

An Application Exploration of Meaningful Learning Theory in Secondary School English Grammar Teaching from a Core Competency Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In the context of ongoing English curriculum reform, secondary school English grammar teaching is increasingly expected to move beyond mechanical rule memorization to foster students' core competencies. However, many classroom practices still emphasize form-focused instruction, which may lead to fragmented grammatical knowledge and limited language transfer ability. Grounded in Meaningful Learning Theory, this paper adopts a theoretical and practice-oriented perspective to explore how Meaningful Learning Theory may be applied to secondary school English grammar teaching under the core competency framework. Through theoretical review and problem-oriented analysis of current practices, this study suggests ineffective grammar learning may largely stem from insufficient integration between new grammatical knowledge and learners' existing cognitive structures. On this basis, several pedagogical strategies are proposed, including activating prior knowledge, constructing meaningful learning contexts, facilitating knowledge integration, and enhancing grammar transfer. It is argued that applying Meaningful Learning Theory may enhance students' grammatical understanding and support the holistic development of their English core competencies.

KEYWORDS

Meaningful Learning Theory; English grammar teaching; Core competencies; Secondary school English; Curriculum Standards.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Grammar has long been regarded as a fundamental component of English language teaching in secondary schools. Traditionally, grammar instruction has relied heavily on explicit rule explanation and repetitive practice, mainly aiming to improve students' grammatical accuracy in examinations (Harmer, 2015; Wang, 2017)[1][2]. While such practices may boost short-term performance, they may fail to promote deep understanding or flexible language use. As a result, many students may recite grammatical rules but struggle to apply them in authentic communicative situations (Ellis, 2006)[3].

With the release of the *English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition)* and the *English Curriculum Standards for General High School (2017 Edition, Revised 2025)*, English teaching in China is undergoing a paradigm shift from knowledge-oriented to competency-based education (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2022, 2017)[4][5]. Both standards emphasize the integrated development of core competencies including language ability, learning ability, thinking quality, and cultural awareness. Within this framework, grammar is no longer viewed as an isolated system of

rules but as a meaningful resource that supports language comprehension and expression (Larsen-Freeman, 2003)[6].

However, empirical studies and classroom observations indicate that grammar teaching in many secondary schools has not fully aligned with new curriculum requirements. It remains decontextualized, teacher-centered, and examination-driven, overemphasizing mechanical drills and rule memorization (Lu, 2016; Liu, 2018)[7][8]. Such practices may hinder meaningful understanding and limit knowledge transfer, revealing a gap between curriculum ideals and classroom reality (Zhao, 2021)[9]. In this context, Meaningful Learning Theory, which emphasizes the integration of new knowledge with learners' existing cognitive structures, provides a valuable cognitive framework for rethinking grammar instruction.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

This study explores the applicability of Meaningful Learning Theory to secondary school English grammar teaching within the framework of core competency-oriented curriculum reform. Against the background of persistent issues like mechanical memorization and insufficient contextualization, it attempts to reinterpret grammar teaching practices from a cognitive perspective.

By examining the theoretical principles of meaningful learning and their relevance to grammar acquisition, the paper aims to demonstrate how grammar instruction may become more effective when new grammatical knowledge is systematically integrated with learners' existing cognitive structures (Ausubel, 1968, 2000)[10][11]. Through theoretical analysis and problem-oriented discussion, it proposes pedagogically feasible strategies aligned with the latest English Curriculum Standards, with the expectation of promoting meaningful learning and supporting the development of students' English core competencies.

1.3. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study can be discussed from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Theoretically, it contributes to the application of Meaningful Learning Theory in foreign language education by extending its explanatory power to English grammar teaching. By relating grammar learning difficulties to learners' cognitive structures, it may provide a cognitive explanation for the limitations of traditional form-focused instruction (Ausubel, 1968; Zhang, 2014)[10][12].

Practically, this study may offer secondary school English teachers feasible instructional implications to improve grammar teaching effectiveness in line with core competency-oriented standards. By emphasizing meaningful learning processes, teachers may be better design grammar lessons that integrate form and meaning, facilitate knowledge transfer, and foster students' learning ability and thinking quality (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Cui, 2019, p. 18)[13][14]. In this sense, the study may help bridge the gap between curriculum reform goals and actual classroom practice.

2. PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

2.1. Meaningful Learning Theory

Meaningful Learning Theory, proposed by Ausubel, serves as the central theoretical foundation of the present study. The theory distinguishes meaningful learning from rote learning by emphasizing the role of learners' cognitive structures in knowledge acquisition (Ausubel, 1968)[10]. According to this theory, learning becomes meaningful when new information is consciously and non-arbitrarily related to relevant existing concepts in the learner's cognitive structure. In contrast, rote learning mainly relies on mechanical memorization, often resulting in fragmented knowledge hard to retain and transfer..

