



Literature Review on English Grammar Teaching in Light of Three-Dimensional Grammar Framework

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Abstract

Grammar is the cornerstone of English language learning, and its importance continues throughout the learning process and its practical application. However, how to teach grammar effectively has sparked extensive and heated discussions around the world. Chinese Ministry of Education released *the English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education* in 2022, advocating that English grammatical knowledge is a synthesis of form, meaning and use. The purpose of learning English grammar is to understand and master its form, meaning and use in context, so as to flexibly use grammatical knowledge to express meaning accurately. This paper presents a systematic review of the published literature about English grammar teaching. The review categorizes the literature into several different areas of study, especially the adoption of the Three-Dimensional Grammar framework in improving students' English grammar mastery and application ability. Future research directions guided by gaps in the literature are explored.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Grammar Teaching, Three-Dimensional Grammar Framework, Systematic Review

1. Introduction

In the field of linguistics and language education, the Three-Dimensional Grammar Theory divides grammar into three dimensions, *Form*, *Meaning* and *Use*, from

the perspective of communicative use of language, which corresponds to morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics in traditional linguistics to form a three-dimensional view of grammar. This view of grammar aims to break the limitation of traditional grammar teaching that over-emphasizes the form of language and neglects the actual use of language, and emphasizes the dynamics and communicativeness of grammatical knowledge in the context, which provides a new perspective for the learning of English grammar.

In order to explore the core concept of the three-dimensional view of grammar and its current development, this paper carries out a systematic literature review. Through detailed data organization and in-depth analysis, the paper reveals the remarkable achievements of the three-dimensional view of grammar in theoretical construction and practical application, as well as the challenges and shortcomings faced by the three-dimensional framework of grammar in practical application. This literature review aims to sort out and analyze the relevant contents of three-dimensional grammatical framework and tries to provide several reference ideas and potential exploration directions for subsequent theoretical research and practical exploration.

2. Background of Three-Dimensional Grammar Framework

Grammar teaching has always occupied a pivotal position in the history of language teaching, which is not only the foundation of language learning, but also the key to improving the ability of language use. Throughout the development of language teaching, the discussion on grammar teaching has never stopped, and various theories, schools and teaching methods have emerged, each with unique advantages and limitations. From the traditional grammar-translation method to the modern communicative language teaching, grammar teaching has always been present in the whole process of language learning. In different historical periods, the status and methods of grammar teaching have undergone many changes. With the continuous updating of educational concepts and innovation of teaching methods, grammar teaching has gradually shifted from single-rule memorization to more flexible and diversified language practice.

Before the 1970s, language teaching emphasized grammar and was influenced by structuralism, which focused on the specific form of grammar, that is, isolated language structure and form, and neglected the meaning and communicative function of grammar. During this period, the goal of teaching was to make students master grammatical structures, and the teaching method was single and lacked context, which led to students' low pragmatic ability and insufficient interest in learning.

From the 1970s, the focus of grammar teaching was shifted to meaning, and the rise of the idea of communicative language teaching, led to the gradual abandonment of the form-oriented grammar teaching and a shift to focusing on the practical use and communication of language. However, the excessive exclusion of grammar form-based teaching led to students' inaccurate grasp of grammar and the phenomenon of rigidity in language learning.

Since the mid-to-late 20th century, people have realized that grammar teaching should not separate form and meaning, and grammar teaching that takes both form and meaning into account has become the mainstream. Formal grammar studies grammatical constructions, semantic grammar focuses on meaningful communicative structures and internal connections, and pragmatics guides how to choose appropriate grammatical structures in specific contexts to realize communicative intentions.

The evolution of the focus of language teaching contributed to the birth of the Larsen-Freeman three-dimensional theory of grammar. The traditional view of grammar teaching is limited to a single dimension of grammar, which is viewed as a static linguistic construct. In contrast, Larsen-Freeman proposes a more holistic view, which sees grammar as dynamic and skillfully integrates the three key dimensions of form, meaning and actual use.

