

On FL Learners' Individual Differences in Grammar Learning and Their Grammatical Competence Training

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Abstract—In FL grammar teaching field, there are many researches concerning about students' English grammatical learning and grammatical competence improvement, but the previous researches are mainly about foreign language learners' grammar level as a whole, very few researches are about the individual differences in learners' grammatical knowledge acquisition and competence improvement. This paper analyzes the individual differences that influence FL learners' grammar acquisition and grammatical competence improvement through interview, questionnaire and observation, four college students majoring in English participated in the study. Then, basing on the Study of FL learners individual differences in grammar learning and the integration between explicit grammatical knowledge and implicit grammatical competence in grammar acquisition, this paper constructs an FL learners' grammatical competence training model according to different students' individuality, aiming at narrowing down the gap between top students and ordinary students' grammatical competence in non-native context and the gap between FL learners' English grammatical knowledge and their grammatical competence. The results, to a certain degree, will be beneficial to the improvement of FL grammar teaching quality.

Index Terms—individual differences, motivation, strategies, internalization, grammatical competence training model

I. INTRODUCTION

In acquiring a foreign language, grammar has long been an early obstacle to overcome. As we know, English grammar acquisition in non-native context is not only an indispensable part but also a complex process which remains to be further explored. Nevertheless, the role of grammar has been undervalued in the field of SLA in the early part of the 20th century. During the past decades, though there has been a growing interest in foreign language learners' grammar acquisition among second language teachers and researchers, and the research stockpile has expanded in scope and complexity at a remarkable rate in and abroad. And a lot of researchers (like: Skehan, 1989; Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Ellis, 1994) have proved the individual differences among learners' foreign language learning, but the studies by far mainly concern foreign language learners' grammar level as a whole, while neglecting the individual differences of foreign language learners' grammar learning. Thus, we still do not know whether, and to what extent, their findings work in FL learners' grammar learning or not. In this paper, we will study grammar learning from the perspective of FL learners' different individuality.

English grammar acquisition in non-native context is a complex mental process which needs to be further studied. Though the existing researches have broadened the scope of English grammar study, the research on how to help FL learners internalize their explicit grammatical knowledge into their grammatical competence in non-native context is still in its infancy. During our foreign language grammar teaching, we are usually puzzled by the problems like, why most students have grasped the systematic knowledge of grammar while cannot output them freely in their writing or speaking? Why students' grammar levels are quite different even under the same learning environment? What kinds of individual differences mainly influence foreign language learners' grammar learning and grammatical output competence? And how to help FL learners narrow the gap between their grammatical knowledge and grammatical competence? In order to settle these problems and help FL learners improve their grammatical competence in non-native context, we divide the 160 English majors of Zhengzhou University into 4 different groups (excellent, 40; good, 40; ordinary, 40; poor, 40) according to their final grammar exam scores, and randomly select one college student from each of the 4 group (their grammar final scores are: student A, 88; student B, 82; student C, 76; student D, 58).

The main methods of this study are: semi-open interview, questionnaire and observation.

II. METHODS OF RESEARCH

Student A, B, C and D respectively come from countryside, city, city and countryside. Their ages are: 19, 19, 18 and 20. Student A and C are female, B and D are male. They came to the same University in the year 2010 and studied grammar with the help of the same teacher for a whole year. From their present test score, we can easily find that student A and B's grammatical knowledge are better than student C and D's. Data collection was mainly conducted

through interview, questionnaire and observation. The question forms are mainly semi-conducted and are designed before the interview. The allocated time to each student is 30 minutes. The whole process was recorded and taken down item by item by the interviewers. In addition, the four students' English level, their notes, and outside exercises are also included in this research. In order to get a better result, the interviewees' expressions and their methods of answering questions are also observed and taken down by us.

To the data analysis, we mainly adopt the qualitative methods.

III. THE RESULTS ANALYSIS

According to the analysis of the data from the interview, questionnaire and observation, a lot of individual differences have been found in foreign language learners' process of grammar acquisition. Such as: motivation, language aptitude, personality, previous educational background, learning strategies and even gender. This finding coincides with the findings of individual differences in language learning research, which, to a certain degree, proves that most of the findings that have been found about individual differences in language learning can still work in the learning of pronunciation. Among all the differences, motivation, learning strategies and the learners' previous educational background are the most influential factors that influence their grammar learning effect. This article will discuss them respectively in detail.

