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**THE REAL WORLD OF LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION: CACHE
VALLEY TEACHERS SPEAK OUT ON THE CHALLENGES
THEY FACE WHILE TEACHING GRAMMAR**

by

Shauna Wight

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree**

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Establishing a Balance

“Discussing grammar in the teachers’ lounge is a little like stepping in between two opposing 350-pound NFL linemen just after the ball is snapped,” says Harry Noden, veteran English teacher and author of *Image Grammar* (Noden vii). With this statement, Noden captures the intensity and hostility that has characterized departmental meetings, university classrooms, and scholarly articles in which the issue of grammar has been disputed. Relying upon this football metaphor, Noden aptly describes the precarious situation language arts teachers face when they enter the profession and one of its greatest debates—grammar instruction—an issue in which all English teachers inevitably become entangled, regardless of their professional opinion or stake in the matter.

Dramatic and exaggerated as Noden’s observation about grammar instruction sounds, he is not alone in considering “The Great Grammar Debate” to be English teachers’ most salient obsession. John A. Skretta, a reading teacher at Northeast High School in Nebraska, classifies the issue of grammar as being “the proverbial white whale” of the language arts classroom (65). Stephen and Susan Tchudi reaffirm this statement, saying, “Over the years, grammar has probably generated more discussion, debate, acrimony, and maybe more fistfights than any other component of the English/language arts curriculum” (164). Based upon the bulk of scholarly writings that discuss the way in which grammar should be taught (if it is to be taught at all), a grammar fixation truly seems to be present among English teachers.

Other equally vocal groups join the language arts community in ruminating over how to prepare young people to become effective users of language. Indeed, politicians, parents, newspaper columnists, business leaders, and other prominent members of society exhibit a deep concern for making sure that rising generations communicate efficiently and “correctly.” The College Board, for instance, recently approved the inclusion of a new grammar section to the

SAT test, suggesting that national institutions are placing an increasingly heavy emphasis on grammar.

As a future English teacher, I have often been an outlet for the venting of family members, friends, and complete strangers who complain about the way students are—or, in many cases, are not—learning grammar. In fact, even while sitting at my ailing grandmother's bedside, I was bombarded with my aunt's accusations that her son's English teachers never taught him to speak and write correctly. Sadly, I am not alone in being forced to listen to the world gripe about grammar. As university professor William Strong points out in *Coaching Writing*, most English teachers are “trapped on airplanes or cornered against barbecues, listening to the lubricated angst and self-righteous indictments” of individuals such as my aunt (47).

Listening to the deafening clatter of scholars, teachers, politicians, and personal acquaintances rumbling and grumbling over the hows, whys, and what ifs of grammar instruction, I am struck by the fact that these gladiators of the language arts arena often are not even arguing about the same thing. Martha Kolln, an advocate for grammar's inclusion in the language arts curriculum, advises scholars to avoid using “the unmodified grammar” in debates about how much grammar students need to learn (qtd. in Dunn and Lindblom 43). After all, the word *grammar* means something different to everyone. Therefore, in order to know what role grammar should play in the classroom, it is important to have a clear definition of what grammar really is.

When defining grammar in *The English/Language Arts Handbook*, researchers Stephen and Susan Tchudi divide grammar into three separate categories: Grammar 1, Grammar 2, and grammar 3. Grammar 1 includes the innate knowledge that a native speaker has of his/her language system. For instance, all native speakers of English are able to transform complete, declarative sentences into questions without assistance. Grammar 2, on the other hand, refers to

the terminology used to describe a language system. The lessons found in the average schoolhouse grammar book, with their focus on parts of speech and sentence structures are prime examples of this type of grammar. The final classification, Grammar 3, involves usage, the language etiquette that members of our society must utilize in order to fit into certain social groups (Tchudi & Tchudi 165). Grammar 3 includes linguistic niceties such as knowing when to use “going to” instead of “gonna.” Because debates regarding grammar instruction involve mostly Grammar 2 and Grammar 3, I shall focus on the Tchudis’ last two categories of grammar. Sometimes, however, Grammar 1 will be mentioned as a base upon which to build Grammars 2 and 3. Additionally, many researchers now suggest that style be included in the discussion of *grammar*, as a knowledge of Grammar 2 often improves students’ writing style. Therefore, I shall discuss approaches that teach grammar and style synonymously (Weaver 1).

By understanding what the term grammar actually means and what types of grammar instruction are actually being questioned, I have been forced to reconsider my original position in the grammar debate. Although still a pre-service teacher, I already feel entrenched in debates regarding the role that Grammars 2 and 3 should play in the classroom. Having had very little grammar instruction during my years in public education, I was always self-conscious about the way I spoke and wrote until I was able to take a grammar course at Utah State University. Before taking a course in grammar, I pestered my mother to read and edit all of my papers. I dreaded the thought of going off to college and not being able to rely upon someone else’s editing skills. Learning grammar, therefore, made me a more independent and confident writer. With such a background, I latched onto the notion that, as a teacher, I would need to provide my students with explicit and systematic instruction in Grammars 2 and 3.

I was so adamant in my views on how grammar should be taught that I met any challenges to my beliefs with suspicion and irritation. Reading and discussing studies labeling

systematic grammar instruction as worthless and perhaps even detrimental, I generally tried to convince my classmates in various English education courses that this research is significantly flawed. After all, I knew from personal experience that grammar instruction could improve writing, and I resented the views of the researchers whose work I grudgingly studied.

Still, I could not completely ignore the wealth of evidence suggesting that traditional grammar instruction has failed the majority of students. Furthermore, while observing students during my clinical placements, I realized that the instructional methods best suited to me might not be effective for all. Reluctantly, I entered a state of confusion concerning “The Great Grammar Debate.” I could no longer shrug off the discoveries of researchers, nor could I deny the benefits I saw in traditional grammar instruction. I realized that I had to find a way to negotiate these tensions in order to teach my students to communicate effectively and in a manner appropriate to the society in which we live.

