



**Camilo Andrés Bonilla  
Carvajal**

Candidato a Doctor en  
Lingüística Aplicada  
Docente Fundación Universitaria  
Unipanamericana  
cabonillac@unipanamericana.  
edu.co

Artículo de Reflexión

Recepción: 10 de enero de 2013  
Aprobación: 20 de agosto de 2013

# MÉTODO “TRADUCCIÓN GRAMATICAL”, UN HISTÓRICO ERROR LINGÜÍSTICO DE PERSPECTIVA: ORÍGENES, DINÁMICAS E INCONSISTENCIAS.

## Resumen

El método Gramática-Traducción es considerado el enfoque más tradicionalista e inefectivo por antonomasia. Tal opinión suele justificarse mediante la creencia de que antes del método Audiolingüe no se lograba la destreza oral; la enseñanza constituía la memorización de reglas gramaticales y listas de vocabulario. No obstante, tal opinión se deriva de afirmaciones aún por corroborar, emitidas principalmente por autores mal informados y sin evidencia de base empírica que sustente sus prescripciones restrictivas, lo que conduce a malinterpretar el influjo de la traducción, negándole su valor de estrategia metacognitiva. Este artículo argumenta que la Gramática-Traducción es simplemente una etiqueta histórica arbitraria, desarrollada por teóricos para abarcar la historia de la enseñanza de idiomas desde 1790 hasta 1950. Así, se revisan críticamente distintas referencias a la Gramática-Traducción para demostrar que emergen como inferencias basadas en evidencia parcial para dar cuenta de la existencia de tal metodología. La asunción acrítica de que la Gramática-Traducción sí existió, y de que es el modelo negativo de práctica docente que debe ser evitado a toda costa, refleja un interés ideológico y nocivo por parte de teóricos y profesores.

**Palabras clave:** Gramática-Traducción, metodología, historia de la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, revisionismo histórico.

## “GRAMMAR-TRANSLATION” METHOD, A LINGUISTIC HISTORIC ERROR OF PERSPECTIVE: ORIGINS, DYNAMICS AND INCONSISTENCIES

### Abstract

The Grammar-Translation method is frequently referred to as the traditional ineffective approach par excellence. Such view is often justified by the claim that before the Audiolingual method oral performance in foreign language was not reached, and language classes were reduced to memorizing grammar rules and lists of vocabulary. Nevertheless, this opinion is derived from unproved claims, mainly made by misinformed authors for they offer no compelling empirical evidence to validate their restrictive descriptions where translation is shown as an invalid metacognitive strategy. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that *Grammar-Translation* is merely an arbitrary historic label, developed by methodologists and theoreticians to encompass the history of language teaching from 1790 through 1950. References to Grammar-Translation are critically reviewed to make evident they are biased inferences based on partial evidence to account for the existence of any such methodology. The assumption that Grammar-Translation did exist, and that it is the negative model of teaching practices that should be better avoided at all costs, might reflect an unconstructive and unfounded ideological interest of mainstream theoreticians and unsuspecting teachers.

**Key words:** Grammar-Translation, Methodology, History of Language Teaching, Historical Revisionism.

## MÉTHODE DE “GRAMMAIRE-TRADUCTION” UNE ERREUR D’HISTORIQUE LINGUISTIQUE DE PERSPECTIVE: ORIGINES, DYNAMIQUES ET INCONSISTANCES

### Résumé

La méthode de Grammaire-Traduction est considérée comme l’approche la plus traditionnaliste et inefficace par excellence. Une telle opinion se justifie généralement par la croyance qu’avant la méthode Audio linguale on ne pouvait pas arriver à la dextérité orale; l’enseignement était constitué par la mémorisation de règles grammaticales et de listes de vocabulaire. Toutefois, une telle opinion découle d’affirmation qui restent encore à prouver, émises principalement par des auteurs mal informés et sans base empirique évidente

qui puisse soutenir ses prescriptions restrictives, ce qui nous amène à mal interpréter l'influence de la traduction, en lui refusant sa valeur de stratégie métacognitive. Cet article argumente que la Grammaire-Traduction est tout simplement une étiquette historique arbitraire, développée par des théoriciens pour englober l'histoire de l'enseignement des langues depuis 1790 jusqu'à 1950. On révisé donc ainsi de manière critique, diverses références à la Grammaire-Traduction pour démontrer qu'elles émergent comme des inférences basées sur des évidences partielles pour rendre compte de l'existence d'une telle méthodologie. L'acceptation sans sens critique de que la Grammaire-Traduction a bien existé, et qu'elle représente le modèle négatif de pratiques d'enseignement qui doivent être évitées à tout prix, reflète un intérêt idéologique et nocif de la part des théoriciens et des professeurs.

