English Grammar Teaching for Advanced ESL Learners in China*

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English majors usually have learned English for at least six years at middle school, but there are still many grammatical errors in their writing and speaking. Such errors even still remain after four-year English learning at university. Such problem has troubled many teachers teaching English Grammar. Therefore, the paper attempts to study the ways of improving English majors’ grammatical competence. It is concluded that reform of grammar test should be carried out to guide grammar teaching and learning, error analysis should be conducted to decide what to teach, and an output-oriented approach should be employed to meet the requirements of learners’ future profession.

Keywords: English Grammar teaching, English majors, reform of grammar test, error analysis, output-oriented approach

Introduction

In the past 30 or more years, the role of grammar instruction and error correction in L2 (second language) classroom settings has been an issue of considerable debate in SLA (second language acquisition) research. This debate can be categorized in terms of meaning-focus and form-focus instruction. Meaning-focus instruction is based on the assumption that, L2 acquisition occurs unconsciously and implicitly like L1 (first language) acquisition (Loewen et al., 2009, p. 92). Krashen (1981), among others who supported meaning-focus instruction distinguished the difference between acquisition and learning, and put forward the acquisition-learning hypothesis which claims that learners acquire language unconsciously and spontaneously. Meaning-focus instruction is further supported by the theory of Universal Grammar (general knowledge of what all languages have in common) (Chomsky, 2002) which claims that children are born with an innate language faculty; Principles and parameters per se are not, cannot, and need not be learned in L1 acquisition. This also may be true for L2 learners. Therefore, “any overt attention to form is unnecessary, and any corrective feedback is ineffective” (Loewen et al., 2009, p. 92).

However, counterevidence to the effectiveness of purely meaning-focus instruction has been raised. Swain (1985), who had studied immersion programs in Canada argued that even after many years of exposure to the target language, L2 learners’ production is still grammatically inaccurate. The inaccuracy in grammar is attributed to the unavailability of opportunities for learners to notice and practice linguistic forms, suggesting that

* The paper is one of the research results of “A Project Supported by Scientific Research Fund of Zhejiang Provincial Education Department” (Grant No. Y201224499).

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some type of form-focus instruction is beneficial for successful L2 learning (Loewen et al., 2009, p. 92). Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) found that classroom instruction is helpful to L2 learning. In addition, in the past 20 or more years, many other empirical studies (such as Klapper & Rees, 2003; Russell & Spada, 2006) conclude that grammar teaching in classroom settings can greatly affect SLA. Their studies suggest that the best way to improve accuracy is to carry out grammar instruction in L2 classroom settings.

According to form-focus instruction, grammar can be learned, so the course of English Grammar is offered to English majors at different universities. Usually, the course at Chinese universities lasts one semester (16 weeks), with two periods each week. It seems that the grammatical errors in students’ theses indicate that they need more practice, because practice makes perfect. Therefore, some teachers propose that more time should be put on grammar teaching and learning. The course may last two semesters, with two periods each week so that students have enough time to practice to have a good command of English Grammar, thus improving their output in speaking and writing.

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However, time is not the key to the problem. University students (in the paper, advanced ESL learners refer to English majors at university) have practiced English Grammar for at least six years before studying at the university, and they will practice it for four years at the university before their graduation. A questionnaire conducted to the graduates of English majors in Quzhou University shows that English Grammar is the course with which they are least satisfied. In many cases, they can produce correct answers on the exercise or test of multiple choice, but consistently make errors when they use the language in context. Therefore, what should be changed is not time, but the way of teaching.

In the past 20 years, communicative approach has been widespread in L2 teaching, with fluency in spoken language stressed. In many cases, even broken sentences can get speakers’ ideas across, which lead to teachers’ neglecting on accuracy. Many teachers encourage students to speak and turn a blind eye to their grammatical errors. Thus, many English majors can speak fluently, but not accurately. Their grammatical errors in speaking and writing are covered by their fluency in speaking.

In addition, when it comes to English Grammar, both teachers and students may think it boring. Teachers do not like teaching the course, and students do not like learning the course. Many teachers still employ a conventional teaching approach and are reluctant to have a reform. Students display numerous grammatical errors in L2 production even after four-year’s study at university. The teaching of English Grammar is still far away from what it is expected.

