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Writing, Teacher Training, and Grammar

Jim Meyer

In many English syntax courses aimed at future middle and high school teachers of English, we perpetuate grammar separated from any meaningful context. We ought instead to use the students' own writing as the basis for the syntactic analysis of English; this allows them to break out of the workbook mode of teaching and learning and encourages them to see syntax as a dynamic field of research.

Although the debate over the teaching of formal grammar has raged for some time, the conclusions of Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer in 1963 ("the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or... even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing," pp. 37-38) and of Hillocks in 1986 ("The study of traditional school grammar... has no effect on raising the quality of student writing," p. 248) have seemed for many to bring the matter to an uncompromising conclusion: formal grammar should not be taught as a means of improving students' writing skills. Perhaps, as Sanborn has argued, formal grammar should not be taught at all except in the upper grades of secondary school as an elective.

More recently, Noguchi has argued that grammar *can* improve writing—but only a limited kind of grammar, a "writer's grammar." Noguchi begins his monograph with an analysis of the relationship between grammar and writing and concludes that, while we have certainly shown that formal grammar instruction *has not been* applied to students' writing, we have not shown that it *cannot be*. Grammar instruction that might improve writing must differ from traditional grammar instruction in two ways: first, it must be clearly focused on those grammatical structures which are "the real basics," and secondly, we must change the way in which grammar is taught. Noguchi sketches the relationship he sees between grammar and writing clearly: "[T]his type of grammar [a tool for writing improvement] should not be taught for its own sake..., nor should it be taught in isolation from writing activities. Ideally, this grammar will be integrated with writing instruction" (Noguchi 1991:17-18).

Although I agree with Noguchi's basic statement, what troubles me is the assumptions that are made about the relationship of writing and grammar instruction *in the context of grammar as an academic subject*. Because Noguchi carefully (and rightly) distinguishes between grammar-for-writing and grammar-as-an-academic-subject, the discussion may lead to this unfortunate conclusion: In writing classes, we must not separate the students' own writing from grammar instruction; however, grammar taught as an academic subject has no relation to the students' own writing.

This leads, then, to methods of training future English teachers which perpetuate ineffectual learning of grammar in the first place. These future teachers—or other students enrolled in a course in English syntax/grammar—learn to study grammar outside of any context, without relationship to their own use of language; they do not find it easy to go into the schools and begin teaching any kind of grammar as related to student writing.

The kind of grammar instruction that we tolerate, at all levels from the early elementary grades to college, must change if we are to bring grammar and writing together. Seeing the link between grammar and writing does not simply mean that we integrate grammar into the writing classroom; it also must mean that we integrate writing into the grammar classroom, at the college level where English syntax as an academic subject is generally taught.

Currently grammar instruction usually looks like this: discussion of a grammatical point with examples carefully chosen to illustrate those points, then carefully chosen exercises, then another grammatical point. And this is far too often the case at every level of grammar instruction: college textbooks for grammar classes look distressingly like the *Warriner's* texts used in junior high and high school. Even textbooks with titles that promise to be different, such as Veit's *Discovering Grammar*, fit that mold.

Now compare what we know about effective teaching with these usual methods of grammar instruction.¹

We know that ideas must be presented in terms of what the learner already knows if they are to be learned. Yet grammar instruction generally has nothing to do with our own experiences with language; the sentences used come from the textbook and from worksheets.

We know that students must feel some need to learn, must sense what Piaget has called cognitive dissonance. Yet grammar instruction is generally presented as if the syntactic analysis of English is a fixed artifact, there to be learned simply because it's there.

We know that learning based on the students' own discovery of the content is more likely to succeed than learning based on the teacher's presentation of the material, and that content learned by discovery is more likely to be retained. Yet grammar is traditionally taught entirely by exposition.

And because true learning depends on the students' own sense of cognitive dissonance and discovery, it is clear that we must see learning as a spiral. We must come back to the same general topics in new ways, in new contexts, and in new depth. Grammar instruction typically is based on repetition instead, with the same definition of *noun* and virtually identical exercises used year after year.

We know that we have to choose between depth and coverage, and that trying to cover too many topics can mean that nothing is learned adequately. Yet we pretend that we can present overviews of English syntax—perhaps even two or three competing theories—in a single course.

Given the traditional approach to teaching grammar, it is not surprising that there is little retention and that motivation is low. But grammar does not have to be taught in this way. The structure of English syntax, as an academic subject in its own right, can be taught effectively if, in addition to recognizing the role grammar can play in the writing class, we also recognize the role that writing ought to play in the grammar class. For the remainder of this article I present an overview of a university course in English grammar/syntax which takes seriously the role of writing in teaching grammar.

