

2012

# Incorporating effective grammar instruction into the classroom

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## Recommended Citation

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INCORPORATING EFFECTIVE GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION INTO THE  
CLASSROOM

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors with Distinction

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December 2012

## “Incorporating Effective Grammar Instruction into the Classroom”

### I. Introduction

The debate about the effectiveness of traditional grammar instruction has been ongoing for many decades now. Traditional grammar instruction involves memorization of grammatical rules and practice exercise drills. As early as 1936, the Curriculum Commission of the National Council of Teachers of English stated that “all teaching of grammar separate from the manipulation of sentences [should] be discontinued...since every scientific attempt to prove that knowledge of grammar is useful has failed” (Weaver, *Teaching* 9). So why is grammar still being taught in the same way-through traditional direct instruction-in many schools? It is because some parents, administrators, politicians, researchers, and teachers wholeheartedly believe that students will learn grammar best through direct instruction, lectures, textbooks, and worksheets of practice exercises, with grammar totally removed from a relevant context. Conversely, other researchers and teachers believe that students learn grammar best by situating grammar instruction in the context of reading and writing, and these researchers and teachers have controlled studies and a body of literature on their side. Immersing students in authentic reading and writing activities, using mini-lessons to teach grammatical concepts, and showing applied grammatical concepts in real life leads to better student writing. Teachers must also focus on the individual writing needs of their students and stop seeing grammar instruction as a hunt for errors. Many prominent teachers in the field of English have designed effective lesson plans that teach grammar in this way. Students will be more motivated to write and will become better writers if grammar is taught in an incorporated setting.

## II. Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze some common reasons why direct grammar instruction is not effective at the middle school and high school levels. Additionally, this thesis will explore diverse grammar instructional strategies and discuss why these strategies have been effective or ineffective. This thesis will also seek to explain why incorporated grammar instruction is much more effective in the retention of grammar-related learning, and propose some possible lesson plans that will incorporate grammar instruction into content-related materials.

## III. Central Themes to Be Addressed

There will be three central themes addressed in this thesis:

1. Analysis of the literature demonstrating the ineffectiveness of direct grammar instruction upon writing at middle and high school levels;
2. Analysis of the literature demonstrating reasons that certain grammar instructional strategies have been effective or ineffective;
3. Benefits of incorporating grammar instruction into authentic reading and writing activities.

## IV. Research Methods

In researching this topic, the National Council of Teachers of English online journals *College Composition and Communication* and *English Journal* were very helpful. I then pulled articles from certain issues that I thought would be relevant to my research. Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, Rebecca Bowers Sipe's *They Still Can't Spell?*, and Constance

Weaver's *Teaching Grammar in Context* and *Lessons to Share* were also very valuable resources. I read and analyzed what each author had to say, highlighting and marking important points, and included relevant findings in the Literature Review section of this thesis.

## **V. Literature Review**

A wide variety of topics were covered in the literature over the general topic of grammar instruction. Traditional grammar instruction's characteristics, how children learn language, how grammar should be taught, teaching remedial writers, how to deal with student errors, spelling, and strategies for teaching grammar effectively will all be covered in this literature review.

### **Traditional Grammar Instruction**

According to Weaver, throughout centuries of schooling, traditional grammar instruction seems to have had two main goals: "(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" (*Teaching* 3). Grammar was learned through the "memorization and recitation of definitions, rules, paradigms, examples, and other grammatical features...once these were committed to memory, supposedly the student would then be able to apply them" (*Teaching* 5). Traditional grammar instruction also involved "pages of skill and drill practice" (Petruzzella 69). The grammarians who taught in this way "gave little or no evidence of being concerned that students actually *understand* the grammatical information they were required to memorize and recite" (Weaver, *Teaching* 5). In other words, students had to learn grammar for the sake of mental discipline, not actual understanding of the English language or for improving their own writing.

Hartwell considers a discussion about grammar by W. Nelson Francis and proposes that there are five different meanings of “grammar”:

Grammar 1: “the set of formal patterns in which the words of a language are arranged in order to convey larger meanings” (Hartwell 109). Grammar 1 is the rules of writing that are in our heads, but that we cannot necessarily access or explain.

Grammar 2: the formal grammar rules that are associated with linguistic science, sometimes called “descriptive grammar” (109).

Grammar 3: common usage, or “linguistic etiquette” (109). Grammar 3 changes based on the appropriate level of speaking for the situation.

Grammar 4: school grammar, otherwise known as “prescriptive grammar” (109). Many times, this grammar is influenced by individual teacher preferences.

