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The Pros and Cons of Teaching Formal Grammar in the Elementary School

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THE PROS AND CONS OF TEACHING FORMAL GRAMMAR
IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A Research Paper
Presented to
the Graduate Faculty
Central Washington State College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree
Master of Education

by
James L. Moore
August 1962

THIS PAPER IS APPROVED AS MEETING
THE PLAN 2 REQUIREMENT FOR THE
COMPLETION OF A RESEARCH PAPER.

William D. Floyd
FOR THE GRADUATE FACULTY

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM AND DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

There is considerable divergence of opinion as to whether or not formal grammar should be taught in the elementary schools. Many educators are moving away from the charmed circle of grammarians, but the latter think the salvation of our culture depends upon the clear and concise communication achieved only by the formal study of grammar. For many years English was considered the area of the curriculum least likely to change. Now for the first time in perhaps a century and a half, teachers of English are beginning to question their material and their methods of teaching this material. The traditional grammar we have been using since the origin of American education is unmistakably faulty, and certainly, for some of our students, it does increase the difficulties of communication. Yet many learn it quite fast and quite well and, what is more important, learn to use it effectively in communicating their thoughts.

I. THE PROBLEM

Statement of the problem. It was the purpose of this study (1) to discover and compare the arguments for and against the teaching of formal grammar in the elementary school and (2) to broaden the writer's own point of view on whether or not formal grammar should be a part of the study of English in his elementary school classroom.

Importance of the study. Communication is surely one of the primary

objectives of all teaching efforts in the public schools. In spite of this fact many students reach high schools and universities with a poor ability to communicate their thoughts and are thus unsuccessful. We must examine our method of teaching our language. It is often the traditional method, a study of the components of English and the rules governing the uses of these components. If there are better methods, we should adopt them. If formal grammar is the best method, then we must renew our efforts to give the student the best possible training in the skills of communication.

II. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

Grammar. Grammar was interpreted in this study to mean the systematic treatment of a language or the rules that govern it. This includes a study of the different classes of words, their relations to one another, and their functions in sentences.

Formal grammar. Formal grammar refers to a method of teaching grammar. This, in general, implies a scientific study as opposed to an incidental learning of the language. The scientific study would include the deductive learning of logically organized principles and rules relating to the subject of grammar.

Traditional method. The traditional method of learning grammar, in this paper will refer to the method most common in our public schools until recent years, namely the study of formal grammar.

Elementary schools. Those schools commonly containing grades one

through six shall be referred to as elementary schools.

Functional grammar. This method refers to the introduction of grammatical concepts whenever they are needed or add value to the language experiences of the child. Some concepts will be introduced only when they can or are likely to be immediately used by the student in his understanding or use of the language.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Much has been written on the pros and cons of teaching formal grammar in the elementary school. Most authors take a definite stand on one side of the issue; to them it is an either-or stand. To others the issue is not clear cut. A brief summary of the highlights of the available literature and research will be presented in this paper.

I. AUTHORITATIVE OPINION AND RESEARCH RELATED TO FORMAL GRAMMAR: PROPONENTS

The 1957 Committee on Grammar found that although some teachers deny that grammar should be taught, they actually were teaching it under a different name (11:51-70). They perhaps called it "sentence structure" or "mechanics." These teachers thought that since they were not teaching grammar as it was taught to them, they were not teaching it at all.

Hook (7:43) has attempted to defend the teaching of formal grammar in our public schools:

The teacher of English is not a comma hound, not a searcher for "errors," not a resident of an ivory tower. Rather, he is an alive human being deeply interested in developing his students into effective citizens of a democratic nation. The effective use of language -- alike by leaders and by those who choose the leaders -- is one of the keys to the continued success of democracy. No nation can rise above the level of its ideas or above the clarity and vigor of their expression.

Clear understanding of the most important grammatical terms is important A combination of analysis and construction, with greater emphasis on the construction, affords the best way of improving students' sentences.

