Grammar is a controversial and anxiety-inducing topic, yet it is making a comeback. Why has it suddenly reappeared, and what do teachers need to know to help students?

Suddenly, the word grammar has reappeared in elementary school teachers’ conversations. The source of this talk is the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), which set out grade-level expectations for grammar knowledge. The problem is that many teachers are like the preservice teachers with whom we’ve worked: They are very uncertain of their own grammar knowledge (Gartland & Smolkin, 2014b; see also Watson, 2013). This is not the teachers’ or our students’ fault; it is the result of years of grammar instruction controversies, in which grammar instruction came to be seen as a “skunk” at the language arts “garden party” (Haussamen, 2003, p. xi). No matter how we got here, many teachers are asking, “How am I supposed to teach this to my students?”

Our purpose is first to provide some historical background pertinent to issues of today’s instruction; second to provide teachers with pedagogical suggestions that can enable them to escape the “definition, drill, and memorization” (Beckham, 1938, p. 35) pedagogies that have plagued grammar instruction for centuries.

What Is Grammar?
As Myhill, Jones, Watson, and Lines (2013) suggest, grammar instruction is complicated by “the multiplicity of meanings and connotations that the word evokes” (p. 103). In general, we can say that grammar is a set of rules that explain how a system operates, and in language, this system typically refers to syntax.
THE HISTORIES AND MYSTERIES OF GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION

(the arrangement of words and phrases to create well-formed sentences in a language) and morphology (the study of how words are formed in a language). Grammar can also refer to semantics, the meaning of words and the vocabulary choices we employ. In understanding the controversies that surround grammar instruction, it is vital to distinguish between descriptive grammar and prescriptive grammar. Essentially, descriptive grammars present language as it is actually used by speakers and writers of various communities in different settings and contexts, whereas prescriptive grammars describe how people should speak and write (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005).

Prescriptive grammars privilege standard English (SE) as the correct variety of English, whereas descriptive grammars characterize SE as one variety of English (albeit an important one) without valuing it above others. SE is the type of grammar presented in the Common Core because it is the grammar that’s associated with “long-term success in public schools, completion of higher education, and employment with opportunities for professional advancement and financial rewards” (Rumberger & Scarcella, 2000, p. 1). Adding this type of grammar to children’s repertoires can open the door to educational success and socioeconomic mobility. The word adding is where much of the controversy lies. If we can come to view SE as appropriate to employ in particular settings and situations and other forms as appropriate for other situations, we move away from the idea that there is a single, correct way to speak and write. And we move into the realm of descriptive grammars; this recognition of the legitimacy of other dialects will be the key to successful grammar instruction.

A Brief History of Grammar Instruction

Before prescriptive grammars arrived on the educational scene in the late 1700s, scholars approached grammar in much broader terms. Specifically, “Grammar was fully realized in language itself—in fluid, flexible, lively, ever-changing, emotional, beautiful, stylish, graceful language performance” (Glenn, 1995, p. 10). In fact, ancient scholars like Quintilian (35–95 C.E.), a Roman rhetorician, aimed to use grammar instruction as a means to produce habits of language that would enable students to become successful and productive citizens (Murphy, 2012). Toward that end, children read, wrote, spoke, and listened to a variety of exemplary texts on a daily basis within an exceptionally integrated language arts curriculum as their teacher, the grammaticus, addressed the language choices authors and speakers made that contributed to the overall impact of the text’s message. By carefully examining how esteemed authors used language in mentor texts (defined both as written and oral presentations), Quintilian’s students developed a bank of resources from which they could draw to create their own engaging and effective language (Murphy, 2012).

While particular aspects of this ancient curriculum are visible throughout history, the overall coherence of Quintilian’s system eroded. As a result, grammar instruction became increasingly fragmented (Abbott, 2012; Murphy, 2012). The goal of preparing students to be successful, productive citizens by producing habits of effective language was ultimately lost, replaced with a much narrower goal for grammar instruction—that is, speaking correctly.