**Mots clés:** Grammaire-Traduction, méthodologie, histoire de l'enseignement des langues étrangères, révisionnisme historique.

## MÉTODO “TRADUÇÃO GRAMATICAL”, UM HISTÓRICO ERRO LINGÜÍSTICO DE PERSPECTIVAS: ORIGENS, DINÂMICA E INCONSISTÊNCIAS

### Resumo

O método Gramática-Tradução é considerado a tendência mais tradicionalista e ineficiente por antonomásia. Esta afirmação justifica-se pela crença que antes do método AudioLíngua não se lograva a destreza oral; o ensino constituía-se na memorização de regras gramaticais e listados de vocabulário. No entanto, tal opinião se deriva de afirmações ainda por corroborar, emitidas principalmente por autores mal informados e sem evidencia de base empírica que sustente suas prescrições restritivas, o que leva a manipular a influencia da tradução, negando-lhe o seu valor de estratégia metacognitiva. O artigo argumenta que a Gramática-Tradução é simplesmente uma etiqueta histórica arbitrária, desenvolvida por teóricos para abranger a história do ensino de idiomas de 1790 até 1950. Assim, revisam-se criticamente distintas referências à Gramática-Tradução para demonstrar que emergem como inferências baseadas em evidencia parcial para dar conta da existência desta metodologia. A Gramática-Tradução admitida de forma acrítica sem existiu, e o modelo negativo de prática docente que deve ser evitado; são reflexo ideológico e nocivo por teóricos e professores.

**Palavras chave:** Gramática-Tradução, metodologia, historia do ensino de línguas estrangeiras, revisionismo histórico.

*“If language teaching methodologists themselves ignore their history, how can they demand respect from the philologists who run the humanities departments and faculties?” Paolo Balboni, 2001)*

*Dedicated to all those teachers that still believe in the “Grammar-Translation” terror*

## Introduction

This paper denies critically a number of claims that are usually made in connection with the Grammar-Translation Method in foreign language teaching, through the demonstration that there is not enough evidence to assert that at some point in history has ever existed something as ‘Grammar-Translation’, as it is generally depicted. I will refer to Grammar-Translation Method in the well-known sense coined by authors such as Kelly (1969), Kumaravadivelu (2006), Larsen-Freeman (2000), Richards and Rodgers (2001), Stern (1983), and Titone (1968) amongst many others, i.e. a language teaching methodology that dominated the scenario of schools and colleges from the eighteenth century through 1950 all across Europe and America. More precisely, my only concern is the invention of an instructional approach in which, according to them, “[...] *learning must have been a deadening experience for children, for lapses in knowledge were often met with brutal punishment*” (Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 4) Or where “[*t*] *he ability to communicate in the target language is not a goal of foreign language instruction*” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000: 15).

It is no part of my purpose to defend the set of techniques normally attributed to, or associated with this method, for I totally agree with those asserting that languages should be learnt through constant practice and exposure, and not by means of rote learning, drills or syntactic analyses. What I cast doubt on however, are the reductionist assumptions and popular beliefs revolving around the Grammar Translation Method as such, lacking of rigorous scientific analysis, and historic evidence, conforming themselves to present it as the ‘bogeyman’ or the ‘escape goat’ of language teaching methodologies, that is, as the wrong paradigm from which all methods and teachers should run away. Therefore in order to annul the concept of Grammar-Translation Method, it is necessary to firstly assess the prejudices available in the form

of written affirmations in books and / or articles. There are three chief authors in relevant SLA, EFL, and ESL literature on which all the rest of claims and criticisms against Grammar-Translation are based, namely: Howatt (1984), Kelly (1969), and Titone (1969).