Grammar 5: “stylistic grammar, ... grammatical terms used in the interest of teaching prose style” (110).

Grammar 1, Grammar 3, and Grammar 5 all seem to have a place in the classroom.

Grammar 1 is impossible to banish from our minds, and so influences our writing skills.

Students need to be taught linguistic etiquette (Grammar 3) in order to know how to effectively communicate in the world. Students also need to learn Grammar 5 in order to be able to add variety to their writing. Conversely, Hartwell believes that Grammar 2 and Grammar 4 are of little practical interest in the classroom. In fact, “experiments have shown that providing subjects with formal rules...remarkably degrades performance” (117). Rules can degrade performance, because, as Mina Shaughnessy says: “when learners move into uncertain territory, they tend to go by the ‘rules,’ even where the rules lead them to produce forms that sound completely wrong” (99). Students may have learned the rules wrong or may be applying a rule

to an irregular pattern that does not fit the rule. In addition, many grammatical rules “are not rules that adults typically know or teach” (Weaver, *Teaching* 38). Instead, rules should be taught as generalizations (Gribbin 56). If students know that a grammatical concept is generally a certain way, but not always, then they will be more flexible in applying it to their writing, and will be more willing to follow their intuitive sense of the language when presented with a challenge.

### **Learning Language**

Kiel believes that there are four components that operate together to allow children to learn their native language: “an innate cognitive ability, or capacity, to learn, recreate, and create language; the physical development necessary to produce speech; a need to communicate, and a language rich environment” (Weaver, *Lessons* 1-2). Children do not need to learn the rules of English in order to be able to speak the English language, because “children acquire the grammar of their language without direct instruction” (Weaver, *Teaching* 38). If children are not directly taught language, then why should teachers directly teach grammar? Kiel states that “by the time they reach school age, children will have relatively sophisticated arsenals of grammar and syntax rules under which they are operating” (Weaver, *Lessons* 7). This knowledge is developed just by listening, trying, and adjusting. They can speak the language quite fluently, so they understand how the language works. In order for English teachers to get some sense of this vast, complex, unconscious knowledge that is behind the everyday language of their students, Murdick claims that it is helpful to do some research on generative grammar (40).

Teaching children grammatical rules may cause them to doubt their intuitive knowledge of the language. Teachers need to understand that grammatical rules, which were developed by

linguists, do not accurately reflect the process by which sentences are formed in someone's mind (Murdick 40). Because language is learned naturally, many researchers believe that acquiring grammatical knowledge naturally and authentically is also best (Skretta 66). A way to present grammar naturally and authentically is to situate it in the context of reading and writing.

Contextual learning is so crucial because, developmentally, "middle school children will just be beginning to analyze abstractions" (Small 177). This means that middle school students will not be able to grasp grammatical concepts taught traditionally because grammatical concepts are taught in this way as abstractions. Many high school students cannot grasp these abstractions either. These students are simply not cognitively developed enough yet to learn the material in this way. This is one reason why traditional grammar instruction does not belong in the middle school and high school classrooms.

Brian Cambourne developed a model of literacy learning which I believe can also apply to students learning grammatical concepts and improving their writing:



