The Study of College Students’ Understanding of Three Major English Clauses And its Influence on Their English Learning

Mei-Lan Lee
meilan.meilan@gmail.com

Abstract

In the era of globalization, English is undoubtedly not only a necessary tool for cross-cultural communication but also has become an indispensable surviving skill. For those whose native language is not English, how to learn English well and use it appropriately is a common problem encountered by most of them. In Taiwan, countless scholars and researchers have sought to find the best possible way for learners to master English. However, the English proficiency level of college students seems to go from bad to worse ranking almost the bottom among all the Asian countries. There are certainly serious problems in both students’ learning and teachers’ teaching. What exactly went wrong? Obviously, traditional grammar translation method is still prevailing in most of the schools in Taiwan. The instruction in most of the classrooms is still teacher-centered and test oriented. Students are forced to memorize the content of the lessons in order to get better grades on the tests without fully understanding the meaning of the context. As many researchers have already proved, motivation plays a vital role in English learning. If teachers can find ways to boost students’ interests in learning English, the performance will be much better as well. It’s a common belief that if one can gain confidence and sense of achievement in learning, the outcome is normally more satisfactory. There must be some fundamental difficulties faced by most Taiwanese students which in turn lower their learning motivation. Taiwanese students generally are lack of correct and concrete English grammar concepts in order to fully comprehend an English text no matter in written or oral form. The focus of the study will be on the three major clauses, namely adjective clause, adverbial clause and noun clause since they are the most commonly misused and confusing grammatical concepts for college students. A questionnaire is designed to examine the students’ understanding of the three major clauses as well as their learning experiences to find out about their problems and hopefully provide some practical suggestions in English learning and teaching regarding grammar instruction in the classroom for the teachers.

Keywords: proficiency, grammar, adjective clause, adverbial clause, noun clause
I. Background

As a college English teacher for almost twenty years, the most commonly asked question from the students is, “How can I learn grammar well?” It is never an easy question to answer as there are simply too many aspects in terms of English grammar. Although it has been a heated debate as whether grammar should be taught deliberately in the classroom, grammar is still the center of all kinds of tests from the primary schools to colleges or even graduate schools in Taiwan. Basically, all of the students in Taiwan have learned most of the important grammatical rules, including the three major clauses before they graduate from junior high schools. And they receive even more detailed and explicit instruction when they go to senior high school. However, when I ask the students the definitions and functions of the three major clauses in my English classes, only very few of them could give very rough ideas about them. Obviously, most of them are still in the dark or don’t even have a clue. It must have been a very depressing learning experience for them since so much time and efforts have been devoted to learning them. I keep wondering what exactly went wrong and what might be done to help them better understand the grammatical rules and boost their motivation? Therefore, a research is conducted to reveal the truth of the students’ learning situation and difficulties they face in learning the three major clauses. By collecting first-hand information, hopefully I’d be able to gain more specific ideas about how to make instruction in the classroom more effective and the findings of the research may also provide certain insights for other English lecturers as well.

II. Literature Review

According to Sobin (2011), “Linguistics is the scientific study of human language and the human language capacity. Our understanding of how human languages are structured and learned is only advanced by hypothesis formation and testing. Human language is a strongly subconscious mental faculty.” It is very difficult to test the learners’ real understanding of the language but Lightbown pointed out that there are predictable sequences in acquisition so that certain structure has to be acquired before others can be integrated. (1985: 176-178) That is probably why in junior high school in Taiwan, English curriculum is still designed according to grammatical rules, from easier ones to more complicated ones like the three major clauses. In order to express themselves well in English, the students have to acquire the usage of clauses. In the process, “the learners creates a systematic interlanguage that is often characterized by the same systematic errors as the child learning the same language as the first
language, as well as others that appear to be based on the learner’s own native language.” Interlanguage refers to the separateness of a second language learner's system, a system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and target language. (Selinker, 1972) Many Taiwanese students try to translate directly from Chinese instead of following English grammar when making English sentences. While a lot of researchers agree that it is in fact part of the learning process, many students suffered from bad grades and low sense of achievement. Lado also believes that “in the comparison between native and foreign language lies the key to ease or difficulty in foreign language learning.” (1957:vii) In the test-oriented learning environment like Taiwan, if the differences between Chinese and English regarding the three major English clauses, the students may find it easier to express themselves more freely. “We can predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning, and those that will not cause difficulty, by comparing systematically the language and the culture to be learned with the native language and culture of the student.” By examining the learners’ mistakes, the teachers may be able to detect the common errors made by most learners and strengthen them in the class because a learner’ errors “are significant in that they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language.” (Coder, 1967:167).

III. Research Limitation

It has always been clear to a lot of teachers that the college students who graduated from vocational high schools have a much lower English proficiency level than those graduated from senior high schools. Therefore, the teachers sometimes are depressed because of their low achievement and low motivation. The aim of the research is to find out about college students’ understanding of the three major English clauses especially in the University of Science and Technology, but the questionnaires are collected mainly from one of the national Universities of Science and Technology in central Taiwan. Therefore, the result of the research may not be able to reflect the real situation in all universities around the island. Though the majority of the students are from various areas in Taiwan, the samples are still not representative for all the students in Taiwan. Secondly, there are many different aspects in terms of English learning and grammar instruction is only one of the issues which is often discussed among teachers and students. The hypothesis is if the students can better understand the function and usage of the three major English clauses, they could express themselves better as well. The result of the research may not be able to show the direct relationship between the understanding of the three major clauses and language
proficiency level. Since the questionnaires are collected randomly, the students are from different colleges, including science, management, design and humanity. However, there are only three students from the humanity college. It is a nice coincident because one third of the students in humanity college are English majors whose English proficiency level is much higher than that of those from other colleges.

