Honors Research Projects

The Dr. Gary B. and Pamela S. Williams Honors College

Spring 2018

Traditional Grammar for a Modern Classroom

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A Review of the Literature

For years, there has been an ongoing debate as to what the best method to teach grammar is. While linguists and English professors may all claim to have the right way, a thorough review of the literature reveals there are multiple ways grammar is being taught, and with the different methods comes different successes. Before doing an in-depth analysis of the application of traditional grammar practices in a modern-day classroom, it becomes necessary to first gain an understanding of the vastly differing thoughts on grammar instruction. Despite years of research and analysis, the professionals have not come to the conclusion that there is one superior method. Consequently, through the look at different methods, it becomes obvious that different teachers and different students can respond positively to a multitude of methods.

While many value the teaching of rules, Deborah Dean in her 2011 article "Shifting Perspective about Grammar: Changing What and How We Teach" suggests that the emphasis should be focused far more on the function of language. Dean utilizes imitation to model to her students how published authors are varying their sentences and structures. Through this method, students first identify different structures and styles authors use, and they then practice utilizing these same methods within their writing. Furthermore, she believes students should learn how different genres ultimately shape individuals' use of language: "Teaching language from a genre approach helps students understand how to marshal their language skills for specific tasks instead of seeing language as a unitary concept" (Dean, 2011, p. 22). Dean believes teaching imitation by genre allows students to see how the expectations for writing vary depending on the audience and purpose. She hopes students will not see grammar as a list of rules to be followed but as an ever-changing, progressing language that is shaped by context.

Similarly to Dean, Bowling Green State professor Lance Massey values the differences in grammatical usage. Massey, however, believes different uses of grammar should be acknowledged and analyzed: "Grammar thus marks an important point of contact between form and content, and, as such, it also constitutes a powerful analytical lens for textual analysis and criticism…" (2011, p. 66). Massey believes that grammar is "manipulated for rhetorical effect" and they reason behind grammatical usage does not indicate mistakes (p. 66). Instead, these differences intentionally reveal the text's deeper meaning. As a result, grammar and literature cannot be taught separately but are intricately connected. Therefore, there is no room for grammar being taught in isolation within the classroom.

Harold Foster, former University of Akron professor, in his 2002 book *Crossing Over,* explores how grammar can be integrated into writing units. Foster explores how Bob Sanderfelt, English teacher of twenty-one years, uses grammar in his classroom. Sanderfelt does value the teaching of basic grammatical terminology such as parts of speech and punctuation rules; however, the terminology is used solely so that the students and teacher can easily discuss basic sentences. From there, Sanderfelt will review common errors in writing. through usage-based exercises. This veteran teacher ultimately believes that only noticeable errors should be identified and minor grammatical errors can be ignored: "Some errors should be ignored, with the teacher concentrating only on the most serious types. Those errors that jump out at the reader should be considered for analysis" (Foster, 2011, p. 213). While Sanderfelt values correct grammar, he ultimately strives to ensure that writing is clear from grammatical errors that will distract from the students' writing

Instead of following the basic rules of grammar, Patricia A. Dunn and Kenneth Lindblom in their article "Why Revitalize Grammar" believe that grammar should be taught solely using descriptive methods. Descriptive methods encourage students to observe the patterns of grammar from the world around them, identify patterns, and form rules from the observed patterns. Acknowledging how professional writers are breaking the traditional rules of English, Dunn and Lindbolm believe the basic conventions of "standard English" should be questioned and changed: "Published contemporary writers do all sorts of things students are taught to avoid" (2003, p. 46). These differences, as suggested by Dunn and Lindblom, should be discussed and explored, but they should not be condemned or marked incorrect. The two former high school English teachers believe students should not be taught what is right and wrong but instead how the differences in grammar affect the message being sent.

From strictly following the rules of grammar to intentionally breaking the simplest rules, it becomes apparent that there cannot be one simple method that works for teaching grammar. If there were, it would be clearly supported by years of research. Teachers, professors, and researchers alike must consider instead the advantages and disadvantages of each method. After all, students are individual learners and cannot be prescribed a learning style, nor can teachers be prescribed a teaching method.

