

A Narrative Study of Grammar Teaching Design of Chinese Senior High School English Teachers Based on Skill Acquisition Theory

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Abstract—Skill Acquisition Theory (SAT) describes the language acquisition as a gradual transition from effortful use to more automatic use of the target language. This paper delves into the application of SAT in the grammar teaching design of two Chinese high school English teachers through a narrative inquiry method. The investigation reveals that both teachers, either consciously or unconsciously, integrate SAT into their grammar teaching designs, and each has experienced a period of adaptation in aligning the theory with their teaching methods. These findings suggest the alignment of SAT with the natural process of student learning, offering valuable insights and a framework for guiding English language instruction.

Keywords—narrative study, skill acquisition theory, second language teaching, grammar teaching design

I. INTRODUCTION

Anderson suggested that acquiring a skill is a function of the automaticity of operating processes [1]. He divides these processes into three stages: the cognitive, the associative, and the autonomous. According to Chapelle, this theory falls under the category of general human learning, i.e., it focuses on “language learning as a process of human learning” [2]. In other words, in Skill Acquisition Theory (SAT), learning language just like learning other skills can be acquired by practice and experiencing several stages.

SAT offers educators an integrated approach that emphasizes both structure and meaning, thereby rendering second language learning more psychologically coherent [3]. Consequently, when applied to classroom pedagogy, this theory empowers teachers to craft educational activities with a keen understanding of students’ psychological dynamics, leading to the attainment of aligned instructional outcomes.

The requirement of English knowledge in Chinese senior high school is in line with the learning process of SAT. In China, senior high school English, guided by the 2017 version of the General High School English Curriculum Standard (revised in 2020) [4], is characterized by a wide range of knowledge as well as high requirements for comprehensive ability. English learning is not only accumulation of vocabulary, but also language use and understanding. Therefore, teachers in high schools cannot achieve their teaching objectives by only repeating explanations about the key points [5]. Instead, they should be good at guiding students and promoting students’ internalization of knowledge through extended targeted training to achieve meaningful learning. Students’ learning process in this kind of teaching is similar to the learning process in SAT, in which learners need to go through

repeated meaningful drills and receive feedback at the right time in order to realize knowledge transformation, enabling meaningful learning, and realizing knowledge automation [6].

Our study employs narrative inquiry as its research method to explore the grammar teaching designs of two high school teachers who have different understandings of SAT. Understanding how Chinese high school teachers adapt their teaching designs to reflect the cognitive, associative, and autonomous stages of SAT can inform educational policy and teacher training programs. It can also contribute to the development of more effective teaching strategies that cater to the diverse learning needs of students, ultimately enhancing the quality of English language high school teaching in China.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the early 1970s, there has been a “narrative turn” in social sciences [7]. This development has established narrative inquiry as a bona fide methodological approach across the spectrum of social research [8 and 9]. Barkhuizen observed that narrative research has become a catchall term for qualitative research that focuses on participants’ experiences [9]. Narratives-in-interaction, as a narrative data collection approach, draws on studies of talk-in-interaction in naturally occurring conversation. And short extracts from transcribed research interviews are used as data in applied linguistics [10]. Advocates of this approach often refer to their data as small stories, in contrast to the big stories of life history research [11–13]. Researchers believe that this approach not only provides insights into narrative discourse, but also into language learning and teaching issues [10].

Given its strong connection to second language instruction, SAT has been a focal point for numerous studies examining learner performance across various developmental stages following practice. For instance, Hui and Daniel have investigated the impact of diverse corrective procedures on learners’ English listening proficiency [14]. Similarly, scholar Saito and Lyster have concentrated on improving learners’ pronunciation based on different types of feedback [15]. Nonetheless, seldom researches delve into teachers’ comprehension of SAT, particularly through narrative inquiry. The focus on teachers’ understanding through narrative inquiry contributes to the refinement of teaching design and the enhancement of student learning.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a term for a variety of approaches in which stories of the experience of language learning and teaching are in focus [10]. As Golombek and Johnson aptly observe, this approach offers a way of “getting at what teachers know, what they do with what they know and the sociocultural contexts within which they teach [16].”