The use of three-dimensional grammar theory to guide English grammar teaching not only meets the requirements of the new curriculum standards, but also effectively promotes the improvement of students' comprehensive language use ability. Larsen-Freeman's concept of three-dimensional grammar is highly in line with the core concepts of China's current reform of English language teaching and the current situation of practice. Integrating this theory into grammar teaching helps teachers to accurately grasp the new trends of curriculum reform and make grammar classes more interesting and practical. Moreover, the three-dimensional grammar model emphasizes the interactivity and dynamism of grammar teaching, creating a more student-centered learning environment for students and helping them achieve more significant results in language acquisition.

This study aims to provide teachers, students and other researchers in the field of education with new perspectives and ideas through a comprehensive overview of the three-dimensional grammar theory, with a view to enhancing the effectiveness of English grammar teaching. Through an in-depth analysis of the connotation of the three-dimensional grammar theory, the current state of research and its application in teaching practice, this study expects to guide teachers to better understand and utilize this theory, so as to achieve better teaching results in English grammar teaching and promote the overall development of students' language proficiency.

3. Literature Review on the Study of Three-Dimensional Grammar Theory

3.1. Definition of Three-Dimensional Grammar Theory

The concept of Three-Dimensional Grammar was first proposed by Diane Larsen-Freeman, an American applied linguist, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, who combined the research results of semantics and pragmatics at that time, and put the three dimensions of language, namely, *Form*, *Meaning* and *Use*, to echo with morpho-syntactic, semantical and pragmatical in traditional linguistics [1]. Larsen-Freeman (2003) regarded the form, meaning and use of grammar as a closely related whole,

which is also the main content of grammar teaching [2]. She advocates that grammatical items should be analyzed and processed in specific contexts based on the form-meaning-use framework of grammar.

The first dimension, Form, refers to how a given linguistic unit is formed, involving morphosyntax (grammatical morphemes, lexical patterns, syntactic patterns including phonemes, graphemes, symbols, inflectional changes and function words). The second dimension, Meaning, refers to what the linguistic unit means, and involves semantics, including lexical (word position, derivational morphemes, multi-word units) meaning, grammatical meaning, and ideation. The third dimension, Use, refers to when and why the linguistic unit can be used in such a way, and involves pragmatics, taking into account the context (social and discourse contexts and presuppositions about contexts) and function (social functions of speech acts and discourse patterns of articulation and cohesion), and aims to express the intentions that are achieved by the use of language in a given context.

3.2. Research on Grammar Teaching Based on Three-Dimensional Grammar in the West

Since Larsen-Freeman's proposal of Three-Dimensional Grammar, there has been a wave of research in foreign countries, and Larsen-Freeman herself has been constantly refining the principles and requirements for the application of this theory in foreign language teaching. Larsen-Freeman (1997) argues that the goal of grammar teaching is to enable students to use grammar accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately, and that rather than viewing grammar as a static system of arbitrary rules, it should be seen as a rational, dynamic structural system with three features: form, meaning, and use [3]. Instead of viewing grammar as a static system of arbitrary rules, it should be viewed as a rational, dynamic structural system characterized by form, meaning and use. In 2000, she believes that grammar is not only related to formal accuracy, but also focuses on its meaning and usability [4]. In 2007, she further clarified the three-dimensional approach to grammar teaching by emphasizing that grammar has three dimensions, which must be taught as a whole rather than in isolation, and suggesting that teachers adjust their teaching according to students' difficulties in these three dimensions [5]. In 2015, she proposed that teachers should guide students to observe the difference between the semantic and the pragmatic aspects of grammar when they teach it, and that teachers should also develop students' ability to flexibly choose different grammatical expressions [6].

Other scholars have further researched the theoretical aspect. Shirzad (2016) argues that focusing on form in grammar teaching can improve students' accuracy, affirming both the emphasis on structure and form drills in the grammar-translation method and the emphasis on communication in the direct teaching method and the communicative method [7]. Devi (2017) proposes that learning the form, meaning and use of grammar is conducive to the internalization of the grammar learned [8].

