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Reconstructing the Grammar-Translation Method with Generative AI in EFL Teaching

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Abstract

The Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) has traditionally been associated with rule-based instruction, vocabulary memorization, and sentence translation. (Lu, 2023) Although frequently criticized for lacking communicative practice, GTM continues to influence teaching in many EFL classrooms where grammatical accuracy and reading ability remain central goals. The recent emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools provides new possibilities for revisiting this long-standing method. This paper explores how generative AI can be practically integrated into GTM to modernize classroom procedures, increase learner engagement, and improve form-focused learning outcomes. Based on realistic classroom practices, the study proposes an instructional framework that combines explicit grammar teaching, translation activities, and AI-assisted feedback. Several teaching examples are presented to illustrate how this approach can be implemented in daily lessons. The paper argues that generative AI does not replace the teacher but enhances the effectiveness of GTM by providing abundant contextualized input, differentiated exercises, and immediate feedback. This reconstructed approach offers a feasible and efficient model for EFL teachers working in accuracy-oriented learning contexts.

Keywords

Grammar-Translation Method, generative AI, EFL teaching, translation practice, grammar learning

1. Introduction

The Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) is one of the earliest systematic approaches to foreign language teaching. (Zhang, 2022) It emphasizes explicit grammar explanation, vocabulary study, and translation between the native language and the target language. Although communicative language teaching has become dominant in recent decades, GTM remains present in many classrooms, especially

in educational contexts where examinations, reading ability, and writing accuracy are emphasized. (Li, 2021) In practice, many EFL learners continue to struggle with grammatical accuracy despite participating in communicative activities. They may be able to express simple ideas orally but find it difficult to produce correct written sentences. Persistent problems such as tense confusion, incorrect sentence structure, misuse of voice, and inappropriate word choice are common. These problems often require focused attention on language form, which is precisely the strength of GTM. However, traditional GTM is often criticized for relying heavily on textbook examples, repetitive exercises, and delayed teacher feedback. Students may lose interest because translation tasks appear mechanical and disconnected from meaningful contexts. (Jin, 2021) These shortcomings are not caused by the principles of GTM itself but by limitations in classroom resources and procedures.

The development of generative AI tools creates new possibilities for addressing these limitations. These tools can generate context-rich sentences, passages, and explanations instantly, providing varied materials for grammar instruction and translation practice. They also offer immediate feedback, which significantly improves learning efficiency. This technological support makes it possible to reconsider how GTM can be implemented in a more engaging and effective way. This paper explores how generative AI can be used to reconstruct GTM for contemporary EFL classrooms. Rather than abandoning GTM, the study proposes a renewed instructional approach that retains its focus on grammar and translation while improving classroom interaction and learner engagement through AI-supported activities.

2. The Continuing Pedagogical Value of the Grammar-Translation Method

The Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) has been a cornerstone of traditional language teaching, and its focus on explicit grammar instruction and translation remains relevant in many EFL contexts. Before discussing the specific aspects of this method, it is important to recognize that GTM's strength lies in its systematic attention to form and structure. The following sections examine key pedagogical advantages of GTM and how they address common challenges in language learning.

2.1 Attention to Language Form and Accuracy

Although the Grammar-Translation Method is frequently described as a traditional or even outdated approach, its core emphasis on careful analysis of language form continues to address problems that are still common in EFL classrooms. In many learning contexts, students can participate in simple conversations but struggle when asked to write accurate sentences, understand complex reading passages, or translate ideas precisely between languages. These difficulties often arise from insufficient attention to sentence structure, tense consistency, voice, and word choice. GTM, by its very nature, places these elements at the center of classroom work.

A key strength of GTM lies in the way it slows learners down. Instead of encouraging quick responses, it requires students to examine how each part of a sentence functions. When learners translate from their native language into English, they are forced to make deliberate choices about verb forms, word

order, and grammatical agreement. This process draws their attention to features of English that may otherwise be overlooked in communicative tasks where meaning can be conveyed despite grammatical inaccuracies. (Chen, 2020)

2.2 Developing Contrastive and Metalinguistic Awareness

Translation activities promote contrastive awareness. Students become more conscious of the structural differences between their first language and English. For example, learners whose native language does not use tense markers in the same way as English often omit or misuse tense forms in writing. Through translation, they repeatedly encounter situations where they must decide which tense is appropriate, gradually developing a more stable understanding of English verb systems. In this sense, GTM provides a practical pathway for developing metalinguistic awareness.

