

Reconsidering English Grammar Teaching for Improving Non-English Majors' English Writing Ability

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Abstract

With the globalization of world economy, English learners' writing ability has been attached less and less importance to. As a result, many college students in China, especially the non-English majors, cannot express themselves effectively in written English. They make various kinds of mistakes, mostly grammar mistakes, such as writing sentence fragments, using dangling modifiers, and using punctuation marks inappropriately or incorrectly. Many factors are responsible for their weak writing ability, but teachers' neglecting grammar teaching and only teaching grammar knowledge are two critical factors. So, this paper is intended to call on teachers of English to reconsider grammar teaching for improving non-English majors' English writing ability. It first explores the role grammar plays in English learning and in English writing, then proposes a few practical and effective methods of instructing grammar, and finally concludes that to improve non-English majors' writing ability, we had better teach them the right grammatical concepts in the right way on the right occasion

Keywords: grammar, grammar teaching, English learning, English writing, non-English majors

1. Introduction

What is grammar? In the dictionary *Macmillan English-Chinese Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2005), grammar is defined as "the set of rules that describe the structure of a language and control the way that sentences are formed." Every language has its own grammar. People who speak the same language are able to communicate just because they intuitively know its grammar system. It is self-evident that grammar plays a very important role in language learning, including English learning. However, with the globalization of world economy, English learners' writing ability has been attached less and less importance to. And with the development of functional linguistics and communicative method, grammar teaching has been one of the most controversial and least understood aspects of language teaching in China. Students argue that they should not and need not think about any grammar rules when they are communicating, especially when making oral communication, with others. So they have no interest in the study of English grammar. And many teachers of English, especially those who teach non-English majors in college, hold that it is just because students spend too much time memorizing grammar rules that they do not have adequate time to practice speaking English and as a result, many students' comprehensive ability to use English is rather weak. So they usually don't teach grammar in class. Even if some teachers teach grammar, they are the center of the class management and teach grammar rules rigidly, while students are not involved in the least and just memorize the rules mechanically. It inevitably follows that many non-English majors cannot express themselves freely and effectively in written English. They make various kinds of mistakes, mostly grammar mistakes, such as writing sentence fragments, using dangling modifiers, making collocation errors, using punctuation marks inappropriately or incorrectly, and making word-for-word translation from Chinese to English.

Without doubt, many factors are responsible for non-English majors' weak writing ability, but teachers' neglecting grammar teaching and only teaching grammar knowledge, which cannot be converted into grammatical competence automatically, are two critical factors. To improve the non-English majors' writing ability, what we need to do at once is reconsider the role grammar plays in English learning and in English writing and come up with some practical and effective methods of instructing grammar so as to cultivate their grammatical competence as well as teaching grammar knowledge.

2. Grammar and English learning

As is known to us all, phonetics, vocabulary and grammar are three components of any language. Phonetics and vocabulary are its building materials while grammar is its basic structure, without which we cannot learn a language well.

In fact, people have long realized the important role grammar plays in language learning. For instance, in the Middle Ages, grammar was considered “the necessary prerequisite for understanding theology and philosophy as well as literature” (Weaver, 1996) and “was thought to discipline the mind and the soul at the same time” (Huntsman, 1983, qtd. in Weaver, 1996). Having a systematic knowledge of English grammar can help students construct clear, interesting, and precise sentences and paragraphs with their limited vocabulary, can save them much time and help them learn English faster because they can make use of the established rules summarized by our forefathers instead of spending much time trying to find out the rules by themselves, and can also help deepen their language awareness and improve their English day by day. Whether students can learn English well or not depends largely on their knowledge about its grammar and their ability to use grammar effectively. So, to help students learn English well, we need to teach grammar.

3. Grammar and English writing

The “University English Teaching Requirements (Draft)” published in 2004 by the Chinese Ministry of Education says, the goal of college English teaching is to cultivate students' English comprehensive application ability, especially their listening and speaking abilities, so that they can communicate with others effectively in oral or written English, and at the same time to enhance their ability of autonomous learning and to improve their comprehensive cultural quality so that they can adapt to China's economic development and the needs of international exchange. So cultivating non-English majors' writing ability is one of the main goals of college English teaching.