In addition, this study adopted interactive narratives as an approach to collect data. This approach, which is emerging in research on language learning and teaching, often draws on research interviews, but instead of focusing on the narrative represented by the participant’s contribution to the interview as a whole, it focuses on short stretches of narrative within the interview [10].

In this study, we engaged with stories that teacher participants told us about their work, with a particular focus on narratives about how they dealt with their own transitions during the adjustment period and the design of their grammar lessons after the transition.

B. Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection period for this study lasts for more than a year. The research incorporated an immersive approach to understanding the experiences of two high school English teachers with varying levels of teaching experience. Their stories were captured through interactive narratives and detailed recordings, as well as an overview of their classroom practices. The primary source of data for this research is the “Talk-in-interaction” happened in naturally occurring conversation, which is complemented by selected excerpts from transcribed interviews, offering a rich context for analysis. In China, General High School English Curriculum Standards serve as official documents that provide teachers with guidance and a framework for teaching knowledge. For this reason, this study also considered the requirements for teachers and students in the 2017 version of the General High School English Curriculum Standard (revised in 2020) to provide a basis for subsequent analysis. Information of these two teachers and a brief description of their classes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Information of two English teachers

Pseudonym	Age group	Teaching years	Course	Systematically studied teaching theory or not?	Knew SAT theory or not?
Teacher H	20–30	0.3	Senior high school English	yes	yes
Teacher F	40–50	22	Senior high school English	yes	no

Initial communication took place naturally, focusing primarily on their reflections on their teaching experiences and their interactions with students. These exchanges provided a foundation for understanding their perspectives and emotions as high school English teachers. Later, more structured interviews were conducted to delve deeper, offering a comprehensive supplement of detailed insights into their professional lives and pedagogical approaches. The conversation with Teacher H occurred 11 months ago

(August 2023), shortly after she started her new job, and it was a natural discussion about the teaching profession. The conversation with Teacher F took place about two years ago (October 2022), originally unrelated to teaching, but evolving into a discussion about the significant transformations she had experienced in her twenty-plus years teaching career. Subsequently, for research objectives, two separate one-hour online interviews were conducted with each teacher in September and October 2023, separately.

C. Teachers’ Grammar Teaching Design under the Guidance of the Curriculum Standards

The interviews centered on their short stories, which were mainly about their grammar teaching design at different stages throughout the time period from when they first became teachers to the present day and what they learned at that time.

The reason why we choose grammar teaching design as an analysis example is that the students’ grammar learning process is similar to the learning process described by SAT. According to the 2017 version of the General High School English Curriculum Standard (revised in 2020) [4], in the Compulsory Section, high school students are explicitly required to learn to realize the grammatical knowledge in language and ultimately to use grammatical knowledge effectively in contexts to understand and express meaning, which is a unity of “form-meaning-use”. Grasping grammatical knowledge in a unity of “form-meaning-use” is just like going through cognitive, associative, and automatic stages in SAT. As for teachers, they should closely follow the text book, flexibly use teaching material, and enable students to unconsciously master language knowledge.

The curriculum standard put special emphasis on grammar leaning. And the two teachers told us that it was very challenging for them to tailor grammar teaching design into students’ language level. They both had a struggling experience on adjusting their grammar teaching design. By investigating the adjustment period of two teachers through their grammar teaching design, we can provide other teachers with valuable references, helping them better understand and apply principles of grammar teaching design, and ultimately improving students’ grammar learning outcomes.

IV. RESULTS

A. ‘It Was a Process of Slow Transformation’: Teacher H’s Story

Teacher H, a recent English language graduate, embarked on her teaching journey at R Senior High School in H City in August. With a childhood dream of becoming a teacher, she embraced the profession despite initial challenges. Prior to her appointment, she studied pedagogical theories and SAT basics. R High School provided practical training, but H realized the disparity between theory and practice during her first few months. She said, “Despite the many difficulties I have encountered since joining the profession, I am still enjoying it and love working with the students.” H’s love for the teaching profession is also why she has since continued to keep her lessons improving to maximize student progress.

Adhering to the 3P (Presentation, Practice, Production) model in grammar lessons, H found her students progressing slowly. Luckily, her homeroom teacher identity, which made

her had more opportunity to interact with students, helping her to adjust the teaching design based on their feedback.