While it is evident there is no one right way to teach grammar, sentence parsing—breaking down sentences to their parts of speech and identifying noun phrase functions—has become a method the mainstream media has deemed inefficient. In fact Michelle Cleary, DePaul University professor, goes so far as to claim, "[T]raditional grammar lessons—those hours spent diagramming sentences and memorizing parts of speech—don't help

and may even hinder students' efforts to become better writers" (2014). However, in a society that eagerly desires individuals to be critical and analytical thinkers, it is time to reconsider the true effects of sentence parsing. Therefore, it becomes necessary to examine this method in-depth to reveal that is in neither archaic nor ineffective; instead, it holds invaluable benefits that must be considered in the modern-day classroom.

A Traditional Method in a Modern-Day Classroom

In 1985, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) declared, "[T]he use of isolated grammar and usage exercises not supported by theory and research is a deterrent to the improvement of students' speaking and writing…"(Resolution on Grammar Exercises to Teach Speaking and Writing, 1985). Therefore, it seems the use of sentence parsing would appear an irrelevant practice in the modern-day world. However, a closer look at research from Lynn Sams, in her 2003 article "How to Teach Grammar, Analytical Thinking, and Writing: A Method That Works," reveals another side to the problem with the implementation of grammar: "Both traditional and in-text context approached to grammar instruction fail for exactly the same reason: they treat grammar as something that exists apart from and outside the writing process itself" (p.57). Sams opines instead that grammar is connected directly to teaching writing and cannot be taught separately. It, therefore, becomes necessary to examine the benefits of sentence parsing to reveal, in contrast to the NTCE, exactly how sentence parsing becomes an essential tool to improving speaking, writing, and reading in the secondary classroom.

Teaching sentence parsing allows students to understand the rudiments of the English language, building a strong foundation with which students can fully explore reading and writing. In an interview, high school English teacher of 10 years Frank DeVitis necessitates the

basic understanding of sentences: "Students are actually starting to see sentences not as the whole unit but as the pieces as they unfold, and so when students learn sentence parsing, this helps with everything else that we do in English class" (F. DeVitis, personal communication, 2018). When students are able to see the parts of the English language, they can put it together as a puzzle. They do not merely see the overall picture, they see how each individual part of speech and noun phrase ultimately affects the deeper meaning of the sentence. Furthering this idea, Sams, in her aforementioned article, suggests the ability to understand the basic parts of sentences is necessary to fully understand the rudiments of English: "The ability to analyze sentences, to understand how the parts work together to convey desired meaning, emphasis, and effect is thus essential to the writing process" (Sams, 2003, p. 57). Therefore, sentence parsing allows students to go from merely identifying and explaining texts to analyzing and evaluating the deeper meaning behind the text. This in-depth look at sentences ultimately allows students to critically think about the complex structure of the English language.

Understanding the basic building blocks of the English language, students are able to delve deeper into reading and gain greater comprehension. The critical thinking behind sentence parsing takes the practice from an isolated skill merely tested on quizzes to an integral part of understanding complex texts. The Common Core standards for grades nine and ten require students to "determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone" (English Language Arts Common Core Standards, 2018). To successfully analyze the effect of word choices, it is essential that students know the exact role

the word plays within the sentences. Sentence parsing equips students with the skills they need to break down the sentence and understand how one word can altogether alter meaning and tone.

Harvard Instructor Phyllis Weaver further reveals how sentence parsing can improve reading comprehension: [A]ttention is now shifting to higher level processes of comprehending and recalling written discourse and to the contribution of these processes to reading skill and skill deficiency" (1979, p. 130). When students can understand the sentences as parts and pieces they are able to better comprehend texts in-depth. Weaver furthers, "Moreover, efficient interaction or integration among various word analysis and discourse processes is considered to play an important role in overall reading skill" (1979, p. 130). If students merely view sentences as a whole unit, they will fail to see how the parts interact to create a deeper meaning. However, understanding how words interact with one another allows students to pick apart the sentence. It becomes a tool students can call upon to ask how and why.