## Cambourne's Conditions of Learning: A Model of Learning as it Applies to Literacy

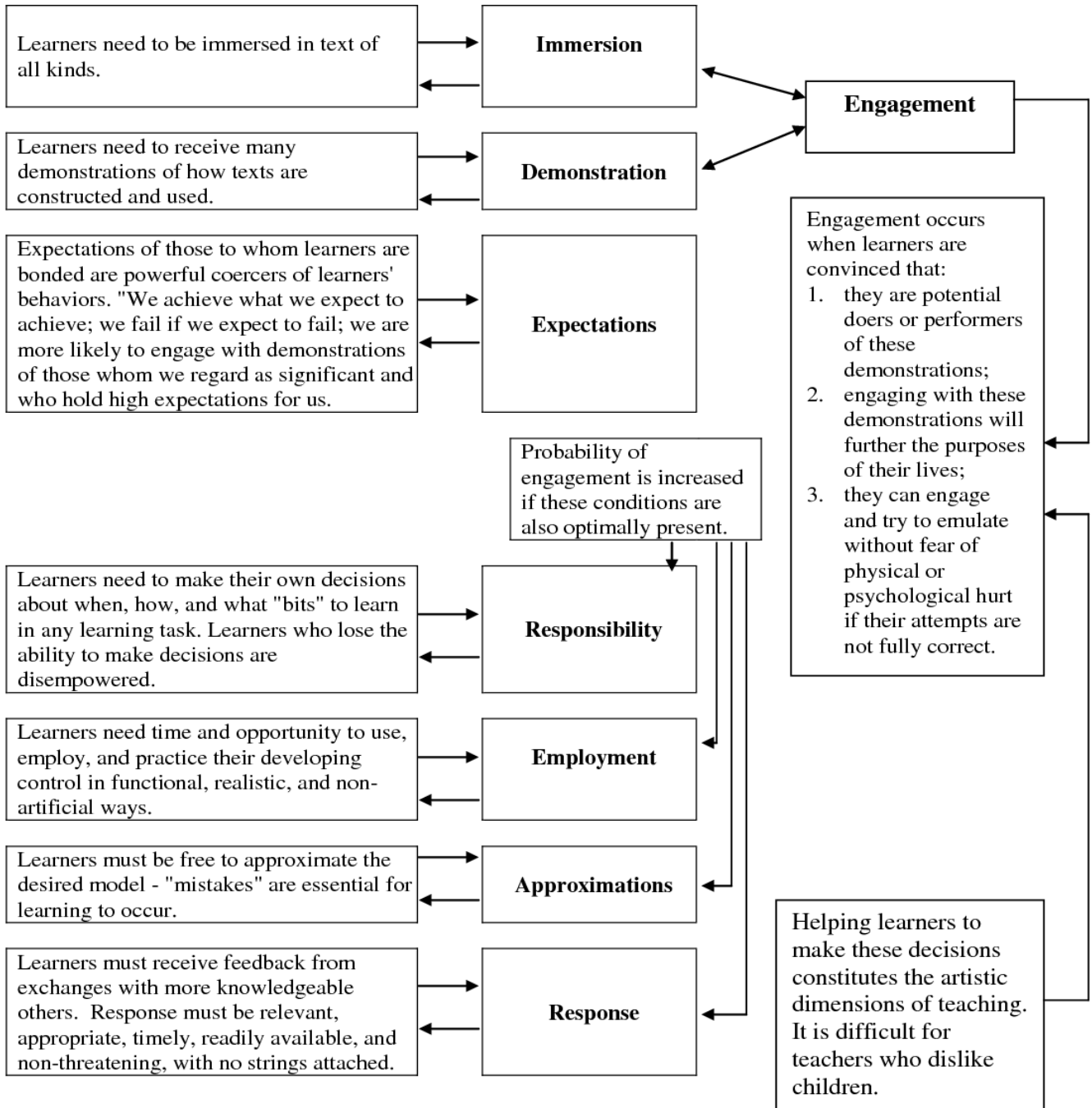


Figure 1

From: Cambourne, Brian. (1995) "Toward An Educationally Relevant Theory Of Literacy Learning: Twenty Years Of Inquiry". The Reading Teacher, Vol. 49, No. 3.

As the research has shown, students need to be immersed in texts in order to be able to learn to write well. Students need to be given demonstrations about grammar. This does not mean traditional lectures and textbook exercises, this means grammar in action through sentence combining, sentence expanding, and other activities that will be discussed later in this thesis. Students need to be held to high expectations. If they are expected to fail at improving their writing, then chances are, they will. If they are expected to succeed at improving their writing, then chances are, they will. Students must feel a sense of responsibility for learning the material. If they do not see how writing skills apply to their real life, then they will not feel responsible for learning writing skills. Teachers must give students time to practice their writing skills. A challenging grammatical concept is not just going to be learned and applied overnight. Teachers and students both must feel that mistakes are alright. Mistakes can actually be a sign of growth. Students may be taking a chance by trying something new and when trying something new, students will make mistakes. If mistakes are treated positively, then students will be more likely to continue to try new things and not be discouraged about writing. Students must receive feedback about their writing. They cannot be expected to learn anything from a simple marking up of all of the grammatical errors. Instead, feedback about how to improve their writing and what they did well will lead to writing growth. Finally, students must be engaged in the material in order to more effectively learn grammar. According to Cambourne, if high expectations, responsibility, employment (practice), approximation, and response are all present, then the probability of student engagement is increased.

