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Construction of a College English Grammar Teaching Model Based on Pragmatic Competence Cultivation

Ya-Lin Zhai*, Bai-Ru Zhao, Meng Yuan

Shaanxi University of International Trade & Commerce, Xianyang City, Shaanxi, 712046, China

*Correspondence to: Ya-Lin Zhai, Shaanxi University of International Trade & Commerce, Xianyang City, Shaanxi, 712046, China, E-mail: zhaiyalin125@163.com

Abstract: Traditional college English grammar instruction has long focused on formal accuracy while neglecting contextual appropriateness in language use, resulting in students' solid grammatical knowledge but weak pragmatic competence. Based on Larsen-Freeman's three-dimensional grammar framework, this paper constructs an integrated grammar teaching model that combines "form, meaning, and use," emphasizing the cultivation of learners' pragmatic competence in authentic contexts. Through contextualized input, explicit pragmatic analysis, and task-based output, this model promotes the synergistic development of grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence, providing a theoretical framework and practical pathway for the reform of college English grammar teaching.

Keywords: pragmatic competence; grammar instruction; three-dimensional grammar; contextualized teaching; college English

Introduction

Traditional college English grammar teaching is grounded in structural linguistics, focusing on explaining the morphosyntactic features of grammatical rules and helping students master "correct" sentence structures through mechanical drills. However, numerous studies have shown that while students can accurately complete grammar exercises, they often make errors in real communication characterized by "grammatical correctness but pragmatic inappropriateness," such as misusing modal verbs leading to offense or misapplying tense-aspect causing misunderstandings. This phenomenon reveals a significant "transfer gap" between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence. Based on the practical context

of college English grammar teaching and guided by Larsen-Freeman's three-dimensional grammar theory, this paper constructs an integrated teaching model of "form-meaning-use," aiming to systematically incorporate pragmatic competence cultivation into the entire process of grammar instruction, thereby shifting the teaching focus from "grammatical correctness" to "contextual appropriateness."

1. Theoretical Evolution and Pedagogical Shift: Paradigm Reconstruction from Grammatical Competence to Pragmatic Empowerment

1.1 From Grammatical Competence to Pragmatic Competence: Conceptual Evolution

Traditional linguistics regards grammatical



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competence as the core of language proficiency, positing that mastering grammatical rules equates to mastering a language. Chomsky's concept of "linguistic competence" focuses on the internalized grammatical knowledge of an ideal speaker. However, this approach has long dominated foreign language teaching practices, transforming classrooms into venues for explaining grammatical rules and drilling sentence patterns. Canale and Swain's model of communicative competence was the first to place grammatical competence on par with pragmatic competence, emphasizing that true communicative competence involves not only the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences but also the capacity to use appropriate linguistic forms in specific contexts to achieve communicative goals. Pragmatic competence encompasses three dimensions: the ability to perform speech acts, sociolinguistic appropriateness, and discourse management skills. Leech further distinguishes the fundamental differences between "grammar" and "pragmatics": grammar deals with the formal question of "whether a sentence conforms to rules," while pragmatics addresses the functional question of "whether an utterance is appropriate to the context." This distinction reveals a fundamental flaw in traditional grammar instruction—it teaches students to generate an infinite number of correct sentences but fails to teach them when, to whom, and in what manner to use these sentences. Grammatical competence serves as the foundation for pragmatic competence, but the former does not automatically translate into the latter. This understanding has laid the theoretical groundwork for the pragmatic turn in grammar teaching^[1].

1.2 Larsen-Freeman's Three-Dimensional Grammar Framework

The "form-meaning-use" three-dimensional framework proposed by Larsen-Freeman serves as the core theoretical foundation of this study. The form dimension encompasses the morphosyntactic features of grammatical structures; the meaning dimension involves the literal and extended meanings expressed by these structures; and the use dimension focuses on the appropriateness conditions of grammatical forms in specific communicative contexts. She emphasizes that grammar is not a static knowledge system but rather a dynamic "skill," with mastery reflected in the

ability to automatically and flexibly match forms with functions in communication. This perspective provides a theoretical basis for shifting grammar instruction from "knowledge transmission" to "competence development."

1.3 Teachability Research in Pragmatic Instruction

Kasper and Rose systematically reviewed research findings on second language pragmatic instruction, confirming that pragmatic competence is teachable and that explicit instruction yields better outcomes than implicit instruction. Explicit instruction refers to teachers clearly explaining the pragmatic functions of grammatical forms, contrasting pragmatic differences between the native and target languages, and providing metapragmatic explanations. Studies have shown that learners who receive explicit pragmatic instruction perform significantly better in pragmatic appropriateness judgment and production tasks compared to control groups receiving only form-focused or implicit instruction. Rose's experiments further revealed that even short-term explicit interventions can effectively enhance learners' pragmatic awareness, though the automation of complex pragmatic features requires long-term immersive training. Contextualized input and output tasks—such as discourse completion tests, video dialogue analysis, and role-playing—have proven to be effective methods for developing pragmatic competence. In domestic research, scholars like Ran Yongping have called for an integrated "grammar-pragmatics" approach in foreign language teaching to avoid the disconnect where "grammar instruction focuses solely on formal accuracy, while oral instruction emphasizes fluency." However, there remains a lack of systematic, operable pedagogical models for pragmatics instruction. Most studies remain at the level of theoretical advocacy or fragmented teaching techniques, lacking comprehensive designs for "how to teach." This gap constitutes the direct motivation for the present study.

