



Effectiveness of English Grammar Teaching and Learning: A Study in Junior Middle Schools in China

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Abstract

The article conducts a questionnaire survey and interview on the students and teachers in three different junior middle schools in Zhejiang Province of China. The results indicate that the effectiveness in English grammar teaching and learning is not satisfactory. And the grammatical competence is not correlated with the goals and objectives of the National English Curriculum. There is significant demand for teachers to encourage students to improve the efficiency and accuracy of English grammar. The outcome is useful for foreign language researchers to know better about current situation of grammar teaching and learning in Chinese junior middle schools. Some suggestions are presented to enhance the effectiveness of English grammar teaching and learning.

Keywords: *grammatical competence, effectiveness, teaching and learning*

1. Introduction

For decades, the value of grammar in foreign language teaching and learning has been a focus of debate. Perhaps there will never be a solution to the debate whether grammar should be taught or not and to what extent grammar is supposed to be taught. It is believed that teaching grammar is less significant for children than adults and it plays a less important part in listening and reading than writing (Celce-Murcia, 1991). Despite many various views about the role of grammar in language teaching and learning, it is incontestable that the importance of grammar can't be ignored, especially in formal classroom language teaching. However, for a long time, English grammar has been a headache for many teachers and students. Although it takes teachers and students a great amount of time to get access to English grammar teaching, the effect is not that obvious. Analyzing different approaches and problems related to each approach, Ellis (2006) states that teaching grammar is undoubtedly necessary for mastering the language, for achieving accuracy and fluency. Nowadays, most junior middle school students in China are willing and encouraged to speak English. Some of them are able to speak English fluently, but they fail to meet the demand of grammatical accuracy.

In China, as great importance is attached to applied linguistics from “teaching” to “learning”, language learning strategies have aroused widespread concern among linguistic experts (Huang, 2017). Language learning strategies refer to a series of methods or behaviors used by learners to understand, learn, and memorize language information (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). It is widely recognized that learning strategies are of vital importance in teaching and learning of English grammar. But what kind of learning strategy is the most effective for junior

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middle school students in China? How can learning strategy be effectively conducted in a language classroom? In order to address the above questions, a survey is conducted to analyze current learning problems of English grammar that students in junior middle schools have. Some suggestions are put forward to improve students' grammatical competence and it is expected that they will be useful for teachers of English when they present grammar knowledge.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Aims

This study intends to figure out the current situation of grammar learning and teaching in Chinese middle school students. In this way, problems in grammar learning and teaching can be pointed out. Meanwhile, the research focuses on investigating the effectiveness of English grammar teaching and learning. In order to collect comprehensive information about it, a questionnaire is designed in different perspectives. Students' preview before class, learning conditions in class, and consolidation after class, etc. are included in the questionnaire. It also aims to put forward feasible suggestions and learning strategies on these issues and explore a reliable path to improve the effectiveness of grammar teaching and learning in junior middle schools.

2.2 Subjects

At any stage and in any circumstance, English grammar teaching should not be diluted, especially in the period of junior middle schools because of its detectable significance. Since Grade Seven is the first year of junior middle schooling in China, students in Grade Seven are new to English grammar learning, thus having no idea about grammar. Grade Eight and Grade Nine students have learned model verbs, present progressive tense, simple past tense, prepositions, sentence types, etc. Therefore, Grade Eight and Grade Nine students have a more comprehensive view on grammar learning than Grade Seven students, and the subjects of this study are chosen from Grade Eight and Grade Nine students and their English teachers in three different middle schools in Zhejiang province of China. A total of 148 students, including 71 male students and 77 female students, are from different classes of discriminating English levels. There are altogether 30 teachers taking part in this research.

2.3 Instrument

In the study, questionnaires and interviews are used to collect data. Through questionnaires, students and teachers are asked to answer 15 relative questions, intending to learn about the students' learning effectiveness of English grammar and current methodology of English grammar teaching and learning. The questionnaires are administered at the beginning of a new semester with the help of the teachers. In order to make every student understand each statement clearly, Chinese version of the questionnaire is used. During the whole process, the students and teachers were informed of the purpose of the study and told that there was no right or wrong answer. Therefore, they just answered each question honestly and frankly according to their own opinion and behavior. Ultimately 178 questionnaires were received and the data was analyzed manually. In addition, a total of 9 students (three from each school) and 3 teachers (one from each grade) who were randomly chosen from the three different middle schools, were interviewed exclusively.

3. Results and Analysis

The following tabulations present the results of the research. It is found that the following main factors are related to students' learning effectiveness of English grammar by respectively analyzing the 15 questions in the questionnaires.

