Research over a period of nearly 90 years has consistently shown that the teaching of school grammar has little or no effect on students. —George Hillocks & Michael Smith, 1991

Background

The most common reason for teaching grammar as a system for analyzing and labeling sentences has been to accomplish some practical aim or aims, typically the improvement of writing. For decades, however, research has demonstrated that the teaching of grammar rarely accomplishes such practical aims. Relatively few students learn grammar well, fewer retain it, and still fewer transfer the grammar they have learned to improving or editing their writing.

What doesn’t work: The research

■ “Diagramming sentences ... teaches nothing beyond the ability to diagram” (1960 Encyclopedia of Educational Research).

■ “The impressive fact is ... that in all these studies ... the results have been consistently negative so far as the value of grammar in the improvement of language expression is concerned. Surely there is no justification in the available evidence for the great expenditure of time and effort still being devoted to formal grammar in American schools” (DeBoer, 1959).

■ “None of the studies reviewed for the present report provides any support for teaching grammar as a means of improving composition skills. If schools insist upon teaching the identification of parts of speech, the parsing or diagramming of sentences, or other concepts of traditional grammar (as many still do), they cannot defend it as a means of improving the quality of writing” (Hillocks, 1986).

■ For most students, the systematic study of grammar is not even particularly helpful in avoiding or correcting errors (Elley et al., 1976; McQuade, 1980; Hillocks, 1986).

■ “The teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing” (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer, 1963).

What works better: The research

■ Studying formal grammar is less helpful to writers than simply discussing grammatical constructions and usage in the context of writing (Harris, 1962).

■ Learning punctuation in the context of writing is much more effective than studying punctuation marks and rules for punctuation (Calkins, 1980).

■ Usage, sentence variety, sentence-level punctuation, and spelling are applied more effectively in writing itself when studied and discussed in the context of writing, rather than through isolated skills instruction (Di Stefano and Killion, 1984).

■ Systematic practice in combining and expanding sentences can increase students’ repertoire of syntactic structures and can also improve the quality of their sentences, when stylistic effects are discussed as well (Hillocks and Smith, 1991).

■ For learners of English as a second language, research suggests that extensive reading may promote the acquisition of grammatical structures better than explicitly studying or practicing such structures (Elley, 1991). Indeed, for both first and second language learners, extensive reading significantly promotes grammatical fluency and a command of the syntactic resources of the language (Krashen, 1993).

Implications for teaching grammar as an aid to writing

■ Teach only the grammatical concepts that are critically needed for editing writing, and teach these concepts and terms mostly through mini-lessons and conferences, while helping students edit.

■ Help students expand their syntactic repertoire and explore style by considering effective examples, then experimenting and discussing the results.

■ Have students experiment with and discuss various activities in sentence combining, expanding, and manipulating (Strong, 1986; Killgallon, 1987; Daiker, Kerek, & Morenberg, 1990).

■ Give students plenty of opportunities and encouragement to write, write, write: for a variety of purposes and real audiences. Teacher response should include assistance with sentence structure and the mechanics of writing, during both revision and editing (Rosen, 1987).

■ Give students plenty of opportunities and encouragement to read, read, read.

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Read aloud to students, choosing at least some selections that have more sophisticated sentence structures than the literature that the students would ordinarily read by themselves.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES


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