The Introduction of Relativity into English Grammatical Teaching in China

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ABSTRACT
For students of English as a second language at or above intermediate levels in classrooms in China, the instructor’s means to present English grammar may well gain effectiveness through the exercise of relativity as a principle in disparate areas such as the number of nouns, the way time is conveyed and the reorganization of word meanings. This article explores ways to round out the number of some elusive English nouns and ways to command the concept of time in terms of relativity. This article suggests that these widely independent areas in English grammar are clustered here as they differ a great deal from the Chinese ways of expression, hence the importance of helping foster an integrated way of thinking in English once the students begin to gain momentum in their English study. The introduction and adoption of relativity can be exploratory for both teachers and students alike.

KEY WORDS: RELATIVITY; NUMBER; TIME

Research by Hinkel and Fotos (2002:240) pointed out that in second language classrooms, the enduring challenge remains how grammar should be presented and taught in classrooms. Students of English as a foreign language in China tend to dismiss the English grammar as innumerable particles of sand in that they fell short of an integrated evaluation about it. On the other hand, teachers of English may be experiencing stresses and hints from examinations and so on to focus upon different grammatical articles and points at different stages of teaching, which aggravates the English learners.

Scholars with a pragmatic view in English grammars have been trying to be helpful in this respect, but even the most successful ones fail in one way or another in juggling the myriad details of a living language. While it is most unlikely for teachers in the second language classrooms to lecture on grammar solely after the fashion of any grammarian’s presentation for the amount of time allowed, the grammar teaching strategy is indispensable for any instructor whose domain is the classroom. The gaps between grammatical reference books and teachers, between the teachers and the students have to be addressed properly to relieve both parties of stress and unease in the classroom.

New Perspectives(2002:240) experts agree that grammar should be taught communicatively, meaningfully, and in the context of use and that it should not be treated or taught separately from
discourse. Most instructors realize this to varying degrees, though they also see how tough it is to carry out the creed. While both teachers and students may experience inadequate language facts to bolster all the established grammatical principles, they can also argue that a great many of language details contrive to stand out against the unity of any such principles even with the limited learning material at hand. Towards an effective command of an organic language, the job to effectively reorganize the grammatical facts of a second language into a coherent system which is simultaneously a product of and deviation from the first language and to apply it in the process of learning and teaching contexts is vital for the teacher and the learner alike. Moreover, since the exploration of a high order in a second language adds to the learner’s motivation and elevates his horizon, the learning efforts can be self-contained and the learning process sustainable. Hopefully, the ESL teachers’ labor would be somehow relieved.

Relativity is exploited here to round up quite a few English grammatical clues that are widespread in English. Instead of defining the hypothesis in an all-embracing manner, this article includes two relevant categories, the number of nouns and the concept of time in English to illustrate the reorganization of the grammatical thinking to facilitate teaching and learning English as a second language where the first language is typically Chinese. Considering the bulk of the principle, it leaves enough room for learners to explore their own findings in the process of learning.

THE RELATIVITY OF NUMBER

Practical English Grammar paid special attention to a comparison between the nouns that are defined differently in terms of their number in Chinese and in English (2002:47). That’s helpful for the beginners in their unavoidable efforts to generalize on the basis of a combination of limited English as a second language and the overwhelming Chinese as their first language. For those at the intermediate level and above, when an understanding of the inner system within the English language is called for, they are confronted with an inadequate exposure to the original English learning resources. They soon realize that those absolute uncountable nouns and countable nouns as defined by most grammatical guidebooks are the easier part in learning. After all, nouns that can be categorized as absolute countable and uncountable are easier to follow in their contexts for their consistency in terms of number. It is those that keep lingering between the uncountable and the countable that are counted as more demanding.

Simultaneously the learners are experiencing their disappointment with grammar guidebooks. Whether edited by native speakers or Chinese scholars, most of these tools tend to treat the volatile and elusive members of nouns in separate categories. While such practice may help create a seemingly orderly book arrangement, the actual learning practice fails to benefit a great deal more with it. L. G. Alexander seems to have put forth a more accessible view. He mentions the dilemma for learners as far as the number of these changeable nouns is concerned and recommends falling back on dictionaries for proper usage of a specific noun. He also tries to analyze some of these nouns in a comparative way (1990:75).