The emphasis on correct language use was largely the result of rapid changes occurring in the English language during the Elizabethan era. As a result of a large influx of new words (fascinatingly, Shakespeare himself introduced at least 1,700 new words to the English language; Crystal, 2010), many scholars contend that English was “out of control” (Crystal, 2006, p. 60). Scholars were also concerned with the expansion of English dialects, which resulted in an urgency to standardize English in terms of vocabulary, spelling, and grammar. These standardization efforts led to the publication of numerous dictionaries, grammars, and pronunciation manuals with an emphasis on correcting the language use of speakers and writers who held lower social stature (Crystal, 2006).

Efforts to standardize English largely focused on regularizing English with Latin models in mind; such grammarians (e.g., Lowth, 1762) would later become termed prescriptive grammarians. Their goal was to enable English speakers and writers of all classes to produce a single correct form, even if, in doing so, they had introduced awkward new rules from their Latin language reliance (such as the rule that forbids ending a sentence with a preposition).
Rather than focusing on pedagogies associated with the integrated approach to grammar instruction seen in Quintilian’s time, the goals of prescriptive grammar instruction narrowly focused on rules and corrections. The pedagogy was simple: Students would memorize grammar rules; they would parse sentences into their various component parts of speech; and they would engage in exercises related to false syntax, that is, changing isolated sentences with “incorrect” syntax into the standard form.

Not surprisingly, over time, educators rejected this isolated, drill-oriented pedagogy. By the mid-20th century, research had clearly demonstrated that such pedagogy was ineffective in enabling children to speak and write with SE. During the 1960s, there was also a growing awareness of the negative impact prescriptive grammar instruction had on children whose home communities did not emphasize SE. Organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) suggested that teachers should “reject approaches to grammar and usage study that support the linguistic imperialism of prescriptive ‘school grammars’” (as cited in Kolln & Hancock, 2005, p. 17). Understandably, many teachers stopped teaching grammar; however, without replacement pedagogy, grammar instruction in schools virtually disappeared, with the unfortunate consequence that many teachers today have had no firm grounding in this important language arts component.

In light of today’s Common Core standards, teachers face an imposing charge. On the one hand, there is an emerging consensus among researchers that teachers have a social responsibility to provide all students with access to SE grammar. On the other hand, such instruction, supplied by teachers insecure in their own grammar knowledge, must also foster an appreciation of language variation (rather than a disdain for it). In other words, teachers are tasked with providing children with “opportunities to take control of their language choices as they interact in different social situations with others who speak in diverse dialects” (Cheatham, Armstrong, & Santos, 2009, p. 8).

**Promising Approaches to Grammar Instruction**

Given the new emphasis on SE grammar in the CCSS, coupled with the fact that many teachers have never received grammar instruction themselves (see Table 1 to begin building your knowledge), teachers may feel they have little choice but to move to worksheets representing prescriptive grammar pedagogy (Troia & Olinghouse, 2013). In fact, more and more research indicates that teachers who are confident in their own grammar knowledge tend to “foster classroom climates which nurture effective grammatical conversations” (Troia & Olinghouse, 2013, p. 89), whereas teachers who feel anxious or insecure about their own grammar knowledge tend to overly focus on rules and enact prescriptive grammar exercises (Myhill, Jones, & Watson, 2013). In the upcoming sections, we present three principles that reflect current scholarship on implementing grammar instruction “deeply informed by a disciplined study of language” (Kolln & Hancock, 2005, p. 22), as opposed to a return to “the older, dysfunctional, error-focused, Latin-based school grammar” (p. 22).

**Principle 1: Integrate Grammar Instruction Into the Overall Language Arts Curriculum**

A common myth around grammar instruction is that it is only relevant to writing; however, grammar history (Gartland & Smolkin, 2014a) indicates that as early as ancient Greece and Rome, grammar instruction occupied a central position in all language arts instruction. In fact, Quintilian asserted that attention to the productive aspects of language (speaking and writing) was not possible without also considering the receptive aspects of language (reading and listening; Glenn, 1995; Murphy, 2012). Likewise, Schleppegrell and Colombi (2008) have argued that it is not enough for students to understand the complex grammatical features they encounter in their reading and listening; they must also be supported in using such language in their own speaking and writing.

