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The Importance of Grammar for English Learners and English Teachers in the Coming Decade

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I am a native speaker of English. Long before Kindergarten, I could produce and understand an infinite number of utterances in my mother tongue. I could ask and answer questions. I could use English to explain, describe, persuade, inform, accuse, justify, complain and entertain. Sometime during that first year of school, I began to read on my own, and I started to put words and sentences together in writing. By the time I turned six, the grammar of English was pouring into me and out of me: nouns, verbs, direct objects, personal pronouns. But I didn't know what a verb was; if I had ever heard the term *pronoun*, I might have thought it was a species of athlete. Like all of us, I learned to speak, listen, read, and write in my native language without being able to identify a predicate. I was very good at using an *adverb* to modify an *adjective* without ever having been taught what either was. Simply put, I didn't know my grammar.

And there were other things I didn't know. For example, I didn't know that I was falling in love with English (including English grammar) or that I'd spend much of the rest of my life studying it and teaching it to others at the secondary and post-secondary levels. Nor did I know how difficult it would be to try teach the grammar of English to other native speakers, all of whom could already produce utterances such as "I hate English" without knowing what a pronoun was, what a verb was, or why *English* needed to be capitalized. But I learned.

And after nearly forty years in the classroom, I'm still learning. In this essay, I

hope to share part of my journey as an English teacher with you, focusing in particular on shifting attitudes—my own and my students'—toward the role of grammar instruction. In fact, my attitudes are changing because my students are changing: in the 1980's, 100 percent of my students were native speakers who often felt that a focus on grammar was unnecessary (to say the least). That's far from true anymore. Breiseth, for example, notes that the population of English Language Learners (ELLs) in the United States is burgeoning. And according to language acquisition experts such as Brown, Folse, Frodesen, and many others, most English language learners need significant, clear, explicit instruction in the grammar of the language in order to master it, in order to thrive in the classroom and in English-speaking societies. If I don't want my students who are emerging bilinguals to say things like "I hate English," I need to bring them my A-game when it comes to teaching them grammar. When I started out as a teacher, I knew my grammar—but I had no game at all.

Knowing (and Teaching) My Grammar

I first taught English in October of 1982. I was a senior English major at a Big Ten university and, to make some money, I spent a day subbing for an English teacher in a nearby school. That first sub job turned out to be an easy gig: from early morning to mid-afternoon, I was supposed to teach grammar to middle and high school students. In every hour, the students were to have completed some traditional grammar homework ("Identify the parts of speech";

“Underline the subject once and the predicate twice”). According to the sub plans left for me, my only responsibility was to correct each class’s homework and then assign new grammar exercises.

I followed the plan. Hour after hour, I stood by the blackboard, grammar text in hand, and helped successive classes check their homework: “OK. Let’s look at Exercise C on page 54. What did you get for number 1?” For the most part, the students went along with the routine, but they were clearly bored, disengaged. However, just before lunch, a dispute arose between two eighth graders about the answer to a particular problem. When I announced the correct answer, the student who was incorrect angrily demanded proof. Quietly pleased that at last there was some energy in the room, I wrote a sentence on the blackboard and used it to explain why the correct response was correct and why the incorrect response was incorrect. When I turned around, the class stared dumbly at me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“How did you do that?” said a student in the front row.

“Do what?” I responded.

“Explain the answer,” she replied.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said.

“Wasn’t my explanation clear?”

She shook her head. “No. I mean yes, it was clear. I get it. But you didn’t have to look it up.”

“Look what up?” I asked.

“The answer. You just knew it. You didn’t use the book.”

“What book?”

“Right there,” she pointed. “On Mrs. Johnson’s desk. That workbook is the answer key. Whenever there’s an argument, she goes to the book and tells us the answer. But you just explained it. How did you know the answer without looking it up?”

