

HOW TO HELP CHINESE EFL STUDENTS
SOLVE THE PROBLEMS CAUSED BY GRAMMAR
IN ENGLISH CLASS IN UNIVERSITIES

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dennis Ciesielski". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'D' and a flourish at the end.

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Wang Guzi

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Abstract

HOW TO HELP CHINESE EFL STUDENTS
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Under the Supervision of Dennis Ciesielski, Doctor

This paper tries to analyze the role grammar plays in the reading comprehension classes in Chinese EFL classes. Is Grammar a vital factor to influence the reading ability of Chinese EFL students in Universities? Will the improvement of Grammar help improve the reading ability of Chinese EFL Students? These are two questions that have confused College English teachers in China for many years. Through reading other experts' study and research, the author of this paper have got some idea of the crucial role that grammar plays in both the intensive reading and extensive reading. Thus, there would be some efficient methods to improve students' reading ability through the introduction of grammar rules.

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Chapter I Introduction

English teaching in China has formed some typical features since 1990s. From middle school period, students began to learn English, and English teaching was invested with highlighted importance from then on. As everything developed, English teaching methods required improvement. The approaches of grammar instruction vary -- the deduction and induction are two common approaches mentioned. “Two approaches to grammar instruction are often discussed in the ESL literature: direct explicit grammar instruction (DEGI)(deduction) and indirect explicit grammar instruction (IEGI)(induction)” (Dong Dang & Nguyen, 2013, p.112). Another example, “Morphological knowledge was positively correlated with teachers’ self-perceived teaching abilities, and it contributed unique variance even after controlling for the effects of ultimate educational attainment and years of teaching”(Jing Zhao, 2015,p.1).

Through the whole process of English teaching and learning, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing are the four basic language skills for Chinese EFL students, and most Chinese English teachers try their best to improve their students’ ability in these four aspects. “With the rapid economic development in China, Chinese people’s interactions with English – speaking people from various countries have dramatically increased”(Meihua & Shan, 2011). Reading comprehension is one of the most important parts of students’ integrated ability. However, most students do very poor at the part of reading. And they see grammar as a great barrier to their English study. For reading comprehension, the main reason is that reading requires more comprehensive ability of language -- when the sentences are a little longer and complicated, many students could not seize the correct meaning of it. “Since the 1970s, attention has shifted from ways of teaching grammar to ways of getting learners to communicate, but grammar has been seen to be a powerful undermining and demotivating force among L2 learners. In terms of

motivation and learner success with languages, grammar has been seen to be a problem and to stand in the way of helping learners to communicate fluently”(Al-Mekhlafi, A.M., 2011, p71). That is to say, many students concentrate too much on the grammar while reading; thus sometimes they found it’s difficult to understand certain sentences, and grammar surprisingly became a kind of barrier to understanding.

What’s more, some students found that when they spend more time on listening and speaking, or even watching more English movies, they could also improve their English with fun. Both students and EFL teachers are soaked in somewhat “hostile” feeling toward grammar. There the question comes -- shall we put grammar instruction into the English reading classes? To many English teachers, grammar instruction certainly is very important in English reading classes. But the traditional teaching methods don’t work well in the teaching process. As Supakorn Phoocharoensil mentioned, “Students as English as a foreign language (EFL) can easily become bored with learning grammar in a traditional style, i.e. in a classroom setting where teachers primarily focus their instruction on presenting grammatical rules through a series of lectures”(2012, p508).

Hence, this paper aims at finding out the importance of grammar instruction in Chinese EFL students’ reading classes in universities; the teachers’ role in grammar teaching and the possible efficient ways to teach grammar in universities.

Statement of the Problem

Is Grammar a vital factor to influence the reading ability of Chinese EFL students in Universities? Will the improvement of Grammar help improve the reading ability of Chinese EFL Students? To what extent can teacher help students improve their reading ability by grammar instruction in Chinese EFL classes in universities?

