

The Main Difficulties Faced by Chinese College Students in Learning English Grammar

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Abstract: English is one of the most important languages in the world. English grammar is a compulsory course for Chinese students. However, there are many factors causing difficulties for Chinese students to learn English grammar at college. This paper focused on analyzing the factors that cause difficulties for Chinese college students to learn English grammar at college. The factors of weak foundation in English grammar, the differences between Chinese and English, the development of English grammar, the differences between American English and British English, and the more advanced grammar knowledge at college have been analyzed. To help college students learn English grammar more effectively and efficiently, some suggestions have been proposed. For example, the students should spend more time learning English grammar at elementary school and middle school so as to build up a solid foundation for English grammar. English teachers should keep on learning and equip themselves with the latest English grammar knowledge.

Keywords: English grammar; Chinese students; Difficulties in learning English grammar

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1. Introduction

English is the most widely used language in the world and it is a compulsory course for Chinese students^[1]. Grammar is the foundation of a language. It helps to build up the logic for a sentence or a passage so as to remove any misunderstandings. At the same time, English grammar can enhance a person's ability to communicate efficiently and confidently. What's more, without grammar knowledge, one cannot understand an English passage thoroughly. We can say that if one wants to master a language well, grammar is the section that he/she cannot escape from. However, it is not so easy for Chinese students to learn English grammar. Though some of them have spent more than ten years learning English, grammar is a headache for them. Many college students still make grammatical mistakes in their writing. This paper will discuss the main difficulties faced by college students in learning English grammar and provide some suggestions to help them master English grammar better.

2. The main difficulties faced by Chinese college students in learning English grammar

When learning English grammar, Chinese students face many difficulties. In this section, the author will discuss the different obstacles for Chinese college students in learning English grammar.

2.1. Weak foundation in English grammar

Though Chinese students begin to learn English when they are 7 or 8 years old, they don't build up a solid foundation in English Grammar. Some of them don't master the basic grammar knowledge, which brings difficulties to them when they take the English grammar course at college ^[2]. Here are some mistakes caused by the weak foundation in English grammar.

1.They are walk to school every day.

In the above sentence, we can see that the student doesn't know the differences between linking verbs and notional verbs, and they use both linking verbs and notional verbs in the same sentence.

2.I are your friend.

In the above sentence, we can see that the student doesn't know that there are different forms of verbs, and the form of a verb is decided by the subject.

3.The passage is writed by my teacher.

In the above sentence, we can see that the student doesn't know the correct past participle of the verb write.

4.The students playing football now.

In the above sentence, we can see that the student doesn't know that the auxiliary verb "be" should be used with the present continuous tense.

5.I have many moneys.

In the above sentence, we can see that the student doesn't know the difference between countable noun and uncountable noun.

The linking verb and the notional verb, the different forms of a verb, the use of auxiliary verbs to make the present continuous tense, the past participle, and the countable and uncountable nouns are the basic English grammar knowledge. But some students still make sentences with these grammar mistakes when they are college students, which results in difficulties in learning more advanced English grammar at college.

2.2. The differences between Chinese and English

Chinese and English are two totally different languages. They belong to two language systems, and they have different grammar structures, which makes it difficult for Chinese students to learn English grammar ^[3]. Here are some examples of the grammar differences between Chinese and English.

Firstly, there is no plural form of Chinese nouns. This rule may result in Chinese students forgetting to use the plural form, which means to add the letter "s" after a countable noun in most cases.

Secondly, there is no past tense and past participle of Chinese verbs. When writing a Chinese sentence with the past tense, the Chinese people will use a verb and other words to show that the behavior happened in the past rather than changing the form of the verb. This difference causes Chinese students to forget to change the verb into the past tense or past participle when dealing with the past tense or past participle.

Thirdly, there is no difference between the subjective case and the objective case of pronouns in Chinese. The form of a pronoun will stay the same, no matter whether it is used as a subject or an object in a sentence

or a phrase. However, the subjective case and the objective case of pronouns in English are different. For example, *I* is the subjective case while *me* is its objective case. This difference makes Chinese students forget to use the correct form of the pronoun in English.

