IMPROVING INSTRUCTION IN GRAMMAR

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INTRODUCTION

One of the unfortunate consequences of the Braddock et al. report is that not only has it generated a tremendous backlash against the teaching of grammar but it has caused the term "grammar" itself to take on a pejorative meaning. For many teachers of writing, just the mention of the word "grammar" conjures up images of the parts of speech, sentence diagramming, dangling modifiers, split infinitives, and so forth. But while many of us sense the uselessness of grammar, we still value what is supposedly the result of studying it: the ability to write Edited American English. However, we have done little to improve the teaching of this skill. Instead, we have been content either to dismiss the relevance of grammar in the composition classroom or to teach it the traditional way, from the freshman English handbook.

I wish to argue in this paper that we cannot ignore the teaching of grammar, nor can we expect it to succeed if it is taught the traditional way, an approach that has been proven ineffective.[1] Instead, we need to carefully examine the ways we have traditionally taught grammar and change and refine any particular methods that are theoretically or pedagogically unsound. Specifically, we need to rethink the method of teaching grammar presented in the freshman English handbook, a book that has profoundly influenced how we define grammatical terminology, organize discussions of grammar, and present grammatical exercises. Although I recognize that grammar has many applications in the writing class, I will restrict my discussion to the problems of handbooks and to how, by addressing these problems, we can help students satisfactorily edit their papers.

HANDBOOK TERMINOLOGY

Handbook terminology is based on traditional grammar, a theory of grammar developed by the ancient Greeks and Romans. Since traditional grammar was originally conceived to study Greek and Latin, its terminology proved somewhat inadequate for describing English. As a result, 18th century grammarians revised the terminology of traditional grammar so that it more adequately described English. During this century, some of the more traditionally-based grammars, such as those by Jespersen and Quirk et al., have further refined the terminology of traditional grammar. Unfortunately, modern handbooks have drawn little from these grammars, and consequently contain definitions of terminology that are inconsistent, vague, or simply out-of-date.

It is not unusual for grammarians to disagree about how terminology should be defined, and for their definitions of terms to be somewhat inconsistent. Languages are complex, and one grammarian's definition of a coordinating conjunction, for instance, may be theoretically as justified as another grammarian's competing definition. In the handbooks I have surveyed, however, terminological differences seem to arise not from legitimate theoretical differences but from an ignorance of the complexities of the English language.

Consider the number of different ways that relative clauses are defined in modern handbooks. Three types of relative clauses are discussed by Quirk et al.: those that have a modifying function (such as *who* in sentence 1), those that have a nominal, or noun-like, function (such as *whoever* in sentence 2), and those that have an adverbial function (such as *where* in sentence 3) (737-9 and 860-74).

1. The student who studies hard usually receives good grades.
2. Whoever studies hard usually receives good grades.
3. A good place to study is the library, where a student will not be disturbed by other students.

Of the six popular handbooks I surveyed, only one made clear this distinction (Millward 505). Of the five that did not, one acknowledged that relative clauses had only modifying or nominal functions (Hodges and Whitten 553); one termed words such as

who and whoever relative pronouns but failed to distinguish their differing functions (Watkins and Dillingham 68-70); one did not contain the term relative clause but instead said that who, which, and that introduced adjective clauses and in the categories of noun and adverb clauses made no mention of words such as whoever or where (Corbett 235-6 and 244-5); one said that only who, which, and that introduced relative clauses (Leggett et al. 523); and one made mention of the constructions in sentences (1) - (3) but claimed that relative clauses in sentences such as (1) had a nominal function and that words such as whose were not pronouns (Crews and Van Sant 158-9). In the six handbooks I surveyed, I found six different definitions of relative clauses.

Sometimes handbooks are justified on pedagogical grounds for presenting a much simpler picture of English grammar than really exists. For instance, most handbooks list as coordinating conjunctions the words and , or, but, for, nor, so, and yet, even though these words behave quite differently. One difference between them is that while and, or, but, for, and nor cannot be preceded by another conjunction (sentence 4), so and yet can (sentence 5):

4. *I went to the store and but my wife stayed home.
5. I like expensive cars and yet I drive a 1968 Monza.

On theoretical grounds, we may wish to distinguish various types of conjunctions, calling and, or, and but pure coordinators and placing the other conjunctions somewhere on the gradient between pure coordinators and pure subordinators (Greenbaum 32). On pedagogical grounds, however, these distinctions are unnecessary. We might confuse students if we require them to make finer terminological distinctions than are necessary. Moreover, since these coordinators are punctuated somewhat similarly, we can explain their punctuation more easily to students if we simply call all of the coordinators coordinating conjunctions.

