

# A Study on the System Construction and Practical Pathways of Junior High School English Grammar Teaching under the Guidance of Thematic Meaning

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**Abstract:** Grammar teaching in junior high school English education faces the dilemma of separation between form and meaning, and the concept of grammar teaching guided by thematic meaning provides a theoretical foundation for solving this problem. Based on the logic of integrating grammatical knowledge with thematic meaning, this study constructs an analytical framework covering theoretical basis, system composition, and practical pathways. It clarifies the characteristic of thematic meaning as the semantic field of grammatical knowledge, reveals the endogenous mechanism of grammatical rules driven by meaning, and demonstrates the cognitive adaptation features of grammar learning at the junior high school stage. On this basis, this study proposes the principles of thematic hierarchy screening and gradient setting for grammar items, establishes a classification of three presentation modes of grammatical structures under meaning orientation, designs practice modules that integrate grammatical form and meaning, and determines the derivation sequence, internalization framework, and transfer trigger conditions of grammatical rules based on thematic contexts. This study provides a systematic theoretical reference for junior high school English grammar teaching.

**Key words:** thematic meaning; junior high school English grammar teaching; grammar internalization; cognitive adaptation; transfer trigger conditions

## Introduction

The problem of separation between form and meaning has long existed in junior high school English grammar teaching, and the root cause lies in the fact that rule explanations are detached from contexts and fail to be embedded into authentic semantic expression needs. The concept guided by thematic meaning takes thematic context as the basic unit for organizing grammatical knowledge and achieves the organic integration of form and meaning through the evocation and constraint of meaning on form. Learners at the junior high school stage are in a cognitive transition period and have limited capacity for processing abstract rules; thematic meaning can function as a cognitive scaffold to reduce analytical load and promote internalization. Although current research has paid attention to the role of context, it has not yet formed a systematic framework with thematic meaning as its logical starting point, and there is a lack of a complete pathway design from selection and presentation to internalization and transfer. This study aims to construct the theoretical basis, constituent elements, and practical pathways of this system to fill the gap in a systematic framework.

## 1. Theoretical Basis of Junior High School English Grammar Teaching under the Guidance of Thematic Meaning

### 1.1 The Logic of Integrating Thematic Meaning and Grammatical Knowledge

The Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) points out that grammatical knowledge should be presented in thematic contexts. Thematic meaning constitutes the semantic field of grammatical knowledge. In language use, grammatical rules obtain operable representational forms through specific thematic contexts. Thematic meaning provides a unified conceptual framework for grammar items, enabling scattered items to form an associative network at the level of meaning. The core of the integration logic lies in the fact that the choice of grammatical forms is constrained by thematic meaning. For example, the past tense used when narrating past events and the conditional sentence patterns used when describing causal relationships are both calls upon

grammatical resources driven by thematic meaning. Observed from the perspective of information organization, thematic meaning, as a high-level cognitive schema, can integrate the semantic functions of multiple grammatical structures and form a knowledge topological structure with meaning nodes as its core<sup>[1]</sup>.

According to The Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition), grammatical knowledge should follow the principle of the unity of form, meaning, and use. Grammatical knowledge, in turn, imposes structural constraints on thematic meaning, ensuring that meaning expression conforms to the normative requirements of the language system. Under different thematic contexts, the frequency of use and distribution patterns of grammar items present systematic differences; such differences do not occur randomly but are determined by the degree of match between the semantic potential of the grammatical forms themselves and the thematic meaning. The integration of thematic meaning and grammatical knowledge follows a hierarchical relationship of "meaning first, form following," that is, thematic meaning defines the communicative goal, and grammatical forms provide the symbolic means to achieve that goal. The deep mechanism of the integration logic is manifested as a two-way selection process: thematic meaning selects the appropriate grammatical structures, and grammatical forms, in turn, shape the expression boundaries of thematic meaning, with the two forming a stable synergistic relationship through interaction<sup>[2]</sup>.

### ***1.2 The Endogenous Mechanism of Grammatical Rules Driven by Meaning***

The core of the meaning-driven mechanism lies in the process of transforming grammatical rules from external memory objects into internal cognitive tools. In traditional grammar teaching, rules are often presented as unconditional structural patterns, and learners perform mechanical drills in situations lacking meaningful support, which results in the storage of rules in the declarative memory system and makes transfer difficult. Being driven by meaning embeds grammatical rules into complete expression tasks, activates learners' semantic needs, and prompts them to actively seek grammatical forms to meet communicative requirements. This endogenous mechanism takes "need-form-matching" as its basic cyclical unit: the expression needs triggered by thematic meaning motivate learners to retrieve relevant grammatical structures from their existing knowledge base, and when the existing structures cannot meet the needs, new grammatical rules obtain the dynamic conditions for internalization.