Context: Their Own Texts

First, to insure that students have personal experience with language, they themselves create the texts that are to be used for grammatical analysis. At the time that they are given a writing assignment, they do not know what point of grammar is to be considered. The focus is thus on their having a realistic experience with language rather than on creating a paragraph with lots of adjectives or prepositional phrases.

The writing assignments for the course, certainly, have to be structured, and this is part of the instructor's job. DeBeaugrande makes the point that grammar textbooks have "traditionally... been easy to write and hard to use" but argues that we must now turn things around and put the burden of work on the course designer or on the instructor (1984:364). And the instructor can

¹ These statements are based primarily on the theories of Jerome Bruner and Jean Piaget; for further discussion see Berlyne 1965, Bruner 1979, Bybee and Sund 1982, Duckworth 1979, Piaget 1974, and Worthen 1968.

make writing assignments so that certain grammatical structures are generated naturally; for example, an assignment calling for dialogue will generate questions, so this assignment can be used to provide students with material for analyzing question formation in English. Likewise, an assignment calling for "how to" will generate imperatives. It was my job to devise assignments that would give students usable and challenging data to analyze.²

Method: Discovery, Not Exposition

The idea of teaching by discovery in a college grammar class could be daunting; how can we pretend that students are "discovering" what a *subject* is when they have heard the definition since grade school? But this is the role of the writing assignments that are used: I do not ask students "Write several sentences illustrating the grammatical notion of *subject*" but rather make an assignment designed to produce natural text which will allow discovery of the grammatical notion. The discussion of what a subject is, for example, grows from looking at questions—what can students observe about questions, and about the relationship between questions and statements? Given those observations, what statements can be made about the structure of sentences in English? We then arrive at some notion of subject—and even those who were ready to parrot a "correct" definition from elementary school have discovered something about subjects.

This process is repeated throughout the semester: after a writing assignment of a lab report, we focus on passives and on objects; after writing instructions, we focus on imperatives. An assignment to describe a significant person then generates sentences of all types to complete the first half of the course, on sentence constituents and structure.

This method of teaching is difficult. Students' experience of grammar instruction has been with prescriptive grammar, a presentation of English syntax which implies that all of the questions have been answered and everything is known. And they expect me to do the same, even if I have an unusual approach. However, since I don't know what students are going to propose, I may often be put in the position of saying, "That's an interesting way to analyze the sentence, but I honestly don't know if there will be problems with that later."

But I must teach in this way if I want students to learn and retain what they learn. In addition, this is more honest. Grammarians are unable to agree on how to analyze English; there simply is no "correct" way to do so. The number of basic sentence types in English varies according to the grammarian, from three (Weaver 1979) to seven (Quirk et al. 1985) to ten (Kolln 1990) to sixteen and more (Gleason 1967). If I force students to learn one model, I am doing them a disservice, particularly when there are other models available that might be more suited to any individual student's interests and perceptions.

Cognitive Dissonance and the Journals

Students' performance in the class is evaluated primarily through a series of analysis journals which they turn in regularly. After students have written a text and then analyzed it for some feature, they present an analysis of what they have found and illustrate it with examples from their writing; the last sections of the journal include a list of sentences which the student finds puzzling or cannot yet analyze confidently.

² DeBeaugrande argued that "the grammar of talk contains all the categories needed for a grammar of writing" (1984:360). Here I am applying those ideas to a different context and might state my position in parallel terms: "the grammar of native-speaker-produced text, spoken or written, contains all the categories needed for use in a class studying the grammar/syntax of English as an academic subject."

The journals are an important tool in heightening disequilibrium for two reasons. First, through the list of sentences that cannot yet be analyzed, the student's attention is focused on areas that are not yet clear. Second, the journal allows for ongoing dialogue between professor and student; I can ask individual questions to push students further and draw their attention to discrepancies that they might not have noticed.

Spirals and the Journals

The journals are also a powerful method of building a learning spiral into the course. Students return to the same material week after week, refining their analyses; each text assignment will add new data to the corpus, and students will have to consider whether their analysis of the previous week is still adequate for the corpus. New sentences will require new analyses, and there may come for some students a point at which a whole new approach will be necessary. Each journal will be a chance for the students to represent what they have learned; then they will return to manipulate more data, and represent it again, in a spiral.

Depth and the Journals

We cannot hope to prepare our students for every kind of grammar they might need to teach in the high schools. Coverage of enough grammar to make them ready to step into all possible school systems—from those that teach absolute constructions in seventh grade to those that emphasize sentence combining based on transformational grammar—is clearly impossible.

The journals, however, also help students pursue depth rather than coverage. The goal of teaching the class as proposed here is not to let students know about all the possible syntactic structures of English; it is rather to help students create their own analysis of English that will allow them to refer to other grammatical descriptions of English that may be more complete. Students will be required to go as deep as necessary for their own texts; they will be allowed to add sentences from other texts to complete an analysis if they wish, but the course goal is to push them deeper into the structure of English.

