

The Explicit Cognition of Grammar Learning Acquired in L2 Acquisition

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Abstract: English is a universal language and taught in countries in which English is a foreign or second language. There are some essential reasons behind this is that it is the main language of the Internet, media, books, newspapers, airports, international trade and commerce, scientific magazines and communication. Therefore, mastering the use of English to read, write, speak, and translate is quite meaningful. Under these circumstances, grammar acquisition comes to the fore and becomes indispensable science any language without grammar is like a disability. It must also be pointed out that grammar is one of the main systems of a language, and comprises the rules that show how language items are put together in order to make a correct utterance. This paper illustrates grammar plays an unshakable role in second language acquisition.

Keywords: Cognition; Grammar; Second; Language; Acquisition

1. Introduction

It is quite common for the average English native speaker when asked about his knowledge of grammar to say that he doesn't know any or that he hates grammar. What does this mean? It is obvious that he can speak excellent English, correctly and appropriately; and he knows how to use grammar correctly. He may not tell us what the rules of grammar are, or how English works grammatically, but he has the language competence or a subconscious knowledge of the grammar rules of English that allows him to make sentences.

However, for a non-native speaker like each of Chinese students, the situation can be a world of difference. We are the ones who have to be taught and strictly trained to use them precisely and correctly. If there is no conscious, purposeful, and systematic learning, it is impossible to automatically master the correct use of grammar.

For a long time since, many people have been arguing that teaching grammar means giving students chances to use English in various real conditions so as to learn to communicate effectively. For some teachers, a grammar class is the one which is involved in the formal explanation of grammatical rules using grammatical terminology. For other groups of teachers, the learning of grammar is simply the exercise of common grammatical patterns. These might be simple statements with interrogatives and sentences with subject, verb and object.

Based on the research and the current foreign language grammar teaching in China, the paper attempts to bring forward the interactive task-based grammar teaching functioned by implicit cognition and explicit learning together.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Grammar theory

Grammar as a form of internal linguistic knowledge that operates in the appropriate production and comprehension of natural languages. The universal grammar theory in linguistics is usually credited to Noam Chomsky that suggests that the ability to learn grammar is built into the human brain from birth regardless of language. That is to say, the brain of human being has a structure or attribute which is congenital, namely language acquisition device. It is the internal cause which mankind learn to use languages. The theory is the core of Chomsky grammar theories, and it is a challenge to the traditional sense. In other words, according to Chomsky, a native speaker has, somewhere in his brain, a set of grammar rules which he

can use to make sentences. There are a finite number of rules that all native speakers know. (Bygate, 1988) ^[1]

2.2 Experts with their controversial opinions

Grammar is perhaps so serious and central in learning another language that all ways should be searched for which will focus student energy on the task of mastering and internalizing it. (Greenbaum, 1991) ^[2]

The purpose of grammar instruction is to help learners to use L2 appropriately and correctly, and to gain confidence and competence in using the language. Learners need to know, use and practice the rules even if they don't need to discuss and explain them formally. (Macaro & Masterman, 2006) ^[3]

We teach grammar because we cannot avoid teaching it. It is an integral part of the language-learning process. (Alexander, 1990:379) ^[4]

Students need to be given details of grammar rules if they are to learn English successfully. (Jeremy Harmer, 1987) ^[5]

The important point is that the study of grammar as such is neither necessary nor sufficient for learning to use a language. (Brumfit, C.J. & Johnson, K1979, pp. 165) ^[6]

The language teacher's view of what constitutes knowledge of a language is an understanding of the syntactic structure of sentences. The assumption that the language teacher appears to make is that once this basis is provided, and then the learner will have no difficulty in dealing with the actual use of language. There is a good evidence to suggest that this assumption is of very doubtful validity indeed. (H.G. Widdowson, 1979. pp. 49-60) ^[7]

From the aforementioned literature review, it is clear that the cognition of grammar learning is various. Although some contradictory points of view, most researchers reveal that learning to use grammar is absolutely necessary. Teaching and learning a language should include both how to use grammar communicatively and structurally, which is especially indispensable for non-native English learners.

3. Essential grammatical knowledge in second language acquisition

In some ways the role as a language teacher is similar to teaching someone how to play a sport such as baseball. In order to play baseball, one needs to know the rules of the game even though they may never be asked to explain those rules. But knowing the rules of baseball cannot guarantee that one can play baseball. Likewise, having the knowledge of grammatical rules does not mean having the knowledge of how the rules can be used effectively.

For example: M: Would you please shut the door?

W: The campus is so big.

From the example, one can say that W knows how to produce a correct grammatical sentence, but she does not know when and where to use it. She has obviously given an inappropriate answer to M's question. On this occasion, teachers are expected to have a good grasp of grammatical knowledge in order to give students sound guidance. In China, grammar used to be the central point of language teaching and learning. It has to be clear that although there are some similarities between the syntactic structures of English and Chinese, the difference between the two is also huge. The written form of Chinese uses characters, not an alphabet. Features such as affixes, which bind morphemes, are not noticeable. Chinese students find these features are all new to them. Therefore, enough attention should be paid to master the grammatical knowledge on sentence grammar, phrase grammar and morphology and focus on the differences between Chinese and English.

3.1 Sentence grammar

In English, sentences begin with a capital letter and include a verb. Whereas Chinese uses characters and a verb is not always necessary in a sentence. For example:

"I am tired." In Chinese, literally it should be "I tired".

"It is extremely cold." In Chinese, it is "It extremely cold.

