

# 2

## Teaching Grammar Reasons for, Evidence Against

*When* people talk about “teaching grammar,” what they usually mean is teaching descriptive and prescriptive grammar: that is, teaching sentence elements and structure, usage, sentence revision, and punctuation and mechanics via a grammar book or workbook, or perhaps a computer program. They mean teaching grammar as a system, and teaching it directly and systematically, usually in isolation from writing or the study of literature. They mean studying parts of speech and their functions in sentences, various types of phrases and clauses, and different sentence types, perhaps accompanied by sentence diagramming and usually followed by a study of such concepts as subject-verb agreement and pronoun reference. Since this is what people typically mean by “teaching formal grammar” or “the traditional teaching of grammar,” it is also what we shall mean in this chapter as we discuss reasons for and evidence against the practice.

The articles listed in Figure 2.1 articulate some of these reasons and describe some of the research.

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### Why Teach Grammar?

Over the centuries, various reasons have been offered for teaching formal grammar, among them these:

1. The study of grammar is important simply because language is a supreme human achievement that deserves to be studied as such.
2. The study of grammar can be an important vehicle for learning to study something the way a scientist does.
3. The study of grammar will help form the mind by promoting “mental discipline.”

FIGURE 2.1 References for and against the teaching of formal grammar.

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4. The study of grammar will help students score better on standardized tests that include grammar, usage, and punctuation.
5. The study of grammar will help people master another language more readily.
6. The study of grammar will help people master the socially prestigious conventions of spoken and/or written usage.
7. The study of grammar will help people become better users of the language, that is, more effective as listeners and speakers, and especially as readers and writers.

One can hardly quarrel with the idea that language is intrinsically interesting and worthy of study, except to point out that grammar books rarely make it so, and that students are less likely to be interested in the grammar of their language per se than in various appealing aspects of language use, such as the language of advertising, the "double-speak" of government, the language of sexism, and various ethnic and community dialects. And the study of grammar *can* help students learn to work like scientists, provided the teacher approaches it that way instead of the way it is traditionally taught (see Postman and Weingartner, 1966).

But what of the other reasons for teaching grammar? They reflect the assumption that studying grammar in itself, apart from reading and writing, or speaking and listening, will automatically produce desirable effects such as improved mental ability, higher scores on standardized tests, mastery of another language or of socially prestigious grammatical forms, and greater effectiveness as users of the language.

Logically, we need to consult the research evidence.

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### Early Research Summaries

As long ago as 1936, the Curriculum Commission of the National Council of Teachers of English recommended that “all teaching of grammar separate from the manipulation of sentences be discontinued . . . since every scientific attempt to prove that knowledge of grammar is useful has failed . . .” (as quoted in H. A. Greene, 1950, p. 392).

About fifteen years later, an article in the *Encyclopedia of Educational Research* (1950) summarized the available research on the teaching of grammar as a system and a subject, with the comment that these summary statements were warranted by “the best opinion, practice, and experimental evidence” (H. A. Greene, 1950, p. 393). The 1960 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Educational Research* includes similar summary statements (Searles and Carlson, 1960, p. 461), so I have combined some of them here, indicating only the year of each statement as it is quoted or closely paraphrased:

1. “The disciplinary value which may be attributed to formal grammar is negligible” (1950). That is, research does not support the contention that the study of grammar brings about mental discipline (1960).
2. “No more relation exists between knowledge of grammar and the application of the knowledge in a functional language situation than exists between any two totally different and unrelated school subjects” (1950). In fact, one investigator found a higher correlation between achievement in grammar and mathematics than between achievement in grammar and composition or oral language abilities (1960).
3. “In spite of the fact that the contribution of the knowledge of English grammar to achievement in foreign language has been its chief justification in the past, the experimental evidence does not support this conclusion” (1950). It appears that “knowledge of grammar does not materially affect a student’s ability to learn a foreign language” (1960).

4. "The study of grammar has been justified because of its possible contribution to reading skills, but the evidence does not support this conclusion" (1950).
5. "The contribution of grammar to the formation of sentences in speech and in writing has doubtless been exaggerated" (1950).
6. "Diagramming sentences does not carry over to expressional problems [actual writing]." Indeed, "it teaches students nothing beyond the ability to diagram" (1960).

In short, the research apparently gave no support to the idea that teaching grammar would help students develop mental discipline, master another language, or become better users of their native language. Indeed, further evidence indicated that training in formal grammar did not transfer to any significant extent to writing "correct" English or even to recognizing it.

