

How to Teach Grammar Based on Three-Dimensional Grammar View in Senior High School

Yafei Xiao

China West Normal University, Nanchong, China

Abstract

Grammar is essential for effective communication and academic success in senior high school English. However, traditional grammar teaching often relies on memorization and isolated rules, making it difficult for students to use grammar in real-world contexts. The three-dimensional grammar view, proposed by Larsen-Freeman, focuses on integrating grammar's form, meaning, and use. This paper highlights common challenges in traditional grammar teaching, such as a lack of context and overemphasis on rules, and proposes strategies for applying the three-dimensional approach in high school classrooms. The proposed strategies include connecting grammar with thematic contexts, using multi-modal materials to explore form and meaning, designing meaningful practice to apply grammar in context, and encouraging real-life use through communicative activities. An instructional example on teaching attributive clauses illustrates how this approach improves students' ability to understand and apply grammar dynamically. By integrating the three dimensions of grammar, this method helps students see grammar as a practical communication tool, aligning with modern English curriculum goals and fostering more effective learning outcomes.

Keywords

Grammar Teaching; Three-Dimensional Grammar View; Strategy; Instructional Design.

1. Introduction

Grammar is a fundamental aspect of language learning, serving as the backbone of effective communication and comprehension. For senior high school students, mastering grammar is not only essential for academic success but also critical for their ability to engage in meaningful communication in both spoken and written forms. However, traditional grammar instruction often focuses on isolated rules and rote memorization, which may limit students' ability to use grammar in real-world contexts. The English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School (2020 edition, Hereinafter refers to as the new curriculum standards) advocates a three-dimensional dynamic grammar view of "form-meaning-use" oriented by language use. Three-dimensional grammar teaching is a way and concept put forward by Larsen Freeman. She advocates that grammar teaching should be instructed in three aspects-form, meaning and use of grammar, which is followed by a large numbers of teachers. Based on the previous study, the essay summarizes the studies on the theory of three-dimensional grammar and its application in English teaching, aiming at providing effective strategies for grammar teaching based on three-dimensional grammar view in high school.

2. Problems in High School Grammar Teaching

Teaching grammar in senior high schools often poses significant challenges for both educators and students. Despite the importance of grammar in mastering language skills, traditional approaches to teaching it have frequently been criticized for their lack of engagement,

practicality, and effectiveness. Several key issues arise in the process of teaching grammar at this level, which can hinder students' learning and long-term retention.

2.1. Overemphasis on Rules and Memorization

Traditional grammar instruction in high schools often prioritizes teaching grammar rules explicitly. Students are expected to memorize complex definitions, structures, and exceptions without fully understanding their relevance or functionality. For example, students might learn about verb tenses or subject-verb agreement through theoretical explanations, but they struggle to apply these rules in their writing or speaking. This approach can make grammar feel like a purely mechanical process, disconnected from its purpose as a tool for communication. Consequently, students may find grammar tedious and fail to develop the deeper understanding necessary for practical use.

2.2. Lack of Context

Grammar lessons frequently use isolated sentences or artificial examples, such as, "She is reading a book," to teach specific structures. While this might clarify grammatical forms, it rarely reflects authentic language use in real-life situations. Without contextualized examples, students cannot see how grammar helps construct meaning in conversations, essays, or other forms of communication. This gap often leads to a lack of transferability, where students know the rules but fail to apply them effectively in practical contexts, such as writing essays or participating in discussions.

2.3. Limited Integration of Form, Meaning, and Use

Many teaching methods focus predominantly on form—the structure of grammar (e.g., how to form the past tense). However, they often neglect meaning (the function or purpose of the grammatical structure) and use (how the structure is applied in context). For example, students may learn to form the passive voice but fail to understand why or when it is used in communication. This lack of integration results in a fragmented understanding of grammar, where students know how to construct sentences but cannot use them effectively in meaningful contexts.

2.4. Assessment Focused Solely on Accuracy

Grammar assessments in high schools often emphasize error correction and accuracy, such as identifying and fixing mistakes in isolated sentences or completing multiple-choice tests. While accuracy is important, these types of assessments do not measure a student's ability to use grammar effectively in real-world communication. For instance, a student might perform well on a grammar test but struggle to write coherent paragraphs or participate in discussions because their focus has been on avoiding mistakes rather than using grammar dynamically.

