

PREFACE

More than fifteen years ago, the National Council of Teachers of English published my *Grammar for Teachers* (1979). In the intervening years, this book has been one of NCTE's bestsellers, attesting to the widespread concern about teaching grammar but also reflecting the book's congruence with the writing process movement of the 1980s and 1990s. While suggesting that teachers need to know grammar in order to teach writing more effectively, I also argued that students mainly need to be guided in learning and applying certain grammatical concepts as they revise and edit their writing.

For a long while I had nothing new to say on the topic of teaching grammar. Indeed, I was no longer teaching courses in grammar, but instead teaching courses in the reading and writing processes and whole language education. My books have reflected that thrust: for example, *Reading Process and Practice: From Socio-psycholinguistics to Whole Language* (1994) and *Understanding Whole Language* (1990). But for the past seven or eight years, I have also been teaching, once a year, a graduate/undergraduate course on grammar and the teaching of grammar. Teaching this course has forced me to reread and update myself on the relevant research, naturally, but also to reexamine, refine, and expand my thinking about what aspects of grammar need to be taught to writers, along with the related questions of why, when, and how.

The present book derives, then, not only from my original background in grammar and linguistics, language acquisition, the writing process, and the teaching of writing, but from more recent forays into learning theory and the acquisition of literacy. As much as anything else, the book is informed by my experiences as a teacher/researcher, always taking new risks and trying to figure out why something has or hasn't worked. Thus, what I currently think about teaching grammar in the context of writing reflects an amalgam of research and experience, which is always to some degree in flux. It is this evolving theory that I invite you to explore in these pages, and to which I urge you to contribute as a teacher/researcher yourself. The book is intended for teachers at all levels, but especially the junior high and high school levels, where grammar has been taught most intensively.

Chapter 1 introduces some common meanings of *grammar* and provides a historical overview of traditional school grammar books and grammar teaching. Chapter 2 examines reasons commonly given for teaching grammar as a school subject and calls these reasons into question by describing decades of research that show the teaching of grammar in isolation to have little, if any, effect on the writing of most students. What might be more effective? To lay the groundwork for exploration of this topic, Chapter 3 considers how preschoolers acquire the basic structures of their native language and how the basic grammar of a second language may likewise be acquired. Developing an important point from that discussion, Chapter 4 suggests a research-based perspective on the concept of error itself and on the “errors” our students make as writers, then concludes with practical alternatives to what Lois Rosen (1987) has dubbed “the error hunt.” Chapter 5 draws upon the preceding chapters and further research in suggesting what aspects of grammar we might focus on, as we guide our students in becoming more effective in writing and revising sentences and in editing their writing. Finally, Chapter 6 addresses the teaching of grammar from the perspective of learning theory.

Originally, these six chapters were to be followed by chapters dealing with teaching different grammatical concepts in the context of writing. But as I met with teachers interested in sharing more effective ways of teaching useful aspects of grammar, we realized that it would be good to have these chapters written by various teachers who have tried different things in their classrooms. Before long, we concluded that I should publish the more theoretical, research-derived chapters as a separate book and that together we should work toward a sequel in which we will share some of the lessons we’ve learned, through experience, about teaching grammar in the context of writing.

The Appendix, with sample lessons from my own teaching, looks forward to the future book. These lessons illustrate the kinds recommended in Chapter 6: incidental teaching, inductive learning, mini-lessons, and extended mini-lessons. They also illustrate the five broad topics for grammar lessons suggested in Chapter 5: (1) teaching concepts of subject, verb, clause, sentence, and related concepts for editing; (2) teaching style through sentence combining and sentence generating; (3) teaching sentence sense and style through the manipulation of syntactic elements; (4) teaching the power of dialects and dialects of power; and (5) teaching punctuation and mechanics for convention, clarity, and style.

While this list sounds fairly comprehensive, the book does not actually

cover everything you might have wanted to know about grammar and the teaching of it. First, the book does not deal much with linguistic theories; rather, I have mostly drawn upon such theories without discussing them in detail. Second, the book does not include much of the descriptive/prescriptive grammar found in the grammar handbooks. Third, the samples in the Appendix reflect my own teaching situations and therefore do not deal with the particular needs of so-called basic writers, or with the needs of and issues involved in teaching students for whom English is not the native language, or for whom a so-called standard dialect is not the dialect of their nurture or community (but see Chapter 3 and the Appendix). Most of these issues will be treated more thoroughly in the forthcoming sequel, tentatively titled *Lessons to Share: Teaching Grammar in Context*.