Reading articles on grammar in *English Journal* and other publications focusing on composition, I’ve found that my struggle to create a balance between tradition and research is shared by the majority of writing instructors. Teachers Deborah Johansen and Nancy Shaw discuss this struggle for balance in an article on revitalizing grammar, saying, “As teachers who grew up in another age of traditional grammar instruction consisting of memorizing rules, completing pages of practice exercises, and diagramming sentences, we increasingly felt guilty parting with that aspect of English instruction, but we did part with it” (97). Following the guide of research claiming that grammar in isolation is ineffective, Johansen and Shaw abandoned formal grammar instruction. However, they were never given a suitable alternative to replace former pedagogical methods. Riding the pendulum of extremes on the grammar debate, Johansen and Shaw eventually conclude that teachers must find a middle ground in teaching grammar (Johansen & Shaw 97). Ed Vavra, editor of *Syntax in Schools*, echoes this advice in his

article "On Not Teaching Grammar," observing, "The debate continues, and will continue, both because the problem has been improperly stated, and because the debate is carried on by a few people at two extremes of our profession" (32). Based upon the work of Johansen, Shaw, Vavra, and others, a need within the profession becomes apparent—more teachers with moderate viewpoints must be heard. After all, extremists have traditionally dominated this debate. Consequently, no resolutions have been made; proposed teaching methods have been both impractical and ineffective; and the average teacher has been left wondering where she fits into all of this brouhaha.

It is with this need in mind that I embarked on a study to collect the perspectives and suggestions that ten Cache Valley teachers have on grammar instruction. With the help of my professors, I selected ten teachers—seven females, three males—who had a range of different experience in teaching English. Some were beginners, having only taught for two years. Others were in the middle or nearing the end of their careers. I met with four teachers from Mount Logan Middle School; two from Logan High; two from Skyview; and two from Mountain Crest. During my twenty-minute interviews with these teachers, I asked them questions regarding their teacher training; their experiences learning grammar; their views on, and methods for, teaching grammar; the pressures they experienced with grammar instruction; and what kind of language diversity they saw in their classroom. Although, for the most part, we adhered to these questions during the interviews, sometimes the conversation veered off in interesting directions. I allowed myself to follow these slight strays in our discussion and, as a result, gained some illuminating insights that have allowed me to understand the experiences and efforts of secondary school teachers. Because the majority of these professionals have obtained their training at Utah State University, I feel that this group has a background somewhat similar to mine. Also, collecting data from these Cache Valley teachers in addition to the research of composition teachers from

around the country has given me a chance to compare perspectives, challenges, pressures, and realities between teachers in Utah and the rest of the country. With this information, I hope to provide a sketch of the competing pressures English teachers face in language instruction and then offer a description of the methods they use for negotiating such tensions.

As a starting point, I will examine what scholars from each side of the grammar debate actually have to say about grammar's place in the classroom. Capturing the most fanatical views surrounding this issue provides a glimpse into the problems inherent in arguments surrounding grammar instruction and suggests the need for a middle ground. Additionally, the majority of teachers are deeply affected by this research. Therefore, I wanted to see how teachers actually interpret and react to scholarly findings concerning grammar.

After examining the implications that grammar instruction has for the general populace, I will turn to see how minority students and other diverse populations are affected by their teachers' attitudes towards Standard English¹. As our classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse and teachers are scrambling to find ways to help diverse learners succeed, many educators are questioning whether they should help all students to speak Standard English or whether they should encourage all students to appreciate and speak multiple dialects. In examining how both the teachers in Cache Valley and their colleagues nationwide negotiate this tension, I try to discover a compromise between a rigid adherence to Standard English and a tendency to underestimate the political implications of language usage.

While there are other factors that influence teachers' instructional decisions in teaching grammar, I feel that research findings and concerns regarding diversity are most significant. For example, during my interviews, I noticed that the teachers' personal experiences learning grammar, their school culture, and state standards had an impact on the types of instruction they

¹ The term "Standard English" refers to Formal Written American English of the early 21st century.

chose to provide. Still, these factors do not seem to be as pervasive and influential as the pressures I chose to examine.

In order to answer some of the questions that I raise about how to teach grammar, I conclude with an analysis of three popular programs: mini-lessons, the Daily Oral Language Program, and a semantically oriented approach. In looking at the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, I hope to suggest that teachers can use these programs in concert in order to overcome the limitations of any one method. Additionally, I attempt to explore how teachers actually use their techniques in their classroom while providing grammar instruction.

Competing Research Claims

According to David Mulroy, author of *The War Against Grammar*, the decline of grammar's prestige among educators correlates with the rise of progressive education, developed at the turn of the century. With the impetus for progressivism lying in the burgeoning numbers of non-college bound students enrolled in public education during the 1920s, educators began searching for curriculum content that would be of practical value to the majority of students. Valuing instruction that would be directly beneficial in students' everyday lives, progressive educators began attacking formalist content, with its emphasis on facts, rules and definitions. Naturally, formal grammar instruction—a subject traditionally filled with prescriptions, proscriptions, and rote memorization—quickly fell prey to the vehement criticisms of liberal educators (Mulroy 61).

One of the first attacks against traditional grammar instruction occurred in 1925, coming from Charles Fries, a linguist at the University of Michigan. In his most influential work, *The Structure of English*, Fries asserts that linguists should describe language rather than prescribe how it should be used. Additionally, Fries felt that, as scientists, linguists should base their

definitions and rules on empirical evidence instead of intuitive judgements. Using Fries work as one strike against traditional grammar instruction, which usually involves language prescriptions rather than descriptions, NCTE, the National Council of Teachers of English, labeled Fries work as the “‘strongest and most typical criticism’ of traditional school grammar” (qtd. in Mulroy 5).

In the crusade of anti-grammarians, later studies would become equally damaging to the reputation of traditional, schoolhouse grammars. A report by Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer entitled *Research in Written Composition* (1963), for example, has long been cited as one of the most conclusive pieces of evidence used in the case against methodically teaching grammar. Within this report, an analysis of previous studies on formal grammar instruction, Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer make the following assertion:

In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing. (qtd. in Weaver 10)

This statement, quoted in almost every scholarly publication or college textbook on writing instruction, has been so influential that just about every language arts teacher teaching in today's schools has heard it. Indeed, while interviewing several teachers in Cache Valley, the majority, either directly or indirectly, referred to this quotation when asked about their views on teaching grammar. Some teachers used this study as vindication of their current teaching practices; others, somewhat skeptical of the bold claims made by Braddock and his colleagues, reported that this study had only a minimal impact on their teaching. Still, the far-reaching effects of this work, it seems, have been the deathblow of systematic instruction in Grammars 2 and 3.

Although not as influential as the Fries and the Braddock et. al writings, other studies have also been key in the anti-grammarians' argument. For instance, George Hillocks and Michael Smith—scholars who, like Braddock et. al, reviewed numerous studies on grammar

instruction—describe research done by New Zealand educator W.B. Elley, as being “by far the most impressive” investigation of teaching grammar in schools (qtd. in Mulroy 75). Essentially, Elley monitored the progress of 248 high school students in eight different classes. These eight classes were broken up into three categories, each with a different type of grammar instruction being used. Three sections studied transformational grammar; three focused on reading and writing assignments; and two completed grammar exercises out of a traditional text. Elley tested all of the groups annually. At the end of three years, Elley noted that the testing showed no significant differences in the three groups. Such results definitely suggest that neither traditional nor formational grammars are effective in teaching students to become better users of language (Mulroy 75).

