Grammar Pedagogy

The pedagogical approach to teaching grammar has had a long history, as teaching the standardization of usage in privileged and academic settings has long been considered the basic or even main work of writing instructors. The great volumes of research produced on the teaching of grammar have been overwhelmingly uniform and do not support the explicit teaching of grammar as a method of reducing errors or improving writing. This research conclusion has not, however, changed the majority of practice, perhaps due to a lack of teaching options. The challenge to an understanding of grammar pedagogy is finding successful teaching approaches when the research criticizes the methods available and popular. To teach grammar, regardless of method, you must first be familiar with the language, divisions, and some of the history of the field.

Grammar divisions may be understood in terms audience, function, or history. The grammar of the linguist is descriptive, in that it seeks to categorize language in all the ways it is used. The grammar of educators, administrators, and politicians demanding “higher standards” is prescriptive, listing just the ways language should be used. The way educators use the term “grammar” would be called “usage” by linguists, a term giving greater freedom to the educator to proscribe degrees of correctness in usage. This grammar or usage has been described in different ways over the past century, with traditional or formal grammar, structural grammar, and transformational generative grammar as the main schools. Traditional grammar involves defining certain words in terms of categories of meaning and finding rules for their use. For example, complete clauses must have a subject and a verb and may be joined with a conjunction. This system is based on Latin and does not map well to English, so the rules become increasingly complex and increasingly inaccurate. Structural grammar redefines the meaning-based parts of speech as function-based word types, but doesn’t change the basic purpose of proscribing correct usage. In 1964 Noam Chomsky wrote, “The grammar of L[anguage] will thus be a device that generates all of the grammatical sequences of L and none of the ungrammatical ones” (Enos 292). This changed the focus of grammar to creating a set of rules that would generate all grammatical sentences of a given language, and while very fashionable among linguists, had more limited applicability to writing pedagogy. Many differences exist on what is considered grammar and how to describe that grammar, but the research on teaching grammar as a method of improving writing is much more uniform.

The types of research relevant to the grammar pedagogy are those that describe possible methods of teaching grammar and those that evaluate these teaching methods in terms of effectiveness. This volume of research has been variously summarized, as by Patrick Hartwell, in his 1985 article “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar,” that attempts a fair assessment of both sides, but overwhelmingly concludes that traditional grammar instruction does not improve writing. There are a few studies that are so often cited, it is worth a specific look at them. Bateman and Zidonis published a 1966 study, “The effect of a study of transformational grammar on the writing of ninth and tenth graders,” concluding that instruction in transformational grammar along with practice in sentence combining is effective in improving writing. Later studies found only the sentence combining useful, and Robert Connors published a 2000 article “The Erasure of the Sentence” that explains how this can be used. Stephen Krashen divided grammar learning into acquisition and monitoring, which can be explained as the unconscious and conscious learning of grammar rules. Later studies by Ellen ialystock and Herbert Seliger disputed any transfer from conscious learning to actual use. An influential New
Zealand study has been “The Role of Grammar in a Secondary School English Curriculum,” as the study involved a wide group of students for an appropriate length of time, measuring a variety of skills. This study found no difference between the language growth of traditional grammar instruction, transformational grammar instruction, and a reading and writing group that received no grammar instruction. These studies frustrate the teacher looking for the magic bullet method to fix students’ grammar, but also liberate the teacher in knowing that any method chosen will be equally ineffective.

When finding methods of grammar instruction, it is necessary to decide what the purpose of the instruction will be. Grammar instruction has not been shown to improve writing, but in terms of understanding the nature and structure of the language, grammar instruction is very useful. Also, grammar allows for a basic shared vocabulary between the teacher and student, useful in revision and instruction, though perhaps not in composition. The development of an understanding of the language of grammar and usage allows the student to self correct from available rules, and defines appropriate areas of attention for the student to correct. The instructor must keep in mind, however, that this instruction is not what improves writing, here defined as more complex, varied, error free prose. Knowledge of traditional grammar terms may be necessary for ease of teacher student communication, but the suggested methods of writing usage improvement do not involve specific grammar instruction.

Several different traditions provide suggestions and support for different grammar instruction techniques. Classical rhetoric suggests imitation as a way to develop a standardized, and can be easily applied to the classroom. Assignments that ask students to read well-written prose, as well as those that ask students to write in the style of an author they’ve read are classically justified grammar instruction assignments. While classical rhetoricians rewrote and re-delivered famous speeches word for word, the challenge with imitation is to also produce original content. Transformational/Generative grammar suggested to Francis Christensen that sentence combining could be used as a pedagogical technique to produce more correct complex sentences. Sentence combining defines different types of sentence kernels and modifiers, and then defines how they can be put together. The technique was very popular and successful in the 1970s and then fell out of favor. English as a second language has unique issues with grammar instruction, as it cannot be assumed that a student has a speaking knowledge of English before learning to write. ESL pedagogy involving decontextualized drills or traditional grammar definition is not considered by the research to be at all beneficial, but ESL does provide a ideal for the language learning classroom as, “a comfortable, nonthreatening place with rich opportunities for communicative interaction, [and] lots of comprehensible input” (Clark 367). This focus on a nonthreatening environment is important as grammar instruction can lead to hypercorrection, as students overcompensate for errors and make their writing even worse. And while both comprehensive and selective error marking has not been found to improve writing, the possibility of productive error correction, if coordinated with instruction and timed with student readiness, is left open (Clark 382).

This mountain of research criticizing grammar instruction is discouraging as teachers struggle to address usage problems, but are unable to find teaching techniques supported by research. This frustration has led to the continuation of teaching using traditional grammar methods proved ineffectual by research fifty years ago. Certainly, an awareness of the limitations of traditional grammar is important for a writing instructor, and while no magic bullet may exist for effective grammar instruction for all students, the variety of techniques available may give hope for personalized instruction to meet the specific needs of students.
Annotated Bibliography & Works Cited

This presentation of “current findings” about grammar is useful as a basic theoretical approach to what non-linguists consider grammar, including punctuation, vocabulary, spelling, and sounds, not always receiving any treatment as grammar, but still important as expectations for what writing instructors teach.


This article traces the history of sentence based teaching methods, like sentence combining and imitation, to examine why they are not widely used today without having been disproved by research.


This often cited New Zealand study was reprinted in RTE because of the quality of the research done and the significant, if unsurprising result, that no type of grammar instruction tested fared any better than none at all.


Harris, Joseph. A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966.

Shaughnessy presents a very influential view of how traiditonal grammar should be taught, and though not supported by the research, it does advise the teacher to create the kind of non-threatening environment that doesn’t blame a lack of cognitive development in the student for their usage errors.

This book is an overview of the basic schools and developments in linguistic grammar theory, to provide the teacher with a theoretical basis for classroom practice. Includes Traditional, Phase-Structure, Transformational-Generative, and Cognitive Grammar chapters.