Several authors, including Henry Christ (3:1-4), say there can be no argument about whether or not grammar must be taught but that questions may arise as to the amount to be taught. Christ believes that "the problem is not shall we teach grammar, but what grammar shall we teach?" A child's intuitive knowledge of grammar, he says, is incredibly extensive; the teacher's most important job is to turn this knowledge into improved communication. He also defends the English teacher's position, saying they cannot accept these new theories overnight. It would be difficult, he reflects, for teachers to unlearn everything at once to follow new approaches by no means clear and complete.

Long (9:266) feels that the structure of American English should be described simply, beginning in the early grades. He states, "Writing is a deliberate activity in which the grammatical patternings shared with speech are followed more scrupulously." He cautions, however, that the focus should never be on errors that are made or that might be made.

According to a 1928 editorial in the Detroit Free Press, found in a book by Fries (6:2), the remedy for the poor grammar heard and written in our country does not lie in the repeal of the rules of grammar but rather in a stricter and more intelligent enforcement of these rules in our schools. This editorial further criticized those in favor of functional grammar: "This protest against traditional usage and the rules of grammar is merely another manifestation of the unfortunate trend of the times to lawlessness in every direction."

Fries (6:2) says that approximately 95 per cent of all children and teachers come from homes or communities where incorrect English is used. One of his major concerns is that such people are exposed to the

ridicule of those who notice the errors. He says, "The only way they [the 95 per cent] can cure themselves is by eternal vigilance and the study of grammar."

In supporting the study of formal grammar, Colby (4:1) states that we are judged first by our physical appearance and next by our speech. If one is well groomed he is immediately thought of as a pleasant person of clean habits. When people judge by our speaking abilities, "well-ordered and accurate speech has ever been the sign of a well-ordered mind, of culture and refinement."

Harold Whitehall (16:1-7) reflects that written English is much more demanding in its need for clear expression than is the spoken language. When speaking, we can make use of voice intonation, volume, accents, gestures, and other expressive features to clarify our expression and meaning. In written language these are quite difficult, if not impossible. In the absence of these aids, we must depend upon other means to be certain that we are not misunderstood. Our written language must be more carefully organized, with a greater emphasis on exactness and clarity of expression. The reader cannot interrupt the author to ask for clarification on points that were not clear. The author must have sufficient command of the universally accepted forms of the language to relate his ideas in a way that leaves no questions in the reader's mind. Whitehall also implies that education in the English language has become education in the linguistic niceties, a poor substitute for the real linguistic education children should be receiving in our schools.

Discipline and literary elegance were two of the practical classroom goals of traditional grammar. It was thought that grammar, as the

taxonomy of language, could be related to the general order of the universe. Thus, when a student had mastered grammar, he had mastered a worthwhile science and had engaged in "logical exercises which improved the intellect and had beneficial effects on the character."

Generally, those in favor of formal grammar propose four basic premises to support their philosophy. (1) The study of formal grammar provides the only effective basis for mastery of the expressional skills. Only through the mastery of language forms, the learning of rules, and the diagramming of sentences can the student learn to express himself acceptably. (2) Grammar is of definite value as a disciplinary subject in developing the mind and improving the thinking abilities of students. (3) Grammar is a means of establishing correct idiomatic usage. This theory is based on the belief that the grammar of a language determines usage patterns rather than reflects them. (4) Grammar is a method of developing understanding of the sentence. Surely different individuals advocating these ideas would arrange them in different orders of importance. Some would argue, for example, that item number 4 is the most important because the individual can learn the meaning and use of the sentence best by studying the form and function of its component parts.

II. AUTHORITATIVE OPINIONS AND RESEARCH RELATED TO FORMAL GRAMMAR: OPPOSITION

Strickland (15:346-7) thinks that it is not important that elementary children understand the reasons for the forms they use. It is her philosophy that children can think, speak, and talk better if they can think only about what they are saying rather than being concerned with matters of correctness of grammar. They need to be correct, but this should be achieved by doing the correct thing often enough that it becomes automatic. "The form, after all, is only the vehicle of the content," she contends. Teachers can get results more quickly in young children by concentrating on their everyday speech to help them achieve a suitable standard of correctness. The teacher of the elementary school should not be concerned with trying to achieve a finished product in his English classes but with reaching the level of good colloquial speech. The stages of refining their language should be left to the secondary schools. There the students who have the need and the desire can learn to use formal grammar.