In writing this text, I originally thought that whenever I used grammatical terms, I would define them and give examples. Thus, for instance, Chapter 3 includes definitions of the terms I think most important to teach, and Chapter 5 includes some terms used in the examples to clarify research studies described. However, defining or exemplifying every term proved impractical, so I settled for defining a few in the text itself and, in the Glossary, defining and illustrating these terms and others that were used prominently in the book. Fortunately, though, I don't think readers of this book need to have a strong background in grammar to grasp my major points. While a strong grammar background will enable readers to follow the details of an argument, the essence of the arguments should typically be clear without that background.

Thanks go to those in my Grammar and Teaching Grammar class who have shared their work and their ideas, particularly Dan Baker, Dan Cupery, and Jane Kiel; to classroom teachers who have shared materials, particularly Amy Berryhill, Lisbeth Bond, Renée Callies, Scott Peterson, Christina Travis, Susie Veeder, Sarah Woltjer-Bollow, and Grace Vento-Zogby; to Dorothy Strickland of Rutgers University for her contribution to Chapter 6; and to my longtime friend Rosemary Monkhouse Beaman, for her prompt help with research. In general, I want to thank those in the Grammar and Teaching Grammar class who have forced me to rethink issues and thereby taught me as much as I have taught them. Thanks go especially to all of those who have contributed samples of their drawing and/or writing, from kindergartners to adults. I am particularly indebted also to my colleague and friend Ellen Brinkley for reading and commenting on most of the chapters herein—though of course the book's shortcomings remain my responsibility.

Scott Mahler, Associate Editorial Director of Heinemann–Boynton/Cook, has been invaluable as a critic and supporter in the final stages of preparing the manuscript. Thanks go also to Alice Cheyer for her dedication and thoroughness in editing the manuscript and to Melissa Inglis for her expert handling of the book's production.

As always, though, my greatest appreciation goes to my son, John, and to my partner, Rolland. They offer unfailing support for my work and bring joy to my daily life.

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Grammar and the Teaching of Grammar

An Introduction

At the outset it seems sensible to consider various meanings attached to the term *grammar* and something of the history of grammar texts and the teaching of grammar. That is the purpose of this introductory chapter.

The Meanings of *Grammar*

When teachers are invited to brainstorm what the term *grammar* means to them, they commonly produce a list such as this:

- Parts of speech (elements or categories)
- Syntactic structures (phrases, clauses, sentence types; roles of elements within larger structures)
- "Correct" sentence structure (subject-verb agreement and such)
- "Correct" punctuation and other aspects of mechanics
- Appropriate usage (often thought of as "standard" or educated forms)
- Sentence sense; style (appropriate and effective use of syntactic options; ability to manipulate syntactic elements)

The first two of these, parts of speech and syntactic structures, are part of what one might call a description of how different kinds of words in a language combine into grammatical structures, or *syntax*. Thus one definition of *grammar* would be "a description of the syntax of a language," or an explanation of its syntax (a theory of language structure). The next three items, dealing with correctness and appropriateness, clearly involve pre-

scriptions of how to use language. Thus another meaning of *grammar* is “a set of prescriptions or rules for using language.” Still another meaning deals with sentence sense and style: for instance, the construction of clear, readable sentences, and the deliberate use of syntactic constructions for particular effects. The latter might be defined as “the rhetorically effective use of syntactic structures,” or in other words suiting syntax to such things as the meaning, audience, genre, voice, and intended pace of a text. All three kinds of *grammar*—but especially the descriptive and prescriptive—are commonly found in the grammar books used in schools, such as *Warriner’s High School Handbook* (1992), an offspring of the long-lived *Warriner’s English Grammar and Composition* series (1986; first edition, 1951). For related treatments of the various meanings of grammar, see Hartwell (1985) and Francis (1954).

Most teachers conceptualize grammar as descriptions of the structure of a language, prescriptions for its use, perhaps as sentence sense or style, and as the kind of books designed for teaching all these. However, relatively few teachers have realized that underlying these four senses of *grammar* is a more fundamental one: the unconscious command of syntax that enables us to understand and speak the language. Even toddlers use grammatical constructions that are reductions and precursors of the mature syntax they will gradually acquire. In this most fundamental sense, then, we do not need to teach grammar at all: the grammar of our native language is part of what we learn in acquiring that language. Furthermore, non-native speakers of a language can acquire the language in much the same way as native speakers, given similar kinds of opportunities to hear, use, read, and write the language. These topics are addressed in subsequent chapters.