When we simplify our definitions of relative clauses, however, we are simply giving our students an erroneous view of English grammar. I see no pedagogical reason why we should not say that words such as who, whoever, and (in some instances) when introduce relative clauses. Now, it might be argued that students

do not even need to know what a relative clause is, that we would be far better off not teaching our students unnecessary grammatical terminology. However, if handbook authors choose to discuss certain terms in their handbooks, as scholars they owe their audience as accurate a picture as possible of the grammatical phenomena they are attempting to present. My survey of handbooks has convinced me that they are based primarily on the author's knowledge of English grammar, not on scholarly linguistic or grammatical research.

While it is important that terminology be accurately defined, it is far more important that it be precisely defined. And indeed, a much more serious shortcoming of handbooks is the vague definitions of terms that continue to persist in them. In four of the six handbooks I surveyed, the subject of a sentence was defined in vague and impressionistic language such as the following "[The subject is] the person or thing about which the predicate of a sentence or clause makes an assertion or asks a question" (Leggett et al. 524). Obviously, a student who has little command of English grammar is not going to find such definitions very helpful.[2]

Instead of couching definitions of terms in overly broad and impressionistic language, we should provide our students with simple tests to help them identify terms. Broadhead and Berlin suggest that students be taught to identify the parts of speech by filling slots in what they term "frame sentences" (296).

> Noun Frame: I was thinking of ________________(-s).
> Verb Frame: They might ________________ (them).
> Adjective Frame: They seem ________________.
> Adverb Frame: That one did it ________________.

If a word fits into a noun frame, it is a noun; if it fits into a verb frame, it is a verb, etc.

The obvious advantage of tests such as the above is that they enable students to very easily identify constituents; the disadvantage of them is that their simplicity often limits the number of constructions they can account for. For instance, Beaugrande offers the following test as a simple way to identify subjects and predicates (241).

> Make up a 'who/what' question about the statement made in the sentence. The PREDICATE of that sentence is all the words you used again in the 'who/what' question; the SUBJECT is the rest.

While this test correctly identifies many subjects and predicates, often it does not. If applied to sentence (6), it incorrectly identifies its high cost as subject, since a what-question about this sentence would read: What is a key weakness of the plan?

6. A key weakness of the plan is its high cost.

Similarly, the test fails in sentences (7) and (8). A what-question based on sentence (7) is impossible, and one based on sentence (8) yields there as subject.

7. It is unlikely that the project will succeed.
8. There are three reasons why the cost of the project is so high.

When devising tests such as the previous one, we want to strive for accuracy on the one hand and simplicity on the other, and striking a balance between the two can be difficult but not impossible. It is important, however, that we not sacrifice simplicity for accuracy; as R. A. Close rightly points out, "an inadequate basic rule will sooner or later have to be modified by a series of sub-rules and exceptions which may cause far more trouble in the end than a basic rule that is more accurate though less temptingly teachable" (24).

To help students more accurately identify subjects, I have devised two tests rather than one.[3]

9. To identify the subject of a clause, apply one of the following tests:
   a. Make the clause a question by inserting a form of the verb do. Whatever comes between do and the rest of the verb is the subject.
   b. If the clause contains a form of the verb be, you cannot form a question by inserting a form of the verb do. In clauses like this, form a question with the form of the verb be already in the clause and whatever changes places with the verb is the subject.

Since applying these tests requires students to have some knowledge of verbs, I teach in conjunction with these tests the verb frame test given earlier in this paper.

While tests (9a) and (9b) correctly identify the subjects in sentences (6) and (7), they incorrectly predict that the subject in (8) is there. Now, it would not be difficult to devise a third test to deal with sentences such as (8), but rather than complicating the tests for subjects further, I tell students that most of the tests I give them will not always work, simply because of the unpredictable nature of the English language. And even though many students are uneasy with such statements, I try to convince them to appreciate the complexity of the English language, not to fear it.

Other tests can easily be devised to identify other constructions. Subject complements can be distinguished from direct objects because the former cannot be made the subject of a sentence in the passive voice:

10. The woman is ill. (no passive equivalent)
11. The woman wrote the book.
12. The book was written by the woman. (passive equivalent of 11)

Of course, this test has exceptions too: active sentences containing a form of the verb have can take a direct object, yet such sentences have awkward passive paraphrases:

13. The woman has three children.
14. *Three children are had by the woman.

But the predictive power of this rule is so great that exceptions can be dealt with on an individual basis and without giving students an extremely inaccurate view of the English language.

