Samples of Teaching Activity Based on Three-Dimensional Grammar Theory in English as Foreign Language Classes

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Abstract: *Three-Dimensional Grammar Theory emphasizes the importance of setting up contextualized input and output activities in each dimension of form, meaning, and use. These activities contribute to enhancing language awareness and enable students to apply grammar knowledge in language use. This paper takes the passive as an example, analyzes teaching contents from the related three dimensions, explains teaching design ideas based on Three-Dimensional Grammar Theory in the context of Chinese as the mother tongue, and then presents six teaching activity samples in these three dimensions, respectively. These activities have been proven beneficial for cultivating grammatical competence.*

Keywords: *Three-Dimensional Grammar Theory; teaching content analysis; teaching activity samples; grammatical competence*

1. Introduction

English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) stipulates that students in junior high school should initially realize that grammatical knowledge in language use is a unity of "form-meaning-use". They are expected to comprehend the form and ideographic function of the learned grammar in spoken and written texts, as well as use the grammar knowledge they have learned to develop a description, narration or illustration in certain context. However, the preliminary survey results show that although some junior high school students can memorize grammatical rules and keep them in mind, it is still difficult for them to use grammatical forms meaningfully and appropriately in communication or writing.[1] [1] One of the main reasons is that language teaching often focuses solely on grammatical forms, neglecting the holistic development of students' grammatical competence. [2] In reality, mastering grammatical forms is just one step in cultivating grammatical competence, yet language teaching often stagnates at this stage, impeding students from consciously applying their knowledge. [3]

2. Grammar Teaching Method Based on Three-Dimensional Grammar Theory

Larsen-Freeman proposes that grammar teaching consists of three dimensions, namely, form (syntax), meaning (semantics) and use (pragmatics), which further develops as the Three-Dimensional Grammar Theory. [4] She also puts forward the notion of *grammaring*, [2] which refers to one of the dynamic linguistic processes of pattern formation in language. It can be used by humans to make meaning in context-appropriate ways. The Three-Dimensional Grammar Theory suggests presenting each dimension in a non-hierarchical manner, emphasizing the dynamic interaction between subsystems. It suggests using morphological and syntactic subsystems to express meaning in a given context, which implies that grammar teaching needs to focus on more than just whether students can generate correct grammatical forms. Meaning and use are equally important dimensions as form in grammar teaching. All of these aim to solve the "inert knowledge" problem and change the outdated impression of teachers and students on grammar teaching and learning.

Regarding teaching practice, Larsen-Freeman suggests that grammar teaching should focus on cultivating students' language awareness and using contextualized input and output activities to improve students' grammatical competence.

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[1]Whitehead called this phenomenon the "inert knowledge" problem.
[2]Larsen-Freeman creatively uses the new term *grammaring* to locate grammatical competence. [4]

First of all, Larsen-Freeman emphasizes the importance of interaction in language teaching and points out that various "scaffolding" activities such as dialogues, teacher-student communication, and community dialogues play a guiding and supporting role in language acquisition. These activities help enhance students' language awareness. In addition, consciously managing the input of teaching materials, such as designing a teaching activity that incorporates multiple example sentences using the target grammar, is beneficial for capturing students' conscious attention. This is also an effective method for enhancing students' language awareness.

Secondly, English teachers can provide a large amount of contextualized texts for students and facilitate students' understanding of the target grammar by using means such as questioning, revision, clarification, inspection, and confirmation. These efforts contribute to raising students' self-consciousness in responding to the target grammar. The use of contextualized input activities also provides a more meaningful, relevant, and diverse learning environment for grammar, helping students construct the connection between target grammatical forms and their meanings, better understand and apply grammar rules, and use correct grammatical forms and expressions in practical communication.

Contextualized output activities play a key role in developing students' grammatical competence as well. These activities create an immersive learning environment for students, making it easier for them to engage with real-life language usage scenarios. This immersive learning helps improve students' language awareness and intuition, assisting them in better transforming the acquired knowledge into the ability to use grammar accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately. On the other hand, contextualized output activities provide teachers with feedback on students' learning, mainly including whether students' cognition of the target grammatical items is accurate, whether the use is reasonable, and whether the expression is in line with the contexts. [5]

3. Teaching Content Analysis and Teaching Activity Samples

The following section takes the passive as an example to explain how English teachers in Chinese junior middle schools conduct three-dimensional analysis of target grammar and how to design and implement teaching activities guided by the Three-Dimensional Grammar Theory. It is worth mentioning that the activities presented in each dimension can be viewed as a combination of two aspects. Firstly, emphasis is placed on the explanation and application of language knowledge within each dimension. Secondly, contextualized input activities are integrated with output activities. [3]

3.1 Form

3.1.1 Analysis of Teaching Content

Students in junior high school should master the form of the passive in three tenses, namely the simple present tense, simple past tense, and simple future tense. The basic structure of the passive is be + v.-en, which should be taught as the first point. What's more, considering the cognitive levels of junior high school students, the passive grammar teaching should also emphasize different forms of person and number of the auxiliary verb be, as well as the sentence structures of the passive in the affirmative, negative, and interrogative forms. In addition, students easily mix up the passive with predicate-argument structure due to the similarities in surface structure. This confusion is particularly evident when a sentence contains a word that has different morphological properties but appears in the same form. Therefore, English teachers need to explicitly clarify the distinction.