A. English Grammar Learning in Chinese Junior Middle Schools

In the research, 148 students were involved in the investigation about English grammar learning. English grammar learning is an objective requirement for cultivating their communicative competence and it plays an important role in English learning. A survey was carried out accordingly. It proves that effectiveness of grammar learning in Chinese junior middle schools is not satisfactory.

TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF GRAMMAR LEARNING CONDITION

ITEM	OPTIONS	PROPORTION
1. Interest in English grammar learning	Very strong	14%
	Strong	41%
	Not bad	36%
	Low	7%
	Very low	2%
2. Position of English grammar in English Learning	Very important	48%
	important	39%
	Not bad	11%
	Useless	1%
	Very useless	1%
3. English grammar practice in classroom	Having a complete understanding of learned grammar knowledge	6%
	Understanding the vast majority of learned grammar knowledge	36%
	Feeling unclear about grammar knowledge	47%
	Feeling completely confused about grammar knowledge	5%
	Not knowing what is grammar at all	6%

According to the descriptive statistics of students' grammar learning condition, Table-1 shows that most Chinese junior middle school students have realized the importance of grammar learning in English study and over half of them also have willingness to learn grammar well. However, most students cannot effectively master the grammar knowledge system, so their learning efficiency is quite low. Nearly half students feel unclear about grammar knowledge after a year of learning, at the same time, 5% of them feel completely confused about grammar knowledge and 6% of them even don't know what grammar is at all. The results of the interview show that many students do not know how to effectively consolidate grammar knowledge that they have learned. What's more, in the interview, the majority of students involved admitted that the accuracy of grammar knowledge was low when they spoke or wrote in English, and they often made grammatical errors unconsciously. They want to improve their grammatical competence, but just don't know what to learn and how to learn it.

B. English Grammar Teaching in Chinese Junior Middle Schools

Altogether 30 teachers were involved in the investigation about English grammar teaching in the research. For language learning, the mastery and usage of necessary grammar is a prerequisite for language acquisition. For junior middle school students in China, it is unrealistic for students alone to have the natural acquisition of English grammar. Therefore, it is very necessary for English teachers to use scientific strategies to present, explain and train students' grammar knowledge through curriculum teaching. It is widely acknowledged that, for a long time, teachers of English in China have been adopting mechanical and deductive teaching methods, which provide students with a clear description and explanation of complex grammatical rules. However, these two approaches often result in an inability on the part of the students to use the target language for communication. This kind of monotonous teaching style is likely to make students lose interest in English grammar learning. In order to examine the

teaching of English grammar at this stage, a corresponding investigation is made.

TABLE-2: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF GRAMMAR TEACHING CONDITION

ITEM	OPTIONS	PROPORTION
1. Classroom coordination	Very high	6%
	High	47%
	Not bad	47%
	Low	0%
	Very low	0%
2. Main grammar teaching method	Grammar-translation teaching method	40%
	Task-based language teaching method	18%
	Communicative teaching method	18%
	Situation teaching method	22%
	Others	2%
3. Ideal grammar teaching method	Presenting in a more inductive way than a deductive way	44%
	Practising more flexibly than mechanically	56%

The descriptive statistics of grammar teaching condition has revealed the problem that students' learning efficiency is relatively low although they make great effort in learning English grammar. The analysis of Table 2 is consistent with that of Table 1: most students study hard and nearly all of them actively cooperate with teachers in class. Table 2 also show that the main grammar teaching method is still traditional teaching method (Grammar-translation teaching method), task-based language teaching method and communicative teaching method account for the same proportion in classroom teaching, and situation teaching method account for 22%.

As for the ideal grammar teaching method, it seems that teachers are actually well aware of the disadvantages of exam-oriented education and want to make a difference. 44 percent of the teachers think that presenting in a more inductive way than a deductive way is anticipated in English grammar class, and the rest of them hold that it is reasonable to make the classroom practice more flexibly instead of doing mechanical drills. Chastain (1988) states that all students have their own learning strategies. Among them, some are successful while others are not. Therefore, the approaches of consolidation have to correspond to students' learning strategies. The interviews also confirm the above results of questionnaires to some extent. Even though grammar learning is boring and sometimes difficult, many students still have a very positive attitude towards it. Both teachers and students are struggling to find appropriate ways to improve learning efficiency and grammatical competence.

As a result of the problems reflected in students' learning and teachers' teaching, it is found that sharp contradictions are apparent in the relationships between students' learning effectiveness and teachers' teaching strategies. Students lack the ability to master English grammar effectively and teachers lack the consciousness of integrated teaching method. Therefore, how to effectively solve the problem of low efficiency of English grammar learning and teaching in junior middle schools is particularly important.