Suddenly, my grammar life flashed before my eyes. The teachers in the elementary school I had attended as a kid pounded traditional grammar into us from second grade on. To them, English *meant* grammar. My friends hated those grammar exercises, but I enjoyed them. They were easy for me. I read the definitions and remembered them; I heard the explanations and understood them. Then, in high school, I studied Latin for four years, which deepened my grammatical understanding and taught me that learning an additional language means, in part, learning the grammar of that language. At the university, I continued studying Latin and added French and Greek. Studying the grammar of other languages not only helped me to learn those languages, but it also helped me understand English grammar even better. To top it off, my English major had included coursework in linguistics and the structure of English. So, yeah, as a college senior, I knew the answers to those eighth grade grammar questions. It never occurred to me that I shouldn’t. And I didn’t really understand why the students’ regular teacher had to look up the answers. I assumed that everybody who taught English “knew their grammar.”

As it happened, my first job out of college was as an English teacher at the school where that sub job had been. Because the school was so small, it was my responsibility to teach grammar, literature, and composition—we had separate textbooks and curricula for all three—every day to most of the kids, 7–12. Teaching grammar was a particularly tough slog. I found out quickly that most of my students were like the friends I had grown up with: they hated grammar and, in general, didn’t understand it very well. But I worked hard at teaching them. I really did know my stuff and did my best to explain it. I felt reasonably successful that first year because almost all of the kids got at least a C on the

unit tests and final exams. Still, as the year wore on, I noticed that passing the grammar tests didn't improve the correctness of their writing.

Then came year two. The seventh graders I had taught the previous year were now my eighth graders, and so on. The faces were mostly the same, and so was the curriculum, which required that I begin with parts of speech. That second September, I discovered that the teaching I had done in year one had been in vain. Nobody seemed to remember anything. All but a few had passed the tests the previous May, some with flying colors. But here we were again, trying to remember what an adjective was. Even the best students seemed unable to tell a helping verb from a linking verb. And their writing was still full of errors I thought we had already covered and corrected. What was going on? Was I a bad teacher? Were the kids not trying?

When the same thing happened in year three, I was near despair, and so were my students. What none of us knew then was that we were not alone. It wasn't until I went back to grad school that I was introduced to the voluminous research that had been done on the teaching of traditional school grammar (TSG). It wasn't pretty. For example, Hillocks's careful analysis of TSG research taught me that my students' responses to grammar instruction were quite normal, including their obvious dislike of grammar instruction, their tendency to forget what they had learned, and their seeming inability to apply the conventions in their own writing. Hillocks concludes that "if schools insist upon teaching the identification of parts of speech, the parsing or diagramming of sentences, or other concepts of traditional school grammar . . . , they cannot defend it as a means of improving the quality of writing" (138).

Research since then has confirmed Hillocks's conclusions. For example,

Smagorinsky, Wright, Augustine, O'Donnell-Allen, and Konopak write that "there is a strong consensus from more than a century of empirical studies: Traditional grammar instruction—that which isolates the teaching of grammar from language usage—is, at best, simply ineffective in changing students' language use" (78). Indeed, as Graham and Perrin demonstrate, traditional grammar instruction may be especially and uniquely harmful to students' writing.

In my present position as a teacher educator, I tell my students the grammar horror stories from my early days as a teacher, and I make sure they know what the research tells us about the negative effects of relying on drills divorced from genuine communication. I don't want anybody to teach grammar the way I tried to teach it myself, dragging kids from exercise to exercise and watching them become more bored and bewildered by the day—but never better writers.

However, as the year 2020 approaches, I'm worried that I might be doing too good a job of convincing future teachers that studying TSG isn't likely to improve students' language use. Many of the future English teachers in my classes have trouble passing simple grammar tests, and many of them couldn't care less. I recently asked a room full of student teachers to write and talk about what they know and how they feel about teaching grammar. The results were alarming. Here is a sampling of their responses:

- There are a lot of grammar rules I am not aware of. I cannot recall ever taking a class related to grammar.
- I haven't formally studied grammar since 6th grade. If I were to teach it, I'd be only one day ahead of my students.
- I know that the way I was taught grammar (drill through worksheets) is not effective. I want to help my

students learn grammar in context, but am not confident in my ability to do so.