In 1963, Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer wrote an NCTE report titled *Research in Written Composition*. For three decades, scholars have been quoting the statement that concludes their discussion of research on the teaching of grammar:

In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing. (pp. 37-38)

This bold statement seemed only a logical extension of DeBoer's conclusion from the available research four years before. DeBoer (1959) had written:

The impressive fact is . . . that in all these studies, carried out in places and at times far removed from each other, often by highly experienced and disinterested investigators, the results have been consistently negative so far as the value of grammar in the improvement of language expression is concerned. Surely there is no justification in the available evidence for the great expenditure of time and effort still being devoted to formal grammar in American schools. (p. 417)

These strong indictments from the late 1950s and early 1960s clearly echo the NCTE's 1936 summary statement in its resolution against the teaching of grammar: "every scientific attempt to prove that knowledge of grammar is useful has failed." Of course, this conclusion will be no surprise to teachers who have observed that many students are unable or unwilling to analyze and label the parts of sentences or to apply the grammatical "rules" they have been taught.

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## Research on the Effects of Structural and Transformational Grammar

The 1950s and early 1960s saw the rise of structural linguistics, which attempted to describe languages more consistently, without recourse to meaning or to previous grammars, and therefore more objectively and “scientifically” than traditional grammarians had done. Structural linguists based their grammatical descriptions on careful analysis of English as it was actually spoken in their time, not on hand-me-down rules from Latin and from English grammars of earlier centuries. Therefore, some investigators hypothesized that a study of grammar from the viewpoint of structural linguistics might prove more valuable to writers than a study of traditional grammar, with its inconsistencies and unabashed use of meaning in determining the functions of grammatical elements. George Hillocks’s 1986 review (with Michael W. Smith) of the research indicates, however, that overall the research comparing the effects of teaching structural grammar does not demonstrate that it is appreciably superior to the teaching of traditional grammar, with regard to its effects on writing (Hillocks, 1986, pp. 134–135).

The rise of transformational grammar in the 1960s and 1970s generated a similar optimism regarding the practical value of studying grammar through that approach. It emphasized how surface structures can be generated from hypothesized deep, underlying structures, and how underlying structures can be transformed into different stylistic variants. For instance, *The woman is tired* might be derived linguistically from a deep structure like “Something + tired + the + woman,” thus validating many native speakers’ sense that *tired* in the original sentence is a verb, though it functions as an adjective in the surface sentence. Similarly, a deep structure like “A + new + surgeon + performed + the + operation” might surface as either *A new surgeon performed the operation* or *The operation was performed by a new surgeon*, thus demonstrating the relationship between stylistic variants that mean essentially the same thing.

Bateman and Zidonis (1966) were perhaps the first researchers to investigate the effect that studying transformational grammar might have upon students’ writing. The experimental group that studied transformational grammar during their ninth- and tenth-grade years wrote with a lower incidence of errors than the control group that studied no grammar. The transformational group also used more mature sentence structures (the kinds

of structures that characterize older writers), though this difference was largely due to four students (about a fifth of the experimental group) and was not statistically significant.

In 1969, John Mellon reported a study in which he had hypothesized that a knowledge of transformational grammar in combination with practice in sentence combining would result in greater syntactic fluency in students' writing. The students in five experimental classes were exposed to terminology and grammatical explanations reflective of transformational theory, though actual practice in sentence combining seems to have been the major focus of the experimental treatment. The students in five control classes studied a course in traditional grammar. The two placebo classes that studied no grammar at all had additional lessons in literature and composition, but no additional writing assignments. During a one-year period, the experimental group significantly increased its syntactic fluency on all twelve of the factors analyzed. The control and placebo groups increased on only three of the factors at the same level of significance. The absolute growth in the experimental group was approximately double the growth in the control and placebo groups (Mellon, 1969, p. v). However, there were no appreciable differences in the overall quality of students' writing (p. 69).

In the wake of Mellon's study, Frank O'Hare (1973) reasoned that the greater syntactic maturity of Mellon's transformational group might have been due to their practice in sentence combining alone, rather than to their study of transformational grammar in conjunction with sentence combining. Indeed, Mellon (1969) himself had written, "Clearly, it was the sentence-combining practice associated with the grammar study, not the grammar study itself, that influenced the syntactic fluency growth rate" (p. 74).

Thus O'Hare hypothesized that sentence combining by itself might produce the same kinds of results, without the formal study of grammar or the use of technical terminology. Using nontechnical terms to describe different structures, O'Hare had his experimental group do sentence-combining exercises, while the control group studied no grammar but spent more time in the regular language arts curriculum. The result? The sentence-combining group made significant gains over the control group, in terms of syntactic maturity—which O'Hare (1973) defined as the range of sentence types used (p. 19). In fact, his seventh-grade sentence combiners wrote well beyond the syntactic maturity level typical of eighth graders, and in many respects very similar to that of the twelfth graders in a study by Kellogg Hunt (1965a), which had provided the benchmark data on syntactic maturity at different grade levels, compared with that of adults. Students in the experimental group also "wrote compositions that were

significantly better in overall quality than the control group's compositions" (O'Hare, 1973, pp. 67-68). Thus O'Hare's research suggested that sentence-combining practice alone can enhance syntactic maturity and writing quality, without grammatical terminology or the study of grammar.

