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Improving the Use of English Subjunctive Mood in Remote Conditionals: A Pedagogical Framework for Chinese Learners

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Abstract: This study explores the challenges Chinese learners face when using the English subjunctive mood in remote conditionals, a grammatical structure that expresses hypothetical or unreal situations. Rooted in the author's personal struggles and broader observations among Chinese postgraduate students, the paper investigates the cognitive and linguistic barriers stemming from differences between Chinese and English grammar. The study identifies key issues such as confusion between declarative and subjunctive moods, misuse of verb tenses, and modal verb errors, often caused by negative language transfer and intralingual overgeneralization. Drawing on second language acquisition theories and contrastive analysis, the paper highlights how learners' reliance on first language structures and insufficient feedback can hinder accurate subjunctive usage. The pedagogical response proposed integrates two established models: ESA (Engage, Study, Activate) and ARC (Authentic use, Restricted use, Clarification). This integrated framework emphasizes learner motivation, contextual understanding, and structured practice. By aligning teaching strategies with learners' pragmatic needs and cognitive processes, the study offers a systematic and communicative approach to improve both recognition and production of the subjunctive mood in English. The framework is designed to support more meaningful and accurate language use in academic and real-world contexts and to enhance learners' grammatical competence and communicative confidence.

Keywords: subjunctive mood; remote conditionals; Chinese learners; language transfer; grammar pedagogy

1. Introduction

Grammar plays a central role in English learning, serving not only as the structural foundation of sentences but also as a vehicle for conveying meaning. Within grammar, the subjunctive mood plays a distinctive role in pragmatics, particularly in expressing demands, recommendations, proposals, resolutions, intentions, and similar concepts [1]. Despite its importance, the subjunctive mood continues to pose significant difficulties for Chinese learners of English. This study was inspired by a classroom discussion among a group of Chinese postgraduate international students, during which many of us expressed confusion and uncertainty about the usage and interpretation of the English subjunctive mood. Reflecting on my own high school experience, I often struggled to memorize the grammatical rules and repeatedly made errors in exams and writing tasks [2]. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the specific difficulties commonly encountered by Chinese learners—drawing from my own experiences—and to offer practical

pedagogical suggestions for overcoming these challenges. Through this investigation, I hope to contribute insights that may benefit other learners facing similar struggles.

This study begins by providing the context and background of my difficulties in learning the English subjunctive mood, detailing the specific challenges I encountered. Following this, these difficulties will be analyzed in depth, exploring the grammatical complexities and the reasons behind my struggles. In the subsequent section, I will review relevant literature on the subjunctive mood, focusing on both its linguistic features and the teaching strategies that can be applied to overcome the difficulties learners face [3]. Finally, the paper will propose a tailored solution to address these challenges, incorporating insights from the literature and reflecting on my own learning experience. By the end of this study, a comprehensive approach will be suggested to help learners with similar difficulties improve their understanding and use of the subjunctive mood.

2. Context and Problem

The subjunctive mood is one of the key components in English grammar instruction in Chinese high schools. The national curriculum standards explicitly require students to understand and correctly use subjunctive structures in various contexts, including conditional sentences, expressions of wishes, and suggestions. Instruction focuses particularly on mastering the subjunctive mood in conditional sentences, with emphasis on the correct use of verb forms in hypothetical contexts—for example, using were to express situations that are contrary to present reality [4]. As a Chinese high school student, I was required to acquire the subjunctive mood in these contexts as part of classroom instruction. Before being introduced to the subjunctive, I had already learned and become familiar with the declarative mood, adverbial conditional clauses, and the basic rules of English verb inflection.

My English teacher explained the rules and usage of the subjunctive mood in subordinate clauses as outlined in the textbook. The teacher began with conditional sentences, where the subjunctive mood is commonly used [5]. It was divided into three types: one where the if-clause contradicts a present fact, one where the if-clause contradicts a past fact, and one where the if-clause imagines an unlikely future scenario. For example, in present hypothetical situations, the verb in the subordinate clause should be in the past tense (using “were” for the verb “be”), and the main clause verb should be formed with a modal verb (should/would/could/might) plus the base form of the verb.