2. Current Status and Issues of English Grammar Teaching in Higher Education Institutions

College English grammar instruction has long adhered to a structuralist paradigm, with textbooks organized according to the "morphology—syntax—discourse"

framework and classroom activities primarily centered on teachers explaining rules and students completing mechanical exercises. The underlying issues of this model manifest in three aspects. First, teaching content is detached from context, with exercises often limited to grammar fill-in-the-blanks or sentence pattern transformations at the isolated sentence level, lacking explanations of the communicative functions of grammatical forms. Through such training, students may recognize structures like the "if-clause + would + base verb" form of the subjunctive mood but fail to understand that this form can be used in real communication to express polite suggestions or soften criticism^[2]. Second, teaching evaluation lags behind, as grammar items in final exams predominantly consist of multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank questions, focusing on structural correctness rather than contextual appropriateness. Students who frequently produce utterances that are "grammatically correct but communicatively offensive" can still achieve high scores, leading to misguidance in evaluation. Third, there is a widespread cognitive bias regarding grammar among teachers and students. Teachers tend to view grammar as a knowledge system that needs to be "thoroughly explained," while students equate it with tedious "rules and regulations." Neither side recognizes grammar as a flexible tool serving the construction of communicative meaning. Classroom observations reveal that even when teachers supplement their explanations with "how this sentence pattern is used in daily conversation," subsequent exercises remain dominated by mechanical drills, causing the pragmatic dimension to quickly fade. This teaching inertia results in a persistent and widening gap between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence.

3. Construction of a Teaching Model Based on Pragmatic Competence Development

3.1 Pattern Design Principles

This study constructs a teaching model based on four principles. First, the integration of form, meaning, and use. The instruction of any grammatical point must simultaneously cover its structural features, semantic functions, and contextual appropriateness, avoiding the reduction of grammar to isolated formal rules. Second, the principle of contextualization. All practice materials should be drawn from authentic or

semi-authentic communicative texts, such as movie dialogues, email exchanges, and academic discussions, enabling students to perceive the communicative functions of grammatical forms within context. Third, the combination of explicit and implicit instruction. While providing metapragmatic explanations, ample experiential tasks are designed—explicit instruction guides attention, while implicit tasks facilitate internalization, with the two complementing each other. Fourth, the principle of learner-centeredness. Through collaborative learning, reflective activities, and pragmatic journals, knowledge is transformed from "teacher-delivered" to "student-constructed." Among the four principles, integration is the core, contextualization is the vehicle, the combination of explicit and implicit instruction is the strategy, and learner-centeredness is the value orientation. These principles mutually support one another, collectively forming the logical foundation of the model design^[3].

3.2 Teaching Model Framework

This model comprises four dimensions: the objective layer, content layer, implementation layer, and evaluation layer. The objective layer places equal emphasis on developing grammatical competence and pragmatic competence, requiring learners to master grammatical structures while also being able to make appropriate formal choices in various communicative contexts. The content layer selects high-frequency grammatical items that are prone to pragmatic errors, including six core areas: modal verbs (politeness levels and power relations), conditional sentences (the mitigating function of hypothetical conditionals), indirect speech (perspective shift and face maintenance), passive voice (attribution of responsibility and objectification strategies), tense-aspect choices (temporal reference and emotional stance), and negation structures (the face-threatening nature of direct negation and mitigation strategies for negation).

The implementation layer adopts a five-stage cyclical process. In the first stage, "Contextual Awareness," authentic dialogues, emails, or video clips containing the target grammatical structure are played or displayed, accompanied by guiding questions such as "Why did the speaker choose this particular expression?" to prompt students to notice the relationship between

grammatical form and communicative function. The second stage, "Explicit Pragmatic Analysis," involves the teacher systematically explaining the functional variations of the grammatical point under different social variables (e.g., power distance, social distance, degree of imposition). For example, summarizing that "Can you..." is suitable for making requests among acquaintances, "Could you..." for formal situations, and "I was wondering if you could..." when addressing superiors or less familiar individuals. The third stage, "Controlled Practice," includes tasks such as "selecting the appropriate form," where students choose the most appropriate option from multiple grammatically correct alternatives based on given communicative contexts and speaker relationships. After completion, they discuss and justify their choices in small groups. The fourth stage, "Task-Based Output," requires students to actively use the target grammar in authentic tasks such as role-plays, debates, or email writing to achieve specific speech acts, such as employing the past subjunctive "If I had known..." to express indirect criticism rather than direct blame. The fifth stage, "Reflection and Feedback," involves joint analysis of pragmatic errors in student output, summarizing grammar-pragmatic mapping rules, and students writing reflective journals to document insights and uncertainties. The five stages—from noticing to understanding, from controlled to free practice, and from input to output—form a progressive cognitive sequence^[4].

