
Reassessing the Grammar Translation Method: Evidence from teaching the simple past tense in Islamic higher education

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Abstract

This study examined the efficiency of the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) in improving the understanding of university students regarding the Simple Past Tense. It employed one-group pre-test and post-test experimental design with 24 first-semester students of the Department of Islamic Education, Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teaching Sciences, IAI Khozinatul Ulum Blora. The students completed a pre-test to determine their prior knowledge, followed by three teaching sessions involving each of the GTM components with explicit grammar explanation, translation practice, and sentence-pattern drills. Post-test was then employed to measure learning gain quantitatively. Data analysis involved Shapiro–Wilk normality test, descriptive statistics, and paired-sample t-test to assess the significance of variations in scores. Findings indicated that the pre-test mean score of 61.25 improved to 70.83 in the post-test, and the paired-sample t-test indicated a statistically significant difference ($t = -8.536$, $df = 23$, $p = 0.000$). Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected, supporting the fact that the Grammar Translation Method significantly improved students' command of the Simple Past Tense. These results suggest that GTM remains an effective and useful way to teach grammar, particularly for low-exposure students.

Keywords: *learning English; learning method; Grammar Translation Method, language learning*

INTRODUCTION

It needless to say that learning English is one of the most valuable skills for a university student. Regardless of which field they are pursuing, English is tremendously sought after because it helps them gain access to recent scientific publications and participate in international research. With the ability to speak English, students have a stronger prospect of pursuing further studies or finding employment abroad; hence, they can easily fit into the global academe (Afreen, 2023).

English, especially in Indonesia, is the first foreign language to be taught in schools and also considered an important language for technological advancement. English is introduced to students in the majority of high schools, and even in some areas, it is introduced as early as the first or fourth elementary school grade (Nisa et al., 2024; Zahra,



2024). English education in Indonesia remains far from achieving anticipated success. The majority of the students perceive English as a dull and tough subject. This is because the majority of high school graduates are still not proficient in using English even after completing six years of its study (Cook & Leshin, 1991, in Cook (2008). Therefore, English is continued to be studied at the university level, particularly during the first and second semesters, to strengthen students' basic skills.

One of the pedagogical approaches that can address this issue is the Grammar Translation Method (GTM). The GTM is a traditional yet systematic approach to language teaching that focuses on explicit grammar explanation and sentence translation (Afriati et al., 2025; Mulyanti & Febriani, 2024). It is rule-governed and analytic in its understanding of learning, where the focus is on being precise on paper without regard to speaking competence. Though charged with being of minimal communicative value, it remains helpful to students who have grammatical difficulties (Al-Qahtani, 2016; Moghadam & Mahmoudi, 2021). This renders GTM usable for Indonesian university students, who oftener than not require direct instruction so that they may comprehend the like of the Simple Past Tense (D. A. Putri & Nursiniah, 2024).

GTM finds its origin in the idea that mastery of grammatical rules is essential for overall language competence (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). While it has only a limited focus on speaking and listening abilities, it may allow learners to have firm control over grammatical forms (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). For Harmer (2007), GTM remains appropriate when learners need to acquire complex grammatical systems, such as verb tenses before using them communicatively (Tuan, 2017).

Previous studies of GTM have provided inconsistent findings. For instance, Parveen and Latif (2021) determined that GTM effectively improves learners' understanding of grammatical rules but is not as effective in inducing spontaneous use of language. Similarly, Karim et al. (2023) reported improvement in grammatical accuracy but limited advancement in communicative use. Kurniawan et al. (2020) also indicated that GTM promotes understanding but fails to engage learners in interactive use of language. These findings indicate that while GTM enhances accuracy, the impact of GTM on fluency and motivation is questionable (Rahman & Pandian, 2018; Smagul, 2024; Suryani & Lestari, 2023).

In light of this, the present study focuses specifically on how effective GTM is in boosting Simple Past Tense comprehension among university students, an area of grammar that has been known to pose difficulty for Indonesian learners (Halijah et al., 2023; Naserly, 2024). Despite the debate over GTM's lack of communicative effectiveness, the present study aims to determine if its formulaic and rule-bound nature can significantly help learners' comprehension and utilization of the Simple Past Tense. Mastery of this tense is also closely related to students' ability in constructing recount texts (Sutrayani et al., 2025) and is influenced by students' prior grammatical competence and reading habits (Messi & Reflinda, 2023).