A. *Motivation*

Harmer (1983) argues that motivation is an internal drive which encourages language learners to pursue a course of action. That is, when a learner perceives an attractive goal that he wishes to achieve, he may do whatever is necessary to realize it. Gardner (1972) defines motivation as referring to a combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes towards learning the language. He also makes the famous distinction between integrative and instrumental orientations in motivation. The former mainly happens when a learner is studying a language because of his wish to know the culture of that language; while the latter describes a series of factors about motivation resulting from external goals such as passing exams, getting rewards, or gaining promotion. Of course, the motivation that Gardner refers mainly correlates with the language achievement. Through the interview and observation, we think that this distinction also works in the process of learners' grammar learning. That is to say, motivation is also an important factor in FL learners' grammar learning and their grammar competence improvement.

With the focus of foreign language grammar teaching shifting from teacher-centered to student-centered, one of the prime problems cannot be neglected is learners' individual motivation. Only by studying learners' motivation to grammar learning, can we give a more reasonable explanation of the gap among different learners under the same learning environment.

Among the four learners, student A's grammar score is the highest, and her grammatical competence is also relatively higher than the other three during the interview. During the process of interview, we find that her motivation mainly belongs to instrumental one. She says that she wants to be an excellent English teacher after graduation. "Only have a good command of grammar, can I become a qualified English teacher", says she. With this purpose, she persuades herself to love English, to imitate every good structure from the textbook or newspaper, to pay attention to the different forms and sentence patterns that she's met. As a future teacher, she requires herself to remember the grammatical items such as passive/ active voice, nonfinite verbs (infinitive, including bare/ naked infinitive, split infinitive; gerund and participles), superlative degree, comparative degree and different names for English tenses. In fact, integrative motivation also more or less exists in her learning, because in order to realize her dream of becoming an excellent teacher, she tries to cultivate her interest in the learning of English grammar.

Student B says, "I like English, and I want to be an interpreter after graduation." "It is my English that helps me to be confident and proud of myself, I really love English. And if possible, I want to go abroad to study further." Obviously, his motivation mainly belongs to integrative one. Interest is the most important factor that impels him to study English, and great interest helps him to study hard and get good achievements. Though his grammar score is not the highest, his all-round ability is the best among the four. He says, "Besides the contents that teachers ask me to grasp, I also like business English, tourist English, and something like western cultures and all that I'm interested in." From the interview, we can find that integrative motivation usually correlates with higher achievement in foreign language learning, while to the learning of grammar, it may not always work.

Student C is the youngest one among the four. From the observation to her notes and exercises, it is easy to find that she is not a diligent student. During the interview, she says, "I can not say I like English grammar. But, I think it is interesting, and I especially like to know the differences between Chinese grammar and English grammar. Frankly, I'm not sure whether grammar is useful in my future job or not." To the way of studying English grammar, she mentions that she has no good method of grammar learning, but she wants to know some grammar learning strategy. "I seldom review or prepare for my grammar lesson, but I prefer reading English novels and poems. Besides, I think grammar cannot be learned." From what she says, we can find that: only interest cannot help a learner to be successful, and the role of motivation in foreign language learning should not be neglected. Without clear goal and strong motivation, to a certain extent, hinders student C's grammar improvement.

To student D, before I asked him questions, he told me frankly, “my parents ask me to choose English, while my interest is history.” He also said, “I want to be an archaeologist in the future. English can only be a tool, and I think it’s no need for me to study English grammar.” When I ask him, “How do you usually study English grammar, and what’s the most difficult problem that you come across in your grammar learning?” He answers, “Sorry, I seldom study grammar. The only purpose I study English grammar is to pass the exam, but I failed. I have a lot of problems in grammar learning, such as why to study and how to study.” Obviously, He is not so cooperative with the interview. Lacking of motivation in grammar learning, even the English learning is the main factor that hinders his improvement of grammar level. Student D represents a kind of learners in English learning---they study English with their parents’ hope, not their own motivations.

From the analysis of the four typical students, we can find that: integrative motivation includes learners’ interest, but only interest itself is not enough to draw the conclusion whether a learner has integrative motivation or not. Student C is a good example. Student A’s high score depends on her strong motivation---to be an excellent English teacher. Though instrumental motivation has been found to be a weak predictor of foreign language achievement, it appears to be much more effective in foreign language learners’ grammar learning.

