



## CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

*CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what they know and deepen their understanding of issues and interest in the ESL field.*

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### Teaching Reading and Grammar Translation

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This is the first in a series of articles on the teaching of reading to students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). The articles provide descriptions of the four most common ways in which EFL reading is generally taught. I describe the prominent features of the four, and discuss their strengths and weaknesses.

This article focuses on *grammar translation*. In countries where English is taught as a foreign language (in contrast to countries where English is taught as a second language), the oral use of English (listening and speaking skills) may not be as important as a reading knowledge of English. In such cases, teaching English and teaching the reading of English are often the same thing. As a means of studying English, students may be taught to read texts written in English by translating them into the students' first language.

A grammar-translation approach to the teaching of EFL reading often takes the following form in the classroom: The teacher reads aloud a short passage in English while the students follow along in their textbooks. The teacher then reads the passage sentence by sentence, and the students read each sentence aloud after the teacher. This is followed by an oral word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence translation by students. Meaning is taken at the sentence level, with less attention paid to the meaning of the text as a whole. Meaning is also constructed via the students' first language, not directly from English.

Grammar-translation "continues to be widely used in some parts of the world today" (Richards & Rodgers 1986: 4) where it reflects local educational practice and cultural values. The aim is both language learning and character building, often with the goal of preparing students for national or other examinations that include translation. These examinations may serve as rites of passage and as measures of general scholastic aptitude as much as measures of English language ability.

Grammar-translation also suits cultures where the teacher knows English, but has not been trained to transmit that knowledge. As Nobuyuki Hino, describing "yakudoku," the Japanese variant of this approach, notes, it "requires little professional training, and also little preparation is needed for each class. Anyone who has studied English through yakudoku is able to teach it in the same way without much effort" (1992: 106).

There are some major problems with the grammar-translation approach in teaching reading. First the grammar-translation approach confuses the teaching of English with the teaching of reading. These are two related but somewhat different issues. Let me explain. It is possible, and actually frequent, that someone can learn to speak and understand English but not know how to read (or write) English. Moreover, there are scholars who can read a foreign language but have never learned to speak it.



This confusion between the teaching of English and the teaching of reading leads to a second problem with the grammar-translation approach. Because the focus of the grammar-translation approach is translating, EFL students do not learn to read. They see reading as translation. They may become very good at translating English into their first language, but they do not become fluent readers in English.

All reading experts agree that we learn to read by reading. This is true in both a first language and a foreign language. There is no other way. We learn to read by reading. And what is reading? Reading is an interactive process between the reader and the reading material (the text, which can be a book, a newspaper, a magazine). The reader brings the knowledge that he or she has about the world to interact with the text to *create* or *construct* meaning. That is why we say that reading is an interactive process between the reader and the text.

A grammar-translation approach does not allow students to *create* meaning in English. It requires the students to *translate* the text word-for-word. This is not reading; it is translating.

There is nothing wrong with translating. In many countries, students need to be able to translate well in order to pass national examinations. But translation is not reading. They are different.

There are two problems with a grammar-translation approach. First, students do not learn to read. Second, students believe that translation is reading the foreign language. Translating is hard work. So students do not “read” (translate) when they finish their education.

I believe that it is important in teaching EFL to make a distinction between translation and reading. Often both are important skills for EFL students, but they learn only one, translation.

## References

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- Richards, J. C. and Rodgers, T. S. 1986). *Approaches and methods in language teaching: A description and analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*Please take the time to give us the addresses of anyone else you think might be interested in receiving this newsletter of the CAPE Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk. And don't forget to write us with any comments you might have. Mahalo!*

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