An Analysis of Grammar in Chinese Students' Narrative Writings in English Class from the Perspective of SFL

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Abstract: Writing is a significant part of English teaching and learning, so it is worth analyzing and discussing. For middle school students in China, English writing takes up a noticeable proportion of 12.5 percent in the entrance examination for high schools, and it is indispensable in English learning. Moreover, it can effectively promote the internalization of students' English knowledge and help test learners' use of syntactic structure and words. Therefore, writing is as important as listening, speaking, and reading. However, writing is considered to be an obstacle to English education in China, and it seems to be overlooked in middle school English teaching compared to other major English skills. Chinese students' actual writing ability falls far short of the requirements and standards.

The purpose of the study is to identify grammar issues in Chinese middle school students' English compositions from the perspective of Systematic Functional Linguistic. The study also aims to explore the process in which the teacher teaches writing and then provide some suggestions to help middle school teachers know how to model writing teaching and teach grammar so as to help students improve their writing abilities.

Keywords: Grammar; English Writing; Chinese students; Systematic Functional Linguistic

1. Introduction

Grammar plays an important role in writing, so grammar teaching is an essential aspect of the English curriculum in Chinese middle schools. However, it is still based on traditional grammar and tends to focus on sentence rules and patterns. Differing from a series of rules and patterns to memorize and follow, Systematic Functional Linguistic is a theory of language which is different from others, mainly in text and grammar. It suggests that language is a series of choices influenced by the cultural and situational contexts, purposes, and audience (Halliday, 2004). A functional approach focuses on how language enables us to share information, express ideas, argue, reflect, construct ideas, provide our experiences, and make sense of the world. It looks at how people use real language for real purposes. The selection of lexical and grammatical use in texts is to make meanings.

SFL contains three metafunctions, interpersonal metafunctions, experiential metafunctions, and textual metafunctions. For interpersonal metafunctions, there are two main grammatical features, the subject and the finite, which form the mood of the clause, declarative, interrogative, or imperative. The mood could show readers the relationship between two persons or between the person and the object. Experiential metafunctions focus on analyzing and discussing the actions which are expressed in the main verb. It pays much attention to different types of processes in the text, including material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential (Thompson, 2014). There are three ways that textual meanings are constructed in a text: repetition, conjunction, and thematization. It is used to examine whether readers could make meaning of the text by reading the words and sentences used in the text.

Since the genre of students' writing is narrative, and it also concerns how languages serve as resources for making meaning. Therefore, I would like to use SFL as a tool and guidance to analyze learners' writing samples. What's more, I will use the three metafunctions as guidance to analyze the grammar selection and use in their writings.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Questions

In this paper, my research questions are:

1) How does the teacher teach writing to Chinese students in English class?

2) What kinds of grammar problems do Chinese students have in their writings, and why are they important based on SFL?

2.2 Research Subjects

The subjects of this research are 40 first-year middle school students from Class 3 in Suzhou Pingjiang Middle School. All the students are the same in the following aspects:

1) All of them have received complete primary school education, and this is their first year in Suzhou Pingjiang Middle School.
2) The students in the class are taught by the same English teacher and have received the same education from their teacher.

2.3 Research Instruments

Two instruments were taken in this research: 1) samples of one topic-based narrative composition and 2) An interview.

2.4 Composition

On December 1st, 2020, all the students in Class 3 were asked to write a composition entitled "My Dream Christmas Day" with about 80 to 100 words in class. They were expected to write it within 30 minutes. Their English teacher supervised the whole writing process, which ensured that all the samples could reflect the students' actual and spontaneous language use and language ability.

All the students handed in their compositions on time, and the teacher corrected their writings on time. After that, I selected 25 compositions randomly for further analysis and research.

2.5 Interview

I did an online interview with the English teacher of Class 3, Grade 7 after she finished correcting the students' compositions, and the interview lasted about 20 minutes. The interview was divided into two parts. First, the teacher was asked to talk about how she taught writing to learners. Second, she was asked how she provided guidance to students in their writing process.

2.6 Data Collection

In this research, the reason why I chose writing texts is that compared with other language skills, writing is the most comprehensive task, which can reflect students' target language ability. It can provide useful information not only for language learning but also for language teaching. Data were collected in this study through the following steps:

Step 1: To collect and number the samples

After being finished by all the students in class within the given time and evaluated by the English teacher, their compositions were collected and numbered. 25 compositions are chosen at random by me for further analysis.

Step 2: To select out grammar errors

After selecting 25 compositions in the class, I read the compositions carefully to check them for grammar errors the students had made. For the purpose of the study, grammar errors were marked. Then I read the compositions again to double check for errors.

Step 3: To confirm the errors for further study

In order to make the identification of errors more objective, I invited the English teacher to check the compositions carefully again with me. The agreed errors were then counted and recorded for further analysis and discussion in this study.

3. Data Analysis

3.1 Students' General Performance in Writing

The compositions of all the students in Class 3 were scored by their English teacher before being collected and analyzed.

Table 1 The Students' Scores in the Writing Exercise

Scores	Numbers of students
0-5 (weak)	4

6-7 (limited)	26
8-9 (fair)	8
10 (good)	2

As can be seen from Table 1, the distribution of students in each scored segment is: 4 people on a scale of 0 to 5, 26 people on a scale of 6 to 7, 8 people on a scale of 8 to 9, and 2 people on a scale of 10.

Table 2 Writing Score Index

Class	Number	Total Score	Average Score	Pass Rate	Excellent Rate	Highest Score	Lowest Score
Class3 Grade7	40	10	6.6	90%	5%	10	5

As can be seen from Table 2, the average score of the writing is 6.6 points, the highest score is 10 points, the lowest score is 5 points, 90.0% of the students have passed, but the excellence rate is low, only 5%.

