In one sense, the question is academic. We teach grammar because the public wants us to, indeed demands it. For if there is a literacy “crisis,” then the obvious solution must be to get “back to the basics.” And what could be more fundamental to language arts instruction than a rigorous component of “grammar”? (In addition to phonics, of course.)

But that’s not good enough. The wide and uncritical public acceptance of the need for grammar instruction should not make the question “Why?” a moot one for us, the language instruction professionals. We must have academic answers to justify spending the time, a rationale which explains how studying grammar fosters skills or enriches content we want students to learn. Further, I believe that we have the professional obligation to try to clarify the discussion of this part of the curriculum for the benefit of both the education establishment as well as the public. Such clarification is badly needed, for there is considerable confusion about what “grammar” is and about what benefits its study provides.

First, what do people mean by grammar when they insist that it be in the curriculum? Consider the following typical outcries:

1. These kids need to study grammar. They can’t even put together a basic English sentence.
2. These kids need to study grammar. They can’t even diagram sentences or identify the parts of speech.
3. These kids need to study grammar. Their speech and writing are full of mistakes.

Though the remedy in each case is said to be “grammar,” the symptoms are diverse enough that we should look closely at the basis of the supposed maladies to see if the same kind of pill is being requested for each.

In order to take the first literally—that the children can’t construct basic sentences—the word grammar has to mean “the set of organizing principles which native speakers intuitively follow.” In this sense grammar is the unconscious knowledge which we learned as very young children during language acquisition. From the spoken language around us we were able to discover, in some amazing and little understood way, what the elements and rules are for forming utterances. No one taught us, and the ability is not open to inspection. Yet obviously speakers of the language share a complex, highly structured system, the abstract structure of the language itself—the grammar. To distinguish this sense of the word from others to come, we will call it grammar-1.

Now admittedly some congenital defect of infant trauma may prevent normal acquisition of grammar-1. Children thus deprived may literally be incapable of putting together a basic English sentence. But such children are comparatively few, and they have almost always been identified early and accommodated in special programs. The English speaking children who are in our regular classrooms—because they are within the limits of normal educability—all have grammar-1; they can all put together basic English sentences. Of course, students who are from homes in which English is not the actively used language are in quite another situation. But it is simply wrong to assert that our ordinary English speaking Johnnies and Joannies can’t form basic sentences. We may not like some features of those sentences. Or we may want them to be more effectively constructed. Or we may wish
the content were different. But none of that is grammar-1. However, when it is charged that students can’t diagram sentences or identify the parts of speech or words in them, there is good reason to accept this assessment, for now grammar is being used in quite a different sense. Whereas grammar-1 was the abstract underlying structure, here grammar means the theory of that structure, the concepts, terminology, and analytic techniques for talking about the language. Grammar-1 is unconscious knowledge; it is knowing how. Grammar-2, as we can call this second sense, is conscious knowledge; it is knowing about the language according to a particular descriptive model. In our society, as in most literate societies, we have developed the strong expectation that an educated person should know a basic set of concepts and associated terminology for commenting on sentence features. Of course we don’t come by this grammar-2 naturally, because it isn’t any part of the language acquisition process. We have to go to school to learn it. However, many students have difficulty doing so, few retain the knowledge for long, and hardly anyone finds it very exciting—teachers nor students. Yet its place in the curriculum is probably secure, at least during the foreseeable short term, for the assumption is widely held that a heavy dose of grammar-2 is very important for improving language skills, especially writing. We will examine the possible connection between grammar-2 study and writing improvement in a moment.

First, however, we must notice still a third kind of lament over a deficiency in “grammar.” It is frequently pointed out that students confuse lie and lay, do not choose who and whom correctly, say infer instead of imply, mismatch subjects and verbs, mix up pronoun reference, use double negatives, etc., and that these mistakes are evidence of their need to study grammar. In such a claim we have grammar being used to mean not “underlying structure” (grammar-1) or “theory of the structure” (grammar-2) but “linguistic etiquette,” the rules of “proper” verbal manners which tell us what to do to be correct but most frequently what to avoid. This collection of “don’ts” is popularly called “grammar,” and in fact must surely be what most people think of when the term is used. So here we have grammar-3, and here the other grammar responsibility assigned to the schools. However, the distinction is usually considerably blurred. We don’t find separate grammar-2 and grammar-3 textbooks. And sometimes single lessons will mix description and pre/proscription, especially in using concepts and terminology from grammar-2 to explain the grammar-3 errors. But the two are fundamentally different in nature.

Most people, including educators, do not feel any need to justify teaching grammar. Thus the possible benefits remain unspecified and their validity unexamined. My purpose in what follows is to attempt to state precisely the range of possible justifications for including grammar study in the curriculum, keeping in mind that they are not mutually exclusive. First for grammar-2.

