



A study on the acquisition path of grammar for higher vocational college students based on cultural context

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Abstract. The focus of grammar acquisition has been shifted from form and rules to the exploration of the discourse and meaning. Interactive use of concepts and meanings in contexts is of great significance in improving grammatical competence. Students in Higher Vocational Colleges are weak in English grammar due to years of boring grammar rules reciting and out-of-context exercises training. In this setting, this study set out to explore the path of grammar acquisition from the perspective of cultural context, which is rooted from contextual and socio-cultural theories. Through the survey, test results and practice, five possible aspects are provided as reference for the grammar acquisition of college students.

Keywords: cultural context; higher vocational college students; English grammar acquisition; socio-cultural theory

1 Introduction

The standards for the Higher Vocational Education Specialist English Course categorize the necessary language knowledge as phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, discourse and pragmatics and state that this is one aspect of achieving successful communication^[1]. English grammar courses in higher education institutions are one of the core courses in English. However, in terms of the effectiveness of actual grammar acquisition, it is unsatisfactory^[2] In the English language, the number of linguistic errors in writing is alarming^[3]. The need for and the effectiveness of grammar learning form a major conflict. Grammar is a weak point in the language output of higher education students, and a pain point in the teaching of higher education English teachers and the learning of students.

Xu Jinfen et al.^[4] have made an overview of foreign research on grammatical competence of second language learners in the past 40 years, and concluded that foreign attention to grammatical competence shows a trend of continuous development, with a wide coverage of research topics, reflecting the results of three aspects: mediated language, learners and teachers and they found that the theoretical framework involves

universal grammatical theory, cognitive psychology, neurobiology, communicative function and so on; qualitative research has been marginal in terms of research methods.

Domestic research on the improvement of learners' grammar skills is mainly reflected in the following aspects. Firstly, at the macro level, research is conducted from theoretical perspectives, grammar learning perspectives and other aspects. For example, on the grammar function perspective, Jia Fang emphasizes that the teaching of traditional sentence grammar is detached from the functional context, which hinders people from exploring the essential issues of grammar.^[5] Wang Yin et al. analyze the deeper causes of grammar from an embodied linguistic perspective, which is beneficial for improving students' literacy and language proficiency.^[6] Zhang Yu and other scholars have conducted a qualitative study of Chinese English majors' views on grammar learning, encouraging teachers to guide learners to construct a systematic view of grammar learning and to improve the "correctness" of grammar.^[7] Secondly, at the meso level, grammar learning strategies, or grammar teaching strategies such as flipped classrooms, micro-lessons, blended learning, games, mind maps, etc. have been used to discuss the effectiveness of grammar acquisition practices and applications. There are many research results in this area. For example, Xu^[8] applied the teaching process of flipped classroom according to three steps: independent learning before class, supplementary teaching during class and evaluation feedback after class, and gave countermeasures in the teaching of grammar in higher education. Bai Xue^[9] made a teaching practice based on the Rain Classroom app. combining English grammar and writing. Hao Chongling^[10] explored the hybrid teaching mode of English major grammar course, using the Super Star platform to optimize the learning process, improve the efficiency, and achieve the organic unification of knowledge, ability and literacy. Thirdly, the acquisition of a certain grammar knowledge point is explored from the micro level. For example, Chen Minzhe et al.^[11] studied the effect of online teaching on English completion acquisition and analyzed the effect of different teaching environments on the grammar acquisition effect of undergraduate English majors.

Overall, these studies highlight the promising trend on researching learners' grammar acquisition and show diversities in researching methods and perspectives. For instance, in the contextual view, Niu Baoyi talks about the fact that context is not only semantic (pragmatic) but also grammatical.^[12] It is the foundation on which grammar and semantics are based. It shows the close relationship between context and grammar. However, few studies are served for higher vocational college students, let alone their grammar acquisition under cultural context. In view of this, it is of some research value and significance to explore the grammar acquisition path of college students from the perspective of context theory.