**Table 1: Sources for Growing Your Own Grammar Knowledge**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resources for Developing Grammar Knowledge</th>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resources for Understanding Linguistic Diversity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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*Do You Speak American? (PBS series): www.pbs.org/speak/Understanding Language: Language, Literacy and Learning in the Content Areas: ell.stanford.edu/teaching_resources*
What this means today is that grammar instruction needs to be thoughtfully integrated into the language arts curriculum. As Clark (2010) suggests, “a curriculum for grammar is not easily reducible to textbooks or ‘we mustn’t forget the grammar’ bolt-on exercises” (p. 198), nor is it meant to replace critical time spent reading, writing, and speaking. Integrated grammar instruction is meant to complement other language arts instruction.

**Principle 2: Develop Clear Objectives for Grammar Instruction**

In keeping with the notion that grammar instruction should represent a complementary piece of an integrated language arts curriculum, Derewianka (2011) presents a list of objectives for grammar instruction (see Table 2) that can guide both teachers and students as they engage in linguistic exploration within their language arts curriculum. Derewianka has clearly linked grammatical form (how grammatical features are structured; e.g., how different verb tenses are formed, how an embedded clause works) with meaning (how our linguistic choices create certain meanings, an array of possibilities from which we can choose). For example, her fifth objective of having a “shared language for teaching and learning about the main features of the English language” requires teachers to attend to form (e.g., parts of speech, placement of phrases) in order to develop a grammatical metalanguage; however, the objectives additionally encourage students to consider how those forms affect meaning, supporting students in critically analyzing texts and considering appropriate grammatical choices in their own language use. Myhill and Watson (2014) have further emphasized the interrelated nature of grammatical form and meaning when they point out that “grammatical terminology is simply the tool that facilitates language investigation and analysis” (p. 54). They explain that it is not only important for students to know what a passive construction is (e.g., *he dropped the ball vs. the ball was dropped*), but they must also understand how a passive construction changes the way the information is presented (e.g., the agent of the action is moved to a less direct position, often designed to present information in a more detached, authoritative, and objective manner).

In guiding teachers to consider the relationships between grammatical form and meaning, Derewianka (2011) also offers a list of questions teachers might consider when thinking about grammar instruction:

- What range of meanings do verbs express?
- How can my choice of nouns affect the meaning of the text?
- How can I use certain types of adjectives to express my opinion about something?
- Which grammatical features are involved in skills such as classifying, defining, describing, generalizing, and exemplifying?
- Which linguistic features can help me produce a text that is coherent and cohesive?
- How do grammatical patterns change from text to text? Why, and with what effect?
- How does context affect the kinds of grammatical choices made? (p. 2)

Clearly, these questions represent a movement toward grammatical choice and critical analysis rather than a list of rules stating what is and is not acceptable. Using Derewianka’s (2011) objectives as a guide can help teachers offer a more respectful approach to grammar instruction—one that empowers students to become more contemplative, effective language users.

**Principle 3: Experiment With Specific Classroom Activities**

In this section, we present two specific approaches: contrastive analysis and sentence combining attached to mentor texts. Each is research-supported and historically grounded for use in an integrated language arts curriculum. Following each approach, we offer some examples of how these activities might be approached in the classroom.

**Contrastive Analysis.** Perhaps one of the most promising pedagogies for effective grammar instruction can be seen in contrastive analysis (CA)—the systematic study of languages that examines linguistic similarities and differences between two languages or dialects. Rickford and Rickford (2007) contend that CA encourages linguistic versatility.

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**Table 2: Objectives for Teaching Grammar**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>We learn about grammar to:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Be able to reflect on how the English language works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Be able to use language effectively, appropriately, and accurately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Understand how different kinds of meaning are created through the use of different grammatical forms so that we can control and shape those meanings more skillfully and effectively ourselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Critically analyze texts so we can understand how grammar has been used to achieve certain effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Examine patterns of language and word choice so that we can appreciate, interpret, and create well-constructed texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Have a shared language for teaching and learning about the main features of the English language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Children’s nonstandard English is neither wrong nor deficient, rather appropriate to certain situations.”

by helping students to switch from vernacular dialects (e.g., African American English [AAE], Hawaiian Creole, and Southern Mountain English) and other languages (e.g., Spanish, Mandarin) to SE. Sometimes referred to as code-switching when referring specifically to dialect (e.g., Wheeler & Swords, 2006), CA has long been an important pedagogical tool for academic language acquisition (i.e., Lado, 1957).

