Abstract: This paper examines to what extent different learning contexts inform grammar acquisition of Chinese adult learners of English. The research was conducted in London and Chongqing within a different framework that acknowledges the role of context from a perspective of the general theory of second language acquisition. The results partly supported the hypothesis that Chinese adult learners improve grammar acquisition much more quickly when they are exposed to the target language context. The implications derived from the findings are of some pedagogical significance to the teaching of English.

Key words: learning contexts, EFL, ESL, grammar acquisition

1. Introduction

The study of “second language acquisition (hereinafter referred to as SLA) has grown exponentially since its beginning in the 1960s” (Ellis, 1997: 6). Early research typically consisted of the collection of isolated learner utterances gained by observing the learners in natural environment. These were then subjected to various kinds of analysis (e.g. Ravem, 1968). One of the changes at present in the study of SLA has been the increasing attention that researchers pay to the role of context. The question of whether, to what extent and how second language development is affected by the learning environment has attracted considerable interests among SLA researchers and language teachers in recent years.

The reasons for the subject chosen are based on these ideas and thoughts of the
relationship between learning context and second language grammar acquisition. Although foreign language teaching in China at present puts more emphasis on communicative competence and while some teachers even find the teaching of grammar boring, grammar on its own answers most of the questions about the way a language works. I believe, to teach college students an overall understanding of the development of grammar acquisition is helpful for teachers to determine their philosophy of education, teaching approaches and classroom techniques.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Aims and Objectives

From the perspective of the general theory of second language acquisition, the aims of the study serve a dual purpose: (i) to examine language specific grammatical errors frequently committed by Chinese students in their written tasks. (ii) to evaluate to what extent different learning contexts inform second language grammar acquisition with focus on English syntax.

The expected objectives of the study are: (i) to test the hypothesis that students improve grammar acquisition much more quickly when they are exposed to the target language context. (ii) to contribute to the issues on adult second language acquisition of grammar in different learning and teaching context.

2.2 Research Context

In the study, two types of classrooms were selected as the main basis of comparison between the different learning contexts. Type 1 was a Chinese class of English at Chongqing Jiao Tong University (CQJTU), China. The medium of instruction was the mother tongue—Chinese together with the target language English. Besides four foreign teachers, the rest of the teachers were Chinese nationals. Type 2 was a pre-sessional English class at London Metropolitan University (LMU). The teaching methodology of Type 2 was very different from that of Type 1. The main features of the two types of classroom contexts were summarized in the next section.


2.3 Participants

Two groups of students selected for the study were 20 years old on average and all native speakers of Chinese. Group 1 were second-year Non-English majors at CQJTU whose exposure to English was largely or solely in the classroom, and whose teachers of English were non-native speakers. Group 2 were Chinese students with intermediate English level who enrolled in a 15-hour per week intensive pre-sessional English course at LMU. Teachers of Group 2 were all native speakers of English. The salient differences between the two groups of students were their informal exposure to the target language environment and the different instruction they received in the classroom.

3. Results and Analyses

3.1 Classroom as Learning Context

Except for the salient different social context of EFL and ESL, classroom contexts for both groups of students were very different. Based on classroom observation and questionnaires, the main features of the two types of classroom were summarized as follows:

Table 1  Main features of the two types of classroom contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Type 1</th>
<th>Type 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammar translation method</td>
<td>Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-centered</td>
<td>Learner-centered</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form-based instruction</td>
<td>Content-based instruction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam-oriented (CET 6)</td>
<td>Exam-oriented (IELTS)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrinsic motivation &gt; intrinsic motivation</td>
<td>Intrinsic motivation + extrinsic motivation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to teachers’ answers to questionnaires and classroom observations, type 1 classroom was traditional and disciplinary as English was the compulsory course for all students at CQJTU. The classrooms were teacher-centered with a few visual aids.
provided. Form-focused instruction was the mainstream of classroom activities. In this study, all selected students from type1 classroom had passed CET 4 and were preparing CET 6. In the interview, eight out ten students expressed their strong desire to pass CET 6 although they didn’t like English at all. Only two students expressed interests in the language and Anglo-American cultures. In this sense, I suppose extrinsic motivation overran intrinsic motivation for students in Type 1 classroom context.