A key assumption of Meaningful Learning Theory is that learners' prior knowledge plays a decisive role in learning effectiveness. When new knowledge is meaningfully integrated into existing cognitive structures, learners are more likely to achieve deep understanding and flexible application (Ausubel, 1968)[10]. From a cognitive perspective, learning difficulties may arise not from the complexity of new content itself, but from the lack of meaningful connections between new information and learners' prior knowledge. Thus, the theory provides a powerful explanatory framework for analyzing learning problems and guiding instructional design, particularly in contexts where understanding and knowledge transfer are emphasized.

2.1.1. Meaningful Learning Theory from a Core Competency-Oriented Perspective

Core competency-oriented education provides the macro-level instructional orientation for applying Meaningful Learning Theory to grammar teaching. According to the *English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition)* and the *English Curriculum Standards for General High School (2017 Edition, Revised 2025)*, English education aims to cultivate students' core competencies, including language ability, learning ability, thinking quality, and cultural awareness (MOE, 2022, 2017)[4][5]. These competencies emphasize the integrated development of knowledge, abilities, and cognitive processes rather than the accumulation of isolated linguistic knowledge.

The emphasis of Meaningful Learning Theory on understanding, knowledge integration, and cognitive organization is highly consistent with the goals of core competency-oriented education. For example, meaningful learning requires learners to actively relate new knowledge to their existing cognitive structures, which contributes to the development of learning ability and thinking quality. In this sense, Meaningful Learning Theory offers a cognitive explanation for how core competencies can be cultivated through classroom instruction. It also provides theoretical support for instructional practices that prioritize deep understanding and long-term learning outcomes over short-term performance.

2.1.2. The Application of Meaningful Learning Theory to English Grammar Teaching

Traditional grammar teaching has often emphasized rule explanation and accuracy, which may help learners achieve short-term examination success but may fail to promote meaningful language use (Ellis, 2006)[3]. As a result, learners may acquire explicit grammatical knowledge but struggle to apply it flexibly in communication.

From the perspective of Meaningful Learning Theory, such problems may arise when grammatical rules are taught in isolation or memorized without meaningful connections to learners' prior knowledge (Ausubel, 2000)[11]. Grammar learning is more likely to be effective when grammatical forms are meaningfully linked to meaning and use. This view is consistent with Larsen-Freeman's concept of "grammaring", which regards grammar as a dynamic resource for meaning-making rather than a static system of rules (Larsen-Freeman, 2003)[6].

By applying Meaningful Learning Theory to grammar instruction, grammar teaching can be reconceptualized as a process of helping learners construct meaningful cognitive connections between form, meaning, and use. Such an approach not only addresses the limitations of traditional grammar teaching but also supports the development of learners' core competencies by fostering understanding, knowledge integration, and communicative ability.

2.2. Related Studies Home and Abroad

Foreign studies on English grammar teaching have long focused on the relationship between form, meaning, and use. From a second language acquisition perspective, Ellis pointed out grammar instruction may be less effective when forms are taught in isolation from communicative contexts (Ellis, 2006)[3]. He argued that grammar teaching should help learners understand how linguistic forms function in meaning construction. Similarly, Larsen-Freeman (2003) emphasized integrating grammar learning into meaningful communication, while Long (1991) suggested embedding

attention to form in meaning-focused activities. These studies demonstrate that meaningful context and learner engagement play important roles, aligning with Meaningful Learning Theory[6][15].

In the Chinese context, many researchers have examined problems in secondary school English grammar teaching. Studies have pointed out that grammar instruction often remains examination-oriented and teacher-centered, with an overemphasis on rule explanation and mechanical drills (Lu, 2016)[7]. As a result, students may achieve satisfactory examination results but demonstrate limited ability to use grammar in real communication. Some scholars advocate integrating grammar teaching with meaning and communication. Liu (2018) argued that grammar should be taught as a tool for meaning expression rather than as isolated knowledge[8]. From a curriculum perspective, Cheng (2015) and Cui (2019) emphasized that grammar teaching should align with the cultivation of students' core competencies[14][16], while Chen (2020) specifically focused on applying Meaningful Learning Theory to propose targeted instructional strategies, which enriches the practical exploration of theory-based grammar teaching reform[17]. However, most domestic studies focus on teaching strategies or classroom techniques, while relatively few studies systematically apply Meaningful Learning Theory to analyze grammar teaching problems at the cognitive level (Zhao, 2021)[9].