A substantial number of studies have supported this conclusion. Hillocks (1986) reports:

These [sentence-combining] studies have led to a number of sentence combining texts and a host of dissertations from 1973 to the present. The overwhelming majority of these studies have been positive, with about 60 percent of them reporting that work in sentence combining, from as low as grade 2 through the adult level, results in significant advances (at least  $p < .05$ ) on measures of syntactic maturity. Thirty percent of the reports have recorded some improvement at a nonsignificant level or at a level which was not tested for significance. Only 10 percent of the reports have been negative, showing either no significant differences or mixed results. (pp. 142-143)

In their summaries of research on the teaching of grammar, Hillocks (1986) and Hillocks and Smith (1991) present a thorough review of the relevant research since the early 1960s, including studies comparing the effects of teaching traditional or structural or transformational grammar with the effects of teaching no grammar, and studies comparing the effects of teaching structural or transformational grammar with the effects of teaching traditional grammar. After discussing these various studies, including the Elley study described in detail in a later section, Hillocks (1986) concludes:

None of the studies reviewed for the present report provides any support for teaching grammar as a means of improving composition skills. If schools insist upon teaching the identification of parts of speech, the parsing or diagramming of sentences, or other concepts of traditional grammar (as many still do), they cannot defend it as a means of improving the quality of writing. (p. 138)

Little research on the teaching of mechanics has been done, but the available evidence does not offer much reason to be optimistic about teaching grammar as an aid to avoiding or correcting errors, either (Hillocks, 1986, p. 139; and see Chapter 6 of the present book for a discussion of Calkins, 1980, and DiStefano and Killion, 1984). In fact, as we shall see, the three-year Elley study showed that the writing of students studying transformational or traditional grammar was not significantly different from the no-grammar group, *even on the mechanics of writing*. Thus Hillocks

(1986) issues a strong indictment against the formal teaching of traditional grammar: "School boards, administrators and teachers who impose the systematic study of traditional school grammar on their students over lengthy periods of time in the name of teaching writing do them a gross disservice" (p. 248).

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### A Note on Functional Grammar

In Australia especially, the functional grammar of British linguists Halliday and Hasan has gained increasing influence in the schools (Halliday, 1985; Halliday and Hasan, 1976). Grammarians in this linguistic tradition claim that functional grammar is more relevant to writing because it emphasizes the functions or uses of grammatical constructions. Here are some ways in which functional grammar differs from traditional grammar (Collerson, 1994, pp. 142–144):

- It is primarily concerned with how the language works to achieve various purposes.
- It focuses first on larger grammatical components (clauses and sentences) and their functions within texts, not on parts of speech. Units at the clause and sentence level are considered most important because of their relationship to rhetorical and stylistic effectiveness.
- It is more concerned with effectiveness than with prescribing adherence to "rules"—that is, to particular conventions of language use.

As far as I know, research has not been conducted to determine the effects on student writing of teaching functional grammar in isolation, as a system for understanding the language. Indeed, the idea of teaching functional grammar in isolation from writing and speaking would seem contrary to the whole notion of focusing on the functional aspects of language structure.

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### A Dissenting Voice

In light of this overwhelming body of evidence, it may seem surprising that there is any dissenting voice among scholars. But in 1981, before the Elley study and before the Hillocks and Smith summaries, Martha Kolln wrote



an article critiquing some earlier research summaries, describing some other relevant research, and articulating her own conviction—without offering any research support—that it should be helpful for students in their writing to bring their unconscious grammatical knowledge to conscious awareness, through the study of the categories and structures and labels of grammar.

One significant contribution is her critique of the research underlying the widely cited research summaries of Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer (1963) and of Dean Memering (1978). For example, she points out weaknesses in the design and implementation of some of the studies summarized by Braddock et al.—weaknesses of which the authors apparently were aware (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer, 1963, p. 37). And indeed, just preceding DeBoer's (1959) decisive summary of the research, he had written that "a close examination of some of the reports of investigations of the effectiveness of grammar instruction might reveal flaws in research design or conclusions not fully warranted by the evidence" (p. 417). Since Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer also noted weaknesses in methodology and interpretation in the studies from which they generalized, one wonders why these hints of flawed research studies did not inspire more scepticism about their conclusions.