The abundance of studies denouncing the role of traditional grammar instruction has led scholars such as Constance Weaver, author of *Teaching Grammar in Context*, to conclude that “there is little pragmatic justification for systematically teaching a descriptive or explanatory grammar of the language, whether that grammar be traditional, structural, transformational, or any other kind” (23). Within this statement, Weaver is directing teachers to abandon the explicit, step-by-step grammar instruction previously provided in language arts classrooms. While acknowledging that teachers may have reservations about changing curriculum, Weaver points out that most teachers are already intuitively aware of grammar instruction’s failures. Furthermore, those teachers and administrators savvy to current discoveries in the language arts community “should find that research difficult to ignore” (Weaver 26). Weaver confidently attests to the validity of these studies, pointing to the increasing numbers of scholars who find little benefit in explicitly teaching grammar to students. Emboldened by faith in her colleagues’ work, Weaver even goes so far as to say that “teaching formal, isolated grammar to average or heterogeneous classes, perhaps even to highly motivated students in elective classes, makes no

appreciable difference in their ability to write, to edit or to score better on standardized tests” (26). A tidy, succinct argument, this view on teaching grammar presents itself as an open-and-shut case. With scholarly research, national organizations, and well-respected professionals on their side, the anti-grammarians’ claims should leave teachers with a clear view of what approaches do not work in the classroom.

There are a few dissenting voices in the scholarship on teaching grammar, but they are quickly silenced. David Mulroy, for example, observes, “There is no necessary conflict between scientific linguistics and traditional grammar. They are complementary endeavors” (5). Certainly, within the language arts classroom, he argues, students should be encouraged to examine and analyze how language is actually used in the world around them; however, he adds, they should still be asked to learn the rules that they will need to know in order to be successful within our society.

To support his argument, Mulroy points out the weaknesses and limitations in studies that have “proven” the futility of traditional grammar instruction. He shows that almost all of the studies on grammar’s failings have focused exclusively on the short-term effects of a crash course in grammar provided to relatively mature students. If students were systematically and patiently taught grammar from a young age, Mulroy argues, researchers would likely see more positive gains in students’ speaking, writing, and editing skills. As Mulroy shrewdly observes, “insert[ing] some grammar into the curriculum at various spots along the way [. . .] is like trying to insert partial foundations beneath half-finished houses and concluding from the ensuing debacles that foundations are useless” (75). From Mulroy’s perspective, the reason why traditional grammar is failing is that students are not being given a strong foundation in basic grammatical terms and concepts. When researchers test this incomplete, partial type of

instruction, it is only natural that they would conclude that all traditional modes of instruction are ineffective.

Mulroy's argument that formal grammar instruction needs to be introduced early in life—when, studies demonstrate, individuals have the greatest capacity for learning language—has an intuitive appeal. However, language scholars such as J. Sanborn, author of "Grammar: Good Wine Before Its Time," and Constance Weaver dispute the idea that young children have a need or capability for formal grammar instruction. Sanborn, for instance, highlights children's native language capabilities to criticize early grammar instruction, saying, "I do not believe that we should attempt to teach grammar as early and as relentlessly as we do. It is valuable to understand the workings of one's own language but hardly necessary" (qtd. in Milner & Milner 64). From Sanborn's perspective, children already have innate tools enabling them to be competent creators and receptors of language. Therefore, making this understanding explicit is, in many instances, superfluous.

In this same line of reasoning, Sanborn goes on to point out that children being taught grammar often do not possess the level of abstraction necessary to understand key concepts and suggests that "students who have not yet reached a level of formal operational thought or a level of ego development where they can step outside themselves should not be forced into grammar exercises that can have no meaning for them" (qtd. in Milner & Milner 64). Constance Weaver reinforces Sanborn's position lamenting that "grammatical analysis is sometimes required of children before they are capable of what Jean Piaget called 'formal operational thought'" (103). Weaver does note, however, that if children are inductively introduced to grammatical concepts in a manner similar to native language acquisition, they will be more likely to comprehend instruction (103). With these arguments that are heavily based in educational psychology, the

anti-grammarians effectively oppose Mulroy's common-sense critiques with scientific observations, evidence that is hard to ignore.

Also damaging to Mulroy's argument that studies on grammar instruction have failed to take into consideration the benefit of early training is the fact that some studies have, in fact, explored this very issue. Specifically, William H. Macauley's "The Difficulty of Grammar," a longitudinal study conducted in 1947 among Scottish schoolchildren, suggests that, despite extensive drilling beginning at age seven, most pupils cannot understand parts of speech (Mulroy 76).

Macauley bases this conclusion on a series of tests targeting the identification of parts of speech that were given to 131 twelve-year-olds. Fifty sentences were presented to the students during the test. One word was underlined on each sentence, and students were asked to identify whether the underlined word was a noun, pronoun, adjective, verb, or adverb. Despite years of formal grammar instruction, the students failed miserably. On average, each student missed three-fourths of the questions. When Macauley gave a version of this same test to high school students, the scores improved slightly; however, the results still were not promising. At the end of this study, Macauley concludes that traditional grammar should not be taught in grade schools or middle schools, "as comparatively few pupils have the necessary maturity and intelligence to benefit from it" (qtd. in Mulroy 77). Additionally, he felt that only a select number of students in high school should be taught grammar, specifically, those students preparing for college (Mulroy 77).

While Macauley's study compromises the notion that grammar instruction benefits students when provided at an early age, his work is not flawless. Several scholars question the methodology of this study. David Mulroy, for one, insists that the experiment is not valid unless the results can be replicated with *any* group of students, and in order to prove his conviction, he

performed the study again. This time, thirty-seven seventh and eighth-grade students from Elm Grove Lutheran, a suburban school in Milwaukee where “formal grammar” continues to be taught, took a modified version of Macauley’s examination. The average score among the students was seventy-eight percent. One student even got a perfect score. (Mulroy 77).

Mulroy’s “replication” of Macauley’s study seems to undermine the 1947 results. However, upon closer inspection, Mulroy’s results clearly cannot represent the abilities of the average student. For instance, Elm Grove Lutheran—a private, suburban school—has teachers with more education and training, instructional materials with less wear and tear, parents with more resources to contribute to the school, and students with a record of higher achievement than do inner-city schools. Furthermore, Mulroy tested only thirty-seven students as opposed to Macauley’s 131. Clearly Mulroy’s sampling of such a small number cannot be considered as statistically relevant as Macauley’s selection.

