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On the Questionable Utility of Grammar: a Viewpoint

René Díaz H.

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Resumen

Este trabajo representa una visión personal del autor sobre el lugar de la gramática, problematizando la enseñanza de esta en la adquisición de una segunda lengua. A través de preguntas y respuestas, el autor aborda temas controversiales, como la pertinencia de la gramática en las aulas escolares y el canon de lo que se entiende por un alto nivel de dominio de la gramática en la lengua inglesa.

Finalmente, haciendo una retrospectiva hacia la educación inicial de la lengua inglesa y los orígenes de muchas tergiversaciones conceptuales, el autor delinea una definición de la gramática, clarificando su utilidad y su vigencia en la enseñanza moderna del idioma inglés.

Palabras claves: adquisición de segunda lengua – gramática inglesa – didáctica de la lengua

Abstract

This research paper presents the author's personal viewpoint about the place of grammar, questioning its teaching when dealing with language acquisition. By means of questions and answers, the author reviews controversial issues, such as the utility of grammar in the classroom and what we understand by `a high level of proficiency in English Grammar.

Finally, by looking back into earlier language education and the origins of many misunderstandings and misconceptions, the author sketches a definition of grammar, pointing out its utility and current state in modern English teaching.

Keywords: second language acquisition – english grammar – language teaching

1. The viewpoint

Consulting scholars' repeated requests to have me "just go over the grammar" in their papers triggered my interest in the subject of this paper. I wondered what they meant by that. Why were they so concerned about grammar? As a result, I made up my mind to investigate how students are instructed in grammar. This paper, an article for the `L & L' magazine, grew out of my summer research.

Through a series of questions and answers, I simply, yet thoroughly, examine the subject of grammar. Taking a trip back to early childhood education and the origins of many misunderstandings of the mere definition of grammar, I attempt to offer concrete understandings of the

life span of grammar, and, writing from the point of view of a professor who teaches grammar, lends this paper further credibility.

Grammar this, grammar that. So much is heard about grammar, most of it negative. If you are a professor whose main concern is grammar, you will hear these remarks just about everyday:

"Can you help me with my grammar?"

" I hate grammar."

"My grammar sucks."

Where does this obsession and loathing of grammar come from? This question would probably take a whole dissertation to answer, and I do not have the time to write that sort of paper. So, this essay will be more narrowly focused. In most cases, this misunderstanding of grammar takes place early on in one's educational career. Most students have made their position with grammar clear before they enter high school. Many of these students who detest grammar were taught grammar systematically. It is this systematic teaching of grammar that creates such fear and hatred of grammar. In this short piece, systematically taught grammar will be analyzed and discussed. It is the intention of the author to provide a critique of this method of teaching and propose alternative teaching styles. Grammar taught systematically is ineffective and should be discarded. This essay shall also look at how grammar is defined, what this word means. Later on, past philosophies of the systematic teaching of grammar will be discussed, including how some experts answer the question, "Should we teach grammar in schools?" Then, I will discuss how grammar can be used rhetorically, and why this is important to teach to students. This essay will also investigate different learning and teaching styles different from the traditional systematic teaching of grammar. Finally, the issue of grammar's origins will be examined and compared to what grammar means in the modern teaching of English.

2. What does grammar mean?

What is grammar anyhow? Grammar is defined in several different ways. The Oxford American Dictionary, for example, defines grammar as: "the study of words and the rule for their formation and their relationships to each other in sentences; the rules themselves; speech or writing judged as good or bad according to these rules" (1980:282). This definition seemed a little narrow for this piece. Patrick Hartwell, author of "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar", categorizes grammar into five definitions, derived from the likes of W. Nelson Francis and Matha Kolln, summarized as follows:

Grammar 1 : set of formal patterns in which the words of a language arranged in order to convey a larger meaning.

Grammar 2 : the branch of linguistic science which is concerned with the description, analysis, and formulation of formal language patterns.

Grammar 3 : linguistic etiquette.

Grammar 4 : school grammar.

Grammar 5 : grammatical terms used in the interest of teaching prose (1987: 352–353).