In elaborating her viewpoint, Strickland states that children in the elementary school can see little or no use in learning facts and rules concerning their language. For this reason the child's first contacts with grammar should be as meaningful as we can possibly make them. She would have children begin learning grammar in the fifth or sixth grade via an introduction to the concept of subject and verb and the place of each in the sentence. Even this is only preparation for later work, she feels, because neither the terminology nor the function of grammar will be

mastered until later on in the secondary school. In Strickland's opinion "Grammar books have no place in the elementary school" (15:357).

Strickland concludes her discussion of the topic of formal grammar in the elementary school by saying:

Formal grammar is a professional tool like the technical knowledge which doctors, lawyers, mechanics, and others use in carrying on their professions. It is needed by the linguistic specialist, the editor, and the copyreader in the publishing house, but not by the average citizen in carrying on his vocational and personal life. Good usage is the school's goal.

McKee (10:4) would agree that a pupil with incorrect language habits is usually not aware of these mistakes and that one of the jobs the school faces is to make the pupil aware of his incorrect habits and to correct them. "However," McKee adds, "there is no reason for teaching grammar unless the ideas taught can be used by the child almost immediately as independent aids for improving his speech and writing." Dr. McKee's main philosophy is that rules committed to memory are not retained unless they can be immediately applied or in some way be found usable by the student. "Aside from certain readiness exercises, all the formal grammar which needs to be taught in the elementary school can and should be taught in the sixth grade and above."

Sledd (14:2-9) believes that American schools are perpetuating an eighteenth century grammatical tradition, attempting to teach what is right by showing what is wrong. This author also criticizes the teaching of formal grammar, saying that many of our great writers do not observe the rules. The principal argument for some of our rules of grammar seems to be bare authority. Most American literary critics are not especially interested in grammar, but in style.

Research as early as 1913 found no support for the long-held contention that the study of grammar brings about mental discipline apart from the actual learning of the language.

Most teachers of grammar have contended that grammar is valuable, if not essential, to the learning of the English language. They feel that the knowledge of grammar will improve the student's ability to use his language in oral and written situations. This group would further support the study of grammar by contending that it is necessary to improve usage, to understand literature, or to learn a foreign language. Successively, each of these contentions has been submitted to intensive research.

The independent studies by Hoyt, Rapeer, and Strom were interpreted by the Encyclopedia of Educational Research (12:461) to indicate that significant effects of knowledge of formal grammar on the abilities of literary interpretation were not present. Correlations between knowledge of grammar and proficiency in various areas of subject matter were also studied and reported in the Encyclopedia of Educational Research. According to this source, Boreas, in his doctoral study, found that although all correlations were low, there was a higher correlation between achievement in grammar and mathematics than between achievement in grammar and composition or oral language abilities. Searles and Carlson, the compilers of research data in the 1960 edition of the Encyclopedia of Educational Research, state that "Research has steadily built a body of evidence that knowledge of grammar does not materially effect a student's ability to learn a foreign language" (12:461).

One of the methods frequently used in teaching sentence structure is the system of diagramming sentences. Research has demonstrated that

diagramming sentences teaches the students little beyond the ability to diagram. It offers little help with expressional problems.

The subject of English should not be thought of as primarily a body of facts to be learned but a group of skills to be achieved; not an instructional subject made up of literature, grammar, and composition, but the study and practice of the essential communication arts of reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

In her doctoral study, Kraus (8:281) used a different method of teaching sentence structure with each of 3 groups. In group 1 the students studied sentence structure but did no original writing. In group 2 the students studied sentence structure and also wrote weekly themes which were not discussed after their return. In group 3 sentence structure was discussed only as a result of errors made in weekly themes written in connection with a literature unit. One of the main conclusions of her study was that all three groups showed significant gains in the ability to choose correct punctuation and usage. However, the gains were effected in group 3 in one third of the time required for the other methods.