Because students do have legitimate different interests in the course—those in elementary education are interested in grammar as it relates to whole language, for example, while the secondary education majors are more interested in grammar as it relates to the writing process—the course includes exposure to various applications of grammar, through a series of readings in professional journals. I also provide some exposure to various approaches to syntax (such as the classic transformational approach) so that students can see that their understanding of English grammar, based on their own writing and described in terms that they understand, enables them to read scholarly work within other frameworks. But the basis of the course is the students' own analyses of the grammar of English, not their ability to show familiarity with all theories or all issues.

Does It Work?

Teaching grammar by this method is obviously risky. Some students come to class with good memories of high school grammar and with the expectation that this class will be the same, probably an easy A. Others come with bad memories, but they may nonetheless not be ready for such a radically different approach; there is something comforting about an approach in which the teacher has all the answers and is ready to give them to the students.

More risky than this, though, is the fact that students are going to be working with their own writing. As the teacher I must be ready to deal with any sentence that comes up—even those that are puzzling to me. This approach requires that I too be willing to expose my own lack of understanding, that I too be ready to do extra homework to look things up.

But I believe that it is worth it. Not only do the learning theories predict that this method will work, but I have seen it. I see the advantages of this approach particularly in two areas.

First, students genuinely come to understand the problems of the traditional Latin eight parts of speech. Nearly any textbook tries to make this clear to students, but--as Piaget and Bruner point out--students have to sense the dissonance for themselves. We can't force this conflict to occur according to our schedule by assigning a workbook exercise of sentences that lead to this conclusion. Each student must come to see it in his or her own time.

For some students, this occurs early in the course when we talk about direct objects. Most students remember the traditional, semantic definition--"the direct object receives the action of the verb." On what basis, I challenge them, do we declare there is action in the verb *resemble* but none in the verb *become*? Why is there a direct object in "John resembles his father" but not in "John became a doctor"? This may create enough conflict for some students to think more about traditional grammar.

For others, though, it takes much longer. One student, Tobey, did not agree that there was a problem with traditional definitions. He continued to think that I was making a big deal out of a few minor inconsistencies. Then, towards the end of the semester, we looked at the word *worth*, as in the sentence "It's worth three dollars." What part of speech is this?

Interestingly, grammarians and dictionaries do not agree. The *American Heritage Dictionary* calls this an adjective; it lists, as an example, "worth its weight in gold" and "a proposal worth consideration." *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, on the other hand, calls it a preposition, with examples "well worth the effort" and "worth one's salt." Aarts and Aarts opt for adjective as well (1982:121); Quirk et al. put it in the group of "words which behave in many ways like prepositions, although they also have affinities with other word classes such as verbs or adjectives" (1985:667).

Now the problems of applying Latin parts of speech to English become obvious. In Latin there would be no question; if *worth* were an adjective, it would agree with a noun, and if it were a preposition, it would be invariable and would be followed by a noun in the ablative case. In English those criteria are irrelevant.

At this point Tobey agreed. In his journal he admitted, "Until this last week I thought that the traditional parts of speech were basically correct and you were just pointing out small problems. This week the class discussion finally convinced me."

Discovery for the Teacher as Well

Second, working with the students' own writing generates structures that I have never thought about before. Another student, Elizabeth, wrote this sentence in a composition for class: "I broke my shoulder three days before I was supposed to leave." She then asked me in her journal, "What is 'three days before I was supposed to leave'?"

I didn't know. In this sentence it is adverbial, and the whole phrase can be replaced by "before I was supposed to leave." But what seems to be the same construction can be used in other sentences, such as "I worried about it for three days before I was supposed to leave." Here the phrase--or at least part of it--is nominal, and "before I was supposed to leave" can be deleted or moved to the beginning of the sentence.

Students in a traditional grammar class can easily go through an entire semester without coming up against phrases which are not easily analyzed. The question Elizabeth raised is not discussed in most grammar texts which I know of; Quirk et al.'s massive volume mentions this as a modifier of *before*--but does not discuss the details of how subordinating conjunctions are modified (1985:1082). And that is one of the points of the class: despite the attitude of *Warriner's*, the grammar of English has not been completely described. Structures which native

speakers use daily do not yield readily to analysis and perhaps haven't even been noticed. Using a textbook creates in students the opposite belief--that the analysis of English is set in stone, that the eight parts of speech will cover every situation, and that there are no surprises left.

Does grammar belong in the writing class? Noguchi and others have given us a good place to begin more profitable discussion of this. Does writing belong in the grammar class? The answer is surely yes, if we hope to teach grammar effectively.

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