Definition of Terms

The inductive approach of grammar teaching: The approach that the teacher first presents different examples of the target language form and the students should discover the rules themselves (Baleghizadeh, 2011)

The deductive approach of grammar teaching: The approach that a rule is explicitly introduced by the teacher and the students should practice it through different examples (Baleghizadeh, 2011)

Metalinguistic discussion: The use of grammatical terminology to talk about language (Abdu, 2011)

Extensive reading: ER, meaning engaging learners in reading long passages, say stories, can improve students' various aspects of proficiency (Rezaee & Nourzadeh, 2011)

Task-based teaching:TBT, a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The tasks should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle and an end. (Newman, 2004)

Purpose of the Study

My purpose of the study is to find out how important role the grammar plays in the Chinese EFL students' reading comprehension and how can teachers sufficiently help Chinese EFL students improve their reading ability via the improvement of grammar knowledge.

Significance of the Study

A contemporary Chinese language teacher, Liu Yongqiang (n.d.) has mentioned in his article “Grammar plays vital role in English Reading comprehension” that grammar plays an important role in language learning and teaching. “Learners of English as a Foreign language (EFL) are often found to be far more successful when grammar is introduced through corpus-informed data”(Phoocharoensil, 2012). Only when students have mastered the grammar rules, can they understand reading materials more easily. He also said that English grammar rules are complicated and difficult for Chinese EFL students, so the learning process is also hard for many students. From elementary school to college, Chinese Students and teachers all consider grammar as the most important and difficulty part in English education. If there are some ideas to improve grammar, students would read fast and precisely in English.

Methodology

A brief literature review related to the role that grammar plays in the reading comprehension of Chinese EFL backgrounds would be in the part of Chapter 1 (introduction). A second review of literature related to the teachers’ role in grammar teaching and reading comprehension in Chinese EFL backgrounds would be found in the part of Chapter 2; and in Chapter 3, the difficulties students have in their reading comprehension and the relation between grammar improvements and reading ability improvement would be analyzed. In the part of conclusion, there is a summary of the last three chapters. I will also focus on the keywords such

as “Chinese mainland” and “effective Grammar teaching”. At last I hope this paper can be a good source for the study in the reality – should a college English teacher teach English

Chapter II Review of Literature

In Chinese EFL background, many English teachers are in a dilemma about grammar instruction -- should grammar be taught in a teacher-centered mode or students-centered mode? As the levels of colleges in China vary according to many elements, methods of grammar instruction vary as well. A researcher Sasan Baleghiszadeh(2011) once said: “ There are always some hints about a good grammar teacher, but one cannot easily find a holistic framework for a successful ESL/EFL grammar teacher”(p.364). We can't evaluate a teacher as “successful” or “not successful” easily, especially for a teacher of teaching grammar.No matter how proficient a teacher might be, some students would feel difficult and hateful toward grammar.When students confront with a difficult sentence, the first thing they do is always waiting for the aid from teacher.on the other hand, to foster students establish a kind of confidence in reading, a comprehensive ability in language is needed, and grammar proficiency is a good preparation for well reading ability.Rezaee(2011) has mentioned in her article *Does extensive reading improve EFL learners' processing ability?* that “in order to become competent in an L2, one needs to possess linguistic and pragmatic knowledge of that language”.

The seniors have given suggestions in improving the student's grammar proficiency. Baleghiszadeh has mentioned three instructional techniques, “...dialogues, focused tasks, and games on teaching grammar”(2011, p.70). As the increasing development of technology, the teaching methods relating to internet is also posed, including the teaching of grammar. For, instance, “Of course computer can push us to the ways of teaching which are so novel and a student learns too many other things more than the main object. Instruction markedness grammar through this new method of learning is considered...”(Najibi, A et al., 2012, p356). When it comes to the combination of reading classes, not all the methods of teaching grammar are proper.

It hopes that some of them could be efficient and helpful, while the other methods would also work after refining.

The Role that Grammar Plays in Reading classes

The role related to history

As a foreign language in China, although globalized, English still can not be as prevailed as in other countries as India and Singapore. One of the reasons is the history. Chinese mainland has never been colonized by English-speaking countries, and the English has not been influential before 2000s in Chinese Mainland. As grammar covers sentence constructions and verbs which are vital to the meanings to a sentence, students' reading proficiency has a lot with the grammatical understanding.