Even these definitions appear to be too constraining. Although these definitions reveal a range of meanings for grammar, they presuppose that grammar does not have a more global meaning. The definition that will be adhered to in this essay is the one created by Janice Neuleib who defines grammar as: "The internalized system that native speakers of a language share" (qtd. in Hartwell: p.349: 1987). This definition allows grammar to take on several forms beyond the linguistic and formal writing processes.

3. Should we teach grammar in school?

Unfortunately, until recently, the only definition of grammar that was accepted was the dictionary definition presented above. It was not until the 1950's that this definition and its teachings were questioned. Grammarians and anti-grammarians alike have been looking for an answer to the question: "Should we teach grammar in schools?" The answer to this question seems to be yes, but the system needs to change first.

Studies like Hartwell's show that there is no benefit gained from the systematic teaching of grammar. "After two years, no differences were detected in writing performance or language competence; after three years small differences appeared, but these were offset by the less positive attitudes they showed towards their English studies" (1987: 349). Hartwell goes on further to describe an instance where one of his students put an -s at the end of children. When asked why he did this, the student replied that the manual handed out in class said to put an -s at the end of words to make them plural. Hartwell, in looking at this case and others, believes that the systematic teaching of grammar interferes with writing well and writing creatively. His study revealed that writers are indeed hindered from this type of teaching.

John Dawkins writes that there should not be a right or wrong way of practicing grammar. "According to the handbooks there is a right-or-wrong approach. Such instruction is negative in that it tells students what

not to do and how not to do it; better instruction _in any skill, I assume_ is going to tell students what to do and how to do it" (1995:534). This right or wrong approach does not encourage students to study and improve their writing skills. This type of negative reinforcement may teach students how to use grammar rules, but it will not promote exploration of grammar and writing.

Ray Wallace, editor of *The Place of Grammar in Writing Instruction*, agrees that systematic teaching can be hindering. He writes:

"There is little pragmatic justification for systematically teaching a grammar of a language, whether that grammar be traditional, structural, transformational, or whatever. On the other hand, it may be desirable or even necessary to use some grammatical concepts and terminology in helping students to become more effective language users" (1995:3).

4. Grammar can be used as a rhetorical tool

It is important to teach grammar in a way that students will find interesting and useful. For instance, in his article "Teaching Punctuation as a Rhetorical Tool," John Dawkins describes how good writers use punctuation as a form of rhetoric, regardless of grammatical rules. Many good writers break grammatical rules in their work. "There is a system underlying what good writers, in fact do; it is a surprisingly simple system; it is a system that enables writers to achieve important _even subtle_ rhetorical effects" (1995: 533). Rhetoric is defined by *The Oxford American Dictionary* as "the art of using words impressively, especially in public speaking"(1980: 581). In writing, rhetoric can be defined as a method of persuading or affecting the reader.

The way in which an orator expresses a sentence is comparable to the way a writer punctuates. Both stress different parts of the sentence to create different meanings. The writer can create different effects with the same sentence through its punctuation. The same sentence can be punctuated to create a tone separate from its initial meaning.

Dawkins looks at the hierarchy of punctuation from a rhetorical standpoint, and how each mark can be used in the same sentence yet convey different meanings. The highest form of punctuation: the exclamation point, the period or the question mark, create a great sense of separation in a piece of writing. The next level of punctuation: the colon, semi-colon, or dash all give a distinct meaning to the passage following one of these marks. The comma and the zero (not using any punctuation marks) denote little separation within a sentence.

In order to see the practical use of these marks, let us look at an example as in the sentence:

Tom slammed the door, when he got fired.

When the comma is replaced with a period, and the second clause ends with an exclamation point, it changes to:

Tom slammed the door. When he got fired!

These sentences create a different meaning. Although there is still separation in both examples, the sentence using the comma emphasizes the attachment of the dependent clause to the main idea. In the sentence split by a period, the attachment is lost. The second clause becomes a separate sentence, a fragment. This separate idea becomes more powerful alone, as it is emphasized separately, than it does as a dependent clause. The meaning of a sentence can vary by changing its punctuation, thus punctuation can be used as a rhetorical tool.