The main characteristics of Type 2 classroom can be summarized as follows: (1) Classroom goals were focused on more of the linguistic components (2) Language techniques were designed to engage in the pragmatic, authentic use of language for meaningful purpose. (3) Students in the class ultimately had to use English productively and receptively in unrehearsed contexts outside the classroom. (4) Students were given opportunities to focus on their own learning process through an understanding of their own styles of learning and through the development of appropriate strategies for autonomous learning. (5) Students had strong desires to take IELTS and get scores over 6, which was the basic language requirement for their further degree course. All Students had a feeling of self-determination. Their learning behaviours were both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated.

3.2 Errors Committed by Students in Written Work

To understand how contexts inform learners’ grammar acquisition, an analysis of students’ written work was conducted. Firstly, ten compositions of the final examinations taken at July 2002 of Group1 were carefully examined. In the meantime, ten pieces of written work from Group 2 were selected for the same purpose of investigation. Errors were clarified into three main categories—lexical errors, morphological errors and syntactic errors. (see Table 2). As to syntactic errors, only verb phrase, word order, preposition phrase, clause structure and conjunction were taken into account because these were the specific syntactic areas, which, were regarded as the most difficult items for Chinese learners of English.
Table 2  Errors in written samples of Group 1
(Elicited from the compositions of the finals taken at July, 2002 and June, 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of error</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>Post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexical errors</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morphological errors</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syntactic errors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb phrase</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preposition</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clause</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conjunction</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3  Errors in Written Samples of Group 2
(Elicited from the written tasks at July, 2002 and June, 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of error</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>Post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexical errors</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morphological errors</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syntactic errors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb phrase</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preposition</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clause</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conjunction</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A close examination of students’ written samples reveals that morph-syntactic error
which is also referred to as grammatical error by some researchers (e.g. James, 1998),
took up over 75% of the total errors. Most of these errors were made within the TL
itself (the misuse of the target language roles), that is, they were intralingual errors.
Many lexical errors were mainly influenced by the learners’ L1—Chinese, thus they were interlingual errors.

It has been found that the above-mentioned five problematical syntactic errors were
those grammatically absent in that of Chinese or have no equivalent in the Chinese language. It is also noticed that among all the syntactic errors, verb phrase (mainly improper forms of verbs with respect to tense and aspect), was one of the largest group of all errors for Chinese learners whilst word order was the smallest.

After a one-semester intensive study of English, both groups made progress on the
development of English grammar. But the effect was different. Students in Group 1 improved their grammar acquisition on verb phrase especially in the written texts more often than not. The slowest improvement was in the use of prepositional phrases. Students in Group 2 made far less errors on the preposition phrase in their composition and only a few mistakes were found in terms of word order and conjunction. To both groups, the change forms of verbs within contexts and clause structure remained to be the most difficult parts to be mastered.

Interestingly, we might be captivated by the first impression that there has noticeable decrease of grammatical errors for both groups of students after classroom instruction. But if we analyze the percentage of grammatical errors on the whole, we may find that the pre and post percentage ranged from 48% to 49% for Group 1 while 51%-49% for Group 2. The result indicates the development of grammar acquisition was slowly improved or even became retrogressive at some certain stage for the intermediate or advanced learners. I suppose this might be the stage of ‘stop learning’, which, according to Selinker (1972), can be called as ‘fossilization’ of IL development.
3.3 Summary of Findings

In short, the analysis of data suggests the following main points on how and to what extent learning contexts inform the acquisition of English grammar.

1. The different learning contexts as identified lead to certain differences in the students’ interlanguage development.

2. The interference from the source language or L1—Chinese (interlingual errors) decreases when learners studying in both EFL and ESL environment with levels of learning. However, CLT as a teaching approach in the ESL context helps learners improve interlingual understanding more naturally and effectively.