In addition to giving our students consistent, precise, and simple definitions of terms, we need to make sure we provide them with definitions based on up-to-date treatments of English grammar. All of the handbooks I surveyed contained the traditional definitions of clauses and phrases, even though most modern grammarians have long abandoned these definitions.[4] Traditionally, the adverbial beginning sentence (15) has been called a clause, and the adverbials beginning sentences (16) and (17) a prepositional phrase and participial phrase, respectively.

15. After we ate lunch, we took a walk.
16. After eating lunch, we took a walk.
17. Having eaten lunch, we took a walk.

The adverbials in sentences (16) and (17) have traditionally been considered phrases because they lack subjects. But if these constructions are investigated more carefully, they begin to look more like clauses than phrases. Like the adverbial clause in sentence (15), the adverbial clauses in sentences (16) and (17) contain constituents found only in clauses: we can say that the non-finite verbs in these sentences (eating and having eaten) are functioning as verbs and the nouns (lunch) as direct objects. And in each of these clauses, the subject—we— is implied. The clausal nature of these constructions can be further illustrated if we introduce other clause functions into them, such as a direct object, indirect object, and adverbial:

18. Having given the vagrant a dollar yesterday, I felt no need to give him another one today.

No other phrase in English behaves like the adverbials in sentences (16)-(18): no noun phrase, prepositional phrase, adjective phrase, etc. can be analyzed as containing verbs, direct objects, indirect objects, etc. It is thus quite arbitrary to say that Having eaten lunch is a phrase and After we ate lunch a clause, and it strikes me as no less difficult to teach students that both of these are clauses rather than a phrase and clause, respectively. In fact, it might even prove simpler, since we would no longer have to teach such complicated terms as "participial phrase" or "prepositional phrase with nominal object."

THE ORGANIZATION OF HANDBOOKS

As Newkirk points out, instruction in grammar involves both content and method: "a body of grammatical principles and concepts" and "a method of teaching this content" (46). Even though everyone acknowledges that handbooks are reference books, few have questioned whether a reference format is the best method for teaching grammar. Most, I suspect, feel the same way that the following instructor does about the role of the handbook in the composition classroom: "Like thousands of other teachers, I want a book I can simply refer them [my students] to, in the knowledge that if they read a section carefully, they will understand" (Butler 338). Like this instructor, many become disappointed when their students learn little from reading a handbook. Part of

the problem is, as I suggested in the previous section, the ways that terms are defined in handbooks. But an even greater problem is that handbooks are reference books, and reference books are only of value to those who already know something about the information within them.

Consider the information that students will find if they look to handbooks for advice on correcting sentence fragments. They will read that they should not punctuate as complete sentences subordinate clauses, participial phrases lacking finite verbs, detached compound predicates, modifying phrases, incomplete sentences, and so forth. Unfortunately, this advice presupposes that students know not only what a subordinate clause is but what a complete sentence is. Such advice is therefore circular, since if students knew what a sentence was they would not be writing fragments.

If instruction in grammar is to be of any instructional value, handbooks must be reorganized so that they meet the needs of the students for whom they are intended. In other words, handbooks must become more like textbooks and the information in them needs to be sequenced so that students will have all of the information they need to learn the particular grammatical skill they are being taught.

The notion that grammar should be taught in a sequence has not been widely considered. There are textbooks, such as Blumenthal's *English 2600*, in which grammar is presented sequentially. But we might question the value of such approaches because of their behavioristic orientation, a point I will discuss in further detail in the next section of this paper. Others have advocated less behavioristically motivated sequences. Freeman proposes that we write a "pedagogical grammar," a grammar in which related errors are discussed together (148). For instance, errors involving word-formation, such as spelling or the use of the apostrophe, would be discussed in one section of the grammar rather than, as is the case in handbooks, in separate, unrelated sections. Probably the most detailed discussion of how we should sequence instruction in grammar can be found in Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*. Shaughnessy not only identified and classified the errors that basic writers make, but sought to outline a sequence of lessons in grammar that basic writers should be taught to help them eliminate errors from their writing. For instance, to help students eliminate fragments from their writing, Shaughnessy ad-

vises that they be taught first to recognize simple subjects and predicates; once they have mastered these constructions, they should be taught progressively more complex structures: subordinate clauses, appositives, and verbals. Throughout this sequence, students are introduced to the marks of punctuation—periods and commas—that set off the above constructions (41-3).