Cambourne's model is useful for incorporating grammar instruction into the classroom and improving student writing, but traditional grammar instruction is not. In Teaching Grammar

in Context, Weaver identifies five potential reasons why formal grammar study does not lead to better student writing:

1. Many things that are taught in traditional grammar instruction have little or no relevance to writing.
2. Because English grammar is so complex, it is hard to be easily or well-learned.
3. Formal grammar study is boring to many students.
4. In traditional grammar instruction, the concepts learned are not applied to appropriate writing situations.
5. The educational theory underlying traditional grammar instruction is faulty. A behavioral theory of learning is behind traditional grammar instruction, and learning, according to the behavioral theory of learning, happens through practice and habit formation (102-103).

Students in formal grammar study are not engaged in the material and do not have the chance to employ what they are learning, two of the conditions that need to be present, according to Cambourne's model. Additionally, transforming a theory behind a certain way of teaching can be challenging to do, but it can be achieved. Teachers need to look at grammar instruction in a more constructivist way, where students discover concepts for themselves and construct their own knowledge about it. This will lead students to become more motivated about learning grammar, because they will see the payoffs in their writing assignments.

There are some concepts that Weaver believes should be taught to students and provides some ways to teach each major concept. She suggests:

teaching concepts of *subject*, *verb*, *sentence*, *clause*, *phrase*, and related concepts for editing; teaching style through sentence combining and sentence generating; teaching

sentence sense and style through the manipulation of syntactic elements; teaching the power of dialects and dialects of power; [and] teaching punctuation and mechanics for convention, clarity, and style. (Weaver, “Context of Writing” 16-17)

Because these aspects are all relevant to writing, Weaver believes they are still important for students to know. When teaching the concepts of subject, verb, sentence, clause, phrase, and related concepts for editing, Weaver has her students engage in wide reading. During sentence combining and sentence expanding, she wants students to “expand their syntactic repertoire in order to write more syntactically sophisticated and rhetorically effective sentences” (*Lessons* 22). Through manipulating syntactic elements, students play with sentence elements by arranging and rearranging them. This helps students learn manipulation techniques to improve the readability and effectiveness of their own writing.

Teaching the power of dialects, the fact that all dialects have value, and the dialect of power, Standard American English, helps students gain a deeper appreciation for different dialects that are out there. Students gain an understanding of the grammatical differences in different dialects while also learning when certain dialects are appropriate and when they are not. Students also learn how to use different dialects in their own writing to achieve a desired rhetorical effect. Students that speak a different dialect at home also gain a greater sense of the worth of their home dialect instead of feeling constantly put down by Standard American English. Finally, teaching punctuation for convention, clarity, and style helps students learn how to punctuate correctly and effectively while also helping them to learn when to break punctuation rules to achieve a desired effect in their writing.

Weaver also suggests that students need to “form hypotheses about concepts in the process of coming to understand them” (“Context of Writing” 18). In other words, instead of the

teacher coming right out and saying what a concept is, it is better for students to research a concept and come to a conclusion about it on their own. In order to help students do this, “teachers must give a wide range of examples to illustrate a concept and also...contrast these with common non-examples that are frequently mistaken for instances of the concept” (“Context of Writing” 18). This will aide in helping students to develop their schema about what a certain grammatical concept really is.

In Teaching Grammar in Context, Weaver also offers some potential guidelines for teaching grammar more effectively:

1. Students should be heavily engaged with writing.
2. Students should be heavily immersed in good literature. Good literature is literature that is challenging syntactically or particularly interesting.
3. Thorough grammar study should only be for elective courses.
4. Use the context of students’ writing to teach relevant grammatical concepts.
5. Use the minimum amount of terminology possible.
6. “Emphasize (as appropriate to writers’ needs) those aspects of grammar that are particularly useful in helping students revise sentences to make them more effective” (145).
7. “Also emphasize (as appropriate to writers’ needs) those aspects of grammar that are particularly useful in helping students edit sentences for conventional mechanics and appropriateness” (145).
8. When students are ready to revise at the sentence level or edit a piece overall, then teach them needed skills, structures, and terms (141-145).

A grammar program following these guidelines is more likely to help students improve their writing skills than a traditional grammar program.

Vavra also agrees with Weaver on the need to limit the use of grammatical terminology:

Grammar and grammatical terms should be used as a tool to teach students how sentences work, including such things as how the human brain might process sentences and how different constructions do different things for different groups of writers...Grammatical terminology should be kept to a minimum and...emphasis should be put not on individual sentences, as it is in almost every current grammar book, but rather on sentences in context, i.e., paragraphs or short essays. (34)

Teachers can even go a step beyond by “trying to teach students how to recognize grammatical constructions in their own writing” (37). Students do not need to know the correct grammatical terminology; just knowing the name of something grammar-related will not help them apply it to their writing. Instead, they need to be taught how to actually apply grammatical concepts to their writing. They will learn more by seeing what grammatical concepts they use when writing and also by seeing ways to use other different grammatical concepts in their writing.