3. The interference from the TL—English (intralingual errors) decreases when learners were exposed to both ESL and EFL learning contexts with different teaching methodology. But the provision of explicit instruction, say grammar-translation in approach as applied in Type 1, seems to be more beneficial to the lessening of intralingual errors.

4. As far as the five specific syntactic areas are concerned, the availability of informal exposure seems to promote initial IL development at a faster rate in acquisition of word order, preposition phrase and conjunction while verb phrase and clause which remain the most complex syntactic areas for both groups of learners improve slightly faster by explicit instruction in an EFL learning context.

5. The development of grammar acquisition might be slowed down or even stopped in a so-called ‘fossilization’ stage. In another word, learners’ IL was slowly improved or even became retrogressive when they reached intermediate English level.

In general, the route of grammatical development was response to different learning
contexts but the effects are not so obvious as expected. The hypothesis that students improve grammar acquisition much more quickly when they are exposed to the TL context is partly right. However, learners who are close to the TL context are not always likely to outperform those who are more distant with respect to specific grammar acquisition. In terms of classroom settings, it is clear that the relationship between formal instruction and grammatical accuracy is also complex. A number of studies (Ellis 1984c, Long 1988, Felix 1981, Lightbrown 1983, Kadia 1988) have produced controversial results. In this sense, learning domains are not a main parameter for SLA. Socio-linguistic background, learning strategies and other variables should be taken into account as well.

4. Implications

4.1 Sociopolitical Contexts and Language Pedagogy

It is easy to underestimate the importance and power of sociopolitical contexts which might have significant influence on classroom settings and language pedagogies. As Brown (2001) reminds social roles of language are dominant in language pedagogies. “Interaction, negotiation, interpretation, intended meanings, misunderstandings, and pragmatics all underscore these roles. When such considerations are extended into communities, regions, nations, and continents, the political side of language becomes evident.” (Brown,2001:115). In this sense, sociopolitical contexts to some extent have vital influence in classroom cultures and pedagogies. Both the output and input are essential as suggested by Ellis (1987)—SLA researchers need to examine not only the language produced by learners but also the language addressed to them. This is because the properties of the input may be reflected in the properties of the output in various ways.

In the study, the pedagogical method applied in the Chinese classroom context had been a compound one. The process could be summed up as follows—teaching (sections or chapters in the textbook)—sample reading (sentences, paragraphs, essays
were chosen for students to read and imitate for their beauty either in diction, structure, sound/rhythm, figures of speech, organization or in idea, thought and spirit)—practice writing (students were required to produce an assay no less than 250 words every fortnight)—error correction and feedbacks. Thus, we can say that students in Type1 classroom improved or bettered syntax acquisition through constant practices on the basis of reading and imitating high quality writings by native writers.

Type2 classroom at LMU, however, was so-called ‘comprehensible input’. The teacher believed that explicit grammatical instruction and constant practicing were of subtle importance for grammar acquisition. Rather, more attention was paid to cognitive learning, which, according to Krashen (1986), referred as ‘i+1 hypothesis’. One of the classroom activities was processed in this way: Vocabulary revision—Review of language points—pronunciation practice—discussion—word building—workshop visit. The lesson was taught in a casual way at the very beginning (played a game) and became formal for the rest of 40 minutes. Unlike Type1, students were required to answer questions and speak constantly while errors were sometimes ignored. Teacher’s feedback to students was short and concise. However, unexpectedly, I noticed that some students didn’t enjoy the game at all and even became absent-minded. I was told subsequently that students liked the teacher and his teaching style but they believed more paper and pen exercise in class would be more helpful for their study. One of the students even said that the improvement in English language skills she had made was due to her own hard work after class but not for the sake of learning it in the classroom. She admitted that the teacher did help, but the effect was not satisfied her expectation.