Still, while Mulroy cannot completely undermine the significance of Macauley’s results, other scholars have partially attributed the Scottish students’ poor performance to the poor design of the grammar examination. Dedicating an entire section of her book *Teaching Grammar in Context* to a review of Macauley’s work, Constance Weaver clearly values its implication that teachers should discontinue teaching traditional grammar from early elementary to high school. She, however, admits to the study’s faults, saying, “We cannot consider Macauley’s results entirely reliable, since his directions did not make it clear that students were to determine the word’s part of speech by its function” (Weaver 10). Additionally, the test was confusing to students because the same word was underlined in different sentences although the function changed in each sentence. Many reviewers of the study agree that this aspect of the test design was unnecessarily confusing for students. Despite the obvious shortcomings of this study, though, Weaver suggests that the results are, for the most part, still accurate, saying,

“Even assuming that students understood the parts of speech somewhat better than their scores suggested, one can hardly escape the conclusion that extensive and intensive teaching of grammar may not be warranted” (20).

Reluctant to discredit the findings of this piece of evidence and other flawed studies, Weaver points out that, although many of the studies highlighting formal grammar weaknesses may not be fully accurate, their sheer number lends strength to the validity of their conclusions. As impressive as the bulk of research against grammar instruction may be, a collection of half-truths do not necessarily make a truth. Teachers, therefore, are thrust into a mire of speculations, unresolved questions, and (as paradoxical as it sounds) inconclusive conclusions. Remarking on the Ping-Pong quality of the debate on grammar, Brenda Arnett Petruzzella, English teacher and author of “Grammar Instruction: What Teachers Say,” admits that “professional reading [is] not particularly helpful because even researchers are not in agreement about grammar instruction. The debate in scholarly journals has, at times become quite acrimonious” (68). With the ambiguous results of scholarly findings offering little support to their practical needs, teachers have been left alone in untangling the Gordian Knot of grammar instruction in the classroom.

Teachers’ Responses to the Scholarly Research on Grammar:

In order to understand what teachers actually take away from this instructional debate on grammar’s place in the classroom, I sat down and interviewed ten English teachers who represented a wide range of professional experiences and perspectives. During the interviews I conducted with these Cache Valley educators, the uncertainty regarding published studies on grammar instruction cropped up frequently as I questioned them about their attitudes on teaching grammar. For instance, Karen Cutler, a well-respected veteran teacher employed at a local high school, displayed a strong sense of guilt over the lack of grammar instruction provided in her classroom. One reason Cutler gave for not teaching grammar in her class was that “students hate

it, and it's a battle we don't have to fight, which is a total cop-out." She went on to describe how she felt she used scholarly research as professional justification for "copping-out" of trying to teach students grammar, saying, "I guess I want to believe or sort of believe the research that says [grammar instruction] doesn't really translate into their language and their writing. I'm not sure I buy it completely, but it's a nice way to not do it, to not have to battle with the kids."

Within this statement, Cutler—a highly qualified, effective, caring educator—reflects upon the unfortunate position in which many language arts professionals have been placed. Struggling to get adolescent students interested in a subject as difficult and, at times, tedious as grammar while reading professional articles that label their efforts as worthless, many language arts teachers have hung up their boxing gloves and pitched their grammar worksheets in the rubbish bin. After all, even grammar advocates such as David Mulroy confess that teaching students grammar is "like trying to teach table manners to a motorcycle gang," and teachers are given little professional validation for their attempt (7).

Teachers like Cutler who provide little systematic grammar instruction certainly have the support of popular research and national organizations like NCTE. Still, they express guilt over the way in which they teach, or avoid teaching, the grammar and usage portion of the language arts curriculum. Why? One probable explanation is that, as I have mentioned previously, many teachers were raised in a generation in which the ability to parse and diagram sentences was valued. Departing from this tradition and their own experiences learning grammar, then, becomes uncomfortable.

However, while this explanation may partially explain some of the angst and guilt that Cutler and some of her colleagues feel, my research shows that the drawbacks teachers see in not teaching grammar may also cause them to feel uneasy. One of the biggest drawbacks to not teaching grammar in the classroom that was mentioned in the interviews was that students and

teachers did not have a common code for talking about writing. During the course of my interview with her, Cutler made the following observation about the lack of Grammar 2 in her classroom:

Without them understanding how their language works, it's really hard for [teachers] to talk to [students] about the way things are written and about literature. It's hard for me to talk to them about, even just the use of active verbs sometimes because they don't even have a handle on what those are.

While Cutler seems to feel frustrated by the advice of scholars to limit grammatical terminology, conflicts between scholars and her own experience in the classroom seem to have, in a sense, left her paralyzed on this issue of grammar instruction. When I asked Cutler how she worked around the obstacle of not having a metalanguage for talking about the students' writing, she responded, saying, "I'm not sure I do very well. [Teachers] have to describe, rather than saying 'active verbs,' we have to describe them each time we talk about them." According to Cutler, this process of description is both confusing and time consuming, which has led her to feel that she does poorly in overcoming the drawbacks to avoiding instruction in grammar 2.

Of course, understanding why teachers such as Cutler feel reluctant to change their approach is easy to understand upon examining the negative, "schoolmarm" image pinned upon those who opt to follow tradition. In *Breaking the Rules: Liberating Writers Through Innovative Grammar Instruction*, Edgar Schuster describes traditional grammar instruction as a "compacted and overwhelmingly authoritative tradition in large measure because that is what the public and most teachers wanted" (15). Looking at the rhetoric of this statement, and even the title of Schuster's book itself, one can easily see how Schuster equates his approach to grammar instruction with greater freedom, using words like "liberating" to describe his teaching methods and "overwhelmingly authoritative" to describe more conventional approaches. David Mulroy discusses this use of "rhetoric reminiscent of political campaigns for civil rights" in *The War Against Grammar*, pointing out that the NCTE group that "disseminates its critique on formal

Against Grammar, pointing out that the NCTE group that “disseminates its critique on formal instruction in grammar describes itself as an ‘intellectual freedom network’” (5). Amy Martinsen, another critic of the way in which the anti-grammarian’s war cry draws upon the language of politics, describes the protests against grammar as “a virtual Woodstock in the English classroom: Abandon all the rules; free love and free grammar for all” (123). With the bulk of scholarly research portraying teachers who continue to teach grammar as “overwhelmingly authoritative,” dogmatic, and unscientific, it is no wonder that teachers such as Cutler have been scared into submission.

