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What English Teachers Need to Know about Grammar

William Murdick

When writing for a professional journal in English education runs a special issue on grammar, the focus is invariably on what students need to learn and how we can teach it to them. But also important is the question of what English teachers need to know about this subject and how they can acquire that knowledge. As the teacher of a university course called Grammar and Usage, required for secondary English majors, I regularly struggle with the question of what issues to address in such a course. Over the years I have slowly moved away from a conventional “coverage model,” in which I tried to teach substantial detail about several different grammars, towards a course that evolves from questions about what English teachers need to know to be good teachers, rather than amateur linguists.

In the following sections, I present some ideas on that subject, suggest some readings, and recommend parallel changes in how language should be studied in English teacher preparation programs and, subsequently, how it should be taught in the secondary schools.

ENGLISH TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW THAT GRAMMAR IS A DIFFICULT SUBJECT

I get the sense that the complexity of even traditional grammar is not universally understood when I read discussions about whether or not we should teach a comprehensive grammar to school children, without any consideration of whether or not it is possible to do so. The junior and senior English majors in my course, when they take their pre-test, reveal the same blank slate year after year: few to none in any class of 25 students can define or give an example of a direct object, a clause, an adverb, and so on. They all studied grammar in public school, but little to nothing stuck.

Once the course begins, these highly literate twenty-year-olds struggle to acquire the understanding of grammar necessary for their careers. A sizable minority—a third or more of the enrollment each year—score unimpressively on exams covering the same concepts that appear in middle school grammar books. My conversations with English professors from other universities who teach the same course confirm that the “struggle” is universal.

I don’t mean to raise an alarm. I don’t find these students’ incomplete mastery of the subject particularly troubling, since no one expects recent graduates and beginning teachers to know everything that veteran teachers have learned over many years of experience and continued education. But given the trouble these college English majors experience, I have to admire the fortitude of middle school teachers who undertake to teach the “gerund phrase” and the “adverb clause” to ninth graders.

Traditional grammar seems simple on the face of it. It is, after all, nothing more than a small set of assumptions about what kinds of word classes and larger structures exist in English (noun, prepositional phrase, adjective clause, etc.) and the functions of those elements (subject, object, predicate, modifier). Other more modern grammars identify a larger number of elements and see the functions somewhat differently, but traditional grammar, partly because of its oversimplification and partly because it seems to be roughly accurate within the limits of what it tries to describe, remains the grammar taught to school children. And indeed it seems to serve us well in uncomplicated matters, such as providing a guide to punctuation on the basis of sentence structure.

For all its usefulness, however, traditional grammar has deficiencies which may partly explain why children and teenagers have such trouble learning it. Several authors have documented these inadequacies thoroughly (Allen 1972; Haussamen 1993), and I will offer only one example to make the point.

The pronoun, according to John Wariner (1968), is a “word that is used in place...
of a noun" (381). But in most cases, pronouns that stand in for nominal elements stand in for phrasal or clausal units, not just nouns. The pronoun it in the first of these next sentences clearly stands in for His way of walking, not just way:

- His way of walking is unusual, and it added to his eccentricity.
- His way of walking is unusual, and his way of walking added to his eccentricity.
- His way of walking is unusual, and way added to his eccentricity. [not permitted in English]

The traditional definition also fails because some words that are not pronouns are “used in place of” nominal elements. For example adverbs like there and epithets like the lucky guy:

- It's warm in the South, but I've never lived there.
- John won the lottery, and the lucky guy is quitting his job.

Pronouns don't always have antecedents, and therefore are not always replacing something, as in the case of Who in this sentence: “Who do you think will attend the meeting?” Sometimes pronouns that have a relation to an earlier nominal don't “refer to” or “stand in for” it but rather “co-refer” with it to the same entity evoked by the text, as in the case of the singular each and the plural they in these sentences:

- Each of the wrestlers bowed to his opponent. Then, at the referee's signal, they assumed the traditional crouched postures of antagonists.

Similar problems occur with all the major part-of-speech definitions in traditional grammar. The linguist Robert Allen (1972) has concluded that “Given the inadequacies of such definitions, it is no small wonder that the average student leaves school with no real understanding of English grammar” (11).