Although existing studies have explored grammar teaching reform from various perspectives, grammar instruction in many secondary schools remains form-focused and examination-oriented. In such contexts, grammatical rules are often taught through mechanical explanation and repetitive practice, with limited attention to learners' prior knowledge or meaningful contexts (Liu, 2018)[8]. From the perspective of the present study, these problems are not merely methodological but cognitive in nature. Specifically, grammar teaching often fails to facilitate meaningful connections between new grammatical knowledge and learners' existing cognitive structures. Besides, although recent curriculum reforms emphasize the development of English core competencies, grammar instruction in practice has not yet fully incorporated cognitive-oriented learning principles to support such development.

Therefore, this study seeks to address how Meaningful Learning Theory can be systematically applied to secondary school English grammar teaching under a core competency-oriented framework, so as to provide theoretical explanation and pedagogical guidance for grammar teaching reform.

3. PROBLEM SOLUTIONS

In response to the problems identified in current secondary school English grammar teaching, this section proposes pedagogical solutions grounded in Meaningful Learning Theory and guided by the core competency-oriented curriculum framework. By integrating theory with classroom practice, the proposed solutions aim to promote meaningful grammar learning through concrete instructional cases and feasible teaching pathways.

3.1. Activating Prior Knowledge through Structured Lead-in Activities

In many grammar lessons, new grammatical structures are introduced abruptly, without sufficient connection to students' existing knowledge. As a result, grammar learning often relies on rote memorization, which limits long-term retention and transfer. Meaningful Learning Theory holds that new knowledge can be meaningfully learned only when it is anchored to relevant prior knowledge in learners' cognitive structures (Ausubel, 1968)[10]. Activating learners' prior knowledge is therefore a prerequisite for meaningful grammar learning.

Nation (2013) emphasized that effective language learning requires sufficient exposure to relevant and familiar input, and connecting new knowledge to learners' prior linguistic experience can significantly improve learning efficiency and retention[18]. In classroom practice, teachers may activate prior knowledge through contextualized lead-in activities that draw on students' familiar linguistic experiences. For instance, When teaching the present perfect tense in a junior high school

class, a teacher begins the lesson by asking students to discuss recent personal experiences using the simple past tense, such as “What did you do during the winter vacation?” Students share familiar experiences, which activates their existing knowledge of verb forms and time expressions. The teacher then presents sentences such as “I have visited Beijing three times” and guides students to compare them with simple past sentences. Through guided discussion, students are led to notice differences in meaning and usage between the two tenses.

Through this process, new grammatical knowledge is no longer presented as an isolated rule but becomes meaningfully connected to students’ prior knowledge. Also, by systematically activating prior knowledge, teachers may help students develop learning ability. Such an approach also reflects the principle that “the most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows” (Ausubel, 1968, p. vi)[10].

3.2. Embedding Grammar Instruction in Meaningful Contexts

Another prominent issue in grammar teaching is the decontextualized presentation of grammatical rules, which often limits students’ ability to apply grammar knowledge in authentic communication. Meaningful Learning Theory suggests that learning materials should be logically organized and meaningfully related to learners’ experiences in order to promote cognitive integration (Ausubel, 2000)[11]. From a language teaching perspective, grammar learning is more effective when form, meaning, and use are integrated (Ellis, 2006)[3].

In secondary school English classrooms, teachers may design contextualized tasks such as short reading passages, dialogues, or situational descriptions that naturally incorporate target grammatical structures. For example, when teaching attributive clauses, a teacher may design a short reading passage titled *My Favorite Teacher*. The text naturally includes several relative clauses describing the teacher’s personality and achievements. Students are first asked to understand the text meaning, and only then guided to notice how relative clauses provide additional information. Rather than explaining rules directly, the teacher encourages students to identify patterns and infer usage through discussion.

By integrating grammar instruction with meaningful contexts, students are more likely to understand how grammatical forms contribute to meaning-making. This approach is consistent with the view that grammar should be taught as a dynamic resource for communication rather than as a static set of rules (Larsen-Freeman, 2003)[6]. Moreover, contextualized grammar teaching supports the development of students’ language ability and thinking quality, which are key dimensions of English core competencies.

3.3. Promoting Knowledge Integration through Comparative Grammar Tasks

Students often acquire fragmented grammatical knowledge and struggle to distinguish between similar grammatical structures, such as modal verbs or verb tenses. According to Meaningful Learning Theory, meaningful learning involves the integration and reorganization of knowledge within learners’ cognitive systems (Ausubel, 1968)[10]. Accordingly, grammar instruction should include tasks that promote comparison, reflection, and conceptual clarification.

Particularly, comparative grammar tasks may be particularly effective in facilitating knowledge integration. For instance, when teaching modal verbs such as “must”, “have to”, and “should”, teachers may present different communicative situations, including school regulations, personal advice, and social rules. Students are encouraged to decide which modal verb is most appropriate in each context and explain their choices and to discuss subtle differences in meaning and degree of obligation. Through such comparison, students gradually construct a clearer and more systematic understanding of grammatical concepts. Such comparative tasks help students form clearer conceptual distinctions and integrate new knowledge with existing grammatical knowledge.

