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Nathan Henton
nhenton@harding.edu

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The History of English as a Tool for Teaching Grammar

Nathan Henton, Assistant Professor, Harding University

I currently teach ENG 322 Systems of English Grammar at Harding University. Originally designed to educate English majors seeking teaching licensure on the basics of English grammar, the course now draws students from across the university. As a response to my students' lack of prior education in the subject and to their anxiety about what they didn't already know about formal English grammar, and to the success I have had, this presentation proposed that teachers of English grammar should consider incorporating material on the origins and history of English into their teaching because the material adds context to the grammatical discussion and helps students cope with the more challenging aspects of standard edited U.S. English.

Adding content on the history of English fits with Hillocks's concept of the "frame experiment" (*Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice* 32). Further, it adds a narrative element to the class, thereby making the class more appealing— or, at least, less dreadful. The content provides my students with a "why" on the language that helps them assimilate the grammatical content of the course and connect that material with their prior knowledge. Finally, adding an overview of how English happened gives them objective grounds for their suspicions and relieves their anxieties about their perceived deficiencies in English grammar: a language that came about the way English did will at times be difficult and strange no matter the skill, knowledge, or experience of the user.

There is a long, albeit spotty, pedagogical trail that supports this teaching method. In English, the 1928 report to NCTE by the Committee on English Language Training for Teachers, Jean Malmstrom's 1977 *Understanding Language: A Primer for the Language Arts Teacher*, Kevin McCarthy's 1978 "The Application of Linguistics in the Classroom," and Suzette Haden Elgin's 1980 *Never Mind the Trees: What an English Teacher Really Needs to Know about Linguistics* all recommended that preparation of English teachers include, recommend, or argue for teaching the history of English.



Foreign language instruction also supports the inclusion of historical matter in language classes. Roland Wolff makes the case for including language history in the teaching of German in his 1993 article “The History of the Language as an Instructional Aid.” Charles Hall, emeritus professor German and linguistics and for whom the original version of this paper was written, once mentioned to me in passing that he also used to include information on the history of German when he taught that language. Deborah L. Arteaga and Julia Herschensohn provide even stronger validation for the inclusion of history in grammar teaching in their 1995 article “Using Diachronic Linguistics in the Language Classroom” on the teaching of French. The article explains a research study they conducted that found a strong link between learning the history of a language and mastering that language.

The current iteration of my lesson is to have the students read the first four chapters of Bill Bryson’s *The Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way* and the first chapter of Jack Lynch’s *The Lexicographer’s Dilemma*. When next the students come to the third class meeting, we take a quiz on the reading (or don’t) and I open the floor comments or questions about the reading. After a few moments of processing aloud, I transition to a PowerPoint I made of what I consider the most significant dates and events in the history of English (e.g.: the major invasions, Johnson’s dictionary, the birth of structural linguistics, and so on). The PowerPoint also contains definitions of and perspectives on grammar and grammar teaching. Concluded that presentation, we enter the semester’s work of examining English grammar. I continue to add historical details as needed over the rest of the semester. Most students respond positively to the discussion and lecture, even with a significant out-of-class reading component. Discussion also tends to be lively and focused, a bit unusual for early in the semester. A brief survey I conducted of eleven former students via Facebook and Twitter in December 2013 provided positive, highly specific reactions to the content.

Knowing the history of English in a grammar class provides context to the language. The context then provides a bridge by which students can move from parroting rules to understanding the rules.



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