Grammar Instruction: What Teachers Say

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There are sometimes significant differences between what colleges teach prospective teachers in education courses and what practicing teachers in schools actually do. Nowhere is this more evident than in the area of grammar instruction. As both an undergraduate and graduate student, I had college classes which explicitly discouraged the teaching of grammar. However, high school English teachers I know continue to feel the need for some grammar instruction in their classes.

ATTITUDES TOWARD TEACHING GRAMMAR

In times past, English teachers had no doubt that formal grammar instruction belonged in the curriculum along with reading and writing. I learned the eight parts of speech, the intricacies of case and mood, and how to diagram sentences. It was not until college that I encountered the idea that grammar instruction was a waste of time. In 1963, Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer published, through NCTE, Research in Written Composition, an ambitious attempt to summarize research findings about the teaching of writing. Among other things, these authors found widespread agreement among research studies that teaching grammar had no positive effect on student writing. It seemed to follow that grammar instruction could therefore be abandoned. Numbers of professors, teachers, and prospective teachers, I believe, greeted this suggestion with glee, because they and many of their students found grammar both difficult and dull.

In my own classes, I found many students remarkably resistant to learning grammar. I would painstakingly prepare and teach a lesson on nouns and verbs, using the most creative and relevant examples I could think of, and many students would fail the quiz. I was quite willing to abandon the formal teaching of grammar in favor of writing instruction—my students had good ideas and interesting things to say—but I found it very difficult to assist them in polishing their work without a common vocabulary of grammatical terms. How could I talk to them about the most basic writing concepts or discuss sentence fragments or run on sentences without using words like subject or verb?

Like many other teachers, I tried first one thing and then another, depending on the individual class. Sometimes I used a grammar book; sometimes I didn’t. Some years I taught prepositions; some years I didn’t. Mostly I tried to teach grammar in the context of writing, the course recommended by most of my graduate school classes, but I had received little practical instruction about how to do this, and I often felt inadequate to the task. What seemed to make the most impact with students was individual discussion about their papers, as suggested by the various “workshop” approaches which became popular in the 1980s. This, however, was difficult to arrange in a class of 30 students, half of whom would be looking for ways to goof-off or cause disruption while I was occupied on the other side of the room. And always, there was the problem of how to explain and discuss grammatical concepts with students without using grammatical terms that they didn’t know. I was always grateful for those few students who had acquired a modicum of knowledge, either from reading, from some instruction in middle school, or simply from a home where people tended to speak in standard English.

Professional reading was not particularly helpful because even researchers are not in agreement about grammar instruction. The debate in scholarly journals has, at times, become quite acrimonious. (There are numerous examples; two good ones are Martha Kolln, 1981 “Closing the Books on Alchemy,” College Composition and Communication, 32.2, May; and Patrick Hartwell, 1985, “Grammar, Grammars and the Teaching of Grammar,” College English 47.2, Feb.)

School systems are nothing if not diverse, and while some simply ignored research findings and continued teaching
grammar as they always had, others virtually abandoned grammar instruction. As a doctoral student, I worked recently for several quarters as a student teacher supervisor. Several of my prospective English teachers had received little systematic grammar instruction but were now placed in settings where it was part of the curriculum, and they were in trouble. One of my student teachers wrote in his journal that the university "really pisses me off. All my ed. courses said grammar wasn't important, and now I find out that it is!" On the student's evaluation sheet from the cooperating teacher I found this comment: "Needs to work on grammar basics—fragments, run ons, comma splices, etc. His spelling is weak and he misses many mis-spellings on student essays. He also needs to rid himself of the sub-standard English he uses in speaking." Another cooperating teacher said about her student teacher, "He has no clue about grammar, usage, and punctuation. The university's 'grammar doesn't count' attitude is a great disservice to new teachers. Sadly, my seniors have a better working knowledge of grammar, usage, and punctuation than my student teacher."

RESEARCHERS VS. CLASSROOM TEACHERS

The point is, despite research studies and college classes which disparage it, large numbers of classroom teachers have continued to teach grammar in some form. In an effort to assist my student teachers, I began asking cooperating teachers about their beliefs and practices concerning grammar instruction; how they defined "grammar"; whether they were aware of controversy about the usefulness of teaching grammar in school; and what they did in their own classrooms.

Every teacher I spoke with insisted on the need for some grammar instruction in the teaching of writing, and their reasoning was remarkably similar, whether they were veteran teachers or relatively new, male or female, in urban or suburban schools.

I concluded that researchers and classroom teachers often have different definitions of grammar or grammar instruction. When a study concludes that "formal grammar instruction" has not shown measurable improvement in students' writing, it is often not clear exactly what "formal grammar instruction" means, but it usually seems to refer to isolated memorization of rules and terminology and pages of skill and drill practice. Many of the studies reviewed by Braddock et al. dealt with skill and drill exercises in isolation and with some of the more esoteric terminology such as predicate objectives or gerunds. Classroom teachers, on the other hand, tend to use the term grammar for what might be more properly labeled mechanics—usage skills such as subject-verb agreement, punctuation, and even spelling—which obviously do affect the readability of writing.