The internalization of grammatical rules also depends on the role of meaningful contexts in making the applicable conditions of the rules explicit. The same grammatical form may carry different semantic functions in different thematic contexts. For example, the simple present tense can express both habitual actions and universal truths, and such functional differentiation can only be accurately identified within a specific meaning framework. The meaning-driven mechanism prompts learners, under the guidance of thematic clues, to induce the usage conditions of grammatical rules rather than the morphological features of the rules themselves. From the perspective of cognitive processing, being driven by meaning reduces the degree of abstraction of grammatical rules and transforms them into perceivable semantic operation steps, thereby shortening the transformation cycle from rule recognition to automatic production. The endpoint of internalization is manifested as the deep integration of grammatical rules with the representation of thematic meaning; at this point, rules are no longer explicitly recalled but are automatically activated along with the activation of thematic meaning<sup>[3]</sup>.

### ***1.3 Cognitive Adaptation Features of Grammar Learning at the Junior High School Stage***

The cognitive development of learners at the junior high school stage is in a critical period of transition from concrete operations to formal operations. Grammar learning during this period shows a strong dependence on meaning support, and the direct presentation of abstract rules easily exceeds the limits of their processing capacity. The cognitive adaptation features are first reflected in the fact that the organization of grammatical information must match learners' schema construction ability. Junior high school students can extract grammatical regularities from complete thematic contexts, but they have difficulty understanding grammatical terminology and complex rule descriptions that are detached from contexts. Thematic meaning plays the role of a "cognitive scaffold" at this stage, mapping abstract grammatical relations onto perceivable event logic or attribute relationships of objects, thereby reducing the cognitive load of grammatical analysis.

Another cognitive adaptation feature of grammar learning at the junior high school stage is that inductive processing is superior to deductive processing. Learners can spontaneously form implicit knowledge about grammatical distribution through the comparison of multiple thematic contexts;

although this knowledge is difficult to express in words, it can guide actual production. The repeated presentation of thematic meaning helps to cumulatively enhance grammatical sensitivity, and the appearance of variants of the same grammar item under different thematic frameworks prompts learners to develop the ability to generalize grammar across themes. Meanwhile, the working memory capacity at the junior high school stage is limited, and explicit instruction of grammatical rules, if lacking integration with meaning, can easily cause cognitive overload. Being guided by thematic meaning compresses information redundancy and highlights structure-function correspondences, thereby providing an economical pathway for the encoding and storage of grammatical rules. The cognitive adaptation features ultimately determine that junior high school grammar teaching should take thematic meaning as the priority dimension for organizing grammatical knowledge<sup>[4]</sup>.

## **2. The Constituent Elements of the Junior High School English Grammar Teaching System under the Guidance of Thematic Meaning**

### ***2.1 Thematic Hierarchy Screening and Gradient Setting of Grammar Items***

The thematic hierarchy screening of grammar items sorts the items according to the strength of the call of thematic meaning for grammatical forms. Significant differences exist in the frequency of occurrence and functional importance of different grammar items in thematic contexts. The screening mechanism uses the “theme-grammar co-occurrence matrix” as an analytical tool to identify grammatical structures that frequently co-occur within each thematic domain. For example, in the thematic domain of describing personal characteristics, the comparative degree of adjectives and degree adverbs have a high probability of co-occurrence; in the thematic domain of narrating event sequences, the combination of adverbial clauses of time and the simple past tense presents a systematic distribution. The thematic hierarchy is divided into the core layer, the expansion layer, and the peripheral layer. Grammar items in the core layer have the highest degree of binding with thematic meaning, and the reasonableness of using the grammatical form decreases significantly when it is detached from that theme.

Gradient setting follows the dual progression logic of thematic meaning complexity and grammatical form difficulty. The same grammar item can match thematic contexts at different levels at different learning stages. For example, modal verbs combine with the theme of “school rules” at the basic level to present a single function; at a higher level, they combine with the theme of “environmental protection suggestions” to present polysemy and pragmatic differences. Gradient setting also needs to consider the influence of the degree of abstraction of thematic meaning on the complexity of grammatical structures: grammar items carried by concrete themes (such as shopping and asking for directions) are suitable for early presentation, while those carried by abstract themes (such as values and causal relationships) are presented later. The vertical distribution of grammar items forms a spiral structure with thematic domains as units, where the same grammar item appears repeatedly across multiple thematic levels but with its semantic functions gradually differentiated<sup>[5]</sup>.