## Unfounded Wide-Spread Beliefs on Grammar-Translation

Kelly (1969) presents a rather brief review of the mode of learning foreign languages in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, reducing the whole practice at the time as “language learning through rote learning”. Howatt (1984) on the other hand, reproduces in his five volume series called *Modern Language Teaching* facsimile versions of old pamphlets and essays dealing with language teaching in 1800-1900. Apart from the introduction by Howatt himself, no direct reference to the name Grammar-Translation is found in none of these books, which only means, nobody baptized thus the practice of teaching languages in those years. Likewise, neither in Hazlitt (1888) Smith (2005), nor Widgery (2010), let alone Sears and Ruthardt (1844) Seidenstücker (1829), Ollendorff (1838) or Plötz (1853) any direct or indirect reference to the word pair *grammar-translation* is observed as referring to a way to teach languages. This poses then a more interesting question: Where does the name Grammar-Translation come from? No solid answer could be given because no one dares to father the baptism of the infamous legend.

Accordingly we have a Method, that unlike any other (i.e. Task-based, Audiolingualism, Whole language, Counselling, etc.), has no founding fathers, clear name or accurate reports, but for which there seems to be attacks and discredit galore; in spite of the fact that:

*No full and carefully documented history of grammar-translation exists.* There is evidence that the teaching of grammar and translation has occurred in language instruction through the ages; but the regular combination of grammar rules with translation became popular only in the late eighteenth century (Stern, 1983: 453 emphasis added).

Accordingly a second question turns out: Why? Why is there a method without a base of authors supporting it? What were the real circumstances in which Grammar-Translation rose? Is it Grammar-Translation a method anyway? Was it rather a mere technique to teach foreign literature? Is Grammar-Translation an accurate name for such technique of teaching?

The chief reason for which all authors and teachers mistakenly believe in the “Grammar-Translation Terror” is the absence of a sound and comprehensive history of foreign language teaching; this is but a seed to simple inferences and arbitrary associations based on shared common beliefs. Titone (1968) for instance, one of the pivotal references of all the critics of Grammar-Translation, only clouds even more the history by confounding it all with inconsistencies, such as simple reductions of the work by Johann Seidenstücker (1829) and Karl Julius Plötz (1853) naming their duty as “frozen rules of isolated sentences”, ignoring that classroom, as well as independent study, compensated what cannot be seen now in the texts (the sole source of his research). To illustrate his error, we might fail in the same logic by analyzing —out of the texts alone—, the “frozen” set of exercises in modern language teaching. Let us take for example, the *Interchange* series by Jack C. Richards (2004); if it were assessed only by the exercises provided in it, one will be prone to think that merely “filling the gaps”, “matching sentences”, and “repeating out loud” pre-made conversations is the current goal of foreign language teaching. These *a priori* assumptions are well far from the truth, because they derive rules out of de-contextualized hermeneutics, and try to misconstrue a bygone past from the scarce textbooks we keep from back then.

Another good example of short sighted perspective is given by Richards and Rodgers (2001: 5), they, once again, base their descriptions on Grammar-Translation out of books alone regardless of the historical context, sociocultural aspects and the difficulties back in the day to move from one country to another. Richards and Rodgers start out well in bringing back Barnes Sears, and Ernst F. Ruthardt’s *The Ciceronian: or, The Prussian Method of Teaching The Elements of The Latin Language. Adapted to The Use of American Schools* (1844). This was in fact the first attempt to import the Prussian method to language teaching into the American continent. Setting aside the importance of having a solid sociocultural, and historical framework of reference in order to analyze the appropriateness of any methodology (which Richards and Rodgers’ account lacks of), let us look at this evident example of historical negationism and cunning word manipulation by presenting only one side of the coin.

This is how Richards and Rodgers (2001: 5) introduce the dreadful Grammar-Translation in their book:

The principal characteristics of the Grammar-Translation Method were these:

1. 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 foreign-language study. Grammar Translation is a way of studying a language that approaches the language first through detailed analysis of its grammar rules, followed by application of this knowledge to the task of translating sentences and texts into and out of the target language. 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.

Even though they cite as reference Sears and Ruthardt's book, this is but a mere interpretation of what is actually found in *that* book, since, quite the contrary...

*“The entire amount of elementary study ought, therefore, to be concentrated, and kept within narrow bounds, so that none of the acquisitions made, can, for a moment, be out of reach. When the simplest principles are not only comprehended but deeply fixed in the mind, the circle of knowledge can be gradually enlarged”* (Sears and Ruthardt, 1844: 6).