By comparing two linguistic systems, students learn not only rules but also the reasons behind those rules. They begin to notice patterns, exceptions, and functional differences between languages. This analytical process strengthens their ability to monitor their own language use in later writing tasks.

2.3 Supporting Reading Comprehension through Sentence Analysis

GTM also contributes significantly to reading comprehension. When students analyze sentences word by word and clause by clause during translation, they learn to unpack complex grammatical structures commonly found in academic texts. Many EFL learners report that while they can understand the general meaning of a passage, they struggle to interpret long or grammatically complex sentences. GTM-style analysis trains them to break down such sentences into manageable parts, improving both comprehension and confidence in reading.This skill is particularly valuable for learners who need to read textbooks, academic articles, or examination materials written in formal English. The ability to analyze sentence structure becomes a practical tool for understanding meaning accurately.

2.4 Practical Limitations in Traditional Classrooms

However, the effectiveness of GTM in achieving these outcomes depends largely on how it is implemented. In many classrooms, the method has been reduced to repetitive exercises based on a limited number of textbook sentences. Students may translate mechanically without fully engaging with the language. Feedback is often delayed because teachers must correct large amounts of written work after class. As a result, learners do not always connect their mistakes with the underlying grammar points, and motivation gradually declines.

These practical shortcomings have contributed to the negative reputation of GTM. Yet they are not inherent weaknesses of the method itself; rather, they stem from limitations in teaching resources and classroom procedures. If learners had access to varied examples, meaningful contexts, and timely feedback, translation practice could become both engaging and effective. This observation creates a clear link to the potential role of generative AI, which can supply exactly these forms of support.

Seen from this perspective, GTM still holds considerable pedagogical value for accuracy-oriented learning. Its focus on form, careful analysis, and cross-linguistic comparison remains highly relevant for learners who need to improve grammatical control and reading ability. The challenge for teachers is

not whether to abandon GTM, but how to modernize its classroom application so that its strengths can be fully realized. (Lihang, John Chi Kin Lee, Yue Zhang & Mingyue, 2025) The following section discusses how generative AI provides practical tools to achieve this modernization.

3. Generative AI as a Support Tool for Form-Focused Instruction

The previous section has emphasized that the pedagogical strength of the Grammar-Translation Method lies in its sustained attention to language form, contrastive analysis, and careful sentence-level processing. The practical challenge for teachers, however, is how to provide sufficient examples, varied exercises, and timely feedback within the limits of classroom time and available materials. In traditional settings, this often results in repetitive tasks and delayed correction, which weakens the effectiveness of form-focused learning. It is in this context that generative AI becomes pedagogically meaningful. Rather than introducing a new teaching method, it offers practical tools that make the principles of GTM easier to carry out in everyday classroom practice.

3.1 Expanding the Supply of Contextualized Grammar Examples

One of the most immediate advantages of generative AI is its ability to produce large numbers of grammatically accurate sentences and short passages in a short time. For teachers, this means that examples for any grammar point are no longer limited to those found in textbooks. Instead, examples can be created based on topics familiar to students, such as campus life, daily routines, hobbies, or current events.[8] When grammar examples are connected to students' experiences, they become easier to understand and more interesting to analyze. Students are less likely to treat them as abstract patterns and more likely to pay attention to how the structure functions in meaningful contexts. The variety of examples also prevents mechanical memorization. Each sentence appears in a slightly different situation, encouraging learners to focus on the grammatical feature rather than the surface wording.[9]

3.2 Enabling Differentiated Translation Practice

In many GTM classrooms, all students work on the same translation exercises regardless of their language level. This often leads to frustration for weaker students and a lack of challenge for stronger ones. Generative AI makes it possible to design translation tasks with varying levels of difficulty without increasing the teacher's preparation time. Teachers can request simple sentences with clear structures for beginners and more complex paragraphs for advanced learners. In this way, students are able to work at an appropriate level of difficulty, which improves both engagement and learning efficiency. Differentiation, which is difficult to achieve with fixed printed materials, becomes a practical option in daily teaching.

3.3 Providing Immediate and Detailed Feedback

A major limitation of traditional GTM practice is the delay between students completing a translation task and receiving the teacher's correction. By the time feedback is given, students may no longer remember their original thinking process. Generative AI allows learners to check their work immediately after completing it. More importantly, feedback is not limited to showing the correct

answer. Students can also receive explanations of why a certain grammatical form is required. They can identify which part of their translation is incorrect and understand the underlying rule. This immediacy makes error correction more effective and helps students internalize grammatical patterns more quickly.