3. Three-Dimensional Grammar View

According to Larson-Freeman, the grammar is a complete system consisting of form, meaning and use. To better reflect the dynamic interplay of the subsystems, Larson-Freeman's three-dimensional grammar is shown in the form of a pie chart.

The form is the first dimension. It includes the visible or audible language units:

phonology, graphology, morphology, semiology, and syntax. Phonology is the study of the sound system of a language. Graphology is the study of the grapheme, which is the smallest constructed unit in the system of writing. Morphology is the study of morphemes, including the inflections and the function words. Semiology refers to the signs and signing language. The syntax is about a set of rules in a language. It specifies how words from different parts of speech fit together to express a complete idea.

The second dimension is meaning or semantics which is encoded in language. That is the denotation of a particular form we will learn if we look up a dictionary, the referential meaning without the context. The meaning can be lexical or grammatical.

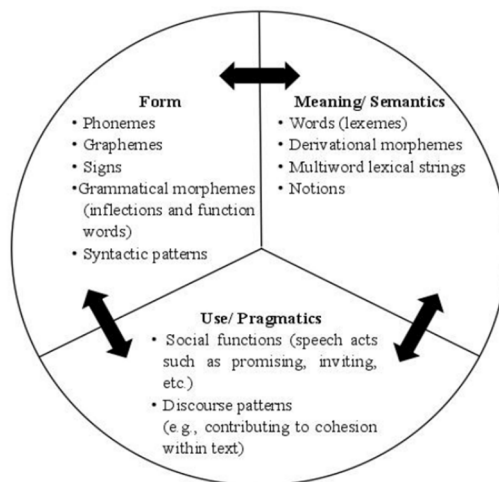


Fig 1. Larson-Freeman's three-dimensional grammar

The third dimension is the use or pragmatics, which is the meaning of language in communicative situations. Pragmatics highlights the purpose of the speakers' use of language. Although the three dimensions of grammar play different roles in the language, Larson-Freeman emphasizes that they are equally important in the language. These three dimensions are not "in an ascending hierarchy" but "in a non-hierarchical fashion" which emphasizes the dynamic interplay of the subsystems (Larsen-Freeman 2005: 34-48). Larsen-Freeman believes that these three dimensions are interconnected and dynamic. A dimension will vary with the change the other two dimensions

4. Strategies for the Application of Three-Dimensional Grammar View in High School Grammar Teaching

4.1. Provide a Context by Connecting Grammar Teaching with Thematic Context

The theme provides a thematic scope or contextual framework for language learning (Ministry of Education, 2020). In classrooms guided by thematic meaning, teachers should create contexts closely related to the theme. In grammar teaching, teachers should focus on presenting new grammar knowledge within a context. They should guide students to observe the usage scenarios, expressive forms, and pragmatic functions of the grammar items being learned within that context (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The curriculum standards also clearly state that overall teaching objectives for units should be developed to foster core competencies. Unit-based integrated teaching is based on textbooks and uses a systems approach to analyze, reorganize, and integrate content with inherent connections within the textbook to form relatively complete teaching units. Under the guidance of a holistic view of teaching, it systematically plans the elements of teaching to optimize instructional design and improve teaching outcomes (Lü Shihu et al., 2016).

Teachers should carefully study the teaching content of the unit, analyze, reorganize, and integrate it, plan unit lessons, and create an overall unit context. In the overall unit context, the contexts for grammar teaching become more coherent and systematic. Additionally, the

contexts set in grammar lessons should connect with the previous lesson or preceding lessons, forming an integrated teaching context for the unit.

4.2. Present Multi-modal Discourses to Learn the Form and Understand the Meaning

Discourses are the fundamental carriers of language learning (Ministry of Education, 2020). Discourses used in language teaching are often presented in multi-modal forms, including oral and written texts, as well as audio and video materials. When selecting discourses, teachers should include various types, including multi-modal discourses (Ministry of Education, 2020). By presenting multi-modal discourses and designing activities such as listening, speaking, reading, and viewing, teachers guide students to perceive and acquire the forms of target grammar.