- I feel like I don't know the content [of grammar] or how to teach it at all.
- Grammar is my weakest area...I learned many rules through reading and writing, but sometimes struggle to explain the "why."
- I am the least confident in teaching grammar/language because I think a lot of it is useless crap. I think it's the reason why people hate English. While literature and writing are full of freedom, grammar is full of rules and restraint, and I did not go into this field for it.

Now, why would a person who chose not only to major in English but also to teach English to others consider English grammar to be "useless crap"? How is it possible that so many successful English majors seem to know so little about the grammar of their own language?

Well, that's just it. It's their language. They don't need to be able to explain grammar in order to use the language successfully. Their knowledge is tacit and intuitive, native and natural. As English majors, most of them have learned to speak and write more conventionally than the general population. Like their Bluetooth speakers and their iPhones, English is something that (usually) works for them, something they use every day. Do they really need to be able to explain *how* it works? Will their future students need detailed explanations of all those grammar rules?

Emphatically, yes. English Language Learners (ELLs) represent the fastest growing segment of the student population in the United States (see Breiseth; Wolf, Bachman, Bailey, & Griffin). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, about one in every ten students nationwide

is an ELL, with much higher ratios reported in urban areas (see National Education Association). The U.S. Department of Education expects those numbers to increase dramatically by 2025; and all those emerging bilinguals are going to need teachers who can help them understand the formal properties of English.

As Frodesen argues, "a focus on form appears to be necessary...for optimal second language learning" (233), in part because "when instruction is meaning focused only, learners do not develop many linguistic features at targetlike levels" (233). Of course, not all form-focused instruction is equally effective for ELLs; for example, Larsen-Freeman notes that teachers who rely on "decontextualized grammar lessons" (251) are likely to be less effective than those who help emerging bilinguals to attend to formal matters during authentic, "communicative interactions" (251)—for example, in carefully designed group activities and discussions, in role-playing, in dramatic responses to literature, in writing to real audiences, and so on. Teachers who, like so many of my own students, are unsure of their own grammar knowledge are far more likely either to avoid teaching grammar altogether (see Hadjiouannou & Hutchinson; Hagemann & Wininger; Numrich) or to rely heavily on the kinds of decontextualized grammar exercises that have proven repeatedly to hinder language learning and language use (see Hadjiouannou & Hutchinson; Pezzetti).

In an ideal world, as Folse notes, English learners would be placed with teachers who have specialized training in ESL issues, including ESL grammar and pedagogy. However, "in the real world...as a default, the primary source of ESL instruction...falls on the content teachers" (19)—that is, on teachers who might know too little about English grammar to be of much help (see also Quintero & Hansen). What kind of ESL

instruction will the future teachers I work with be able to provide if they, themselves, can't pass a grammar test and believe that explicit understanding of how the language works is useless?

As Folse argues, teachers' inability to explain the essentials of grammar to non-native speakers might be natural, but it is not acceptable. ELLs need their English teachers to help them learn how English works. This means that I, as a teacher educator, have my work cut out for me. I need to do a better job of motivating future English teachers to learn basic grammar, both for themselves and for the good of their future students. In addition, I need to help them identify and think through the aspects of English grammar that are especially important and, often, especially difficult for ELLs (see, for example, Folse, 2016). Finally, I need to do a better job of modeling how to design collaborative, communicative lessons that focus on form and give both native and non-native speakers authentic opportunities to learn and to use the conventions of English.

I began this essay by telling a story from the early 1980's, my first decade as an English teacher. I end it now by looking forward to the stories to be written in the 2020's. As my students and I enter the new decade, increasing numbers of ELLs are going to need us to provide clear and complete explanations of the grammar of English. For those emerging bilinguals, at least, learning English won't be about completing boring homework assignments, passing a test, or pleasing the grammar police. For them, understanding grammar might mean the difference between thriving and merely surviving in the U.S., between graduating and flunking out. I never made that connection in the '80s when all of my students were native speakers. But I see grammar differently now. It's about access. It's about justice for all. It's about not hating English. And that's not useless crap.

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