English forms "yes-no" questions by reversing the order of subject and verb. The difference in Chinese is that it uses a statement with the interrogative "ma" at the end of a sentence to signal the question form. For example:

"Are you going to the downtown?" The same question in Chinese can be formulated as "You are going to the downtown

+”ma”?”

The most common parts of an English sentence are subject, verb and object, which maybe made into a pattern like “He likes e-books.” But if the sentence is in the interrogative form, the interrogative often moves to the front of the question. But Chinese almost always starts a sentence with the subject.

3.2 Phrase grammar

The phrase is a short unit within the clause, of one or more words, but fulfilling the same sort of function as a single word. (Penny Ur, 1996).^[8] Chinese students face the problem of correctly using fixed phrases such as verb with a proposition and prepositional phrases. Errors of all kinds are common. For example:

I do not mean to interfere you. (It should be “I do not mean to interfere with you.”)

She cures the lady from her sickness. (She cures the lady of her sickness.)

Listen some music. (Listen to some music.)

They are going to visit a friend in this evening. (They are going to visit a friend in the evening.)

I shall stay at the home. (I shall stay at the home.)

This module is too hard to me. (This module is too hard for me.)

Furthermore, some transitive and intransitive verbs are often confused and misused. For example:

He wants to read and do today.

I talked my classmates

It is also worth mentioning that in Chinese pronouns, there is no difference between the subjective case and the objective case. It does not differentiate the adjectival from the nominal. Students are frequently confused, like this book is me instead of using mine. And in the spoken form of Chinese pronouns, there are no gender distinctions. She, he, and it are not different in sound, which is always “ta”. So, it is not surprising that even advanced students use he to refer from time to time and vice versa.

3.3 Morpheme

Morphological interference often happens when Chinese students use the rules of morphemes in English. For instances, in Chinese, the negative morpheme is formed by just adding “No” before a verb, an adverb or an adjective. Students automatically equate negative morphemes in English with the Chinese equivalent. Many errors appear in both oral and written work.

In Chinese, past action is signaled by a marker after the verb. Therefore, a common mistake for Chinese is that they regard “-ed” as the Chinese past tense marker and so simply add the “-ed” marker to all verbs, like teach + ed, choose+ ed. However, at other times, students often forget to use “-ed” form.

The commonest English plural morpheme is “s”, “es”. Students are confused by the fact that the singular marker for English verbs is the same as the plural form for some English nouns. They add “s” or “es” to make a singular noun plural and make a plural verb singular frequently. For example:

tress (plural)

He shouts out.

That piece of clothes is dazzling.

Sometimes, however, students add “s” “es” to all nouns to make nouns plural, like “data + s”, “wife + s”, “parenthesis + s”.

In Chinese, characters do not have relative prefix, suffix and bound morphemes. If an EFL teacher notices this and gives the student a clear explanation or proper leading, it will be tremendously beneficial for students. For example, knowledge of the meanings of some common prefixes like pre-, trans-, dis-, un-, anti-, bi-, inter-, and common suffix like -ness, -ion, -or, -al, -less, -able, can help students to enlarge their vocabulary.

In addition, the pronunciation of some regular suffixes is changed because of the different phonological environment.

In a nutshell, grammar has a list of dos and don’ts, rules that tell us what we should or should not say. The rules of

grammar are found mainly in written language, and it is an objective description of structures of language, with no comment concerning correct versus incorrect forms.

4. Discussion

It is essential for an EFL teacher to realize that having a good grasp of English grammar is an indispensable qualification. One must have possessed grammatical knowledge in order to convey it to students other than explicitly lecturing on the rules, or a practice that has showed its ineffectiveness. Thorough knowledge of Grammar influences students to use English in all skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, so teaching the grammar in the language class is definitely meaningful because one can hardly acquire a language well without the grammatical knowledge of sentences, phrases and morphemes. Teachers themselves may have found that their own abilities to read and understand some research in areas like language acquisition, discourse analysis, contrastive analysis and error analysis frequently rely on their knowledge of grammar.

Moreover, in a language classroom, students may more often challenge a teacher's grammatical knowledge than other skills. When students do not understand some points, they need explanations; when students make mistakes, a teacher should have the ready ability to detect, diagnose them and give answers accurately since providing students with grammatical information skillfully is surely one of a teacher's unavoidable responsibilities. For instance, although Chinese students always work hard and are able to remember almost every rule, the learning of rules alone cannot make them be able to use them. The fact is that they still find a great deal of difficulties in using what they learn in real life situations.

Besides, language is dynamic rather than static. EFL teachers are supposed to possess sound, specific grammatical knowledge: this is in addition to presenting the grammar clearly, interestingly and concisely to the students and helping them build up confidence, develop what they have learned, and then use English more effectively. Otherwise, the more rules students remember, the less ability to use the language they may have. Since the phrase structure rules can generate the basic structure of the sentence, lexical items are needed to complete the meaning or semantic representation of the sentence and then the sentence helps realize the function of language. Therefore, without having thorough grammatical knowledge of sentences, phrases and morphemes, the EFL unquestionably loses something essential about language.

5. Conclusion

From the discussion above, it may clearly be seen that grammar is like the science, which teaches the proper use of words, phrases and sentences. These are the rules of the spoken and written language. Good grammar teaching should be an important component of foreign language teaching since there is no short cuts at this point. Mastering strong grammar knowledge should also be one of the essential qualities of EFL teachers. Besides, what is clear is that making a correct sentence needs both the knowledge of sentence grammar and the knowledge of phrases grammar and morpheme. As Batstone (1994) ^[9] points out that "It would be impossible to learn a language effectively without drawing on grammar in some way."

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