Furthermore, parsing allows students to consciously see the full meaning behind a sentence. DeVitis in his interview reveals how utilizing this traditional grammar practice has transformed the way his students read complex texts: "We will read a sentence in class and discuss the meaning, and then we will slow it down and put the sentence on the board and parse it. As the kids are parsing it, we are looking at parts of speech and now they see it so much more clearly" (F. DeVitis, personal communication, 2018). DeVitis further discusses how understanding the composition of a sentence allows individuals to see past irregular syntax within poetry. With students being able to identify subjects and verbs, students can easily rework complex structures in poetry to a sentence that is normal to them: "Now they can put it together and marshal it in their mind in the way it actually belongs" (F. DeVitis, personal communication,

2018). Suddenly, intimidating texts such as Shakespeare become easy to navigate. It becomes evident that the use of sentence parsing allows students to break apart complex texts, analyze the impact words have within texts, and grow in reading comprehension.

While encouraging students to critically read, sentence parsing also equips students with the skills they need to grow as writers. Most obviously, the understanding of parsing and sentence identification allows individuals to better diversify their writing. DeVitis comments on the need for students to be able understand how to vary sentence structure: "Teachers will tell students you need to vary your sentence structure, but they don't tell you how. When they know sentence parsing, all these structures that you talk about come into the students' minds" (F. DeVitis, personal communication, 2018). When students are told to add sentence variety, it often becomes a checklist to add a compound sentence or a dependent clause set off by commas. However, because sentence parsing directly reveals the basic building blocks of the English language, students can creatively construct their sentences instead of pulling from a bank of solutions. Sentence parsing and diagramming sets students up for lifetime of learning how they can move their sentences around to best convey what they mean. It becomes an art—not forced editing.

Being able to see the parts of a sentence and how they affect the other parts allows students to more accurately find their voice in writing. Joan Berger in her 2006 article "Transforming Writers through Grammar Study" explores how teaching the basic elements of sentences allows her students to grow and find their own voice: "When the teaching of grammar is viewed as a way to enable students to use their voices more effectively, to deliver their ideas and passions with greater impact, we can reinstate it as an important means to an end" (p. 58).

Without knowing how sentences can be reworked, students are limited in their ability to tap into their own writing voice. Grammar is not just an answer on a test. It is not merely a list of rules that need to be followed. It is a portal for students to explore the depths their words can explore. Knowing the basic elements of a sentence allows students to move the different pieces and parts around to create their own unique voice.

While some might argue that the teaching of sentence parsing and diagramming in isolation is ineffective, it is absolutely necessary due to the prior knowledge students have and the importance grammar has. DeVitis reveals that most of his students come in knowing little to no grammar, and he feels it is his responsibility to take action: "It is necessary to teach parsing and diagramming because students cannot write, and most often, it is not their fault. They have not gotten the rudiments of grammar" (F. DeVitis, personal communication, 2018). Therefore, to do only short mini lessons building on prior knowledge would not be effective. As students are learning the basic parts of speech and noun phrases, they will likely be unable to apply it to the book they are reading or they paper they are writing. Thus, the rudiments must be taught first and readily applied after. Sams furthers this idea in her aforementioned article: "Students have no background knowledge about grammar, no vocabulary, no concepts, no means for understanding teachers' explanation of rules or their application. Thus, someone who attempts to teach grammar in context, is, in effect, attempting to teach grammar in a vacuum" (2003, p.63). If students came in with an understanding of grammar, the lessons would become reviews and could be easily folded into instruction. However, until students truly learn how the English language is structured, they must focus on grammar skills in isolation before applying them in context.