Kolln points out that in the same year as the Braddock report was published (1963), Henry C. Meckel described in the *Handbook of Research on Teaching* many of the same studies as Braddock and colleagues had done. However, his conclusions were rather different. Meckel's conclusions that can be directly compared with those of Braddock et al. are as follows:

1. There is no research evidence that grammar as traditionally taught in the schools has any appreciable effect on the improvement of writing skill.
2. The training periods involved in transfer studies have been comparatively short, and the amount of grammar instruction has frequently been small.
3. There is no conclusive research evidence, however, that grammar has no transfer value in developing composition skill.
4. More research is needed on the kind of grammatical knowledge that may reasonably be expected to transfer to writing.
5. Research does not justify the conclusion that grammar should not be taught systematically.
6. There are more efficient methods of securing *immediate* improvement in the writing of pupils, both in sentence structure and usage, than systematic grammatical instruction.

The major points on which Meckel differs from Braddock et al. are items 4 and 5. He explains item 4 by indicating that research in which students are led to apply the grammatical principles taught may produce more positive results than research in which grammar is studied in and by itself. Similarly, he explains item 5 by saying that the systematic teaching of grammar does not preclude explicit attention also to the application of the grammar taught. That is, the formal study of grammar does not have to be the isolated or unapplied study of grammar.

Thus while Kolln points out that the research showing the ineffectiveness of teaching grammar for improving writing is not completely valid, her major contribution lies in pointing out that grammar study in conjunction with explicit application may have more promise than grammar study alone (her 1991 book *Rhetorical Grammar* reflects this conviction). However, it is still by no means clear that "application" cannot be done just as effectively, and a lot more efficiently, without detailed, explicit grammar study. Witness, for example, O'Hare's (1973) research on sentence combining.

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### Three Studies in Detail

By far the most impressive research on the effects of grammar study is that conducted by Elley, Barham, Lamb, and Wyllie (1976). Equally interesting, however, are an earlier study by Macauley in Scotland (1947), who focused on the degree to which grammar is actually learned, and a study undertaken by a secondary school teacher, Finlay McQuade (1980), who focused on the practical effects of grammar study. All of these studies were reported before the publication of Kolln's article.

#### *The Study by Macauley (1947)*

Macauley's study—or rather, his series of studies—strongly suggests that despite years of grammar study, students do not achieve much ability to identify even the basic parts of speech as these function in sentences.

Macauley reports that grammar is (or was in the 1940s) extensively taught in both the primary (elementary) and secondary schools of Scotland, for an average of about thirty minutes a day at both levels. He further explains:

Formal grammar has to begin at 7½ years of age with lessons on the noun, singular and plural number, and the verb; at 8, is added the study of

adjectives; at 8½, personal pronouns and the tenses of verbs; at 9, analysis of simple sentences, conjugation of verbs, kinds of nouns and case of nouns; at 9½, particular analysis, tenses of auxiliary verbs, adverbs; at 10, adverb, preposition and conjunction, the relative pronoun, interchange of phrases and clauses; and so on till in the top primary class at age 11½ to 12 the course to be covered includes complete revision of all the parts of speech with declensions and conjugations, and written exercises involving analysis and parsing of easy, simple, complex, and compound sentences. (p. 153)

In short, the teaching of grammar in the elementary grades emphasizes parts of speech and their functions.

With such extensive and intensive teaching of these aspects of grammar, one might assume that the grammar would be well learned. Not so, according to Macauley's research.

A number of tests were used, similar to the one in Figure 2.2. This test consists of fifty sentences in which the student is to indicate the part of speech of the underlined word, given the choices of noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, or adverb. The student needs to understand that the *function* of a word determines the part of speech in a given context.

Macauley explains that given the method of scoring, students could have gotten about 11 percent of the answers right simply by guessing. Nevertheless, he and his scorers decided to use a 50 percent correct score as a standard of success—not a very demanding standard, given the years of intensive teaching of grammar. For all the test items, the average (mean) score for the 131 students was an incredibly low 27.9 percent. The scores ranged from 35.5 percent at one school to 21.8 percent at another (without knowing Scottish geography, the reader cannot relate these scores to the kind of school, whether city, town, or rural).

For each part of speech, there were ten items. For the five parts of speech, the rate of successful identification was as shown in Figure 2.3. Out of the 131 students, only one scored 50 percent or better on all five parts of speech.

To corroborate or challenge these results, Macauley administered the same test to a group of (average) students entering a junior secondary school. The students were approximately the same age (twelve), but the scores were even lower. Macauley explains that this is probably because the best students had already been siphoned off to a senior secondary school.

Macauley went on to determine the results for students who had spent two years in a junior secondary school, during which they continued to receive instruction in grammar. Their scores did rise steadily from an overall

FIGURE 2.2 Macauley's grammar test (1947). Apparently Macauley expected students to focus on how the word *functions* in the sentence. Since this expectation is not clear in the directions, the lack of clarity must surely have affected the results.