Whether on the National Matriculation English Test or CET, the contexts of grammatical details are given in order to guide the learners on a right track and the benefits of such a practice are beyond question. But all of the above practices and tendencies work very little in facilitating the
ESL teacher’s role as an effective supervisor. The English as a second language teacher in his or her classrooms is confronted every now and then the urgency to aid an individual student or a whole class with a more comprehensive and more pragmatic mechanism. The principle of relativity as a medium to understand the dynamics of such nouns as both uncountable and countable makes an exploration within the English-Chinese learning milieu. Once the principle of relativity is outlined and demonstrated with examples with which they’re familiar, the learners’ qualms soon give way to a speed-up comprehension, and, after a few intensive drills, to an improved expression of their own.

Hereinafter are a few examples from the widely used resources in Chinese universities and colleges.

1. Even the housekeeping and laundry staffs take pride in the fact that in their own ways they are helping to cure sick people --- and thus accomplishing a good deal. (Unit Ten, Book 4, Intensive Reading College English)
2. Although the Republic may have been born in the East, it has spent most of its time and energies since then moving west. (Unit 9, Book 4, Intensive Reading College English)
3. Have you thought about the hardships your children would go through? (Unit 3, Section A, New Horizon English, Book 2)
4. Green Spaces in Cities (Title of Unit 2, Section B, New Horizon English, Book 2)
5. These elephants usually travel vast distances in search of food. (Worldbook 1999)
6. I had a strange experience the other day. (Longman English Grammar, 1990)
7. The observation of the skies has played a special part in the lives and cultures of peoples since the earliest of times. (TOEFL, August 1999)

Words such as staff, energy, hardship, distance, experience and culture in the above sentences have constantly caused confusions about their number to an average learner whose learning activities are limited. Once he/she reads a context when these words are used as uncountables, he/she tends to foster an illusion that they cannot be used otherwise. Such prejudice persists until they are reluctantly brought to the inevitably new facts of language. Before the new way soaks in and forms an organic unity in his/her mind, the bias usually recurs throughout his/her learning process.

According to my investigation in college classes ranging from first-graders of undergraduates to the graduates at the point of graduation, a proper understanding of such countable noun forms is not difficult to achieve. My students can quickly adjust to the nuances of these words, and invariably mentioned the concreteness of these new noun formations. While I believe this quickness in recognition may partly account for the slippery features of these nouns, I argue that an analysis within proper contexts about these nouns certainly helps to broaden the students’ vision about the proper way in which those nouns are established in the English language. Generally speaking, the scope of these nouns can vary from an abstract core concept to the applications of such a concept. Take temperature as an example. When it is used as an uncountable, it refers to the quality of coldness or hotness in a place or in an object. When it is used as a countable, it is about the measurement of such a quality. L. G. Alexander also proposed material as abstract, such as Glass is made from sand, and object as countable, say, I broke a glass this morning.

Considering the fact that the uncountable use of these volatile nouns forms a deep-rooted, next
to detrimental sector of the learners’ foundation, no comparative sentences are given in the above
demonstration. Still I firmly believe that no explanatory effects are undermined for lack of them.
Should a static notion be held about these nouns, a naturally creative learning process would be
diminished. A beneficial part of the job remains, however, for the learners to find out the
comparability between the different uses of an individual noun and more such nouns, so as to
make a personal reference that is essential for an overall command of these nouns.

RELATIVITY IN TIME THROUGH ENGLISH TENSE

For Learners of English whose L1 is Chinese, they are soon made to believe that English has an
overwhelmingly different system in conveying time. It is evidenced that they are quite at home
with time adverbials, whether in objective tests or in their writing assignments. As for other
vehicles to reveal time, they begin to show incompetence to varying degrees. While textbooks and
instructors are experimenting with various methods to help students command the English tense,
the students may still feel uncomfortable with the complex network in which time is inevitably
found.

Beyond the time concept that is conveyed in both languages by the conventions of direct time
words and phrases, English differs from Chinese in that English contains a reference system of
time which can be defined by the principle of relativity. At times when the instructor finds it
necessary to facilitate the learners with their understanding of a broader view of the time concept
in the English milieu, relativity may well include a higher reference system that can be properly
represented by the relations of different verbal forms. Like the kind of generalization one has to
made on the basis of what has already been gathered about nouns, the generalization one makes in
light of disparate verbal expressions gets to go a little further from the mere knowledge of time
expressions in one’s first language. It gets to be something self-contained, something sustainable
to one’s improvement in the expression of time, which is an indispensable and and pervasive
feature in any human culture.