CA has not only been successful in expanding children’s grammar knowledge and language repertoires (Fogel & Ehri, 2000), but it is also popular among many teachers because it explicitly teaches SE while honoring the diverse linguistic resources that children bring to the classroom. Rather than forbidding children’s non-SE dialects, teachers who use CA are able to build on what children already know about language and leverage those resources to their advantage (Cheatham et al., 2009). In fact, not only have teachers had a great deal of success using CA to improve students’ writing, Rickford and Rickford (2007) have also noted that children who are taught CA tend to make greater gains in reading scores as well.

Inside the Elementary Classroom.

The most popular work with CA in the elementary grades can be seen in Wheeler and Swords’ (2006) exemplary work, in which a sociolinguist, Wheeler, and an elementary school teacher, Swords, worked together to help students learn to effectively code-switch from nonstandard to standard English, with an emphasis on AAE to SE. Drawing from both their experience and research, they show teachers how to “lay down the red pen and use successful strategies—contrastive analysis and code-switching—for teaching SE grammar in linguistically diverse classrooms” (p. vii).

Because the overall goal of CA is to equip students with an awareness of how their grammatical choices impact the messages they are trying to communicate, there is less emphasis on the use of drills; the authors recognize that simply correcting errors does not teach students grammar and can, in fact, lead students to withdraw from classroom participation. In particular, understanding that children’s nonstandard English is neither wrong nor deficient, rather appropriate to certain situations and not to others, is critical to the success of CA lessons. Toward that end, Wheeler and Swords (2006) are careful never to talk about what is “right or wrong” when referring to how students speak or write. Table 3 offers an illustrative guide to help teachers be mindful of how they talk about language use in their classrooms.

For those interested in a video example of a CA lesson, Stanford University (n.d.) has made materials from its online CLAD program publicly available, offering excellent classroom examples. In a Listening and Speaking video, Ms. Tong, a bilingual first-grade teacher working in San Francisco, provides a glimpse into CA for English and Cantonese with a lesson on the possessive form (“Module: Guiding Speaking Skills,” n.d.). Ms. Tong, pointing to her chart paper where she has listed a guiding principle (“‘s”—use it to show that something belongs to someone”), examples from her children’s writing in English, and a Chinese example, begins her lesson noting that she has seen the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of This</th>
<th>Try This</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thinking in terms of</td>
<td>Seeing language as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>proper or improper</td>
<td>appropriate or inappropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good or bad</td>
<td>effective or ineffective in a specific setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking about</td>
<td>Talking about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>right or wrong</td>
<td>patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>correct or incorrect</td>
<td>how language varies by setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking that students</td>
<td>Seeing your students as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make mistakes or errors</td>
<td>following the grammar patterns of their home language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have problems with plurals, possessives, tenses, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leave off -s, ‘s, -ed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saying students</td>
<td>Inviting students to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“should have,” “are supposed to,” “need to,” “should correct”</td>
<td>code-switch (choose the language pattern to fit the setting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making red notes in the margin</td>
<td>Leading students to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>correcting students’ grammar</td>
<td>compare and contrast language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>build on existing knowledge to add new knowledge—standard English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>code-switch to fit the setting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

phrase “I’m going to my friend house” in many of their writing journals. She continues, “I know why you do that. Because in Chinese, you don’t need an apostrophe, but in English you do.” One of her students responds, “That’s why we get mixed up!” Ms. Tong carefully builds her students’ grammatical understanding of their new language by consciously linking it to their home language.

Once the children have had an opportunity to consider these language differences, Ms. Tong gently guides them through other examples, eventually releasing them to independent practice. In pairs, her children practice asking each other questions and responding with the sentence frame Ms. Tong has provided. One child will ask, “Where will you go after school?” The partner will respond, completing the sentence frame, “After school, I will go to ______’s house.” Ms. Tong has created an excellent speaking/listening activity that provides her students practice with academic English speaking in a safe atmosphere. Potential follow-up activities to this CA lesson could include opportunities for students to share now-revised sentences from their own writing or encouraging children to try out their new understanding of SE grammatical forms in puppet shows and other dramatic play activities (Cheatham et al., 2009), performance already being an important component of Ms. Tong’s teaching.