INSTRUCTIONS: Here are fifty sentences. In each sentence, there is a word underlined. On your answer sheet, you have to indicate what part of speech you think the underlined word is. Do so by putting a ring round N or V or P or A or J, according as you think the word is a Noun, Verb, Pronoun, Adverb, or Adjective.

1. His new cycle was stolen.
2. He cycled from the farm to the hostel.
3. You must visit us soon.
4. Meet me here in an hour.
5. The daily paper peeped out of his pocket.
6. The shopkeeper promised to send fresh milk daily.
7. What have I done to deserve this?
8. A haircut lasts him a month.
9. The cobbler put the boot on the last.
10. Lightning was the last horse to pass the post.
11. The steamer touched in at Rothesay.
12. Who stole my heart away?
13. He seems a nice, friendly dog.
14. The dog watched his master hopefully.
15. Are you going to dance tonight?
16. It was shortly after midnight.
17. He looked very worried.
18. It never rains but it pours.
19. The letter was delivered by the first post.
20. You must be patient with me.
21. My watch seems to be slow.
22. Are you going to the dance, to-night?
23. Give me my money and let me go.
24. The day will probably be cool.
25. I will keep what is mine.
26. He was cooling off after the game.
27. The tide was ebbing fast.
28. The child was knocked over in the rush.
29. We watch the progress of our team.
30. Those who can find the time, should visit the exhibition.
31. I should like some to take home.
32. You should post early in the day.
33. Why did he do it?
34. The doctor visited his patients.
35. The fastest runner does not always win.
36. I suffer from nerves.
37. Which team do you support?
38. I might have believed you earlier.
39. I should like some fruit to take home.
40. What have I done to deserve this?
41. He used a stop watch to time the runners.
42. Where shall we meet?
43. Have patience and I will pay thee all.
44. It is the early bird that gets the worm.
45. Which team do you support?
46. It was shortly after midnight.
47. It is not so long since we saw them.
48. I might have believed you earlier.
49. He was well-known for his friendliness.
50. We hope to encourage the team spirit.

FIGURE 2.3 Macauley's results (1947).

| PART OF SPEECH | MEAN SCORE ON THOSE 5 ITEMS | PERCENT OF STUDENTS SCORING 50% OR BETTER |
|----------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Noun           | 43.3                        | 36.6                                      |
| Verb           | 30.5                        | 20.6                                      |
| Pronoun        | 28.5                        | 16.0                                      |
| Adverb         | 19.8                        | 3.8                                       |
| Adjective      | 17.8                        | 5.3                                       |

mean of 26.3 percent to a mean of 35.4 percent of items correct. Obviously, however, few students achieved the minimally acceptable standard of 50 percent. Out of the 397 students, only four scored at least 50 percent on all five parts of speech.

Finally, Macauley used the same test with students in a senior secondary school for the academic elite, wherein there are nevertheless technical and domestic tracks for "early leavers." Despite continued intensive teaching of grammar throughout three years of secondary school, Macauley found, there was still relatively little improvement:

- No domestic or technical class scored above 40 percent on the whole test.
- The only classes scoring 50 percent or above on all five parts of speech were the two classes studying a foreign language.
- The overall mean for the top boys' class and the top girls' class increased from 46.5 percent in the first year to 62 percent in the third year.
- By the third year, when more than half the senior secondary students had left school, still only 41.5 percent of all the remaining students scored 50 percent or higher on the total test.

In trying to interpret the results, Macauley first hypothesized that the students in the elementary grades did so poorly because "a certain stage of mental maturity appears to be required for the understanding of grammatical function" (p. 159). However, the results for the students in junior and senior secondary schools are not a lot more impressive.

On the one hand, we cannot consider Macauley's results entirely reliable, since his directions did not make it clear that students were to determine the word's part of speech by its function. Particularly troublesome in this regard are the items where the underlined word is a pronoun in form

but an adjective in function; however, the lack of clarity in the directions could certainly have affected responses to some other items, too.

On the other hand, even assuming that students understood the parts of speech somewhat better than their scores suggested, one can hardly escape the conclusion that extensive and intensive teaching of grammar may not be warranted—even if the mastery of grammar itself were our primary or sole aim, rather than the learning of grammar for some other purpose such as mental discipline, learning a second language, or the improvement of writing.

#### *The Study by Elley et al. (1976)*

This three-year longitudinal study in New Zealand began when students were in their third-form year, at age thirteen. The study involved 248 students in eight matched classes of average ability; one “bright” and three “slow-learning” classes were deliberately excluded so as to make any observed differences more likely the result of the approach itself rather than of the differences among students. To control for teacher differences, the three teachers each taught each program to each class part of the time.