For now, suffice it to say that there are four major senses of *grammar* that will concern us in this book:

- Grammar as a description of syntactic structure
- Grammar as prescriptions for how to use structures and words
- Grammar as rhetorically effective use of syntactic structures
- Grammar as the functional command of sentence structure that enables us to comprehend and produce language

Chapter 2 introduces some of the reasons commonly given for direct teaching of grammar as a system and a set of rules for language use: the descriptions and prescriptions found in school grammar texts. First, however, we consider the historical context from which these reasons have arisen.

Traditional School Grammar in a Historical Perspective

During previous centuries, traditional school grammar seems to have had two primary aims: (1) disciplining and training the mind (and sometimes the soul); and (2) teaching grammatical forms and word usages that were considered correct or socially prestigious. Ostensibly the socially prestigious forms were taught to enable the lower classes to move more readily into the middle class (or the middle classes into the upper class), but one suspects that in effect if not intent, the result has more often been to offer the middle and upper classes an excuse for considering themselves superior to others (e.g., Noguchi, 1991, p. 114).

In any case, the teaching of grammar to schoolboys dates back to Greece in the second century B.C. Prior to that, Aristotle and the Stoics regarded grammar as a means of understanding language, but language as a product of humans' nature and therefore, "like man's other attributes, subject to anomalies inexplicable within any strict system of grammar" (Huntsman, 1983, p. 61). However, the Alexandrian grammarians seem to have assumed that language once reflected reality. In a sense, their early grammars were attempts to recover that reality by imposing order on language, especially the language of the centuries-old texts they were trying to understand (Huntsman, p. 61). In our schools, the Alexandrian tradition has dominated the study of grammar for more than two thousand years.

The first grammar text, published by Dionysios of Thrace late in the second century B.C., became the standard for Greek schoolboys until the twelfth century A.D. It also became the basis for Latin grammars, such as the grammars of Donatus in the fourth century A.D. and of Priscian in the sixth century. Their works "dominated school grammar study throughout the Middle Ages to the Renaissance" (Hillocks and Smith, 1991, p. 592).

During the Middle Ages, the concept of grammar as training the mind reached a peak. Grammar became the chief subject of the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic), studied intensively because it was considered the foundation of all knowledge. Indeed, grammar was considered the gateway to sacred knowledge as well as secular; it was the prerequisite for understanding theology and philosophy as well as literature. Considered the basis for all liberal learning, "grammar was thought to discipline the mind and the soul at the same time" (Huntsman, 1983, p. 59). At that time, the major task of the religious cleric (clergyman) was to use the arts, especially

grammar, “to disclose the hidden mysteries of Scripture.” Also, Christians thought that grammar would enable them to examine “valid processes of reasoning, the operations of the mind itself” (Morrison, 1983, p. 39). Perhaps it is no wonder that until the late 1960s and early 1970s, Great Britain had what they called “grammar” schools for the highest achieving secondary-level students. Indeed, such elitist schools still survive in a few school districts, even today.

In the eighteenth century, as the Industrial Revolution created a new middle class, traditional school grammar books of English became more numerous and more important. Mastering the grammar books’ prescriptions helped the nouveau riche gain social acceptance. But even more than before, the eighteenth-century English grammar books were based upon the early Latin grammars and the structure of Latin. For example, English nouns were described as having the same cases as Latin nouns, though in fact English had already lost most of its distinctive inflectional endings for nouns and verbs. Users of the language were admonished to avoid splitting an infinitive (e.g., to avoid saying “to boldly go”) because infinitives are single words in Latin. In other words, the eighteenth-century English grammarians concluded that because Latin infinitives cannot be split (e.g., *amare*, ‘to love’), English infinitives should not be split. Their prescriptions for English were based on descriptions of Latin, even where these were irrelevant to English. So it was, too, with the prescription against ending a sentence with a preposition: this literally *can’t* be done in Latin so, the eighteenth-century grammarians reasoned, it *shouldn’t* be done in English. This recourse to the structure of Latin reflected the belief that languages like English and German and French and Spanish were “corruptions” of Latin, which was thought to provide a purer standard, a more accurate reflection of thought and reality.

There were, of course, dissenting voices, even in ancient Rome, such as that of the orator and rhetorician Quintilian. True, in support of tradition, Quintilian did describe in his *Institutes of Oratory* essentially the same parts of speech named by the earlier Greek grammarians, and Quintilian did believe that one major concern of the grammarian should be “rules for correctness” (*Institutes*, I.v.1). However, he also believed that standards for usage should be based upon the current usage of the educated, not upon ancient authority that has ceased to govern the speech of learned individuals (I.vi.43–45).