Despite this explanation, I found myself repeatedly making mistakes in producing sentences correctly. I struggled to distinguish between the subjunctive mood and the declarative mood, especially in conditional sentences. For instance, I made errors like:

If she worked harder, she could get a promotion next year.

If I had known about the concert, I would have gone.

Additionally, the complexity of the subjunctive mood increases when dealing with mixed conditional sentences, which combine two types of conditional clauses: Type II (contrary to present or future facts) and Type III (contrary to past facts). I often confused the tenses of these clauses, which led to incorrect verb forms. For example:

If I had studied harder last year, I would have been in a better job now.

If I were you, I would take the job offer.

This confusion discouraged my confidence in learning the subjunctive mood, and negatively affected my grammar learning progress.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Features of Subjunctive Mood

The subjunctive mood is one of the three basic moods in English, alongside the indicative and imperative moods, and is used to express non-factual or hypothetical contexts,

such as assumptions, wishes, requests, and suggestions [6]. It conveys unreality or requirements through contextual cues, modal verbs (e.g., "should"), and specific verb forms, such as the plain form in "I suggest that he remain".

Traditionally, the subjunctive mood is classified into present and past subjunctive (e.g., "were" in "If I were rich"), defined by changes in verb inflection to express meaning . However, it was proposed that it should be characterized as a syntactic structure rather than solely a morphological feature [7]. This means the subjunctive mood emerges from the overall sentence structure, not just the verb form, and is typically found in specific contexts like conditional clauses (e.g., "Were he to arrive...").

The subjunctive mood is marked by the absence of subject-verb agreement and the use of past verb forms to indicate hypothetical scenarios, which distinguish it from indicative constructions and highlight its role in expressing speaker intent or hypothetical scenarios.

Based on the framework, the subjunctive mood applies specifically to remote conditionals which express hypothetical situations that are contrary to reality or highly unlikely to occur [8]. This type of conditional construction is characterised by the grammatical marking of modal remoteness, and its standard form consists of a protasis (the if-clause) and an apodosis (the main clause). Remote conditionals can be categorised into three types according to the temporal reference of the condition—namely, whether the hypothetical situation refers to the present, past, or future [9].

First, present unreal conditionals refer to situations that contradict current reality. Their structure is typically If + subject + were (modal preterite) in the protasis and would/could/might + base verb in the apodosis. For example, If I were taller, I would play basketball implies that the speaker is not tall at present, and therefore does not play basketball. In contrast, past unreal conditionals describe events that did not happen in the past. These are typically formed using If + subject + had + past participle in the protasis and would/could/might + have + past participle in the apodosis, as in If he had come, we would have started, where the speaker is stating that he did not come, and therefore the action did not happen. The third category, future hypotheticals, refers to low-probability events that might happen in the future [10]. The protasis typically takes the form If + subject + were to or should + base verb, while the apodosis remains would/could/might + base verb. An example is If she were to agree, I would be surprised, indicating that her agreement is unlikely.

The final type, often referred to in pedagogical contexts as a mixed conditional, is sometimes termed a "doubly remote conditional" due to its combination of past and present/future time references [11]. These sentences combine a past-time protasis with a present- or future-time apodosis, reflecting that because something failed to happen in the past, a current or future consequence cannot be realised. For instance, If I had studied medicine, I would be a doctor now implies that the speaker did not study medicine in the past, and thus cannot be a doctor now [12]. These constructions are particularly useful for expressing regret about past actions or engaging in hypothetical reasoning that links past events to unrealized present or future outcomes. In this case, the protasis follows the If + had + past participle structure, while the apodosis typically uses would/could/might + base verb. This classification of remote conditionals provides an essential foundation for understanding learner difficulties and informs instructional approaches that clarify the relationship between verb form, time reference, and reality status in the subjunctive mood.

