

College English Grammar Teaching Guided by Constructivism Learning Theory

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Abstract—Grammar is the most important part in English study, but a good command of it does not mean one can learn English well. Oppositely, grammar should play an active role in improving the integral development of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Therefore, we have to reform our traditional grammar teaching method. In this paper, the author tries to establish a feasible and effective modal in English grammar teaching under the guidance of constructivism theory. According to the theory, grammar should be dynamic in different contexts rather than a kind of static knowledge. Thus, the author adopts several teaching concepts, such as cooperative study, learning in context and task-based learning, so as to offer a new view of teaching and research in English grammar.

Keywords—Grammar teaching; Constructivism theory; Task-based learning

I. INTRODUCTION

For learners, mastering English grammar systematically doesn't mean you can learn English well. Especially for college students, grammar is supposed to be a kind of skills rather than remember syntax rules. However, in the process of English teaching, the traditional mode of English grammar "teacher-speaking, students-listening-remembering" is still popular. Teachers play a role of "knowledge instiller" and students act as the "container of knowledge". In this traditional teaching mode, students' initiative and enthusiasm have not been valued and played. Their original knowledge and experience are ignored. As a result, it is difficult for students to combine the syntax rules and communicative competence. For example, there are full of mistakes in oral and writing English, students cannot use grammar to analyze long sentences and discourses in reading materials. That is to say, the purpose of learning English grammar is to promote English comprehensive ability of listening, speaking, reading and writing rather than master grammar knowledge.

II. PROBLEMS IN COLLEGE ENGLISH GRAMMAR TEACHING

A. *The Neglect of Grammar Teaching by Functional Communication Method*

At present, functional communication method is popular, but we have to admit that we have overcorrected while emphasizing the cultivation of students' communicative competence, and ignore the cultivation of grammar ability. As a result, students' language basic are on the decline. From their usage of English, we can find that there are full of grammatical mistakes, most students can only output scattered sentences, but cannot write coherent discourse. It may help students to communicate in simple English, but a qualitative improvement

must depend on the development of students' language ability, so improving grammar ability is the only way to improve students' language ability.

B. *The Current Situation and Problems of English Grammar Teaching*

Recently, grammar teaching often tends to explain and pass on grammar knowledge instead of cultivating students to use grammar in reading, writing, speaking and listening. The whole class is dominated by teachers, students are only audiences, the task of students is to write down grammatical knowledge on their notebook and understand grammatical knowledge. For teachers, college English grammar is quite difficult to teach, students have learned English for six years in middle school, so it is hard to find appropriate entry point to teach. As a result, on the one hand, students have no interests in grammar, on the other hand, students have a lot of grammatical mistakes in writing and speaking.

Thereby it is necessary to explore a new teaching methodology which can not only arouse students' interest in learning grammar but also improve students' grammar ability and language comprehensive competence effectively.

III. GRAMMAR TEACHING GUIDED BY CONSTRUCTIVISM

A. *The Necessity of Using Constructivism in Grammar Teaching*

Based on current situation and existing problems in grammar teaching, the author attempts to use constructivism in teaching grammar. Because the object of teaching is college students who have some learning basics and experience, of course they have their own past learning and life experience. In a word, the author believes that teachers should make a good use of past experience and knowledge, which should be considered as a growth point of new knowledge. All the teaching process should base on their past experience and knowledge in order to guide students to enrich and improve their past experience and knowledge. That is to say, learners are not a kind of receiver who gets information passively, but an active constructivist of knowledge.

This paper takes constructivism as a new perspective, nowadays constructivism is a hot topic in educational field. Since the beginning of 21st century, this theory has been wildly used in teaching research in China. The result of literature search is shown: from 2000 to 2018, CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) take down 8200 articles about constructivism and teaching. There are only 71 articles on grammar teaching. This paper attempts to combine constructivism learning theory and college English grammar.

Based on our specific teaching environment and learners' level, in the process of practical teaching, we mainly apply the constructivism learning theory of cooperative learning, situational learning and cultivating learners to construct knowledge initiatively. This research not only enlarges the applicable scope of constructivism, but also takes grammar as a dynamic process in different context instead of some static knowledge. In this way, students can learn grammar and improve their language application ability effectively.

B. The Definition of Constructivism

Constructivism can date from Swiss psychologist Piaget (1966), and absorb the theory of historical cultural psychology by Vygotsky (1978), the theory of meaning learning by Ausubel (1968), the theory of discovery learning by Bruner (1960) and essences of other learning theories, uncover the learning cognitive process of human beings.