In this sense, I suppose that while a number of students experience psychological blocks and other inhibition of the second language culture, teachers in an ESL context should do something to help students turn such a frustrated experience into one of increased cultural and self-awareness. For these Chinese learners with intermediate English level, CLT is not the effective way of improving linguistic accuracy. Learning
a foreign language is somewhat a social activity and in a classroom setting, it is subject to a unique set of social conventions. Therefore, an understanding and awareness of the intricacies of the social and psychological processes of the classroom is central to effective language teaching.

6.2 Contexts and learning strategies

On the relationship between context and grammar acquisition, another implication is what learning strategies are used by learners within different contexts. Studies of learning strategies indicate that students can effectively improve their performance on a wide range of linguistic comprehension and problem-solving tasks. From a cognitive psychological perspective, researchers (e.g., Brown et al. 1983, Dansereau 1985) make a general formulation of learning strategies in information-processing model. The model contains metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social/affective strategies. **Metacognitive strategies** involve thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring of comprehension or production while it is taking place and self-evaluation after the learning activity have been completed. **Cognitive strategies** are more directly related to individual learning tasks and entail direct manipulation or transformation of leaning materials. **Social/affective strategies** are cooperative learning, which involves peer interaction to achieve a common goal in learning and asking questions for clarification. (O’Malley and Chamot, 1990)

According classroom observations, in terms of syntax acquisition, learning strategies were applied in different ways within the different learning contexts. metacognitive strategies used by both groups were almost the same. As to social/affective strategies, students in an ESL context with CLT in approach used more cooperation and questioning techniques than those in an EFL context with more formal instruction. Self-talk and self-reinforcement were used widely by both groups of students. Overall, the two groups of students applied far more cognitive strategies than metacognitive and social strategies. However, as to cognitive strategies, there were many differences
Learning Strategies Used by Students of Group 1

In cognitive strategy use, students of Group 1 relied on translation, note taking and summarizing most frequently. For these intermediate students in an EFL learning context, these strategies enabled them systemize the syntax rules of TL and also helped them to link new information to prior knowledge. I noticed that all the ten selected students had a special notebook in which language points were tracked during the process of classroom teaching. Rote learning was still regarded as an effective way of studying English for EFL Chinese learners. Undoubtedly, this would lead to a gap between linguistic and communicative competence. In another word, these learning strategies helped students improve grammar acquisition but may cause semantic or pragmatic problems. A relatively verbatim manner in rendering ideas from TL was a habit which cannot easily be eradicated by many Chinese learners of English. Verbatim translation also leads to difficulties in acquiring word order and preposition phrase, which, grammatically, have no Chinese equivalent. In this sense, I suppose, teachers in such a context should emphasize and instruct other cognitive learning strategies, especially repetition, substitution and inferencing.

Learning Strategies Used by Student of Group 2

Among the cognitive strategies, elaboration and substitution emerged as major learning strategies that were used widely by the students of Group 2. Classroom activities were designed to engage in the authentic use of language for meaningful purpose. Thus, Learner autonomy was much better than that of Group 1. As there were more opportunities were given to foster autonomous learning, it was easier for student to set up their own styles of learning and develop appropriate cognitive strategies such as elaboration, substitution, referencing, and resourcing. However, the using of these strategies also causes some problems. First, learners’ syntax acquisition was in one way or another inductive, which means students worked out some rules of
the English language empirically. This may lead to what Selinker (1972) calls as ‘overgeneralization’ of TL rules and ‘system simplification’. Secondly, for learners with intermediate level, strategy like substitution makes student avoid using some expressions or usages, which they find unfamiliar with. Consequently, it leads to lower acquisition on complex syntactic areas such as verb phrases and clause structure.

In short, learning strategies used by learners in different contexts have different effects on SLA. In this sense, I suggest that teachers may help learners improve grammar acquisition by enhancing ‘instruction’ of strategies. It is teacher’s responsibility however to facilitate student find effective and appropriate learning strategies.