The evaluation layer adopts a combination of formative and summative assessments. Formative assessment includes classroom performance (engagement in pragmatic inference), task outputs (role-play recordings, email writing), and reflective journals (self-reported pragmatic awareness). Summative assessment, in addition to traditional grammar questions, incorporates discourse completion tests (filling in blanks based on given communicative contexts) and pragmatic appropriateness judgments (selecting the most contextually suitable expression from multiple grammatically correct options). The four layers form a closed-loop system: "objectives guide content—content determines implementation—implementation relies on evaluation—evaluation informs objectives," ensuring the coherence and continuous improvement of teaching activities.

4. Application Path and Safeguard Mechanisms of Teaching Models

4.1 Pragmatic Reconstruction of Textbook Resources

Existing college English grammar textbooks generally lack systematic presentation from a pragmatic perspective. The reconstruction of textbook resources can proceed in three aspects: first, contextual transformation of isolated example sentences by adding brief descriptions of micro-communication scenarios for each grammar item, such as labeling "dialogue between a professor and a doctoral student"; second, introducing a "pragmatic comparison" section to contrast functional differences of the same grammatical form across various contexts using tables; third, developing supplementary materials by extracting pragmatically rich segments containing target grammar forms from TV dramas, academic speeches, and real emails, with annotations of speaker relationships, formality levels, and functional intentions. The pragmatic reconstruction of textbook resources requires collaboration between teachers and teaching research teams, allowing division of labor by grammar items to gradually build a shared pragmatic teaching resource library. Contextual task cards also serve as crucial auxiliary tools, with each card describing a specific communication scenario (speaker, listener, location, communicative purpose), enabling students to select or produce grammatical forms based on card information to achieve direct "form-context" connections.

4.2 Professional Development of Teachers' Pragmatic Awareness

The effectiveness of model implementation heavily relies on teachers' pragmatic teaching competence. If teachers themselves lack a systematic understanding of the pragmatic functions of grammatical forms, classroom practice may regress to form-focused instruction. Therefore, it is essential to establish mechanisms for developing teachers' pragmatic teaching abilities: at the school-based training level, organizing grammar-pragmatics integration workshops to comparatively analyze pragmatic differences between English and Chinese in areas such as modality expressions and negation strategies, thereby enhancing teachers' cross-cultural pragmatic awareness; at the instructional design level, encouraging teachers to

expand the "teaching objectives" of grammar units from "mastering structural forms" to "being able to use form Y in context X to achieve function Z," using clear objectives to drive instructional design; at the lesson study level, selecting exemplary pragmatic teaching cases for typical grammar items, conducting collective observations, discussions, and refinements to build a replicable teaching case library^[5]. Additionally, teachers need to shift their role perception from being "authoritative explainers of grammatical rules" to "guides for pragmatic awareness" and "creators of communicative contexts." The enhancement of teachers' pragmatic awareness is a key prerequisite for the successful implementation of the teaching model.

4.3 Coordinated Reform of Teaching Evaluation

The evaluation system serves as the guiding compass for teaching reform. If assessments continue to focus solely on structural accuracy, the sustainable implementation of new models will encounter resistance. Coordinated evaluation reform encompasses three dimensions. First, the immediate integration of classroom assessment: during controlled practice and task-based output activities, teacher feedback should not only address the correctness of students' grammatical forms but also highlight issues of contextual appropriateness—for example, noting, "While grammatically correct, using 'Can you...' when addressing a professor may sound too informal; consider using 'Could you...' instead." Second, adjustments to the formats of periodic tests: transforming traditional grammar fill-in-the-blank exercises into contextualized cloze tasks, where each blank is accompanied by a communicative scenario, requiring students to comprehensively evaluate the alignment between form and function. Third, establishing a pragmatic competence portfolio that includes recordings of role-playing activities, email writing samples, and reflective journals, enabling longitudinal tracking of the development of pragmatic skills. This coordinated evaluation reform demands collaborative efforts from teaching research departments, instructors, and students to gradually shift the entrenched perception that "grammar is only tested through fill-in-the-blank and multiple-choice

questions," ensuring that assessment genuinely supports the core objective of cultivating pragmatic competence.

Conclusion

College English grammar teaching has long focused on formal accuracy, leading to a pragmatic dilemma in students' language production characterized by "grammatically correct but contextually inappropriate" usage. This paper introduces Larsen-Freeman's three-dimensional grammar framework to develop an integrated grammar teaching model encompassing "form-meaning-use," forming a complete instructional cycle from objectives, content, and implementation to evaluation. The model emphasizes the synergy between contextualized input and task-based output, integrating pragmatic competence development throughout the stages of grammar teaching—perception, analysis, practice, production, and reflection. Future research could conduct teaching experiments to validate the model's effectiveness across different types of institutions and student populations, while exploring deeper integration of technological tools such as corpus-assisted instruction and AI-driven pragmatic feedback.

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