In terms of experimental research, Abello (2016) points out that understanding the content of a discourse requires mastery of its grammar and that the context should be close to the real society. Their experiments showed that Three-Dimensional Grammar teaching facilitated discourse analysis and transformation [9]. Fikron (2018) provided English teachers with pedagogical perspectives on how grammatical competence assists learners to communicate well in the target language, emphasizing that grammar is not only the rules of linguistic structure, but also an important tool to help learners to express their thoughts fluently and accurately in the target language [10]. Tao and Wang (2021) experimentally explored the effectiveness of a Three-Dimensional Grammar-based teaching method with Chinese secondary school students' learning of English phrasal verbs in comparison with a teaching method based on conceptual metaphor theory, and found that there is a significant difference between the effectiveness of Three-Dimensional Grammar teaching and that of conceptual metaphor teaching, with the former being of great benefit to the learners' acquisition of English phrasal verbs [11]. Mukhtarova and Borisov (2020), in contrast, further broaden the perspective, pointing out that grammatical competence is the core of the development of language skills of second language learners of English, emphasizing the central position of grammatical competence in this process as the cornerstone to support and promote the balanced development of the four basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and through the study, it has been shown that strengthening the study of grammar helps to build a solid foundation of language structure, and to realize the overall language competence [12]. The study also shows that strengthening grammar learning helps to build a solid foundation of language structure and realize the comprehensive language ability.

3.3. Research on Grammar Teaching Based on Three-Dimensional Grammar in China

In the 1980s, Chinese linguists, inspired by the relevant theories abroad, adopted a dialectical approach to draw on and develop the relevant foreign doctrines, and gradually formed their own self-contained theory of three planes [13]. Although the theory originated from abroad, it has shown a unique style by combining with the actual research of Chinese grammar. At present, most scholars have accepted the theory and actively applied it to the study of Chinese grammar. It integrates the essence of domestic and foreign grammatical doctrines, combines with the actual Chinese language, and constructs a unique grammatical theoretical system, thus distinguishing itself from the framework systems of traditional grammar, structuralist grammar, transformational generative grammar and functional grammar [14].

Around 2010, domestic researchers mainly interpreted or commented on the meaning of the three-dimensional view of grammar proposed by Larsen-Freeman and its impact on grammar teaching. In terms of theoretical research, Gui (2005) summarized the 12 views on grammar and grammar teaching put forward by

Larsen-Freeman and evaluated the current situation of English grammar teaching in China [15]. Ouyang (2007) thinks that grammar teaching should be based on the three-dimensional view of grammar put forward by Larsen-Freeman, combining the form, meaning and use of grammar, and advocating the combination of grammar teaching with listening, speaking, reading, writing and practical use of language [16]. Gui (2010) affirms Larsen-Freeman's view on grammar teaching from the perspective of grammar teaching in China and suggests that grammar teaching should be based on the perspective of meaning and function [17]. Liu (2011) elaborated on the changing focus of grammar teaching and the basic content of 3D grammar teaching from a linguistic perspective [18]. Wang (2012) points out that Three-Dimensional Grammar teaching absorbs the advantages of audio-visual speaking and communicative methods and makes up for the shortcomings of traditional teaching methods [19]. Ge (2013) pointed out that teachers actively practice the concept of Three-Dimensional Grammar in teaching [20]. Yin (2015) elaborated on the specific operation methods of Three-Dimensional Grammar teaching: demonstrating grammatical meaning in the "advance organizer", highlighting grammatical forms in meaningful contexts, making grammatical usage clear in practice, and applying grammatical rules in communication [21]. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, Wu and Wang (2016) argue that grammar teaching has now entered the era of "usage-based" language theory [22]. Tan (2017) discussed the principles of Three-Dimensional Grammar teaching, including the principles of comprehensible input and contextualized input, the principle of combining induction and deduction, the principle of combining form-meaning-use, and the principle of contextualized language output [23]. Hou and Yang (2020) pointed out that teachers' theoretical quality and teaching effect in grammar teaching need to be improved, and there is a lack of curriculum resources for grammar teaching. A curriculum based on the "three-dimensional dynamic view of grammar" should be constructed to promote the implementation of the new concept of grammar teaching [24]. Chen (2021) pointed out that in the process of exploring the meaning of a topic, students can acquire the ability to use language comprehensively by learning grammatical forms, understanding the meaning, and applying grammar [25]. Subsequently, Zhuang (2022) explored the teaching strategies of three-dimensional dynamic grammar [26].