While the indicative mood expresses real or assumed factual events through regular tense and subject-verb agreement, the subjunctive mood operates in non-real contexts and is often marked by reduced or altered verb morphology. However, the formal differences between the two moods are often minimal and difficult to discern. In particular, within past-time counterfactual conditionals, the only overt morphological distinction lies in the use of the verb be: while the indicative mood uses was for first and third person singular subjects, the subjunctive mood employs were, giving rise to what has been called the

were-subjunctive [13]. For second person and plural subjects, both moods use were, making them formally indistinguishable in these cases. As a result, learners often conflate the two moods, leading to errors in both form and interpretation. This underscores the importance of shifting the focus of instruction from purely morphological recognition to a deeper understanding of the contextual meaning and modal function of the subjunctive mood.

3.2. Language Transfer

It was pointed out that when learners acquire a second language (L2), they often apply linguistic knowledge, structural rules, and processing strategies from their first language (L1). This is called language transfer. Transfer itself is a neutral phenomenon that can facilitate learning when L1 and L2 are similar, but may also result in errors when structural differences exist between the two languages. For example, both Chinese and English use subject–verb–object word order [14]. This may help Chinese learners understand English sentence structure. However, Chinese verbs do not change with tense or subject. So, Chinese learners may ignore verb inflections in English, such as -ed or -ing endings. This causes typical transfer errors.

Researchers viewed language transfer as a cognitive process. It includes several stages: input recognition, structural mapping, hypothesis formation and testing, error formation, and restructuring or fossilisation.

In the input stage, learners use L1 knowledge to understand L2 input. They focus more on parts that are similar to their L1. In structural mapping, they apply L1 grammar rules to L2. This helps them build their first understanding of the new language. Then, learners test these rules by using them in speaking or writing. If their understanding is wrong, they will produce errors. These errors are not random. Learners repeat them because the rules in their minds are not yet correct. If learners receive useful feedback, such as corrections or good input, they may fix their errors. Their internal grammar becomes closer to the target language. But if there is no feedback, the errors may become fixed. These are called fossilised errors.

Over time, learners develop an interlanguage. This is a language system between L1 and L2. It operates under internally consistent rules that differ from both L1 and L2. Language transfer shapes this system and affects how it changes. It also gives researchers a way to observe the process of language learning.

Errors in language learning can be predicted and projected. Lado (1957) proposed the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), which posits that difficulties in second language acquisition often arise from structural differences between the native language (L1) and the target language (L2). He argued that by systematically comparing the linguistic structures of L1 and L2, it is possible to predict the errors learners are likely to make during the language acquisition process. The central tenet of CAH is that most of the learners' errors can be anticipated by analyzing the linguistic differences between the two languages.

However, it was critiqued the strong version of the contrastive hypothesis. He contended that language learning difficulties are not solely attributable to structural differences between L1 and L2, but are also influenced by various factors, including cognitive processes, the complexity of the target language, and teaching methods. Despite this critique, Wardhaugh acknowledges the core idea of the contrastive analysis hypothesis, emphasizing that contrastive analysis remains valuable for understanding and predicting learners' errors.

Based on CAH, the differences between the subjunctive mood in Chinese and English can be analyzed by recognizing that English is grammar-driven, using verb tense backshifting and modal verbs like "would" and "could" to express hypothetical situations. In contrast, Chinese is context-driven, relying on contextual cues rather than morphological

changes. These differences can be summarized in three major areas: the use of formal grammatical markers, temporal expressions, and modal verbs.

In English: If I had known earlier, I would have helped

In Chinese: If I know earlier, I help.

