Debunking Some Myths About Traditional Grammar

by
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Learning traditional grammar has been part of coming of age in America. Our parents had to study it, we had to study it, and now, as teachers of English, we struggle with how to teach it . . . or whether to teach it. Well-meaninged parents and administrators tell us that grammar is good for our students. However, even though research has told us for over fifty years that traditional grammar does not help with reading or writing or thinking, fifty years' worth of students have spent a good deal of their time in English classes from grades two to twelve studying grammar. This article will examine the myths that have supported the teaching of the rule/exercise approach to grammar.

When strictly used, the term "grammar" refers to the set of rules that deal with the form and function of words and their arrangement of meaningful order, but the word "grammar" has also come to refer to the isolated study of usage, mechanics, punctuation, and even occasionally spelling. In short, it is often seen as anything in that little book of "basics" which accompanies the literature anthology under the arm of the student bound for the English classroom.

Experts in educational research tell us that there is a fifty-year lag between the publication of research and its implementation in the classroom (Lehmann and Mehrens, 1979). Clearly it is time to "re-view" the well-entrenched myths that have sprung up about traditional grammar and to debunk them. The fifty years are up.

Myth #1: *That traditional grammar is an accurate description of standard English.*

Grammars are attempts to describe the structure of language. The problem with our "traditional" grammar is that it has evolved out of the 18th century neoclassicists' attempt to glorify our language by perceiving within it a Latin structure. Crunching the English language into the Latin structure was like crunching a foot into an ill-fitting shoe. It has not been a good fit. Yet to the neoclassicists (who all knew and revered Latin), language was a divine inspiration, originally perfect, but debased by man (Postman and Weingartner, 1969). They implemented the crunch so that English might absorb some of the linguistic purity with which Latin and Greek were imbued. In his book written in 1762, *The Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762), Robert Lowth outlawed the double negatives that kept popping out of the Latin overlay on the English sentence. At the time, a rising middle class in search of respect and status were only too willing to use language as a mode to get that status. Their children were trained in Lowth's English even though it was not characteristic of even the upper class at the time.

Language has remained a tool for the perpetuation of social class ever since. The irony is that Priestly (the discoverer of oxygen) surveyed the language of the English people to find that from royal to peasants, every social class used double negatives (Priestly, 1768). Writers from Chaucer to Shakespeare used double negatives as well. Now standard English has exorcised the double negative in formal written text, but other structures that Lowth would have fainted over have crept back into acceptable speech and in many cases into acceptable writing. For example, split infinitives and end-of-the-sentence prepositions (both of which were outlawed by Dryden because they didn't occur in the Latin sentence) have reappeared (Postman and Weingartner, 1966).

That traditional grammar is an inaccurate description of the English language should give us some impetus to look at some other myths that claim that the teaching of grammar in the traditional manner has an effect on our use of language or on the use of our minds.

Myth #2: *That learning grammar disciplines the mind.*

There is no research that has proven that grammar disciplines the mind. Hoyt found no correlation between the study of grammar and the ability to think logically (Sherwin, 1969). In some ways, grammar is confusing instead of clarifying (Hillock, 1986). Once a student has identified the grammatical pattern to be learned, thinking can become rote. Take, for example, the s-v-i.o.-d.o. pattern. If you give a student twenty sentences with this pattern, thinking can become automatic. There may be an original insight, but getting students to internalize the insight seems to fail; hence, the necessity to repeat instruction year after year. Conscious knowledge of what students already know and use unconsciously early in life may not seem relevant or important to the child or adolescent.

Many grammatical concepts are in the abstract, making thinking very difficult for students who are not developmentally ready. In addition, some of the definitions we ask students to understand are not very logical. The definition of a pronoun is "a word that takes the place of a noun." The word "boy" is a noun and not a pronoun. Even the definition of a sentence is confusing: A sentence is a group of words containing a subject and a verb and expressing a complete thought. What is a complete thought? What may be a "complete thought" to one person may not be to another. Children tend to punctuate by complete thoughts rather than by structural completeness until they have read or written to internalize sentence patterns. They have difficulty in seeing the run-ons and fragments that occur in their complete thoughts. They have no difficulty, however, in finding fragments in our best authors who use them to futher their craft.

We also have to come to some informed perspectives. What's more important: determining whether a prepositional phrase is adjectival or adverbial or writing about how *Huckleberry Finn* reflects life? If we want students to use higher order thinking skills, then they need to read literature, interpret it, and write about it. Students are often excited about searching for meaning in reading and creating meaning in writing before they are ready to make adjectival and adverbial distinctions.