This piece of advice would not defy any modern trend, and, furthermore, it perfectly agrees with Ausubel's Meaningful Learning theory, that is to say, advanced learning should only occur once previous knowledge schemata have been firmly fixed. So many other authors present Grammar-Translation as the process of tormenting students with grammatical drills, to which Sears and Ruthardt respond with: *“The object of studying Latin is not the power of rehearsal, but an accurate knowledge of the facts, and a comprehension of the principles of the language”* (1844: 10). Some others even present past language teaching as extensive and exhaustive hours in front of prescriptive grammars and lexicons trying to decipher the meaning of a pair of *sententiæ Latinæ et Græcæ*, but few recognize that *“[...] it is now [eighteenth century] pretty generally conceded that neither long lessons learned from books by private study, nor instruction given by formal dictation is adapted to a young pupil. He needs shorter tasks, and more frequent exercises with his teacher”* (Ruthardt, 1844: 11)



And even though there are some references to “committing to memory” in Sears and Ruthardt (1844), it goes without saying that back in those days memory, as we understand it now, was a much sought-after and achievable virtue than what we deem it today, due to the less distractions for pupils in the environment (Cf. Buckingham, 2007). The mechanisms to evaluate were quite different too, and learning was paired to recalling facts and data. We do agree that this is not the best goal to look for in language teaching, but we ought to be in agreement too, in accepting this was a problem of curriculum design and educational policies of the day, not an intrinsic problem of a given methodology named Grammar-Translation. Thus, we are looking at the tree and not at the forest. There is evidently a comprehensive and reasonable course of action in the book by Sears and Ruthardt, a thoughtful curriculum designed to cater not for students and parents’ needs of 2000’s but from 1800’s. We cannot ask a teacher more than s/he can give in his/her moment of service. De-contextualized criticism to methods begets prejudices and biased assessments against context-bound decisions and socially-dependent solutions in education.

It might be possible to keep on endlessly deconstructing false claims on the mental discipline of foreign language learning as those by Stern (1983: 455), just by checking one of the most influential syllabus that dates back to 1599, the *Ratio atque Institutio Studiorum Societatis Iesu* “Plan and Institution of Studies of The Jesus Society” in which oral, progressive and no-nonsense teaching was devised (see Pavur, 2005). I could not emphasize anymore the importance of going to the original books that led to the exponential growth of classroom practices in any given time. In effect, historic accounts without due bibliographic support are flawed, and by no means they should be a source for our beliefs, and even less for methodological constrains. Neglecting that since the sixteenth century onwards there was no other influence than that of “*the doctrine operative in the Ratio Studiorum*” (Baldwin & Clark, 1939: 64), without even making the effort to read the book, fictional narratives is all that remains, in way of example:

Textbooks consisted of statements of abstract grammar rules, lists of vocabulary, and sentences for translation. Speaking the foreign language was not the goal, and oral practice was limited to students reading aloud the sentences they had translated. These sentences were constructed to illustrate the grammatical system of the language and consequently bore no relation to the language of real communication. Students labored over translating sentences [...] (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 4).



If that were the case then James Hamilton (1831: 4) would not have enjoyed being taught Latin and Greek with the Jesuits, by listening to them reading direct translations from those languages into English, and not, as it is usually shown, by labouring over grammars and dictionaries, and struggling with the language. He was widely known in Europe and North America as the author of interlinear translations, a very popular, friendly, sold-out series of books named after him: “The Hamiltonian System”. They were used in schools, colleges, and by private learners in which both the foreign language and the native tongue were presented concurrently in an interlinear way. This was arguably a follow-up for the work that began seventeenth century British philosopher John Locke (1703), with his *Æsopi Fabulæ / Aesop’s Fables in English and Latin*, perhaps the oldest interlinear, didactic teaching material of a foreign language, that, naturally, included translation without harming anyone. This could not be otherwise due to the fact that it was Locke himself who wrote in his seminal book *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1884), that “*How ... is it possible that a child should be chained to the oar, seven, eight, or ten of the best years of his life, to get a language or two, which, I think, might be had at a great deal cheaper rate of pains and time, and be learned almost in playing?*”

This was written in 1692, and it sheds light on the existence of plenty other alternatives to teach foreign languages through meaningful learning without burden, as it is reinforced by this pedagogic revelation: “*There was, indeed, nothing then that could be called a system, although two important principles formed the best possible foundation for one. I taught, instead of ordering to learn; and secondly, I taught my pupils to translate at once, instead of making them get a grammar by heart*” (Hamilton, 1831: 6-7 emphasis in the original)