We can imagine a similar lesson in Mr. Walker’s second-grade classroom in Baltimore, Maryland; Mr. Walker’s students are all AAE speakers. Like Ms. Tong, Mr. Walker has noted home language/SE differences in his students’ compositions; having read Wheeler and Swords (2006), Mr. Walker creates a slightly different CA lesson. Like Ms. Tong, Mr. Walker also begins his lesson with graphical support (see Table 4). His table, following Wheeler and Swords, is entitled “Informal Versus Formal Language Use”; his left-hand column is labeled “Informal” while his right-hand column is labeled “Formal.” His informal example, taken from a student’s paper, reads, “Yesterday he cook dinner”; his formal example reads, “Yesterday he cooked dinner.” In each, he has underlined the verb. At the bottom of each column, Mr. Walker has written “The pattern we see” but has left the chart unfinished. He begins his lesson by reminding students that they’ve been thinking about differences between their informal language (AAE) and the formal language (SE) of school instruction.

Mr. Walker Let’s look at two sentence examples [points at his chart]. “Last week, he cook dinner.” “Last week, he cooked dinner.” What do you notice about these two sentences? How are they different?

LaShonda One says cook and the other says cooked.

Mr. Walker That’s right. The way we use past tense verbs at home is slightly different from how they are used in academic settings. Let’s look at some examples that I’ve noted from your journals and from listening to you.

Mr. Walker then talks through several additional student examples, adding them to his chart in the informal column, discussing the formal version before adding it to the right-hand column—carefully noting differences, but never referring to them as wrong or errors or mistakes. After several examples, Mr. Walker and his students look at the pattern section of the chart. For each column, they define the pattern they have seen and record that information to complete their table creation (Table 4). By focusing his grammar lessons on teaching his students to expand their language repertoires rather than forbidding or condemning AAE, Mr. Walker aims to facilitate “children’s growing socio-linguistic awareness to use language appropriately for different situation, for emphasis, and with different audiences” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 9).

Beyond examples from students’ speech and writing, Mr. Walker also employs high-quality children’s literature that includes a variety of dialects as a helpful way to both encourage children’s appreciation of language variation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4 Informal Versus Formal Language Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informal use</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yesterday he <strong>cook</strong> dinner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The pattern we see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>past + verb</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and validate their own language use (see Table 5 for suggestions). Nikki Giovanni’s (2008) text Hip Hop Speaks to Children honors the variety of cadences and rhythms seen in AAE. During read-alouds, Mr. Walker specifically focuses on how each poet’s language choices contribute to the overall purpose and power of the message.

Sentence Combining and Mentor Texts. Sentence combining (SC) is a popular approach to grammar instruction, which some researchers (e.g., Rose, 1983) suggest can be seen in Quintilian’s ancient Roman language arts instruction; it appeared in American instruction about 100 years ago. Gaining research-based prominence in the 1960s (see Saddler, 2012), SC teaches students how to develop more effective sentences by examining how short, choppy sentences might be combined to create a more mature, complex sentence. At the simplest level, a child who consistently writes short, simple, and unvaried sentences (e.g., My cat has orange fur. My cat is soft.) can use SC exercises to work toward a more complex and sophisticated sentence (e.g., My cat has soft, orange fur.). Over 50 years of research demonstrates the effectiveness of SC for the development of more sophisticated writing (Saddler, 2012).

Sentence Composing: An Important Variation. Building on SC, Killgallon and Killgallon (2000) present an expansion, sentence composing (SCO), an approach to teaching SC along with the use of exemplary children’s literature as mentor texts for students to examine and imitate (another strategy associated with Quintilian!). In their introduction explaining the power of SCO as a pedagogical tool, the Killgallons quote Christensen, highlighting their mutual desire for students “to become sentence acrobats, to dazzle by their syntactic dexterity” (p. vii). The Killgallons next highlight Christensen’s call for the integration of literature, writing, and grammar—the contextualization of language studies within the study of literature, which will not only make the child “a better reader of literature,” but will also help “him thread the syntactical mazes of much mature writing, and...gives him insight into that elusive thing we call style” (p. vii). Christensen’s and the Killgallons’ notion of integrated language arts, like CA, contextualizes grammar studies, this time within a critical analysis of exemplary texts.