We can extend Shaughnessy's notion of sequence to cover freshman writers as well as more advanced writers, although a full explanation of this sequence awaits a rigorous examination of the writing of these students. My cursory investigation of the writing of English 101 students indicates that they need to be taught to recognize the difference between restrictive and non-restrictive modification, to avoid broad pronoun reference, and to make pronouns agree in number. Eventually students will reach a stage at which they will no longer need the instruction in grammar I have been discussing and they might indeed benefit from owning a typical freshman English handbook. They could then use the handbook to look up any incidental information they might need to know. But whenever we teach grammar to students, we should make sure that our discussions are purposeful and that we do not, for instance, teach adverbs simply to teach adverbs. Students quite easily sense the uselessness of such discussions, which in addition to wasting class time alienate students from the study of grammar.

HANDBOOK EXERCISES

It is important not only that we be concerned with defining terminology clearly and organizing discussions of grammar effectively but that we devise exercises to insure that students will be able to transfer to their own writing the grammatical concepts that we teach them. Traditionally, we have tried to accomplish this by having students do handbook exercises, which usually focus on one grammatical principle and take various forms. Some exercises simply require students to identify a particular constituent (for instance, a subject or verb) in a particular sentence. Other types of exercises require students to circle the correct answer (sentence 19) or to correct examples of "false syntax" (sentence 20).

19. When the fire (ended, had ended), the store closed (Hodges and Whitten 90).

20. Plan after plan have been made; nothing can go wrong (Watkins and Dillingham 55).

Unfortunately, there is no evidence that these types of exercises work. In fact, they frequently produce students who "are able to correctly do grammatical exercises which focus on a particular problem, but continue to make errors in this area in their own free writing." (Fox 332).

Why should this happen? One reason is that such exercises are not natural and do not reflect the actual situations in which "real" writing takes place. Most handbook exercises, such as sentences (19) and (20), are based on trite sentences taken out of context. The most important reason handbook exercises fail, however, is that they are based on the principles of behavioristic psychology, and there is good evidence that the knowledge gained from exercises involving rote drill is not internalized very deeply. The research in this area, according to Krashen, "suggests strongly that students do not pay much attention to repetitive drill after a few repetitions, and it is doubtful that the meaning strikes very 'deeply' " (103). In fact, we are just beginning to investigate the cognitive processes involved in transferring grammatical knowledge from instruction to practice, and the situation is, not suprisingly, rather complex. Bartholomae has found, for instance, that when many basic writers are asked to read aloud a paper of theirs containing numerous grammatical errors they will frequently "substitute correct forms for the incorrect forms on the page, even though they are generally unaware that such a substitution was made" (261). This finding indicates that some grammatical errors may occur in writing not because students do not know the appropriate form or rule but because students do not perceive the correct form in their own writing.

That many students cannot perceive their errors should not really surprise us. Poor writers are notoriously poor readers, and consequently do not "see" their errors when they silently read their own essays. Furthermore, many errors do not affect the meaning of the text and are simply the result of students eliminating redundancies of the language or print code. In a phrase such as the woman's book, both the -s possessive and apostrophe are redundant: they simply reinforce what the word order of this phrase has already revealed. It is therefore not surprising that students

so frequently have difficulty with -s inflections and apostrophes: the meaning of the constructions in which they occur will not be affected if the -s or apostrophe is left off.

There have been various attempts to develop exercises that will enable students to transfer grammatical knowledge from instruction to practice. One such attempt is called controlled composition, a technique originally developed in ESL and recently adapted to the teaching of basic writers: "Controlled composition rests on the assumption that as students practice correct writing, making certain assigned manipulative and transformational changes, they will acquire greater proficiency in using English in its standard written form" (Gorrell, "Controlled Composition. . . ." 309). Sentences (21 a-d) illustrate controlled composition exercises on plural and possessive -s. After reading a short discussion of the uses of these morphemes, students are instructed to recopy the (a) and (c) sentences, making the singular nouns that are underlined plural (Gorrell, Copy/Write 108).

21. (a) My brother buys a new album at least once a month.
    (b) My ____buy new ____at least once a month.
    (c) My roommate's part of the room is always cleaner than mine.
    (d) My ____ of the room are always cleaner than mine.