However, teaching these skills is conducted quite differently from the traditional grammar instruction many had in school. All of the teachers I talked with spoke of the necessity for teaching grammar in the context of writing and individualizing instruction as much as possible. Several spoke highly of the usefulness of sentence combining. From the 25 or so teachers I interviewed over the course of two quarters, I have selected six who seem to illustrate the prevailing opinions.

WHAT TEACHERS SAY

John, a veteran teacher in a suburban school, said:

"It seems to me that the grammar debate is almost a moot point—it is debated now for the sake of debate, between highly traditional people interested in structure for the sake of structure and those philosophically opposed to structure. I don't think the majority of English teachers see any purpose in the discussion."

The guidelines for our district require no formal grammar study, but do require mastery in terms of writing skills—subject-verb agreement, punctuation, etc. . . . I teach grammar with the understanding that it helps us express our thoughts precisely. Commas and question marks do have rational functions. We have to have some basic terminology—the parts of speech and their functions—to discuss writing.

Tom, a younger teacher in a similar school, said:

"I agree that as a set of prescriptive rules to be followed for a writer, [grammar] is not useful. But if you teach grammar as a description of what a writer does, and as a vocabulary to talk about writing, it's very useful. In fact, you can't teach writing without it. If you have students diagram sentences before they write, you're wasting time. But after
they begin writing, when they're ready, diagraming sentences can be very helpful. Beginning writers tend to use the same type of sentence patterns over and over. When they're ready to move on and learn something new, you can show them a diagram of what their sentences do. They can see that they're all the same. Then they can learn a new pattern. I love sentence combining for this; it's fun, and the kids love it, too.

That's one of the myths about grammar—that it's hard. It's not really hard, it's easy. But the writing comes first. Teaching the rules first is like giving a sixteen-year-old a manual of traffic laws and saying, "Now you know how to drive." The rules don't mean anything unless the students see how they can apply them in their own writing.

This instruction needs to be individualized in personal conferences. On every assignment, I have a conference with each student at least once. If you're really reading students' papers, not just grading them, you'll see what their patterns are. As I watch students write over the course of the year, I know when one is ready to learn to use semicolons. If you try to teach semicolons to the whole class, you're going to lose half of them.

Ann, a teacher in a large, affluent school where almost all the students are college bound, observed:

I usually think of grammar in terms of mechanics and usage—writing skills. I am aware of the studies which show that teaching grammar does not improve writing, and I think they must have just used grammar drills in isolation. In college, I was taught that grammar drills don't help, and I agree, if the students are not shown how to apply the practice. Of course we should teach grammar, and of course it applies to writing. If a student doesn't know where to put apostrophes, how are you going to explain it except by teaching the rule? I teach subordinate clauses with sentence combining. I don't necessarily have them do a lot of labeling. I don't really care if they know it's an adverbial clause, as long as they know how to do subordination. Everybody needs to know the basics of usage, capitalization, punctuation, and be able to produce writing which is mechanically correct.

Janice, an experienced teacher in an urban school, noted:

Every English teacher I know thinks that you have to teach some grammatical skills in order to teach writing. I use worksheets in class—not the fill-in-the-blank kind, but the kind that require students to write a sentence of their own. When I identify a particular problem with a student, I try to discuss it individually. They often don't pay attention to the comments I write on their papers. I find that the students tend to pay more attention to grammatical concepts if we talk about them in the context of a paper they're working on, although there are some kids who just won't learn some things, like apostrophes and homonyms. No matter how I explain it, I have some students who just won't learn the rules. They don't expect to do any writing after high school, and they just don't care. They enjoy sentence combining, and that really helps a lot of students.

For Michelle, a young teacher in a large urban school, "the controversy about teaching grammar is just silly." She continued:

All "real" writers know grammatical conventions. You have to know the rules, even though you may sometimes choose to break them. Of course our students need to know some grammar. They need some terminology to talk about writing. They have to be able to use basic terms like subject, verb, noun. I think the controversy is really about how much to teach, and how to do it. You can't teach it now the way it was traditionally taught, at least to the type of students we have at this school.

I learned a lot by acquisition, by reading, and my students never read for pleasure. When I went to school, we learned the rules. My students now just won't do that. With more advanced kids, I can teach grammatical concepts, and it will transfer to their writing, but not with lower ability students. We can do a lesson on capitalization, and it just doesn't dawn on them to use the same rules in their own writing . . . so I individualize as much as possible. One-to-one conferencing about a paper is the best way. The big problem is not enough time to do that. I believe that achievement is directly related to class size. If I really try, I can get to half my class in one period.