From improving reading comprehension, to growing students as writers, to encouraging students to think critically, sentence parsing and diagramming proves to be an effective tool to utilize at the secondary level. Not only does research reveal the powerful effects of the practice, results of students reveal drastic improvements in understanding of the English language. DeVitis states that students who pay attention in his class and come prepared to learn improve their English ACT score anywhere from six to ten points. Diagramming and parsing takes the gray area of the English language and creates black and white rules. Rules on commas, semicolons, subject-verb agreement and who and whom become blatantly clear. DeVitis says, "Kids have been blind to grammar. It is the unexplored vein of the mind" (F. DeVitis, personal communication, 2018). It is time for teachers to acknowledge their role in opening students' eyes to the unseen. Grammar can no longer be a list of rules that must be followed. Grammar must become a way for students to be challenged as they think critically, grow analytically, and challenge themselves to find their voice—one that will follow them wherever they go.

A Series of Materials

I myself am a student who went through the process of learning sentence diagramming and parsing in the aforementioned interviewee Frank DeVitis. It was during this time that I took my English ACT score from a 24 to a 34. While reveals my growth in this area, it was my writing skills behind the scene that improved even more. I was able to understand why my writing failed to transition in spots and why my writing appeared lackluster. Suddenly, I was able to analyze and evaluate my writing at great depths and grow in my shortcomings.

It is for this reason that I will incorporate sentence parsing and diagramming into my classroom. While many students are at first loath to explore the depths of grammar, they

eventually see how the knowledge directly affects their ability to analytically read and write. While all teachers are capable of teaching this, it is essential that they actively choose to take sentence parsing from mere identification to analysis and evaluation. If not, students become stuck in a stage of loathing.

To assist teachers in taking grammar instruction full circle, below is a series of materials I have created. The materials could be printed as a packet and passed out for students. Teachers could choose how they would pace this unit. It could be used as bell work for students as they slowly learn parts and pieces, or a class could be centered on learning this material all at once. Following the foundations of parts of speech and noun phrases, students can then learn rules for punctuation, as they would then be able to understand the basic parts of a sentence. Furthermore, students could then learn subject verb agreement as they are able to easily identify simple subjects and with what noun the verb needs to agree. Overall, the following materials provide teachers the flexibility to make the material fit their classroom while still providing students the information they need to begin critically thinking and analyzing the words that they use.

Parts of Speech

Noun: a person, place, thing, or idea
Example: Singing is fun.
Questions to ask: Is it a person, place, thing, or idea? Does it have a dictionary definition? Does
      a, an, or the precede the word?
Label: N

Verb: an action or state of being; has to have a subject (someone/ something performing the
idea)
Example: Madison is amazing
Forget what she said.
Questions to ask: If you are calling the word a verb, who is performing the action? What is the
      subject of the verb?
Label: V

Adjective: describes a noun or pronoun
Example: Madison is nice.
The pretty girl
Questions to ask: What noun or pronoun does the word describe?
Label: Adj.

Pronoun: person, place, thing, or idea with NO dictionary definition; must have an antecedent
Example: I do not want Sam to go to the movie. Antecedent: The speaker
      Even though the pencil was an inch long, Kayla used it anyway. Antecedent: the pencil
Questions to ask: What is the antecedent? If you plug in the antecedent, does the sentence still
      make sense? Would the pronoun have a dictionary definition?
Label: Pro

Adverb: Modifies a verb, adverb, or adjective; shows how, when, why, or where.
Example: She was always pretty.
      She was always very pretty.
      She was always so very pretty.
Questions to ask: What does the adverb modify? Does it reveal, how, when, why, or where?
Label: Adv.

Conjunction: Conjoins two like structures; not the standard FANBOY
Example: Even though I was scared, I went to the haunted house.
      She was kind yet sarcastic.
Questions to ask: What two like structures does the conjunction conjoin? How are the two
      structures like?
Label: Conj.

Preposition: has a full prepositional phase that acts as an adjective or adverb; usually fits the fox
jumped _____ the hollow log

Example: The girl (in the pink dress) was sweet.PP: adjective
　　　　Don't forget to brush your teeth (in the morning.) PP: adv modifying when to brush
Questions to ask: What is the full prepositional phrase? Does it act as an adj or adv.
Label: Prep

Interjection:an abrupt remark, made especially as an aside or interruption.
Example: Oh no, how will I finish my paper on time?
Questions to ask: Does it affect the meaning of any other words in the sentence?
Label: Interj

Steps for Labeling Sentences

1. Label all parts of speech
   A. When you are stuck, look for nouns, pronouns, verbs, and adjectives first
   B. Using the questions listed above, narrow down options for what the POS could be
2. Find all prep phrases and their functions
3. Label the simple subject and the simple predicate

Parts of Speech Practice

Directions: Label all parts of speech, prep phrases and their functions, all simple subjects, and all simple predicates.