Thus school grammar is hard to learn partly because it is not nearly as simple or consistent as it is made out to be in textbooks. English teachers should have a good sense of how complex grammar really is, and a good place to start is by perusing a “descriptive” grammar written by a reputable linguist (e.g., Long 1961). To make this point clear, let me contrast representations of the noun phrase from two different texts. Donald Emery et al.'s (1991) traditional grammar book English Fundamentals implies that only two types of optional words are involved in noun phrases: “Nouns often follow the, a, or an, which are called articles. A descriptive word (an adjective) may come between the article and the noun” (2). But Nelson Francis' (1965) descriptive grammar text The Structure of English reveals a more complex reality (41). Francis lists six types of optional words that can precede, in a required order, the head word, which is the noun:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predeterminer</th>
<th>Determiner</th>
<th>Quantifier</th>
<th>Particularizer</th>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Adjunct</th>
<th>Head</th>
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</table>

We can extend Francis' description by noting that adjectives fall into categories with particular word order requirements (e.g., color before material) and that noun phrases also include optional post-noun phrasal and clausal constituents. Here is a noun phrase with all these elements in the proper positions (the head word is dresses):

Not all • her • many • different • pastel, silk • cocktail • dresses • with straps • that cross in the back . . .

But before we panic at the complexity of grammar, or worse, conclude that what is needed is more formal grammar instruction to cover all this “new” material revealed by descriptive linguists, let's consider what children already know when they walk through the school door.

**ENGLISH TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW WHAT CHILDREN KNOW ABOUT GRAMMAR**

All children know the concepts of traditional grammar implicitly (unconsciously). These concepts—types of words, phrases and clauses, and the functions they serve—are so basic that without a thorough knowledge of them, a child would not be able to speak or understand others when spoken to. When a girl says, "I let Mary keep it," she has demonstrated an ability to distinguish appropriately among nouns, pronouns, and verbs. If we follow a traditional grammar analysis of the sentence, we can say that she also knows what an indirect object is and what a direct object is, and which comes first; in fact, she knows that an infinitive can be reduced (the to dropped) and used as a nominal in the
object function: “(to) keep.” She knows that infinitive nominals can be transitive (taking the object it). And she knows the proper case for pronouns that function in the subject role (I instead of me).

She also knows the classic SVO word order of English sentences. She knows that among the grammatical features of her verb let is the fact that it takes a reduced infinitive for a verbal direct object, not a fully expressed infinitive or a gerund. And she knows that the “argument structure” of let will establish her intended semantic relations, so that Mary is the agent of keep (compare with “I promised Mary to keep it” in which I is the agent of keep). Traditional grammar books try to make conscious a small portion of the knowledge which already exists in the children’s heads unconsciously. They do this by organizing that knowledge under a set of abstract terms in a way that is not always complete or consistent with the facts of language, as we have seen.

Children, indeed, know a great deal of grammar that most English teachers are not even consciously aware of, such as the phenomena described by generative grammarians. Traditional grammar parses only correct sentences; it does not address the issue of grammaticality. But generative grammarians have always been interested in how correct structures are formed, and incorrect ones avoided.

Let me draw two examples from Elizabeth Cowper’s (1992) text on contemporary grammar. Here’s a simple question: What is the general rule for placing adverbs in the predicate (where can they go and not go)? Surely, if we were to teach students a type of grammar useful for producing correct sentences, then we would teach rules like that, so that students didn’t misplace adverbs. But, while few English teachers have such a rule immediately at hand, no children in their classes need to be taught this rule, because they already know it: before the verb or after the object(s), but not between the verb and its object(s). Thus:

. . . slowly lifted the cup
. . . lifted the cup slowly
. . . lifted slowly the cup [not permitted or not normal in English].

Here’s another example which shows a more complex form of the implicit knowledge that children bring with them to school, again from Cowper (slightly modified). Every teenager who is a native speaker of English can recognize that sentence 1) below is permissible, while sentences 2) and 3) are not:

1. Who did Mary think Anna saw?
2. Who wrote which book did Mary hire the person?
3. Which book did Mary hire the person who wrote?

This grammatical knowledge can be represented in the form of a “generative-transformational” rule: it is possible to form WH-questions (who, what, when, where, why, how) by transferring a WH-word from the verb phrase to the beginning of the sentence, provided the WH-word inhabits a noun clause and not an adjective clause. Therefore, 1) was derivable from “Mary thought Anna saw who?” but neither 2) nor 3) were derivable from “Mary hired the person who wrote which book?”