2 Realistic claims of grammar acquisition

In order to know the status quo of grammar acquisition of college students, a survey and test were conducted in a class of 50 first-year college students majoring in Computerized Accounting before English grammar course started. The survey contains their

attitude towards grammar learning, their learning methods and their high school teachers' grammar teaching method. The test consists of 10 multiple choices on simple present and past tense, and a passage writing with given context of talking about past event and key words.

First of all, in terms of the conception, college students haven't been aware of the importance of grammar learning. The survey shows only 16% of students agree that grammar learning is as important as English speaking. As it is known that the secondary school stage emphasizes more on the learning of grammar rules, and the goal of learning is also linked to the entrance examination. When they are free from test-taking goals in college, they tend to pay less and less attention to grammatical rules. Moreover, the objective of talent training at the higher vocational level emphasizes application and professionalism, and the course objectives emphasize the ability to apply language in foreign-related environments, which might be the reason that students take English speaking competence as a more important ability.

Secondly, in terms of learning method, 80% students choose doing exercises over reading. That's their traditional way of learning grammar. It's boring but effective for getting high scores. The aftermath of that learning method brings fragmentary grammar knowledge. English grammar knowledge is complicated, but there is a system to find. On the one hand, students lack systematic knowledge and see only the trees but not the forest, so they gradually get lost in the detailed exploration of knowledge points and finally give up halfway in the tastelessness; on the other hand, reading grammar books takes a long time. They prefer to study professional skills courses that can help them improve their vocational ability than to spend a lot of time on the exploration of grammar knowledge system. This kind of approach of sacrificing the root cause ultimately leads to the bottleneck of professional improvement.

Lastly, in terms of pedagogy, the barrier between knowledge and application of grammar is difficult to break. The survey shows that 70% of their high school teachers only paid attention to the micro aspects of grammar teaching, such as form and structure, and ignored the grammar usage in the macro aspects of discourse and pragmatic functions. That makes it possible for students to understand a certain grammar knowledge in class, but when they encounter a test, they do not know how to do it again. Their test results show that of 10 choices only 3 students made mistakes in one choice question concerning the form of verb in an interrogative sentence. Since it's quite simple grammar, almost everyone did them right. But when it comes to writing, the average error rate, meaning wrong use of tenses, took up 30%. Take one as an example, it says, "Yesterday, I went to see a movie with my friend Lucy. The movie is called *Monsters never sleep*. It was a horror movie. Lucy was a timid girl. She doesn't like horror movie very much, so we left before the movie ended." 2 out of 5 sentence tenses are used wrongly. Although, it's about the things happening in the past, when it comes to the movie type or a person's personality, it should be simple present tense. Most of students didn't realize the actual use of tenses in real context.

To break this barrier, students need to understand the deeper grammar, the rationale behind it, and grasp the meaning and function of grammar in the context of discourse.

3 Theoretical Foundations of English Grammar Acquisition

3.1 Contextual theory

The earliest concept of context was proposed by Malinowski in 1923. Subsequent experts and scholars have developed it to different degrees, for example, Halliday subdivided the situational context into discourse field, tenor and mode, forming the theory of register, revealing to us the mechanism of interaction between context and language^[13]; domestic scholar Hu Zhuanglin divided the context into situational context, cultural context and contextual context. Situational context refers to the surrounding situation when the discourse is produced, the nature of the event, the relationship of the participants, the time, place and manner, etc.; cultural context refers to the history, culture and customs of the speaker's speech community; and contextual context refers to the environment within the discourse.^[14] Knowledge of grammar is essentially knowledge in the process of language use, born in context, used in context, and changed in context^[15]. Understanding context is a prerequisite for grammar acquisition.

3.2 Socio-cultural theory

Sociocultural theory is a systematic theory developed by the Soviet psychologist L.S. Vygotsky. It is not a single theory, but consists mainly of mediation theory, internalization theory, activity theory, nearest development area, scaffolding theory, dialogue theory and situated learning theory.^[16] Sociocultural theory talks about language development in the context of social interaction and highlights the meaning and use of language. Grammar acquisition in its true sense is not simply the learning of rules and forms. Grammar cannot be internalized without real-life situations and interactions.