Either or both of two general benefits have been claimed for consciously knowing about the structure of sentences. The first is that it has humanistic value, that it is liberating knowledge for its own sake. This lofty view was expressed strongly in a statement from the NCTE Commission on Composition (1974, no. 12):

The study of the structure and history of language, including English grammar, is a valuable asset to a liberal education and an important part of the English program. It should, however, be taught for its own sake, not as a substitute for composition, and not with the pretense that it is taught only to improve writing.

Or more eloquently, Bradford Arthur in Teaching English to Speakers of English (1973, p. 150):

The study of language need not be justified by its effect on learning academic skills. If man needs or desires to understand himself and other human beings and if education helps satisfy this need, then the study of language does not have to be an aid to reading or writing, or to anything else. Our ability to think, act, feel, and interact as human beings is bound up with our ability to speak to and understand each other. In learning about language, a student is learning about himself; no further justification is necessary.

But if the continued funding of grammar teaching depended just on its humanistic value, we would see its place in the curriculum shrivel to insignificance. We are a much more pragmatic people than that; almost all the support that exists for grammar instruction rests on the belief that knowing grammar contributes to improving language use, especially writing. However, much less clear, because seldom discussed, are the exact ways in which grammatical knowledge may aid writing improvement.

Two pragmatic ends are offered for knowing grammar-2, one productive and the other editorial.
The stronger claim is that knowing grammar-2 enables the writer to consciously and actively choose from a wider range of structural resources, the result being more direct, sophisticated, varied, and well-structured sentences and discourse. For example, knowing the various means by which English subordinate clauses allow one to structure interrelated propositions effectively and precisely. Or an awareness of how the devices for attaching free sentence modifiers improve the use of detail in descriptive writing. Some approaches actually require students to practice using these structures in specific ways. However, mostly it is assumed that the knowledge itself is sufficient and that it will transfer when appropriate writing situations arise. In the words of one widely used text:

Just as there are careful and effective drivers who do not know what makes a car run, so there are those who, through practice and skillful observation, have become satisfactory, even effective, writers with very little understanding of the mechanics of the language. But it follows that the more you know about the form and function of the parts that make up the larger unit, the sentence, the better equipped you are to recognize and to construct well-formed sentences. . . .


The weaker, but more common claim, is that the ability to analyze sentences grammatically helps the writer to recognize problems and to understand how to remedy them. These may be stylistic problems, such as monotonous patterns or awkward passives or front-heavy subjects. However, by far the most frequent application of grammar-2 knowledge is in learning the "mechanics" of standard written English, primarily punctuation and correct linguistic etiquette (grammar-3). Because we don't acquire these editorial rules naturally, we have to learn them consciously, usually in school. But to be teachable, the content must be analyzed and be specified with a nomenclature. This is precisely what grammar-2 provides—the shared concepts and associated terminology by which the linguistic preferences of the elite can be objectified as rules learnable by anyone. As John Warriner (n.d., p. 8) puts it: "The chief usefulness of grammar is that it provides a convenient and, indeed, as English is taught today, an almost indispensable set of terms to use in talking about language."

To summarize, the justifications for teaching grammar-2—that is, conscious theoretical knowledge about the structure of the language—are that

1. The knowledge has humanistic, liberating value for its own sake; and/or

2. the knowledge improves language use, especially writing,
   a. by making the writer aware of the grammatical resources available for creating effective sentences, and/or
   b. by providing the student and teacher with a common basis for recognizing and analyzing sentence problems and for learning to remedy them.

The obvious justification for teaching grammar-3—the collection of linguistic behaviors to be avoided—is that we want our students' writing to be free of the sorts of errors that would mark them as uneducated. However, when we examine attitudes towards the teaching of linguistic etiquette, we find two sharply differentiated assumptions. The prevailing belief is that the rules should be taught as absolutes, what Joseph Williams (1981, p. 166) has called the standard of "Transcendental Correctness." Thus, as much as possible, all rules are treated as having about equal validity and each as being applicable in virtually all writing situations. Opposed to this, however, is the view that the teaching of grammar-3 should have a relativistic justification, what can be called the standard of usage. If we are training our students for the real world of writing, then our instruction should be based on—and should reflect—what successful writers actually do. Therefore, how the rules are justified will depend on whether specific ones are generally heeded, generally ignored, heeded variably according to context, or heeded by some writers and ignored by others.

There might be still other justifications offered for teaching grammar, such as that it exercises some general analytic or reasoning faculty or that the knowledge is simply an essential mark of an educated, cultured person. However, I believe that the reasons specified above account for the preponderance of attitudes and assumptions about why American students should be taught grammar.