At R Senior High School, there is a rule for new teachers that the first semester of a new teacher's employment will be assessed by two in-school competitions, and the first competition would be held at the end of October. According to H, she started to prepare for the test at the beginning of October. During the preparation period, she endeavored to revise her teaching design according to the students' feedback. Simultaneously, she was committed to maintaining the coherence and effectiveness of her classroom instruction. Her diligent efforts brought a successful test outcome. This achievement not only bolstered her resolve but also reinforced her confidence to implement changes in her teaching approach. She also sought advice from a senior teacher, who highlighted the importance of crafting lessons that are more purposefully aligned with student-centered learning objectives. The experience made her realize that "there is a difference between actual teaching practice and theory." And she claimed that she went through "a process of slow transformation."

Incorporating her colleague's advice and SAT, H redesigned her grammar lessons based on students' learning stages. She gave an example of her lesson using the present perfect tense, which is considered a difficult tense to learn in high school.

(1) First of all, in order for students to understand the present perfect tense, she divided the lesson into two steps. She would first explain the present perfect tense itself, and then compared it with other tenses to help students understand its meaning and the situations in which it is used. These elements would probably take up the whole lesson.

This teaching design helped her students to reach the cognitive stage of recognizing and understanding what the present perfect tense is.

(2) In the following lesson, in order to help the students to further understand the contexts in which the present perfect tense occurs, H would explain what kind of time gerunds and adverbs occur in the present perfect tense, using "ever since", "already", etc. as examples. At this point, she would choose a text with the present perfect tense and ask students to internalize the tense by drawing out the present perfect sentences and telling the meaning of the sentence tense through what they have learned.

This design aimed to promote her students to get to associative stage. At this stage, her students could internalize the knowledge and had the ability to use present perfect tense in certain context.

(3) In the next lessons, she chose single-sentence exercises in which students complete the morphing of verbs through the temporal gerunds in the sentences, some of which were in other tenses but overwhelmingly in the present perfect tense. At this stage she aimed for students to increase their proficiency in associating the present perfect with the time gerund. Students could achieve a better understanding of the context in which the present perfect tense occurs or even might be motivated to get answers naturally and quickly in the college entrance exams through this period of training.

In this stage, her grammar teaching design helps her students to be automatic, performing the present perfect tense better and faster.

The brief description of teacher H's grammar teaching design is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Teacher H's grammar teaching design

	Stage1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Activities	Explaining the definition; Introducing the context	Students' active application of judgments in discourse	A large number of grammar exercises
Stages of SAT	Cognitive	Associative	Automatic

From the above description, we can see that H's transformation aligned her teaching with SAT, moving from a focus on lesson completeness to student acquisition stages. This shift improved her students' performance. Therefore, H, who plans to continue to use this effective teaching design.

B. 'It Doesn't Surprise Me That it Fits with SAT Theory': Teacher F's Story

Teacher F, a seasoned English teacher, embarked on her teaching journey in 2001 after graduating from the English Education Department of H City Normal University. In the past 22 years, she has honed her craft at N Senior High School in H City, adapting her teaching design to better suit her students' needs. For her own teaching, F commented this way, "What remains unchanged is the framework of English knowledge, meanwhile, my teaching design have to make progress all the time during these years."

In the early years of her career, teacher F, armed with a wealth of educational theories, struggled to see tangible progress in her students. "However, in practice, I found that my students' progress was very slow, and I felt frustrated that my teaching was only based on the text books. This situation improved after the first full term of teaching from 2005 to 2008," Teacher F said. During this period, she had more time to devote herself to teaching, and she was determined to change her previous predicament. She aimed to make her lessons more accessible to her students and to avoid mechanical training. Her efforts paid off, with students showing positive results in both their regular work and the college entrance exam. F said: "The students in this period also helped me tremendously, and their motivation and good foundation in foreign languages ensured my teaching design implemented smoothly."

F credits her students for her confidence in teaching, citing a grammar lesson on the present perfect tense as an example.

(1) Initially, she focused on identifying sentences that utilized the present perfect tense within the discourse. She instructed her students to contrast these with sentences in other tenses. After explaining the basic definition, she encouraged students to find more examples in the text.

During this period, what she designed was helpful for students to reach the cognitive stage, where students actively observed and knew the grammar knowledge.