4 The path of English grammar acquisition based on cultural contexts

Both contextual and socio-cultural theories emphasize the significance of context for language acquisition. The acquisition of grammar lies in the interactive use of concepts and meanings in contexts. After integrating contexts into grammar learning and teaching, the author had a follow-up test on paragraph writing with give context and key words to lead students to use proper tenses. The result shows the error rate has dropped to 18%. Students have improved their ability of grammar in use. Based on the practice, the following five areas are an attempt to the exploration of the path of English grammar acquisition for higher vocational college students.

4.1 Mediated resources

For Lantolf, the concept of mediation in sociocultural theory refers to the process of 'regulating the social and mental activities of the material or personal world with each

other'. He divides the study of mediation into three categories, namely social mediation, cultural product mediation and personal mediation.^[17] There are many concepts in grammar, and the knowledge involved is complex, making it difficult for higher vocational college students, who are not strong learners overall, to systematically grasp the concepts and knowledge system of English grammar. The use of mediated resources can go a long way towards building a systematic system of concepts and knowledge.

Firstly, socially mediated resources in grammar acquisition are mainly environmentally mediated resources. The environmental resources within the classroom are the organization and arrangement of various grammar teaching activities. Teachers can set up teaching thematic units based on concepts to help students deepen their understanding of concepts; the environmental mediated resources outside the classroom mainly refer to the Internet resources, which can be used to activate students' interest in learning while gradually building a systematic knowledge system.

Secondly, cultural artifacts resources contain both native language mediators and instrumental mediators. The mother tongue is often cited as a major impediment to students learning English well. The influence of negative transfer from the mother tongue is evident in the prevalent Chinese English grammar discourse produced at higher levels. However, it is undeniable that the mother tongue can again serve as a valuable mediating resource in deepening the understanding of some concepts.^[18] For example, the similarity of some grammatical concepts in Chinese can help students to better understand the concepts of subject, object, determiner, gerund and so on in English. And among the mediating resources in the category of tools, teachers and students can use mind mapping tools and diagramming tools to help sort out grammatical frameworks, important and difficult knowledge, etc.

Finally, personal mediation refers to the resources mediated by the learning community consisting of teachers and the students. When college students have problems in understanding and applying grammatical concepts, teachers can provide appropriate 'scaffolding' resources to analyze and explain the rationale behind the grammar and the historical and cultural contexts in which it occurs, which can be of great benefit to students' understanding. At the same time, peer correction, mutual evaluation or explanation can also help to enhance each other's grammar acquisition to some extent.

4.2 Incorporation with cultural contexts

When a language is expressed, its content naturally reflects the history, culture, customs and values of a particular speech community, which is the cultural context in which the speech is embedded. Comic strips, sketches, stand-up comedy, etc., which are rich in cultural markers, are often very difficult for non-target language learners to understand. If one only analyses the grammar of the sentences, one cannot fully understand the overall meaning of the text, even in contextual and situational contexts. This is where a certain amount of cultural background knowledge is necessary. The integration of cultural contexts plays a crucial role in the overall grasp of the grammar of a discourse.

From the viewpoint of language use, 'correct' grammar means using the right words and sentences to express the right semantics. The type of word used depends on whether the cultural context in which it is used is consistent with the type of discourse and the

audience it is intended for. For example, the pejorative word *bitch*, which is used in many contexts inappropriately, may also be understood as a neutral word due to the specificity of the audience it is intended for. The use of simple or complex sentences may also depend on whether the audience is children or academic researchers. The use of a non-finite participle as a gerund or a clause may simply be a matter of articulation and coherence of the discourse, etc. Thus, the acquisition of grammar cannot be separated from specific cultural contexts and usage scenarios, and only by strengthening the discourse and pragmatic meaning of grammar can students' view of grammar learning be improved and grammar be truly brought to life.