A transformational (TG) group studied the grammar, rhetoric, and literature strands of the Oregon Curriculum (Kitzhaber, 1970). The transformational grammar strand focused on explaining the rules of grammar that a native speaker naturally uses; the aim of the strand was simply to teach students about the syntax of English, not to teach grammar for any utilitarian purpose. The reading-writing course (RW) included the rhetoric and literature strands of the Oregon Curriculum, but substituted extra reading and creative writing (mostly reading) for the transformational grammar strand. The third group studied from a *Let's Learn English* (LLE) program (Smart, 1969), wherein the grammar taught is largely traditional, and more functional than the grammar taught in the Oregon Curriculum. It also included many applications. The teachers consulted regularly in order to maintain similar emphases in those aspects of the English curriculum that were not being compared.

Various language tests were used to ascertain any differences that might arise from the differing approaches. These included (but were not limited to) the *PAT Reading Comprehension and Reading Vocabulary Tests* (1969), a test of sentence combining, and a test of English usage that required students to correct “errors” in specially prepared short sentences and continuous prose. At the end of each year of the study, all students wrote a set of essays on various topics. Four essays were assessed for each student in the first year of the study, with three essays being assessed in the two subsequent

years. The essays were assessed by carefully trained groups of English teachers from nearby high schools.

During the first year of the study, none of the three programs showed a significant superiority on any of the twelve variables assessed. The only significant difference was in attitudes: the TG group liked writing less than the other groups. Only one of the possible language test comparisons proved significant the second year, though the two groups using the Oregon Curriculum showed significantly more positive attitudes toward literature and toward explanatory and persuasive writing. However, the TG group found English more difficult than the other groups, and claimed to read less than they used to. However, none of these differences was dramatic.

At the end of the third year, both the TG and RW groups scored significantly better than the LLE (traditional grammar) group on sentence-combining exercises. On the English usage test, both grammar groups produced means significantly higher than the reading-writing group. For the TG group, the discrepancy was at least 10 percent on 16 of the 38 items; the traditional grammar group showed a similar superiority over the reading-writing group. However, "what slight superiority there was in the two grammar groups was dispersed over a wide range of mechanical conventions, and was not clearly associated with sentence structure" (Elley et al., 1976, p. 15).

On the essays, there were no significant differences among groups in overall quality. In light of earlier studies of the effect on writing of studying transformational grammar, the syntactic structures of the essays were analyzed in detail. However, only one difference proved significant out of a possible 36 comparisons: the TG group did not use as many participles as the other two groups. Thus "there is no support in these results for the hypothesis that a special study of any kind of transformation increases the propensity to use them" (p. 17).

The authors conclude that transformational grammar study has a negligible effect on the language growth of secondary school students, and that traditional grammar also shows no measurable benefits. The slight advantage of the TG group in mastering some minor conventions of usage were "more than offset by the less positive attitudes which they showed towards their English studies" (p. 18). Nor were any significant differences found in the School Certificate English results of the three groups, nor in a follow-up writing assessment a year later. The authors indicate, "It is difficult to escape the conclusion that English grammar, whether traditional or transformational, has virtually no influence on the language growth of typical secondary school students" (p. 18).

### *The Study by McQuade (1980)*

In contrast to the exceptionally detailed three-year study of Elley et al., Finlay McQuade's study involved a more modest investigation of the effect that his Editorial Skills class had on high school students.

Aware that research on the teaching of grammar did not support teaching grammar on the grounds that it would improve writing, he nevertheless thought that the Editorial Skills course might enhance students' performance on the College Entrance Examination Board's Achievement Test in Composition, since it included questions dealing with correctness in grammar as well as punctuation, usage, and diction. Since the eleventh and twelfth graders who took the Editorial Skills course chose it as an elective, they were highly motivated to succeed.

The course itself reviewed parts of speech and basic sentence structure, then dealt with application of such principles as "agreement, reference, parallel construction, tense, case, subordination" to the task of finding errors in sentences written expressly for that purpose. A similar approach was taken to punctuation, diction, and—if time permitted—to spelling. Students completed dozens of exercises and five mastery tests; there were also interim and final exams, each testing everything previously studied "and, presumably, mastered." The course was popular, with students signing up for it semester after semester, claiming to have learned a lot, and insisting that it helped on the SAT tests as well as on the CEEB's Achievement Test in Composition.

In short, everyone seemed happy with the course, until failures began to appear. The English faculty developed tests to identify students below a certain level of competence in reading, writing, mechanics, and vocabulary, and some students who had passed the Editorial Skills class were assigned to the mechanics competence course on the basis of that assessment. This unexpected turn of events led McQuade to actually investigate the effects of the Editorial Skills course, instead of merely assuming that it succeeded in its aim because everyone seemed to think so.