Although Cutler’s circumstance may sound extreme, she is by no means alone in feeling a considerable amount of pressure from academic circles to abandon grammar instruction. Robin Coleman, who has been teaching English and Speech at another local high school for five years, has decided to teach more Grammar 2 in her classroom than Cutler because of this need for a common code in talking about writing and literature. Like Cutler, Coleman has felt considerable pressure from academia, specifically from faculty members at Utah State University, to focus less on grammar instruction. Coleman summarizes the conflicts she feels between following the advice of scholars and doing what she feels to be best within the context of her classroom:

I’ve been ridiculed by people up at the college if I say I teach the parts of speech. They get mad at me for ‘teaching grammar out of context,’ and I just have to blow it off because if you want [the students] to improve their writing, you have to talk about the sentence. And how can you talk about the sentence if you don’t know what the parts are called. You have to call the parts of the sentences something before you can teach [the students] to play with them.

Clearly, Coleman is well aware of research suggesting that systematic instruction in Grammar 2 is useless. She even, for the most part, values the research that denounces isolated grammar instruction, saying, “I try to teach [the students] writing techniques, and I try to just fit the grammar in with the writing techniques.” Coleman, it seems, is attempting to create a balance

between teaching traditional grammatical terms and encouraging students to apply this knowledge to their writing.

The struggle faced by Coleman and Cutler seems common among the teachers I interviewed. Perhaps living and teaching in a university town has placed additional pressures on teachers to avoid the formal, traditional grammar instruction that so many scholars criticize. Still, these teachers have their own doubts—echoed by the criticisms of scholars such as David Mulroy and the ATEG (Association of Teachers of English Grammar)—regarding the sparse, almost non-existent, amount of grammar that many academicians are now pushing educators to use in their classrooms. Quite simply put, the stacks of bound journals, the mass of yellowing manuscripts, and the bulk of instructional texts cannot fully satisfy educators' minds regarding the issue of grammar. Many factors and experiences must be examined before educators can successfully consider how to handle perhaps the stickiest issue in the language arts profession—grammar.

Issues of Diversity in Grammar Instruction

Ross was the kind of neighbor who would pop into my apartment just as I was eating dinner, heap a generous portion of Macaroni and Cheese (or whatever other pre-packaged meal I had assembled) onto a plate, and proceed to blab at me. Cruel as it sounds, I often rearranged my schedule to throw him off track, just so he wouldn't know when to expect me at home. Still, with Ross living in the apartment across from mine, he was over often, telling me—a pre-service teacher—how he thought public education was unconstitutional, how he thought women with uncovered heads—much like mine—were immodest, and how he thought atheists should be executed for treason.

One night, Ross was even *charming* enough to *complement* me on how my new haircut made me less attractive. “I think it’s cool that, unlike most girls, you’re not concerned with trying to beguile members of the opposite sex with the way you look,” Ross pronounced earnestly while giving me a hearty slap on the back. “Wow, thanks Ross. The ugly look was exactly what I was going for,” I scoffed back with lightly masked irritation and sarcasm.

As extreme and far-out as most of Ross’s opinions were, I guess that I really shouldn’t have been too surprised when I heard his intolerant views on linguistic diversity. However, I was indeed shocked by how incredibly racist and snobbish Ross became when I shared my plans to become an English teacher. Remarking upon how “noble” he thought it would be to teach the masses to speak “correctly,” Ross shared his view that anything less than hyper-correct Standard English was substandard, a perversion of the order and beauty of God’s gift of language. Ross also felt that anyone who failed to learn Standard English, the language of prestige and power, lacked intelligence. Specifically, Ross felt that African-Americans, whom he considered to be an especially ignorant race, spoke “slang” because they lacked the mental capacity needed to talk “properly.”

Ross's views on language are both unscientific and disgusting. I find his intolerance inexcusable, but I at least thought that such narrow-mindedness was exclusive among the eccentric and unwelcome members of society who, like Ross, live in a world of their own. Therefore, when I first read the transcripts of "The Politics of Grammar" by Sabah Salih, I was surprised that a speech about usage in Iraq was presented before the Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar. I could not see a connection between political turmoil among dictators in Iraq and educational turmoil among English teachers in the United States. In the presentation, Salih discusses the way in which Iraqi dictators, such as Saddam Hussein and Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr, mandated the instruction and use of certain Arab dialects in order to control the political ideologies of the Iraqi people. Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr, for instance, forced all of the Iraqi people to learn and use classic Arabic because this dialect represented the glorious past of a united Arabia. Since Pan-Arabism, the return of Arabic nations to a unified state, was the ultimate political goal of the al-Bakr regime, classic Arabic became a linguistic means for reuniting The Middle East (Salih 7).

When Saddam Hussein overthrew the al-Bakr regime, he pushed to reintroduce the provincial dialects against which al-Bakr had fought. During his reign of power, Hussein gained popular support by making political moves against the aristocratic, land-owning minority. Validating the language of the average citizen was one way to affirm this new political stance (Salih 7). Reflecting upon the way in which both al-Bakr and Hussein manipulated grammar use for political purposes, Salih says, "Fear, imprisonment, torture, and assassination are the common means by which a totalitarian state controls its people. Another equally effective means is language, which the state turns into an official domain where what gets said and how it is said requires state approval" (5). Looking at Salih's work, I could see how language was, in fact, a means by which Iraqi dictators controlled their subjects. Still, I could not see how such

information would be of any relevance to American English teachers. After all, we do not live under a totalitarian regime.

In addition to being unable to appreciate the implications Salih's research has for English teachers in the U.S., I was further unable to see the relationship between explicit dialectal control in foreign nations and the more subtle forces existing in this country. For instance, the poem "Parsley" by Rita Dove details how Rafael Trujillo, the dictator of the Dominican Republic, ordered the execution of 200,000 blacks because of their inability to pronounce the "r" in "perejil," the Spanish word for Parsley (Weaver 228). As distant and far removed as these overt displays of power were, I was naïve enough to ignore the way in which the social stigmas attached to non-standard forms of English are often used as justification for discriminating against disenfranchised members of the American population. After all, violent acts of discrimination, such as mass executions, are much more visible than the systematic denial of social goods and opportunities to certain members of society.