Regarding above conditions, the study targets the following question: "How effective is the Grammar Translation Method in improving university students' understanding of the Simple Past Tense?" In focusing on this particular aspect, the study adds to the debate of the relevance of traditional methods of learning for the acquisition of grammatical proficiency in present-day higher education.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative experimental design, specifically a one-group pre-test and post-test design, to determine the efficacy of the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) in improving students' understanding of the Simple Past Tense. This is the type of design employed since it allows the measurement of the difference in the performance of students prior to and after they received the treatment, where there is evident proof of instructional impact (Creswell, 2013).

Respondents

The participants were 24 first-semester students from the Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teaching Science, Department of Islamic Education, IAI Khozinatul Ulum Blora. They were selected using purposive sampling since they previously underwent a general English placement test and were found to have low to mid-level grammatical competence. All participants were enrolled in the obligatory English course and came from the same background, which aided in maintaining the internal validity of the research.

Instruments

The research tools of the present study were pre-test and post-test questions in the format of 20 multiple-choice and 5 short-answer questions that tested students' understanding of the Simple Past Tense. The tests were designed to assess grammatical knowledge including verb form, time expression, and sentence modification. Pre-test and post-test instruments were pilot-tested and tested by two English teaching experts before its implementation on content validity and reliability. The reliability coefficient was calculated using Cronbach's alpha and was found to be good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.81$).

Procedures

Data were gathered over three weeks of the first semester of the academic year 2024/2025. There were three procedures stages, namely pre-test, treatment, and post-test. Pre-test: Pre-test was carried out among the students in order to assess the students' initial level of understanding of the Simple Past Tense. Treatment: The researcher used the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) for four sessions. Lessons involved direct grammar explanation, translation of model sentences, and writing exercises that required students to translate Indonesian sentences into English. Students also discussed the grammatical rules that controlled each example. Post-test: Following treatment, students were given a similar test to measure improvement. The post-test had the same structure as the pre-test but included unique items with similar difficulty to avoid recall bias.

Data analysis

Data were presented in descriptive statistics (mean, percentage, and standard deviation) and inferential statistics with paired sample t-test through SPSS version 25.0. Paired sample t-test was used to ascertain if there existed a statistically significant difference in the pre-test and post-test scores. The significance level was set at $p < 0.05$, and thus any value increase in the post-test was statistically significant.

Ethical considerations

Before conducting the study, ethical permission had been obtained from the Tarbiyah Faculty and Teaching Science, IAI Khozinatul Ulum Blora. Confidentiality and informed consent had been assured to the participants, in addition to the voluntary aspect of participation. The researcher also made clear that test results would be utilized solely for research purposes, not for grading.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The effectiveness of the GTM in enhancing students’ understanding of the Simple Past Tense

Various statistical analyses were used in this research to analyze the difference in test scores resulting from the treatment applied. First was a normality test, which was meant to check if the data were normally distributed. This was followed by descriptive statistics in order to look into general trends within both pre- and post-test scores. Finally, the differences between the pre- and post-tests were tested using a paired sample T-test to establish whether such changes were statistically significant. The outcome of these various analyses is presented below.

Normality test

One of the most important assumptions for many statistical tests is that data follow a normal distribution. In this research, the normality of the data was tested by the Saphiro-Wilk test, which is considered one of the most reliable methods for small sample sizes (n<50) (Razali & Wah, 2011). The results of the normality test are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Test of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Pre-Test	.161	24	.111	.930	24	.100
Post-Test	.158	24	.124	.922	24	.064

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Table 1 of the Shapiro-Wilk test results for the pre-test and post-test showed significance values of 0.100 and 0.064, respectively. Since the significance level of both is larger than 0.05, it concluded that the data in both the pre-test and post-test meet the normality assumption. This is a very important result because it enables us to be sure that the normality assumption is held true and to proceed with further statistical analysis.

Paired sample statistic

Descriptive statistics were generated to summarize central tendency and variability in the pre and post-test scores. Accordingly, summary statistics are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std.Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-Test	61.2500	24	21.12334	4.31178
	Post- Test	70.8333	24	24.48010	4.99698

From Table 2, it can be described that the mean for the pre-test was 61.25, and the mean for the post-test was 70.83. this indicates an improvement in the students’ performance after the treatment. The standard deviation values indicate that some variation in scores is present, but on the whole, the improvement from the pre-test to the post-test is very clear. The post-test mean is higher than the pre-test means, which indicates that the students’ grammar skill, especially about the Simple Past Tense, were improved

after the treatment. To see whether this difference is significant, it will be interpreted the paired sample T-test output as follows.