3.1.2 Samples of Teaching Activity

Form-centered grammar teaching can combine implicit teaching with explicit teaching, which concentrates on developing grammatical competence and strengthening grammar awareness respectively. In terms of form dimension, teachers can design the following teaching activities:

(Sample 1)

Taking the teaching of the passive in the simple present tense as an example, a large number of sentences containing the target grammar are presented firstly, and then students are asked to find out the predicate in each example sentence. Finally, students work in groups to summarize some characteristics

[3]The following part is based on the author's personal teaching experience. After several adjustments and improvements, all teaching samples have been verified its effectiveness in teaching experiments.

of the structure of the passive in the simple present tense.

(1) Disneyland <u>is enjoyed</u> by millions of people from all over the world.

(2) English <u>is spoken</u> as the main language in America.

(3) Chinese <u>is taught</u> in many schools throughout the world.

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Teachers can highlight the predicate to enhance the emphasis on the content by underlining, bolding, or using other methods. This is conducive to capturing students' attention to the highlighted components, enabling them to independently explore the characteristics of the basic form of the target grammar and improve their understanding and mastery of this aspect.

(Sample 2)

Use short videos as a lead-in activity and set up discourse exercises related to the videos. Based on the prompts and teacher's demonstration, students are required to apply their knowledge of the passive to make a brief description of the content of the video. For the mistakes that surface in the process of completing the task, teachers correct them in time and arrange extra mechanical drills for reinforcement.

This kind of contextualized activity provides opportunities for students to apply the forms of the target grammar multiple times while carrying out the task, which is conducive to deepening students' understanding of the grammatical forms. Furthermore, through teacher-student interaction, teachers can have a clear idea of students' mastery of the target grammar and correct students' mistakes in time, thereby further improving accuracy in application.

3.2 Meaning

3.2.1 Analysis of Teaching Content

Larsen-Freeman proposed that the semantic dimension is related to the meaning conveyed by a specific grammatical form and runs through the whole grammar teaching process. As for this study, voice is mainly used to illustrate the specific relationship between the subject and the predicate in a sentence. The passive is often used in the same way as the active voice in terms of tense. However, active and passive voice are independent of each other, and there is no absolute corresponding conversion between them. Active and passive sentences with symmetrical syntactic structures may be different in the aspects of semantic meanings and truth conditions. [5] This phenomenon will be more significant if there are modifiers such as numerals or quantifiers in the sentences.

3.2.2 Samples of Teaching Activity

Early transformational grammar and second language classroom teaching tended to treat the passive as a syntactic variant of the active voice. [6] Taking active voice grammar teaching as the starting point, sentence interchange between the active and passive is a common teaching method in second language teaching. However, both teachers and students often ignore whether the meanings of the transformed sentences change and when and why there exist semantic differences. In response to this phenomenon, teachers should consciously form a comprehensive understanding of the semantic dimension of the passive and emphasize to students, in the early stages of teaching, that the conversion of the two voices may give rise to semantic changes.

(Sample 3)

At first, the teacher asks several students to convert the example sentences into the passive, and then introduces the differences in structures between active and passive voice. Next, the teacher organizes students to discuss whether the meaning of the sentences has changed after the conversion. After the discussion, the teacher introduces in detail the semantic changes that occur in the example sentences and summarizes several situations in which semantic asymmetry is caused by the transformation of sentence patterns. At the same time, the teacher reminds students that not all sentences using the active can be converted into the passive.

(1) <u>Every</u> student in Tom's class speaks <u>two</u> languages.

(2) <u>Few</u> people read <u>many</u> books.

(3) My mom always <u>makes the bed</u> for me.

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The main purpose of this activity is to clarify that the semantics of active and passive voice with symmetrical syntactic structures are not completely equivalent, and the conversion of sentence structure may cause semantic changes. By comparing and highlighting the semantic differences between the two voices, students are expected to develop a correct semantic understanding of the passive.

(Sample 4)

Mini game: Find the difference. Have students carefully observe the facilities and decorations in the classroom, and then ask them to close their eyes and wait for a while. The teacher will make changes to the decoration in the classroom. Once the rearrangement is complete, organize students to discuss with their peers and identify the changes that have taken place. Then the teacher asks what happened in the classroom.

