HOW TO ENHANCE CHINESE MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS’ INTEREST IN GRAMMAR LEARNING

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HOW TO ENHANCE CHINESE MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS’ INTEREST IN
GRAMMAR LEARNING

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Abstract

HOW TO ENHANCE CHINESE MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS’ INTEREST IN GRAMMAR LEARNING

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Under the Supervision of Prof. Dennis Ciesielski, PhD

In recent years, English education is becoming more and more important in Chinese daily life. English as an extremely important subject covered in all kinds of schools. Besides, English takes a significant role in many large-scale exams. Meanwhile, English is also wildly used in China. Schools provide English courses for students. If they want to further their studies in a good university, students should get high marks in English courses. What’s more, in the entire English study for middle school students, grammar troubles students most. As Suppiah, Subramanian, and Michaels (2011) say, that English grammar learning is always considered as a difficult task to students. As for teachers, mastering the methods of teaching strategy is very important. “Hence, it is the responsibility of the teachers to prepare appropriate grammar resources to gauge the varying needs of students with different learning styles” (Suppiah, Subramanian, & Michaels, 2011, p.167). This paper focuses on the methods of enhancing Chinese middle school students’ interest in learning English. First, it briefly introduces the definition of grammar and the importance of learning English grammar. Then, the current situation for Chinese learners and the difficulties they face. Results indicate that although grammar is important to middle school students, they have difficulty learning it. At last, this paper shows methods of learning grammar, by utilizing the methods of comparative analysis and exemplification. According to these methods, students can improve their grammar levels a lot.
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Chapter I Introduction

With the development of economic and social life in the 21st century, English is the most widely used language in the world. It is becoming more and more important. Nowadays, English as a second language is even more important than the first language in some countries (See & Ching, 2013, p. 2). The importance of English education is increasing in Chinese daily life. English is an extremely important subject taught in all kinds of schools. Besides, English takes a significant role in many large scale exams. If students want to learn English better, they should grasp not only listening, speaking, reading and writing, but also learn standard English. What is standard? It means that language follows grammatical norms, the best time for Chinese students to learn English grammar is in middle school. Students can solve more challenging studies due to how they study in this age period. If they lay a very solid foundation, they can easily progress in the future.

Because of the traditional teaching methods, students are scared and misunderstand of grammar. As Suppiah, Subramanian, & Michaels say that “learning English grammar has always been a challenging task for students” (2011, p. 167). As the time goes by, students lose interest and confidence to learn English, especially in grammar. That is a big deal for teachers to pay much attention on it. Teachers should first focus on how to enhance students’ interest. In China we usually say “Interest is the best teacher”. Thus, students will have motivation to learn by themselves. Results indicate that by using methods to enhance students’ interest, their grammatical levels greatly improved.

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed is: How can teachers make grammar interesting to middle school students so that they care enough to learn this very important knowledge?
Definition of Terms

EFL: English as a foreign language
ELT: English language teaching
Grammar: “The rules for combining words into phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs. The standardizing impact of print has meant that spoken or colloquial language is often perceived as less grammatical than written language, but all forms of a language, standard or otherwise, have their own grammatical systems. People often acquire several overlapping grammatical systems within one language; for example, a formal system for writing and standard communication and a less formal system for everyday and peer-group communication” (“Grammar”, 2014).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to provide a review of the literature related to students’ interest and the grammar learning profession to inform and improve practice in the area of English study. The paper mainly focuses on the characteristics of Chinese students and the Chinese teachers teaching methods. Thus, according to the paper, students and teachers can both benefit from the grammar learning and teaching.

Significance of the Study

In recent years in China, English education is becoming more and more important in Chinese daily life. English as an extremely important subject covers all kinds of schools. Besides, English takes a significant role in many large scale exams. Meanwhile, English is also wildly used in China. Schools provide English courses for students. If they want to further their study in a good university, they might get a high score in English test. What’s more, in the entire English study for middle school students, grammar troubles students most. As for teachers, master the methods of teaching strategy is very important. If students can learn English grammar
with motivation themselves, they can easily accept and understand the grammar.

**Delimitation of the Study**

The research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources. Key search topics included “grammar”, “grammar learning” and “interest in learning”.

**Methodology**

Research will be in the form of a review of literature related to the importance of learning grammar and the ways to form the relationship between students’ interest and the act of grammar learning.
Chapter II Review of Literature

This chapter introduces the concept of grammar. Then, it explains the role of grammar in China. Nowadays in China, students are increasingly aware of the importance of learning English and the trend is that more and more students and teachers have realized the significance of English grammar. Based on these two points, English teachers should first know grammar difficulties that Chinese middle school students may face in order to successfully solve two main difficulties. One is an extrinsic problem, and the other is an intrinsic problem. In accordance with the intrinsic problem, a review of methods to enhance Chinese middle school students’ interest is the main part of this literature review.