In order to improve advanced ESL learners’ grammatical performance, teaching reform should be conducted from the following three perspectives. First, reform of grammar test should be carried out to guide grammar teaching and learning; second, error analysis should be conducted to decide what to teach; third, an output-oriented approach should be employed to meet the requirements of learners’ future profession.

Reform of Grammar Test

To a great extent, the teaching of ESL, especially the teaching of English as a foreign language is test-driven. In many standardized examinations, English Grammar is tested in multiple choices, because answers to such questions are easy to evaluate. Machines do it. As a result, to some instructors and learners, learning English
Grammar is to do multiple choices. However, multiple choices, in which only a small part of a sentence is tested, do not test students’ competence in producing a complete sentence.

In order to improve students’ scores in examinations, teachers usually teach some techniques of choosing the right answer in multiple choices. Students who may not understand the sentence or could not produce a correct sentence can succeed at choosing the right answer. It is techniques that work (see Example (1)):

Example (1) No sooner had they heard the news ____ they rushed out into the street.
    A. than  B. when  C. what  D. then

As to the example, teachers usually ask students to memorize such collocations as “no sooner… than” and “hardly… when”. Students who succeed at memorizing the collocations can choose the right answer, but perhaps they could not use the structures in speaking and writing. The sentence in the example can be divided into two parts. The first part is “no sooner had they heard the news”, the second part “than they rushed out into the street”. Tense is different in the two parts. Without practice in speaking, writing or translating, learners may not know that the relationship between the two parts and “no sooner” is followed by a clause with past participle. What students know is only the collocation. This may account for the fact that learners may overuse “as soon as”, but underuse “no sooner… than” and “hardly… when”.

In addition, some teachers may collect and analyze the previous examination papers, and summarize the exclusively grammatical focus. Repeated practice on the grammatical focus helps learners obtain higher marks in examinations.

Given these reasons, the test of English Grammar has to be reformed. It should test students’ grammatical competence in producing complete sentences. Writing, speaking, and translating should take the place of multiple choices. Otherwise, students can only choose the right answer in multiple choices, but make many grammatical errors in output. Perhaps, it is difficult for teachers to change national test, but the test for the course of English Grammar can be easily changed. Even in some countries such as Japan and Korea, middle school and high school curricula have undergone significant reform and contain an “oral communication” emphasis (Fotos, 2002, p. 142).

**Error Analysis**

Influenced by Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, language teachers often follow the rule: input first, output second. They think output comes naturally after enough input. English Grammar teachers at universities are no exception. They follow either deductive method (rule → examples → practice) or inductive method (examples → practice → rule) without taking into consideration what the learners have learned before. They do not know whether what they present in the class is new or not.

In order to teach the course better, an error analysis should be conducted before teaching. Corder’s *The Significance of Learners’ Errors* (1967) is the beginning of error analysis. Errors result form learners’ incomplete knowledge of the target language. They can shed light on the process of L2 acquisition. Therefore, analyzing and researching learners’ errors will provide some help for language teaching.

English majors at university have learned English for at least six years before studying at the university. Grammar instruction at university should be different from that in elementary and middle schools in which English Grammar is integrated with listening, speaking, reading, and writing and students learn English Grammar in the order native English speakers acquire English, i.e., from the easy part to the difficult part. However, the
course book of English Grammar for English majors is organized in a different order, from morphology to syntax. Some teachers treat English majors as beginners in English learning and try to cover everything in the course book. They repeat what the teachers in elementary and middle schools have taught. As a result, students may think the course boring and a waste of time. Gradually, students will lose their interest in the course. What is more, there is no enough time for the teacher to cover all the chapters in the course book. Only half the chapters can be covered in the class after a semester’s teaching.

In order to raise students’ interest and improve teaching efficiency, teachers need not teach all that the course book presents from cover to cover. They should choose some chapters to teach, but what should be taught? It can be decided by error analysis. Before teaching, teachers can give students an entrance test in which students are asked to write a passage and translate some sentences in which different grammar structures are included. Then teachers analyze the grammatical errors students make in the test and decide what to teach according to the errors. Therefore, what the teacher teaches in the class is new or at least necessary to the students or most students, which helps attract students’ attention.