Myth #3: *That grammar is best learned deductively, from rule to examples.*

For some years now linguists have studied the way that children acquire language. Children listen to the language around them and learn to speak by a process of unconsciously building a rule system from the examples of language presented to them. This is an inductive process. "Students need to develop good intuitive sense of grammar, but they can do this best through indirect rather that direct instruction" (Weaver, 1979, p. 5). Correction doesn't affect their language acquisition, though some take it to heart emotionally. Children persist in incorrect forms until they have accumulated enough instances and maturation to figure the rules out for themselves (Moskowitz, 1982). Knowing that the human mind learns concepts more effectively in an inductive manner brings to question our pedagogical strategy in teaching grammar—from rule to example to exercise. Children learn their language from home as well as from their peers. If children learn nonstandard grammar and usage at home (their home dialect), it is difficult to eradicate that grammar by "grammar instruction" of rule and example and exercise at school (Cleary, 1988). Time would be better spent if students read and wrote extensively. They would begin to make inductive distinctions between oral and written language and to develop sentence and story sense.

Myth #4: *That learning grammar helps with the study of a foreign language.*

For years foreign language teachers have told us that students need to know English grammar before they can learn another language. It is embarrassing and frustrating when we are asked if we teach grammar when we know that our students have studied grammar from grade two to twelve. Not only does it simply not stick, but it doesn't transfer. There are several reasons for lack of transfer. English grammar is unlike other grammars in that it is structured on word order while many languages are based on inflection. Thus, syntactic structure in English may be quite different from those in other languages. Knowing grammatical terminology does not increase a student's proficiency in learning another language. What may be defined as an adjective in one language may be a noun in another. And except for a few pronouns, English does not have grammatical gender; other languages do.

In the last decade or so, grammar has been a sticky issue with foreign language teachers. They're in the same quandry as English teachers: should grammar (not English but that of the language being taught) be taught at all? Their argument is that if the goal of learning a language is proficiency in communication, why spend time on teaching grammar? Time would better be spent on expression and meaning. Their contention is that students can become proficient users of language without memorizing grammatical rules (Garrett, 1986). The same holds true for English, as our first graders come to school with an almost fully developed grammar system.

Actually, foreign language teachers perform an important service for our students of the English language that we as English teachers have difficulty doing in isolation. Instead of English grammar helping with the study of foreign language, quite the opposite is true. Many of us have had the experience of finally making sense of English grammar when we study a foreign language. It is in comparision that the structures of our own language become clear.

Myth #5: *That the study of grammar improves reading and helps with the interpretation of literature.*

No evidence supports this conclusion. If anything, the reverse is true. As previously stated, the act of reading itself fosters the understanding of the structure of language as grammar exercises never will do. Recent research refers to communicative competence, the unconscious knowledge about the structure and function of language, including meaning, structure, and sound. By the time students enter school when they are five or six, they have a great fund of unconscious knowledge about the spoken language and use it rather well. Whatever is not developed will grow systematically as they learn to read and write. Through reading, these youngsters pick up a lot of information on story grammar or genre schemes (the conventional organization of a particular story or genre, e.g. setting, plot, resolution), the beginning steps in understanding literary elements (Pearson, 1978).

Current practice in reading instruction emphasizes comprehension strategies such as story mapping, clustering, webbing, prereading writing, all of which lead to the understanding of literature and give students experience with sentence structure that models further complexity year by year. Futhermore, research also indicates that preschoolers who write (scribbles, invented spellings, etc.) have a rather sophisticated knowledge of language, especially sound. This might be one of the most important steps in learning how to read. Researchers are also telling us that students who write become betters readers, and readers who write, become better writers (Weaver, 1979; Graves, 1983). This holds true for the first grader as well as for the senior. In short, if we want to improve reading instruction and literary interpretation, we must have our students read and write daily. Not only will comprehension and interpretation be improved, but students will also learn the structure of language.

Myth #6: *That the learning of traditional grammar improves spoken and written expression.*

Since the turn of the century, studies consistently and emphatically have shown that there is not a direct correlation between the knowledge of grammar and writing competency. There is a correlation between the amount of exposure to literature and writing, and between oral and written communication. Recent literature in the field cite a number of studies [Harris (1962), Elley (1976)] to support this conclusion. Ingrid Strom (1960), after reviewing over fifty studies, concluded that writing is a far better way of teaching sentence structure, usage, punctuation, and other such elements than are activities such as identifying the parts of speech, diagramming, and memorizing rules (Hartwell, 1985). More research needs to be done to investigate the effects of the functional teaching of grammatical concepts, usage, and mechanics—the folding of language instruction into writing instruction.