### **Remedial Writers**

“Remedial” writing courses and classification of students as remedial, adequate, or advanced writers has been prevalent in the school system for many years. Many beginning English teachers will be charged with helping the remedial set of writers and will not possess adequate strategies on how to chip away at the abundance of errors present in a remedial writer’s writing. Shaughnessy wants teachers to see that “BW [Basic Writing] students write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic

excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes” (5). Instead of thinking of these students as hopeless, teachers need to see the value in teaching them.

## **Errors**

Beginning to understand the common types of errors that basic writers make will help make the task of improving their writing seem less daunting. Common errors, as Shaughnessy describes them, are surface-level errors that show “inexperience with writing rather than with the language itself” (90). Some examples of common errors are “verb form errors, tense switches across sentences, pronoun case, dangling modifiers, [and] broken parallels” (91). These errors are almost irresistible for English teachers to correct because they seem so obvious to someone so familiar with writing and the written language.

Bartholomae proposes that there are three main categories of errors: “errors that are evidence of an intermediate system; errors that could truly be said to be accidents...and, finally, errors of language transfer” (257). Each writer has a unique set of errors that needs to be addressed. Bartholomae points out the rationale for individualizing error instruction:

If we investigate the pattern of error in the performance of an individual writer, we can better understand the nature of those errors and the way they ‘fit’ in an individual writer’s program for writing. As a consequence, rather than impose an inappropriate or even misleading syllabus on a learner, we can plan instruction to assist a writer’s internal syllabus. (258)

Bartholomae believes that teachers need to take the time to assess each student’s individual writing idiosyncrasies and develop an individual plan for each student instead of just using a

general grammar syllabus. Bartholomae claims that just tweaking instruction slightly for each student can have profound effects.

Bartholomae identifies a useful strategy for overcoming the first hurdle of teaching basic writers: helping them to see that they have made a mistake in their writing. He proposes that having students read their work aloud will help them to notice many mistakes, although not all of them. Hartwell also supports this strategy, but mostly for diagnostic purposes, by saying “most students, reading their writing aloud, will correct in essence all errors of spelling, grammar, and, by intonation, punctuation, but usually without noticing that what they read departs from what they wrote” (121). This can help teachers see what category different errors would fall into and also to see what errors are not recognizable to the student.

Instead of viewing errors as teachers always have, Hartwell suggests that “we need to redefine error, to see it not as a cognitive or linguistic problem, a problem of not knowing a ‘rule of grammar’, but rather...as a problem of metacognition and metalinguistic awareness, a matter of accessing knowledges that, to be of any use, learners must have already internalized by means of exposure to the code” (121). This means that students will not benefit from direct grammar instruction because they are not metacognitively developed enough yet. Instead, they need to work on internalizing grammar. Grammar “is a ‘metalanguage,’ a language we use to talk about language” (Gribbin 56). Students cannot really understand grammar because they are not metacognitively developed enough. This is the reason to postpone direct grammar instruction until students are cognitively ready for it. Hartwell suggests that “the mastery of written language...increases one’s awareness of language as language” (123). Students need to practice writing and working with language in order to improve their writing abilities. They need to be



exposed to a wide variety of literature to see how grammar is used in different contexts. This will be much more beneficial than simply being taught rules.

In order to give students more access to writing opportunities, Shaughnessy suggests that “courses can be formally linked so that the academic content of one course can serve the writing course as well, thereby relieving the writing teacher of the task of fabricating writing situations” (88). Students need to see that writing applies to the real world, and that they need to have good writing skills to get ahead in life. For basic writers, writing in all of their classes will drastically increase the amount of time that they spend thinking about and learning how to write.

Students will also be more likely to benefit from instruction if they are motivated to learn the material. Shaughnessy claims that a great way for students to become more motivated about grammar related materials is to let them figure out the rules for themselves. If students are allowed to explore and deduce why the English language is a certain way, then they are much more likely to claim ownership of the rule and internalize it.

Shaughnessy suggests two important propositions for English teachers to remember about writing errors. First, “errors count but not as much as most English teachers think” (120). If writers still get their point(s) across to the reader, then that can be counted as something positive. Secondly, “The teacher should keep in mind the cost to himself and the student of mastering certain forms and be ready to cut his losses when the investment seems no longer commensurate with the return” (122). While some teachers may be discouraged by this second suggestion, it simply means that, at a certain point, if a student is simply not going to be able to fix a certain aspect of his or her writing, then it may be better to focus energy on a different error that can be fixed.

