ESL/EFL Grammar Textbook Review: Grammar Dimensions 3: Form, Meaning, Use

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Abstract

In this paper, I have examined the guiding approach, target audience, unique characteristics, presentation of grammar points, amount of teacher guidance, and typical activities included in Thewlis and Larsen-Freeman's 2007 grammar textbook, Grammar Dimensions 3: Form, Meaning, Use, according to their appropriateness, accuracy, completeness, and usefulness. Based on these criteria, I have concluded that although this textbook is not an exhaustive resource for students regarding the grammar topics it covers, it is still both valuable and appropriate for its stated intended use.

Keywords: communicative competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, linguistic competence, strategic competence
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In this review, I will examine a) the approaches to teaching grammar adopted in this textbook, b) the contents of the textbook, c) whether or not these contents are appropriately designed based on the book’s stated target audience, d) unique, interesting, and useful characteristics of the textbook, e) the textbook's discussion of certain aspects of adjectives in terms of its accuracy, completeness, and appropriateness for whom this textbook is intended, f) the amount of guidance provided for teachers, and g) the value of the activities suggested for practicing the grammar points selected. Based on this information, I will conclude whether or not I believe this a useful textbook for teaching grammar.

Approach

This book adopts an approach that seems to be based on Hymes's (1966) idea of communicative competence. According to Celce-Murcia (1991), this approach consists of four components: 1) sociolinguistic competence, in which the speaker knows how to communicate his/her intended message effectively and appropriately given the purpose, circumstance, and audience, 2) discourse competence, in which the speaker knows how to select, sequence, and arrange words and structure clearly and effectively, 3) linguistic competence, in which the speaker is skilled in implementing the grammatically correct forms, inflections, and sequences to express a message, and 4) strategic competence, in which the speaker can effectively use strategies to compensate for any weaknesses in the aforementioned areas (p. 466). Although only the “linguistic competence” component involves grammar, Celce-Murcia (1991) claims that grammar interacts with the other three skill areas, and that there are times where a “reasonable degree of accuracy is critical” in avoiding miscommunication. (p. 466). Furthermore, she posits...
that learning grammar at the “decontextualized sentence-level...is not very useful to listeners as they listen, read, speak, and write in their foreign language” (p. 466). Therefore, Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988, as cited in Celce-Murcia, 1991) suggest that teachers consistently present grammar as serving this higher-order objective by consistently referencing these other “interacting dimensions of language”: meaning, social factors, and/or discourse (p. 467). Van Patten, Williams, and Rott (2004, as cited in Ellis, 2006, p. 87) agree, emphasizing that making connections between form and meaning is a “fundamental part of language acquisition.”

It is therefore appropriate that the series editor, Diane Larsen-Freeman, structured this grammar textbook series with the fundamental goal of helping English language learners to “use the grammatical structures accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately” (Thewlis & Larsen-Freeman, 2007, p. xii). In order to achieve this goal, each grammar structure is presented with the rule for its formation, an explanation of its meaning, and examples of its use in a real life context; each of these sections is followed by exercises which measure student comprehension of each component. Examples of the presentation of these topics and the activities intended to help students learn them will be examined more thoroughly in the content and activities sections of this review.

Content

In this section, I will first present an outline of the “front matter” of this textbook, the general layout of each unit, and finally the “back matter”. Then, I will specifically name the grammatical focus of each unit.

The introductory pages of this book detail the specific grammar level, primary language and communication focus, and major skill focus of this particular book (see Approach), followed
by a “guided tour” of the layout of each unit and the purpose of every element that has been included. In the Table of Contents (pp. iii-xi), the various foci of each Unit are listed (e.g. p. v), followed by which dimension of grammar this focus relates to (e.g. Focus 3: Verbs Followed by Gerunds: Pattern 1 (Form); Focus 7: Implied Meanings of “Too” and “Enough” (Meaning)).

The beginning of each unit shows a list of “unit goals” (i.e. the grammar points students will work on), followed by a three-step “Opening Task” that simultaneously fulfills three functions: first, it introduces the target structure; secondly, it puts this grammatical structure in a real-life context (e.g. the opening task for the section on gerunds elicits student discussion about leisure activities); lastly, the task can be used to measure students' previous exposure to the structure. Each unit contains several “focus” sections that relate to the form, meaning, and/or use of a particular structure, which helps students to “develop the skill of ‘grammaring’--the ability to use structures accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately” (p. xv); whether the point is related to form, meaning, or use is shown at the top of the page next to the name of the grammar point. The grammar tables that are included in each focus section presents rules and explanations that are shown in tandem with examples; in this way, students can “work inductively to try to discover the rule on their own” (p. xv). Each focus section is followed by “purposeful” exercises which are designed to help students “practice and personalize” the structure. At the end of each unit, “Use Your English” activities attempt to “integrate grammar with reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills.”

