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## TEACHING GRAMMAR TO WRITERS

At a recent workshop for high school and community college teachers, an earnest young high school teacher explained forcefully to an experienced community college teacher that grammar was of no use in teaching writing. The high school teacher cited the now-famous Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer quotation. She said that knowing grammar had no effect on writing ability, insisting that “all the research” counterbalanced any intuitive and experiential evidence the older teacher might have to offer. The young teacher had, however, misquoted the passage; it says: “the teaching of *formal* [emphasis ours] grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing” (37-38).

Taking the words *teaching of formal grammar* to mean *knowing grammar* is a serious mistake. What the research cited by Braddock et al., indicates is that instruction in traditional grammar over a limited period of time (a semester or less in the research studies being discussed) showed no positive effect on students’ writing. In fact, several research studies and much language and composition theory argue for certain types of grammar instruction, when effective methods are used for clearly

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defined purposes. When writers learn grammar, as opposed to teachers merely "covering" it, the newly acquired knowledge contributes to writing ability.

In separate essays on grammar, both Kolln (139) and Neuleib (148) point out that the often-quoted passage in Braddock et al. was preceded by "Uncommon, however, is carefully conducted research which studies composition over an extended period of time" (37). Few people seem to pay attention to the qualification, however. Also, another 1963 study, one that Kolln reviews, has attracted much less notice than *Research in Written Composition*. Yet that other study, by Meckel, is more extensive and thorough in its conclusions and recommendations than is the Braddock work. Meckel's work shows that major questions still existed in 1963 about the teaching of grammar.<sup>1</sup>

Meckel points to three crucial issues (981): First, none of the grammar studies up to 1963 extended beyond one semester—"a time span much too short to permit development of the degree of conceptualization necessary for transfer to take place." Second, none of the studies had to do with editing or revising, that is "with situations in which pupils are recasting the structure of a sentence or a paragraph." Finally, none of the studies makes comparisons between students who had demonstrated knowledge of grammar and those of equal intelligence who had none.

Meckel's recommendations indicate that studies with systematic grammatical instruction ran too short a time or that the research involved presentation of rules without assured student comprehension. Meckel offers several important conclusions (981): (1) Although grammar has not been shown to improve writing skills, "there is no conclusive evidence, however, that grammar has *no* transfer value in developing composition skill." (2) More research needed to be done on "the kind of grammatical knowledge that may reasonably be expected to transfer to writing."<sup>2</sup> (3) Sometimes *formal grammar* has meant grammar without application; grammar should be taught systematically with applications. (4) "There are more efficient methods of securing *immediate* [Meckel's emphasis] improvement in the writing of pupils, both in sentence structure and usage, than systematic grammatical instruction." (5) Practice of forms improves usage whereas memorization of rules does not.

In spite of Meckel's work being little known, trends in the profession were confirming his conclusions. The years following 1963 were filled with sentence-combining research that showed statistically significant results on methods that relied on practice with forms (e.g., Mellon; O'Hare). This research culminated in the 1979 study by Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg in which college students made significant progress in writing, including surface structure and punctuation, without any kind of instruction except in sentence-combining exercises and essay writing. Sentence combining, a method of teaching grammar without explicit grammar instruction, fits with Meckel's earlier conclusion on the effectiveness of practice of forms as opposed to the learning of rules.

Shaughnessy in her 1977 *Errors and Expectations* developed a new method of helping students with writing by using grammar. Working

with open-admissions students, she developed a form of grammar instruction that has since been called error analysis. Error analysis fits with Meckel's recommendation that students work only on the errors in their own writing and not on rules external to that writing. Teachers gear instruction only to the needs of the students. Shaughnessy shows many error patterns which teachers can use to understand each student's needs. Shaughnessy offers an approach to error excluding formal grammar instruction, but including grammar at every step.

D'Eloia in the *Journal of Basic Writing* explained the reason for the grammatical approach to basic writing instruction introduced by Shaughnessy: ". . . something was radically wrong with the research design [of earlier studies which rejected grammar instruction] or with the instruction in grammar itself. . . . They [basic writing teachers] cannot bring themselves to believe that units combining the analysis of a grammatical principle with well-structured proofreading, imitation, paraphrase, and sentence consolidation exercises, and with directed writing assignments could fail to produce more significant results in both fluency and error control" (2). D'Eloia then offers applied grammar activities effective with basic writers similar to those in Shaughnessy's book.