To help students compose well-constructed essays, English writing instruction has experienced much reform of teaching methods – from handbooks and grammar drills to hands-off writing workshops, from a focus on forms and mechanics to a focus on content and meaning, from written product to writing process, and from teacher-directed classrooms to student-centered learning ... (Hagemann, 2003). But unfortunately, in our efforts to develop approaches that were radically different from the previous ones, we had to paint grammar in the most negative light possible. As a result, we forgot how grammar contributed to meaning and how it aided communication. We went from giving students one lopsided version of language to giving them another.

To give students a well-rounded version of English, we must seek a more balanced approach, one that seeks mastery of both content and form and requires attention to both process and product. To achieve this purpose, we have to mention grammar. Although “relatively few students learn grammar well, fewer retain it, and still fewer transfer the grammar they have learned to improving or editing their writing” (Hillocks & Smith, 1991), grammar still has a revered place in the world. In the eyes of the teachers of English who are for grammar instruction, whenever we write and whatever we write about, what really counts is not that we can simply get our ideas across but that we can do it credibly and persuasively, which means using conventional grammar. And for many readers, especially those in the business world, getting their ideas across credibly and persuasively also means using conventional grammar. Some surveys made by researchers have proved it, too. For example, Larry Beason (2001), a famous instructor and grammarian in the University of South Alabama, once interviewed some business people to learn about their responses to different kinds of errors. He reported that not only did all his respondents find all errors bothersome, but they all felt writers who were careless in their writing would be careless in conducting business as well. From this survey he concluded that form is not an added-on feature of writing, but an integral part of communication and that it is necessary for us to impress upon student writers that errors matter.

So, to write effectively, students must have a good command of English grammar. But because English is learned as a foreign language (EFL) in China, students' knowledge about English grammar largely comes from formal classroom instruction, which means it is absolutely necessary for us to teach grammar in class. Then what grammatical concepts to teach and how to teach them effectively?

4. Practical and Effective Methods of Teaching English Grammar

Writing is a complex and challenging activity for many students, especially the non-English majors, so we should “focus on the grammatical concepts that are essential for the clear communication of meaning” (Chin, 2008). Broadly speaking, we can teach grammar explicitly and implicitly.

4.1 Teaching Grammar Explicitly

4.1.1 Doing Sentence-combining Exercises

Sentence combining is “the strategy of joining short sentences into longer, more complex sentences” (Chin, 2008). It is a well-recognized activity: students start with simple exercises in inserting phrases and combining sentences, and progress in complex exercises such as embedding one clause in another. Some research indicates that this method of instructing grammar can produce better results than traditional teaching of grammatical analysis. For example, “Hillocks surveys the many studies of the effects of sentence combining, and find them overwhelmingly positive at all levels (grade 2 to adult). 60% show significant gain in syntactic maturity; 30% non-significant gains; 10% no gains” (Weaver, 1996).

Sentence-combining exercises can be in different forms – written or oral, structured or unstructured. No matter in which form, they are helpful to improving students’ writing for the following reasons. First, by engaging in sentence-combining activities, students can learn to vary sentence structures to achieve their writing purposes better. Second, because sentence-combining practice provides students with “systematic knowledge of syntactic possibilities,” students can learn to “sort through alternatives in their heads as well as on paper and to choose those which are most apt” (Hillocks, 1986, qtd. in Chin, 2008). Third, by participating in oral and written sentence-combining activities, students can better understand how sentence structure, usage, and punctuation affect meaning. Besides, by participating in sentence-combining activities, students can learn to identify short, choppy sentences in their own writing and then learn to combine ideas in more fluid and sophisticated ways. As they generate more complex sentences from shorter ones, they will discover how the appropriate arrangement of words, phrases and clauses help develop fluency and variety in their own writing style and affects the overall effect of their writing.