What is grammar?

When facing difficulties, students who want to overcome and conquer them, should know what they are really facing and what difficulties are. Similarly, if students have interest in learning grammar and they choose to study. At first, they must know what grammar is. Different people have different ideas about grammar.

Chin (2000) thinks grammar is a system of language which contains structure, sound and meaning. Different languages have different grammar. People are able to communicate by using the same language with each other due to the grammar rules they have already learned. So grammar acted as media and bridges of communication (p.1). Damodare (2012) has the same idea as Chin (2000); he thinks grammar makes a sentence have its own meaning, because grammar arranges the form and structure of a sentence. Therefore, we can study grammar terms by analyzing the sentences. We can learn from Damodare that grammar makes sentences more appropriate and meaningful (p.1).

Based on Chin (2000) and Damodare’s (2012) opinion, we know grammar can make
sentences meaningful. But Tabbert (1994) defines grammar from another aspect. He defines grammar in terms of linguistics. According to his opinion, grammar is the foundation of a language. It is hard to give a specific definition of grammar, because it has already been formed in native speakers’ brains. When native speakers started to learn language, they followed grammar rules intuitively (p.1). It is the same in all languages, people never concerned about why they follow grammar rules intuitively in their native languages. When people talk about grammar rules, they usually refer to a foreign language.

Although grammar is the foundation of a language and also can make sentences meaningful. Some people may think grammar is a restriction of language. But Widdowson (1990) has a different idea about grammar. He thinks grammar should not be considered as a restriction of language, it makes context and lexical more clear for people to understand (p.86). If people know grammar, it is easy to understand some complicated sentences by analyzing sentence constituents. One good way for analyzing sentence constituents is doing sentence diagram. It is a very clear way and can help people see clearly about complicated sentences.

What we have mentioned above is based on the definition of grammar. Dirven (1990) has an idea to create grammar categories. He thinks grammar should be divided into two main parts. One part is pedagogical grammar, which contains learning and teaching grammar. Teachers teach grammar and students learn grammar are both belong to pedagogical grammar. It is more like prescriptive grammar. Another part is descriptive grammar, which contains references and linguistic grammar. Descriptive grammar refers to use vivid explanation to teach grammar. (p. 1).

It has been proven that grammar is a system of language which provides rules. Grammar can make sentences more logical and has become a conventional usage. Therefore, if Chinese middle school students want to solve grammar problems, the basic step for them and teachers is
to know what the grammar is. Even if they know what they are facing, they can find good ways to deal with difficulties.

The role of English grammar in the EFL classroom

Students usually have to learn grammar when they take language curriculums because grammar plays an important part in learning a foreign language. It is a basic step for students to learn grammar when they start to take language curriculums because it has elements like syntax and word structures, which can’t be ignored in English acquisition (Jurhill, 2011, p.7).

Jaeger (2011) agrees with Jurhill (2011) because he believes that a student cannot learn foreign languages without first learning grammar (p.12). Grammar can make a sentence have its own meaning because it arranges the form and structure of a sentence. People who only speak a foreign language don’t necessarily know the language’s grammar rules. This can cause confusion when a speaker with English grammar knowledge tries to communicate with a speaker who does not have it. This is why it is essential for EFL students to learn grammar rules.

Learning a foreign language grammar is not only essential but also helpful. According to Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2011), students especially those who learn English as a foreign language must learn language rules while using intellectual knowledge to fully understand grammar (p.70). This knowledge helps students to overcome grammar difficulties such as misusing tenses and different points of view. We can conclude that when learning English grammar, EFL students get a better understanding overall.

Four element skills to help EFL students learn English include listening, writing, reading and speaking. According to Azar (2007), learning English grammar can help EFL learners to improve these four skills. Azar (2007) states that grammar can help students explore the basis of a language; it can make what they say, hear, read and write intelligible (p.3). Based on grammar
knowledge as well as the four main language skills, EFL learners can study language effectively.

From the above, we can easily conclude that students ought to learn English grammar. Not only is grammar the base of sentences, but it also helps students to improve their overall English skills. The most vital part of studying grammar is to help students understand the sentence meaning. What’s more, students can comprehend the meaning of the language.