Students enter school with syntactic structure nearly intact. Most so-called grammar problems are really usage problems (problems in dialect difference); and writing problems usually deal with usage, mechanics, and organization, or with a student's lack of confidence in having something to say. If students show a lack of growth in writing,

it is probably because they have had little opportunity to write (Cleary,1988). Ironically, it is usually the least successful students who are most often involved in the isolated drills that become roadblocks to good writing.

The hours of remedial exercises that these students do often keep them from becoming fluent in the other language arts and may contribute to a feeling of low self-esteem as students (Cleary, 1988). If, however, instruction in usage is folded into writing instruction, students can formally compare the difference between their home dialect and standard English and can begin to express themselves in both dialects, learning which dialect to use for which audience.

If we want students to become better writers, we need to have them read and write daily, avoiding countless and futile hours of labeling sentences. Students need to create sentences, not tear them apart; it is in these generative activities that they come to an intuitive sense of language. Patrick Hartwell poignantly notes that if knowing grammar makes better writers, then linguists and grammarians would be our best writers, and, he adds, "I can certify that they are, on the whole, not" (Hartwell, 1985 p.115). Studies reviewed by Hillocks (1986) indicate that exercises in sentence combining and sentence construction are the only exercises that have beneficial effect on syntactic maturity. It is not known, however, how lasting the effects are.

Myth #7: *That grammar instruction raises SAT scores.*

The verbal section of the SAT is primarily a test of a student's vocabulary and reading comprehension. Parts of speech and parts of the sentence are not tested. The SAT verbal areas include antonyms, analogies, sentence completion (based on vocabulary and sentence sense), and reading comprehension. If we wish to help students perform well on the SAT, then we need to give them many and varied experiences in literature and vocabulary development. It should also be noted that most standardized achievement tests focus on usage, mechanics, spelling, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and knowledge pertaining to composition. It has long been shown that students who read and write often excel on these tests. Time taken away from reading and writing for formal grammar instruction will work to the detriment of students' test scores.

In Conclusion

It's time to take another look at what we really want our students to know. More time is spent in our schools from grades seven to twelve on grammar instruction than on any other English instruction. Many researchers think this is why the time spent on grammar instruction is inversely proportional to progress in writing. While students are spending time on grammar drills and exercises, they are not learning to write by writing or reading. Moreover, students in many schools receive a large dosage of grammar from grade two on. Each fall they come to school with an excitement and eagerness to learn; but each fall we start them out with the same definitions: A noun is the name of a person, place, or thing. This boring repetition year after year shows negligible results; yet, traditional grammar still has a prominent place in the curriculum. By the tenth

grade students are still identifying the parts of speech and many still fail tests on them. That in itself should indicate the futility of long term instruction on traditional grammar.

With some of the myths about the teaching of traditional grammar debunked, we can get a clearer picture of how grammar study, or more broadly, language study, should be taught in our schools. Does this mean that attention should no longer be given to the parts and order of the English sentence? No. Knowing the names of the parts of speech (and the parts of a sentence) provides both the student and the teacher with common terminology. Students need these terms for car parts to discuss the adjustment of a carburetor with the owner. More importantly, if the students talk about their writing with other students and the teacher, the students will remember these terms, and they will not have to learn them over every year.

Broader language study, the study of grammar, usage, and mechanics, can be taught with positive results in connection with writing or in mini-lessons right before a writing assignment, for it is in students' own writing that they can see their dialect differences and can consider why it might be economically beneficial to acquire a more standard form. Students should be and can be taught to value their personal language and also be able to vary that language for different audiences. Studying problems that occur frequently in a classroom may alert students to become sensitive to those errors/problems when reading their own or their peers' papers. By eleventh or twelfth grade most students are developmentally ready to rediscover language in all its complexity, and to be challenged by "the tantalizing problems that language has always posed for those who are puzzled and intrigued by the mysteries of human intelligence" (Chomsky, 1982, p. 84). If they haven't been inundated with "grammar" study previously, they are curious and eager. Phrase structure rules, transformational syntax, morphology, phonology, phonetics, and semantics can be fascinating to the student who wants such knowledge. It is also clear that prospective teachers of English must have a thorough understanding of their language to help their students use language effectively (Weaver, 1979).

Debunking some of the myths that surround the teaching of traditional grammar is important so that we, as teachers of English, can consider what to do for our students. The teaching and learning of traditional grammar from grade two through twelve no longer need to be a hurdle for us as teachers or for our students. Our task must be to educate parents and administrators who haven't had the benefit of a close understanding of the research that has been fifty years in the making. It is exciting to see that curriculum guidelines from the State of Minnesota Department of Education are beginning to have some effect on district curriculums, and that inservice teacher training and writing projects in Minnesota are making important steps towards the change that is over fifty years in coming. . . and several years overdue.

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