None of these testimonies are given in the books that have spawned the construct Grammar-Translation, in so far as there is no exact reference to that name neither. Both name and descriptions are sheer inventions, and this is certainly the other side of the coin that some authors (Kumaravadivelu 2006; Larsen-Freeman 2000; Richards and Rodgers 2004), entirely based on short, abridged historical depictions by third parties (Kelly 1969; Stern 1983 and Titone 1968) do not allow us (and themselves) to see. Centuries of language learning are thus skimpily introduced with easily-noticed holes as Stern’s (1983: 454 my comments in italics):

[...] grammar-translation became the principal method of teaching modern languages in schools. In his elementary grammar (1848) Ploetz (*sic*) laid emphasis on the practice of verb paradigms, while in the more advanced *Schulgrammatik der französischen Sprache* (1849) systematic grammar was the central theme of the course (*which is obvious granted that the name clearly reads: School-Grammar of the French Language, what else could be expected?*). In the final decades of the nineteenth century grammar-translation was attacked as a cold and lifeless approach to language teaching (*by whom?*), and it was blamed for the failure of foreign language teaching (*in what sense?*). The majority of language teaching reforms in the late nineteenth century and throughout the first half of the twentieth developed in opposition to grammar-translation (*which documents of those reforms claim that?*).

Kumaravadivelu (2006) also uses the same expression *grammar-translation* several times throughout his book in a derogatory sense, nonetheless, no clear explanation of the sources from which his beliefs emanate is given. Neither Kumaravadivelu nor does any other author under review seem to be familiar with, just to name one, Adler's (1858) well-known exercises in speaking and writing, a 700 page book to qualify students in oral, productive skills making use of modern vocabulary for everyday conversation in Latin.

So far I invite readers to kindle their critical skills by reading the very nineteenth century texts upon which classical teaching was based — most of them now available on-line for free. Albeit there are samples of an old-fashioned approach to teach languages (a definitely more text-centred approach), and there are certainly many classroom practices we would rather avoid in present day, the myth, as it has been introduced by popular common notions, is seen to be found nowhere but in the pages of uninformed writers. Let us then characterize those notions comprising the “Grammar-Translation” terror.

### Characterizing Popular Notions on Translation, Origins of the Prejudice

The absolute uncritical acceptance of the Grammar-Translation fallacy is read in Larsen-Freeman (2000: 11-6). She summarizes all sort of common biased claims against translation (and Grammar-Translation as a concept) by introducing light-hearted statements such as: “*it was thought*

*that foreign language learning would help students grow intellectually; it was recognized that students would probably never use the target language, but the mental exercise of learning it would be beneficial anyway”* (Larsen-Freeman, 2000: 11). Sources for those assertions still remain unknown.

The entire chapter is based upon what we could easily refer to as: “science fiction.” She portrays an imaginary English teaching classroom set in Colombia (no exact data are given about whether this is based on real events or everything is just part of a fictional exercise), a teacher is said to use the Grammar Translation Method, and she even uses a text to help her (is it maybe a fictional text with the title “Grammar Translation Method”?) This imaginary professor makes all possible mistakes in teaching a foreign language. She has her students reading a tale by Mark Twain with a dictionary and no peer interaction. Larsen-Freeman then goes on enumerating the purportedly ruling tenets of this Method: (Larsen-Freeman, 2000: 15-6):

- A fundamental purpose of learning a foreign language is to be able to read literature written in it. Literary language is superior to spoken language. Students’ study of the target culture is limited to its Literature and fine arts.
- An important goal is for students to be able to translate each language into the other. If students can translate from one language into another, they are considered successful language learners.
- The ability to communicate in the target language is not a goal of foreign language instruction.
- The primary skills to be developed are reading and writing. Little attention is given to speaking and listening, and almost none to pronunciation.
- The teacher is the authority in the classroom. It is very important that students get the correct answer.
- It is possible to find native language equivalents for all target language words.
- Learning is facilitated through attention to similarities between the target language and the native language.
- It is important for students to learn about the form of the target language.
- Deductive application of an explicit grammar rule is a useful pedagogical technique.

- Language learning provides good mental exercise.
- Students should be conscious of the grammatical rules of the target language. Wherever possible, verb conjugations and other grammatical paradigms should be committed to memory.

This is only the beginning of an array of common places and prejudices against translation, exemplified through this fictional Method in an, also, fictional classroom. She enjoys using defamatory tags such as “traditional”, “memorize”, “rote-learning” “it was believed that”, branding translation as a continuous drill of linguistic nomenclature from which almost no procedural knowledge can be acquired.