1. Falling through the roof was the rain that had somehow come into the house.

2. The clock struck twelve as Cinderella ran down the staircase and magically changed from her sparkling blue dress into her rags.

3. The recently engaged expel knew they could never afford a trip to the Bahamas.
4. The man clad in the purple bandana was indeed the fugitive for whom the cops were searching.

5. Maybe the girls lost so many socks while doing laundry due to her inattentiveness.

6. The student whose name was just called had forgotten to do her homework from the night before.

7. The seemingly foreign land had no traces of human civilization whatsoever.

8. Immediately upon entering into her grandmother's house, Susan took her shoes off while trying to give out proper hugs to all her relatives.

9. How many people will attend the New Year's Eve party is we offer free hot chocolate and party hats?

10. It was surprising that Lucie received her personal record during the hottest day of the year.

11. Ten minutes will be enough time to travel from the clock tower to the library as long as you speed walk.

12. Whenever you have time, please clean your shower and pick up the cotton that has fallen onto the floor.

13. Casey became the long-forgotten puppy when the one-month-old lady was adopted into the Smith family.

14. Although the apple pie tasted good, it could never surpass Linus's homemade apple delight.

15. No one could forget the good in Sarah—especially when watching her give out cookies to everyone in her school.

Sentence Parsing

Steps:

1. Identify all parts of speech
2. Label full prepositional phrases and identify the function
   A. Connect prep phrases adj to the noun they describe
3. Label simple subject and simple predicate
4. Circle all nouns and underline all verbs
5. Identify full noun phrases with brackets
6. Identify noun phrase functions

Noun Phrase Functions

Subject: completes the action (verb) of the sentence; the subject of a verb
Label: NP: Subj
      NP: Subj
Example: [The only girl] cried.
Questions to ask: Who/what is completing the action of the verb?

Oblique object: Answers the question of the prepositional phrase
Label: NP: Obq Obj
      NP:Obq Obj
Example: Macy slept (inside [the house])
Questions to ask: Does it answer the question of the prepositional phrase?

Direct object: receives the energy of the verb
      Label: NP: DOBJ
        NP: DOBJ
      Example: I slammed [the door]
      Questions to ask: Does it receive the energy of the verb?

Noun Phrase Subject and Direct Object Parsing Practice

1. Even though the teacher from Jackson never offered a suggestion, he still listened carefully in the meetings.

2. The dog with black-and-white fur at the store ate all the candy from my Easter basket.

3. I frequently sit at the dinner table before I wash my hands.

5. You will hang the portrait on the wall or I will do it for you.

6. The custodian with the grey hat changed the lightbulb, but it still did not work.

7. Past this door will be a new set of keys on the wall.

9. The smell of the lotion filled the air, but I could still not smell it.

10. If you want more food, you must bring it to the party.

11. The chair with the pink fabric has fallen over three times.

12. If you like the new software, you should buy it for your family.

13. My new phone still will not turn on, so I will take it to the Verizon store.

15. Will you please set my glass on the kitchen counter?

16. The pen is still not working, so I will throw it away.

17. The snotty girl never put her phone in her pocket during the conversation.

18. The plastic pink headband will break if you stretch it.

19. The sticky notes would not stay on her wall, so she taped them.

_____

Create your own following the format below

NP: Subj with NP: Obq Obj, NP: Dobj

NP: Obq Obj, Verb, NP: Dobj, NP: Obq Obj

Noun Phrase Functions

Indirect object: receives the direct object
      Label: NP:IDOBJ
      NP: IDOBJ
      Example: I gave [my sister] my cup of soup.
      Questions to ask: Does it receive the direct object?