Williams also suggests that the concept of error needs to be redefined. He says that “it is also necessary to shift our attention from error treated strictly as an isolated item on a page, to error perceived as a flawed verbal transaction between a writer and a reader” (153). He also suggests that, sometimes, what many people would consider an error in a piece of writing is not an out-and-out grammatical error, but simply not what is more commonly used. Teachers need to realize this and analyze the error more thoroughly to decide if it is a grammatical error or just a less common usage.

Something to keep in mind when dealing with errors is that teachers need to give students time to master a new writing skill. A writing skill that has just been taught will not be applied correctly 100% of the time. As students are working on a new skill, they will make some errors regarding the skill, but teachers need to have tolerance for these errors (Weaver, *Lessons* 142) and see these errors for what they are: students taking risks in their writing and learning and growing in the process. This process involves lessening the frequency of each error pattern over time until it is eliminated.

Many experts discuss ways to help students learn to write better. Shaughnessy offers some lesson plans for helping basic writers in the main categories of handwriting, punctuation, syntax, common errors, spelling, vocabulary, and beyond the sentence which provide students with some practice exercises, but also encourage students to keep their eyes open to these concepts in their own reading and writing. She offers possible reasons for different common errors in student writing, most of which relate to students over-applying rules that they were taught or not internalizing rules that they were supposed to have learned through traditional grammar instruction.

## Spelling

Shaughnessy's book offers a lot of helpful advice, but teachers may question whether her tips for improving spelling are really valid in today's technological world. After reading Sipes' book, however, teachers can see that many students still struggle with spelling. Other authors have suggested having students write often in order to improve their usage and writing abilities, but Sipe suggests that writing can seem like an insurmountable task to a struggling speller. They are focused so much on trying to spell words correctly that they cannot focus as much energy on sentence structures and meaning making. But teachers need to make sure not to fall into the old trap of teaching spelling rules, because "the English spelling system is so complex, with almost as many exceptions as there are rules" (Weaver, *Lessons* 11). Memorizing rules is just not a viable or effective option. Sipe suggests that an effective way to help struggling spellers is to expose them to more literary works, a strategy that ties right in with suggestions that other authors have made. Teachers must make sure to address spelling problems in order to help future students make gains in their usage and writing abilities overall.

English teachers need to know some things about grammar in order to be able to teach it effectively, and Murdick provides a few suggestions. First, "English teachers need to know that grammar is a difficult subject" (Murdick 38). It cannot be learned with just one lesson; students need many opportunities for practice. Second, "English teachers need to know what children know about grammar" (39). Specifically, teachers need to know the fact that children implicitly know grammatical concepts. Finally, as I have discussed above, "teachers need to know that grammatical error is complex" (40). There may be many forces or different reasons behind a student's error.

## **Strategies for Incorporating Grammar Instruction**

One useful strategy for incorporating grammar instruction into the classroom is “Grammar in a Nutshell,” discussed by Diana Purser in her article of the same name. Grammar in a Nutshell is a visual graphic organizer that students put together like a jigsaw puzzle throughout the course. Students learn about one piece of the puzzle at a time, practice it, then add it to their graphic organizers. This strategy helps students to see how different parts of the English language relate to and are connected with each other. It also helps them to visually build their knowledge-adding more and more pieces to what they know. The program also utilizes auditory and kinesthetic methods: students learn chants about different grammatical constructions and recite them while snapping their fingers and clapping their hands. This multi-modal approach provides students with many different ways to absorb the material.

Another successful way to teach grammar in an incorporated setting, according to Sharon Kane, is through the news. Students are aware of current events in their school, their local community, and throughout the world and can be very interested and engaged with some of these topics. Kane pointed out many different aspects of grammar and writing to her students using newspaper headlines from the O.J. Simpson case. She discussed various aspects such as verbs, rhyme, and antecedents. The students wanted to hear about the O.J. Simpson case, so they were engaged with the material. She also keeps a file of favorite sentences from her reading and uses those to show her students something that she wants them to learn. These sentences are far from the boring, dull sentences provided in workbooks. Many of them are from famous authors or famous works, so students see the value of analyzing them. Finally, she has her students provide their own favorite sentences. This makes students apply what they have been learning outside of the classroom (when they are encountering texts on their own), and also makes them more

personally invested in the material. In her classroom, “language study was always connected to meaning, to purpose, to effect” (90). If teachers do not connect language study to real life, students will not learn it as well.