The question now remains: can any of these justifications, alone or together, support a prominent place for grammar instruction in the curriculum? I leave aside here the important question of whether, in fact, teaching grammar achieves the ends claimed. There is a long history of research attempting to measure the alleged practical benefits
of studying English grammar. These research results are reviewed and assessed in a number of places, including Braddock, et al. (1963), Sherwin (1969), Elley, et al. (1979), and Kolln (1981). Overall the research gives little cause for optimism. But for my purposes this doesn’t matter. Let’s assume that the research designs were faulty or that the wrong kind of grammar was used or that the teaching method was bad. Let’s assume that grammar instruction is effective. I want teachers, administrators, and the public to seriously consider whether the ends that are claimed justify the time and resources required to achieve the necessary level of knowledge and skill.

As a linguist I would enjoy being able to plump the importance of part of my stock in trade, grammar. However, in my short career I have seen the pendulum swing from one grammatical excess to the other in the American school curriculum. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the salvation was to be “linguistic” grammar. If traditional grammar hadn’t worked, it was because it was the wrong grammar—pre-scientific, prescriptive, Latinate. What was need was the “new grammar,” descriptions of English according to the structural or transformational models then current or evolving in linguistic research. They came, and though many of the textbook versions were superficial and poorly done, there were several thorough treatments which, within the limits of theory and knowledge then available, accounted for large amounts of English structure, and quite systematically and explicitly too. The epitome of the trend was the kindergarten to high school Roberts English Series, which immersed the students in detailed information about the structure of English presented within the framework of early transformational grammar.

For many reasons, some of which should have been obvious early on, the “new grammar” failed. The fad quickly passed, hastened by the growing perception of a “crisis” in the reading and writing abilities of the students of the mid and late 1970s. Obviously if the “new grammar” hadn’t succeeded—in fact, according to some, had contributed to the problems—then the direction to go was back to the old grammar, the “traditional grammar” with its relatively few, relatively familiar terms and concepts and especially with its no-nonsense emphasis on “correctness.” The pendulum has swung, and now with overwhelming public and establishment support, grammar again rides high in the textbooks being published and in curricular changes being made or urged. Like phonics, grammar (this time “real” grammar) is one of the “basics” that we are getting back to.

What can we expect from this renewed stressing of the old grammar? Will literacy improve? Will verbal test scores rise? Will the impatient public be satisfied that language arts teachers are using the appropriate means to achieve the right ends?

Since standardized tests almost always check on the control of correct punctuation and linguistic etiquette, it is possible that a wide, sustained instructional emphasis on grammar-2 and grammar-3 could result in somewhat improved verbal scores. If we started the drilling and memorizing early and insisted more strongly on the importance of the skills, then we could reasonably expect that more students would retain more of it. That is the direction we seem to be going, and if this trend lasts long enough, then we will likely produce young writers who are better able to edit the surface features of their writing.

Will the public be satisfied? Probably yes, at least partly. The expressions of concern about writing are almost never occasioned by, or exemplified by, problems such as poor organization, inadequate development, inappropriate tone, etc. Rather, the handwringing attaches to bad spelling and punctuation and to the grosser errors in linguistic etiquette. If we can show that language arts instruction has improved on these problems, then public criticism will, I think, be considerably diminished.

But will literacy have been improved significantly? That, I think, is the serious question which we must raise both for our own professional consideration in rationalizing our instructional goals and methods and also for the larger public policy discussions. For I sense that once again unrealistic hopes are being raised for “grammar.” I have tried to show through my close specification of answers to “Why teach grammar?” that the benefits which can possibly be claimed are few and modest, even when accepted collectively. But especially when we consider the benefit which overwhelmingly justifies grammar instruction—error avoidance—we see how narrow is the base on which such great expectations are founded.

I am not saying that we shouldn’t teach grammar. We should, both grammar-2 and grammar-3.
And we should do it more interestingly and effectively so that in fact our students are more knowledgeable about the structure of English and are better editors. But we should not allow the current enthusiasm for grammar to distort the curriculum. True literacy is more than the negative virtue of not making mistakes, and it cannot be attained primarily through analyzing sentences and memorizing rules. Reading and writing must remain the center of the language arts curriculum, “basics” which we must be prepared to explain and defend to colleagues, administrators, school boards, and the public.

References


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*I Seen It*

“I seen it wit mine own eyes,” Thomas shouted.
“You mean I saw it with my own eyes,” teacher corrected.
“Oh, you seen itto?”
“Thomas, you must say I saw it.”
“OK, I’ll tell evryone you seen itto.”
“No, you did not seen it!”
“But, I did seen it,” Thomas gasped!
Teacher interrupted, “No one seen it.
Say I saw it; you saw it.
Somebody saw it.”
“They did?” Thomas was surprised.
“Now, Thomas, why did you say, ‘I seen it?’”
“Because I seen it.”
“Let’s try another way,” teacher suggested.
“What did you see?”
“Thanks a lot.
What I seen, you made me forgot.”

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