For example, Unit 4 which presents the passive voice, first gives an explanation of its form: “be + past participle ( + by phrase). Form all passive verbs in the same way. Only the be auxiliary changes form…” (p. 48); four exercises focusing solely on the formation of the passive
voice are then presented (e.g. *Find ten examples of passive verb forms...on page 47 and underline them; Write the passive forms for the verbs provided below*). Next, an explanation of the meaning of terms such as *agent* and *receiver* are given, and an explanation of the meaning behind the passive voice is provided (*In passive sentences, the receiver is the subject and the agent is often not mentioned.*), followed by exercises testing student comprehension of these explanations (e.g. *Write one active sentence and one passive sentence for each set of agent, receiver, and verb. 1) Agent: the maid; Receiver: the money; Verb: find, etc.*). Finally, an explanation regarding the use of the target structure is provided (e.g. a list of situations in which the agent is typically included) followed by an exercise to measure understanding of this concept (e.g. *Identify the agent in each of these sentences and decide if it is necessary.*)

The “back matter” of this textbook contains a total of six appendices. Appendix 1, “Time Frames and Tenses” (p. A-1) provides students with a reference chart for the form meaning, and use of each time frame/tense, followed by two examples. I find this section to be very thorough, as it seems to take into consideration the Bull Framework (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 165) in its presentation of the future tense: the simple present and present progressive are both included in the chart referring to future time frame (p. A-4), despite their present tense forms, as they can be used to refer to events that are already scheduled or expected in the future (e.g. *The plane leaves at 6:30 tomorrow, I am spending next summer in France*). Appendix 2 (p. A-5) presents a chart which details how to use the passive voice according to tense and aspect (and also includes a disclaimer which states that the perfect progressive passive is rarely found in speech and writing, though it is grammatically possible). Appendix 3 (pp. A-6 - A-7) contains charts which display which verbs and verb patterns are typically followed by infinitives, and
those that are typically followed by gerunds. Appendix 4 (p. A-8) shows a chart detailing the usual position (beginning, middle or end of clause) for sentence connectors, and groups these connectors according to meaning (e.g. addition, contrast, result, etc). Appendix 5 (p. A-9) presents a chart that lists basic rules for choosing the correct form of the article, as well as a series of questions students can ask to determine which article should be used (e.g. \textit{What is the form of the noun? Noncount or count? Is the noun used to make a generic reference or a particular reference?}). Appendix 6 (pp. A-10-A-11) presents a list of irregular verbs, shown in their simple form, past tense form, and past participle form (e.g. \textit{swim, swam, swum}). The index, containing both grammatical terms and function words (e.g. \textit{modals} and “might”, respectively), runs from page I-1 – page I-11.

This book contains a total of 25 units, covering the following grammatical topics: 1) time and tense, 2) aspect, 3) adverbial phrases and clauses, 4) passive verbs, 5), one-word and phrasal modals, 6) infinitives, 7) gerunds, 8) intensifiers and degree complements, 9) modifying noun phrases: adjectives and participles, 10) comparatives, 11) connectors, 12) relative clauses, 13) present time frame, 14) present perfect, 15) future time, 16) modals of prediction and inference, 17) hypothetical statements, 18) sensory verbs, causative verbs, and verbs that take subjunctive, 19) articles in discourse, 20) reference forms in discourse, 21) possessives, 22) quantifiers, collective adjectives, 23) past time frame, 24) modals in past time, and 25) indirect quotation.

\textbf{Level}

This book is part of a series which is designed to help students eventually progress from “the sentence level to the discourse level, and learn to communicate appropriately at all levels” (p. xiv). As it is the third book in the series, it is designed for students of a high-intermediate
proficiency level. According to a chart detailing the focuses of each book in the series (p. xiv), students using this third book will be focusing primarily on: 1) grammatical structures related to discourse (as opposed to the high-beginning and intermediate level study of grammatical structures of the sentence and sub-sentence levels); 2) primary language and communication skills related to “cohesion and coherence at the discourse level” (as opposed to the focus on “semantic notions such as time and place” for high-beginning learners and on “social functions such as making requests and seeking permission” for intermediate learners) and 3) reading and writing (as opposed to listening and speaking, the focus of high-beginning learners and intermediate learners using this series).