The introduction of grammatical discourse can be drawn from fictional texts such as novels, or from non-fictional texts such as news and current affairs, biographies and other texts. The criteria for selecting the difficulty and scope of the texts should take into account the English level of the students and the topics they are interested in. For example, if students are keen on entertainment topics, teachers may choose a live video of the recent Oscar ceremony in the US in which actor Will Smith beat up the host Rock on stage after Rock teased Will's wife about her hair loss (spoken discourse) and a newspaper report (written discourse) to reinforce the grammatical and pragmatic knowledge of the language, such as the connotation of imperative sentences, the denotative meaning of the discourse, the genitive case of nouns and the emotional stance of words, etc.

In the social setting, host Rock's inappropriate joke offends Will Smith and his wife, who were present at the time. Will's forceful remark "*Keep my wife's name out of your fucking mouth*" shows the commanding meaning of the imperative, which is evident and impressive. At the same time, teachers can direct students to notice that Will's reference to his wife is not the conventional personal reference *her*, but the social reference *my wife's*. The meaning behind this choice of title in the discourse is more of a defense of his family's interests. The wording of this news story was subsequently presented in various newspapers. The Reuters headline reads "*Will Smith smacks Chris Rock on stage, then wins an Oscar.*" The headline is free of modifiers and the verb "*smack*" is borrowed from a descriptor used by Rock himself at the time, in order to present the situation as neutrally and objectively as possible. The Washington Post's headline "*Will Smith slaps Chris Rock after Jada Pinkett Smith joke at Oscars.*" does not use the *'s* possessive case. The connotation of whether to use *'s* in the noun genitive case or not is different; it is a matter of whether the joke is about Jada herself or what Jada said. The New York Post's headline is "*Will Smith wins best actor Oscar for 'King Richard' after Chris Rock punch.*" Without context, it is impossible to understand whether it is Chris Rock punching others or Chris Rock being punched. This kind of deliberate ambiguity is, in fact, a peculiar strategy for attracting attention and reading in news articles. In short, the exploration of discourse grammar in context reinforces the purpose of grammar acquisition and students' pragmatic competence.

4.3 Internalization through flipped classroom

English grammar is a lesson rich in concepts and rules. If the limited time in the classroom is devoted to learning concepts and rules, then students can only learn superficial

grammar and the barrier between knowledge and application of grammar cannot be broken down. This traditional approach to classroom teaching catalyzes a sense of aversion and helplessness in higher education students. With the flipped classroom, the limitations of time and space are broken, and the knowledge-based content is made into micro-lessons for students to learn before and consolidate after class. Students with low levels of understanding can watch the lessons several times to deepen their understanding. Applied content can be carried out in the classroom. For example, in the classroom, examples of grammatical texts can be analyzed in a cultural context, or teachers and students can participate in question and answer sessions to analyze difficult points, or complete interactive tasks to promote internalization and deeper learning of grammar. Take the modal auxiliary verbs *may* and *shall* as an example, both of which need to be repeated in specific sentences to appreciate their specific meanings. The phrase *may not* stressed in different places will convey different meanings. The stress on *may* indicates the speculative use of *may not*; the stress on *not* indicates not allowed (which is more often replaced by *can't* or *mustn't* because the meaning cannot be reflected in the written language); The word *shall* is used in sentences such as "*And you shall have it*" and "*No one shall stop me*" to express the speaker's determination and intention. The only way to appreciate the momentum is to act it out aloud. Teachers can use the cultural context of the movie *Excalibur* to deepen their grammatical perception by introducing clips of lines from the movie that contain this grammar point, and combining it with students' imitations of reading aloud.

4.4 Appropriate teaching methods

The conceptual approach is a new pedagogy promoted by socio-cultural theory and is centered on teaching students conceptual meaning, with an emphasis on teaching materialized concepts as a pedagogical component.^[19] It extends the teaching of grammar to the pragmatic and metaphorical level, linking language and cultural contexts. Conceptualization, materialization and verbalization are the basic principles of the conceptual approach. In the process of teaching grammar, this is manifested in the following ways.