While controlled composition appears behavioristically motivated, its proponents claim that it is only partially so. In "Controlled Composition. . . .," Gorrell remarks, for instance, that as students rewrite sentences, there is "a resolution of conflict at each point of difference between the student's habitual performance and the target performance" (314-15). The exact processes that these resolutions draw upon are presently unknown, but perhaps controlled composition enables students to internalize grammatical principles because it forces them to read more carefully and thus to notice grammatical distinctions they might miss when reading and writing at a much faster pace.

Controlled composition, however, has a somewhat limited application. It focuses mainly on morphological errors, such as subject-verb disagreements and faulty case and pronoun forms. It does not deal with more syntactically-based errors, such as run-ons or sentence fragments, or more idiosyncratic types of errors,

errors that defy classification. To deal with these types of errors, I have devised exercises based on a student's actual writing. For instance, to avoid writing sentence fragments, run-ons, and comma splices, students need to be taught what a sentence is, a construction consisting of an obligatory main clause and an optional subordinate clause. And before they will be able to identify a clause, they will need to be taught to recognize subjects and verbs. Now, instead of teaching them subjects and verbs and then having them do a handbook exercise, I have my students identify the subjects and verbs in, say, one paragraph of the last essay they wrote. The advantage of this type of exercise is that the sentences on which it is based are natural, not trite and taken out of context. Furthermore, in an exercise of this type, something is at stake: students are analyzing their own writing, writing which is presumably of value to them.

Once students are able to identify subjects, verbs, main clauses, and subordinate clauses, I teach them to apply this knowledge so that they can eliminate fragments, comma splices, and run-ons from their writing. Unfortunately, while subjects and verbs occur quite frequently in a student's writing, the above errors often do not. While many instructors may consider four or five sentence fragments in a 500 word theme excessive, such an error is not excessive if one considers that the student wrote perhaps 50 or 60 sentences that were not fragments. And simply having this student correct these five fragments may not be enough to insure that the student will be able to edit this error out of his or her next theme. This situation causes many instructors to have their students do handbook exercises, which contain more than enough examples of errors such as sentence fragments.

One way out of this dilemma is to focus on a limited number of errors in a student's essay but to make the correction of these errors as meaningful as possible. It is not enough, however, to simply circle and label an error and have the student correct it: when correcting a comma splice, for instance, a student may simply guess that a semicolon or period is the correct mark and learn little from making this change. Or, as I have noticed on a number of occasions, a student may remove the comma and create a far more serious error: a run-on sentence. Students need to be forced to look carefully at their writing and resolve the conflict between the error they have created and the correct form they should have

used. To encourage this type of "dialectic," I have students keep journals of errors they make and the methods by which they correct them. This type of exercise forces students to be very conscious of the way they edit their essays. Furthermore, it combines the deductive teaching of grammar—going from rule or principle to example—with the inductive teaching of grammar—going from example to rule or principle. Teaching grammar inductively is advantageous because, according to Fraser and Hodson, it "elicits superior motivation, involvement, awareness, conceptualization, and generalization ('transfer')" (51).

CONCLUSIONS

Even though many teachers of writing are dissatisfied with the traditional approach to teaching grammar, they continue to have their students buy the very handbooks that promote this approach. Dozens of such handbooks are on the market today, and their sales total into the thousands every year. I suspect that many teachers feel obligated to have their students read something about grammar, and to ease their consciences, they have their students buy handbooks. If, however, teachers want better discussions of grammar, they must stop having their students buy handbooks and demand from publishers that they produce texts that are theoretically and pedagogically more sound.

The method of grammar I have outlined in this paper need not occupy much of an instructor's class time. Instead, it is meant to supplement—not supplant—discussions of invention, form, and style and to make editing as easy and meaningful a part of the composing process for students as possible. Grammar may be only a small component of a writing course, but whenever we have occasion to teach it, we ought to teach it well.

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NOTES

[1]There is ample empirical evidence demonstrating that studying traditional grammar has either no effect or a negative effect on writing improvement. For a discussion of these empirical studies, see Sherwin and Kolln.

[2]Beaugrande (234) argues that handbooks contain such impressionistic definitions because they are written to appeal to teachers (who order and then assign them), not students (who ultimately use them). I would add that many teachers tolerate such definitions, simply because they are unaware of any better definitions.

[3]I do not teach students how to identify predicates, since I do not see any reason why students need to know what a predicate is. It is much more important that they instead learn what subjects and verbs are.

[4]The definition of clause and phrase I will present can be found in many contemporary studies of modern English grammar. See, for instance, Quirk et al., Close, Huddleston, and Matthews.

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