Perhaps this invisibility is what leads linguists such as Wayne O'Neil to conclude that "language prejudice remains a 'legitimate' prejudice; that is, one can generally say the most appalling things about people's speech without fear of correction or contradiction. The exercise of this prejudice in the United States is [. . .] a shield for racism, thus allowing the holders of racist views a freedom no longer readily acceptable in civil society" (42). Because non-standard forms of English are often publicly viewed as an inferior, sloppy version of a correct and more sophisticated type of usage, these linguistic forms and their users are viewed as being sub-standard. Commenting upon the way in which certain dialects and their speakers are popularly characterized as being deficient and lazy, Rei Noguchi notes that "the social status of a language variety is intimately linked to the social status of its users" (115). The paradoxes existing in American society's attitudes surrounding diversity are obvious: cultural stereotypes such as Aunt

Jemima and Uncle Ben are taboo. On the other hand, parodies and criticisms of dialectal forms such as Ebonics are often accepted and condoned. Clearly, issues of language diversity are highly charged and very political. Therefore, the existence of contradictions and arguments regarding diversity awareness in the instruction of Grammar 3 is hardly surprising.

As with grammar itself, defining exactly what language diversity is presents scholars with blurry boundaries and unclear concepts. Although traditional linguistics is quite clear on the distinctions between dialect and language, with *dialect* being defined as mutually intelligible varieties of a language and *language* referring to non-mutually intelligible speech forms, the politics of such distinctions are more complex than these definitions suggest. Linguists such as Wayne O'Neil, for instance, have argued quite persuasively that the distinction between dialects and languages are often more political than scientific. O'Neil quotes the popular adage that "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy" and goes on to list examples that support this observation (41). Swedish and Norwegian, for instance, are mutually intelligible; however, they are considered to be separate languages. On the other hand, Cantonese, Fujianese, and Mandarin are considered to be dialects of Chinese, mainly because they all exist within the national boundary of the People's Republic of China (O'Neil 41). Looking at the differences between languages and dialects from this perspective suggests that decisions regarding the labeling of linguistic varieties are based more on geography than the innate qualities of the variety under consideration.

Recognizing the blurred distinctions between dialects and languages is important because terms such as "dialect" and "non-standard variety" draw resentment from the speakers and scholars of certain language forms. Wayne O'Neil, who both speaks and studies Ebonics, considers the idea that Ebonics is "merely" a dialect of a "legitimate" language to be demeaning (40). Fellow African-American linguist Ernie Smith argues that considering Ebonics to be a

dialect of English is ridiculous. Smith points out that, while Ebonics draws its lexicon from English, its grammar is based upon the Niger-Congo language family. Since English draws most of its lexicon from Latin but is still considered to be a Germanic language, Smith believes that Ebonics should be viewed as a language distinct from English (Smith 52).

This idea that there are no clear-cut distinctions between dialects and languages has important educational ramifications. For instance, in the 1979 case of *King v. Ann Arbor*, Judge Charles C. Joiner ruled that Black English (Ebonics) is a legitimate language, and students speaking it should receive the same educational services provided to students who speak English as a second language. Essentially, this ruling blurs the boundaries between the terms *language* and *dialect*, suggesting that students speaking a wide range of language variations need special considerations for their unique educational needs (Smitherman 167).

A later educational policy, The Oakland Ebonics Resolution of 1996, basically followed the precedent set by *King v. Ann Arbor*. In order to meet the needs of the fifty-three percent African-American student body, many of whom were falling through the cracks of the educational system, the Oakland school district commissioned an African-American task force to research and recommend new teaching methods. After extensive research and consideration, the African-American task force reinforced the idea that Black English/Ebonics is a legitimate, rule-based language. They went on to state that, since the majority of the students in the district used this language in their homes and communities, it should be affirmed, maintained, and used to help students develop fluency in the standard code (Perry 3). Basically, this resolution reconfirms the idea that language diversity in schools must be addressed systematically in order to nurture students' home languages and give them access to more widely used forms of communication.

As reasonable and well intentioned as policies such as The Oakland Ebonics Resolution sound, any policy towards language use seems to elicit opposition from the outspoken. While both sides of the controversy on how to deal with language diversity seem to believe that students speaking a non-standard form need to learn to utilize the standard code, the amount of instruction in Standard English that should be provided is still a heavily contested component of the debate.

On one side lie the educators who feel that a great deal of formal instruction in Standard English (Grammar 3) is both dehumanizing and ineffective. Sociolinguist James Paul Gee leans toward this perspective in his article “Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction.” Within this work, Gee suggests that a person’s language cannot be separated from his identity. Essentially, in any given social situation, a person must “say or write the right thing in the right way while playing the right social role and (appearing) to hold the right values, beliefs, and attitude” (Gee 526). Gee calls this “identity kit”—the doing, believing, and appearing that go along with communication—discourse (Gee 526). Because everyone must interact with others in a variety of social situations, all people have several different discourses. The first discourse that is acquired within the social context of the home is the primary discourse. All later, additional discourses are called secondary discourses (Gee 527).

According to Lisa Delpit’s article “The Politics of Teaching Literate Discourse,” Gee’s suggestion that acquiring a secondary discourse in a classroom is difficult, if not impossible, has been used by many educators to justify their laissez-faire approach to language diversity within the classroom. Delpit makes this point by saying that Gee’s work can “leave a teacher feeling powerless to effect change, and a student feeling hopeless that change can occur” (Delpit, *Other People’s Children*, 547). Essentially, by telling educators that their students are unlikely to

master the dominant discourse, Gee is discouraging teachers from even attempting to teach the dominant discourse explicitly.

In many ways, Delpit's criticism of Gee's work is justified. After all, Gee tells teachers that they "cannot overtly teach anyone a discourse, in a classroom or anywhere else" (527). Therefore, time spent teaching Standard English in the classroom is time wasted. Students must have access to the standard code in order to succeed within American society. However, that access must occur through an "apprenticeship" in which the learner can participate in "supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse" (Gee 527). From this perspective, students must already have an "in" to the dominant society in order to master the discourse that will allow them full access to the power and prestige that are associated with the culture of power. Delpit criticizes this premise of Gee's work because it suggests that students' attempts to gain access to the goods and status connected to the dominant discourse are futile. As most poor, minority students have no access to the dominant discourse and its surrounding institutions, Delpit says that Gee's work sends the discouraging message that "if you're not already in, don't expect to get in" (Delpit, *Other People's Children*, 546). Since teachers cannot provide this access through explicit instruction, students from disenfranchised groups are on their own to try to succeed in gaining the educational, professional, and economic benefits that can potentially be reaped by developing fluency in the dominant discourse.

While Delpit may be correct in suggesting that some teachers will use Gee's work as an excuse to abandon instruction in Standard English, Gee does suggest a loophole for students for whom Standard English is a secondary discourse. He calls this loophole "mushfake," a term taken from prison culture that refers to making do with something less when the real thing is not available. In teaching students how to "mushfake" the dominant discourse, teachers help students develop a "partial acquisition coupled with meta-knowledge and strategies to 'make

do" (Gee 533). Examining Gee's "mushfaking" strategy makes his prognosis for students who speak a non-standard dialect less grim and gives both educators and students hope that language discrimination can be overcome.