Firstly, materializing concepts. The learning of conceptual knowledge of grammar is a cognitive activity. The cognitive ability of students at higher levels is slightly insufficient when it comes to understanding abstract concepts, and it is difficult to achieve depth of understanding simply by verbal explanation. The materialization of concepts means using tools such as visuals, pictures, graphs or models to represent the concepts. Socio-cultural theorists advocate the development of a 'complete action-oriented base schema' (SCOBA) for the materialization of concepts, which is widely used in teaching tense-verb-modality and sentence structure. This approach is widely used in the teaching of tense and mood and sentence structure.

Secondly, verbalizing activity. It consists of verbal and written verbal interaction activities. It requires students to describe the linguistic concepts themselves in meta-linguistic terms. For example, when learning the grammatical concepts of direct and indirect quotations, the transitions between quotations involve changes in person, tense and temporal representation. The emphasis on the mechanics of the rules often makes

students fearful and mistaken in the application of real-life situations. Teachers can introduce a conversational passage, combine it with a certain cultural context, and organize students to paraphrase the conversation in meta-language in terms of its communicative purpose and meaning, which not only deepens their understanding of the concepts but also enhances their sense of achievement in accomplishing the real communicative purpose.

Thirdly, internalizing the learning outcomes. Whether the grammar outcomes are truly internalized can be seen in the various tasks that students produce. Teachers can test the extent to which students have internalized grammar by assigning tasks such as written writing or oral communication in a cultural context. For example, share your own part-time work experience and future career plans to see how well students have mastered the tenses and forms of English grammar and their attitudes and perceptions of their careers; describe a frustrating experience and how you overcame it to see if students can flexibly use action words to express material processes and sensory verbs to express mental processes, and how they contribute to the emotion of the discourse, while also focusing on affective goals and values. The task also focuses on the development of affective and value goals; the writing of a news report examines students' mastery of words, sentences and personification in factual and objective texts, etc. In short, tasks are designed to take into account cultural contexts and the integration of affective values on the one hand, and strategies for internalizing and applying grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence on the other.

4.5 Updating grammar materials

Most current grammar textbooks still focus on sentence grammar, with lexical and syntactic grammar as the two main points of knowledge, with little coverage of part-of-speech grammar. In addition, as scholars continue to develop their studies of grammar, some historical changes have occurred in the classification and formulation of some concepts. For example, the traditional grammar of the perfect tense, non-predicative verbs and epithets is referred to in some grammar books as the perfect, non-finite verbs and subject complements; modal verbs, which is classified as a separate category, are now considered as auxiliary verbs and become modal auxiliary verbs, while verbal nouns and present participles are unified as *-ing* participles and past participles as *-ed* participles, etc. These changes in reference and classification reflect the evolving course of grammatical research. As the focus of grammar acquisition now shifts from form and rules to the meaning of language and chapter, there is an urgent need to update grammatical concepts and newer grammar materials. In their own teaching practice, teachers can accumulate teaching materials, develop rich media grammar materials, introduce audio and video resources, use grammar-focused discourse examples, distil declarative knowledge with pictures and texts, add task scenarios that assess procedural knowledge, and enhance the interesting, practical, systematic and cultural features of grammar. The development of discourse resources is, of course, a considerable challenge for teachers. Teachers need to update their concepts, learn new techniques, integrate and develop new resources, and improve their quality to make efforts in the development of English grammar materials.

5 Conclusion

There are many problems in the acquisition of English grammar by higher education students. Traditional grammar teaching only focuses on grammar rules without talking about the reasoning behind the rules, which cannot train students' thinking skills. Only by placing grammar in certain cultural contexts such as history, culture, customs and values can the discourse and pragmatic value of grammar be reflected and the barrier between grammar knowledge and use be broken. The author proposes strategies for the acquisition of English grammar, such as the use of mediated resources, the integration of cultural contexts, the practice of flipped classrooms, the experimentation of new grammar teaching methods and the suggestions for the development of teaching materials, in order to provide some preliminary references for the study of English grammar acquisition by college students. There is a long way to go in the development of new English grammar teaching materials. These will be the direction of future research and efforts.

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