5. How to avoid the six week nap

When it comes time to teach grammar, it is important to look at different learning styles and how they effect the study of grammar. Irene Brosnahan and Janice Neuleib write in "Teaching Grammar Affectively: Learning to Like Grammar," that there are two types of learners: theoretical and traditional. Theoretical, or global associative learners, are more interested and work best with the conceptual aspects of grammar. These students tend to learn best when they are taught the uses and reasons behind the rules of grammar. The second types of learners, traditional or specific linear students, tend to see grammar as a set of prescribed rules. These students learn better when grammar is set forth as a set of rules. To incorporate both learning styles, it is important to look at grammar on a metacognitive level. Metacognition, thinking about thinking, is appropriate as it satiates the needs of both the theoretical and the traditional learner. Teaching the rules of grammar, how to effectively employ these rules, and where these rules come from, empowers the student to create influential compositions. Brosnahan and Neuleib declare that the most important aspect of teaching grammar is engagement. "Humans learn when they are interested and involved in the subject matter" (p. 206). Brosnahan and Neuleib argue that involving the student in the draft leads to a better understanding of grammar usage. In middle and high schools, Brosnahan and Neuleib promote teaching grammar as an integral part of writing. Grammar and writing are codependent. One cannot have good writing without knowledge of the rules of grammar, and grammar would not exist if we did not communicate with the written word. Teaching grammar systematically, in a six-week unit, tends to bore and frustrate students as well as instructors. This negative teaching, using the red pen to highlight only the errors in a piece, teaches the students to hate grammar and leads to

negative feelings about English in general. Teaching grammar as needed, in instances when the student's lack of practical grammar usage interferes with the content of the writing, is most appropriate. "Thus the teacher needs a fairly solid background in grammar in order to work with the students"(Wallace: 1995). It is important for the instructor to have a good grasp of grammar, its rules, and how to employ these rules; but it is not necessary to teach students the exact practice of grammar.

6. Is grammar oppressive?

In studying grammar, it is important to look at its origins. Where was the world before standardized grammar? The origins of grammar can lead one to reject the traditional teaching of grammar. The first book of grammar, *Grammatica Castellana* written by the Spaniard Elio Antoine de Nebrija, was published on August 19, 1492. This book was written because " the unbound and ungoverned speech in which people actually live and manage their lives has become a challenge to the Crown" (qtd. in Edlund: 92). In essence, grammatically standard language was created so that people would learn the same language and be easier to govern. If people do not understand what you are saying, then their communication cannot be ruled. (It is interesting to note that 1492 marks the beginning of colonization as we know it. Columbus colonized Native Americans and Mexicans as other European explorers headed towards Africa and Asia.) Teaching traditional grammar rules as the one and only way to convey the English language creates oppressive ideals. If these rules propose that there is one perfect language, and language creates reality, then it can be understood that these rules assume one perfect reality. Standardized, unchanging grammar rules assume that there is only one accurate form of a language, and those who use it are in control of the language and in control of society. These conceptual theories of the oppressive nature of grammar can be seen everywhere. Those who speak "perfect English" are at the top of our economic chain, i.e. politicians, business owners, and professors (I realize that educators are not at the top of the food chain, but they do shape the ideals of their students). Those who use slang, common English, Ebonics, are not in powerful positions in any society. Therefore, proper, grammatical English is a hierarchical divider. James Baldwin writes: "People evolve a language in order to describe and, thus, control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by reality that they cannot articulate. It goes without saying, then, that language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power" (1995: 40).

Those who control language and the formation of language shape reality. Language is ever changing. New dialects emerge all the time. The English are a society of many different origins, perhaps it is time to have language rules that incorporate all of these origins.

7. Conclusions

To conclude this paper, I feel that the best way in which it may leave a message for those interested in the area of grammar is by means of a quote I found on the Internet whose author, regrettably, is anonymous:

"An English Professor wrote the words,

`woman without her man is nothing'

on the blackboard and asked the students to punctuate it correctly. The men wrote,

`Woman, without her man, is nothing.'

The women wrote,

`Woman! Without her, man is nothing'."

No explanation shall be given on the above quote, as it is too obvious that different perspectives among good grammar users may be conveyed.

It is to be hoped that this article may be taken as an inspiration for all those who think the way I do, that is, with a thorough knowledge of grammar, a person can write at ease with confidence and competence.

The English language is in serious danger. Lack of proper English grammar education contributes to the downfall of this illustrious language. Don't let your students be a part of its demise!

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