The Pragmatic Function of Grammar Teaching within a Thematic Framework: Constructing a "Theme-Function" Teaching Model

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Abstract: To address the long-standing problems in traditional grammar teaching — namely, the separation of form from function and the challenge of translating knowledge into communicative competence — this paper adopts the three-dimensional dynamic grammar approach (form-meaning-use) from China's English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools and Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) as its theoretical foundations." It critiques the ineffectiveness of isolated, mechanical grammar drills and proposes a theme-led and function-oriented approach. Grounded in the three metafunctions of SFG, this study re-examines the pragmatic value of grammar in thematic contexts and constructs a four-step teaching model: Functional Awareness, Inquiry and Induction, Contextualized Practicing, and Integrated Production. Illustrated with teaching examples under the theme of "Cultural Heritage," the model aims to equip teachers with strategies for transforming grammatical knowledge into tools for effective communication, thereby enhancing the efficacy of grammar instruction and fostering students' core competences.

Keywords: grammar teaching, systemic functional grammar, three-dimensional dynamic grammar approach, pragmatic function

1. Introduction

The English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 Edition, 2020 Revision) (hereinafter referred to as the Curriculum Standards) clearly advocates a three-dimensional dynamic grammar perspective centered on "form-meaning-use" and oriented towards language application, emphasizing that grammar teaching should be integrated into thematic contexts and use discourse as the fundamental carrier (Ministry of Education, 2020).[1] This pedagogical concept aligns with and reinforces Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL): the three-dimensional dynamic grammar provides a 'form-meaning-use' integrated pathway for teaching, while Systemic Functional Grammar reveals the social function and pragmatic value of language from a theoretical standpoint. SFG posits that the fundamental nature of language is social, and that grammar constitutes a resource system for expressing meaning to achieve specific communicative purposes, rather than a set of isolated rules. However, in current teaching practice, there remains a tendency to prioritize rule explanation over functional exploration and to favor mechanical drills over contextual application. This results in a significant disconnect between grammar instruction and thematic context, discourse type, and communicative purpose. Consequently, students may master the rules but struggle to apply them effectively in real communication (Liu, 2025: 1).[2]

It is therefore imperative to develop a practical teaching framework that aligns with the new curriculum standards and is grounded in solid linguistic theory. To this end, this paper takes the theme of 'Cultural Heritage' as a vehicle and employs Systemic Functional Grammar as its theoretical framework. It delves into the pragmatic functions of various grammatical structures within this thematic context and systematically constructs a transferable 'Theme-Function' teaching model. The core objective is to facilitate a substantive shift in grammar teaching from 'teaching rules' to 'teaching how to use grammatical resources to achieve communicative purposes.'

2. Construction of the 'Theme-Function' teaching model

2.1 Theoretical basis: integration of the three-dimensional dynamic grammar and systemic-functional grammar

The instructional design presented here integrates two key theories: the "form-meaning-use" three-dimensional dynamic grammar concept proposed by the Curriculum Standards provides methodological guidance for teaching implementation, emphasizing that effective grammar teaching must closely integrate the mastery of language form, the understanding of semantic content, and appropriate use in specific contexts (Zhengfang Liu&Heng Yin, 2020: 1);[3] Halliday's Systemic-Functional Grammar provides the theoretical foundation for understanding the social function and pragmatic value of

grammar. His theory of three metafunctions accurately reveals the operational mechanisms of grammar in real contexts.

The synergy between these two theoretical frameworks forms the bedrock of the "Theme-Function" teaching model: the three-dimensional grammar concept outlines the scientific pathway for "how to teach," while Systemic Functional Grammar reveals the underlying rationale for "why to teach this function." Together, they ensure the communicative nature of the teaching content and the scientific validity of the teaching process.

2.2 Construction of the 'Theme-Function' teaching model

Based on the aforementioned theoretical integration, this paper constructs a "Theme-Function" teaching model applicable to various grammatical structures, using Unit 1 "Cultural Heritage" as an example:

2.2.1 Functional awareness: creating thematic situations and triggering communicative needs

Teachers create authentic and communicative situations around the theme of "cultural heritage." By generating information gaps, setting up cognitive conflicts, or presenting real-world problems, they enable students to intuitively perceive the communicative value of grammatical structures arising from the need for "use" (Zhao Linlin, 2024: 1).[4] For example, when expressing the urgency and responsibility of protecting cultural heritage, modal verbs such as 'must' and 'should' are introduced to convey obligation and suggestion. When objectively and neutrally describing the historical background or production process of cultural relics, the passive voice is introduced to emphasize objective facts.

2.2.2 Inquiry and induction: analyzing discourse examples and establishing 'Form-Function' connections

Teachers provide authentic discourse examples of diverse genres related to the theme, guiding students to observe, compare, and analyze how the same grammatical structure fulfills different metafunctions in different contexts (Xu, 2020: 6).[5] For instance, guiding students to discover that the passive voice primarily realizes the ideational function (emphasizing the objective process and result) in an archaeological report, while in promotional posters it may primarily realize the interpersonal function (downplaying the agent to highlight the value of the heritage itself) and the textual function (maintaining thematic coherence). This helps students establish a solid connection between 'grammatical form,' 'pragmatic function,' and 'communicative purpose.'