The activity above makes full use of the context in which the target grammar is used. To discuss the changes in the classroom, both the simple past tense and the passive need to be applied for developing narration. This activity establishes the connection between the form and meaning of the passive in the simple past tense, allowing students to experience the semantic features of the passive in language use. It not only effectively explains the meaning of the passive in the simple past tense but also stimulates students' interest in learning grammar, thereby enabling them to construct meaningful sentences containing the passive. This activity also does beneficial to develop a sense of the target language. By using grammar rules in real contexts, students can gradually become familiar with the grammatical structures and expressions. Cultivating this language sense assists students in naturally understanding and applying grammar rules without excessive reliance on translation or rote memorization.

3.3 Use

3.3.1 Analysis of Teaching Content

As for the pragmatic dimension, it mainly consists of the following six aspects: Firstly, the passive is employed when the agent is not to be mentioned because 1) it is redundant or easy to supply; 2) it is unknown; 3) it is very general; 4) the speaker or writer is being tactful by not mentioning the agent; 5) the speaker is being evasive. Secondly, the passive is used when the patient is more relevant to the theme of the text than the agent, or when the non-agent is a participant in the immediately preceding sentence. Thirdly, it is important to inquire about the usage of the agented long passive, specifically, 1) when the agent is new information; 2) when the agent is nonhuman; 3) when the agent is a well-known personage and should be included as propositional information. [5] Fourthly, grammar teaching should involve usages of how to use the passive to achieve communicative functions, such as making invitations, granting permission, expressing rejection, etc. Fifthly, some special situations where only the passive can be used should be emphasized. Lastly, the teacher should also introduce special situations where the passive cannot be used. For instance, when the predicate verb is a verb of state, such as have, contain, lack, etc.

3.3.2 Samples of Teaching Activity

As mentioned above, the passive is commonly used for specific purposes. Decontextualized teaching will undoubtedly make it difficult for students to master the usages. Therefore, it is suggested to integrate explanations of its usage into application activities and guide students to pay attention to how to use the grammatical knowledge they have learned to organize information. This will help improve their grammatical competence. Here are two teaching samples.

(Sample 5)

The teacher presents several sets of sentences in the PPT, organizes students into groups for discussions, and summarizes the underlying causes of mistakes in each sentence. Finally, the teacher emphasizes several common situations where the passive cannot be used.

(1) Great changes took place in this city.   *Great changes were taken place in this city.

(2) The book belonged to by me.   *The book was belonged to by me.

(3) I had a bike.   *A bike was had by me.

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Many transitive verbs in English can only be used in active statements, while some verbs are

commonly used in the passive. Therefore, to remind students to pay attention to several special pragmatic situations involving the passive, students can be guided to compare several groups of sentences using the two voices. This will intuitively present common situations where the passive cannot be used or can only be used. The teacher can then provide a brief summary, which will reinforce the learning and help students reduce pragmatic errors, allowing them to fully understand the usages of the passive.

(Sample 6)

Ask students to use a polite tone and develop dialogues according to the following situation: Suppose Tom invites you to go to the movies after school, but your mother asks you to go home immediately to review your homework. So you may mainly have two choices: communicate with your mother and seek her approval or reject Tom's invitation. First of all, the teacher lists some reply samples, organizes students to observe the differences within the following expressions in each group, and asks them to choose the expression that they think is more polite and appropriate. Then the teacher will explain the politeness level of each expression. Finally, students work in pairs to further the dialogues freely.

(1) To mom:

I want to see a movie with Tom...

Tom invited me to see a movie...

I was invited by Tom to see a movie...

(2) To Tom:

I cannot agree with your invitation...

My mom asked me to go home and review my lessons...

I was asked to go home and review my lessons...

The activity described above effectively combines the form, meaning, and use of the passive by providing contextual examples. It aims to clarify one specific usage of the passive, which is to reduce the toughness of discourse and facilitate the acceptance of our opinions when making requests or rejections. The description subtly explains how to use the passive to achieve effective communication goals and guides students to independently explore the varying levels of politeness associated with different expressions. This approach enhances students' ability to use the passive appropriately in this particular context. Furthermore, this kind of activity encourages students to actively apply their acquired grammar knowledge to generate creative and unique outputs. By constructing sentences, paragraphs, or conversations from scratch, students can enhance their grammar usage and develop their overall grammatical competence.

4. Conclusion

The current grammar teaching in junior high school should renovate the traditional teaching methods, such as the Grammar-Translation Method, and pay equal attention to the three dimensions of form, meaning, and use. This means that English teachers should not only teach students how to produce accurate forms that conform to grammatical rules but also how to use appropriate forms to achieve successful communication.

On the other hand, it is suggested that grammar teaching should not be limited to introducing grammar rules but should also involve investing more efforts in designing a variety of teaching activities that provide contexts for students to make full use of their language knowledge. This approach can deepen their understanding of the meaning and usage of the target grammar and ultimately help them cultivate language awareness and improve their grammatical competence. [7]

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