Fourthly, there is no comparative degree or superlative degree of adjectives in Chinese^[4]. The Chinese adjectives are used with other words to show the comparative degree or superlative degree rather than changing the form of the adjectives. However, there are comparative and superlative degrees of adjectives in English. For example, the comparative degree and the superlative degree of the word *good* are *better* and *best*. This difference may make the Chinese students forget to change the form of an adjective when dealing with comparative and superlative degrees in English.

Last but not least, there is no subjunctive mood in Chinese, while the subjunctive mood is used by changing the form of the verb in English. For example, if you would like to show that your present wish cannot be realized or is different from the fact, you need to use the past tense of the verb. If you would like to show that your wish is different from the past fact, you need to use the past perfect tense. However, if you want to show your wish, no matter whether it is different from past fact or present fact, you don't need to change the form of the verb or use a different tense in Chinese. This difference between Chinese and English sometimes makes the Chinese students feel confused when they meet the subjunctive mood in English.

The above examples demonstrate that there are many differences between the grammar of Chinese and English, which may hinder Chinese students' learning of English grammar.

2.3. The development of English grammar

Language will evolve as the human society develops, so will the grammar. With the rapid development of technology and society in recent decades, there are many changes in English grammar. Some grammar rules that cannot be accepted in the past are acceptable now, which may cause confusion to the students. Here are some examples of these changes.

Firstly, it is the split infinitive. In the past, if there was other information in the middle of the infinitive structure, this sentence cannot be accepted and will be regarded as containing a grammatical mistake. For example, in the sentence *We started to carefully check the goods*, there is the adverb *carefully* between *to* and *check*. This is a split infinitive and it cannot be accepted in the past. We should say *We started to check the goods carefully*. The adverb should come at the end of the sentence instead of in the middle of the infinitive structure. But now the split infinitive is acceptable, especially when the adverbial is short. This change may make the students feel confused. When they have been accustomed to the old rule, it is not so easy for them to accept the new rule.

Secondly, it is the dangling element. The dangling element means that the logical subject of the participle construction is not the same as the subject of the main clause. In the past, the logical subject of the participle construction must be the subject of the main clause. For example, in the sentence *Hearing the news, we all jumped for joy*, the logical subject of the participle construction *hearing the news* is *we*. It is *we* who *hear the news*. *We* is also the subject of the main clause *we all jumped for joy*. It can be seen that the logical subject of the participle construction is the same as the subject of the main clause. However, in the sentence *Sleeping at night, the ceiling suddenly collapsed*, the logical subject of the participle construction *sleeping at night* is *I* or other persons, but the subject of the main clause *the ceiling suddenly collapsed* is *the ceiling*. We can see that the logical subject of the participle construction is different from the subject of the main clause,

which is known as a dangling element and cannot be accepted in the past. But as English grammar develops, the dangling element is acceptable now, especially on informal occasions. This change in English grammar makes it difficult for the Chinese students to learn English grammar because they have to get used to the new grammar rule.

The above examples show that as time goes by, the rules of English grammar change. When the students have been accustomed to the old rules, they need to spend time and effort to learn the new rules and get used to them, which is also the difficulty that the Chinese students need to face and conquer.

2.4. The differences between British English and American English

Though American English originated from British English, there are many differences between American English and British English^[5]. These differences sometimes cause difficulties for Chinese students to learn English grammar. Here are some examples.

Firstly, Americans will use the base form of a verb in the object clause of words like order, recommend, suggest, advise, etc., while the British will use should + base form of the verb in this object clause. For example, the American will say *The officer ordered that everyone attend the meeting* while the British will say *The officer ordered that everyone should attend the meeting*. It can be seen that in the object clause of order, the base form of attend is used in American English, while *should attend* is used in British English.

Secondly, there are differences in the past tense of some verbs between American English and British English. The past tense of verbs ending with letter *l* in American English is different from that of British English. For example, the past tense of travel is *traveled* in American English, while it is *travelled* in British English. It can be seen that the letter *l* is doubled in British English. Besides, the past participle of get is *got* in British English, while it is *gotten* in American English^[6].

