The English Grammar Teaching Based on Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics

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Although the English teachers in China have been laying stress on the grammar teaching over the years, the teaching effect is not ideal, reflecting in the situation that students are confused the similar grammatical points and unable to memorize as well as understand them clearly. Wang Yin advanced the Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics, and much work was made on this respect. The thesis aims at tracing the development of the study, combined with the relevant theories, and summarizing as well as proposing the several suggestions, in order to turn the English grammar teaching from the angle of description into interpretation.

Keywords: Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics, the English grammar teaching, interpretation

Introduction: The Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics

Cognitive Linguistics is proposed by Sydney Lamb in 1971 (Wang & Wang, 2019, p. 44), mainly researching on the language in the brain (Helmut, 2010) and co-relationships between language, brain, and mind (Wu, 2012, p. 15). The so-called Cognitive Linguistics accepted by linguists at home and abroad, however, is widely divergent with Lamb’s initial category, referring to George Lakoff, Ronald Langacker, and Rene Dirven’s linguistic school (Wang & Wang, 2019, p. 44). Conversely, Sydney Lamb’s ideas are described as Neurolinguistics.

Cognitive Linguistics is often labeled as the innovation in the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure and Noam Chomsky in the field of linguistics (Wang, 2019, p. 57). As we all know, western linguistics analyzes the language characters and written materials from the 5th century B.C. to 18th century A.D., and makes textual research on the language writing, phonological, interpretive and collating laws as the starting point. But such classical linguistic studies lack systematicness. Beginning in the 18th century to 19th century A.D., Comparative and Historical Linguistics (Yu, 1989, p. 14) takes its target at constructing the language genealogical classification and language typology (Wang, 2015, p. 2). Saussure objects to the study tradition of Comparative and Historical Linguistics and establishes Structural Linguistics in light of the Philosophy of Language of that age (Lecercle, 2006; Volosinov, 2006; Chen, 2003; Wang, 2001). On the base of this, Saussure practices “Closing the Door to Beat Language” (Wang, 2013, p. 1), while builds up modern linguistic theories (Wang, 2015, pp. 2-3) centered around the internal and synchronic forms of the language itself, cutting off the connection between language, subject, and the outside world (Zhang, 2007, p. 95). The latter half of the 20th century, Chomsky launches a critical revolution against Structural Linguistics and sets up Transformational Generative (TG) Grammar. TG linguists while adopt structuralists’ core points, such as
synchronic study, turn structure to mind (Wang, 2015, p. 3). Chomsky conducts his linguistic research from the internal mind (Wang, 2002, p. 23) to the language.

Cognitive Linguistics is a re-revolution in the former two and the approach emphasizes Materialism and Human-Centered Theory, which are not much accounted of in TG grammar. Wang thinks that the title of Cognitive Linguistics is undefined with vague use and repairs to Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics (ECL) (Wang, 2014, p. 61). Embodied refers to the interactive experience to the real world, while cognitive expresses the cognitive processing based on the perception and experience. Briefly speaking, the core principle of ECL is: reality-cognition-language (Wang, 2019, p. 45). Language must undergo through cognition process in the middle stage rather than directly related to reality. In short, language must be the outcome with human’s participation. As Wang (2014, p. 62) said, language is learned and used in context by human beings based on Langacker’s statement (1987, p. 155).

**Traditional English Grammar Teaching and Its Limitations**

Although the task-based teaching and communicative teaching method which have played a dominant role in the present English teaching contribute to the fact that the status of English grammar teaching became inevitably less compelling, there is no doubt that English grammar teaching is also one of the most important components to measure an English learner’s language competence, which one having a better effect on English grammar teaching, the explicit teaching, or the implicit teaching, turns into one of the main debating problems (Zhu & Xu, 2014, p. 26).

The former one emphasizes particularly on the goal-oriented English-grammar learning on the basis of Richard W. Schmidt’s Noticing Hypothesis (Zhu & Xu, 2014, p. 26) which they identify the level at which stimuli are subjectively experienced (Schmidt, 1990, p. 132). As John M. Norris and Lourdes Ortega’s (2000, p. 419) words say, the goal of any instructional interventions should be to effect changes in learners’ focal attention when they are processing the L2 (Sharwood, 1993), so as to increase the likelihood that certain linguistic features are noticed, and eventually acquired, and to do this in efficient ways in terms of rate of acquisition and target-like levels of ultimate attainment. Researches, nevertheless, show that the explicit grammar instruction benefits the memory retention of certain grammar items (Spada, 1997) and enhances the accuracy of language expressions (Hossein & Fotos, 2004). The language teaching method, however, requires students to exercise certain grammar items during the class time, which learners are apt to neglect and loss the needed language learning environment (Liu & Yang, 2009, p. 176). The decontextualized mechanical drills go against the learners’ improvement of the communicative language competence (Zhu & Xu, 2014, p. 26) and the grammatical practical ability (Xi, 2015, p. 147). In addition, Jayne Moon (2000) points out that learners tend to concentrate on the meanings of the language rather than the forms. If learners only simply swallow the grammatical rules, they are liable to loose their interest and attention (Liu & Yang, 2009, pp. 176-177).