This insight from the first century A.D. remains unappreciated even today, because the explanations and prescriptions of the eighteenth-century English grammarians (and the Latin grammarians before them) continue to

form the backbone of grammar texts. In the last hundred years, the structure of the English language has come to be much better understood by scholarly grammarians and by linguists—that is, by scholars who have attempted to study language scientifically, and to study how language is actually used by people. But the grammar textbooks have not changed much to reflect this new knowledge about the language itself and how it is used. Indeed, grammar texts still include attention to spelling and to word meanings and choices, as did the texts of the classical grammarians (Huntsman, 1983, pp. 58–59).

An excursion into the nature and rationale of grammar texts and teaching in the United States sheds further light not only on the purposes but on the methods of instruction.

From relatively early times, English grammar has been one of the “basics” taught in U.S. schools. For instance, the Massachusetts legislature passed in 1789 a law requiring schools to provide instruction in “orthography [spelling], reading, writing, grammar, English language, arithmetic, and decent behavior” (Woods, 1986, p. 5).

During the first half of the nineteenth century, what counted as learning grammar was mainly the memorization and recitation of “definitions, rules, paradigms, examples, and other grammatical features” (Woods, p. 7). Once these were committed to memory, supposedly the student would then be able to apply them. Theoretically, students would learn to apply the rules with ease by parsing sentences: identifying the parts of speech of the words “and specifying their case, gender, number, tense, or person in a given sentence” (Woods, p. 18, fn. 2). In addition to promoting application of grammatical concepts, the activities of memorizing, reciting, and parsing were thought to train the mind, to promote mental discipline. Until the period from 1825 to 1830, grammarians of English gave little or no evidence of being concerned that students actually *understand* the grammatical information they were required to memorize and recite (Woods, p. 8).

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the introduction of exercises into the grammar texts, on the grounds that students needed to be active in their own learning. These exercises included activities like answering questions, writing sentences to exemplify certain kinds of grammatical functions and constructions, and sometimes rearranging or combining sentences. Indeed, descriptions of the contents of such grammar texts sound very much like what we find offered as learning aids in the grammar texts of today. That is, the texts allowed for limited production of language, in addition to requiring analysis.

The emphasis on grammar as a reflection of thought took on renewed

importance in the later 1800s. Woods (1986, p. 18) nicely summarizes this trend as follows:

[Samuel] Greene's [1874] intricate sentence analysis had been meant as a way of showing students how "to look directly through the expression to the thought" (as a logician must). Similarly, the pedagogy of diagramming, which characterized the next generation of texts after Greene's, is defended by Reed and Kellogg (*Higher Lessons in English*, 1872) as a method that teaches students "to look through the literary order and discover the logical order" for "[i]t is only by the aid of such a map, or picture, that the pupil can, at a single view, see the sentence as an organic whole" [Reed and Kellogg, 1909, p. 8]. Naturally, the exercises in diagramming, like those in analysis and construction, were validated by that noblest stamp of nineteenth-century theory, mental discipline: "To study thought through its outward form, the sentence, and to discover the fitness of the different parts of the expression to the different parts of the thought is to learn to think" [Reed and Kellogg, p. 7].

By the end of the nineteenth century, grammar came to be considered a means of improving writing. Even in that context, however, grammar was considered a form of mental discipline and a means of social refinement (Woods, 1986, p. 18).

Recently the twentieth century has seen a shift away from the emphasis on grammar as mental discipline and a shift toward even more emphasis on grammar as a means of improving writing. However, the descriptions of the eighteenth-century grammarians and the teaching methods of the latter half of the nineteenth century persisted into the twentieth century (H. L. Smith, 1946) and are still very much with us. Indeed, Thomas and Kintgen (1974) note with dismay that "The school-grammars totally ignore many of the important facts that we have learned about language in the last 150 years" (p. 13), and Hillocks and Smith (1991) note that today's school grammars still reflect the early Greeks' emphasis on grammatical paradigms and their belief that "right" grammatical forms are discoverable. "Over two thousand years later these are still with us," they lament (p. 591).

In Chapter 2, we consider some of the reasons commonly offered today for teaching grammar as a formal discipline, a system of descriptions and prescriptive rules that, in fact, are not always accurate or helpful. We then consider the research evidence that militates against the pragmatic justification for teaching grammar. After considering other relevant kinds of research in Chapters 3–5, we consider in Chapter 6 an emerging research base that points toward more fruitful ways of teaching selected aspects of grammar.