What is constructivism? Psychological research shows: human people's intuition is selective. Human brain doesn't passively receive information of the outside world, but actively select some information and ignore some information, and actively construct the meaning of new information through their past experience and knowledge. Jean Piaget articulated mechanism by which knowledge is internalized by learners. He suggested that through the process of assimilation and accommodation, individuals construct new knowledge from their experiences. Assimilation means individuals incorporate the new experience into an already existing framework without changing that framework. In contrast, when individual's experiences contradict their internal representations, they may change their perceptions of the experiences to fit their internal representation. When we act on the expectation that the world operates in one way and it violates our expectation, we often fail, but by accommodating this new experience and reframing our model of the way the world works from the experience of our own failure or others' failure [1]. That is to say, learners' cognitive structure is constantly improved and developed in the circle of "balance-unbalance-new balance". In the process of teaching design, teachers should emphasize on students' direct participation to gain experience and cultivate their ability of independent exploration and self-regulation.

That is to say, the construction of knowledge cannot be replaced by others. It is impossible for teachers to "infuse" knowledge into students' minds. Instead, learners generate new knowledge by activating original experience through the interaction of the old and new knowledge, and recombine original experience effectively. Therefore, cultivation learners' ability to construct new knowledge and experience through old experience is more important than the ability of reciting and mastering knowledge. In the process of learning, every learner has their own experience and view, so different people also have different understandings about the same knowledge. Thereby it is important for learners to communicate and cooperate each other. The discussion and cooperation of learners is a good way to share and understand knowledge.

The emphasis and difficulty point of this article is how to combine the constructivism learning theory with English grammar teaching effectively, how to build a kind of dynamic

model of grammar teaching. In a word, how to use grammar to improve listening, speaking, writing and reading effectively.

IV. THE APPLICATION OF CONSTRUCTIVISM LEARNING THEORY IN GRAMMAR TEACHING

A. Task-Based Learning

At the beginning of the grammar class, teachers organize all students to form a learning group, every learning group will be assigned a grammar item. For example, noun, article, attributive clause, adverbial clause, non-finite verb and so on. Students will share out the work and cooperate with others in a group, search the related information, then make them present their PPT about their grammar items in class, other students can ask them some related questions and the students in this group will answer their questions. Teachers just act as an assistant, try to give some guide and supplements about their presentation. According to the specific performance of each person, the task-based learning activity will be included into their formative assessment.

B. Induction and Deduction

We should pay more attention to considering how to improve learners' precious experience, how to make good use of previous schema to select, integrate, transform and assimilate new stimuli. New knowledge will be reconstructed only if establishing the necessary collection between existing knowledge, experience and new input.

In practice, we can emphasize both induction and deduction through

"observation-discovery-discussion-induction-application".

That is to say, students read a large number of target language, and try to draw a conclusion about syntax rules in the reading materials under the guidance of teachers, then learners will construct grammar knowledge by their discovery, thinking and discussion. Induction can arouse learners' interest to participate on their own initiative, which is good for improving their ability of inquiry learning and autonomous learning. But it is insufficient only to discover and induct the syntax rules. Deduction is as important as induction. By designing language context, the grammar items which students have learned can be effectively presented through speaking, writing and listening. Learners only can deepen understanding, internalize the rules by repeated practices. Thereby the role of teachers has changed from the initiator and infuser of knowledge to the organizer, instructor and helper of learning. That is to say, in the learning process, instead of giving knowledge, teachers are to enlighten students to think and help them solve problems when they meet difficulties in learning.

Take attributive clause teaching for example, the first step: teachers provide some reading materials, ask students to find out all attributive clauses, make students observe and summarize the characteristics, usages and functions of attributive clause. The second step: ask students to think about the differences between attributive clause and nominal clause [2]. The third step: give them some assignments, such as write down a descriptive essay, at least includes at least five attributive clauses, or ask them to use attributive clause to describe a person, hometown or family. Or ask students to use attributive clauses to make sentences.

C. Comparison and Analysis

For the grammar items which are easy to be confused, try to adopt “grammatical phenomena presentation--comparative analysis--summary--consolidation and application”, for example: when students have finished learning 16 tenses, the simple past tense and present perfect tense, present continuous tense, simple future tense and future continuous tense are easy to be confused [3], so compare and analyze the differences between these tenses and the situation in which they are used. Provide students plenty of reading materials and make them recognize using different tenses in different contexts.

There are many grammar phenomenon are easy to be confused, such as attributive clause and nominal clause, active voice and passive voice, the function of the infinitive, present participle and past participle. Thereby to make some sentences is a good way to learn these similar grammar phenomenon.

D. Formative Assessment

In educational field, although our country has emphasized the implement of formative assessment, but in reality, some traditional test types such as fill-in-the-blank, error correction, selection still occupy the dominant position. These objective test types are overly rigid and standardized. We consider that the criterion for evaluation should not be whether knowledge or skill can be copied, but whether students can apply and transfer for knowledge and skills which they have learned. Constructivism stresses on the diversity of assessment, in addition to written examination, students’ daily record, including the record of observation and discussion, the result of

operations and activities can be used as the items of comprehensive assessment [4]. In class, teachers act as evaluators, if students also can become evaluators, the problem of single subject and object in traditional evaluation between teachers and students is overcome. Therefore, students’ interest and motive are greatly aroused. In the process of teaching, it is important to cultivate students’ self-evaluation and rethink learning content, process and result.