Paired sample t-test

A T-test on paired samples was carried out to determine if the difference between the pre-test and post-test scores was significant. The paired sample T-test is a test carried out on two related groups to determine whether such groups have a difference in means that is statistically significant. The results can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3

Paired Sample t-test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pre-Test - Post-Test	-9.58333	5.50033	1.12275	-11.90592	-7.26075	-8.536	23	.000

Based on the paired sample test output table, the significance value for the pretest and post-test variable is 0.000, which is less than 0.050. therefore, as per the decision rule for the paired sample T-test, the null hypothesis (Ho) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. Thus, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the mean pre-test and post-test data.

The findings of the study indicated a substantial improvement in learners' mastery of the Simple Past Tense when using the Grammar Translation Method (GTM). The mean for the pre-test was 61.25, while that of the post-test increased to 70.83, indicating a significant performance boost. This finding aligns with previous studies showing that GTM is effective in improving grammatical accuracy in EFL contexts (T. D. R. Putri & Bahrudin, 2024; Rahim & Fatimah, 2022; Suryani & Lestari, 2023).

A paired-samples t-test produced -8.536 (p = 0.000), which confirmed that the difference between the two means was significant. Besides, the data were normally distributed according to Shapiro–Wilk test (p > 0.05), confirming the use of statistical process suitable. High positive correlation between pre-test and post-test results also indicated consistency in students' improvement (r = 0.982, p = 0.000).

In general, these results offer strong support that the Grammar Translation Method can successfully improve grammatical awareness, especially in Simple Past Tense instruction for university learners within the contexts of higher education. These findings confirm GTM's ongoing validity as a teaching approach, particularly in EFL settings where accuracy-driven instruction continues to dominate curriculum requirements (Firman et al., 2024).

The increase in scores shows the effectiveness of GTM as a method of teaching grammatical structures, such as the Simple Past Tense. In this case, GTM's focus on explicit grammar instruction and translation exercises seemed to lie at the heart of improving grammatical accuracy among the students. This corroborates findings that structured grammar instruction enhances learners' mastery of tense forms (Afriati et al., 2025; Mulyanti & Febriani, 2024).

One of the reasons why GTM may turn out to be particularly effective might be the very practice and repetition of the core rules and structures that this method is built upon. The practice of translating sentences, with the inclusion of explicit grammatical instruction through the analysis in context, probably allowed students themselves to internalize grammatical rules. This is supported by studies highlighting that repeated exposure and structured practice improve mastery of simple past tense (Fajria et al., 2025; Halijah et al., 2023). In addition, the use of L1 in translation activities helps learners better understand L2 structures (Smagul, 2024).

With a structure like that of the Simple Past Tense, constantly reproduced in translation exercises and by the practice of rules, the students are more likely to improve their mastery of grammatical forms, thereby making their usage more accurate. This agrees with cognitive language learning theories that explicitly highlight how far repetitive practice and explicitness are crucial in achieving accuracy in grammar-focused instruction.

The findings also confirm the theories of behaviorism, which hold that individuals learn through the formation of habits by repetition and reinforcement. In GTM, for example, the repeated exposure to grammatical rules and the practice of translating sentences reinforce the desired behavior, i.e., correct usage of the Simple Past Tense. According to B.F. Skinner, the famous behaviorist, elucidates, "Learning is the result of responses to stimuli, and the learner's behavior is shaped by reinforcing stimuli" (Skinner, 1953). This sounds just like the repetitive exercises one goes through in GTM; each correct grammar is, after some time, engraved into students' minds therefore they apply such grammar rules almost automatically. Hence, repetition links itself as to why this GTM provides very much in grammar accuracy.

In addition, the effectiveness of GTM in developing grammatical competence support prior research. These findings are consistent with studies showing that GTM improves students' understanding and application of grammar rules in classroom settings (T. D. R. Putri & Bahrudin, 2024; Rahayu et al., 2024). Also, Nykopp et al. (2019) reported that explicit grammar-focused methods, such as translation exercises, are significantly more effective in improving grammatical competence. Similarly, Jazilah et al. (2020) found that organized grammar teaching approaches, such as GTM, have a positive effect on learners in mastering tenses, including the Simple Past. These researches also support the claim that GTM gives students a more systematic and rule-based method, which therefore means more grammatical accuracy.