The role related to students' ability

When discussing the meaning of a sentence, students would have different understandings according to their grammatical proficiency. For example, in the *Student's book Business English: An Integrated Course 2*, unit 2, text 1, there is a sentence, "While an important feature of globalization today is its d-westernization, the reality is that in many important respects, Western culture remains the domineering force in the world today" (p.24). Some students would feel confused about the meaning of this sentence, the key word here is "while" -- while can be both a conjunction or an adverb. According to this sentence, while is an adverb, meaning *although*. However, many college students are not familiar with the basic meanings of while, thus they misunderstood this word in the meaning of "when". The whole sentence became a difficult sentence to them. Among 35 students in the class, actually almost 90% of them could not perceive the real meaning of this sentence.

Teachers' Role in Grammar Teaching

Traditional idea about teachers' role in grammar instruction

As a tradition, Chinese students rely much on the help from their teachers. The example being mentioned above is one of them. When students come up with the sentence, the teacher would try to pose the question first by asking "what is the meaning of *while* in this sentence"? By this hint, a few excellent students could figure out the meaning of it. The next step to solve this problem is to pose several sentences containing *while*; and teacher would generally introduce the different uses of *while*. After doing that, about 80% students could understand the original sentence. When students confront with a difficult sentence, the first thing they do is always waiting for the aid from teacher.

However, grammar has not been considered prior to other knowledge according to some teachers. We can't evaluate a teacher as "successful" or not easily, especially for a teacher of teaching grammar. According to Al-Mekhlafi(2011), "The English teacher is often portrayed as an 'unattractive grammar monger whose only pleasure in life is to point out the faults of others'"(p.69). This is a vivid description for Chinese EFL teachers. As to the English majors' courses in most Chinese colleges, reading class and grammar instructions are two independent courses. However, students would attribute their weak ability in reading comprehension to their poor ability in grammar rules; this especially happened in the classes of second-rate colleges. Lopez has mentioned in her article *Implicit and Explicit teaching of grammar: an empirical study* that some results showed that "students in the explicit instruction group achieved significantly higher scores than both the students in the implicit instruction group and the students in the control group on the performance tests(p.7). If teachers focus on the theories of grammar rules and dull exercises, students would feel drowsy in the class; if teachers don't put too much

attention on grammar such as the use of verbs or sentence structures, students would think the teachers are too irresponsible to their English study -- this is an issue always occur in reading class. Hence, when students largely rely on the teachers' instruction, teacher's role in grammar instruction is hard to be neglected.

Other different ideas coming from teachers' camp

There is also another group of teachers have more optimistic ideas about grammar teaching.

“The majority of prospective English teachers represented here appear to regard grammatical knowledge as important and useful especially for fostering students' English writing and reading abilities. However, they overwhelmingly believe that communication practice should precede grammar instruction as they consider learning grammar useless, it enables students to apply grammar knowledge to spontaneous conversation with others”(Basoz, 2014, p.381).

Obviously, the teachers mentioned above believe communication practice is more useful in improving students' English proficiency. Their idea is in correspondence with a group of Chinese EFL teachers, especially those who are still young and with a relatively less teaching experience. Fortunately, many other teachers still put grammar at a very important position. According to Besoz(2014), “ Grammar study should definitely be included in the teaching of English in an appropriate amount and it should not be disconnected from actual grammar lessons. It should be integrated into communicative activities. Hence, it can be suggested that language teaching should center on authentic and real-life oriented tasks rather than superficial practices that are consciously designed with aim of teaching grammar”(p.381).

The Relation between Reading and Grammar Understanding

In Chinese EFL background, the proficiency of grammar understanding has a straight

relationship with the reading ability of students.