Since sentence-combining exercises have so many advantages, teachers can provide such exercises now and then in and after class. What’s more, teachers can use students’ writing as resources to design their own sentence-combining activities, if necessary and possible. For example, at the beginning of last semester my students (freshmen) were required to write a composition on the topic “My view on health and wealth.” I was surprised to read the following opening paragraph: “As to which is more important – health or wealth, different people have different ideas. Some people think wealth is more important than health. Some other people think health is more important than wealth. As far as I’m concerned, both are important.” Undoubtedly, the sentences are grammatically correct, but not effective. They are short, simple, monotonous choppy sentences. After reading all the students’ compositions I found that quite a few students wrote similar sentences, so I decided to use the opening paragraph mentioned above as an example to show students how to combine short sentences and how to make a paragraph, even an essay, more coherent and readable. Under my guidance, the students got the following improved version: “As to which is more important – health or wealth, opinions vary from person (individual) to person (individual). Some people think wealth is more important than health, while some others argue that health is above wealth. But as far as I’m concerned, wealth and health are equally important.” Then I asked the students to compare the improved paragraph with the original one and decide which is better and explain why. Obviously, the sentence structures and words and phrases employed in the improved version are more varied and idiomatic and the three sentences move from one to another more smoothly and therefore the improved version is much more brief, coherent and readable. From this exercise, many students learned something about how to vary sentence structures, sentence length and vocabulary.

In short, sentence combining is an effective method for helping increase students’ repertoire of syntactic structures, helping them learn how to vary sentence structures and helping them develop fluency and variety in their writing style.

4.1.2 Teaching Grammar as a Matter of Style

As soon as such grammar terms as subjects, predicates, subject/verb agreement, and comma splices are mentioned, glazed expressions cross the faces of students and instructors alike at once. We have “seldom” met a teacher who enjoys teaching grammar and a student who enjoys studying grammar.

However, “the problem with grammar is not the subject itself, but the ‘traditional manner’ in which the topic has been taught – through rigid rules and formats” (Petit, 2003). If we can teach grammar as a matter of style occasionally, grammar instruction will be much more interesting. Now let’s take *semicolon* for example.

Semicolon, although a punctuation mark, is often subsumed under the larger category “grammar.” It is something of an oddity. As a punctuation mark weaker than a period but stronger than a comma, it is usually used to link closely related independent clauses, to link independent clauses joined by conjunctive adverbs or

transitional phrases or to separate items in a series containing other punctuation marks. As far as each of these cases is concerned, semicolon is useful but not essential. On the one hand, independent clauses, including those joined by adverbs or phrases, could just easily be linked by a period or a comma plus conjunction. On the other hand, determining whether two clauses are closely related or not remains a matter of opinions, not grammatical fact. And as for using semicolons in a series, even this guideline is more choice than requirement. They certainly render a series more readable, but commas in a series are just as technically correct as their more understandable counterparts. In fact, semicolon could be eliminated entirely from the English language, and the language would still remain comprehensible, though far less rich. Punctuation marks like the semicolon signal matters of choice and, therefore, are more issues of style and rhetorical effect than precision and correctness. So, sometimes it is better for us to teach some grammar items as a matter of style.

4.1.3 Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing

Research conducted since the early 1960s strongly suggests that “the most beneficial way of helping students improve their command of grammar in writing is to use their writing as the basis for discussing grammatical concepts,” and that “it is more effective to teach punctuation, sentence variety, and usage in the context of writing than to approach the topic by teaching isolated skills” (Chin, 2008). To teach grammar effectively in the context of writing, we should prioritize and provide instruction on the grammatical elements “that are most relevant to writing” (Weaver, 1996), because the best grammar instruction should be that which gives the greatest return for the least investment of time and effort. Specifically speaking, we can employ the following strategies.

First, after students have written their first drafts and feel comfortable with the ideas and organization of their writing, we can employ writing conferences to help them see grammatical concepts as language choices that can enhance their writing purposes and help them revise for effective choices. For example, when we discuss with a student the real audience(s) for his/her writing, we can remind him/her that different audiences of different age groups, with different educational backgrounds and different social and economic statuses uphold different values and beliefs, and have different knowledge of and different attitudes towards even the same subject and therefore, to achieve his/her intended writing purpose, he/she has to choose different types and amounts of information, to employ different patterns of organization and to adopt terms of expression of different levels of formality. In this way, students will soon grow more receptive to revising, editing, and proofreading their writing.

