

A Study of Middle School English Grammar Teaching in the CLT Framework

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Abstract: *As an essential part of language, grammar plays an important role in the process of language learning. Grammar teaching is a heatedly discussed topic in foreign language teaching circle. Since the application of CLT in China, grammar teaching has caused more concern than before. This thesis illustrates the necessity of grammar teaching in the theoretical and practical perspectives. In theory, the goal of CLT is to cultivate students' communicative competence and grammatical competence is part of it, so CLT does not exclude grammar teaching but include it. In practice, Chinese realistic conditions determine that grammar should be taught in the CLT framework. Then this thesis proposes some strategies to improve grammar teaching, which tends to give some enlightenment to English teachers.*

Keywords: *grammar teaching; CLT (communicative language teaching); communicative competence; grammatical competence*

1. Introduction

As an essential component of language, grammar plays an important role in the process of language learning. Grammar is also a hot topic in foreign language teaching research. Looking back at the of foreign language teaching in China, we can find that people's different attitudes to grammar have become a clue of modern foreign language teaching research.

Grammar-translation method occupied English teaching for a very long time. In the traditional class, the teacher was the center of the classroom and the focus was on teaching grammatical structures and rules, and students were forced to memorize these rules. In the 1970s, communicative language (CLT) arose and won great popularity among many countries. CLT aims to cultivate learners' communicative competence, and it advocates learning language through use. In the 1980s, CLT was introduced to China and carried out throughout the whole country. However, the application of CLT in middle school English teaching makes grammar teaching a prominent problem. Because of vague or even misleading conceptions of CLT, some teachers think that CLT excludes grammar teaching and it unnecessary to teach grammar in a CLT class, while some other teachers, deeply influenced by traditional ways, still spend too much time teaching grammatical structures. Both of the two cases are to students, because the former makes students fail to output grammatically correct sentences, and the latter makes students lose interest in learning English.

On the basis of CLT, this thesis aims to make clear two points: (1) Should grammar be taught in middle school English teaching? (2) How to teach? In this thesis, a brief introduction to CLT is made at first, which can help clarify the understanding of CLT. Then an attempt is made to illustrate the of grammar teaching in middle school from four perspectives: (1) The relationship between communicative competence and linguistic competence demonstrates that CLT dose not exclude grammar teaching, because linguistic competence is part of communicative competence; (2) The environment of English learning in China requires grammar teaching; (3) The goal of English learning needs grammar teaching; (4) Grammar is still an important component in various examinations. Finally, some strategies are put forward concerning grammar teaching in the CLT framework.

2. An Introduction to Communicative Language Teaching

2.1 Features of CLT

Hymes (1972) first introduced the concept of "communicative competence", which refers to the

ability not only to apply grammatical rules of a language in order to form grammatically correct sentences but also to know when and where to use these rules and to whom. However, “Hymes’ communicative competence, which is sociolinguistically-oriented on the basis of one’s native language, does not seem to be very suitable for foreign language teaching” (Gao, 2003: 51). Later, Canale and Swain (1980) combined the concept of communicative competence with foreign language teaching, and developed it into four components, namely, grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence^[1]. On the basis of the theory of communicative competence, a new approach to language teaching — communicative language teaching — arose, and it emphasizes that the goal of language teaching is to develop learners’ communicative competence.

In order to help understand CLT clearly, many scholars make statements about the features of CLT. As pointed out by Littlewood (2000: 1): “one of the most characteristic features of communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language, combining these into a more fully communicative view.”

Nunan (1991) lists five features of CLT:

- (1) an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- (2) the introduction of authentic texts into learning situation.
- (3) the provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself.
- (4) an enhancement of learners’ own personal experience as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- (5) an attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside.

These five features show that CLT pays much attention to the needs and interest of learners, so students become the center of the class and the language teacher do not play a dominant role. CLT is quite different from traditional approach, so it is necessary to understand the principles of CLT.

2.2 Principles of CLT

On the basis of previous literature (e.g. Nunan, 1991), the principles of CLT could be summarized as being context-oriented, experience-based and learner-centered.

By being context-oriented is meant that a new item should be presented and practiced in context. From a communicative point of view, language items only take on meaning as a result of the context in which it is used, that is to say, an item devoid of context cannot properly be said to have a meaning at all. For example, one word may have many meanings in the dictionary, but it is the context in which it is set that decides which meaning is right and suitable.