English teachers need to look into generative grammar enough to acquire some sense of the vastness and complexity of the unconscious knowledge behind their students’ everyday language use. Finally, it is important for teachers to understand that consciously formulated grammatical “rules,” developed by linguists, are not the same thing as either the process by which sentences are formed in the mind or the basis for that process. These rules merely model grammatical knowledge and the ability to detect ungrammaticality. Obviously, learning simplified representations of a type of knowledge is not the same thing as possessing the knowledge itself, which is why educational research continues to find no serious relationship between the study of this or that grammar and actual language performance. For a closer-to-reality model of how the brain might employ its neural network to “do grammar,” see Steven Pinker’s 1994 entertaining book The Language Instinct (especially pp. 317–320).

**TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW THAT GRAMMATICAL ERROR IS COMPLEX**

As prodigious as the grammatical knowledge of young children may be, there are elements of grammar that secondary students and even college students don’t im-
plicitly know and therefore need to learn. Beginning writers regularly produce sentences like these:

1. Due to the problems of discipline and general apathy arise largely from the boredom of students who have no interest in academic matters.

2. It is everyone’s problem to help control the amount of killings and murders, which have increased about 30% over the years, according to a study done in Chicago, stated in Baumire’s essay, legalize the drugs that are killing today’s youth and improve on the research, which physicians can help many individuals control, overcome, and help survive their addiction and habits.

3. They suggested to make the course easier.

Traditional textbooks imply that error is an obvious transgression of easily described rules for correct writing. By presenting a small set of nameable “mistakes” (agreement, comma splice, dangler, etc.), these books suggest that all mistakes are pretty much the same and should be treated the same (flagged, corrected, minus two points, or whatever treatment the individual teacher prefers). English teachers need to know that this description of error is incomplete and inaccurate.

Valerie Krishna (1975), writing in the first issue of The Journal of Basic Writing, pointed out that the:

clear-cut and predictable errors that are most precisely described and categorized in the grammar books . . . dwindle in significance next to problems of incoherence, illogicality, lack of conventional idiom or clear syntax—amorphous and unpredictable errors involving the structure of the whole sentence. (43)

Krishna concluded that the problem arose from the way students approached their sentences:

Such writers habitually “back into” their sentences, putting the heart of their idea into prepositional phrases, object noun clauses, adjectives, adverbs, or other ancillary parts of the sentence, wasting the subject. (45)

Sentence 1

This is certainly the case of ungrammatical sentence 1) above, a very common pattern in which the subject has been buried in an initial subordinate element. (The easiest revision, therefore, is to pull out the subject, creating: “The problems of discipline and general apathy arise largely . . . ”) Sometimes in this pattern the buried subject is reincarnated as a pronoun:

In his effort at cleaning up, it was very admirable.

Sentence 2

The second ungrammatical sentence above, which in early standardized writing tests was called the “on and on sentence,” illustrates an interesting point about the high degree of grammaticality that lies within the ungrammatical constructions of beginning writers. If we take each phrasal and clausal element by itself, we almost always find that they are well formed, as this breakdown shows:

- It is everyone’s problem to help control the amount of killings and murders, which have increased about 30 percent over the years, according to a study done in Chicago stated in Baumire’s essay.  
- Legalize the drugs that are killing today’s youth, and improve on the research, which physicians can help many individuals control, overcome, and help survive their addiction and habits.

The problem, then, lies not in the forming of sub-structures named by traditional grammar—the student can form those without error—but in the way they are arranged or connected to form the sentence. Clearly there are rhetorical and syntactical constraints on how that can be done in English, and these constraints are numerous and largely unknown; that is, literate, experienced writers must rely on their unconscious instinct or sense of grammaticality to know what to do in the first place, or what to revise and how. No one can learn such information from lecture and drill; it is the kind of knowledge that must be acquired through a slow growth in general literacy.

Sentence 3

Ungrammatical sentence 3) above is an example of a writer having incomplete knowledge of the “grammatical features” of a word she is using. When we learn a new word, we must learn not only its range of meaning, its appropriate usage, its spelling and pronunciation, but also a set of con-
straints on how it can be used syntactically—what other words and constructions it can sit next to. The example sentence shows that the writer doesn’t yet know that suggest cannot be set next to an infinitive; it takes a gerund (“suggested making”). This problem also shows up when students select the wrong preposition: “has become an important situation among most everyone” (become requires “for most everyone”).