### ***2.2 Classification of Presentation Modes of Grammatical Structures under Meaning Orientation***

Under meaning orientation, the presentation modes of grammatical structures are classified into three types according to the mapping relationship between form and meaning: direct mapping type, transformational mapping type, and inferential mapping type. In the direct mapping type, a one-to-one correspondence exists between the semantic function of a grammatical form and its surface structure, making it suitable for focused presentation through typical examples in a single thematic context, such as the association between the plural form of nouns and the theme of “quantity,” and the association between the present continuous tense and the theme of “ongoing activities.” This type of presentation requires the grammatical form to appear with high frequency and semantic transparency in thematic discourse, allowing learners to establish form-meaning connections without explicit instruction.

The transformational mapping type is suitable for grammar items where the same grammatical form carries multiple semantic functions, and it demonstrates functional differences through systematic variation of thematic contexts. For example, the simple past tense marks temporal orientation, narrative progression, and attitudinal distance in different thematic contexts; when presenting this type, parallel thematic texts should be set up for learners to compare. The inferential mapping type serves grammar items whose semantic functions are highly dependent on context, such as the subjunctive mood and inversion structures. In this presentation mode, the thematic context serves as the starting point for

inference, and learners induce grammatical rules in reverse based on meaning recognition. The three presentation modes complement each other within the system: the direct mapping type establishes initial cognitive representations, the transformational mapping type expands the semantic network, and the inferential mapping type deepens pragmatic awareness. The choice of presentation mode depends on the semantic transparency of the grammar item and the constraint strength of the thematic context.

### ***2.3 Design of Practice Modules Integrating Grammatical Form and Meaning***

The design of practice modules takes the simultaneous processing of grammatical form and meaning as its core goal, abandoning the traditional model that separates form drills from meaning application. The integrated practice modules consist of three functional units: the identification and matching unit requires learners to mark specific grammatical forms in thematic discourse and explain the thematic meaning they carry, and this unit strengthens the integrated retrieval of form and meaning; the transformation and generation unit provides a thematic meaning framework, within which learners need to reorganize or expand the discourse using specified grammatical forms, and this unit tests the semantic appropriateness of form choices; the discrimination and correction unit presents the meaning differences expressed by different grammatical forms under the same theme, and learners judge the appropriateness of the use of grammatical forms based on the thematic context<sup>[6]</sup>.

Each practice module follows a progressive sequence from closed to open and from recognition to production along the difficulty gradient. The identification and matching unit adopts a high-constraint task mode, in which both the thematic context and the grammar items are preset. The transformation and generation unit reduces form constraints while retaining the thematic meaning framework. The discrimination and correction unit increases the complexity of the context and introduces interfering grammatical forms. An internal connection mechanism is set up between the modules, and the output of the previous module serves as the input material for the next module, forming continuity of meaning cues. All practice materials are taken from discourse segments with complete thematic meaning rather than isolated sentences, and each discourse segment unfolds around a single thematic clue, ensuring that every invocation of a grammatical form serves the expression of thematic meaning. The overall design of the practice modules strengthens the connection between grammatical form and meaning through repeated integration.

## **3. Practical Pathways of Junior High School English Grammar Teaching under the Guidance of Thematic Meaning**

### ***3.1 The Derivation Sequence of Grammatical Rules Based on Thematic Contexts***

The derivation sequence of grammatical rules takes thematic contexts as the starting point and unfolds along three cognitive stages: meaning identification, structure noticing, and rule abstraction. The meaning identification stage requires learners to locate the semantic function carried by grammatical forms in complete thematic discourse. For example, in a discourse describing daily routines, learners identify the function of the simple present tense in marking habitual actions. This stage does not involve rule formulation but only establishes a preliminary correspondence between form and meaning. The structure noticing stage guides learners to shift their attention from thematic meaning to the surface features of grammatical forms. Through the juxtaposed presentation of multiple similar structures within the same thematic context, learners notice the regularity of morphological changes, such as comparing variant forms of verb endings in discourses with different personal subjects<sup>[7]</sup>.

The rule abstraction stage is the terminal link of the derivation sequence. Based on the results of structure noticing accumulated in the previous stage, learners independently generalize the morphological conditions and usage restrictions of grammatical rules. At this stage, the thematic context recedes to the background, but the semantic framework established in the earlier meaning identification stage still provides a reference system for rule abstraction, preventing rule generalization from deviating from the actual operation of the language system. The overall direction of the derivation sequence presents a unidirectional feature from concrete to abstract and from meaning to form, but each stage is equipped with a feedback loop. When learners deviate during the rule abstraction stage, they can return to the meaning identification stage to re-examine the matching relationship between grammatical forms and thematic meaning. The essence of this sequence is to use thematic contexts as a cognitive scaffold for rule discovery, gradually reduce semantic support, and ultimately achieve the

independent extraction and formulation of grammatical rules<sup>[8]</sup>.