4.3 Grammatical Instruction and Acquisition

For many years, grammar teaching remains a question in ongoing research. The study of language pedagogy indicates that in any grammatical area the teacher of English needs a great deal of information which he cannot easily find in an ordinary descriptive grammar of English. On the other hand, learners of English need to identify appropriate strategies in different learning contexts. The acquisition of English grammar is a process of proper input and corresponding interaction. More practically, as ELT professionals, we need to think about a number of key questions:

1. Does an explicit grammatical instruction enable learners acquire L2 more accurately?

2. What is the role of grammar in language teaching within ESL and EFL contexts?

3. How to balance formal instruction with learners’ autonomy?

Traditionally, English teachers in China use deductive approach to teach grammar, for it is easy to control and efficient, but it is quite boring to both teachers and students. Inductive approach, on the other hand, is rather demanding and rewarding, but it is
too time-consuming. Some teachers therefore follow ‘the Zero option’ which was advanced by a number of SLA researchers (e.g. Krashen 1982) with no form-focused instruction at all. Schwarts (1993) one of the linguists in favour of the zero option, even claims, explicit instruction might be useless for the acquisition of core grammar, mainly syntax, whereas it might play a role in the acquisition of lexical and morphological knowledge. However, my research results never have any indication for this point. Rather, there is some evidence to suggest that learners who received formal instruction become more grammatically accurate than those who those who don’t.

Different grammatical instruction also affect students’ learning attitude. In this study, Students of Group 1 tended to focus on linguistic accuracy with unawareness of fluency while students of Group 2 showed more interests in developing their fluency at the expense of accuracy. Both, of course, go clearly extreme. In this case, teachers are supposed to foster learners’ autonomy rather than pure deductive or inductive instruction. Besides, teachers must take into account the needs and abilities of individual learners as well as the type of error committed.

It is always difficult to arrive at generalizations about perfect teaching because both the learning contexts and learners are always changeable and active. We cannot make efforts on our own. As Brown reminds us “the question is not so much whether to teach grammar, but rather, what the optimal conditions for overt teaching of grammar are.” (Brown, 2001:363). I hereby recommend Marianne Celce-Murcia’s six identifiable variables (Celce-Murcia, 1991: 465) which offer good insights into grammar teaching.

**Table 7 Variables that determine the importance of grammar**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learner Variables</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Adolescents</th>
<th>Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on Form</td>
<td>Less Important</td>
<td>More Important</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These six categories I believe should be looked on as general guidelines for judging the need for conscious grammatical focus in the classroom. In the research which involved intermediate Chinese adult learners with intermediate English level studying in different contexts, the results suggest that grammatical focus is necessarily important for learners’ linguistic development in both EFL and ESL environment. Admitting the importance of naturalistic language acquisition, I though hold my opinion that the most effective way in which teachers can facilitate adult learners’ grammar acquisition is through systematic grammatical instruction, using meaningful and purposeful communicative approaches. Likewise, successful learners, especially post pubescent adults, need to pay attention to the form of TL, applying appropriate learning strategies and also seek out opportunities for communicating in L2.

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of the general theory of SLA, the analysis above concerning learning contexts and grammar acquisition seems to support the hypothesis in part that Chinese adult learners improve syntax acquisition much more quickly when they are exposed to the target language context. In fact, the results indicate more complexity. In general, then, there is support for the claim that formal instruction helps Chinese adult learners (both in EFL and ESL environment) to develop greater L2 grammatical proficiency, particularly if it is linked with opportunities for TL exposure.

Further research will be needed on how teaching pedagogies should be applied to
facilitate learners’ linguistic competence in accordance with different learning contexts. The findings will be enhanced by further analyses of other data which address differences in lexical breadth, morphological complexity, phonological expression, pragmatic competence among students who have been in target language environment as compare to those who have not such opportunities.
Notes

1. CET is the abbreviation for College English Test which is the national unified English language tests at college level in China. The test for many years has been regarded as one of the main evaluations for English learning and teaching at tertiary institutions in China.

2. IELTS is the abbreviation for International English language Testing System which is jointly managed by University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (Cambridge ESOL), British Council and IDP Education Australia.

References