The average high school senior has a reading vocabulary of some 40,000 distinct “word families” (Nagy and Anderson 1984), each of which includes a set of grammatical features. If we consider trying to teach this grammatical information to students to head off error, we are again faced with our own lack of knowledge and the hopeless size of the task. Students learn to avoid such errors by developing a sense of grammaticality through many years of contact with educated language. Whenever we consider the large amount of grammatical information that must be acquired to avoid error, we are reminded that the best practical grammar teachers are those who inspire their students to read a lot.

**TYPES OF SYNTACTICAL ERRORS**

The three ungrammatical sentences just examined hardly reveal all of the complexity of syntactical error. And beyond that, in order to respond productively to their students’ writings, English teachers need to perceive a difference between competence errors and performance errors.

**Competence Errors and Performance Errors**

Competence errors derive from a lack of knowledge or ability, while performance errors derive from a mistake in language processing in the head. An obvious type of performance error is the typo, such as teh for the, a transposition of letters. When the brain translates amorphous thought into the serial order of language, at lightning speed, it sometimes makes mistakes. Psycholinguists have categorized speech errors and have learned a great deal from them about language processing (see, for example, Gar Graham 1985, Chapter 9). Writers also make some of the same errors, and these mistakes sometimes look like puzzling grammatical errors. Let’s look at a few modeled from student sentences:

1. **He shouldn’t be knocked it.**
   - This is a word-part substitution error: -ed for -ing. Intended: He shouldn’t be knocking it (meaning criticizing it).

2. **When that employee see that both customer have . . .**
   - Word-part deletion error. Intended: . . . employee sees that both customers have . . .

3. **. . . how well I can the do work.**
   - A word exchange error. Intended: “do the.”

4. **I really think any coach give a player a hard time.**
   - Word deletion error. Intended: I really don’t think any coach should give a player a hard time.

Errors of Metacognitive Skill

Sitting halfway between the performance error and the competence error is a type of mistake generated from a lack of attention or metacognitive sensibility. Errors of concord, such as the subject-verb agreement error, are among the most common. These mistakes seem to indicate a lack of a semi-conscious or metacognitive skill at keeping parts of a sentence in tune with each other.

**Usage Errors**

English teachers also need to distinguish between grammatical errors and usage errors. Usage is a “social” issue: certain grammatical constructions or word uses are appropriate in one context but not another. It is fine and grammatical for someone to say “She be working,” or “Me and...
him went fishing" or "Ain't I right?" or "He did it hisself," when sitting around the dinner table at home, assuming that these constructions are part of the person's dialect. But those expressions can be quite inappropriate in certain formal contexts, even if they represent a more consistent grammar than what is appropriate (be working is a consistently applied, durative form; ain't I may be more "correct" than aren't I, since the general rule for tag questions requires agreement between the verb and pronoun, and are doesn't agree with I; hisself is consistent with the possessive forms myself, yourself, ourselves, but formal usage calls for the "ungrammatical" object forms himself and themselves in the third person).

What students need to learn here is not grammar so much as multiple sets of table manners. Don McAndrew and Mark Hurlbert (1993) have proposed an interesting approach: teach the controversy, engage students in discussion of the social and political aspects of language use, and let the specific issues arise within that framework.

**Developmental Error**

A final distinction worth considering is the difference between errors which seem to suggest nothing other than confusion and those which signal learning, that is, the "developmental error." Muriel Harris (1981) and Richard Haswell (1988) have written interesting and well-known essays on this subject, so I will do little more here than bring the issue to our attention. In language learning, as in other types of development, people do not always go from not doing something to doing it correctly; instead, they sometimes go through an intermediate stage of doing it, but doing it wrong. Harris suggests, for example, that right-branching modifiers showing up as fragments may be the middle stage between not doing that kind of right branching and doing it correctly. In other words, instead of writing:

1. We wanted to help them badly. Their situation was just like ours,

the student writes:

2. We wanted to help them badly. Their situation being just like ours.

The advanced syntax is:

3. We wanted to help them badly, their situation being just like ours.

The incorrect 2), since it anticipates the extension of a sentence through addition of an absolute phrase, as in 3), is seen as being more sophisticated than the correct pair of sentences in 1). The argument made by Harris and Haswell is that this middle stage needs to be protected, not attacked. As Haswell says of English teachers indiscriminately wielding the red pen: "Such tactics may only be squelching the growth in writing that precipitated the mistakes" (495).