Rezaee(2011) has mentioned in her article *Does extensive reading improve EFL learners' processing ability?* that “in order to become competent in an L2, one needs to possess linguistic and pragmatic knowledge of that language. As to the linguistic aspect, he should know the sounds of the language, the writing system, grammatical structures, words, and discourse. Regarding the pragmatic aspects, language functions, variations, and interaction skills are necessary. With respect to reading successfully in an L2, good knowledge of vocabulary and grammar play the most important roles”(p.1168). Vocabulary and grammar are always considered to be the most important element of English study. “We usually associate reading comprehension with more passive learning skills”(Hudson,2011, p,12).

While reading some materials relating to culture background, politics, science, and art, students are always in a passive situation. “In real life, people choose to read written discourse by themselves. However, in the classroom teachers usually assign texts to their students. It is crucial to keep in mind that our purpose for reading should complement our students' courses and their varying interests and motivation”(Hudson,2011, p,12). For example, most students are not interested in scientific works, and two elements that influence the understanding of scientific works are the vocabulary and sentence structure. In the *Student's book Business English: An Integrated Course 2*(Wang Lifei, 2010,p.45), Unit 4, text I *Universities and their function* is written by a mathematical scientist and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. The passage consists of 1018 words in all. But it's quite tough and sophisticated for students of pre-intermediate proficiency to understand without any help from teacher. The whole passage contains many fresh words such as “zest, pedant, impart, novice, hamper” which are more formal than any other articles they have read before. And the sentence structures are complex. For

example, in the paragraph

“The universities have trained the intellectual pioneers of our civilization -- the priests, the lawyers, the statesmen, the doctors, the men of science, and the men of letters. The conduct of business now requires intellectual imagination of the same type as that which in former times has mainly passed into those other occupations”(Wang Lifei, 2010, p.46).

Students have following problems in understanding the above paragraph. They are not familiar with the expressions “the men of science” and “the men of letters”; they are confused with the structure of the second sentence. However, the meaning of the second sentence is vital for the understanding of the whole paragraph and even the main idea of the whole passage. Here we can see the two elements that influence the reading comprehension: vocabulary and grammar(the structure of sentences). For scientific reading materials, passive voice is always used, which is also a general rule. Liu Yong qiang(n.d.) has written that the scientific English is difficult not only for its obscure and difficult expressions, but also for its long and difficult sentences, which is a big problem for many learners.

Chapter III Discussion about the efficient approaches of grammar instruction

Former researchers have mentioned some methods in teaching grammar. The purpose of this paper is to figure out some efficient ways to improve students' reading abilities by grammar instruction. Apparently, not all the grammar instructions are suitable for reading classes. But after revising and combination, some methods may work in the process of teacher's instruction.

Pedagogic Task

Although different from the pure grammar instruction, in the process of language teaching, grammar translation method is a traditional and popular one for a long time, because grammar is considered to be the base of language. The interesting thing is that the reading method is also an efficient way of teaching language, Najibi, Olyae and Modarresi(2012) mentioned that the grammar-translation method is the oldest one among language teaching methods, and teachers love it while students believe in teacher. At the same time, according to Najibi, Olyae and Modarresi(2012), "Reading method is an internal skill, it is so easiest and cheapest way. Foreign culture is learned too, and students is full of vocabulary"(p.356). Every teacher wants to get the most efficient and interesting way to teach grammar. Many researchers tried to explore more active ways of teaching grammar. Baleghizadeh has mentioned that "teaching grammar has always been one of the controversial issued in both second and foreign language teaching. There has always been many arguments about the best way of teaching grammar. Different methods and strategies have permanently waxed and waned in popularity"(2011,p.70). Baleghizadeh introduced three instructional techniques(2011), and they are dialogues, task-based teaching and games. In reading classes, the dialogue technique is not proper obviously, because "Conversation- facilitation dialogues provide students with useful phrases with which they can

begin to communicate”(Baleghizadeh, 2011, p.71). For the reading classes, students’ main task is to read and grasp the meaning of reading materials. The widely accepted method is task-based teaching. Baleghizadeh(2011) believes that “task-based teaching (TBT) has gained the status of unsurpassed orthodoxy in both second and foreign language pedagogy”(p.71). In Baleghizadeh’s paper, the pedagogic task was mentioned. According to Nunan(2004), it was defined as:

A piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The tasks should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle and an end.