In addition, some researchers have applied the Three-Dimensional Grammar theory to teaching practice and carried out relevant experimental research and action research about proving the scientificity of the Three-Dimensional Grammar theory. Su (2009) used a form-focused Three-Dimensional Grammar teaching model to conduct an experiment on virtual voice teaching for a group of high school students, and the results of the study showed that the Three-Dimensional Grammar teaching model could significantly improve high school students' ability to perceive, recognize, and produce grammatical points, such as virtual voice, compared with the traditional method [27]. Su (2012) carried out a Three-Dimensional Grammar teaching experiment by reinforcing the role of context on the basis of language

form focus. The results of the experiment show that contextualized Three-Dimensional Grammar teaching in the comprehensive English classroom can not only cultivate learners' ability to produce grammar automatically and monitor it effectively, but also promote the natural transformation of "grammatical knowledge" to "grammatical competence", laying a solid foundation for improving students' comprehensive language competence. It also promotes the natural transformation of "grammatical knowledge" into "grammatical competence", laying a solid foundation for improving students' comprehensive language ability. This series of studies fully proves the scientificity and effectiveness of the Three-Dimensional Grammar theory in middle and high school English teaching [28]. Cai (2016) analyzed the grammatical structure based on Three-Dimensional Grammar by taking the simple past tense as an example. She concluded that the processing teaching method and error correction and feedback method are effective for grammar teaching [29]. Li (2019) takes the general present tense as an example and comprehensively analyzes the definition, grammatical form, grammatical significance, and its application methods to deepen the application of three-dimensional grammatical theories [30]. Yang (2021) analyzes the pragmatic function of passive voice from the perspective of pragmatic grammar view, utilizes pragmatics theory to analyze in depth the pragmatic function of passive voice, and explores the principles and effective design strategies of teaching passive voice through specific cases. She advocates that based on the results of diagnostic assessment, students should be guided to carry out exploratory learning and independently generalize grammatical rules through the processes of observation, experience, analysis, application and transfer, so as to enhance the initiative and effectiveness of learning [31]. Zheng (2023) designed an interesting and experiential authentic communicative grammar classroom based on the Three-Dimensional Grammar theory for the selective compulsory textbook of high school, which not only stimulated the students' subjective initiative in classroom learning, but also significantly improved the students' grammatical output ability, which once again verified the prospect of wide application and far-reaching impact of the Three-Dimensional Grammar theory in high school English teaching [32]. Luo (2023) explores a new approach to grammar teaching by applying a three-dimensional dynamic view of grammar and combining it with examples of teaching object clauses. He advocates that the efficiency of grammar lessons can be enhanced by creating thematic contexts to enable students to construct grammatical forms in learning comprehension-type activities; building thinking scaffolds to help students internalize grammatical meanings in application-practice-type activities; and ultimately encouraging students to use grammatical rules critically and innovatively in transfer-innovation-type activities [33].

4. Discussion

4.1. Theoretical Value of Three-Dimensional Grammar Theory

The three-dimensional theory of grammar is comprehensive, emphasizing that grammatical research should be carried out from three planes or perspectives: syntax,

semantics and pragmatics. It requires researchers not only to pay attention to the formal relations between components within a sentence, but also to explore in depth the connection between these components in terms of meaning as well as their functions and roles in actual language use. This multi-angle and all-round research method helps to reveal the essence and laws of grammar in a more comprehensive way and breaks through the limitation of traditional grammar research that focuses only on the syntactic plane.

The three-dimensional grammar theory is systematic in that it divides the grammatical system into three subsystems: syntactic system, semantic system, and pragmatic system, which are independent of and interrelated with each other, and together constitute a complete grammatical system. This division not only helps researchers to analyze and describe the grammatical phenomena in a more detailed way, but also helps to reveal the intrinsic connection and interaction between different grammatical components and grammatical functions. At the same time, this systematic grammar system also provides a clearer and more scientific framework for grammar teaching.