Much to McQuade's surprise and chagrin, the results of his investigation did not bear out even the modest claim that the Editorial Skills test might improve scores on the Achievement Test. Here is what he found:

- Overall, students showed as much gain on their Cooperative English Tests in years that they *hadn't* taken the Editorial Skills class as in the year that they had (p. 28).
- The Editorial Skills class seems to have made no difference in



preparation for the CEEB Achievement Test: students who hadn't taken the course showed just as much difference between the SAT and the later Achievement Test as students who had taken the course (p. 29).

- The class average on the pre-test was actually higher than the average on the post-test (p. 28).
- Though there were fewer errors per T-unit (a grammatical sentence) on the post-test essays (about half as many errors, in fact), it turned out that most of this reduction in errors was a reduction in relatively simple errors (mainly capitalization) by just a few of the students (pp. 29–30).
- Furthermore, though “the essays in the first set are not spectacular . . . the essays in the second set . . . are miserable.” The students’ sentences were “awkwardly and I believe self-consciously constructed to honor correctness above all other virtues, including sense” (p. 29).

McQuade concludes, “No reduction of the number of errors could be significant, I reasoned, when the post-course essays are inferior in every other way to the pre-course essays” (p. 29).

In short, these three studies as well as numerous others during the twentieth century indicate that there is little pragmatic justification for systematically teaching a descriptive or explanatory grammar of the language, whether that grammar be traditional, structural, transformational, or any other kind.

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### Why Teachers Continue to Teach Grammar

There are, of course, a number of reasons why teachers continue to teach grammar despite the research demonstrating its lack of practical value. Among such reasons are the following, some of which are articulated especially well by d'Eloia (1981):

1. Unaware of the research, they may simply assume that “of course” teaching grammar improves reading and writing—or at least the ability to edit written work or to do better on standardized tests that include grammar, usage, and punctuation. This assumption is sometimes promoted by articles

in professional journals where authors may have a deep and often unexamined commitment to a behaviorist concept of learning: that practice and more practice equals learning, and that what is learned will automatically be applied in appropriate situations.

2. They simply do not believe the research, but assume that the research studies must be faulty: "If only the teachers in the research studies had taught grammar the way I do, they would surely have been more successful." Or, if only the study had been designed differently, it would have demonstrated the value of teaching grammar. The most common argument is that surely formal grammar is valuable when applied to writing (e.g., Kolln, 1981). Those who make this argument seem not to consider that most concepts useful to writing can be taught without recourse to the formal study of grammar: in other words, it's the guided application that is valuable, not the formal study of grammar itself.

3. They believe that grammar is interesting in and of itself and teach it primarily for that reason. Such teachers include those who make grammar study a genuine inquiry and a process of discovery for their students.

4. They assume that what writers and readers need to know about grammar in order to comprehend texts and to write effectively must be known *consciously*. Typically these teachers have never thought about the fact that babies and toddlers learn the basics of grammar before entering school, and without direct instruction. Nor have they thought about the fact that most published creative writers seem to have little conscious understanding of grammar as a system.

5. They are aware that some students who are good readers and writers also find grammar study easy. This correlation encourages faulty cause-effect reasoning: students can read/write well because they know grammar; therefore, teaching grammar will make students better readers and writers.

6. They teach grammar because it's easier to assign exercises and grade them according to the answer key (or have a student grade them) than to lead students through the process of producing effective pieces of writing.

7. They believe that grammar study at least does no harm. Therefore, they feel justified in taking the easy way out and teaching grammar according to the book.

8. They are required by their school or school system to teach grammar, and they may have neither the energy to try to change the system nor the

knowledge to teach selected aspects of grammar in less traditional and possibly more effective ways. They may simply not know what else to do to help students with the grammar-related aspects of their writing. Or, they may not be confident enough in their own knowledge of grammar to feel comfortable abandoning the grammar book and answer key.

9. They fear that if they don't teach grammar, students might miss out on something for which they—both teachers and students—will be held accountable. This fear may make them feel guilty at the mere thought of not teaching grammar formally and systematically.

10. They bow to pressure from parents and other community members who are unaware of the research but naively think that teaching grammar will improve their children's use of English. Clearly the idea that grammar is good for a person has become a hallowed part of our cultural mythology, a legacy from the Middle Ages, when the study of grammar was considered vital for disciplining the mind and soul.

11. They believe that the research is valid in general, or for groups of students "on the average," but are still convinced that the writing of some students will benefit from the explicit study of grammar. Perhaps they remember learning ways of varying and manipulating sentence elements through their own study of grammar in school. They may remember learning the conventions of punctuation and grammar through formal study and realize that they themselves were able to apply, in their own writing, the more practical aspects of what they were taught. Often, therefore, teachers think, "Grammar helped me, so it's bound to help some of my students, too." They are willing to teach grammar to entire classes for the benefit of at least a few students.

12. They believe that grammar is valuable when it is applied to writing, and perhaps are not aware of—or do not believe—the research demonstrating that grammatical concepts can be applied without formal study of grammar as a system.