More recently, Bartholomae in "The Study of Error" shows how instructors can discover error-producing language patterns in student writing. He shows that correcting these patterns requires special insight on the part of teachers. Says Bartholomae, "An error . . . can only be understood as evidence of intention. . . . A writer's activity is linguistic and rhetorical activity; it can be different but never random. The task for both teacher and researcher, then, is to discover the grammar of *that* [Bartholomae's emphasis] coherence . . ." (255).

Harris demonstrates this error-analysis approach to a specific problem. She shows that the fragmented free modifier can indicate linguistic growth. Rather than being a case for the red pencil, the fragmented free modifier is often a chance for a teacher to encourage growing linguistic strength. Being able, however, to recognize such indication of growth and using it to help a student develop requires sophisticated grammatical knowledge on the part of the teacher.

Student-centered approaches similar to those illustrated by Harris and Bartholomae demonstrate how grammar can be effectively used in teaching. Of course, merely covering grammar from a workbook would detract from student achievement. Teaching grammar from a traditional grammar text would be worse. DeBeaugrande explains why grammar texts do not teach students either grammar or writing. He argues that teachers need to understand grammar if they are to help improve students' writing. He attacks grammar textbooks, though, saying that they are written for and by grammarians who find the concepts easy since they "know what the terms mean" (358). He calls for a "learner's grammar" taught by techniques that are accurate, workable, economical, compact, operational, and immediate (364). He illustrates some of the techniques, many of which expand and extend Shaughnessy's and D'Eloia's patterns.

Shaughnessy, D'Eloia, Bartholomae, Harris, and DeBeaugrande all

illustrate how grammar instruction improves writing skills. Teachers, however, need grammatical knowledge to use the methods illustrated. To analyze errors and to discover language patterns, teachers need to do more than “cover” grammar. They need to be able to work out exercises of the types illustrated by Shaughnessy and D’Eloia, exercises patterned to students’ individual language problems.

Yet, received knowledge in the profession seems to legislate in another direction. A few years ago, every time we did a workshop in the schools, teachers were shocked when we said that studies showed that teaching traditional grammar would not improve students’ abilities as writers. More recently we have found many teachers too ready to assume that they can omit grammar instruction because it will not help students to write better. These assumptions are reinforced by journal articles which reject formal grammar instruction.<sup>3</sup>

This dismissal of grammar teaching is unfortunate not only because practice has shown that teachers must know grammar to analyze student errors but also because many questions regarding grammar instruction are worth studying. Fundamental questions concern what kind of grammar is being taught, how it is being taught, and what the rationale for that teaching is. Finally, we as a profession need to ask if we understand grammar and the nature of language.

In our opinion, the preparation of teachers is the crucial issue in teaching effectiveness. A confused teacher increases student perplexity. Arguing against the teaching of grammar in the lower grades, Sanborn tells of a teacher who was confused about the difference between a participle and a gerund: The teacher said “being” in “Being accused of something I didn’t do made me mad” was a participle (73). Of course, traditional grammar is replete with ambiguities in its terminology. The term *participle* is ambiguous in that it is both a form term (for a verb) and a function term (modifying a noun, another ambiguity), and the term *gerund* is a function term (functioning in a nominal position) with an implied form (a verb form ending in *-ing*). If our profession had prepared the teacher well, she would have been aware of the ambiguities in the grammar. If some teachers want to teach eight parts of speech in English, for instance, they need to know that the parts of speech are defined neatly, sensibly, and logically by inflectional forms in Latin but that they are defined inconsistently and illogically by mixing form and function in English. Unless teachers are informed about the imperfections of traditional grammar, students will fail to understand it and thereby to learn and retain it.

Superficial retention became painfully obvious to us in a recent survey we conducted in an English grammar course required of upperclass students seeking teacher certification in English. At the beginning of the course, the prospective teachers filled out a questionnaire and took a test in grammar. The questionnaire asked when the prospective teachers had been taught grammar, what kind of grammatical activities they had had, and how they rated themselves on various types of grammatical knowledge. Of the twenty-four participants in the study, twenty-three

reported having studied grammar at two or more levels of schooling (elementary school, junior high, high school, college), and fifteen at three or more levels. All reported having learned grammar through a variety of activities such as diagramming sentences, memorizing grammatical terms and labeling parts of speech, identifying, and correcting grammatical errors, writing sentences and paragraphs with grammatical forms indicated, and so on. They also rated themselves rather high (mostly 3 or above on a scale of 1 to 5) in most grammatical skills listed, particularly in knowing names of and identifying parts of speech and parts of sentences, standard grammatical usage, and correct punctuation rules and applications.