The three-dimensional grammar theory is innovative, which not only enriches the content and methods of linguistic research, but also promotes the in-depth development of linguistic research. It requires researchers to pay attention not only to the form and structure of language, but also to the meaning and function of language, as well as the change and development of language in actual use. This comprehensive research method helps to reveal the nature and laws of language and promote the continuous progress and development of linguistic research.

4.2. Practical Implications of Three-Dimensional Grammar Theory

From the perspective of improving the effect of grammar teaching, the three-dimensional grammar theory emphasizes the three-dimensionality and multidimensionality of grammar teaching, combining grammatical knowledge with context, pragmatics and cognitive structure to build a more comprehensive and multidimensional teaching system. This teaching method can help students understand and master English grammar knowledge more comprehensively and improve the effect of grammar teaching. Through a variety of practical methods such as audio-visual combination, contextual teaching, interactive teaching and game-based teaching, students can more intuitively feel the practical application of grammatical knowledge, and deepen their understanding and memorization of grammatical rules.

From the perspective of enhancing students' language application ability, the three-dimensional grammar theory focuses on the practical application of grammatical knowledge, emphasizing that students should pay attention to the actual scenarios and situations of language application in the learning process. Through the teaching methods such as simulation of real situations and role-playing, students can better understand the use of grammar rules in actual language communication, thus improving their language use ability. This teaching method not only helps students to cope with the grammar questions in the examination, but also

helps them to flexibly utilize the grammar knowledge they have learned in real life to carry out effective language communication.

From the perspective of stimulating students' learning interests, the three-dimensional grammar theory advocates the diversification and personalization of teaching contents. By introducing diversified teaching methods and resources, such as songs, movies and TV dramas, games, etc., students' learning interest and motivation can be stimulated. At the same time, encouraging students to participate in practical activities, such as grammar games, role-playing, group discussions, etc., can also enable students to learn grammar knowledge in a relaxing and enjoyable atmosphere, and feel the fun and sense of achievement in learning.

From the perspective of grammar and pragmatics, the three-dimensional grammar theory emphasizes the combination of grammar and pragmatics, and believes that grammar teaching should be three-dimensional, including not only the explanation of grammar rules and example sentences, but also the use of grammar in actual contexts and students' independent inquiry. This teaching method can make students pay more attention to the application of grammar in actual communication while learning grammar, and cultivate their language use ability and communicative competence. This will help students become more fluent and accurate in actual language use and improve their overall language proficiency.

From the perspective of promoting teaching innovation, the three-dimensional grammar theory provides new ideas and methods for grammar teaching and promotes the innovation and development of grammar teaching. It requires teachers not only to teach students grammatical rules, but also to guide students to understand the meaning and role of these rules in actual language use. This teaching method requires teachers to have higher professionalism and teaching ability, and to be able to flexibly utilize various teaching methods and means to stimulate students' interest and enthusiasm in learning. At the same time, it also encourages students' independent inquiry and cooperative learning, and develops their innovative thinking and problem-solving ability.

5. Conclusions

Through a systematic review of the relevant literature, the track of the research development of Three-Dimensional Grammar theory is clearly visible. It is obvious that domestic and foreign academics are quite rich in research on grammar teaching, and many scholars have made remarkable contributions in the fields of grammar teaching methods, inductive-deductive method, task-based teaching method, situational teaching method and so on. And the core elements of grammar cover the three dimensions of form, meaning and usage. Scholars have deeply realized the importance of grammar teaching in language learning and have significantly innovated the concept of grammar teaching. They generally believe that the ultimate goal of grammar teaching is to cultivate students' ability to use grammatical rules correctly to construct sentences and communicate effectively.

Although some results have been achieved in the research on Three-Dimensional

Grammar teaching worldwide, there are still some research deficiencies. There are relatively few experimental studies on grammar teaching based on Three-Dimensional Grammar in foreign countries, while Chinese domestic studies mainly focus on the analysis of specific grammar teaching design and teaching cases, or the exploration of grammar teaching mode based on Three-Dimensional Grammar theory. However, we still lack a clear understanding of the actual effects of grammar teaching under the guidance of Three-Dimensional Grammar theory. This provides an opportunity for future improvement.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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