She finishes her chapter with a set of leading questions, that is, questions to her readers in which the very answers she expects are already found.

Do you believe that a fundamental reason for learning a foreign language is to be able to read the literature written in the target language? Do you think it is important to learn *about* the target language? Should culture be viewed as consisting of literature and the fine arts? Do you agree with any of the other principles underlying the Grammar-Translation Method? Which ones?

Is translation a valuable exercise? Is answering reading comprehension questions of the type described here helpful? Should grammar be presented deductively? Are these or any of the other techniques of the Grammar-Translation Method ones which will be useful to you in your own teaching? (Larsen-Freeman, 2000: 21)

It is exceedingly harmful to bring forth an imagined classroom where all the don'ts of modern communicative classrooms meet, claiming (with little or any evidence) that this did happen and it was named Grammar (a much-needed skill in language performance) and Translation (a science thousands of years older than the discipline of teaching, and whose benefits are beyond any suspicion, see for a grounded defence and use of translation: Witte, Harden, and de Oliveira Harden (2009); Duff (1996); and Newmark (1991). All the unscientific SLT literature leaves the door open to mislead teachers, learners, and theoreticians to inhibit the use of valid metacognitive tools, i.e. translation and metalinguistic awareness.

Once we have read these arguments, I summarize Grammar-Translation method is a historic tag invented by scholars, just as *Pleistocene*, *Middle*

*Ages or Victorian Era.* The problem is not that throughout history some teachers have had text-centred techniques, have resorted to memorizing passages, grammar rules, or kept control of classrooms by means of physical punishment, because these are undeniable facts corroborated by chronicles and accounts of those days. The problem is the invention of a historic tag that debases translation without due observable evidence. “*The greatest damage done to the reputation of translation as a language teaching tool was probably inflicted by the Grammar-Translation method itself*” (Zojer, 2009: 32).

## A Brief History of The Grammar-Dictionary Technique

It is now impossible for us try to find the creator(s) of the “Grammar-Translation” tag. In books dating back from 1790 through 1950 we find there is not a single mention to it. This alone would suffice to prove we are dealing with a name made up by scholars to comfortably refer to a specific period of time in history, which is why, I ask: Why does Larsen-Freeman use it as an actual name for a set of techniques? There is nevertheless an important reference in the book by Taylor: *An Essay on A System of Classical Instruction: Combining The Methods of Locke, Milton, Ascham, and Colet: The Whole Series Being Designed to Exhibit A Restoration of The Primitive Mode of Scholastic Tuition in England, Disembarrassed of its Modern Abuses* (1829), not to Grammar-Translation as a methodology in education, but to *Grammar and Dictionary*, which portrays more accurately the state of affairs of teaching modern languages at that time:

[...] the principal difference between the ancient and modern mode of instruction in the classic languages, was this —that formerly boys were taught by the *oral interpretation* of the master, what they now have to teach themselves from the *Grammar and Dictionary*: in other words, that the ease and convenience of the pupil was originally recognized *as the principle* of education, whereas now the difficulties of learning are endlessly multiplied, either for their own sake, or for the accommodation of the master (Taylor, 1829: 14 emphasis in the original).

Notwithstanding, learning through the dictionary took a turning point as any other diffused practice, reducing its potential to aversive stimulus when abused as the only technique in classrooms. Furthermore, when it fell in the wrong hands of perhaps well-prepared teachers, but definitely

unprepared translators, it rapidly became a paleontological-linguistic endeavour (literal translation), whose aid to language learning is unclear. *“No digo que la traducción literal sea imposible, sino que no es una traducción. Es una hilera de palabras, para ayudarnos a leer el texto en su lengua original. Algo más cerca del diccionario que de la traducción, que es siempre una operación literaria”* (Paz, 1971: 9-10). Misunderstood, employed in isolation, and as a punishment for classroom management, any learning technique would have surely been forbidden too.

If we go back to the many methods that permeated the teaching-learning of foreign languages, it can be verified that translation was part of it in one way or another. Unfortunately, it was always seen as a mere exercise of translating word by word, without any context, and in many instances even as a punishment for bad behavior in class, as a form of making students quiet and busy. That way, the good things which could be explored were totally lost, making translation into a “skeleton in the cupboard” (Prodomou, 2002: 5).