III. SURVEY OF TEXTBOOKS IN THE FIELD

One of the ways to determine the extent to which items of formal grammar are being taught is through an examination of the textbooks in this area. Copies of textbooks from five of the major textbook publishing companies were examined. These texts were for grades three through six, although two of the companies had, as a part of their series, books for grade two. The purpose of this examination was to determine at what level certain basic concepts in the study of grammar were introduced.

It was assumed by the writer that those textbook writers leaning toward the traditional or formal approach would tend to introduce these concepts earlier than those who favored the functional approach.

Very little difference was found in most areas. The greatest difference was in the introduction of the names of the most common parts of speech, namely the verb, adverb, noun, pronoun, and adjective. Several of the texts introduced concepts but waited one or even two grade levels to attach a name to the concept. For instance, in one text "words that describe" were introduced at grade 3 but not called adjectives until grade five (1:57;2:55).

Generally speaking, one is forced to the conclusion that at no one grade level is great detail about any grammatical concept presented. For example, in grade five of Using Good English (13:68,124) one finds mention made of the definitions of common, proper, and possessive nouns but little more.

TABLE I
 GRADE LEVELS AT WHICH CERTAIN BASIC CONCEPTS OF GRAMMAR
 WERE INTRODUCED IN VARIOUS TEXTBOOKS

Concept	American Book Co.	D.C. Heath	Laidlaw Bros.	McGraw Hill	World Book Co.
Adverb	5	6	4	5	6
Adjective	5	5	4	4	6
Appositive	6	6	6	6	x
Article	5	5	x	6	x
Comparison of adjectives and adverbs	6	x	6	5	6
Conjunction	6	6	6	x	6
Interjection	6	6	6	x	6
Irregular verbs	6	6	6	6	x
Nouns	4	5	3	4	5
Objects	6	6	6	x	6
Paragraph	4	3	3	3	3
Plural	4	4	4	4	5
Predicate	5	5	6	5	5
Preposition	6	6	6	x	6
Pronoun	6	6	3	5	6
Subject	5	5	6	5	5
Verb	4	5	3	5	5

x No mention of concept in textbooks

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I. SUMMARY

It was the purpose of this study to discover and compare the arguments for and against the teaching of formal grammar in the elementary school. The arguments tended to group themselves in such a way that they might be generalized both pro and con.

Proponents of teaching formal grammar stated as their arguments that students can express themselves more clearly and have a better understanding of language through the formal study of grammar.

Those opposed say that most students will have no need for formal grammar and that the methods of teaching it are old fashioned, unnecessary, and unsupported by scientific research. Our language is only a means by which we communicate ideas, not an end in itself. The schools should emphasize on the ideas to be communicated rather than trying to teach a child to communicate without giving him anything to say.

II. CONCLUSIONS

Having examined several of the textbooks in this field and the available literature and research concerned with this topic, the writer has concluded that (1) authorities teaching in or writing on the elementary school level are generally not in favor of the formal approach to teaching grammar in the elementary school, while some other authorities, writing principally for those who are teaching on the secondary level, are decidedly in favor of the formal approach and think that it should begin in the elementary school. (2) Those opposed to formal grammar are

opposed because they feel that the content of what a child has to say is more important than the form he employs to say it. (3) Learnings connected with grammar, to be retained, should be immediately usable. (4) None of the available research studied by the writer showed that students who had studied formal grammar made any appreciable gains over those who had not studied formal grammar. (5) Students can learn sentence structure more quickly under the functional method than the formal method. (6) There is a low correlation between knowledge of grammar and proficiency in other subject areas. (7) The study of grammar is not necessary to the understanding of literature or the learning of a foreign language. (8) The diagramming of sentences does not cause students to improve in the ability to express themselves. (9) Research has found no support for the contention that grammar is of value as a disciplinary subject. Further conclusions based upon the objective data presented in this paper are that (1) elementary school textbooks which include grammatical concepts and encourage a thorough, systematic teaching of these concepts might be questioned as to the wisdom and validity of so doing; and (2) any grammar taught should be taught sparingly and functionally rather than formally.

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