Learner-centeredness means that learners are the center of the classroom. CLT lays emphasis on learners and learning. Learners are seen as active participants, rather than passive recipients of information provided by the teacher or the textbook. CLT involves learners in the whole process of learning and makes learners learn by doing. Therefore, teachers are no longer regarded as an authority on language, but a facilitator, a manager and an advisor of learners.

3. Necessity of Grammar Teaching in the CLT Framework

As the fact that the goal of English teaching is to cultivate learners’ communicative competence has been accepted by researchers and English teachers, CLT has been widely applied in our country. The emergence of CLT makes some teachers think that CLT is advanced and objects to the traditional method, so they neglect grammar teaching in the classroom. However, the overlook of grammar brings about bad influences, that is, students cannot output grammatically correct sentences^[4]. Many teachers are confused whether grammar should be taught or not. Of course the answer is affirmative.

In fact, CLT does not exclude grammar teaching, and this can be illustrated from the relationship between grammatical competence and communicative competence.

Swain (1980) agreed that both grammatical competence and sociolinguistic competence are important elements in any theoretical framework of communicative competence. They thought just as

Hymes was able to say that there are rules of grammar that would be useless without rules of language use, so we feel that there are rules of language use that would be useless without rules of grammar^[3]. So grammar is necessary and essential for communication to take place.

Littlewood (2000: 6) suggests that the following four domains of skill make up a person's communicative competence and must be recognized in foreign language learning and teaching.

(1) The learner must attain as high a degree as possible of linguistic competence, that is, he must develop skills in manipulating the linguistic system, to the point where he can use it spontaneously and flexibly in order to express his intended message.

(2) The learner must distinguish between the forms which he has mastered as a part of his linguistic competence, and the communicative functions which they perform. In other words, items mastered as part of a linguistic system must also be understood as a part of communicative system.

(3) The learner must develop skills and strategies for using language to communicate meanings as effectively as possible in concrete situations. He must learn to use feedback to judge his success, and if necessary, remedy failure by using different language.

In Littlewood's definition of communicative competence, linguistic competence also occupies a prominent position. He stated the importance of grammar as follows: "A communicative approach to the content of a course need not involve abandoning the use of structural criteria for selection and sequencing^[5]. Mastery of the structural system is still the basic requirement for using language to communicate one's own meanings" (Littlewood, 2000: 77).

From the analysis and statements above, it could be safely concluded that grammar is necessary in the CLT framework, and the application of CLT does not exclude grammar teaching^[2]. "Without grammatical knowledge as the foundation, it is impossible for language learners to go far in developing their communicative competence of a foreign language" (Gao, 2003: 51).

4. Realistic Reasons of Teaching Grammar in China

4.1 Environment of English Learning

Grammar teaching is unnecessary, because language including grammar can emerge as a result of comprehensible input. That is to say, being exposed to the target language environment, learners can naturally acquire it and internalize the grammar rules. This is partly true in acquiring a second language, but English is typically taught as a foreign language in China, and learning plays a more important role than acquisition in the process of mastering English.

Second language teaching takes place within the target language community, while foreign language teaching is carried out outside the target language environment, mostly in the classroom. Foreign language learning usually requires more formal instruction for the lack of environmental support.

Acquisition refers to subconscious learning in the natural environment, which is not influenced by explicit formal instruction. Learning a language is a conscious process of language development, which needs the intended and explicit formal instruction in the artificial environment such as the language classroom.

As most Chinese students learn English in China, which is far away from English speaking countries, they cannot acquire English and internalize grammatical rules by being exposed to it. In some poor areas, teachers and textbooks are the only language source, so language input is limited. What is worse, students have to deal with other subjects and the time and energy assigned to English learning is limited, so the chances for them to acquire English are very small. The formal instruction in the class will overcome the difficulties of poor acquisition environment and accelerate their learning process.

4.2 Goal of English Learning

The goal of English learning is not simply to improve spoken English, but to develop listening, speaking, reading and writing skills wholly. Students will come across many long and complex sentences in the process of reading. A mastery of grammatical rules will undoubtedly help them to analyze these complicated sentences, and this will give them a sense of success and help them build

their confidence.