(2) In the next part of the lesson, F provided another discourse for students to actively identify the present perfect tense and discussed their understanding. She also included practice exercises of appropriate difficulty.

During this period, teacher F's design inspired students' initiative to have their own understanding on present perfect tense and to be more familiar with this knowledge. It helped

students to reach the associative stage.

(3) To avoid mechanical repetition, F reduced the number of practice questions, instead, prompting students to actively identify and discuss sentences in the present perfect tense. She monitored their understanding through quizzes that included questions on the present perfect tense.

Her approach aligns with the autonomous stage, where students achieve mastery through regular quizzes and teacher-led error corrections.

The brief description of teacher H’s grammar teaching design is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Teacher F’s grammar teaching design

	Stage1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Activities	Teacher explaining the definition; Students’ active observation	Student’s sharing about their own understanding; Doing exercises	Regular quizzes
Stages of SAT	Cognitive	Associative	Automatic

Teacher F’s grammar teaching design reflects a transformation from focusing solely on her own teaching theories to basing her lessons on her students’ level of understanding and needs. Her approach aligns with the three stages of SAT: the cognitive stage, the associative stage, and the autonomous stage.

Although F was not familiar with SAT during her college studies, after knowing about the three distinct phases of SAT, F thought that her grammar lessons in the present perfect tense actually reflected these three phases, and said, “Grammar lessons have a more stable knowledge framework and teaching objectives. And my teaching activities are designed based on students’ level of understanding and to promote student autonomy, so I am not surprised that my grammar lessons are in line with SAT.”

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to explore how two senior high school English teachers in China developed their teaching practices under the guidance of the 2017 version of the General High School English Curriculum Standard (revised in 2020) and to see whether they apply SAT in their teaching practice either consciously or unconsciously. By examining the chronological narratives of these teachers’ professional journeys—from their initial entry into the profession to the development of teaching designs that currently meet their needs—the similarities between their respective designs have been highlighted. Despite variations in the duration of their teaching careers, they went through similar stages, and both teachers eventually embodied SAT in their teaching, especially in grammar teaching.

Both Teacher H and Teacher F received systematic training in teaching theories. And when they first became teachers, they both went through a period of adjustment, a period of mismatch between the theories and the application of the theories. And both H and F passed through this period with anxiety, but eventually they both found a workable way of teaching to apply theories into practice.

Reflecting upon SAT in her early educational journey,

Teacher H crafted her initial grammar lesson plan around its three foundational stages. Each stage in the grammar lesson corresponds to one of the three stages of language learning: the cognitive, the associative, or the automatic phase. In addition, H made full use of her role as a homeroom teacher to communicate with her students and set the suitable level of the exercises for her students, which ultimately improved her teaching efficiency and enabled her to pass the adjustment period quickly and build her confidence as a teacher.

Teacher F has been teaching for a much longer time, and her adjustment period is also much longer. She went through a 3–5-year adjustment period, and her transformation came firstly from the fact that she had more time to devote to teaching after 2005. In addition, the feedback she received from her students was very encouraging. Thereafter, she had her own views on grammar lessons, which had an inherently stable structure and required teachers to teach in three stages. This was also the reason why F’s grammar teaching design was relevant to SAT even though she did not know it.

In summary, both Teacher H and Teacher F, guided by the 2017 version of the General High School English Curriculum Standard (revised in 2020), designed their grammar teaching to reflect the declarative, associative and automatic stages of students’ language skills learning, and ultimately to achieve students’ internalization as well as comprehensible use of knowledge through teaching. This is in line with the requirement of the curriculum that high school students should learn to realize that grammatical knowledge is a unity of “form-meaning-use”. Narrative research as a methodology brings this research closer to the psychological and cognitive factors behind the different stages of teachers’ transformation. We believe that it is common for language teachers to go through a period of adjustment to recognize the patterns of student learning and to truly apply pedagogical theories to their teaching practice. And for grammar lessons, applying SAT into practice can help language teachers design their teaching process scientifically and effectively.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Xinyue Zhang conceptualized the research idea and designed the study. She also conducted the interviews, transcribed the recordings, and performed the initial analysis to draft the manuscript; Jie Gao provided theoretical insights and the methodology. She revised the manuscript and offered critical feedback and suggestions; both authors had approved the final version.

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