C. Difficulties Encountered During Students' Grammar Learning

Table 2 indicates that grammar-translation teaching method is employed most frequently in class. Therefore, in China, most teachers of English in junior middle schools tend to use traditional teaching methods in their teaching. There are many mechanical drills and practice in class, which causes various difficulties during students' grammar learning.



TABLE 3: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED DURING STUDENTS' GRAMMAR LEARNING

DIFFICULTIES	PROPORTION
Not understanding the grammar knowledge taught by the teacher in class	55%
Having many written errors	11%
Having many oral grammatical errors	25%
Having no time to memorize grammar knowledge	5%
Having no interest in English grammar	4%

According to the descriptive statistics of difficulties that are often encountered during students' grammar learning (Table 3), more than half students think that they all ever have difficulties in understanding teachers' explanation of new grammar knowledge in class. Nearly one tenth of them hold that there are many written errors in their grammar learning. One fourth of them think the grammatical errors in their spoken English is another matter that makes them helpless. And 5% of them complain they are too busy to memorize grammatical knowledge. 4% of them have no interest in English grammar learning at all.

The analysis of Table 1 shows that different students perform differently in school. Table 2 reveals that different teachers use different grammar teaching methods in class, and Table 3 indicates that different students are faced with different learning difficulties in class or after class. Therefore, according to the questionnaires and the interviews, students behave differently when they consolidate grammar knowledge which has been learned. 61 percent of students internalize the learned grammar knowledge by doing exercise in class or after class, which is regarded as the most common way to achieve consolidation in China. 9 percent of the students apply and reinforce the learned grammar knowledge in actual language communication. 19 percent of them internalize the learned knowledge by autonomously reading related materials in English. In the interview, some of the interviewees said reading English materials help them gain bigger vocabulary and get familiar with more sentence patterns and the usage of tense and voice. They could not only easily improve their strategies in grammar learning, but also improve their apprehensive learning abilities. To some degree, reading related materials can help them to consolidate grammar knowledge, broaden their horizons and increase their interest in learning English. It can be assumed that reading is an emerging way to help students learn grammar better and more effectively.

No matter whether they are in class or after class, teachers need to respect the students' dominant position in English learning. In the process of teaching, they need to fully integrate their own characteristics and improve students' self- efficiency in their teaching process. Teacher's language input in class is not enough. It means that students should do a lot of self-learning outside class. Due to the importance of grammar learning, how much they master grammar knowledge has a direct impact on their interest in learning and their learning efficiency. According to the study of neuroscience, it can be known that the brains of junior middle school students are abundant and they have good plasticity. Active environment and flexible teaching strategies can promote students' cognitive development and learning effects. Teachers should have perseverance, patience, and enthusiasm, and try different kinds of teaching methods to gain integrated teaching methods. It is a good choice to use induction and mind mapping in the teaching process.



4. Suggestions

Encouraging Students to Read Classics

The results of the research show that junior middle school students have awareness and willingness of using English, but the efficiency and accuracy is comparatively low. Students have many common misconceptions and misuses about grammar. Since grammar knowledge covered by classroom teaching is extremely limited, the learners must consolidate the existing grammar knowledge and supplement new grammar knowledge through a large number of communication activities. Among them, reading a large number of English classics is undoubtedly a good way to promote students' grammatical competence. A classic is a kind of reading materials which is regarded as a high literary standard and always well-known to almost people due to its popularity. Studies have shown that a large amount of guided reading can benefit foreign language learners significantly in the organization of sentence structures (Chomsky, 1980). This indicates that the acquisition of grammatical knowledge cannot rely entirely on classroom teaching. Hence, as another important means to gain grammatical knowledge, extracurricular guided reading by teachers is quite necessary and helpful. More specifically, encouraging students to read more classics is a measurable way to make students get improvement of grammar learning. Therefore, teachers must learn to instruct students to read more and improve their reading accumulation continuously, finally guide them to use a variety of sentence structures accurately in their communication.

Using Integrated Teaching Methods Rationally

Although English grammar teaching is not only an in-class task, there is no denying that effectiveness in the classroom is the more important than compensatory learning after class. In order to improve effectiveness in the classroom, teachers should actively explore effective and appropriate methods of grammar teaching, such as communicative teaching method, task-based language teaching method, guiding exploration teaching method, cooperative teaching method and etc. Teachers should rationally use integrated teaching methods according to the specific situations and demands. That is to say, when dealing with different levels of grammar knowledge, teachers should skillfully change the one-centered teaching method and combine it with other corresponding teaching methods. For example, when explaining the usage of present progressive tense, teachers are advised to use communicative teaching method as the one-centered method because communication can easily acquaint students with the correct usage of present progressive tense.

