# Three-Dimensional Grammar Framework

## Jyothi Hymavathi Devi

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Grammar is an essential part of language teaching, and many a time, a challenging task given the peculiar nature of it. The history of language teaching has witnessed a number of grammar teaching methods which were evolved in line with the broader language teaching methods existing at different points of time. There are various definitions of grammar. Here are some: "Grammar is the business of taking a language to pieces, to see how it works" (David Crystal, 2004). "... the entire system of a language, including its syntax, morphology, semantics and phonology (Chalker & Weiner, 1994, p. 177). "Grammar teaching involves any instructional technique that draws learners' attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it" (Ellis, 2006, p. 84).

**Questions about Teaching Grammar**

Sine long, there have been many questions posed by various people, in relation to grammar teaching, which are worth answering, and quite significant in dealing with English language teaching. While discussing these issues in detail, Ellis himself posed eight seminal questions, and subsequently, answered them. The following are Ellis' questions (2006); they not only intrigued Ellis but also everybody who are genuinely interested in the present issue.

1. Should we teach grammar, or should we simply create the conditions by which learners learn naturally?
2. What grammar should we teach?
3. When should we teach grammar? Is it best to teach grammar when learners first start to learn an L2 or to wait until later when learners have already acquired some linguistic competence?

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4. Should grammar instruction be massed (i.e., the available teaching time be concentrated into a short period) or distributed (i.e., the available teaching time spread over a longer period)?

5. Should grammar instruction be intensive (e.g., cover a single grammatical structure in a single lesson) or extensive (e.g., cover many grammatical structures in a single lesson)?

6. Is there any value in teaching explicit grammatical knowledge?

7. Is there a best way to teach grammar for implicit knowledge?

8. Should grammar be taught in separate lessons or integrated into communicative activities?

(Ellis, 2006, p. 84)

## Some Frameworks to Teach Grammar

In the context of discussing 'how' grammar is to be taught, it is worth discussing a framework evolved by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999).This paper is an attempt to present their 'Three-Dimensional Grammar Framework' and also how that has been employed by the researchers to analyze some of the grammatical aspects. According to Larsen-Freeman, teaching grammar enables language learners to use linguistic forms 'accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately' (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). Accordingly, the framework has three components-form/structure, meaning/semantics, and use/pragmatics, which are three important aspects of language. This is in accordance to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's own definition of grammar, "Grammar is not merely a collection of forms but rather involves the three dimensions of (morpho)syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Grammatical structures not only have a morphosysntactic form, they are also used to express meaning (semantics) in context-appropriate use (pragmatics)" (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 109). Primacy is given to meaning, the semantics and pragmatic aspects of grammar/language, though form and structure are also given considerable importance.

## The Three-Dimensional Framework

The Three-Dimensional Framework is a departure from traditional analysis of English grammar as it encompasses the three dimensions of syntax, semantics and pragmatics unlike other approaches to grammar teaching. This has been evolved keeping in view the

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communicative aspect of grammar. Larsen-Freeman wanted to 'encourage a balance between grammar and communication' (2001, p.251) and therefore came up with the framework of 'Three-Dimensional Framework of Grammar' which has been evolved in consonance with the communicative approach to language which encourages language use over imparting rules of language. In this connection, Freeman draws our attention to the research evidence which proves the positive effect of focussing the learners' attention on linguistic forms in the context of communicative interactions.

> In contrast, research has shown that researchers who focus students' attention on linguistic form during communicative interactions are more effective than those who never focus on form or who only do so in decontextualized grammar lessons.
>
> > Spada and Lightbown 1993; Lightbown 1998
> > (As cited in Larsen-Freeman, Teaching Grammar, 2001, p. 251)

Here, 'grammatical form in communication interaction' is a key phrase which brings up the issue of 'context' in teaching grammar. This is looking at 'form in/with context' in contrast to 'form without context'. In this connection, the importance of context in teaching grammar can also be seen in Nunan's words, "If learners are not given opportunities to explore grammar in context, it will be difficult for them to see how and why alternative forms exist to express different communicative meanings"(1998, p.103).