**Grammar Difficulties of Chinese Middle School Students’ Facing**

English as the foreign language choice for Chinese students is very different from their native language. Students have all kinds of difficulties when grammar learning. Realizing what difficulties students have helps not only teachers but also other students because they are more capable of solving the problems.

One reason for problems is that middle school students are not old enough to accept very complex and complicated knowledge. In addition, English studies in primary schools have not taught students know the system of grammar; primary school students just learn some words, phrases and simple sentences. Since study grammar in middle school, students feel unfamiliar and difficult. According to Lahigan (2013) “verbs (trans-intrans), linking verb, subject-verb agreement, (relative) pronouns, preposition, adjectives, tenses, word order, articles, etc which may cause problems owing to interference” are especially difficult to middle school students (p. 2). English words are totally different from students’ native language; it can be concluded from Zhuang (2010) that Chinese students are confused with the “tense” in English, because in Chinese, it has no symbols to express tense (p.3). Lee (2005) also says that students think grammar is too difficult to learn and the best time to learn grammar is when they become adults (p.7). Jaeger (2011) shares the same idea with Lee and Zhuang; English grammar is boring to students. Every year when he teaches grammar, Jaeger feels frustrated because students are
confused (p.5).

Another reason as Suppiah, Subramanian and Michaels (2011) offer, English lessons for EFL students are limited; usually students have three or four lessons per week. Therefore students do not have enough time to practice their foreign language, especially in the aspect of grammar (p. 168). From the authors’ point of view, lack of time to practice and non-English language context can be additional obstacles for students. As Chinese middle schools’ for example, in general, public middle school in cities have English lessons more or less, but each schools’ lessons cannot create an entire English language learning environment for students.

Although Chinese schools pay high attention to English education, there are a lot of problems for students. Upon Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam’s (2011) view, both teachers and students have problems based on EFL grammar order, and students face more challenges than teachers (p.82). With regard to this opinion, Robert and Boggase (1992) consider that both teachers and students feel bored and frustrated when facing the grammar units (p.1). According to Yeh (2004), one problem is that teachers often use traditional grammar translation method. Grammar translation method (GTM) is very commonly used in EFL teaching classes. Teachers usually try to explain grammar usage and structure to students. Therefore, many teachers consider vocabulary explanations and passage translations are important. In addition to Yeh’s (2004) Grammar translation method, Lin (2008) thinks that teacher-centered instruction mislead EFL student. Students just need to listen to the teachers’ view and do not need much thinking (p.6). For students, they may think learning English is a way to remember vocabulary and grammar rules; they are passive learners. And repetitive exercise in class make students lack of interests and feel asleep.

What’s more, ample evidence also shows children who are in EFL classes find English
grammar difficult and too boring to learn. Hence, they have less motivation to learn English language (Suppiah, Subramanian, and Michaels, 2011, p.168). Similarly, when Jurhill (2011) teaches grammar lesson to his EFL students, he finds students are unwilling to participate; they lack of interest (p.5). According to their point of view, we can easily draw a conclusion that student’s lack of intrinsic motivation to learn grammar.

To sum up, Chinese students are now facing two main aspects of grammar dilemmas: subjective reasons and objective reasons. For objective reasons, it contains: teachers teaching methods of grammar and the influence of the first language. And for the subjective reasons, it is obvious that lacking of interest in grammar learning is one of the main obstacles for Chinese middle school students. Therefore, not only teachers should change their teaching methods, but teachers also need to know how to use ways to enhance students’ interest. Teachers should pay high attention to using effective ways which can motivate students’ interest.

Ways to enhance students interest in grammar learning

According to Arikan (2009), contextualized grammar teaching (CGT) can be used as a way of teaching language activities and tasks. In order to make teaching grammar meaningful (p.88), Morelli (2003) has the same idea as Arikan (2009). He says teaching grammar can be both traditional and contextual. Students can feel confident and comfortable when teachers choose to use contextualized ways to teach grammar (p.72). But how can grammar be contextualized? According to Arikan (2009), grammar points should be taught in some contextualized ways, such as activities and real-life tasks including “Poster making, writing a letter of complaint, filing a law suit, filling in a report card, demanding a written answer, ordering a piece of technology from a company on the Internet, or gossiping about recent events around the neighborhood” (p.90). Tommaso (2005) also emphasized that teachers can
contextualize lessons based on their classes, such as by “using audio or visual materials, bringing in regalia and props, storytelling, problem solving, giving examples, showing grammar usage, playing games, and teaching explicitly or implicitly” (as cited in Arikan 90).