In most of these instances, what teachers may not have fully considered or understood is the point just mentioned: that students can learn and apply many grammatical concepts without learning to analyze and label the parts of speech and various other grammatical constructions. While this recognition does not solve all our problems in teaching grammar, it can certainly be a starting point for experimenting with other approaches to teaching those aspects of grammar that are most relevant to writing.

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## Toward Other Alternatives

There are, then, many reasons why teachers continue to teach formal grammar as a system. However, teachers and administrators knowledgeable about the previously discussed research should find that research difficult to ignore. Despite concerns about methodology, implementation, and interpretation in some of the studies, a preponderance of the evidence points in one direction. Especially impressive is the scrupulously rigorous three-year study by Elley et al.; indeed, even the study by Finlay McQuade is impressive, given the various kinds of data he examined. Overall, it is *difficult to escape the conclusion that teaching formal, isolated grammar to average or heterogenous classes, perhaps even to highly motivated students in elective classes, makes no appreciable difference in their ability to write, to edit, or to score better on standardized tests.* Departures from such results seem to be the exception rather than the rule.

What, then, are teachers to do? The following are some specific suggestions, most of which will receive further consideration in following chapters.

1. Restrict the teaching of grammar as a system to elective classes and units, offered with no pragmatic justification as an incentive, but only for the pleasure and challenge of studying the language. Emphasize inquiry and discovery more than, or rather than, mastery of all the major elements, functions, and constructions of the grammar (Postman and Weingartner, 1966).
2. Promote the acquisition and use of grammatical constructions through reading, and even by reading to students various works that are more sophisticated in grammatical structures than the writing that most of the students do (see Chapter 3).
3. When explaining various aspects of grammar, usage, and punctuation to help students with their writing, minimize the use of grammatical terminology and maximize the use of examples. Teach the minimal terminology primarily by using it in a functional context and through brief lessons as necessary, rather than through memorization of definitions and the analysis of sentences (see Chapters 4–6).
4. Emphasize the production of effective sentences rather than their analysis (see Chapter 5 and several lessons in the Appendix).

5. Teach not only “correct” punctuation, according to the handbooks, but effective punctuation, perhaps based upon classroom examination of published texts (see several lessons in the Appendix).

6. Lead students in discussing and investigating questions of usage, not in doing usage exercises from a grammar book. Similarly, lead students in exploring the power of dialects through literature and film. Contrast the grammatical constructions of different ethnic and community dialects with each other and with the Language of Wider Communication (so-called standard English), and consider the different effects that differing dialects have in different circumstances in the real world (see several lessons in the Appendix).

7. Engage non-native speakers of English in using the language as best they can, knowing that social interaction, reading, and writing to share ideas will promote the functional acquisition of English more than will grammatical study (see Chapter 3).

Of course, these suggestions do not exhaust the possibilities for language study in the classroom; they merely include several that focus on grammar and its relationship to conventions and choices in usage and punctuation, felicity and appropriateness in sentence structure and style, the power of dialects and dialects of power, the acquisition of grammatical constructions, and the potential excitement and challenge of investigating selected aspects of the grammatical system. Notice that none of these suggestions requires studying grammar as an interlocking system of elements, structures, and rules; even elective classes for the study of grammar can focus on selected aspects that are especially intriguing, if the students and teacher so desire.

Much of our time-honored grammar study has been undertaken in the name of improving writing, but “maximizing the benefits of grammar instruction requires teaching less, not more, grammar” (Noguchi, 1991, p. 16). This is true in part because the teaching of grammar is thereby more focused, but also because less grammar instruction means more time for writing itself, including the revision and editing phases wherein assistance with specific aspects of grammar becomes particularly valuable. Noguchi (1991) explains in his final summary:

Less time spent on formal grammar instruction will mean more time to spend on the frequent and most serious kinds of stylistic problems [including mechanics], more time to examine the various social uses and users of English, and more time to explore the power, the responsibilities, and the social ramifications accompanying the written word. It will also mean more

time . . . to teach and engage students in the writing process, and, of course, more time for actual writing. Less formal instruction in grammar will, furthermore, mean more time for students to find out how language makes them uniquely human, how language not only divides human beings but also unites them. In general, less formal instruction in grammar will mean more time to develop in students a healthy awareness and appreciation of language and its uses, not just of limits but also of possibilities. (p. 121)

We should ponder, consider or reconsider the experimental research evidence, and rethink the what, why, and how of our teaching of grammar. "In the end," Noguchi says, "less is more."

It is time we tried teaching less grammar in the name of good writing, and undertook more research to determine the effectiveness of that general strategy. Toward these goals, I have included some of my own teaching experiments in the Appendix. Other teachers will describe their experiments, too, in the forthcoming companion volume.