

Teaching Grammar: Why Bother?  
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Research on the relationship between formal grammar instruction and performance on measures of writing ability is very consistent: There is no relationship between grammar study and writing (Krashen, 1984). Perhaps the most convincing research is that of Elley, Barham, Lamb and Wyllie (1976). After a three year study comparing the effects of traditional grammar, transformational grammar and no grammar on high school students in New Zealand, they concluded that " ... English grammar, whether traditional or transformational, has virtually no influence on the language growth of typical secondary students" (pp. 17-18).

In addition, research is equally consistent in showing that writing ability and reading are related: Those who read more, write better (Krashen, 1993a). The reform school boys in Fader's *Hooked on Books* study who read self-selected paperback books for two years outperformed comparison boys on writing fluency, writing complexity, and reading, as well as on measures self-esteem and attitude towards school (Fader, 1976).

It is well-established that one can become an excellent writer with very little formal instruction in grammar, and those who do often give reading the credit for their writing ability: "I wanted to write and I did not even know the English language. I bought English grammars and found them dull. I felt I was getting a better sense of the language from novels than from grammars" (Wright, 1966, p. 275).

Finally, our ability to consciously learn the rules of grammar is very limited. Linguists have told us that they have not yet succeeded in describing the rules of language, and anyone who has studied linguistics will attest to the complexity of the rules linguists have described. Studies in second language acquisition show that even experienced students have an incomplete knowledge of the rules they are taught, do not remember the rules well, and have difficulty applying them (Krashen, 1993b, Alderson, Clapham, and Steel, 1997).

If all this is true, should English teachers bother with grammar teaching? I do not think that grammar teaching should be at the core of the English curriculum, but I think there are good reasons for including direct study of grammar.

### Grammar as Linguistics

The first has to do with general education: Grammar teaching can be an excellent introduction to the study of linguistics. An analysis of grammatical constructions in English and other languages can help students understand the idea of linguistic universals and the hypothesis that what is universal is innate. A comparison of present day English grammar and old English can lead to discussions of language change (it is inevitable and natural or a sign of corruption and decay?), and dialects (are some dialects better than others?). The study of linguistics is clearly not as high a priority as is

literature, but it has real value.

### Grammar for Editing

The second reason for including grammar is as an aid for editing. Even with massive reading of appropriate texts, complete acquisition of the conventions of writing may not take place; even very well-read people may have gaps. These gaps are typically small and do not interfere with communication of the message, but they can be irritating to readers. These errors include subject-verb agreement ("A large group of boys is (are?) expected to arrive tomorrow."), verb forms ("lie" or "lay"?) and punctuation ("it's" or "its"). Conscious knowledge of grammar rules can help fill at least some of these gaps, in the editing stage of the composing process.

### Delay editing

Current wisdom on editing and the practice of experienced writers (e.g. Sommers, 1980) agrees that such editing should be delayed until the final draft, until the writer's ideas have been worked out. An excessive focus on formal correctness in early stages can disrupt the discovery of new ideas.

### Open book

It also makes sense to me that editing using consciously learned rules should be done and tested open book. Research shows that knowledge of grammar rules is very fragile and is rapidly forgotten (Krashen, 1993b). Even experienced writers need to refer to a handbook occasionally. It is thus unreasonable to demand extensive memorization from our students. Our goal should be to develop competent users of grammar handbooks.

### When to teach grammar

If most of our competence in writing comes from reading, and if grammar study can make only a limited contribution to accuracy, it is more efficient to delay grammar study until the student has read a great deal. One can then focus on the residue, on those gaps that remain.

I am proposing, in other words, a two-step procedure: 1. Students first acquire (absorb subconsciously) a great deal of grammatical competence through reading. 2. Students are taught to use a grammar handbook to increase their grammatical accuracy further, using consciously learned rules. The grammar handbook can be introduced in junior high school or high school. If a great deal of reading has been done, and continues to be done, the grammar handbook will need to be used only occasionally.

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