Thirdly, the Americans and the British have different language habits. When the British talk about the past behavior and emphasize its influence on the present, they will use the present perfect tense. However, the American will use the past tense. For example, the British will say *I have just arrived* while the Americans will say *I just arrived*. What's more, the British and the Americans have different habits of using prepositions. For example, the British will say *at the weekend, on the train* while the Americans will say *on the weekend, in the train*.

Last but not least, the Americans will regard the collective noun as a singular noun while the British will regard the collective noun as a plural noun when the noun emphasizes the members of that group. For example, the British will say *The team are playing well* while the Americans will say *The team is playing well*. It can be seen that *the team* is known as the members of the team in British English, while *the team* is known as a singular noun in American English.

From the above examples, we can see that there are many differences between British English and American English. When a Chinese student is accustomed to British English or American English, it is not so easy for him/her to accept the other one. These differences will cause difficulties for the Chinese students to learn English Grammar.

2.5. The more advanced grammar knowledge at college

Compared with the grammar knowledge at middle school or at high school, the grammar knowledge at college is more advanced and more detailed^[7]. That is why some students can master the grammar knowledge well in middle school or high school, but find it difficult to learn English grammar after they enter

university or college.

For example, they only need to know that *will* and *be going to* can be used to demonstrate a future behavior in middle school. They don't need to master the differences between these two structures. But they need to have further learning of *will* and *be going to* in the college grammar class. They need to know that *will* is used when they estimate a behavior while *be going to* is used when there is a sign that something will happen. And *be going to* is usually used on an informal occasion, while *will* is used on a formal occasion. What's more, when *will* and *be going to* refer to a plan or intention, *will* means an impromptu decision while *be going to* means a well-considered decision.

The second example is the modal verb. The middle school students know that they can use *mustn't* and *may not* to tell a person that he/she is not allowed to do something, but they don't know the difference between *mustn't* and *may not*. They need to know the difference between *mustn't* and *may not* at college. *Mustn't* emphasizes that somebody not allow someone to do something while *may not* emphasizes the rule or regulation not allow someone to do something ^[8].

From the above examples, it can be seen that the grammar knowledge is more advanced and complicated at college, which causes difficulties for Chinese college students to learn English grammar at college.

3. Recommendations

From the analysis in the second part of this paper, we can see that many factors contribute to the difficulties for Chinese students to learn English grammar. To help the Chinese students learn English grammar in a more efficient and effective way, here are some suggestions.

Firstly, the students need to build up a good foundation at elementary school. They need to master basic English grammar knowledge, otherwise, it is more difficult for them to learn the advanced grammar knowledge at college.

Secondly, the teachers should know the recent changes in English grammar and ensure that they deliver the latest knowledge to the students ^[9]. At the same time, it is recommended that the teachers sort out the differences between American English and British English, which can remove the students' confusion to some extent ^[10].

Thirdly, the students should spend more time learning English grammar and memorizing the advanced grammar rules at college. For each rule, the students can memorize one example sentence. This can develop their language sense and master the new rules more effectively.

4. Conclusion

English is one of the most important languages in the world. English grammar is a compulsory course for Chinese students. However, there are many factors causing difficulties for Chinese students to learn English grammar. These difficulties include the weak foundation in English grammar, the differences between Chinese and English, the development of English grammar, the differences between American English and British English, and the more advanced English grammar knowledge that the students need to learn at college. To help the Chinese students learn English grammar more effectively and efficiently, some recommendations have been provided. The students need to build up a solid foundation in grammar when they are still in elementary school. What's more, they need to spend more time learning English

grammar after they enter college. For the teachers, they need to know the latest and most advanced grammar knowledge.

The limitation of this research is that this paper only analyzed some factors that may cause difficulties in learning English grammar, but other factors, such as the differences in different grammar textbooks, have not been discussed. The future research can focus on the other factors and make a supplement to this paper.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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