Look at the following examples:

1. Having reviewed his lessons, he went to bed. (A Practical English Grammar)
2. Romeo, believing that Juliet was dead, decided to kill himself. (A Practical English Grammar)
3. I shall call you when I have finished the letter. (CET-6)

In the first sentence, we see the action of reviewing is completed earlier than that of going to
bed. This indication in time is an inner ring or layer with the greater frame of time where a certain
point in the past is being addressed. In like manner, we understand that, in the second sentence,
Romeo held such a belief as Juliet was dead till he made a decision to kill himself. In the third
sentence, we see calling will happen after the letter writing.

In addition to such reference systems of time sequence within a sentence, we can trace time in
the construction of a passage, which is noted for the agreement in these cluster structures. Look at

It was twenty years ago and I was living in Paris. I had a tiny apartment in the Latin
Quarter overlooking a cemetery, and I was earning barely enough money to keep body
and soul together. She had read a book of mine and had written to me about it. I answered,
thanking her, and presently I received from her another letter saying that she was passing
through Paris and would like to have a chat with me; but her time was limited, and the
only free moment she had was on the following Thursday; she was spending the morning at the Luxembourg and would I give her a little luncheon at Foyot’s afterwards? Foyot’s is a restaurant at which the French senators eat, and it was so far beyond my means that I had never even thought of going there. But I was flattered, and I was too young to have learned to say no to a woman. (Few men, I may add, learn this until they are too old to make it of any consequence to a woman what they say.)

Somehow we get a neat idea of the sequence of incidents. Within a paragraph the first sentence set a tune of time for those that follow. Relativity as a principle to bring out time in all these sentences can be found in a couple of layers. Answering her letter is the concrete point to which everything else is referred. When answer is used in its past form, those go before it occur in past perfect, such as “had read” and “had written”. Such agreements in verbal forms stand out as a scaffold of the contextual time. There are exceptions, though, such as the sentences that features Foyot’s and the one expressing the folly of man in brackets. Here arouses the permanent time that transcends the story and integrates all the experiences of human beings into a whole piece.

To introduce to the student the function of relativity in time, another eloquent context for demonstration is indirect speech. When the learners are inspired to immerse themselves in these contexts, they began to gain an overall awareness about how time is conveyed in English. According to one of my students, “we just find it everywhere, the way in which time is conveyed”. This is not overstatement. After all, it is the first step to the diffusive and hierarchical English way of indicating time as contrasted to the flat Chinese way of time presentation, which is usually aloof as a syntactic time phrase and invariably refers itself to time as a present dimension.

**SOURCES AND PROSPECTS OF RELATIVITY**

The Relativity in terms of time was inspired, more or less by E. B. White’s The Ring of Time, (1956:117). White wrote it after watching a circus performer practice her act. The practice session itself was uneventful. No one fell from the high wire, nor did a lion go berserk. All that happened was that a young girl rode around the ring on a horse and did some rather uninspiring tricks. Yet this experience occasioned one of the best reflective essays ever written. What White captures in this essay is a moment in time, making it mean something larger, something universal and transcendent.

The term relativity itself is an adoption from Einstein’s famous theory. The ESL teachers reaching a certain stage may sense it necessary to link myriads of linguistic aspects together. Even if they have every reason to feel daunted by the Theory of Relativity itself, the principle of relativity in language teaching can be a worthwhile method to help them extricate their students and themselves out of the English maze for a while.

The introduction of relativity into grammar teaching is useful in that it gives students an idea of a dynamic rather than static English grammar. Such an idea contributes to the building of an open mind through English study, which is vital in the acquisition of any knowledge. With a blueprint in mind, even the students without adequate access to original English material will find themselves boost in confidence with their improving ability to express both by pen and by speech. After all, it is the continuity in mind that usually requires expression and reveals the proficiency of a language. And the idea of relativity in grammar teaching correspondingly exercises the continuity of cultural aspects of a language in many disparate respects such as noun formations, the time concept, and
the reorganization of meaning categories within the reference system of L1 and L2.

In the process of intensive English reading, relativity may be a good thread to pick up. The teacher may as well encourage the students to fulfill an exploration on their own with the purpose to exemplify their understanding of relativity. In essence, it is for the cultivation of an English mind, though the spur of the initial moments is the counter pull of the learners’ first language, Chinese.

The feasibility of relativity as a grammatical principle in TESOL classrooms is far from being exhausted. On the contrary, a great deal of research remains in terms of its possible applications and related effects. Another article related to the redefining of English words for Chinese students is under way.

REFERENCES