The reasons for the study of language to be unsuccessful have to be well pondered over, before one creates judgements on the existence of Grammar-Translation as the inherited monster of the eighteenth century, doomed to inception and fruitless nowadays. The sources given in this article bear testimony of the little development of knowledge in psycholinguistics back in the day, the goals pursued (pupils’ literacy: reading and writing), the school seen as the intellectual exercise scenario, as in the Middle Ages, before one embarked upon the social or occupational functioning in the real world, and finally the firm belief that language proficiency was given through learning grammar rules by heart.

The history behind the grammar-dictionary technique is long and complex enough not to be inserted in this short article; there are some historic and social elements though, that are worth remembering here only to show the lack of socio-historic background in the texts by Kelly (1969), Kumaravadivelu (2006), Larsen-Freeman (2000), Richards and Rodgers (2001), Stern (1983), and Titone (1968), whose absence invariably leads to flawed methodological inferences.

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1 “I’m not saying that literal translation is impossible, but that it is not translation. It is a string of words helping us to read the text in the original language. Something closer to the dictionary than to translation, which is, always, a literary operation” (my translation).

In 1700 Austrian empress of the Holy Roman Empire, Maria Theresia Walburga Amalia Christina, fostered an advanced secondary education system (Goldsmith, 1936) later known as the *Gymnasium* or *Lyzeum*, it was public education but led by priests with a strong religiously laden syllabus. In the criteria for admission students should have been 10 or 13 years old, and have approved basic education; this was named the *klassieke culturele Vorming* (classical cultural formation). After wards students continued with courses leading to college (literature, medicine, law).

The reason to start compulsory education, which in fact began with the youngest (*der Kindergarten*), was that Prussian soldiers defended themselves in the battlefield, instead of facing the enemy; as a result it was considered that the school should shape individuals with the highest sense of loyalty, obedience, discipline and fear to the law. It was needed to instil in people that King's decisions where always fair, and must not be questioned (Cf. Byrne, 1997: 38).

For the Prussian Empire education was a device to indoctrinate citizens in cultural, moral, and behavioural desired responses. All of this was achievable through strengthening discipline, concentration, and the systematic presentation of models of virtue and ethics taken out of classical epic stories. John Locke's ideas of the “*tabula rasa*” of human mind, and Rousseau's “without law and morality human nature is corrupted” are good examples of the line of thought ruling education in Europe in those days.

It was precisely against those salient features that Wilhelm Viëtor wrote in *Der Sprachunterricht Muss Umkehren!* (The language class must change!) (1905), not against translation or any Grammar-Translation method (a historic tag created many years later). Likewise it was in opposition to this set of fossilized practices designed to have students quiet, and busy while reading moral parables from the Latin Bible or the Greek Aesop's fables, that the *Neusprachliche Reformbewegung* led by Henry Sweet (1845-1912) in England, Paul Passy (1859-1940) in France, Otto Jespersen (1860-1943) in Denmark, Wilhelm Viëtor (1850-1918) and Maximilian Berlitz (1852-1921) in Germany, highlighted the absence of the oral practice, which is quite understandable for most of these authors were phoneticians too.

What followed was that as soon as Barnes Sears came back from Europe to the U.S., he decided to repeat and implement the techniques of the



Prussian Empire. No wonder why he called his book: *The Prussian Method of Teaching The Elements of The Latin Language. Adapted to The Use of American Schools* (1844). No wonder why each one of the chapters of that book is called: “Virtue, Wisdom, Equity, Truth, The Passions, and Honour” And it should not come as a surprise neither, that Horace Mann, father of public U.S. education, decided to spread this type of teaching. The rest is history to us.

Readers are warned again that in order to attack any methodology one should be acquainted with the history, social and cultural background of the moment in which that methodology was created. A history of the Grammar-Translation Method should commence thus, by analyzing how accurate the name Grammar-Translation is. In the time of the Prussian Empire literal translation —perusing the dictionary—, was emphasized. Using the dictionary is not the same as translating just as sitting at the table is not the same as eating a meal: it is part of it, but it is just the beginning, not the whole process. There was no translation at all in the Prussian mode of teaching, and consequently it is unfair, dangerous, and inaccurate calling the Prussian method, or the Grammar Dictionary technique: Grammar-Translation; for it only creates a prejudice against the use of translation in the classroom. Maybe this was not thought over by the authors under review, therefore I deem their books as having caused much of the current prejudices and uninformed opinions about translation in EFL literature. Care must be taken when writing about history.