**Output-Oriented Approach**

According to Krashen’s (1981) Input Hypothesis, language learners can acquire the language by enough comprehensible input. However, the research on Canadian Immersion programs suggests that merely providing large amounts of comprehensible input is not sufficient for L2 learners to obtain a high level of L2 proficiency (Hammerly, 1987, pp. 395-401; Harley, 1993, pp. 245-260; Harley & Swain, 1978, pp. 35-79). L2 learners in immersion classes often demonstrate weakness in grammatical accuracy, despite gaining high-level listening comprehension skills and communicative fluency (Izumi, Bigelow, Fujiwara, & Fearnow, 1999, p. 422). According to Swain (1985), one important reason is that they engage in only a small amount of language production. Such findings have led Swain to conclude that comprehensible input although important, is far from sufficient for learners to fully develop a high level of L2 proficiency. Thus, “she argued that what students need is not only comprehensible input but also comprehensible output if they are to be both fluent and accurate in the target language” (Izumi et al., 1999, p. 422). This is what the Output Hypothesis proposes.

On the basis of the Output Hypothesis, WEN (2008) further put forward the Output-Driven Hypothesis which claims that from the perspective of English in workplace, output has more social function in cultivating the expressive competence in speaking, writing, and translating, especially translation, than the receptive competence in listening and reading. In the countries in which English is a foreign language, translation and interpretation are especially important. The output related to students’ future profession may greatly drive students to get more engaged in the classroom teaching.

According to these two hypotheses, an output-oriented approach should be employed in the teaching of English Grammar for English majors. In the process of teaching, teachers should design speaking, writing, and translating exercises instead of multiple choices and blank filling and ask students to practice in class or after class. Connecting classroom teaching with students’ future use of English helps inspire students’ motivation.

In order to improve students’ English Grammar performance, error analysis and the output-driven approach were employed in grammar teaching at Quzhou University. After class, students were usually assigned some translation work which covered what was presented in the very class and what would be presented in the
following class so that the assignment played both the role of review and preview. The teacher could check whether students acquired what had been already taught and what was the difficult part of the following class.

In order to prove the effectiveness of the teaching method, a pre-teaching test and a post-teaching test were conducted. In both tests, students were asked to translate a passage in which different grammar rules were included. In the pre-teaching test, there were 41.7 errors on average in 100 sentences. After the course, the number was 10.1. In addition, more relative clauses, nominal clauses, instances of inversion, and other complex structures were used in the translation in the post-teaching test.

Before the course, a questionnaire was conducted to investigate students’ attitude towards the course of English Grammar. Of all the students, 95.1% regarded it important, but 92.7% considered it boring. After the course, the same questionnaire was also conducted, all students regarded it important, 82.9% considered the course interesting, 90.2% agreed that their grammatical competence has been improved much after a semester’s teaching, and 90.2% expressed that they were willing to finish the assignments.

Conclusions

Students need to spend much time practicing English Grammar, but it does not mean time is the key to improve students’ English Grammar performance. English majors in the university have many courses to take. In the first two years, they are required to take courses such as English Reading, English Speaking, English Listening, English Writing, and English Grammar to improve their language proficiency. In the last two years, they are supposed to take courses such as English Literature, Linguistics, Applied Linguistics, Intercultural Communication, English Lexicology, and English Rhetoric. No teacher will claim time is enough for the students to learn any course. If more teaching periods were assigned for English Grammar, less would be for other courses. In addition, efficiency is important to any work. Improvement of students’ English Grammar lies in improved teaching method.

Grammatical accuracy is an important factor to assess learners’ language proficiency. However, language learners’ grammatical performance is not good enough; even English majors consistently make errors in writing and speaking after four-year study at university. In order to improve learners’ English Grammar performance, reform of grammar test should be carried out to guide grammar teaching and learning, error analysis should be conducted to decide what to teach, and an output-oriented approach should be employed in classroom teaching. Such solutions have been proved effective, but they demand teachers’ more time investment. In addition, the output-oriented approach can not only apply into grammar teaching, but the teaching of other courses as well.

References