The results of the grammar test, given with the questionnaire, however, indicated little retention of formal grammatical knowledge and an inability to apply grammar to editing problems. Only three out of twenty-four prospective teachers could accurately name the eight parts of speech—most of them could name four or five (usually noun, verb, adjective, adverb), but function terms like subject and object were mixed in. Most participants could name the two important parts of a sentence and count the number of sentences in a given passage taken from Wariner (58), but no one could accurately count the number of clauses in the paragraph. Some participants even counted fewer clauses than sentences. Although most of these prospective teachers knew what a verb was, only half the group could pick out a transitive verb, and no one could identify an intransitive verb. Only six could find the solitary passive verb in the passage. A prepositional phrase was easily identified, but only two participants correctly picked out an adverbial clause, and only four found an adjective clause. Quite a few people labeled phrases as clauses, apparently not knowing the difference between phrases, clauses, and sentences. Thus, an obvious discrepancy existed between the prospective teachers' perceptions of their formal grammar knowledge and their demonstrated knowledge.

The grammar test also contained two sentences which the participants were to punctuate. They also had to explain their reasons for using each punctuation mark as they did:

1. Please turn off the light its much too bright
2. I was anxious to go shopping but my mother who is usually so organized was taking her time today.

Only seven participants, less than a third of the group, could punctuate sentence 1 correctly; many either used a comma to separate the two clauses and/or neglected the apostrophe for *its*. With sentence 2, almost everyone separated the nonrestrictive clause with a pair of commas, and thirteen of them put a comma before *but*. As for providing the rules of punctuation, only three participants could explain the punctuation in sentence 1 in appropriate grammatical terms, and only one participant could do so for sentence 2. A number of the participants offered explanations involving pauses and meaning, while others misused grammatical terms. For the majority of these prospective teachers, therefore, punctuation rules had not been learned at the conscious opera-

tional level. Of course, we realize that the performance of this group of prospective teachers cannot be generalized to all students who have studied grammar, but having taught grammar to similar upperclass students in the last fifteen years, we can say that their lack of formal grammatical knowledge is typical.

We would like to suggest that the first step in increasing teachers' understanding of grammar is to develop a clear definition of the term. Theorists as disparate as Kolln and Hartwell stress the confusion in the definition of grammar. Kolln points out that the Braddock et al. report did not define "formal grammar," so conclusions could not be confirmed (292-93). In addressing this need for definition, Hartwell builds upon W. Nelson Francis's 1954 "Revolution in Grammar" to define five grammars: Grammar 1 is intrinsic knowledge of language rules and patterns that people use without knowing they use them; Grammar 2 is the linguistic science that studies the system of Grammar 1; Grammar 3 merely involves linguistic etiquette, such as calling "he ain't" bad grammar; Grammar 4 is "school grammar," the system that is oversimplified in traditional handbooks and workbooks; Grammar 5, stylistic grammar, uses grammatical terms to teach prose style, in the manner of Lanham, Williams, Christensen, and Strunk and White (Hartwell 109-110). Hartwell stresses that these five grammars often do not match. They are pieces of puzzles that fit into different pictures or that overlap untidily in the same picture. Without being aware of the mismatch between Grammar 4, "school grammar" and Grammar 1, intuitive grammar, many teachers teach Grammar 4 as if it made perfect sense.

We strongly feel that writing teachers need to study the historical background of grammar, be well-acquainted with better descriptions of language (that is, with Grammar 2, linguistic studies, as well as Grammar 5, stylistic grammar), and appreciate relations among different grammars. Still, teachers should not begin to teach linguistics in their writing classes. College level linguistics is not the solution for junior and senior high school students. Rather, when teachers understand how language works, they can make the description of the language accessible to students.

The challenge now is in the area of teacher training and retraining. At the end of the semester, the prospective teachers described in the study above had been exposed to the history of language study and to many of the concepts reviewed here. They went on to learn that to work with basic writers at any level, teachers have to do the hard part. They have to understand stylistic choices, and they have to analyze errors so that they can show students how language works. When teachers do more than "cover" grammar, writers will improve their writing by using the grammar they have learned.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For a thorough review of the research, see Meckel; for a summary of Meckel's findings, see Kolln.

<sup>2</sup>Sentence-combining research represents at least one kind of grammatical knowledge that has proved to be transferable to writing. See Neuleib for a summary of sentence-combining research through that date.

<sup>3</sup>Hartwell's "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" illustrates the sort of dismissal of grammar that encourages this attitude in teachers. Hartwell does mention error analysis, but in his conclusion he calls for a halt to all grammar research. The message teachers often carry from such an article is to abandon grammar instruction of any type.

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