### ***3.2 The Internalization Operation Framework for the Synergy of Grammatical Form and Meaning***

The core mechanism of the internalization operation framework lies in the dual-channel synergy of form processing and meaning processing. Under the condition of continuous presentation of thematic meaning, the processing of grammatical forms should not compete for attentional resources with meaning processing but should be embedded within the meaning processing flow. This framework consists of three parallel operating subsystems: the attention allocation subsystem controls learners' sensitivity threshold to grammatical forms during the processing of thematic discourse. It sets a higher attentional weight in the initial stage to ensure accurate encoding of formal features, and then gradually reduces the attentional weight as the frequency of exposure increases, thereby automating grammatical processing; the semantic integration subsystem is responsible for integrating the procedural meanings carried by grammatical forms (such as temporal relations marked by tenses and the attitudinal coloring of modal verbs) with the conceptual content of the thematic discourse to form a unified semantic representation; the structure consolidation subsystem strengthens the strength of the connection between grammatical forms and specific meaning categories through repeated exposure to thematic contexts, transforming this connection from declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge<sup>[9]</sup>.

The unique feature of the internalization operation framework lies in its abandonment of the linear order of "form first then meaning" or "meaning first then form" and its adoption of a parallel processing mode instead. The input of thematic discourse activates both the form detection channel and the meaning comprehension channel simultaneously, and the two channels calibrate each other through a cross-validation mechanism: the meaning comprehension channel generates expectations about grammatical forms, and the form detection channel verifies whether those expectations are met; when the two are consistent, the internalization efficiency improves. When inconsistency occurs, the framework triggers a reanalysis operation, and learners adjust their interpretation of either the grammatical forms or the thematic meaning until a match is achieved. This operation framework utilizes the constraining effect of thematic contexts to reduce the uncertainty in matching form and meaning, thereby accelerating the internalization process. The completed state of internalization is manifested as grammatical forms being automatically activated by thematic meaning, allowing learners to produce contextually appropriate grammatical structures without explicitly retrieving rules.

### ***3.3 Trigger Conditions for Grammatical Transfer in the Extension of Thematic Threads***

A systematic relationship exists between the trigger conditions for grammatical transfer and the manner in which thematic threads are extended. The extension of thematic threads refers to the process of continuous deepening or perspective shifting of the same theme across different learning units, while grammatical transfer is manifested as the application of a form-meaning matching pattern acquired in a known thematic context to a new thematic context. There are three core conditions for triggering transfer. First, the semantic similarity between themes reaches a threshold, meaning that the source theme and the target theme share sufficient features in their conceptual structure. For example, transfer between the theme of "describing physical appearance of people" and the theme of "describing characteristics of animals" is better than transfer between the former and the theme of "narrating historical events." Second, the semantic function of a grammatical form in the new thematic context remains identical to its function in the source thematic context; if the function changes, the matching relationship must be re-established, and the original matching pattern will instead become interference<sup>[10]</sup>.

The third trigger condition concerns the distribution density of grammatical forms in the extension of thematic threads. A density that is too low fails to activate internalized connections, while a density that is too high inhibits the adaptive adjustment of transfer. The optimal density is manifested as the repeated appearance of grammatical forms at natural intervals in thematic discourse, with each occurrence accompanied by clear thematic meaning cues. The direction of thematic thread extension is further divided into two types: horizontal extension (at the same difficulty level) mainly triggers recognition transfer of grammatical forms; vertical extension (with increasing difficulty) triggers generalization transfer of grammatical functions. The latter requires learners to extract the constant semantic features of grammatical forms through a space of comparison across different thematic contexts, and it relies on the driving force of variable input.

## Conclusion

This study systematically explores junior high school English grammar teaching under the guidance of thematic meaning from three levels: theoretical basis, system composition, and practical pathways. At the level of theoretical basis, this study clarifies the logic of integrating thematic meaning and grammatical knowledge, reveals the endogenous mechanism of grammatical rules driven by meaning, and identifies the cognitive adaptation features of grammar learning at the junior high school stage. At the level of system composition, this study proposes the method of thematic hierarchy screening and gradient setting for grammar items, establishes a classification of three presentation modes (direct mapping type, transformational mapping type, and inferential mapping type), and designs practice modules that integrate form and meaning. At the level of practical pathways, this study constructs a derivation sequence of “meaning identification, structure noticing, and rule abstraction,” designs an internalization operation framework with dual-channel synergy of form processing and meaning processing, and analyzes three trigger conditions for grammatical transfer: semantic similarity, functional identity, and distribution density. This study provides a theoretical system and operational pathway reference for junior high school English grammar teaching. Future research can further explore the moderating effects of different theme types on grammatical transfer effects, as well as the quantitative criteria and validation methods for thematic hierarchy screening of grammar items.

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