B. Learning Strategies

Rubin (1975) uses learning strategies to mean the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge. Basing on this definition, the learning strategies in grammar can be defined as: the effective techniques that can help the learner to improve his grammatical competence by freely using his grammatical knowledge in language output.

Oxford (1990) points out the two reasons for which learning strategy is important. One is that strategy is a tool for self-study, especially for improving communicative ability; the other is that learners who use appropriate learning strategies are more confident and efficient in learning process. Grammar is one essential part of language learning, therefore, there is no denying that appropriate learning strategy is a guarantee for effective grammar acquisition.

According to O’Malley and Chamot (1990), “learning strategy can be divided into: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social/affective strategies” (P. 118). And each strategy includes different subcategories. Respectively, cognitive strategies refer to the steps or operations used in problem-solving that require direct analysis, transformation or synthesis of learning materials. Metacognitive strategies make use of knowledge about cognitive processes and constitute an attempt to regulate language learning by means of planning, monitoring and evaluating. While social/affective strategies concern the way in which learners select to interact with other learners and native speakers (O’Malley and Chamot, 1990, P. 118-121). According to the interview and the observation, all the four learners have used cognitive strategies. For examples: student A usually makes some cards on which the grammatical rules or items are written; student B and D like to use imitation in grammar learning. They usually consciously apply what they have learned into their daily practice, such as using newly-learned structures or phrases in their speaking or writing. Except cognitive strategies, in the application of grammatical knowledge, student A and B also prefer social/affective strategies. Especially student A, she has the habit of practicing English in pairs or groups, they talk about what they have learned in English, and they often correct each other’s mistakes. Student B likes to go to the English Corner and make foreign friends. Student C and D seldom use social strategies in grammar learning. Student A adopts more strategies in realizing her dream of becoming a qualified English teacher. To the total amount of strategies, student A: 12; B: 11; C: 8; D: 6 kinds. By observation, we found that some cognitive strategies such as repetition, memory, note-taking, looking up dictionaries and reference books may be most preferred by students, and affective strategies may just serve to regulate emotions, motivation and attitudes. (e.g. strategies for reducing anxieties)

When they were asked “What’s the most important factor that influences your English grammatical competence improvement?” Student A said, “More practice”; B said, “Maybe language aptitude can determine one’s language competence”; student C agreed with student B; while D said, “interest”. Statistical analysis of strategy use indicates that there are significant differences between effective practicing and ineffective practicing. The students who have good grammatical competence usually use more strategies than the poor learners. Research on practicing style also indicates that cognitive strategies are the most influential strategies in grammar acquisition.

C. Previous Experience

The data collection of this part mainly comes from the learners’ answers to the prepared questions and the Questionnaire about personal information. Basing on their answers, the following three aspects are the most influential factors that influence their grammar learning and grammatical competence.

1. Growing Environment

Student B and Student C come from cities, while student A and D come from the countryside. This finding seems contrary to the traditional concept---the students who come from cities usually have good command of English while students from the countryside are relatively poor in English learning. Students A’s high score in grammar final test and her way of answering questions indicate that her grammatical competence is relatively higher than the other three. Though student C comes from city and has good learning environment, her grammar is still poor. The results of this interview indicates that a learner’s grammatical competence has little connection with his birth place and living environment, but has close relationship with his efforts, motivations and other non---intelligent factors.

Both of student A's parents are primary teachers. They know little of English, but they are very strict with their daughter. When student A was only in primary school, they began to ask her to listen to English nursery songs and some simple English fairy tales, all this greatly influenced student A's interest in English learning. Greatly influenced by her parents, student A decides to be an English teacher after graduation.

Student B's father is a Russian interpreter, while his mother is a nurse. He admires his father since childhood and decides to be an interpreter when he grows up. Student C comes from a rich family. Her mother is a successful entrepreneur and her father is an artist. She never thinks more about her future, because her mother 'thinks' instead of her. Student D's parents are peasants. They don't know of English, but they believe that English will be more and more important in the future. That's why they go against their son's will and 'order' him to choose English major.