In the beginning stage of the application of CLT, many teachers paid much attention to fluency. They spent much time practicing listening and speaking skills in the classroom and avoided explicit grammar teaching. As a result, students could not output correctly without enough knowledge of grammar. Their English level could not be improved to a large extent, and their interest and confidence would be affected badly. In the course of cultivating communicative competence, accuracy is as important as fluency and is the basis for successful communication.

4.3 Form of English Assessment

In China, it is difficult to avoid grammar-based test for students. They need adequate grammatical rules to deal with many kinds of examinations. Tests for High School and National Matriculation English Test are two important entrance examinations for Chinese students. Passing them to enter excellent high schools or colleges for further education is most students' dream. Though the design of these examinations has changed a lot, grammar-oriented exercises still occupy an important place. Therefore students have to know the rules of English grammar in order to do well in such tests.

5. Strategies of Grammar Teaching in the CLT Framework

The goal of middle school grammar teaching is not only to make students master the grammar structures but also to make them communicate successfully using appropriate grammatical rules. As grammar is necessary and important, teachers should adopt flexible ways to promote grammar teaching.

5.1 Making Full Use of the Classroom

If it is necessary and available, teachers can make full use of the classroom.

For example, when presenting "there be" structure, the teacher can describe the classroom using the following sentences:

There is a blackboard in our classroom.

There are four windows in our classroom.

There are two doors in our classroom.

There is a box on the desk.

Now, students may realize the function and the meaning of this structure, and then the teacher may encourage students to discover the rules by themselves.

Next, the teacher makes some corrections and assures the students' guesses with proper structure.

Finally, the teacher encourages students to describe their bedrooms or drawing rooms with the learned structure.

5.2 Organizing Communicative Activities

Role-playing activities are those in which students are asked to imagine who they are in different situations and act accordingly. Most students like to play games, so role-playing will undoubtedly stimulate their interest. They will focus on the knowledge as well as the activities.

For example, there is a story happening in a mall, and the passive voice of the past progressive aspect can be introduced in the story.

Firstly, the teacher assigns the role, student A plays the customer, student B plays the thief and the teacher is the director and seller. After the teacher tells A and B how to play, the rest see the following scene:

A is selecting goods, B is walking to A and picking the purse out from A's bag and runs quickly. A feels her bag moved, suddenly she sees B running nervously, and finds her purse stolen, then she shouts loudly: "oh, my bag is cut, my purse is stolen".

Hearing A's shouts, the seller also shouts: "Let's chase the thief", then they are chasing the thief.

At the same time, the teacher speaks in a high voice: “Her bag is cut, and the thief is being chased”, at the same time, the teacher writes the sentences on the blackboard and asks the students to follow her.

When the game is finished, the teacher may ask question: What happened to the customer? Then the students will answer actively. At last, the teacher summaries.

5.3 Teaching Grammar in Discourse

In the traditional classroom, grammatical points are often introduced in single sentences which are not set in specific discourses. What is worse, to illustrate some items, some teachers often fabricate some sentences rarely used in authentic communication. However, written sentences in specific discourses are just like spoken utterances in daily communication in which their meanings of sentences are determined by the context. Therefore, the examples used by most teachers in the past cut off the relation between grammatical rules and functions. Teaching grammar in discourse will strengthen students’ awareness of discourse and make them realized that grammatical rules are not only influenced by single sentences but also affected by the discourse.

For example, when introducing the passive voice of present tense, the teacher may have students read the following essays:

Which language is spoken by the largest number of people in the world? Of course, the answer is Chinese. But which language is the most widely spoken in the world? The answer is English, English is spoken as a first language by most people in the US, Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. But it is also used very widely as a foreign language in many other countries in the world.

After reading the above passage, students will realize that the passive sentences are not just the transformation of active sentences, but they are also the result of the influences of the discourse topic.

However, the discourse selected should be meaningful, interesting and comprehensible, and the topic should be up-to date and relevant to students’ real life, so the material can stimulate students’ interest and their desire to study.

6. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the necessity of grammar teaching and the strategies of grammar teaching in the middle school. The necessity of grammar teaching is illustrated in terms of theories and realistic reasons in China. Now it is widely accepted that grammar should be taught in China. The detailed discussion about the necessity of grammar teaching can help clarify the existing misconception that CLT excludes grammar teaching. Then some strategies are proposed to improve grammar teaching.

Grammar teaching is a heatedly discussed topic. This paper just makes a skin-deep study of it. More studies should be carried out in order to explore the practical strategies.

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