In expressing the subjunctive mood, English uses verb tense backshifting and modal verbs like "would" and "could" to indicate hypothetical situations. In contrast, Chinese lacks such morphological changes, relying instead on context to convey similar meanings. Additionally, in English, the time of hypothetical situations is marked by verb tense, whereas in Chinese, it is indicated by temporal adverbs, such as "earlier" in example b. Therefore, Chinese native speakers often make errors in using the subjunctive mood in English, such as incorrect tense backshifting (e.g., using present tense instead of past perfect) and misuse of modal verbs (e.g., overusing "would" in both clauses), due to the influence of their native language structure.

In addition to cross-language transfer, linguistic knowledge within the target language can also influence language learning. Specifically, previously learned rules within the target language can affect their current learning, a phenomenon known as intralingual transfer. In our study, students have already learned the rules for declarative sentence intonation and verb inflection. As a result, when learning the subjunctive mood, they may overgeneralize and incorrectly apply the rules of declarative sentence intonation to the subjunctive mood, leading to errors. Such overgeneralization reflects the cognitive strategies learners use when applying internalized rules within the target language, which can hinder their accurate understanding and application of the target language's structure.

3.3. Teaching the Subjunctive Mood

Currently, there is no consensus among scholars regarding whether grammar instruction should follow a form-focused or meaning-focused approach. Advocates of traditional grammar teaching, which emphasizes the systematic presentation and explicit explanation of grammatical rules, argue that such instruction enhances learners' linguistic accuracy, depth of comprehension, productive ability, and error correction. In contrast, critics contend that explicit rule instruction may inhibit the natural process of language acquisition, and that abstract grammar learning is not conducive to the development of communicative competence. At the heart of this debate lies the question of whether grammatical knowledge is best acquired through direct rule teaching or through natural exposure in authentic communicative contexts. Despite this divergence, many scholars agree that grammar instruction should not rely on a single methodological paradigm but should be adapted flexibly to learners' individual characteristics, instructional goals, and the learning context.

Among various instructional models, the PPP approach (Presentation–Practice–Production) remains one of the most widely adopted structured methods in grammar teaching, including in the author's own experience of learning the subjunctive mood. This model supports the incremental acquisition of grammar by following three stages: the introduction of target structures (Presentation), controlled mechanical exercises (Practice), and freer communicative tasks (Production). Its clearly staged format provides teachers with a practical framework for sequencing instruction and allows for flexibility in adapting lesson activities to different learner levels and goals. However, the PPP model has been criticized for being overly teacher-centered and for presuming that language learning proceeds in a fixed, linear sequence. For example, in grammar lessons on the subjunctive mood, teachers typically explain verb forms used in conditional sentences during the Presentation phase. Yet without contextualized input, learners may resort to rote memorization and struggle to grasp the pragmatic functions of such structures. Moreover, many textbooks that adopt PPP tend to isolate grammar items and provide repetitive drills (e.g., substitution, transformation), which may reinforce form but lack opportunities for meaningful use in real-world contexts, thus limiting learners' understanding of grammar as

discourse. The delayed placement of communicative activities in the final stage also fails to harness the role of interaction in raising linguistic awareness.

To address these limitations, it was proposed the ARC model (Authentic use–Restricted use–Clarification). This model prioritizes communicative functionality, beginning with the Authentic use phase, where students engage in open-ended, meaningful tasks that encourage the spontaneous use of target forms. The Restricted use phase then shifts the focus to accuracy through controlled grammar practice, and the Clarification phase integrates form, meaning, and use through teacher-led explanation informed by learners' prior output. Unlike PPP, ARC allows the instructional sequence to be non-linear, granting teachers greater flexibility to adapt stages based on classroom dynamics and learner needs.

Researcher further critiques PPP for its neglect of learner motivation. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), learning motivation—particularly intrinsic motivation—is influenced by three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan). In the PPP model, the Presentation and Practice stages are often highly controlled, providing learners with limited autonomy, low engagement, and few opportunities for social interaction or personal achievement. In response, Researcher introduced the ESA model (Engage–Study–Activate), which places engagement at the forefront of the lesson. By incorporating interesting and emotionally resonant activities from the outset, this model seeks to capture learners' attention and foster intrinsic motivation, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of grammar learning.

