolism, metaphor, and plot. Group leaders are chosen to act as peer teachers during this global review.
3. Finally, to encourage critical thinking, the co-teachers ask questions to point out differences in cultural perspectives. For example: Can you "borrow" a horse in Turkmenistan without telling anyone? Should wives stay with husbands who abuse them? Is divorce acceptable?
4. Next, ask students to list metaphors, symbols, and scenes from the stories on poster paper taped up around the classroom and to sign their names to their comments. Compile the comments. In

the next class, generate an interactive ice breaking game by having students answer questions based on the comments. For example:

- Find people who think the horse represents freedom.
- Who doesn't support divorce?
- Find people who preferred "The Velvet Rose."
- Who thought the Saroyan story is about stealing?
- Who thinks horses represent responsibility?

Step 6: Follow-up class

1. Have students form pairs. Assign each pair a paragraph from each short story in the original language, and ask them to translate from Turkmen to English and vice versa.
2. Photocopy their translations and look at the work together as a class. Students learn that linguistic differences involve not just language but also culture, as well as the importance of revision and the value of collaborative efforts. (We include this step because many of our students are heading for careers as translators.)
3. The class writes an original story. The teacher offers a sentence from one of the two stories, and the students take turns contributing sentences that logically follow until the story is complete. This can be done in groups or as a whole class.
4. Volunteers read the final story to the class.

Additional activities

There are a multitude of options to introduce literature into the classroom and involve students in communicative activities, some of which involve the useful reinforcement of grammar and vocabulary. Teachers can expand the activities to a wide array of CLT techniques, such as bridging the gap activities, role plays, or task-based projects that deal with the culturally disparate literary styles or traditions. Following are just a few:

- **Mindmap.** Students call out similarities and differences between two texts, and the teacher draws circles and lines to make associations between concepts.

- **Scrambled Sentences.** Before class, the teacher writes several sentences to summarize the poem or short story, putting each sentence on a separate piece of paper. (The number of sentences/pieces of paper should match the number of students in the class.) During class, the teacher mixes up the scraps of paper and gives one to each student. Then students must negotiate with each other in English to put the sentences in the correct order to create a logical summary of the poem or short story.

- **Think-Pair-Share.** Students are given ten seconds to think about an element that the two texts have in common. Each student then discusses the element with another student sitting nearby. After a predetermined amount of time, each pair shares their conversation with the whole class.

- **Reader's Theater:** Groups of students read a poem or the dialogue from a short story. The point is to act out the expressive voices, pronunciation, and gestures. Students listening to the readings can use a rubric to assess the performances. Drama presentations can be presented and assessed in the same way.

Conclusion

It is fascinating to analyze cross-cultural differences, and critical thinking thrives when EFL students question their assumptions and consider diverse points of view. This is important because tolerance and understanding are desperately needed as globalization and geopolitics influence all citizens of all nations. Everywhere around the world, students want to display and preserve their cultures and validate their identities. Supporting the understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity helps counter the negative effects of globalization and cultural imperialism.

A comparative literature method is an excellent way to focus on critical grammar and vocabulary and to introduce all four English language skills into the classroom. Most importantly, it generates great enthusiasm for classroom interaction. Our teaching presentations are more appealing and pedagogically diverse when we include a multicultural component to enhance our students' speaking skills. We hope that you will have the same success in your classrooms around the world.

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