Teaching method should be adjusted with students' grammar learning situations. At the same time, students are supposed to cooperate with teachers to change their own learning strategies into better ones. Besides, it is widely recognized that free, positive and pleasant communicating environment in class contributes to higher learning efficiency. Teachers should not only teach the rules of grammar, but also pay attention to the practical application of grammar, and guide the students to cooperate with others to enhance their own learning strategy and learn grammar more efficiently. Furthermore, grammar teaching should expand in-class work. For instance, teachers should give students more opportunities to engage in oral communication to improve their grammatical competence as well.

Guiding Explicit and Implicit Teaching Respectively

To improve students' grammar learning efficiency, teachers should pay attention to the role of explicit knowledge in language learning and the value of discovery as a general method of learning (Ellis, 2002). In language learning, implicit knowledge refers to knowledge that unconsciously exists in the mind, which we can make use of automatically without making any effort. Explicit knowledge refers to conscious knowledge about the language. Students can talk about it, analyze it and apply it in conscious ways. Teachers should respectively choose these



two theoretical issues according to students' age, interest, learning ability, motivation, and foreign language proficiency. Since junior middle school students are of weak learning ability and unclear learning motivation, teachers need more implicit teaching when explaining difficult grammar knowledge. In addition, teachers should also recognize that the use of explicit and implicit teaching in grammar teaching is not absolute, and they are affected by other factors. It is necessary to reasonably combine explicit teaching with implicit teaching to improve students' grammar learning efficiency.

Pointing out Students' Errors Skillfully

The results of the research indicate that most students could not realize their grammatical errors in their conversations. Errors which are not correctly will eventually evolve into customary errors in the future learning. Therefore, foreign language classes must include error correction (Hedge, 2002). Thus, during grammar teaching, teachers should pay attention to correct students' errors reasonably. There are generally two ways to correct students' errors: "explicit method" and "implicit method". The "explicit method" means that teachers explicitly point out what kind of grammatical mistakes students make and point out the correct grammatical knowledge by means of analysis.

The "implicit method" means that teachers should use various means to provide students with hints about the errors, helping students find out errors themselves. Some grammatical errors, such as lexical errors, are difficult for learners to perceive. Therefore, teachers should explicitly explain to them or implicitly guide students frequently to strengthen their awareness and concept of error correction in communications. In this way, the accuracy of students' grammar learning will be greatly improved. In addition, as for the time to point out students' errors, teachers should attach great importance to the suitable time. Some serious and common grammar errors should be pointed out immediately in classroom, while some minor errors can be pointed after class. As teachers are not the only group to do the correction, peer correction and classmate correction are also advisable according to different situations. Teachers should learn how to effectively help students correct errors, taking their personality and the specific grammatical errors they make into account, so that students can realize the errors consciously, without hurting their self-esteem.

5. Conclusion

Through the study, it is apparent that the effectiveness that junior middle school students show in English grammar learning is very low, and teachers' current teaching strategies cannot meet the standard of students' communicative competence. Besides, the results of the survey demonstrate that there is a significant demand for teachers to encourage students to improve the efficiency and accuracy of English grammar from reading. The results are useful for foreign language researchers to know better about Chinese junior middle school students' situation of grammar learning, and offer some valuable reference for enhancing English grammar teaching efficiency. In order to improve learners' proficiency and accuracy and facilitate the internalization of its syntactic system in grammar teaching, teachers of English are supposed to encourage students to read classics, try to use integrated teaching methods rationally, guide explicit and implicit teaching respectively, and point out students' errors skillfully. As long as students get access to the effective English grammar learning strategies, both teachers and students are bound to find gratification in English grammar teaching and learning. Students who hold positive and effective learning strategies are more likely to possess appropriate comprehensive ability and communicative competence.

All in all, English grammar teaching is an important part of English teaching. How to use effective teaching methods to organize grammar teaching is a big problem that all teachers of English in junior middle schools should think about. Teachers should not only have a clear



understanding of the importance of grammar teaching, but also have a new consciousness of the purpose of grammar teaching in junior middle schools. What's more, teachers need constantly adjust and improve their teaching methods to enhance their integrated teaching methods. Therefore, students can effectively absorb grammatical knowledge through listening, speaking, reading, writing and other skills. Since grammar is naturally infiltrated throughout daily basic English learning, only if grammar teaching is authentic, interesting, effective and practical, can grammar teaching truly become an effective means to promote the improvement of the comprehensive language ability of junior middle school students.

In this research, the subjects investigated are not universal enough, so the results of the study may have some limitations. Therefore, the follow-up research could be carried out on the basis of this research and the subjects can be students of different grades in different junior middle schools in different provinces. It can focus on analyzing the main factors that influence students' learning effectiveness, which will function as a dynamic and referential choice and application of English grammar teaching and learning.

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