4. Possible Solution

Given the complexity of the subjunctive mood itself in terms of both structure and meaning, this paper argues that its teaching should be based on pragmatic functions rather than focusing on formal explanations alone. By guiding students to understand the contexts in which subjunctive mood applies, and helping them to distinguish between subjunctive mood and declarative voice so that they can choose the correct grammatical form when expressing hypothetical situations, this paper can effectively deal with the challenges of negative language transfer and form confusion. Relying on the traditional PPP (Presentation-Practice-Production) model alone, it is difficult to meet the students' needs for understanding and utilizing grammatical structures in real contexts. Therefore, this paper suggests integrating the ESA model with the ARC model to construct a more interactive, contextualized and cognitively supported pathway for teaching subjunctive mood. This integrated model not only leverages the advantages of the ESA model in fostering motivation and emotional engagement, but also combines the ARC model's emphasis on authentic communication and form-meaning-usage integration, which helps students to master difficult structures such as tense regression and modal verbs in subjunctive mood in a more systematic way.

The specific teaching process can be set as follows: In the first stage of "Engage + Authentic use", the teacher sets up a context of contrasting virtual and real situations or guides the students to watch relevant video clips to help them perceive the non-correspondence between the real situation and the real statement expressed by subjunctive mood. Teachers help students perceive the pragmatic difference between imagined scenarios and actual situations by setting a contrasting context or guiding them to watch relevant video clips, and then organize hypothetical discussions to guide students to naturally generate the structure of the subjunctive mood. In the second stage, "Study + Restricted use" (Study + Restricted use), which focuses on the accurate mastery of language forms, the teacher can combine structured explanations with mechanical drills to guide students to master the verb changes of the main and subordinate clauses in the subjunctive conditional sentences (e.g. were. had + past participle, etc.), had + past participle, etc.) in subjunctive conditional sentences to strengthen their internalization of the rules. The third stage, Activate + Clarification, provides open-ended language production tasks,

such as “If I had gone abroad a year ago...” as a written expression or peer-to-peer oral communication. The teacher provides immediate feedback and clarification based on typical errors in the students' output, and guides them in restructuring the grammatical rules to bring their language use closer to target language norms.

Through the flexible alternation of the key aspects of the ESA and ARC models, teaching can establish an organic link between motivation, rule formation, and deeper pragmatic understanding. This kind of integrated teaching design not only enhances contextualized grammar instruction, but also better responds to the learners' cognitive needs for feedback and systematic regulation during the hypothesis formation and testing stages, which ultimately contributes to the effective acquisition and use of the subjunctive mood in communication.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study offers a valuable contribution to understanding and addressing the persistent difficulties Chinese learners face in mastering the English subjunctive mood, particularly in remote conditional constructions. By combining personal learning experiences with theoretical insights from second language acquisition and contrastive analysis, it identifies the key sources of learner errors, such as negative language transfer, intralingual overgeneralization, and limited contextual understanding. A significant innovation of this research lies in the development of a pedagogical framework that integrates the ESA and ARC models. This dual-model approach responds to both the affective and cognitive needs of learners, fostering motivation through engaging tasks while systematically guiding them toward accurate and meaningful use of complex grammatical structures. The proposed teaching process emphasizes contextualized input, dynamic feedback, and gradual rule internalization, enabling learners to better grasp the pragmatic functions of the subjunctive mood. Ultimately, the study goes beyond identifying problems to offer an actionable and learner-centered solution that can inform grammar instruction in both classroom practice and curriculum design. It contributes not only to the pedagogical discussion on grammar teaching but also to the broader effort of empowering Chinese learners to express complex hypothetical meanings with clarity and confidence in academic and communicative contexts.

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