The shift from focus on the sentence and sub-sentence level to the discourse level is in accordance with TESOL's (2006) description of high-intermediate (Level 4 - “Expanding”) learners: “by the time students have reached this level, their language skills should be “adequate for most day-to-day communication needs...but [they] have occasional difficulty with complex structures and academic concepts.” Halliday and Hasan (1967, as cited in Celce-Murcia, 1991) claim that students wishing to master discoursal features must become familiar with the concept of cohesion, and that this involves learning grammatical structures such as “referential forms (e.g. pronouns, demonstratives, the definite article), substitute expressions such as one(s), do, and so; (c) ellipsis; [and] (d) conjunction” (p. 469). Because this textbook addresses “reference forms in discourse” (Thewlis & Larsen-Freeman, 2007, pp. 332-342), logical connectors and conjunctions (pp. 184), and talks about how to use articles in discourse specifically (p. 321), I believe this textbook is relevant and appropriate for students of the high-intermediate level, and has also fulfilled its goal of focusing on writing and reading.
While this book already contains level-appropriate content, it also provides an “Opening Task” activity at the beginning of each unit that can be used as a “diagnostic warm-up exercise to explore students' knowledge of each structure” included in the list of that unit's specific grammar goals (p. xv). For example, the goals of Unit 2 are 1) to review aspect in English verbs, 2) to review the simple tenses, and 3) to use progressive, perfect, and perfect progressive aspects appropriately (p. 12). In order to gauge students' grasp of these concepts, the opening task is to look at four pictures and to answer questions such as “What has just happened?,” “What is happening now?,” and “What is going to happen next?” Student performance with this task allows the teacher to evaluate the average level of knowledge of his/her students, and to change his/her curriculum accordingly.

**Special Features**

I consider the aforementioned communicative and contextualized approach to teaching grammar taken by this textbook (and its series) to be a special feature in itself; this approach seems to have been the impetus for, and lends itself well to, the inclusion of several other special features as well, which are mostly focused on the integration of communicative practice with grammatical knowledge.

Purchase of this textbook comes with a free four-month subscription to *InfoTrac® College Edition*, a database of nearly 6,000 scholarly and popular periodicals. At the end of each unit, a research activity which requires the use of this database is included. For example, the research activity for Unit 10 on comparatives tells students to use the suggested website to find out information about two countries in which they are interested; then, they are to compare them in terms of population, geography, and economics (p. 180). These *InfoTrac®* activities in
addition to activities from the *Info Please Almanac* (http://www.infoplease.com) are included so as to encourage students to “read articles on carefully selected topics and use this information to reflect on a theme or on information studied in each unit.” These exercises are also intended to enhance students' research skills in English. Additionally, I believe this will increase students' technological literacy, especially in aspects of using technology with which they are only familiar in their native languages.

This textbook also includes audio cassettes and CDs which provide listening activities for each unit so that students can practice listening to grammar structures (p. xvii); the “Use Your English” section at the end of each unit always includes some kind of audio activity. For example, Unit 5, “One-word and Phrasal Modals” asks students to listen to several different conversations containing modals, notice the context in which they are used, note any differences in formality, and the various meanings that each modal conveyed (p. 84).

The end of each unit contains a “Reflection” section which is designed to help students “understand their learning style and create learning strategies” while also using the target structure (p. xvi). For example, the unit dealing with gerunds asks students to make a list of behaviors that good language learners engage in, and a list of behaviors that language learners should avoid (p. 123).

Finally, students who still want additional practice in any structure mentioned in the book can visit the website www.elt.thomson.com/grammardimensions for extra exercises. Additional special features designed specifically for the instructor will be included later in this review, under the section “Teacher Guidance.”

**Adjectives**
Though I am not currently able to review every section of this textbook, I have chosen to examine how this book talks about one particular grammatical topic: adjectives. The accuracy with which this book presents information related to adjectives, based on extensive grammars of the English language, will serve as an insight to the general accuracy with which other grammatical structures are presented and explained throughout this textbook.