In this way, the pedagogic task is quite suitable for the reading class. Reading itself is a communicating process. Students’ understanding of reading materials base on their grammatical proficiency. Sometimes the poor grammatical knowledge would cause the wrong understanding of language.

Utilization of Exercises

Another supplementary teaching method often used in English reading classes in China is the utilization of exercises. In both extensive reading classes and intensive reading classes, students are required to finish exercises concerning on words, sentences, language knowledge. Thus, they can enhance their impression on the language points. For example, in the *Student’s book Business English: An Integrated Course 2*(Wang Lifei, 2010,p.17), there is the exercise called Usage, and the direction is “read the following sentences taken from the texts and examine the expressions of multiple relation”. This exercise aims at practicing students’ ability of

expressing the multiple relation in English sentences. Three sentences were picked out from text one,

- “1. Some 380m people speak it as their first language and perhaps *two-thirds as many again as* their second.
2. Berlitz, Europe’s largest school, is said to have *doubled numbers of* its lessons since 1985.
3. Merde, even the French are *twice as good as it as we are*”(Wang Lifei, 2010, p.17).

There are no exact grammatical rules introduced here about how to express the multiple relations, and no further exercises according to these sentences. There is another direction on this page(Wang Lifei, 2010, p.17-18), “Learn more expressions addressing the multiple relation from the following examples. What other expressions do you know”? Most students of pr-intermediate level still feel confused about some of the rules. In this condition, teachers should afford more extra exercises and proper explanation about the general rules of the “ multiple relation”.

E-teaching Method

Najibi, Olyae and Modarresi mentioned E-teaching in 2012, “...teaching second language grammar through web, can put different bottom for the e-student, thus he/she can choose each methods that enjoy it more. It completely depends on the characteristics of the e-students and of course may be only vocabulary is the reason of learning the second language for e-student”(p.358). Students may not only be e-students. As the students who have got the teacher’s lecture in classrooms, they should also have more chanced to have instructions via internet. Actually, with the development of technology, many teachers in China have taken advantages of the internet to help students in extra study. The disadvantage of this method is that some students are not spontaneous enough to study on the internet.

Other teaching method of grammar such as “game” is not suitable to the reading classes.

Conclusion

According to the teaching experience and reading other researchers’ study, it can be concluded that grammar plays important role in the process of reading comprehension of Chinese EFL learners’ English study in colleges. Maybe not most efficient, but these methods may improve the students’ reading ability to some extent. They are:

1. Teachers should help students to set up a long-term determination -- learning grammar through reading English materials and improve reading ability by sufficient grammar instructions..

2. While teaching reading skills, teachers should add some instruction of grammar rules. For example, the extensive use of passive voice in scientific works. This kind of repeated instruction would impress on students’ minds.

3. Utilization of exercises is another efficient way to improve students’ reading ability. Many exercises, themselves, are a process of reading comprehension. In solving the problems and questions occurred in the exercises, students could enhance their further understanding. For example, in the text book 4 of *Reading Course*(Shouren, W&Jie, F, 2014), there are certain TRUE OR FALSE statements to be decided by students. One of them is, “According to Hume, human imagination has nothing to do with the combination of found elements”(p.161). The relative sentence to serve the answer is on page179 -- “Lest Hume’s point -- that all human imagination is nothing more than the combination of found elements - be thought to apply here...”(p.179). The key words in this sentence are “nothing more than” which means “it just is”. Students could easily figure out the former statement is wrong if they know this grammar rule.

4. Teachers should try to use the method of implicit teaching of grammar more often when teaching in the reading class, but the instruction should be clear. No matter in extensive reading class or intensive reading class, grammar instruction is necessary in the process of reading. Some time, the explicit teaching of grammar is also necessary, especially in intensive reading classes.

It is still a long way to go to improve the students' reading proficiency in collage in China. And grammar instruction certainly is not the only way to improve students' reading ability. Finally, more research and study should be put in to the improvement of the students' English reading proficiency.

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