The emphasis seen in both SC and SCO is on SE sentence structure or form, but a byproduct is often content improvement, particularly when teachers help students make connections between authors’ grammatical choices and meaning through engaging activities. Killgallon and Killgallon (n.d.) have explained that “students like the ‘puzzle’ aspect of unscrambling sentences, coming up with an effective arrangement of the scrambled sentence parts.” And unlike most textbook or worksheet exercises, in which there is typically just one correct answer, SC activities typically have more than one “correct” answer.

Pedagogical Strategies. As an example of how SCO works, Killgallon and Killgallon (2000) offer E.B. White’s writing in Charlotte’s Web as a model. In one exercise, students are presented with the following sentence components: “As the rat rolled it away to eat; With her broad bill; Who could eat almost anything; The goose pushed the rotten egg out of the nest; And even Wilbur...” (Killgallon & Killgallon, 2000, p. 117). After students have constructed their own sentences based on the components, the teacher presents White’s actual complex sentence: “With her broad bill, the goose pushed the rotten egg out of the nest, while the entire company watched in disgust as the rat rolled it away to eat, and even Wilbur, who could eat almost anything, was appalled” (Killgallon & Killgallon, 2000, p. 117).

Teachers might prefer to highlight more mature grammatical features, such as the use of adverbial clauses to enhance descriptive writing. We can imagine Ms. Martinez, a teacher in Albuquerque, New Mexico, following Killgallon and Killgallon’s (2000) suggestions; she begins her fifth graders’ lesson by pointing to her chart featuring a definition (“adverbal clause: the sentence part that gives details about the main event in the sentence; as clauses, both contain a subject and verb”). In this instance, Ms. Martinez highlights sentences provided by the Killgallons from Charlotte’s Web (her class’s current focus book and mentor text) that offer students practice with identifying adverbial clauses (which are italicized here): “The barn was pleasantly warm in winter when the animals spent most of their time indoors, and it was pleasantly cool in summer when the big doors stood...”

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Table 5  Sample Children’s Literature for Appreciation of Linguistic Diversity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Note: Adapted from Cheatham et al. (2009); Wheeler, Cartwright, & Swords (2012).
TAKE ACTION!

1. Based on observations of your students’ work, determine an appropriate grammatical feature to focus on.

2. Develop your students’ understanding of the grammatical form you have chosen to highlight, thinking carefully about how you will also explain the feature through the use of examples and patterns.

3. After identifying the grammatical form in multiple works of high-quality children’s literature, create a discussion about how this grammatical structure enhances the author’s message.

4. Create scaffolded opportunities for students to practice using the grammatical feature to their own writing. For example, after reading Applegate’s (2012) The One and Only Ivan, teachers might encourage students to create a sentence that includes an adverbial clause to describe some aspects of Ivan’s existence in his cage, with E.B. White’s sentences as a model. This work might begin with students working in small, collaborative peer groups before their own independent efforts.

The controversies around grammar are very real, particularly given the deeply ingrained emphasis on prescriptive grammar pedagogies that have traditionally plagued the grammar instruction enacted in schools. However, it is important to remember that teaching SE is not to be belittled. Students need access to the grammatical forms that are associated with success in school and society. The problem has been “the use of SE to beat little kids over the head… and to say to the child that his language, and the language of his family and friends, is ‘not correct’ and ‘not good’” (Elgin, 1976, p. 32).

We have acknowledged today’s additional complication resulting from years of grammar-free teaching: Teachers themselves may lack strong grammatical knowledge and move to limiting children’s language choices rather than expanding them (Myhill, Jones, & Watson, 2013). It is time for schools (and universities) to arm teachers with the necessary knowledge to foster active discussions about grammatical choice within highly integrated language arts curricula, enabling America’s children to effectively employ grammar to their greatest benefit.

In 1990, Martha Kolln implored both scholars and teachers to ask themselves, “If this formal method of studying grammar doesn’t work, then what will? What can we do to make the study of grammar useful?” (p. 4). Hopefully, our article has provided support as teachers move to implement grammar instruction “that affirms and builds up students, rather than putting them down” (Rickford & Rickford, 2007, p. 284).

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