3.4 Encouraging Independent Exploration of Language Form

Beyond assigned classroom tasks, generative AI allows students to explore language patterns on their own. After translating a sentence, they can ask for alternative expressions, sentence transformations, or explanations of usage differences. This process deepens their understanding of how grammar operates across contexts.

Such independent exploration is rarely possible in traditional classrooms due to time constraints. With access to AI tools, students can continue analyzing language outside class, which strengthens their metalinguistic awareness and reinforces what they have learned during lessons.

Taken together, these functions—rich example generation, differentiated task design, immediate feedback, and opportunities for independent exploration—provide practical support for form-focused instruction. They do not replace the teacher's role but make it easier to implement the principles of the Grammar-Translation Method in a more varied, responsive, and efficient way."

4. Reconstructing Classroom Procedures: An AI-Supported GTM Model

The previous discussion has shown how generative AI can provide abundant examples, differentiated tasks, and timely feedback for form-focused instruction. The next step is to consider how these functions can be organized into a practical classroom procedure. Rather than treating AI as an occasional supplementary tool, it can be incorporated into a regular teaching sequence that aligns closely with the principles of the Grammar-Translation Method. In this reconstructed model, grammar explanation, translation practice, feedback, and language exploration are not separate activities but interconnected stages within a single lesson cycle.

4.1 Grammar Presentation with Contextualized Input

In traditional GTM lessons, grammar presentation often relies on a limited number of textbook sentences. With AI support, teachers can prepare a wider range of examples that are closely related to students' real experiences. For instance, when introducing the present perfect tense, the teacher may generate sentences describing students' learning experiences, club activities, travel plans, or personal interests.

These examples make grammar less abstract and easier to understand. Students are more willing to analyze sentences that reflect familiar situations. At this stage, the teacher's role remains central: explaining rules, highlighting key structures, and guiding students to notice how the grammar operates within meaningful contexts.

4.2 Guided Translation Practice at Different Levels

After the grammar point has been explained, students move to translation practice. Instead of giving all students the same set of exercises, the teacher can provide tasks of varying difficulty. Some students work with simple sentences that focus clearly on the target structure, while others handle longer passages where the structure appears in more complex contexts. This differentiation ensures that each student is challenged at an appropriate level. Translation remains the core activity, but the tasks become more flexible and responsive to learner needs. Students are required to apply the grammar rule actively rather than passively recognizing it.

4.3 Immediate Feedback and Collective Error Analysis

Once students complete their translations, they use AI tools to check their work. They receive corrections and explanations immediately. This short feedback loop allows them to see their mistakes while their thinking process is still fresh. The teacher then organizes a brief discussion based on common errors observed in the class. Instead of correcting every sentence individually, the teacher selects representative examples and explains the underlying grammatical issues. In this way, AI handles the initial correction, while the teacher focuses on guiding deeper understanding.

4.4 Language Exploration Beyond the Task

The final stage of the lesson encourages students to go beyond the original exercise. They may ask how to express the same idea using a different structure, how to change an active sentence into passive form, or why one translation is more natural than another. This exploration helps students see grammar as a flexible system rather than a set of rigid rules. By engaging in this process, students develop greater awareness of language use. They begin to notice patterns and alternatives, which strengthens their ability to produce accurate sentences in future writing tasks. Through this sequence—contextualized presentation, differentiated translation, immediate feedback, and guided exploration—GTM is transformed into a more dynamic and responsive classroom procedure. The core principles of the method remain intact, but the learning experience becomes more varied, interactive, and effective."

5. Practical Classroom Applications and Teaching Examples

The instructional model described in the previous section can be applied directly to everyday grammar lessons. When AI-supported tasks are embedded into regular GTM procedures, classroom activities become more varied while still maintaining a clear focus on grammatical accuracy and translation practice. The following examples are drawn from typical EFL lessons and show how this approach operates in practice. Each example follows the sequence of grammar explanation, translation task, feedback, and further exploration.

5.1 Teaching the Passive Voice through Cyclical Translation

After introducing the structure of the passive voice, the teacher prepares a set of sentences describing familiar daily events:

① The classroom was cleaned after school.

②The homework was completed before dinner.

③ The windows were opened by the monitor this morning.

Students first translate these sentences into their native language. After that, they are asked to translate their own versions back into English without looking at the original sentences.

When comparing their sentences with the originals, students often notice problems such as incorrect verb forms, confusion between active and passive voice, or omission of auxiliary verbs. At this point, they check their translations and read the explanations provided. The teacher then selects several typical mistakes and discusses them with the class, helping students understand how passive structures function. This cyclical translation process forces students to focus on verb forms and word order in a way that simple recognition exercises cannot achieve.