2.2.3 Contextualized practicing: hierarchical task-driven functional internalization

Teachers design a graded chain of tasks from simple to complex around the theme (Wu Ying, 2022: 3).[6] This progresses from controlled exercises focusing on formal accuracy, such as sentence combination and paraphrase transformation, gradually transitioning to more open and communicative tasks. For example, in simulated dialogues, role-plays, or paragraph writing, students are required to purposefully use specific grammatical structures to achieve a particular communicative purpose, thereby experiencing their functional value.

2.2.4 Integrated production: completing communicative tasks and achieving functional transfer

Teachers create realistic communicative tasks, such as writing a World Heritage nomination report. In completing such tasks, students are required to independently and comprehensively utilize the various grammatical structures learned in the unit, reflecting on how their choices serve the communicative purpose—i.e., how to better express experiential content (ideational function), how to interact and persuade effectively (interpersonal function), and how to construct a clear and coherent text (textual function). At this stage, the evaluation criteria should shift from the correctness of discrete language forms to a comprehensive assessment focusing on the 'degree of functional realization,' thereby achieving the integration of teaching and assessment.

3. Teaching practice

The following are two teaching cases for specific grammar points, each focusing on different metafunctions and adhering to the four-step model described above:

Case 1: teaching modal verbs - obligation and suggestion (focus on interpersonal function)

Step 1: Functional Awareness: The teacher plays a short video showing damaged cultural heritage sites, then poses guiding questions: 'What must we do to protect our cultural heritage?' This guides students to use modal verbs like 'must,' 'should,' 'have to,' and 'can' to respond, experiencing their expressive effects in conveying different degrees of communicative force.

Step 2: Inquiry and Induction: Teachers and students jointly analyze a formal protection proposal, summarizing the attitudinal differences conveyed by different modal verbs and how they construct the relationship between the proposer and the reader. For instance, 'must' emphasizes strong legal or moral obligation and 'should' expresses persuasive or advisory suggestions, leading to a deep understanding of modal verbs as crucial grammatical resources for interpersonal interaction.

Step 3: Contextualized Practicing: Students are divided into groups and assigned different simulated scenarios, such as issuing warnings to tourists or making suggestions to the government. They choose appropriate modal verbs to draft

'warning notices,' 'suggestion lists,' or 'proposal excerpts,' reinforcing their ability to make accurate choices based on specific interpersonal relationships and communicative goals.

Step 4: Integrated Production: Groups collaborate to draft a "Class Cultural Heritage Protection Convention," requiring clear clauses and the strategic use of at least three different modal verbs to distinguish between mandatory and advisory stipulations, fully demonstrating their interpersonal function in coordinating responsibilities and building consensus.

Case 2: teaching passive voice - describing cultural relics and crafts (focus on ideational and textual functions)

Step 1: Functional Awareness: The teacher displays pictures of cultural relics and presents both active and passive descriptions (e.g., 'People made...' vs. 'It was made...'), guiding students to consider why the passive voice is commonly used in museum commentaries, academic reports, and similar genres. This cultivates an initial understanding of its pragmatic value in enabling objective description and highlighting the action's recipient.

Step 2: Inquiry and Induction: Students read an expository text on the production process of the Terracotta Army, identify passive voice sentences, and analyze how they simultaneously achieve two functions: objectively describing the production process and historical facts (ideational function), and maintaining narrative focus and enhancing discourse coherence (textual function).

Step 3: Contextualized Practicing: Students are given a record of archaeological discoveries written primarily in the active voice and are required to rewrite it into a rigorous and objective archaeological briefing for the public. During the rewriting process, students must consciously judge and convert certain sentences into the passive voice to downplay the individual agent and emphasize the findings themselves, thereby understanding how genre requirements influence grammatical choice.

Step 4: Integrated Production: As an individual task, students choose a cultural heritage site or artifact and write a short English introduction. They are required to strategically use the passive voice in the text to ensure objective description and textual coherence, and to briefly explain the reasons for their choices.

4. Conclusion

Based on the theme of "Cultural Heritage," this study integrates the three-dimensional dynamic grammar approach and Systemic Functional Grammar to construct a four-step "Theme-Function" teaching model. This model treats pragmatic function as both the starting point and ultimate goal of instruction, employs theme as the contextual framework, and regards grammatical forms as resources for achieving communicative purposes (Zheng Xue, Li Huifang, & Cao Xi, 2023: 4).[7] Compared with traditional teaching methods, this model—by embedding grammar within thematic exploration and emphasizing its role as a tool for meaning-making—effectively promotes students' deep understanding and practical application. Consequently, it enhances instructional efficacy and fosters core competences. As a universally applicable model, it thus provides a theoretically grounded and practical pathway for English grammar teaching.

References

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