Listening activities involve students identifying target grammar forms through listening to dialogues, news, etc. Speaking activities refer to teachers guiding students to produce sentences containing the target grammar through prompts or free conversations. Reading activities involve presenting texts that contain the grammar items directly, with the target grammar highlighted or underlined. Viewing activities involve students learning the target grammar by watching images, charts, videos, etc.

Additionally, multi-modal discourses should be closely related to students' real lives. During the input process, teachers should provide students with authentic language materials rich in the target grammatical structures. They should guide students to focus on the forms of the language, the communicative contexts in which they are used, and understand their meanings and functions (Cheng Xiaotang, 2013).

After presenting grammar items through multi-modal discourses, teachers should guide students to focus on the meanings of the grammar items within the context. This can be done through methods such as observing the forms first and then exploring their meanings, group discussions, or providing meanings and asking students to match or select the corresponding grammar forms. These methods help students develop structured grammatical knowledge.

4.3. Focus on the Use of Grammar by Meaningful Practice

The Curriculum Standards state that the goal of grammar teaching in high school English is to enable students, on the basis of consolidating and expanding their existing grammar knowledge, to appropriately use the learned grammar knowledge in context to understand and express meaning.

Teachers can design meaning-focused exercises to guide students in using target grammar within specific contexts. Meaning-focused exercises involve creating concrete contexts and prioritizing the understanding and expression of meaning. These exercises are considered semi-controlled and may include tasks like cloze tests without multiple-choice options or completing tasks based on picture instructions (Jia Fan et al., 2023). The contexts for meaning-focused exercises also need to align with the unit theme and fit the thematic context. Designing meaningful practice activities based on the thematic context helps students correctly use grammatical structures while understanding thematic meaning, thereby establishing a connection between language form and meaning and effectively internalizing grammar knowledge (Zhang Fang, 2021).

Teachers can implement activities such as context-based sentence completion, cloze tests without options, picture descriptions, picture matching, and fill-in-the-blank tasks based on pictures. When designing these activities, teachers should consider whether the activities align with the unit's thematic context, whether there is coherence between activities, and whether the difficulty level progresses incrementally.

4.4. Achieve Grammar Use in Real Life by Communicative Practice

Swain's (2005) Output Hypothesis suggests that successful second language learners need not only a large amount of comprehensible input but also comprehensible output. During the output process, teachers should encourage students to select appropriate language forms to produce semantically coherent texts that convey real communicative meaning (Cheng Xiaotang, 2013). The stage of using target grammar involves students applying the target grammar in new contexts to express meaning appropriately, accurately, and effectively, thereby transforming their skills into competence (Hou Shuchen & Yang Na, 2020).

Communicative exercises integrate grammar learning with purposeful language communication. These activities are open-ended in both process and outcome, and the feedback provided to learners is less controlled. Examples include role-playing, debates, and more (Jia Fan et al., 2023). Speaking activities may include role-playing in new contexts, creating dialogues, debating, giving oral descriptions, dubbing videos, or performing plays. Writing activities may involve completing projects, creating posters, writing descriptions, or composing letters. Integrated speaking-and-writing activities can combine receptive skills, such as listening, reading, or viewing, as an introduction to a new context. Afterward, students can engage in brainstorming or group discussions to gather the necessary information, culminating in a writing task.

5. Examples of Instructional Design Based on Three-Dimension Grammar View

5.1. Procedures of the Instructional Design

Step 1: Lead in

(1) Tell students that the teacher wants to share a film with the whole class.

(2) Guide students to guess the name of the film on the basis of the 2 clues given by the teacher.

Clue 1): It is a Chinese film.

Clue 2): The leading role is a cute monster called Wuba.