## Conclusions

The goal of this text would only be met if teachers and theoreticians wake up to realize that translation is not harmful whatsoever, and that there was no Grammar-Translation method in the history of foreign language teaching because Grammar-Translation is a historic invention; thus, if we were in need for a name to characterize the way languages were taught in the eighteenth century, perhaps Grammar-Dictionary (as used by Taylor 1829: 14) would be more appropriate.

With this in mind, I propose to carefully reconsider in all FLT, ESL, EFL or related literature, as well as by theoreticians, pre-service and in-service teachers the current use of the historic tag Grammar-Translation, for its mistaken, incorrect, and inaccurate meaning has proven to be deleterious to the use of translation in language learning. Simply put, the construct

Grammar-Translation narrows down the variety of learning techniques at our disposal, undermining our own capacity to think in different ways to learn.

Analyzing methods out of the texts alone —as if texts alone conducted classes— is fallacious. A serious, comprehensive, and thorough review of language teaching policies of those years is still an undertaking to avoid de-contextualized analyses yet to be made. Stern himself said it (1983: 453): “*No full and carefully documented history of grammar-translation exists.*” A good point of departure would undoubtedly be the *Ratio Studiorum*. The absence of this pivotal book can be said to be the prime reason for fictional narratives, such as those by Kelly (1969), Larsen-Freeman (2000), and Richards and Rodgers (2001).

*“Many disagreements in education occur because people don’t distinguish between facts and beliefs. Much of the ‘conventional wisdom’ of education is, in effect, a collection of outdated beliefs that retain the power to drive the behavior of the institution”* (Lloyd Yero, 2010: 110) Plenty of uncritical notions are found in the pages of uninformed writers, their position is as simple as *“there is a before and after in foreign language teaching: Before the Audiolingual method everything was darkness and translation. After the Audiolingual method (or whichever classroom where the L1 is not used), everything changed for the common well, and we are at the happiest moment in History thanks to the Task-Based approach”* (For this perspective I also invite readers to check the eye-opening article by Swan, 2005).

Despite the widespread popular assumption that translation should play a major and necessary part in the study of a foreign language, recent theories of language teaching and learning have at best ignored the role of translation and at worst vilified it. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards almost all influential theoretical works on language teaching have assumed without argument that a new language (L2) should be taught without reference to the student’s first language (L1).

English-speaking countries, especially Great Britain, have promoted the employment of such teachers (native) abroad, even in situations where students share an L1 and translation can consequently be used. A highly questionable assumption has developed that the native-speaker teacher is necessarily the best. International publishers have had an interest in

the demise of translation too, as monoglot materials can be distributed without regard to the student's first language (Cook, 1998: 117).

Only a fistful of sound, full-fledged methods using authentic, non literal translation in the classroom apart from Duff (1996) and Uzawa (1994) are found; therefore further research on the topic is a must inasmuch as there is evidence to support that translation is an unavoidable process in foreign-language acquisition (Thierry and Wu 2007), and that oral performance was also achieved in the 1800<sup>th</sup>, (Rivas Sacconi 1993)<sup>2</sup>, all of which amounts to mention —just as a reminder of what is obvious but willingly overlooked by applied linguists—, the treatise by Jones(1915) *Via Nova or The Application of the Direct Method to Latin and Greek*, published by Cambridge in a time and a country earlier than those self-proclaimed forward-looking innovators, as stated by Kelly (1969), Larsen-Freeman (2000), and Richards and Rodgers (2001) among others.

The problem is not the method, the teachers, the students or the resources. The problem is (it has always been) what we do and we do not do with all those elements in the classroom. 18<sup>th</sup> century education was not better or worse than 21<sup>st</sup> century language teaching. It was different. Our duty as language teachers is to get the facts, read, ask, call into question, and be as informed as we can in order to construct solutions for the challenges of our day, instead of construct fears about what our predecessors got to achieve in their time.

## Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to Yeraldine Aldana G., for providing critical feedback and suggestions on the initial manuscript, as well as to Lilia Carvajal A., whose comments and advice before delivering this lecture have greatly improved this paper. Any remaining imperfections or errors are my sole responsibility.

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2 The biography of Italian polyglot Giuseppe Caspar Mezzofanti, (Russell 1858), has a very interesting prologue in which several descriptions of multilingualism through several times and countries in history neglects the spread assumption that oral performance came only after the “enlightenment” of the Audiolingual method in 1950.

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