The implicit grammar teaching refers to the method which the grammar points are avoided discussing directly and require students to experience the language via the specific simulative context created by the teacher instead according to Stephen Krashen’s Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis and Input Hypothesis. During the process, learners are supposed to sum up the certain syntax rules (Liu & Yang, 2009, p. 177). The teaching method can undoubtedly help to improve learners’ communicative competence, but for beginners or elementary learners who a natural context might be difficult to understand, taking words, sentences, and texts out of context threatens their intelligibility (Thornbury, 2000, p. 71).
Recent years, many scholars have devoted themselves to the studies of the combination of the explicit and implicit language grammar teaching, but they still have no idea to deal with the listed limitations: (1) Traditional grammar teaching focuses on a set of grammatical rules based on masses of English language facts and phenomena, without a series of reasonable explanations and the thinking about the English thinking pattern behind the grammatical rules. (2) Learners are accustomed to acquire detailed grammatical rules, but not the whole syntax schemas and structural system. Therefore, based on this, Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics gives a new dimension for English grammar teaching.

The Feasibility of the Issue

Grammar is the cognitive organization of one’s experience with language and strongly tied to the experience that a speaker has had with language (Bybee, 2006, p. 711). Chomsky attempts to apply Inborn Competence and Logic Calculus to entail the syntactic causes, but Wang (2019, p. 45) clearly points out that: Whether it is acceptable to utilize the idealized formulas and complex mathematical deduction to analyze plenty of plain as well as simple linguistic phenomena or not? Although Chomsky comes up with his new theory system, Minimalist Program, over the past 10 years, some notions of it still leave doubtful points unquestioned (Yu, 2007, p. 95).

The Embodied-Cognitive view follows the emergent view and usage-based model of the language, holding that the language grammar is gradually emerged during the widespread use of the language (Wang, 2019, p. 45; Fang, 2018) which is the fundamental common view of Interactional Linguistics and Emergent Grammar. In accordance with the primary principle of ECL, there are some common places among languages all over the world because all human beings, with same physical structures, share the same world. This determines the fact that different languages spoken by all nations have similar thinking models and language expression. That is the alleged embodied. For another, each group of people has their individual subjective initiative and cognitive ability, which contribute to the discrepancies between different languages. This is named as cognition. Above all, ECL can be used for the English grammar teaching.

The English Grammar Teaching Applied in ECL

From the beginning of the 21st century, many researchers at home and abroad bend themselves to the practicability of English syntactic analysis. Gunter Radden and Rene Dirven (2007) open the floodgates to the similar studies. Franka Kermer (2016), Liu and Jia (2015), Jakub Bielak and Miroslaw Pawlak (2013), Wang (2011), et al., try to use the latest cognitive grammar to English grammar teaching. All these are characterized as follows: (1) The content is scattered and short of systematicness; (2) The content is too academic to be applied for English classroom teaching. Based on this, the author presents several ideas combined with specific grammatical cases.

Attempting to Explain the English Grammar, Rather Than Depict the Rules

There is a tendency from emphasis on description to emphasis on explanation (Hu, 2009, p. 80) in the field of the current linguistics and the interpretative method should occupy the core place in the language study (Wang, 2008, p. 32). This requires a new visual angle to reexamine the English grammar teaching approach. The present perfective, have + V-ed, for example, is a difficult grammar question to explain the reason why the tense stresses the influence on the present. The traditional grammar is hard to provide a very convincing explanation.
(1) I have a bike.
(2) I have rid a bike.

The basic sense of have as (1) shown is that someone owns something or that it is available for them to use\(^1\) which contains three connotations: (1) The subject and object present the possessive relationship; (2) The tense is the present tense; (3) The object often refers to an entity concept. (1) and (2) satisfy the same syntactic structure. In other words, the underlined parts of (1) and (2) possess the equivalent grammatical function. In this analogy, V-ed can be seemed as an event or condition which the action is proceeding right now; the possessive relationship starts from the past, extending to present or the future. Therefore, it is lopsided to consider the traditional grammar concept that have in have + V-ed is a sheer auxiliary without any symbolic meaning, but the have is provided with its significance, that is to say, in the English thought pattern, have determines whether the following verb(s) has an effect on the present condition. Such interpretation of have provides a comparatively reasonable explanation while retaining its basic “own” meaning. This renewing-old-version take is more accessible for English grammar teaching with a deeper understanding of the British thinking mode (Wang, 2019, p. 48).