Analysis:

The intention of step 1 is to arouse students' interest quickly and thus to successfully engage them into the topic to be discussed in this class. In this step, students are also encouraged to make predictions with their background

Step 2: Presentation of New Vocabulary

Ask students to go through the wordlist on the task paper, and guess the Chinese meaning of the new vocabulary according to corresponding English explanations.

magical adj. something to do with magic

release vt. to make sth. known to the public

comedy n. a film/movie that is funny, usually with a happy ending

director n. a person who is responsible for a film/movie

character n. a person or an animal in a film/movie

box office used to describe how successful a film, play, or actor is, by the number of people who pay to see them

Ask students to match the words with their meanings

Analysis:

This step aims to get students prepared both cognitively and psychologically for the reading passage in later steps. For one thing, having some knowledge of the meaning of the new

vocabulary will contribute a lot to a better understanding of the reading passage, for another, students' personal anxiety can be reduced to a very large extent.

Step 3: Skimming

Ask students to read the passage to finish the matching exercise

Analysis:

This step intends to make students grasp the rough idea of this passage in a short time. Meanwhile, students are then exposed to the target language material unconsciously. From the perspective of language skill, students are trained to develop their ability of skimming.

Step 4: Scanning: Group Competition 1

(1) Divide the whole class into 8 groups.

(2) Ask students to read the passage again.

(3) Ask students to discuss in groups and then to underline & sentences in the passage which can be filled in the 8 blanks on the task paper.

(4) Ask group representatives to read the sentences they have found, and the teacher presents relevant pictures on the PowerPoint.

Record the scores each group has got.

Analysis:

In general, there are 3 instructional intentions of this step. Firstly, the students can get detailed information about the passage after a second reading, and they are also trained to apply the reading strategy of scanning. Secondly, the students are exposed to enough language materials that contain attributive clause by filling in the blanks all by themselves. In other words, the form of attributive clause is implicitly presented to students through their initiative accomplishment of group tasks. Thirdly, the tasks are finished in the form of group cooperation and competition, which can stimulate students' motivation and guide them to appreciate the spirit of teamwork to some extent.

Step 5: Analysis of sentence patterns

(1) Present the sentences together on the PPT.

(2) Ask students to observe the underlined parts and figure out their functions in each sentence

(3) Introduce the term 'attributive clause': they are used to give modification or description.

(4) Bring in the term 'antecedent' by asking students to focus on the people or things modified by the attributive clause in each sentence.

(5) Guide students to realize that the underlined parts are not complete sentences.

(6) According to the property of the antecedent, guide students to induct the words (who/ that/ whom/ which/whose) needed to complete the underlined parts, as a result, the term 'relative pronoun' is introduced.

Ask students to read the 8 sentences again and get a clearer understanding of the form and meaning of attributive clause.

Analysis:

Corresponding to Larsen-Freeman's Three-Dimensional Grammar Framework, this step mainly focuses on the instruction of two dimensions: form and meaning. Sub-step (1) to (6) is the inductive teaching of language form, and sub-step (7) mainly leads students to further understand the meaning of English attributive clause. In this step, under the teacher's guidance, students are encouraged to discover and generalize the basic sentence structure and proper relative pronouns of English attributive clause all by themselves. That is to say, the form of attributive clause is presented to students in a contextualized and interesting discourse. During the above process of generalization, the students are thus directed to gain certain knowledge

of the decoded meaning of this sentence structure (that is, to give descriptions or modifications of people or things).

Step 6: Film Description: Group Competition 2

- (1) Present the posters and names of 8 other films.
- (2) Ask each group to choose a film, and then work in groups to write at least 3 attributive clauses to describe it and the characters in it.
- (3) Ask group representatives to give reports about the films they have chosen. And the teacher gives sensitive corrections when necessary.
- (4) Record the scores each group has got.

Analysis:

According to Larsen-Freeman's Three-Dimensional Grammar Framework, this step is designed to conduct the instruction of the use domain of English attributive clause. In this step, students are firstly provided with a contextualized situation, then they are expected to work cooperatively to produce correct and appropriate attributive clause in both written and spoken form. From one point, when deciding which 8 films should be presented, the teacher takes most of the students' interest and preference into account. And students are allowed to produce the target language in written form before they are ready to give oral reports, which can largely reduce students' personal anxiety. From the other point, group competition can be both motivating and entertaining.

Step 7: Summary (8:12—8:14)

- (1) Give summary and comments on each group's performance in the competition.
- (2) Summarize the language points of English attributive clause.

Analysis:

This step aims to give students a formative evaluation of their class performance.