4. Findings

4.1 Interview

From the interview, we could know that:

1) The teacher separated language teaching and literacy teaching. She said that before assigning the writing task, she provided clear vocabulary and grammar guidance, instructing students to use the words related to the topic and the proper grammar in their writings. She also provided example sentences to show learners how to logically complete the composition. However, when students were writing, she did not participate and gave any instructions.

2) The teacher didn't guide learners to scaffold the writing process like brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing. Learners finished their writings by themselves without these steps.

4.2 Students' Grammar Problems in Writings

In the following parts, I will analyze some grammar problems existing in the writings of the selected students based on SFL.

4.2.1 Incomplete Sentence Elements

When writing English sentences, the students always miss a certain element of the sentences.

First is the absence of the subject. For example, one student wrote: Decorate the Christmas tree makes me feel very excited. When the phrase is used as the subject, it should be the gerund phrase. Otherwise, there is a lack of subject in the sentence, and there are two verbs. Therefore, we should correct the sentence into: Decorating the Christmas tree makes me feel very excited.

The second is the absence of the complete verb form. It just uses a part of a sentence as a complete sentence. For example, the student used "He a Christmas present" as a complete sentence. It is obvious that he missed the verb. We should follow the rule of the sentence, and we can't miss the subject and the verb, so the sentence should be: He sees a Christmas present.

The third is the absence of conjunctions. Conjunctions' function is to connect the elements and contents of a sentence. Many students still miss it in their writings. For example, a student wrote: I am so happy, I can't wait to tell my mom this thing. In the sentence, we need a conjunction to connect the two parts, so we should put the word "and" between the two parts.

The missing and misuse of sentence elements such as noun, verb, preposition, and conjunction belong to the mistakes of experiential metafunctions. Learners didn't understand the six types of processes properly. Using the examples above: the absence of the subject, verb, and conjunction, they didn't write the existential process, verbal process, and relational process correctly in the sentence.

What's more, they're also mistakes of textual metafunctions. Textual metafunctions are related to what roles the language plays to make coherent discourse. Here, the theme is incomplete because there's no subject in the sentence. It will make readers hard to know what the writer is going to express and then make meanings.

4.2.2 Word Order Confusion

Words in English and Chinese sentences are generally arranged in a certain order. Sometimes English word order is different from

Chinese word order, so it is easy to make the mistake of word order. The Chinese word order is more fixed, while in English, the word order depends on the type of predicate verb. Adverbials that indicate manner and degree are usually placed after verbs: adverbials that indicate frequency, such as "always", "often", etc., are usually placed in front of verbs, followed by verbs, modal verbs, and auxiliary verbs. Chinese students often make mistakes in English syntax by mechanically applying Chinese habits. For example, one student wrote: I very much like going to the shopping mall with my parents. However, such expression is wrong in English. We should put "very much" at the end of the sentence, so it should be: I like going to the shopping mall with my parents very much. Another student wrote: we all are very happy. In the sentence, "all" should be put after "are". The right sentence should be: We are all very happy.

The problem belongs to the mistakes of interpersonal metafunctions. These sentences show the use of declarative mood. The relationship between the author and the readers is that the author as the information provider, and the readers as the information receiver. The author provides information about when and where the action takes place, who the doer is, what the doer does, and how the doer feels. However, the wrong word order here might be potential to make readers find that it is hard to understand the text and hard to get the information. They couldn't make meanings from the text and know the purpose of the text.

4.2.3 Tense Errors

There are still some tense errors in the students' writings. In English, when the tense changes, the predicate verbs will change. Therefore, there are some mistakes.

First is the misuse of the tense. For example, the sentence: They start to prepare the food two days ago. This sentence should be used in the past tense because "two days ago" exist in the end, but it is used in the present tense. The right one should be: They started to prepare the food two days ago.

The second is the inconsistency of the tense. Take the example of one sentence: She bought some fruit and takes these things home. The first half of the sentence is used in the past tense, while the second half is used in the present tense. We need to make the sentences consistent, so we should change "bring" into "brought".

The problems are also the errors of interpersonal metafunctions. These sentences still show the use of declarative mood. The author should provide information about when the actions take place. However, the tense errors make readers not know the clear time of the action, past, now, or future. It is hard for readers to understand the text and then make meanings of the text.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of SFL, grammar is not just learned to know the fixed rules and structures of sentences. It is used to make meanings based on the selection of words and grammar. In the analysis of students' writings, we could see that their narrative writing has a lot of grammar errors. They belong to the mistakes of interpersonal metafunctions, experiential metafunctions, and textual metafunctions. Here I'd like to give some implementations for teachers and learners in the future teaching and learning process.

For teachers, first, grammar shouldn't be taught as a separate subject. Instead, grammar teaching can be infused into the writing process. The selection of words in the sentences ought to be considered in various contexts for different purposes. Texts not only work to position their readers. They are also positioned by writers' own perspectives. Therefore, when students use language, teachers need to help learners select the most appropriate lexical and grammatical options to clearly express their opinions. These selections are designed to convey specific meanings and have particular influence.

Second, the process of writing – brainstorming, drafting, reviewing and editing is quite important for a good writing. Teachers ought to guide learners to know the process of writing and how to write.

What's more, teachers could use "scaffolding" to guide learners in developing their knowledge and skills. For different genres of writing such as poetry, narratives, expositive, and persuasive writings, teacher could first scaffold for learners how to make simple sentences and then guide them to add details to polish their writings.

For learners, they need to know that in writings, the selection and use of grammar is for specific purposes and for making meaning. They can't just copy the fixed sentence patterns. Instead, they ought to make proper selections to accomplish their own writings.

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