Another possible way to teach grammar to students is to teach “rhetorical grammar” rather than formal grammar. This approach is advocated by Kolln. She defines rhetorical grammar as the “conscious ability ‘to select effective structures for a given rhetorical context’” (29). Rhetorical grammar shies away from the “error-avoidance or error-correction purpose of so many grammar lessons” (29) and instead builds up grammar knowledge for writers to use to make effective choices. Students interact with a variety of sentences from different texts, modify different aspects of them, and decide what the effects of the modifications are. In this way, students are learning grammatical concepts, but they are also learning how to use those grammatical concepts in writing and what effect different grammatical concepts can have on writing.

Sentence imitation is also an effective way to help students learn about grammar. Deborah Dean presents a sentence from a published piece of writing to her students and has them create a sentence of their own using the same pattern as the sample sentence. This practice helps her students to “internalize the patterns of more experienced writers” (21) and apply these more advanced and varied patterns to their own writing. She also advocates for the use of sentence combining as a great tool for helping students learn grammar in context. Sentence combining is where students are presented with two or more kernel sentences, which are typically short and only present one piece of information, and then have to combine the kernel sentences into one sentence. Sentence combining shows students ways to connect sentences using grammatical concepts rather than writing a bunch of short, choppy sentences. It also shows students that there

is no one right way to combine sentences. Students are made more aware of the options available to them in their own writing.

Along this same vein, sentence expanding can be very useful in helping students study grammar. Peterson discusses his method in Weaver's *Lessons to Share*. Students start with a simple two-word sentence such as "Dog barked." Then, the students are asked to think about different qualities involving the subject. What color is the dog? Is it big or small? What type of ears or tail does it have? Students use their ideas to create a longer sentence such as "The large black dog with a short tail barked." Then, students are asked to think about the predicate part of the sentence. What was the dog barking at? Was the dog barking loudly or softly? Students then use their ideas to expand the sentence even more. One possible example might be "The large black dog with a short tail barked loudly at the small grey cat." Students then share their sentences with each other and compare the differences. This leads to discussions about subjects, predicates, adverbs, adjectives, and other grammatical constructions.

Sentence expanding is also used in Peterson's lesson called "My Favorite Sandwich." In this lesson, Peterson first has his students draw a picture of their favorite sandwich. They then have to describe each ingredient on the sandwich: bright and yellow for mustard and creamy and smooth for mayonnaise, for example. The students then use these descriptions to write a paragraph describing their favorite sandwich. This activity leads to better use of adjectives in student writing.

Weaver has included valuable lesson plans in Teaching Grammar in Context for teaching the concepts that she views as important. One sequence of lessons that was particularly excellent was for teaching sentence sense and style through the manipulation of syntactic elements. To start the lesson, she puts up some transparencies with sentences that have a long modifier after

the subject and before the verb. All example sentences come from her own or her students' writing, so the students are more invested in the sentences and motivated to improve them. She uses these example sentences to help her students see that the modifier should be placed before the subject in order to achieve better clarity. By providing more example sentences that have the less important information at the end, this lesson also emphasizes that given information should be placed before new information in order to be psychologically more effective. Next, Weaver shows students the effectiveness of WH word transformations (sentences that start with what, who, or why). She starts with an example sentence such as "You may not have realized that I was particularly bothered by your choice of directors," and the students end up changing it to "What you may not have realized, however, is that I was particularly bothered by your choice of directors." The second sentence calls greater attention to the subject. By discovering these grammatical concepts on their own, the students feel more invested in their own learning and they are more likely to actually remember the grammatical concepts and apply them to their own writing.

This thesis has discussed research from many different authors regarding the teaching of formal grammar versus teaching grammar using an incorporated approach. In Teaching Grammar in Context, Weaver offers a concise summary of much of the research that is out there about grammar instruction:

"1. Studying grammar as a system, in isolation from its use, is not in fact the best use of instructional time if better writing (or reading) is the intended goal of grammar study" (179).

2. “Young children acquire the major grammatical constructions of their language naturally, without direct instruction” (179).
- “3. Wide reading may...be one of the best routes to the further acquisition of grammar” (179).
- “4. Writing...is equally critical” (179).
5. “Analyzing language...is much less helpful to writers than a focus on sentence generating, combining, and manipulating” (179).
6. “Attending to usage, punctuation, and other aspects of mechanics and sentence structure in the context of writing is considerably more effective than teaching usage and mechanics in isolation” (179).