Although Gee's work is not actually disheartening as Delpit's interpretation of it, educators must also face the grim fact that speaking Standard English does not necessarily guarantee equal opportunity and success. As James Sledd points out in his article "Grammar for Social Awareness in Time of Class Warfare," acquiring the dominant discourse "removes one barrier, but the most commonplace experience teaches that innumerable other barriers remain where the dominant have chosen to place them" (61). Indeed, even if teachers can actually teach students Standard English, these students still have to face issues such as trying to fund a college education on a meager income or surviving the violence exploding across the urban ghettos in which they live. John A. Skretta, who teaches the underprivileged in remedial reading courses, insists that his kids "don't need lessons in grammatical minutiae. They need lessons in hope" (65). Facing a world filled with injustice and hardship, learning Standard English may seem to be just another drop in the bucket, or as Sledd puts it, rain falling into a sea since "not even a cloudburst can turn the salt sea to fresh" (59).

Teachers are also faced with the argument that asking students to learn the dominant discourse is racist. As noted by College Composition and Communication (CCC) in a proclamation entitled "Students' Rights to Their Own Language," "The Claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another [. . .] A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve the heritage of dialects" (1). Socially conscious teachers who read this widely published proclamation may worry that by teaching Standard English they could be exerting dominance over their students in a sinister attempt to squelch diversity. Making teachers even

more reluctant to try to impose Standard English on learners is the fact that “ask[ing] [students] to add the standard to their linguistic repertory (and consequently to modify their native speech) [. . .] is plainly to make a request (impose a demand) which many of their teachers haven’t had to meet themselves” (Sledd 60). For teachers who grew up speaking the standard code without being forced to relinquish many aspects their native dialect, telling students that they need to give up “the language through which they first encountered love, nurturance and joy” seems domineering and cruel (Delpit, “What Should Teachers Do? Ebonics and Culturally Responsive Instruction,” 17). Such teachers may be concerned about the emotional conflicts that students face while acquiring the dominant discourse and might, therefore, avoid teaching this discourse altogether.

Although there are many justifiable reasons for not wishing to interfere with students’ native dialects, there are just as many arguments suggesting that students need direct and extensive instruction in Standard English. Even Lisa Delpit, who argues so persuasively for a student’s right to retain his native language, opposes the idea that students are necessarily locked into a lower-class status by their language. Delpit cites the experiences of several successful African-Americans to prove her point. Clarence Cunningham, for instance, grew up in an extremely impoverished community in rural Illinois. He is now the vice chancellor at the largest historically black university in the United States. Cunningham’s classmates also grew up to be highly successful. One became the vice president of a major computer company, another was elected as attorney general of Chicago, and others made equally impressive strides in the world of business and politics (“The Politics of Teaching Literate Discourse”153). Commenting upon how these blacks gained power and prestige, Delpit attributes their success to being taught the dominant discourse by teachers. “First, their teachers successfully taught what Gee calls the ‘superficial features’ of middle-class discourse—grammar, style, mechanics—features that Gee

claims are particularly resistant to classroom instruction. And the students successfully learned them,” says Delpit (156). Clearly, even the most difficult and “superficial” features of a discourse are not completely impervious to instruction if so many have been able to master the dominant discourse.

A second argument that Delpit and her colleagues make is that students can indeed benefit from direct instruction. Although Delpit believes that language acquisition occurs most effectively when the student is motivated, identifies with the speakers of the second language, and is not overly stressed and concerned with correctness, she feels that there is a time and a place for explicitness (“Language in the Classroom” 40). In *Other People’s Children*, Delpit reasons that process-oriented approaches to writing instead of product-oriented approaches to writing, can undermine the academic success of poor students and students of color. The basis for this reasoning lies in the fact that students of color have no access to the standard code outside of school. “Writing process advocates often give the impression that they view the direct teaching of skills to be restrictive to the writing process at best, and at worst, politically repressive to students already oppressed by a racist educational system,” says Delpit (*Other People’s Children* 6). With this philosophy in mind, many mainstream teachers avoid directly teaching students usage and other skills they will need to be successful in the world, believing they should nurture their students’ unique voices. Delpit argues that instead of holding to this viewpoint, teachers should express the following sentiment to their students: “I’ve heard your voice loud and clear. Now I want to teach you to harmonize with the rest of the world” (*Other Peoples Children*, 8). Delpit’s argument suggests that while recognizing the value of the student’s own voice is important, we must also teach the students the skills that will make them successful.

In response to writers such as James Sledd who believe that standard usage will not necessarily give students equal opportunities, Delpit points out that “while having access to the politically mandated language form will not, by any means, guarantee economic success [. . .] not having access will almost certainly guarantee failure” (“What Should Teachers Do? Ebonics and Culturally Responsive Instruction,” 17). Students face multiple obstacles. Still, Delpit argues, teachers should not avoid teaching students how to overcome some of these challenges just because of the difficulty of the endeavor.

A final point that Delpit argues against is the notion that asking students to master the dominant discourse forces them to accept the beliefs of the dominant culture and reject their own values. Rather, she says, learning the dominant discourse can become empowering and liberating for students as they find ways to use the standard code to gain power for themselves and their culture. Delpit proposes that, as long as the students’ native dialects are maintained and affirmed, they can experience the best of both worlds—their home community and the broader society in which they live (*Other People’s Children*, 43). Delpit refers to many historical figures—such as Malcolm X, Ida B. Wells, and Martin Luther King—who have succeeded in “changing the joke and slipping the yoke” (*Other People’s Children* 43). Other educators, such as Terry Meir point out that teachers can instruct students in incorporating features of their native dialect into Standard English. Meir points to Standard Black English as an example of this concept, pointing out how many teachers have successfully encouraged their students to add characteristically Black oral features—such as, aphorisms, rhythm, metaphorical language, and analogies—to the standard code (99). Encouraging students to adhere to the conventions of the dominant discourse while helping them make this code their own can certainly empower instead of subjugate.