Teachers should encourage and support students to cultivate the ability of rethinking and self-adjustment. As a result, students will try their best to improve their habits of learning and living, rethink their learning method and carry out the next step of learning better and further.

V. THE EXPERIMENT OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR TEACHING GUIDED BY CONSTRUCTIVISM

A. Pre-test and Post-test

The author did this experiment in five classes in English Department in Peihua College, during 4 months, there are thirty-six periods, students use the same textbook--Bo Bing College English Grammar, three classes adopt constructivism teaching method, the other two classes use traditional method. students first take a grammar test as the pre-test at the beginning of the class, including multiple choice, sentences rewriting, error correction, English-Chinese translation and writing. The final examination is the post-test, the purpose of the pre-test and post-test is to exam students’ ability of grammar application. The result is shown in the following:

TABLE I THE COMPARISON BETWEEN THE RESULT OF PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST

class	1801	1802	1803	1804	1805
Pre-test	69.5	72.6	71.4	73	70.7
Post-test (final exam)	81.4	80.8	82.1	72.5	74.3

(the scores of pre-test and post-exam are the average scores of the whole class)

From the scores of pre-tests, these five classes are parallel classes which have the same English level. The scores of post-test show that classes of 1801, 1802, 1803 get better scores than the classes of 1804 and 1805 because constructivism is used in grammar teaching through learning by doing. The classes of 1804 and 1805 learn English grammar by traditional teaching to infuse grammar knowledge, so their ability of grammatical application hasn’t made noticeably progress.

B. Questionnaire

The author distributed the same questionnaire before and after the lecture, try to investigate the degree of satisfaction of the grammar teaching guided by constructivism. The results are as follows:

Before teaching:

The importance of grammar: 51% students consider grammar is important, 38% students consider it is necessary to have a grammar course than only have an English integrated course. 51% students believe that grammar is important to improve listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The opinion of grammar teaching guided by constructivism: 21% students consider the way that teachers provide plenty of

examples and students generalize grammar rules on their own is better and more effective. 59% students believe it is more effective to communicate with English in context teaching than practice grammar drills.

After teaching:

The importance of grammar: 89% students consider grammar is important, 66% students consider it is necessary to have a grammar course than only have an English integrated course. 82% students believe that grammar is important to improve listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The opinion of grammar teaching guided by constructivism: 84% students consider the way that teachers provide plenty of examples and students generalize grammar rules on their own is better and more effective. 88% students believe it is more effective to communicate with English in context teaching than practice grammar drills. 92% students like teachers and students to correct their errors in collaborative learning and they have made great progress. 83% students consider constructivism teaching theory of learning by doing is helpful for their English grammar.

(Before teaching, 186 questionnaires are distributed, 157 valid questionnaires are collected. After teaching, 186

questionnaires are distributed, 163 valid questionnaires are collected.)

The above data shows that students have a further understanding about the importance of grammar in English learning. They come to realize that mastering grammar rules is not the purpose, grammar should be regarded as an effective tool to improve the integrated levels of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Students hold positive attitude and accept the constructivism teaching.

For most students in private colleges, they lack strong motivation of learning. Students have a high dependence on teachers, students are accustomed to being indoctrinated by their teachers. Thereby the application of constructivism learning theory in grammar learning, even the study of the whole professional courses can stimulate students' motivation and interests in learning effectively. It is a good way to cultivate students' competence and adapt study and work in the future.

C. Interviews

In the process of teaching the course of English Grammar, the author interviews with some students and records some typical interviews as following:

S1: Through learning English grammar, I can use attributive clause, nominal clause and adverbial clause to write an article, which I can't do it before. Thereby it is useful and helpful for me to improve my writing level. And widening my horizon of English grammar learning, I will learn English more effectively than before because learning English grammar is a good way to improve the abilities of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

S2: Through learning by doing in the course of English grammar, I learn to think. In the past, I have the habit to listen to teachers in class and write down on my notebook. Now I come to realize that learning to think is the most important. I like the way of learning by doing, I like to participate some activities which are assigned by teachers. Through participating and cooperating with classmates in the activities, I have more interest in English than before, and I am more confident than before.

S3: I like cooperative learning, my teacher encourages us to form cooperative learning group, in the group, we cooperate to finish one task, we can communicate and teach each other. In a collaborate group, I have a lot of opportunities to speak English, to discuss and share different opinions.

VI. CONCLUSION

On the one hand, this experiment has been implemented for a year, students and teachers have changed positively, whatever their learning and teaching attitude or communication competence. On the other hand, there are still some limitations, for example, some constructivism learning theory is difficult to be used in English grammar teaching, and the result is difficult to measure, subjectivity and arbitrariness are difficult to be avoided. And whether the activities designed by teachers are scientific is uncertain. In addition, too many and too trivial activities and assignments cause psychological pressure on

students. All of these problems are going to be improved in the following grammar teaching innovation.

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