IV. The Questionnaire

The main purpose of the questionnaire is to test the students’ understanding of the three major English clauses and their reflection on their learning experiences. Only when they can differentiate the functions of the three clauses can they make grammatically correct sentences. There are twenty one English sentences in the first section of the questionnaire in which there are two clauses, one major clause and the other a subordinate clause. The subordinate clause in each sentence is underlined and the students are asked to check in the right column to see if it is a noun clause, an adjective clause or an adverbial clause. The purpose is to see if they can differentiate among the three different clauses. The second part of the questionnaire is consisted of three Chinese sentences, which the students are asked to translate into grammatically correct sentences by using the three major English clauses. The last part of the questionnaire is about the students’ English learning experiences. There are three questions including how they feel about the three major clauses, how much they think they understand them, and do they understand their teachers’ instruction regarding the clauses. Regarding the understanding of the three clauses and their teachers’ instruction, the students choose from the five given responses, fully understand, understand, more or less, not much and totally lost. About the students’ feelings toward the three clauses, they may choose from very difficult, difficult, more or less, easy, or very easy.

V. The Research Findings

The total number of the questionnaire is two hundred and sixteen, in which eighty are from the Science College, ninety the Management College, forty-three from the Design College, and only three are from the Humanity College. To examine them through age, one hundred and twenty-nine are freshmen, thirty-four are sophomores, nineteen are junior and thirty-four are seniors. For the first section, the average score for all the students is 51.3. That is to say, all of the students can only answer half of the twenty-one sentences correctly. Among all of them, the students from the Science College got the highest average of 56.1, the students from the Management College,
53.9 and the students from the Design College got the lowest average of 43.9. The result also shows that the seniors seem to perform better than the rest with an average of 59.4. The freshmen and sophomores have very similar scores, 51.4 and 51.5 respectively.

For the translation, very few of them can make complete sentences without any grammatical mistakes. Many of them cannot even make an easy sentence like, “I have studied in the university for three years.” The present perfect tense should be taught in the third grade of junior high school. The other two sentences focus on relative clause and adverbial clause. Compared with the present perfect tense, the students seem to be more confused about the usage of the two clauses. Many of them try to translate the sentences directly from Chinese. That is to say, the word order is totally different from that of English. And of course the meaning can be very different, too. Obviously a lot of students did not quite understand the meaning and function of the important grammatical rule. It shows in the result of the third part of the questionnaire. 50% of all the students admitted that they did not understand the meaning or function of the three major English clauses. And more than 63% of them think that they are very difficult to learn. 15% of them said that they did not understand them at all. The result of the research shows that half of the students are not quite sure about how to use the three major English clauses even though they have learned English for so many years.

There are many possible reasons for this seemingly embarrassing result. One might be the traditional grammar translation method, which focuses a lot on memorization and thus lower students’ learning motivation as well as their proficiency level. Another possible reason of course may be that students are lack of practice. The core of their learning is centered on taking endless written tests which are designed in the form of multiple choices. Even in the college entrance examination, there is no translation or English composition in the English test. Therefore, most of the vocational high school students are not interested in learning to write English sentences, let alone try to use English to express their ideas. Practice makes perfect, but unfortunately they are lack of useful practice in connecting sentences to make the meaning across.

VI. Suggestions

Although the result of the research is not very far from what I had in mind, there are still some things worth noticing in it. First of all, a lot of English teachers are wondering if they should lower the standard for the college students who graduated from vocational high school because their English proficiency level is much lower
than that of general high school students. Since more than half of the students think that they do not understand the meaning or the function of the three major English clauses, there should be some kinds of remedial instruction for them so that it would make more sense for them when they have to take the required English courses. In other words, if the teachers don’t want to lower the standard, they probably need to spend extra time explaining the grammatical rules and usage to them. More importantly, it may also be more sensible for the school to divide the students into different classes according to their English proficiency levels. Not only will it be easier for the teachers to conduct the lessons but also the students to learn more about the subject matter. At college level, the students should be able to express themselves with complete English sentences. In order to do that, they should have a better understanding of the usage of all clauses. Therefore, the teachers should probably spend more time giving them chances to do exercises using the clauses.

VII. Future Research Questions

This has been a brief instruction to some of the whats and whys fundamental to the study of college students’ understanding of the three major English clauses. Does the difficulty hinder their understanding or communication ability with other in English no matter in speaking or writing? There should be further studies about how the problems should be solved and what would be possible teaching suggestions for teachers. For example, what exactly is difficult for them? Is it the definition or the application of the rules? Or is it the many variations of the rules, which seem too complicated and hard to remember? Is it possible that they can relearn the rules at college level? How to increase their motivation? Many have suggested that the college entrance examination should include translation and English composition even for vocational high schools students. If so, what should most of the vocational high schools deal with the change? Apart from that, if the result of the study shows the present learning situation of one of the well-known national University of Science and Technology, what about many other private Universities of Science and Technology?

References