**Distinguishing the Causes of Different Linguistic Phenomena Combined With Chinese**

For the past few years, many researchers in China have done a lot of researches on contrastive studies of English and Chinese languages (Li & Sheng, 2014; He, 2002), even including the factors about the different thinking modes (Mei, 2017; Li, 1996). However, there are still two issues to be further studied: How do the causes impact the efficiency of English grammar teaching and why do we need to distinguish the causes during the teaching process?

Let us back to (1) and (2). Sun (1987, p. 78) once stated that: The English thought pattern is accustomed to reflecting the event with respect to the static state, while the Chinese version is habituated to doing so in regard of the dynamic state. This point tends to be ignored by the broad English learners not because of how abstruse it is, but because Chinese EFL learners are conditioned to learn English with their inherent and limited thinking model. Similar problems often lead to the Chinese EFL learners’ knowledge-confusion.

This statement is beneficial for recognizing the English grammar, especially. For example, the green hands without relevant-language background, are required to interpret the tense, voice, mood, and aspect which are the unique four verb-grammatical categories in the indo-European family. In Chinese, there are also similar experience, but following with totally different ways to express it, such as adding some specific function word, like Zhe (着), Le (了), Guo (过), etc. In contrast, English would rather use the different word order of a sentence or form of a verb to serve the same role.

The origin, development, and evolution of English and Chinese have a lot to do with their own cultural settings beyond all question, entailing different traditions, culture, social values, and thinking models. This, thus, forms different semantic systems. English learners are easily to be limited by their mother-tongue thought pattern, and apply arbitrarily Chinese grammatical rules and idioms during the communication and writing in English which are named as the alleged Chinglish (Wang, 2005, p. 41). Although such expressions are deemed as some sort of deformed English, Chinglish is the interlanguage or approximative system (Nemser, 1971), which means Chinglish is the system that has a structurally-intermediate status between the native and target

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\(^1\) The meaning of have is from Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online. The website is: https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/have; and the searching time is: 11th August, 2019.
languages (Selinker, 1972, p. 211). The interlanguage that is slightly different from L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English) is an inevitable phenomenon for English learners. To solve this problem, the relatively proper and effective approach is to constantly contrast their interlanguage with English to enable the interlanguage to conform as closely as possible to English as native speakers saying. Without a shadow of doubt, the process needs the guide of English teachers rather than by learners themselves. Only via the contrastive analysis on English and Chinese do they assist Chinese EFL learners to accurately grasp the features and rules of a foreign language; more importantly, to deeply understand the different patterns of thought which embody the cultural characteristics.

Constructing the Specific Language Grammar Framework

Anybody who learned or is learning English knows that English grammar points are numerous, complicated, and overloaded. If teachers copy the detailed grammar rules to the classroom and follow the traditional procedures of grammar class, such as mechanical grammar exercises, sentence drills, moot-dialogue training, etc., students are unlikely prone to obtaining the overall system of English grammar. Learners, thus, are quite easily to forget the learned grammar knowledge and be confused with them. And this requires that English teachers have the consciousness of constructing the language framework.

The sentence structure is one of the most intuitive items in English, and the predicate verb is at the center of one English sentence. Therefore, based on this, constructing the grammar system with the start of the predicate verb and sentence structure is a brilliant idea for English teachers to such an extent. What they should do is to do as they previously teach students with detailed language grammar points, while summarize the relevant ones in a table as shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>V + O (Object)</th>
<th>Adv. (Adverb)</th>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Tense</th>
<th>Logical Subject</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/P (Predicative)</td>
<td>/O + OC (Object Complement)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

Some Parts of Verbal Features of Non-finite Verbs

The concise grammar outline enables to absorb the fragmented grammar points into the systems. But if the teacher does not notice how to use them in a better way, the framework has no idea to achieve its proper role. Except the functions aiming to get learners’ ideas into shape, the framework can also be used to mobilize students’ learning enthusiasm. For instance, students are aspiring to sum up the specific grammar rules from a series of sentences and fill in the blanks. There could, for certain, be more applications for teachers to use the grammar framework, but the targets are determined: to attempt to build up L2 learners’ knowledge system and arouse their learning initiative.

Conclusion

The current English grammar teaching is still at the descriptive stage, which means most of English teachers pay more attention on the conclusion of all sorts of grammatical phenomena. Learners consolidate the

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grammar knowledge through teachers’ spoon-feeding classroom teaching and endless assignments. Such teaching method results in the dissatisfying teaching effects, such as the fact that English learners are possible to confound the relevant or similar language points and relatively difficult to remember them. In the face of such situation, the thesis seeks to put forward three possible ideas based on the Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics: concentrating more on the English analytical thinking beneath linguistic phenomena, comparing the grammatical rules and logical causes with the Chinese, and building up the grammar framework. All these design to cognitively transfer the description of the language rules into the interpretation of the linguistic thinking and linguistic awareness in order to help learners have a deeper understanding of English grammar and provide one practical thought for the textbook compilation and English language teaching.

References