Meanwhile, the summary of language points is expected to make students be fully aware of the language knowledge they need to understand.

5.2. An Overall Analysis of the Instructional Design

The plan is designed to teach English attributive clause under the Three-Dimensional Grammar Framework proposed by American scholar Larsen-Freeman. The teaching of the form, meaning and use of English attributive clause is consciously integrated in the whole teaching procedure.

Form: In this instructional design, the form of English attributive clause refers to its basic sentence pattern and the proper relative pronouns applied to modify or prescribe certain antecedents. According to the grammar teaching principle mentioned in chapter 2, the presentation of grammatical rules should be in multiple ways (written, oral or audio form). In step 4, the students are guided to pick out the 8 sentences (all of which are attributive clauses) cooperatively through communicative tasks in groups, which is the teacher's conscious intention to fully present students with the grammatical structure of the target language in written form. As is stated in chapter 2, the explanation of grammatical rules should be simplified to the maximum. Consequently, in step 5, the teacher explains the 8 attributive clauses by guiding the students to discover and generalize the basic sentence pattern and proper relative pronouns mainly by themselves, which can contribute to students' ability of self-discovery learning and can more or less reduce the difficulty and boredom in grammar study.

Meaning: In the teaching procedure of this instructional design, the meaning of English attributive clause refers its decoded meaning (to modify/describe/define/give further information at the level of decontextualized sentences or discourse, which can also be interpreted as the logical reason behind certain grammatical forms. In this class, students

understanding of the meaning of English attributive clause is unconsciously united in the process of self-inducting its form in step 5.

Use: In the teaching procedure, the use of English attributive clause refers to its appropriate application in contextualized situations when simple words or phrases are not available. As is mentioned in chapter 2, grammar teaching should be conducted through the accomplishment of communicative activities or tasks, and it will achieve better results when implemented in relevant context. Therefore, the students are provided with an opportunity to apply English attributive clause to describe films and the characters in a meaningful context through group cooperation in step 6. On one hand, this step may encourage students to produce expected target language output when necessary; on the other hand, students may be guided to apply English attributive clause both correctly and appropriately in a contextualized situation where they feel both familiar and relaxed.

6. Conclusion

The three-dimensional grammar view, which integrates form, meaning, and use, provides a more dynamic and effective approach to grammar teaching in senior high school English classrooms. By addressing the limitations of traditional grammar instruction—such as the overemphasis on rules, lack of context, and fragmented teaching focus—this framework enables students to internalize grammar as a tool for meaningful communication. Strategies like connecting grammar to thematic contexts, using multi-modal materials, and fostering meaningful and communicative practices ensure that grammar teaching becomes more engaging, relevant, and aligned with real-world language use. Through the example of teaching English attributive clauses, this paper demonstrates how the three-dimensional grammar view can be applied effectively in classroom settings, enhancing students' linguistic competence and communication skills. Ultimately, adopting this approach not only meets the objectives of modern English curricula but also equips students with the skills necessary for lifelong language learning and practical communication.

References

- [1] Larsen-Freeman, D. 2003. *Teaching Language: From Grammar to Grammaticing* [M]. Boston: Heinle.
- [2] Swain, M. 2005. The output hypothesis: Theory and research [A]. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning* [C]. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 471-483.
- [3] Cheng XT, 2013. Thought on English Grammar Teaching[J]. *Curriculum, Textbooks and Teaching Methods*, (4):62-70.
- [4] Hou S C, Yang N. 2020. A case study on the design of senior high school English grammar teaching activities based on three-dimensional dynamic grammar view. [J]. *Foreign Language Teaching in Primary and Secondary School*, (3): 25-30.
- [5] Ministry of Education.2020. *English Curriculum Standards for Senior Schools(2020 revised)* [M]. Beijing People's Education Press.
- [6] People's Education Press. 2019. *High School Textbooks, English Volume 3 (Compulsory Module)* [T]. Beijing People's Education Press.
- [7] Zhang F. 2021. Practice of senior high school English grammar teaching based on three-dimensional dynamic grammar view. [J]. *Foreign Language Teaching in Primary and Primary School*, (8): 56-60.