The goals of Unit 9, Modifying Noun Phrases, include putting elements in a noun phrase in the correct order. The presentation of the grammar topic begins with a definition of *noun phrase*: “a noun phrase consists of a determiner and noun plus all its modifiers.” This definition is consistent with that found in Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999, p. 97). A chart on page 148 of the textbook shows from left to right the grammatically correct order of items in a noun phrase: 1) determiner (e.g. the, my, each), 2) intensifiers (e.g. really, very), 3) adjectives and participles (e.g. old, well-known), noun modifiers (e.g. stone, university), 4) noun, and finally 5) modifying phrases (e.g. next to the..., described). The book also mentions that it is “rare to have more than three or four modifiers for a single noun phrase.” This description is also in line with Biber *et al.*'s (1999, pp. 574-575).

The next grammatical topic of focus, the order of descriptive adjectives, is introduced with the disclaimer “different categories of descriptive adjectives *usually* occur in the following order” which is presented with a chart from left to right (p. 150): 1) evaluation/opinion (e.g. good, nice); 2) appearance (divided into the subcategories of size/measure, e.g. big, heavy, shape, e.g. round, square, and condition, e.g. broken, rotten); 3) age (e.g. old, antique); 4) color (red, striped); 5) origin (divided into the subcategories of geographical, e.g. French, Japanese, and material, e.g. wooden, cotton). It is mentioned that descriptive adjectives “*usually* occur in the
following order.” This order is consistent with Bailey's (1975, as cited in Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999) findings of adjectival order according to subcategories. It is also nearly completely consistent with (although phrased differently than) the description of attributive adjectival order found in Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1972, p. 267). However, Greenbaum et al. claim that “intensifying adjectives...e.g. a real hero, a perfect idiot” and “post-determiners, including restrictive adjectives...e.g. the fourth student, the only occasion” occur before the rest of the list, and I believe it would be beneficial for learners if Thewlis and Larsen-Freeman chose to include this rule as well.

One aspect of form that was not explicitly explained is when to use commas between adjectives and when to omit them. The textbook presents conflicting information regarding this point. One example (Thewlis & Larsen-Freeman, 2007, p. 150) shows an example of words within the same “category” (in this case, the “appearance” category) having commas between them (e.g. big, round, shiny apple and big, shiny, round apple). However, in an exercise on the next page (p. 151), adjectives from the same category are not separated by commas in one example (#2. a big shiny new red racing bicycle) while adjectives from various semantic categories are separated by commas in another (#1. handsome, small, well-polished Italian shoes). Because the focus of this particular section is regarding categories of descriptive adjectives, I believe this discrepancy could be confusing to learners without the inclusion of more examples or an explicit explanation. I believe that it is not likely that students will be able to deduce the prescriptive rule; indeed, finding one prescriptive rule regarding this issue is difficult. Regardless, I think even general rules (e.g. Celce-Murcia & Larsen Freeman's 1999 explanation, p. 394: “two or more attributive adjectives are separated by commas in writing if
there is repetition...or if the two adjectives are from the same class and are not incompatible”) could limit confusion here. Because this textbook is intended for intermediate learners who are transitioning from a focus on listening and speaking to a focus on reading and writing, this could be an important topic and should be covered. Nevertheless, misuse or omission of commas typically does not impede communication.

The other topic involving adjectives that is covered in this book is that of collective adjectives (p. 370). The textbook presents several examples of collective adjectives (e.g. *The rich get richer and the poor get poorer*), followed by the explanation “*The + adjective can be used to refer to a group that is defined by a particular characteristic. These structures are plural, and the verbs and pronouns reflect this.*” The book then asks students to complete an exercise in which they have to turn collective adjectives into a noun + relative clause (e.g. *the poor = people who were poor*). While I believe this explanation to be adequate, the examples used relate only to humans; however, examples (p. 520) in Biber *et al.* (1999) illustrate that collective adjectives can also be used to talk about inanimate objects (e.g. *But in politics the unlikely can happen*). Biber *et al.* also include examples (p. 520) in which the definite determiner *the* does not precede the collective adjective (e.g. *A policy which would require many unemployed either to find a job or...*) However, because corpora have found that the adjective-headed noun phrase typically refers to people with the characteristic named by the adjective (Biber *et al.*, 1999, p. 520) and that definite determiners are “the norm” for adjectives as noun phrase heads, I believe this textbook's three examples, brief explanation, and subsequent exercises are enough for students to understand the target structure.

**Teacher Guidance**
According to Williams (1983), situations in which there is a shortage of teachers that have received extensive training in grammar education are not uncommon. In cases such as these, teachers often rely heavily on the accuracy and clear explanations of the grammar textbook which they are using (Williams, 1983, p. 251). Therefore, he claims, it is beneficial for grammar textbooks to provide specific guidance for teachers as well as for students.