In order to respond intelligently to sentence-level problems in students' writing, the English teacher must be able to distinguish between competence and performance errors, between grammatical and usage errors, and between developmental errors and those that aren't leading anywhere. Some problems require better proofreading on the part of the student, while others require growth of a kind that may take years, and still others may be based on a missing concept that the student is ready to learn. To merely red-mark every mishap in a paper, covering the text with monotonous corrections and scoldings, as though one mistake were the same as another, represents the kind of careless, indifferent teacher response that causes students to give up, or to protect themselves from criticism by regressing to a simpler, more childish writing style.

**ENGLISH TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW MORE ABOUT LANGUAGE THAN JUST GRAMMAR**

English teachers have a social responsibility to advise the public on language issues. The new conservatives are bringing back the "English only" concept and its legal manifestation—declaring English the "official language" of various states and, indeed, the whole country. English teachers should know both sides of this issue (for advocacy call U.S. ENGLISH at 202-833-0100; for opposition, see Daniels 1990).

Newspapers annually bemoan the falling SAT scores. What do such scores really mean? English teachers should know the ins and outs of language testing (a good place to start is the April 1989 issue of Educational Leadership, a special issue on testing and assessment; also, Sue Harman's 1989-90 analysis of objective testing and James Crouse and Dale Trusheim's 1988 analysis of the SAT).
When a superintendent, after attending a conference, becomes interested in computer software for English classes, English teachers should be able to evaluate that software (for general advice, see Frank Smith 1988). When a parent suggests sentence combining for her son's senior honors class because she did it in college, the English teacher in charge of that honors course should be able to discuss the research on sentence combining (Robert De Beaugrande 1984, 73–85). When a parent says that his daughter can't be expected to read the assigned story because she is learning disabled, the girl's English teacher, conversant on LD-language research and competing theories (Coles 1988), should be able to suggest, for example, collaborative whole language methods to help that LD student progress and catch up (Strickland 1995).

Teachers in general aren't going to acquire expertise on these and many similar issues unless we change the college- and graduate-level teacher preparation programs that define the knowledge base of the American English teacher. At both academic levels, students need to take a larger course load in language education, and just as important, all courses must have a lab or projects component, so that teachers learn how to become language researchers.

THE ADVICE OF NOAM CHOMSKY

With a broader base in language studies, teachers would be in a better position to lead the public discussion on language issues and take command of language curriculum in their own schools. And with experience as language researchers, they would be better prepared to teach a different kind of grammar course to their own students. When Noam Chomsky (1984) defended the teaching of grammar to teenagers in his famous reply to high school teacher Frederica Davis, he provided some hints as to how language could be taught in what he called a “different context” (165). Chomsky suggested, for instance, that language study could be used to discover things about the human mind. And referring to what children already know about grammar, he pointed out that since all children have “command of a huge mass of [linguistic] data” in their heads, language study could be used to engage children in real scientific investigation, introducing them “to the marvelous world of inquiry” (166).

Chomsky did not believe that grammar instruction would improve writing; instead he thought that grammar should be taught for “its own intrinsic interest and importance” (165). Unfortunately, in the traditional course that still dominates the secondary curriculum, grammar is boring, and its importance is lost.

Chomsky published his letter more than ten years ago, but no one seems to have taken his advice. I think it is time to repeat it.

We need to do something. It is not enough to just throw out the old, though that must be done. Let me suggest, as a new starting point, a course which proceeds through student projects or research, not lecture and drill, and which focuses on language, not grammar alone. The broader content would allow for an enormous variety of intriguing research directions for students—the Chinese pictographic writing system, infant speech, the use of gestures in communication, racism and sexism in the lexicon—just to pull a few out of the air. Grammar would not be neglected. You cannot study a writing system without examining how verb tense is indicated, or language engineering to avoid sexism without looking at derivational suffixes. You cannot look at the utterances of infants without learning about word categories, inflections, and functions. But in such a course, the learning would arise from within a larger and more interesting inquiry into human nature.

Works Cited
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