These points align with the prevailing view among researchers that have studied grammar instruction that grammar is not best acquired through traditional grammar instruction, but rather through a focus on reading and writing.

## **VI. Significance**

This research holds much significance to current and future teachers of English and Language Arts. Grammar instruction is crucial in the English classroom. The National Council of Teachers of English Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar states that one goal of language instruction is that “Every student, from every background, will complete school with the ability to communicate comfortably and effectively in both spoken and written Standard English” (Flynn 27). If English teachers continue to teach grammar in the traditional way, students will not be comfortable and effective with Standard English, and these English teachers



will have failed at meeting a crucial goal that their professional organization deems very important.

Many English teachers were taught grammar in the traditional way, and they may think that is just how it should be done, and that students will benefit from this type of instruction. They may have been good at grammar and enjoyed learning about grammar and truly believe that their knowledge of grammar helped improve their writing. Many English teachers probably enjoyed reading and writing and read and wrote quite a bit, but they overlook these contributions to their linguistic database. They know from their wide variety of reading what the English language looks like. They most likely come from middle or upper-middle class families and communities, where the language that they are surrounded with outside of the classroom is the language used in English classes, and are used to speaking Standard American English with their peers. They may not know that traditional grammar instruction really does not help students become more grammatically adept or better writers. They may not even be aware that there are alternate methods of grammar instruction out there that are proven to be more effective, and this thesis can serve to open their eyes to research on the topic and potentially make them want to learn more about the topic and incorporate it into their own classrooms.

## **VII. Findings**

The findings indicate that traditional grammar instruction is not effective at helping students understand grammatical concepts and apply them to their own writing. Middle-school and high-school aged students are simply not cognitively developed enough to be able to learn about the English language in this way. An integrated approach to grammar instruction, where learning about grammatical concepts is taught through reading and authentic writing activities, is

a much better approach to teaching grammar. Students who are taught with an incorporated approach are better able to apply advanced grammatical constructions to their own writing, and their writing also tends to be more error-free.

Grammar instruction becomes much more effective if teachers teach grammar mini-lessons to the whole class, small groups, or even individual students. These mini-lessons must reflect concepts that students are ready to learn and need to learn, based off of a diagnosis of writing samples. Each grammatical concept taught in a mini-lesson must also then be practiced and applied to the students' actual writing, not just isolated workbook exercises. Teachers need to understand that the same grammatical concept may need to be taught to some students many times before they are finally able to apply it to their own writing. Teachers need to be in tune to the pace at which each of their students' writing is developing and individualize grammar instruction based on their needs.

Grammar instruction has traditionally been characterized as an error hunt: English teachers would search through students' papers and mark up any errors with red pen. Teachers must learn to re-conceptualize their thoughts towards errors in student writing. Many errors are due to students trying out new ways of writing. Students do not need to be discouraged from trying new ways of writing, which can happen when teachers simply mark the errors and give them a bad grade. Teachers need to applaud students for trying something new, and students need to be offered more support on the topic in order to learn to use the new concepts correctly. Teachers also need to provide students with the opportunity to turn in multiple drafts, so that they can first develop the content of their writing before they worry about polishing it grammatically for a final draft.

## **VIII. Recommendations**

I recommend that teachers and schools move away from teaching grammar instruction in the traditional way and move towards teaching grammar in the context of reading and writing. I further recommend that every teacher that is expected to teach students how to write investigate the research for themselves and use the resources out there to develop lessons aligned with an incorporated approach to teaching grammar that attends to individual needs in student writing.

## **IX. Summary/Closure**

In summary, relevant research on the teaching of grammar has shown that traditional grammar instruction focused on memorization and isolated drills is not effective at helping students learn grammar and improve their writing skills. Instead, teaching grammar in context is much more effective. Teaching grammar in context involves immersing students in authentic reading and writing opportunities, teaching grammatical concepts through brief mini-lessons, and showing applied grammatical concepts in real life. It also involves teachers focusing on the individual grammar needs of their students, along with re-conceptualizing their thoughts about student errors in writing. Teachers need to stop seeing grammar instruction as an error hunt and instead discover the underlying reasons for different errors and support students in fixing these errors and eliminating them from their future writing. There are many strategies out there for teachers to use to teach grammar in context, so teachers are not alone in this endeavor. If educators teach grammar in context, their students will become better writers and will be more motivated to write.

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