This book explicitly states that it has revised its grammar explanations and examples from past editions so as to help teachers as well as students to “easily understand and comprehend each language structure” (p. xiv) to a greater degree. Every unit contains a “Lesson Planner” that is designed to “[facilitate] teaching by providing detailed lesson plans and examples” (Thewlis & Larsen-Freeman, 2007, p. xvii), including but not limited to: a summary of main grammar points for the teacher, information for the teacher regarding common student errors, suggested correlations between exercises and activities, suggested timing for each exercise and lesson, explanations for the teacher regarding the purpose of each activity, and step-by-step guidelines for every “focus box,” exercise, and activity (p. xvii). An included CD-ROM also allows instructors to easily “create customized quizzes and tests” to monitor student understanding and progress (p. xviii). Additionally, this book has been designed so that teachers can either use the units in order or as dictated by their curriculum without detriment to student comprehension (p. xiii).

Activities

In this section, I will evaluate the activities and exercises in this book based partially on Garinger’s (2002) article detailing the questions that need to be asked regarding the exercises included in an ESL/EFL textbook: 1) does the book contain both controlled and free practice?; 2)
does the book provide students with adequate guidance in completing these activities? (pp. 1-2), and 3) are the activities meaningful?

This book does indeed include both controlled and free practice. The Opening Task at the beginning of each unit typically contains at least one somewhat controlled exercise (e.g. filling in a chart), in which learners are guided to produce a certain structure the elicited answers are relatively predictable, and at least one free exercise, in which learners produce language without restriction and the elicited answers cannot be predicted (e.g. talking to a partner about opinions). The exercises given after the presentation of each “focus” are typically controlled (e.g. underline the target structure, complete the sentence); however, almost all of the activities presented in the Use Your English section at the end of each unit are considered free (e.g. write a paragraph about a topic, interview a classmate), though they are designed specifically to elicit the natural production of certain structures.

I believe that the activities in this book include enough support to facilitate language acquisition. Exercises are only presented after a thorough presentation of the form, meaning, use, and examples of each structure. Directions are clearly stated; in exercises which require students to complete more than one step, each direction is clearly delineated (e.g. p. 41). At least one example of how to accurately fulfill the requirements of each exercises is presented after each set of instructions. Free practice with the target structure is presented only after a series of controlled exercises, which serve as scaffolding. Furthermore, pictures are included frequently to both clarify context, and could also possibly serve as a source of creative inspiration for students' production (e.g. p. 34).

Due to this book's commitment to communicative competence and its inclusion of
activities which require the use of all four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), I believe that the activities and exercises in this book are meaningful. The topics used in the Opening Tasks to introduce the grammatical structure of each unit are typically related to either some aspect of the target culture (e.g. going to a flea market to talk about modifying noun phrases, p. 146) or are relevant to people worldwide (e.g. “Has the Earth been visited by beings from outer space?”, p. 46). The Use Your English activities at the end of each unit often require students to listen to authentic conversations (e.g. listening to a news broadcast, p. 62), to read authentic articles (e.g. reading about a country's migration patterns, p. 85), and/or to write about their personal lives (e.g. making a list of New Years' Resolutions, p. 122). Furthermore, the aforementioned reflection activities at the end of each unit are valuable for having students make connections to the target structure while examining their own progress, use of strategies, and learning style regarding language acquisition.

Based on this book's inclusion of controlled practice, free practice, meaningful activities, and sufficient support to aid students in completion, I believe the activities used in this book aid students in language acquisition and are therefore valuable.

**Conclusion**

Although it seems based on my examination of how this book talks about adjectives that some grammatical information has been left out, I believe in some cases this could be due to the book's desire to “promote students' noticing” and to invite these students to “make observations about some aspect of the target structure” (p. xviii). Also, due to unlikelihood of mistakes such as misplaced commas or omission of commas to contribute to misunderstandings, it seems appropriate that this book, which focuses on all three dimensions of language, to not emphasize
such a rule.

   Additionally, because of this book's dedication to the three dimensions of language, level-
appropriate content, the development of writing and reading skills, providing guidance for
teachers, and the inclusion of meaningful and communicative activities, in addition to numerous
special features it contains to ease the process of acquisition for students, I have concluded that
this book satisfies its intended purpose.
References