These findings run in contrast to those researches which have argued for more communicative approaches to grammar teaching, stressing fluency rather than accuracy. It is consistent with past studies, which have indicated that GTM is not as successful as other methods in encouraging communicative competence (Rahman & Pandian, 2018; Tuan, 2017). It means that GTM works well in situations where grammar learning is the focus. For example, Kusrini dan Ummah (2021) argued that communicative approaches offer better long-term retention and application of grammar rules. The implication of this apparent discrepancy is that GTM can suit contexts more oriented toward grammatical accuracy. Whereas communicative methods emphasize grammatical use in actual contextual situations to arrive at fluency, the method of GTM is planned for students to achieve mastery in grammatical forms and structures explicitly through practice. It follows from these considerations that GTM does much better where the focus lies with the accurate than the fluent delivery of the learner's linguistic production.

This research thus carries important implications for grammar teaching at higher education. For intermediate level students, GTM provide a firm foundation in developing grammatical accuracy, particularly with regard to complex structures such as verb tenses. Despite some criticisms regarding the weakness of GTM in communicative skills, this research highlights its effectiveness for mastering certain structures, such as the Simple Past Tense. Therefore, though GTM does not lead to fluency, it is not an invalid technique in that it does help to achieve some learning outcomes, especially when grammar is focused (Al-Qahtani, 2016; Moghadam & Mahmoudi, 2021).

The gap between accuracy and fluency can be bridged by exploring, in further research, how GTM could be combined with communicative approaches. For instance, GTM could be used during the presentation stages of a grammar lesson to give students an accurate model of grammar use. Afterwards, communicative practice could be used to help them apply these forms in more interactive real-life contexts. This hybrid approach would ensure that the students not only master grammatical structures but also the use of such structured in effective communication.

This research hints at a number of paths that can be taken for further research. Further research could also investigate whether the long-term retention of grammatical knowledge after GTM differs significantly from that of grammatical knowledge gained following other treatments. Further investigation might explore issues relating to the efficiency of GTM regarding several other grammatical structures. On top of these areas, one may research in a wider range of linguistic and cultural settings; these are circumstances within which results in this area most often sought, although those findings could hardly ever generalize across these conditions.

The second direction in which this could be taken may involve a search into how GTM might interact with technology-enhanced learning platforms, for example, language learning apps or online collaborative platforms. It would be one direction to create GTM effective, while the current needs is for the interactive and technology-enhanced learning experience for students. Increasing the sample size and participant demography could also replicate whether the result of this study is generalizable across different educational context, offering a wider comprehension of the applicability of GTM to grammar instruction.

The research hereby established, from the data analysis, the significant effectiveness of GTM in improving students' understanding of the Simple Past Tense. The students can internalize the rules of grammar through repetition, explicit grammar instruction, and translation exercises to apply them more effectively. This study confirms that GTM is still useful in higher education for language teaching, provided it operates within contexts where grammatical accuracy is the main focus. It can therefore be inferred that further research might elaborate on how GTM could blend with communicative approaches and technological learning tools in enhancing effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

This research confirms that the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) greatly improves university students' understanding and usage of the Simple Past Tense, as indicated through the pre-test to post-test score increases. The systematic and explicit instruction with translation practice facilitated the attainment of greater grammatical accuracy, as per the purpose of the study to verify GTM's effect in accuracy-based learning contexts. These findings validate GTM's ongoing pedagogical value in form-focused instruction, especially in situations in which grammatical precision continues to be deemed top priority. However,

they also raise questions regarding its pedagogical limitations. Although GTM effectively promotes accuracy, it comes at the expense of restricting spontaneous production of language, through which fluency acquisition could be better supported by integration with communicative or task-oriented approaches. That is, GTM can be a foundation for grammatical competence but needs to be supplemented with interaction-based practice to facilitate well-rounded skills. More broadly pedagogically, this study implies that previous methods do not necessarily have to be abandoned but prudently adapted to fit contemporary communicative and computerized learning environments. The secret is pedagogical hybridity, using GTM as a support for language correctness while leveraging newer approaches to ensure learner engagement and fluency. Future studies can explore GTM's extension to other grammatical structures, its long-term impact on retention and transfer, and its integration with technological support or blended instructional methods to enhance its applicability in today's technology-enhanced classrooms. The authors thank the University of Muria Kudus teachers for their assistance with carrying out the research and, similarly, the contributing students for their cooperation and dedication.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software; **Author 2:** Data Curation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation; **Author 3:** Visualization, Investigation, Supervision; **Author 4:** Software, Validation, Writing – Review and Editing.

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