5.2 Distinguishing Tense Usage through Contrastive Sentences

To help students understand the difference between the past simple and the present perfect tense, the teacher provides pairs of sentences such as:

④ *I visited Beijing last year.*

⑤ *I have visited Beijing three times.*

Students translate both sentences and discuss why different tenses are used. Many students initially produce similar translations in their native language and do not notice the tense distinction. Through guided comparison and feedback, they begin to understand how time expressions influence tense choice. Students are then asked to create similar sentence pairs about their own experiences. This task encourages them to apply the rule actively rather than memorizing it passively.

5.3 Paragraph Translation for Sentence Structure Awareness

Students are given a short paragraph related to campus life. After translating it into their native language, they attempt to reproduce the paragraph in English based on their translation. During this process, students frequently encounter difficulties with long sentences, clause connections, and tense consistency. Immediate feedback helps them identify where their sentence structure differs from the original. The teacher uses these differences to explain how English sentences are organized, especially in longer passages. This activity improves not only grammatical accuracy but also reading comprehension, as students learn to analyze how sentences are constructed.

5.4 Sentence Transformation to Observe Structural Change

Students practice rewriting sentences using different grammatical structures. For example, they change active sentences into passive ones or combine two simple sentences into a complex sentence. By comparing the original and transformed versions, students observe how grammar affects meaning and emphasis. This task helps them understand that grammar is not only a set of rules but also a tool for expressing ideas in different ways.

5.5 Observed Changes in Student Learning Behavior

After several weeks of using this approach, noticeable changes can be observed in student behavior. Students begin to pay closer attention to verb forms and sentence structure during translation. They become more willing to revise their work after receiving feedback instead of accepting the first version as final. Teachers also notice that repeated grammatical errors in writing assignments decrease over time. Students show greater confidence when handling complex sentences and demonstrate improved accuracy in written tasks. These classroom examples show that when AI-supported activities are combined with GTM procedures, translation and grammar practice become more engaging, purposeful, and effective."

6. Observed Benefits and Practical Considerations in Classroom Practice

When this AI-supported GTM approach is applied consistently over several weeks, teachers often observe clear changes in student learning behavior and classroom dynamics. One noticeable improvement is students' increased interest in grammar and translation activities. Because the materials are varied and connected to familiar topics, students no longer regard translation exercises as mechanical tasks. Instead, they see them as meaningful opportunities to test and refine their understanding of sentence structure. Another important change is the gradual reduction of grammatical errors. Through repeated translation practice and immediate feedback, students become more aware of tense usage, voice, word order, and sentence patterns. They begin to check their own sentences more carefully before submitting their work. This heightened attention to form is reflected in their later writing assignments, where repeated errors occur less frequently.

Students also show greater confidence when dealing with translation tasks. Previously, many learners hesitated because they were unsure whether their sentences were correct. With access to timely feedback and explanations, they become more willing to attempt complex sentences and revise their work independently. From the teacher's perspective, this approach reduces the time required to prepare exercises and correct large amounts of written work. Instead of spending hours designing materials and marking translations, teachers can focus more on guiding students' understanding of grammar and discussing typical errors in class. To use this approach effectively, however, teachers must establish clear classroom procedures. Students should not be allowed to rely on AI tools to complete tasks without first attempting the work themselves. Tasks must be clearly designed so that AI serves as a support tool rather than a shortcut. Teachers also need to monitor how students use the tools and encourage discussion of errors, alternative expressions, and grammar rules during class.

In addition, teachers should carefully select grammar points that benefit most from intensive form-focused practice, such as tense distinctions, passive voice, and sentence structure. Not all language skills require the same level of translation and analysis.

7. Conclusion

The integration of generative AI into GTM does not alter the fundamental principles of the method. Grammar explanation and translation remain at the center of classroom activities. What changes is the way these activities are carried out. With the support of AI, the method becomes more flexible, responsive, and engaging for learners. Rather than being viewed as a relic of traditional teaching, GTM can function as a useful framework for accuracy-oriented language learning in contemporary classrooms. The availability of rich examples, differentiated tasks, and immediate feedback allows teachers to address long-standing problems associated with traditional GTM practice.

In conclusion, generative AI can play a supportive role in reconstructing the Grammar-Translation Method for modern EFL teaching. By combining explicit grammar instruction, translation exercises, and AI-assisted feedback, teachers are able to create an effective and engaging learning environment. This reconstructed approach preserves the strengths of GTM while overcoming many of its traditional limitations, offering a practical teaching model for today's learners."

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