Predicate noun: renames the subject
      Label: NP:PN
      NP:PN
      Example: The man in the blue shirt played [Shrek] in the musical.
      Questions to ask: Can you replace the verb with an equals sign?

_____

Subject, Direct Object, Oblique Object Indirect Object, and Predicate Noun Practice

1. Even though Suzy often forgets her homework, she never once has forgotten her cellphone.

2. Was your sister the girl with the hippie glasses?

3. She never once offered me any food to eat when I went to visit my best friend.

4. Lisa picked my white elephant present, but I was really hoping to give Jamie the old flip phone.

5. The girl in the sparkly pink dress was named pageant queen.

6. Don't forget to give your mom the old picture in my basement.

8. Even though Miss Smith gave Lizzie the talking stick, Gabe still offered his answers.

7. I had been on the team for three years and went to every optional practice, yet they still did

    not offer me the team captain position.

Noun Phrase Functions

Object Complement: renames the direct object
      Label: NP:Obj Comp
      NP: OBJ COMP
      Example: Critics named *Beauty and the Beast* [the best show of the year.]

Subject, Direct Object, Oblique Object, Indirect Object, Predicate Noun, and Object

Complement Practice

1. Make your mother your best friend if you are hoping to maintain a healthy relationship.

2. Betsy calls Maggie her little sister, but I have always thought Maggie was the oldest.

3. Don't forget to offer Lacey a position at Giant Eagle because she will be your best worker.

4. You will never be a close friend of mine if you continually call me magical meatball.

5. Ohio is the best place to be in the summer, but during the winner, travel agents will call it the

    cold heart of America.

Create your own using the formula below

1. Obq obj, Subject, verb, direct obj, obj comp

2. Verb, predicate noun, conj, subj, direct obj

Adjective Phrase and Functions

Predicate Adjective: an adjective that travels over the verb to describe the subject
      Label: |AP: PA|
       AP: PA
      Example: Macy was always |super sarcastic| but she has a good heart.
      Questions to ask: Is there an adjective that has been separated from the noun that is
separated by a verb?
Object Complement: an adjective that comes after the direct object and renames it
      Label: |AP: OBJ COMP|
      AP: Obj Comp
      Example: I considered Jerry |unqualified for the position|

Adjective Phrases: Object Complement and Predicate Adjective Practice

Directions: Label all parts of speech, identify all noun phrase and functions, and identify all
adjective phrases and functions.

1. I never considered her angry, but she was red in the face after I gave her sass.

2. After George sang the national anthem, he was ecstatic.

3. Even though she never showed up for practice, the team voted Jill most spirited.

4. The phone was brand new, yet Steve would not put a screen cover on it.

5. When all my friends posted a picture of themselves at a movie, I felt completely forgotten.

Relative Clauses

When learning to identify relative clauses, you must first be able to identify relative pronouns.
The following are the four relative pronouns that begin a relative clause:
      -Who
      -Whom
      -That
      -Which
The following is a relative adjective:
      -Whose

Relative Clause:

       -has a subject and a verb

       -unifies as a clause to act as an adjective

       Step 1: Identify any relative pronouns in the sentence

       Step 2: Identify if there is a full relative clause that has a subject and a verb

       Step 3: Find the subject and verb and rework the phrase so that it reads as a clause

       Step 3: Identify the part of speech and what it describes

Label {RC: ADJ}

       RC:ADJ

Example: The boy {whom I met at school today} was very mean to me.

       Reworked relative clause: I met him at school today.

Relative Clause Practice

1. The officers who were riding on horses often give children badges if they are behaving well.

2. Did you like the boy whom I was talking to in the hall.

3. The hotel that I found on trip advisor only had three stars, so let's stay at the hotel that your parents recommended.

4. The telephone, which is in the den, is actually currently out of battery.

5. The TV that I found at the garage sale was only $49.

Create your own using the following formula

1. Subject with RC: Adj, verb, dobj, obj comp

2. Verb, direct object with RC: adj

3. Obq Obj, subj, dobj, idobj with RC: adj

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