The Three-Dimensional framework of grammar facilitates the usage of grammar structures with accuracy, meaning and appropriateness (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 2001). Many English grammar text books overlook either of the above aspects which would deprive the learners of successful communication. This framework also considers grammar as a dynamic system rather a static one. The authors of this framework put forward it in the form of a pie chart and the boundaries between these dimensions are permeable, and are indicated by bidirectional arrows. As it was evolved, there is no hierarchy existing among these three dimensions, rather, all the three are interconnected. The following pie chart explains the framework.

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Pie diagram depicting the Three-Dimensional Framework of grammar
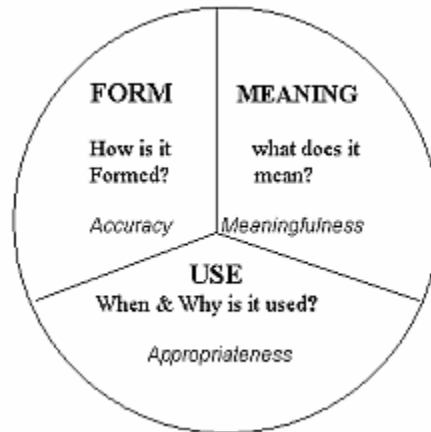


Courtesy: Ozmen, (undated)

The three dimensions of the framework become three wedges in the diagram and are interconnected by arrows which are not visible in the above diagram. Changes in one wedge would affect changes in other wedges. The first dimension is 'Form/Structure' which indicates Morphosyntactic and lexical patterns, and phonemic and graphemic patterns; the second wedge, 'Meaning/Semantics' indicates lexical and grammatical meaning; and the third wedge, 'Use/Pragmatics', indicates social context, linguistic discourse context, and presuppositions about context.

The above framework can be understood with the help of the authors' analysis of the form of possessive case and phrasal verbs in English grammar. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman went on to explain that the form of the possessive case in English is to be explained in the first section of 'form' where it is explained that inflection is required to form possessives. In the 'meaning' part of the framework, it is required to explain that the possessive or genitive form, apart from its indication of possession, can also indicate descriptions, amounts, relationship, part/whole and origin/agent. The final part of the framework 'use' has to explain the usage of possessive. Here, 'when do we use possessive?' and 'why do we use possessive?' in English are to be explained. The usage of 's, possessive determiner (*his, her, their*), '*of the'* are to be discussed. Similarly, the same framework was employed by the authors to explain phrasal verbs in English.

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**Application Value of Three-Dimensional Framework**

The application value of three-dimensional framework can be seen from the way it has been applied to analyze some of the grammar texts. Macias (2010) employed this to analyze grammatical aspects, as discussed by some course book writers. He explored the three dimensions of form, meaning, and use of three-dimensional framework from the perspective of English passive voice in two ELT course books (Macias, 2010, p. 331).The two books selected for the analysis were *Reward* (Greenall, 1995) and *New Headway* (Soars, 1996). His analysis of the two ELT course books revealed that the first book, *Reward* (Greenall, 1995), made explicit reference to form, and made reference to meaning and use to only some extent. He found that more explicit and deductive approach was followed in this course book. Only few activities appeared to focus on contextualized practice. The other book *New Headway* (Greenall, 1995) focused predominantly on meaning and use. The activities in this book were 'seemingly consciousness-rising' (Macias, 2010, p. 342). Macias found that this framework is of great relevance in grammar teaching.

In the context of practical teaching of grammar in classrooms too, teachers can use three-dimensional framework and achieve greater success in making grammar teaching more meaningful as this framework contextualizes grammar.

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Jyothi Hymavathi Devi
Assistant Professor
Centre for English Language Studies
School of Humanities
University of Hyderabad
Hyderabad 500046
Telangana
India
hymajyothi@ymail.com

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