Tommaso (2005) and Arikan (2009) have the same ideas about teaching materials; they think the materials should be more related to students’ real life. According to Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2011), teaching materials should be authentic which is similar to contextualized grammar teaching. They think use the ways like reading newspaper to students is better than illustrating the grammar form to students (p.13). Using cartoon movies like Yaman (2010) says, is also a good way to teach grammar to EFL students (p.1236).

In conclusion, contextualized grammar teaching is a method that focuses on using vivid materials or activities to teach rather than explain the boring grammar form. It is a way to form communication between teachers and students or students with materials and activities. The more important method effectively improving students’ interest in accordance with Arikan’s (2009) research, most students express that they are willing to join these activities; some even claim that these activities make them active in learning grammar. Besides, they wish to use the same activities in future English class (94). What’s more, according to Yamah’s (2010) observation, most EFL students have a lot of fun in watching cartoon movies. The result is students can not only just having fun but also can learn grammar points and get familiar with the usage of grammar as well.

Technique play-way method is similar to contextualized grammar learning. It means makes English grammar learning more interesting and charming. The method includes language games, stories, jokes, riddles and interesting facts (p.3). According to Damodare (2012) common and ordinary teaching methods have made the teaching class boring, vapid and humdrum. The
biggest problem for teachers is to find a method that will make the lessons interesting and absorbing.

As mentioned above, Technique play-way method and contextualized grammar learning are more focused on the authenticity of activities to enhance students’ interest. Group work is more focused on students’ oral grammar skills. Based on Long and Porter’s (1985) idea, group work has five advantages: (1) Group work can increase students’ chance to practice English grammar. (2) Group work can improve the efficiency of skills. (3) Group work can help students improve themselves. (4) Group work can help to create a positive study atmosphere. (5) Group work can enhance students’ interest (p. 208-212).

In view of Chinese middle school students’ age and ability to accept new knowledge, teachers can also use games to teach grammar lessons. Yolageldili and Arikan (2011) say using games in class has many advantages. One of these advantages is that students can learn grammar in games that will help them to relax. Another advantage is games can arouse student’s excitement towards grammar learning (p.220).

Teachers can use the following games:

1. **Noun tennis.** One student stands in front of the class and says a noun such as “ball”. He or she sits down when another student responds with a noun in that category like “basketball.” The game continues until the teacher ends it.

2. **Kids take action.** This game mainly practices verbs. The teacher asks students to write down some sport activities like running, swimming, dancing, kicking football etc. Then the teacher asks them to write the verbs in different forms.

3. **And then I saw...** Conjunctions play an important part in language learning and make things move when story telling. Teachers make sentences “I’m hungry.” Each student adds a
conjunction (such as but, and, therefore, etc.) and his or her own idea. For example: “I am hungry but I eating nothing.” (Brown, 2007, p.1).

4. **Word by word game.** According to Fitrawati (2013), teachers first divide students into groups of 4-6 students. The first student says a word and then the second student say another word to add to the first word. Words can be added before or after the first word. Then the next student continues to add another new word. During the game, there should be a student writing down what these groups of students said. At last, these groups of students finish their sentences. Teachers can either judge the grammar or let students judge or discuss (p.14).

5. **Sentence Survivor game.** According to Rustick (2007), sentence survivor game can help students build a correct concept of grammar structure. The goal of the game is to make the sentence clear and concise. Teachers should first write a long sentence with adjectives and adverbs on the blackboard then divide the whole class into several groups. Each group takes turns removing words in the sentence. Students can remove one or more per turn: “a single adjective, a determiner and a noun, an entire three-word phrase, any combination of words as long as they do not exceed the three-word limit and the remaining words form a complete sentence” (p.53).

To sum up, games can be used to help EFL youth to learn grammar. According to Mccallum (1980), games can draw students’ attention to grammar and sentence structure. What’s more, games can help both slow and fast language learners. Games can also help to build a friendly competition atmosphere. Students can not only learn grammar during games but also learn from each other (p. IX).

Although games have a lot of advantages for grammar teaching, teachers should pay attention to what kind of games they use. According to Arikan and Yolageldili (2011), not all of
games are good for students. When teachers consider using games in language teaching, the first thing to consider is the purpose of the game. Teachers should know what kind of goals students need to achieve, because for middle school students, some of the games may be too difficult or too easy. Therefore, teachers need to select games carefully, in order to make games efficient (p.222).