Linda began teaching in an urban classroom four years ago. She, and several other teachers, pointed out that our colleagues in the foreign language department are often
distressed that we don't have students conjugate verbs any more, but she said,

Grammar, to me, now means mechanics: capitalization, punctuation, subject-verb agreement, how to write a complete sentence. If you're going to teach writing, you have to teach some grammar. I think students need more instruction, particularly in the lower grades... not complicated stuff, just the basics like when to use apostrophes, paragraphing, and the difference between there and their.

It's hard to teach this to non-readers. Many of my students don't read, so they don't know how things are supposed to look and they write what they hear, or think they hear, and since many of us are very sloppy about the way we speak, kids write things like wanna and gonna. They can't just go by what sounds right, because they have no good role models for speaking, and you have to be pretty careful if you're criticizing the way people speak in a student's home.

I don't find peer revision very helpful, but students enjoy sentence combining and usually do well on the exercises. I've also found that using the computers really helps students see their errors and be willing to correct. But it would be a lot better if we had more computers—or fewer students—so we could have one for each student in a class.

DISCUSSION

Obviously, these teachers seldom think of grammar in the linguistic sense as a description of the structure of the language, but rather as mechanics and usage: subject-verb agreement, plural formation, even spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. They speak of these conventions as 'writing skills,' 'grammar skills,' or 'mechanical skills,' and they see these skills, not as the most important thing, but as an essential part of good writing.

It is unfortunate that researchers have not always clearly distinguished between the formal study of descriptive grammar and the practical application of usage skills. The result has been much wasted ink in scholarly journals as well as teachers who feel that scholarly research has little relevance to their classrooms. Attacking grammar instruction in the article referred to earlier, Hartwell said:

Those who defend the teaching of grammar tend to have a model of composition instruction that is rigidly

skills-centered and rigidly sequential; the formal teaching of grammar, as the first step in that sequence, is the cornerstone or linchpin... first grammar, then usage, then some absolute model for organization, all controlled by the teacher at the center of the learning process. (108)

This simply does not describe the opinions or practices of the teachers I spoke with, although they all said they teach grammar. Indeed, Tom articulated very clearly that writing must come before instruction in grammar. Teachers have internalized the point of the many research studies which illustrate the uselessness of grammar drills by themselves. No teacher I talked with defended teaching grammar for its own sake, which is probably a distinct change from the prevailing assumptions twenty or thirty years ago, and none of the curricula for the schools specifies teaching grammar per se. All the teachers I spoke with believe that grammar skills are best taught in the context of the students' own writing, though drills or worksheets may be used to reinforce specific concepts. The teachers maintained that clear, coherent content is the most important component of good writing, but that control of the mechanical conventions is also essential for clear communication.

Ann's anger about what she saw as the abandonment of grammatical instruction by the academic community may not be fair, but it was real:

I think it's just a fad to say we don't need to teach grammar and when new teachers actually start to work they find they need it, and they don't know it themselves. I'm very disappointed that I was allowed to graduate from college as an English teacher without a good background in grammar... Even if everybody doesn't need to know what a participle is, English teachers certainly should know.

It should be noted, however, that several of the teachers I spoke with said that their college courses had not attempted to discourage them from teaching grammar, so perhaps what prospective teachers are taught about this issue depends somewhat on the courses they take and the particular professors they have. Our education colleges need to clarify that abandoning formal, traditional grammar instruction does not mean abandoning all
attempts to teach the conventions of standard English. As one of my student teachers noted rather bitterly, “The professors tell you not to teach grammar, but if you make a mistake on one of your papers, they sure do mark it!”

The teachers I spoke with agreed that they teach more grammar terminology to higher-ability students than to lower-level ones. The rationale for this is that the college-bound students need it more, and the lower-level students are more resistant to learning it. As one teacher explained:

Traditionally, the upper half of society has always learned more grammar—back when they had to learn Greek and Latin, for example. But 80% of our society now is not into academic rigor. Our school system is experimenting with heterogeneous grouping, and dissecting gerunds in mixed classes is just a swamp. I now deal primarily with usage issues.

The teachers from the urban schools have, by and large, given up teaching all but the most basic skills, and there is still a fair amount of frustration about students who refuse to learn even those skills. The urban teachers spoke often about the benefits of using computers in writing classes with less able or more reluctant students.

CONCLUSION

It is time for professionals to agree that isolated grammar drills may be useless in English classes but that accuracy in usage is desirable and can be taught effectively in the context of writing. Many teachers know this, have determined their own lists of the necessary rules and basic terminology, and employ effective techniques such as sentence combining and individual conferencing about papers to meet the needs of their students. I think many teachers wish that we could finally put the great grammar debate to rest, and consider more pressing problems, like how to get composition classes down to reasonable sizes where individual conferencing is practicable, how to get word processors in the hands of all our students, and how to get our students to read more.

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