The research indicates that family environment plays an important role in the learners' grammar learning. Student A's parents build up effective learning environment for her, and her grammar is the best of the four. Therefore, only studying those changeable factors such as what motivations they hold, what learning strategies they adopt and how they attribute their successes and failures is far from enough in helping learners improve their language competence. Successful teaching is not only a matter of teaching strategies, it also involves in the study of students' non-intelligence factors. This finding is consistent with Brown (2001) and Ellis's (2003) research that non-intelligence factors affects learning process and can even affect learners' achievements.

2. Educational Background

Student B and Student C study in the key schools in cities since childhood; and student A and D study in the countryside before Junior Middle School. Then, student A becomes a member of Foreign Language School, while student D enters a key school of his county. It seems that there is no clear relationship between their previous studying schools and their present grammar level, which is, to a certain degree, contrary to the general conception that the Educational background will influence one's future learning.

3. Conclusion of the Study on FL Learners Grammar Individual Differences

The above analysis indicates that individual differences not only exist in learners' foreign language grammar learning, but also have great influences in the improvement of their grammatical competence. From the interview, we also find that: in order to improve students' grammatical competence, great attention should be paid to foreign language learners' individual differences. Only the teacher knows much about the learners' individual differences in grammar learning, can he use flexible methods to improve the learners' learning enthusiasm according to their personalities, and at the same time, help the learners to improve their grammatical competence efficiently.

Basing on Chinese College English Teaching Syllabus (2000), the goal of English grammar teaching is to help students improve their competence of using English grammar in different context, not just to grasp grammatical knowledge, which clearly shows that how to help FL learners internalize their grammatical knowledge and improve their grammatical competence is the real aim of English grammar teaching in non-native context. Basing on FL learners' individual differences in grammar learning and the integration between explicit and implicit grammatical Learning, we'll construct an FL Learners' Grammatical Competence Training Model, aiming at helping FL learners' improve their grammatical competence in non-native context.

IV. THE CONSTRUCTION OF FL LEARNERS' GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE TRAINING MODEL

Only knowing FL learners' individual differences in grammar learning is far from enough in helping them improve their grammatical competence under non-native environment. Under the pressure of entrance examination, most Chinese FL learners have grasped the relatively systematic grammar knowledge, but they don't know how to use them in their language output, and some even have a vague idea of the differences between grammatical knowledge and grammatical competence, needless to say, to improve their grammatical competence. Therefore, helping them gain a clear idea of the differences between explicit grammatical knowledge and implicit grammatical competence is the precondition of improving their grammatical competence and narrowing down the gap between the high-achieving learners and the poor ones.

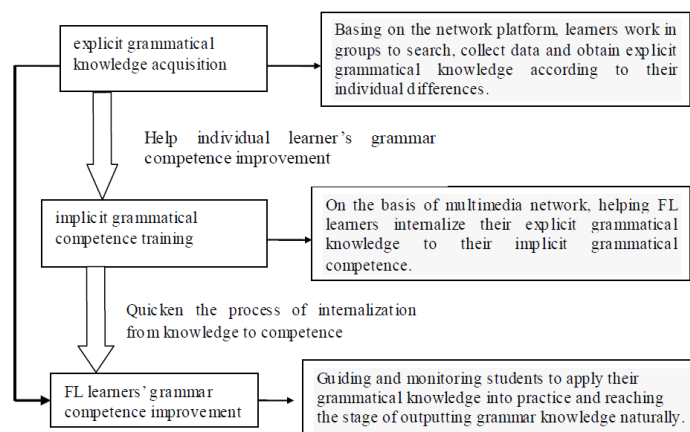
A. Relationship between Explicit Grammatical Knowledge and Implicit Grammatical Competence

"The relationship between explicit grammatical knowledge and implicit grammatical competence is similar to the interrelationship between declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge. The declarative knowledge is equivalent to the knowledge concept we traditionally have, while the procedural knowledge mainly refers to the knowledge used to answer question like how to do" (Du Xiaohong, 2013, P.30). English grammar rules are similar to declarative knowledge, while how to apply grammatical rules during language output belongs to the category of procedural knowledge. According to Pi Liansheng (2004), "the first stage of procedural knowledge is declarative knowledge acquisition, that is, declarative knowledge is the basis of procedural knowledge; the second stage of procedural knowledge is achieved through applying rules from procedural knowledge to declarative knowledge; and the highest stage of knowledge development is to achieve the degree of automation in language output" (P.92-93). For example, after acquiring related rules of "present perfect" tense, students only obtain the declarative knowledge of the tense "present perfect", namely, the grammatical rules and concepts of this tense, if they don't internalize the related knowledge, that is, don't apply it in daily communication or writing, they still cannot have the competence of outputting

this tense in their language output.