To further support integration, teachers may guide students to summarize their findings in tables or concept maps, which visually represent relationships among grammatical forms. Such reflective activities help students reorganize grammatical knowledge and strengthen cognitive connections. This process contributes to the development of learning ability, which is regarded as an important component of core competencies in English education (Cui, 2019, p. 19)[14].

3.4. Enhancing Grammar Transfer through Communicative Tasks

Although traditional grammar exercises may improve short-term accuracy, they often fail to promote the transfer of grammatical knowledge to real-life communication. Meaningful Learning Theory suggests that knowledge becomes functional only when it is applied meaningfully (Ausubel, 2000)[11]. From a language teaching perspective, communicative practice plays a crucial role in facilitating such transfer (Long, 1991)[15]. Moreover, Swain (2005) proposed the Output Hypothesis, arguing that language learners need meaningful output opportunities to consolidate their linguistic knowledge, clarify their understanding of language forms and meanings, and promote the internalization and automatization of grammar knowledge[19].

In classroom practice, teachers may design communicative tasks that require students to use target grammatical structures to accomplish meaningful goals. For example, after learning conditional sentences, students may participate in group discussions on real-life topics such as environmental protection or school rules. They may be asked to discuss questions like “What would happen if people did not protect nature?” or “What would you do if you were the school principal?” During these activities, grammar is used as a tool for expressing ideas rather than as an isolated learning objective.

Such communicative grammar practice enables students to apply grammatical knowledge in authentic contexts, thereby enhancing transfer ability and communicative competence. Also, by engaging in meaningful interaction, students integrate grammatical form with meaning and use, which supports the holistic development of English core competencies emphasized in the curriculum standards.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1. Major Findings of the Study

Based on Meaningful Learning Theory and the core competency-oriented curriculum framework, this study has explored the application of meaningful learning principles to secondary school English grammar teaching. Through a theoretical analysis and problem-oriented discussion, the study demonstrates that many persistent problems in grammar instruction, such as mechanical memorization and fragmented knowledge, may stem from insufficient integration between new grammatical knowledge and learners’ existing cognitive structures.

The analysis indicates that grammar teaching may become more effective when instructional design emphasizes the activation of prior knowledge, the construction of meaningful contexts, and opportunities for knowledge integration and communicative use. When grammar learning is meaningfully connected to learners’ experiences and cognitive frameworks, students are more likely to achieve deeper understanding and flexible application of grammatical knowledge. These findings suggest that Meaningful Learning Theory provides a valuable cognitive perspective for reinterpreting grammar teaching practices under the core competency-oriented curriculum reform.

4.2. Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study offer several implications for secondary school English grammar teaching. Grammar instruction should shift from rule-centered explanation to learner-centered meaning construction, with greater attention paid to students’ prior knowledge and cognitive processes.

Instructional activities that facilitate meaningful connections between new and existing knowledge may enhance learning effectiveness and align with the principles of Meaningful Learning Theory.

In addition, grammar teaching should be embedded in meaningful contexts that integrate form, meaning, and use. By situating grammatical structures within authentic or familiar communicative situations, teachers may help students understand grammar as a functional resource for communication rather than an isolated system of rules. Such instructional practices also align with the emphasis on language ability and thinking quality in the English core competencies framework.

Furthermore, grammar practice should go beyond accuracy-focused drills and incorporate communicative tasks that support knowledge transfer and meaningful output. When students are encouraged to apply grammatical knowledge in meaningful communication, they are more likely to develop learning ability and communicative competence, which are essential components of core competency-oriented English education.

4.3. Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. First, the research is mainly theoretical and does not include empirical data from classroom observations or experimental studies. As a result, the effectiveness of the proposed teaching strategies has not been empirically verified. Second, the study focuses on general principles of grammar teaching and does not provide in-depth analysis of specific grammatical structures. In addition, learner differences and classroom variables are not fully addressed.

4.4. Suggestions for Future Research

As a graduate student majoring in English education, the author recognizes that the present study is mainly theoretical and reflective in nature. Future research may therefore adopt empirical approaches, such as classroom-based experiments or action research, to examine the effectiveness of meaningful learning-oriented grammar instruction in actual secondary school classrooms. Such studies may provide more concrete evidence to support the instructional strategies proposed in this paper.

In addition, future research may focus on specific grammatical structures or learners at different proficiency levels to explore how meaningful grammar learning can be adapted to diverse learning needs under a core competency-oriented framework. Through continuous classroom observation and reflective practice, further studies may contribute to a deeper understanding of how Meaningful Learning Theory can be effectively implemented in secondary school English grammar teaching.

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