

Let's Stop Diagramming Sentences

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It's a fantastic thing that so many teachers in the last half of the 20th century go on teaching students the eight parts of speech, diagramming and parsing sentences. Of course, it's done to teach students to write and speak correctly and effectively. Research clearly rejects this notion.

The 1960 Encyclopedia of Educational Research in its section on English (page 462) says, "Summaries of research in the teaching of language have consistently concluded that there is no shred of evidence to substantiate the continued emphasis on grammar so prevalent in the classrooms." In the context of this article and these studies, grammar does not refer to usage instruction, capitalization or punctuation but to nomenclature drills (eight parts of speech), diagramming and parsing sentences. I share the belief of others that capitalization, punctuation and usage can be taught without reference to formal grammatical terminology. Ingrid Strom, writing in the 1960 monograph Research in Grammar and Usage and Its Implications for Writing, states after a review of 77 studies that a knowledge of grammar or the ability to parse sentences is not necessary, nor is it helpful, in teaching children to express themselves clearly or correctly either orally or in writing.

Considering the above, isn't it preposterous that we continue these dry-as-dust exercises that make our English classrooms so remote from the world? The excuse that it's in the English book isn't valid because publishers write the books to reflect what teachers are doing. They don't see their business as that of pioneering new methods. They'd gladly introduce new techniques if it sold more copies. The argument that we have to teach grammar so the student will know it for the next grade doesn't hold water at all, as the knowledge is useless to begin with. Someone has to break it off. The argument that parents want grammar taught doesn't mean much. Enlighten parents. After all, when doctors changed the period of bed rest after an appendectomy from ten days to four, we had to go along with it. They were the experts in that matter. The argument that it is needed for learning foreign languages is invalid. Language teachers teach what few terms are needed rather easily on the spot. They have to; students seem to forget what grammar they were taught while walking from English to the foreign language room. These same comments apply to the new grammar and its heavy emphasis on analyzing the written word.

Is it any wonder people complain that kids can't write or speak well, having spent so much on useless grammar drills? Any business that refused to change archaic production methods and continued to produce a product that drew complaints would soon be bankrupt. Because so many classes persist in these useless little grammar drills, one might wonder if English teachers aren't about the least perceptive and the most obdurate people in existence.

It isn't that we've merely been inefficient. Not only must we plead guilty to anachronistic methods, we must also stand condemned for the things we've failed to do. Think what students in any former class might have become had we replaced those 300 or more hours spent on formal grammar with useful, relevant activities. In 300 hours they could have written, proofread and corrected at least 18,000 words or about 150 short papers which, in fact, would have improved their writing proficiency. Many authors have suggested how teachers can handle numerous short writing assignments without mountains of teacher homework. The writing laboratory is one idea.

In 300 hours they might have given 3000 short speeches, including evaluation and suggestions for improvement, or about 100 per student in classes of thirty. In 100 speeches one could greatly improve speaking ability and all-around poise and confidence. In the other 1050 effective hours left from grades 4-12 in English there would be time to pursue other English goals that are significant for living.

Most likely you know colleagues who still have their students parse sentences. Tell them to stop. It's possible that even new teachers teach the eight parts of speech. This is not because they were trained in college to do so; no real authorities in the field are that far behind. They teach not as they were taught to teach but as they were taught back in school where they probably enjoyed it.

That's why they became English teachers. Tell them to stop it. Tell them to read material in their own field. They were hired because they were trained in their field and would be expected to keep up. As educated persons they are expected to read widely, to study on their own--in short, to keep on learning. After all, they hope their own students will go on reading after graduation. Tell them this role is for English teachers, too.

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