B. Construction of FL Learners' Grammatical Competence Training Model

With the advent and popularity of Internet, a growing number of new teaching equipments can be applied to help foreign learners improve their grammatical competence according to the individual differences of their grammar learning. "The introduction and application of multimedia technology to FL teaching can not only provide students with "real" or native-like contexts, but also can help them understand the abstract grammatical knowledge by using pictures and other animation or cartoons" (Du Xiaohong, 2011, P. 28). On the basis of multimedia and network environment and the relationship between declarative and procedural knowledge, FL learners' grammatical competence training model under non-native environment can be illustrated as:



According to the above diagram, if grammar learning only stays at the stage of explicit grammatical knowledge acquisition, foreign language learners can only get declarative knowledge. With the help of multimedia network environment, organizing and prompting learners to create native-like grammar acquisition context and providing learners with more opportunities to use grammatical rules will, in a way, quicken the internalization from their explicit grammatical knowledge to their implicit grammatical competence. Implicit grammatical knowledge is not easily visible and expressible, and is often acquired unconsciously or naturally. So, creating "real" or native-like learning contexts is very essential in FL grammar teaching.

Celce-Murcia (1992) state that any formal grammar instruction is more effective if it is discourse-based and context-based than if it is sentence-based and context-free. In order to improve FL learners' ability of internalizing their grammatical knowledge, we should provide students with various native-like contexts to stimulate their grammar autonomous learning, and thus help them combine their grammar learning strategies with the contexts provided, including both semi-contextualized and fully contextualized environments, such as film clips, TV programs, broadcasting, newspapers, difficult sentences in the novels. For example, in order to help students internalize and output past tense automatically, I asked them to freely output some vivid examples such as "I liked pop music", "I was a top student when I was in senior school." (In certain context, they mean "I don't like pop music now" and "I am not a top student now").

In order to evaluate whether students have grasped the comparison between "past tense" and "present tense", I ask them to analyze the conversation:

Husband: Do you love me?

Wife: Yes, I loved you.

Obviously, the wife used the past tense to express her feeling that in the past she loved her husband but now she doesn't love him.

Then, encourage them to distinguish the differences between "You studied very hard last year" and "You study very hard this year". This kind of semi-contextualized or fully contextualized environments can not only arouse students' learning enthusiasm, but also can help them reduce the time of their grammar automatic input and output.

V. CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

According to the analysis of individual differences that influence FL learners' grammatical competence improvement through interview, questionnaire and observation, we find that individual differences not only exist in learners' foreign language grammar learning, but also have great influences in FL learners' grammatical competence improvement, which, in a way, leads to the obvious gap between students' grammatical knowledge and their competence. Then, on the basis of FL learners' individual differences in grammar learning and the integration between explicit grammatical knowledge and implicit grammatical competence in FL learners' grammar acquisition, we construct an FL learners' grammatical competence training model, aiming at improving students' grammatical competence in non-native context.

Obviously, this model will, in a way, benefit students' grammatical competence improvement. However, we still have no relatively appropriate textbooks for FL grammar teaching. Compiling an ideal English grammar textbook to help foreign language learners improve their grammatical competence in non-native context is another problem which needs our further studies.

APPENDIX

Interview questions:

Question 1: What's your purpose or motivation of grammar learning?

Question 2: What kinds of learning strategy do you usually use to improve your English grammar? Question 3: How do you usually study English grammar? What's the most difficult problem that you come across in your grammar learning?

Question 4: What's the most important factor that influences your English grammatical competence improvement?

Questionnaire about personal information:

1. Your name _____
2. Your gender _____
3. Your grammar final score this year _____
4. Your birth place _____
5. The place you received you junior education _____
6. The place you received you senior education _____
7. Your mother's job _____; 8. Your father's job _____
8. Your purpose of learning grammar is _____
9. When did you start to learn English?
 - A. from Junior Middle School
 - B. from Senior Middle School
 - C. from Primary School
 - D. before Primary School
10. How much do you agree with the statement "Grammar learning is very important"?
 - A. Strongly disagree
 - B. Disagree
 - C. Comparatively agree
 - D. Agree
 - E. Strongly agree

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