Second, as students revise and edit their writing, we can offer grammar minilessons so as to “help students make immediate applications and see the relevance of grammar to their own writing” (Chin, 2008). For example, if we find that quite a few students have written such run-together sentences as “Getting married is easy, staying married is a different matter” and “San Francisco is a very cosmopolitan city, there are people from many cultures and ethnic groups living here,” we can present a minilesson on this concept, using examples from students’ writing and then have students edit their own and one another’s writing for this specific problem. By integrating grammar instruction into the revising and editing process, we can help students rearrange, combine, and expand their sentences for greater effectiveness.

In addition, we can organize peer-editing groups to help students become better proofreaders. We can, according to students’ different writing abilities, assign different proofreading tasks. For example, one person in the group might proofread for dangling modifiers, another person for fragments, still another person for ambiguous pronoun reference and wordiness, and so on. As they develop increasing skill in proofreading, they will become responsible for more proofreading areas. Day by day, they can improve their writing ability.

4.2 Teaching Grammar Implicitly

Besides teaching grammar explicitly, most of the time we need to teach grammar implicitly because compared with explicit grammar instruction, implicit grammar teaching, also called suggestive method, has several advantages. First, because it strengthens the use and communicativeness of a language, and lays much emphasis on cultivating students’ spontaneous ability to adapt to various communication occasions, implicit grammar teaching enhances students’ communicative ability and use of the English language by integrating the form, meaning and function of the language. Second, because grammar, regarded as a tool and resource used to serve communication, is often placed in coherent discourses, implicit grammar teaching integrates skill training and comprehensive training, which is helpful to giving full play to students’ enthusiasm and initiative. In addition, because teachers can design their lessons flexibly, choose different coursebooks and employ a variety of teaching aids like tapes, CD-ROMs, Internet, television, films, videos, pictures and so on so as to make students feel as if they were on the scene, students may have a lasting memory of the grammar rules.

Implicit grammar teaching requires teachers to expose students to English environments by setting natural real

situations. So, to help students acquire grammar knowledge and improve their grammar competence gradually and imperceptibly, we can have them engage in various activities. For example, we can ask students to write and try to improve their diaries, journals, or even stories under the guidance of the teacher; using paper and pen, students can create their own resources for practicing grammar. We can also require students to read more after class; connecting grammar to writing and reading can increase student engagement and learning. Besides, we can ask students to engage in some interactive activities, like asking them to compare the similarities and differences between two or more pictures, or requiring them to infer the sequence of the events happening in a picture, or having them talk about something familiar, interesting, or instructive, or adding an ending to a story and so on.

In short, to help students use English grammar effectively, we need to combine explicit and implicit grammar instruction. A combination of the two can help make the tedious, mechanic and painful traditional grammar instruction interesting, lively and effective, and help naturally incorporate grammar concepts that make sense to students into the revising, editing, and proofreading phases of the writing process so as to improve their writing ability.

But at the same time, we must realize that teaching grammar does not necessarily mean that once taught, the grammatical concepts will be learned and applied forever after. On the contrary, students may long afterwards continue to need guidance in actually applying what they have learned before they can automatically make use of them in their writing because, on the one hand, the learning of grammatical concepts is itself such a complex process that practice, practice, and more practice does not promote adequate understanding as we have expected, and on the other hand, a conscious grasp of grammatical concepts usually requires a depth of understanding, but the relatively easy exercises in grammar books do not give students the opportunity to grasp the critical features of a concept. So grammatical concepts must be taught in one way or another time and again, to individuals as well as to groups or classes.

5. Conclusion

From the discussion above we know clearly that grammar plays so crucial a part in English learning that we can say with certainty that no language teaching can be successful without grammar instruction and that no writing can achieve its writing purpose without the correct use of grammatical concepts. As far as the non-English majors in China are concerned, to help build up their power to express themselves effectively in written English, we had better teach them the right grammatical concepts in the right way on the right occasion.

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