According to what we have mentioned above, contextualized grammar teaching, technique play-way method, group work and some small games can motivate students’ interest. Teachers can choose to use one or more methods based on students’ English proficiency and the original English knowledge.
Summary

As the saying goes, “Interest is the best teacher.” Only students with interest will learn with initiative. Especially for Chinese students, schools pay high attention in English education. Grammar is an essential part in language learning. Since the rules of language are so complicated, students must spend a lot of time learn them. Middle school students need to enhance their learning motivation before learning a new language; this has become a critical issue for English teachers.

Of course Chinese middle school students have been facing many other difficulties in learning grammar as well, for objective reasons, it contains: teachers teaching methods of grammar and the influence of the first language. And for the subjective reasons, it is obvious that lacking of interest in grammar learning is one of the main obstacles for Chinese middle school students. The most main problem is lack of interest.

Therefore, teachers can use contextualized grammar teaching, technique play-way method, group work and other games to enhance students’ intrinsic motivation. Both of these methods require teachers to make a teaching environment related to students’ lives. What’s more, these methods should be interest, clearly, and can arouse students’ interest in learning English grammar.

According to the methods mentioned above, these ways can effectively improve the students’ interest in learning English grammar. But teachers should also pay attention to select methods based on students’ specific situations. Because all of these methods all not suitable for every students.
Chapter Ⅲ Conclusions and Recommendations

At beginning, this paper shows what grammar is. Different people have different ideas about grammar. In summary, grammar is a system of language. It provides rules for language and also, grammar plays a very important role in English learning because it is the foundation of a language and also can make sentences meaningful. People who only speak a foreign language don’t necessarily know the language’s grammar rules. This can cause confusion when a speaker with English grammar knowledge tries to communicate with a speaker who does not have it. This is why students should learn English grammar.

Grammar learning is a hard part for Chinese students, but it is necessary to be learned and controlled by every English learner. Although Chinese students’ pay high attention to study English, they also have some difficulties of learning English grammar. One problem is that middle school students are too young to understand very complex and complicated knowledge. And English classes are not available every day. Even if students do understand what they are learning not practicing everyday makes the language and grammar hard to remember. Teachers consider vocabulary explanations as the most important thing; this adds to the challenge for students learning grammar. For the students, learning English means remembering vocabulary. Also, repetitive exercises in classes make students lose interest and fall asleep. All of these reasons are why teacher-centered instruction is not recommended. Students should become the center of learning English grammar so that they don’t become a passive learner. To sum up, Chinese students now are facing two main aspect of grammar dilemma: subjective reasons and objective reasons. For objective reasons, it contains: teachers teaching methods of grammar and the influence of the first language. And for the subjective reasons, it is obvious that lacking of interest in grammar learning is one of the main obstacles for Chinese middle school students.
Therefore, Teacher should find out the effective ways to increase the interesting of the students to learning the English grammar.

Chinese students, if never think about the grammar of Chinese since they have been speaking the language since they were born. This is the same for English-speaking countries, the people will not learn too much grammar, but students know how to speak English correctly because of their upbringing. The environment of learning English is necessary. In China, the lack of English-speaking environments limits learning for Chinese students. Students need to learn what it feels like to have a conversation in English and also practice to familiarity with English thinking. Reading and listening more English is helpful to know how to use the correct grammar. Even sometimes the grammar has some mistake, but the listener could understand what you said.

Teachers must guide students to not only recite vocabulary but also to think with English-speaking minds. The most important parts of learning grammar are increasing the interests of the students. Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that contextualized grammar teaching, technique play-way method, group work and some small games method can motive students’ interest. Teaching grammar in context is a good way to increase students’ interest; this method focuses on how to teach students in a communicative way. Teachers need to use authentic materials and create a teaching environment more related to students’ real life. Therefore, students can learn to communicate and relate grammar knowledge to their own lives. Technique play-way method is a way similar to contextualized grammar teaching. It means making English grammar learning more interesting and charming. The method includes language games, stories, jokes, riddles and interesting facts. As mentioned above, Technique play-way method and contextualized grammar learning are more focus on the authenticity of activities to enhance students’ interest. Another way is group work, this method is easy to implement. The most
advantage of group work is can effectively enhance students’ interest. In view of Chinese middle school students’ age and ability to accept new knowledge, teachers can also use games to teach grammar lesson. This paper recommends several games include: 1. Noun tennis game. 2. Word by word game. 3. And then I saw game. 4. Kids take action game. 5. Sentence Survivor game. Teachers can choose to use one or more games in grammar teaching based on students level and time schedule.

These methods can effectively improve Chinese middle school students’ interest in learning English grammar. It definitely has more methods to enhance Chinese middle school students’ interest. However, teachers should also pay attention to selecting methods based on students’ specific situations and need, because the methods are not suitable for every student.
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