Ultimately, the goal of teaching students a secondary discourse is enabling the learners to code-switch. Code-switching basically involves being able to change one's discourse style as the social context changes. Students are able to determine that they should use Standard English when applying for a job and Black English when gathering at a family barbecue. Advocates of the code-switching strategy point out that learning several different discourse styles is beneficial for all students, not just language minority learners. Not only are individuals with multiple discourses better able to adapt to different social situations, but they are also exposed to ways of thinking that might not otherwise be available. In the following statement, David Mulroy points out the benefits of understanding Standard English:

Spoken dialects have relatively tiny vocabularies. Deficient vocabularies may not prevent speakers from expressing everyday feelings, but fully developed ones enable them to express themselves with much greater precision and on a wider range of subjects [. . .] It is true that speakers of oral dialects could in principle discuss history, philosophy, and the rest in their own dialects, but to do so they would first have to learn a standard language well enough to borrow its terminology. (86)

Mulroy points out the benefits of learning Standard English in the above remark, but he fails to point out the way in which other dialects can be more effective in conveying certain attitudes and emotions. Celie, a character in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, captures the possibilities of the oral dialects Mulroy speaks of with condescension, saying, "Darlene tryin to teach me how to talk . . . Every time I say something the way I say it, she correct me until I say it some other way. Pretty soon it feel like I can't think. My mind run up on a thought, git confuse, run back and sort of lay down" (qtd. in Smitherman 166). This quotation reflects the way in which certain experiences and thoughts can only be communicated in a certain discourse. After all, in every community there are experiences and shared heritages that can only be captured within the community's discourse. Therefore, learning the discourse of a new community can help all learners gain an appreciation for new ideas and diverse cultures.

After examining the arguments of several scholars, I have concluded that students need to learn Standard English. After all, Standard English is the dialect of power, and teachers should try to give all students access to this power. At the same time, however, teachers can validate and celebrate students' native discourses by teaching all students how to code-switch in different social situations.

How Teachers Respond to Diversity During Language Instruction:

As I entered classrooms across Cache Valley to try to learn what methods local teachers use to address linguistic diversity in this community, I found a need to constantly rethink the types of questions I was asking in my interviews. During the ten interviews I conducted, I asked each teacher what kind of language diversity he saw in his classroom. In response to this question, all of the teachers whom I interviewed immediately focused on the most visible aspect of diversity—ethnicity. Although I wanted to know if the teachers observed their students using different dialects in the classroom when I asked them what types of language diversity they were seeing, everyone thought that I was asking about ESL students. Because this miscommunication provided me with some interesting information about what types of linguistic diversity is most noticed and addressed within schools, I did not immediately rephrase my question. Rather, I listened to these teachers' observations about ESL learners before trying to find out more about specific dialects being used within the school.

One example of the teachers' preoccupation with race was reflected by the fact that most of these professionals reported seeing a large increase in the number of Hispanic students attending their schools. The teachers at Mount Logan Middle School, where Hispanics make up thirteen percent of the student population, especially seemed to notice this change in demographics (National Center for Education Statistics "Mount Logan Middle School"). One veteran teacher commented on the language varieties at her school, saying, "We do have a fairly

large Hispanic population. We also have a growing Asian population. There's a lot of different nationalities. We have a small, very small, African—I'd like to say community, but it's really only a couple of families, and some Middle Eastern families as well." This observation shows this teacher's awareness of the diversity at her school because Hispanics are by far the largest group at Mount Logan. Asians come in second, making up four percent of the student body, and African-Americans comprise one percent of the school population (National Center for Education Statistics "Mount Logan Middle School"). Clearly, Mount Logan is beginning to see growing amounts of language diversity and will continue to see more changes in demographics as more minorities move into the area and as the larger numbers of elementary-aged students continue to move through the educational system.

Although Mount Logan Middle School—because younger grades tend to have a more diverse population and Logan School District has a greater variety of ethnic groups—is the most heterogeneous school included in my study, other schools in the valley are also seeing an increase in non-white students. Logan High School, for instance, is the second most diverse school in Cache Valley, both in terms of race and socioeconomic status (National Center for Education Statistics "Logan High School"). While Mountain Crest has a slightly larger Hispanic population than Skyview, both schools appear to be relatively similar in terms of socioeconomic status, as measured by the number of students receiving free or reduced price lunch (National Center for Education Statistics "Mountain Crest" & "Skyview").

These statistics are important because the schools with a greater amount of diversity in ethnicity and socioeconomic status had teachers who reported seeing more linguistic variety. For instance, compared with the previously mentioned teacher from Mount Logan who reported seeing "a fairly large Hispanic population" and "a growing Asian population," one of the teachers from Skyview whom I interviewed said, "I don't know that there is a lot of diversity in

the dialect here in and around this northern end [of the valley]. There is a little bit of mixed languages here.” From this observation, it is evident that linguistic diversity correlates with ethnic and economic diversity for these teachers.

While differences in ethnicity and socioeconomic status are the most obvious indicators of linguistic diversity, variation in usage also occurs on a smaller, less noticeable scale. Several teachers, for instance, reported that they observed students using small-town, rural dialects. The same teacher from Skyview who felt that there was not a lot of dialectal variations in her school clarified her previous statement later on in the interview, mentioning, “There’s not a huge difference I’m seeing in the dialect besides some of the things people say in a small town. I know my mother’s from Wellsville, and I can hear a little bit of that accent coming out, but I’ve never taken the time to decide what makes that accent different.” Another teacher from Skyview clarifies exactly what makes this “relaxed kind of country language” different. Pointing out what he views as errors in this dialect, he says, “The biggest problem would be in agreement, saying, ‘We was at the store,’ and things like that.” While these and other teachers from Cache Valley District felt that their schools were not extremely diverse in dialect, upon deeper reflection, most noticed subtler linguistic varieties unique to their area, suggesting that some deviations from the standard are definitely more noticeable and status marking than others.

These teachers also pointed out that their students use sort of a “youth culture” lingo. One beginning teacher at Logan High school commented on how technology has impacted this teenage discourse, saying, “[The students’] writing style is kind of like an e-mail writing style. They no longer capitalize the pronoun, ‘I.’ So, it’s kind of evolved from just shortcuts in e-mails. If you’re writing ‘before,’ writing the letter ‘B’ and the number ‘4,’ and stuff like that.” This comment emphasizes the fact that the usage of any discourse community changes in order to accommodate the language needs of the users. Another interviewee, a teacher who has been at

Mount Logan Middle School for seven years, also described how the discourse style used by many of her students evolves rapidly, mentioning that “there’s a lot in their language that I don’t understand.” Two examples she gives are “The Bomb,” meaning that something is extremely wonderful, and “Yo, dog. What up?,” a commonly used salutation among the students in her class. Admitting that the usage of her students is often alien to her, this teacher further acknowledges the way in which discourses shift and change to meet the users’ needs. In this second case, changes have been made to solidify social bonds within the community and exclude those who do not belong.

In discussions about the lingo used by young people, there is a tendency to lump together all of the different discourse communities that exist in today’s schools. This tendency is erroneous, however, because the social networks of adolescents are stratified. As a consequence, there are certain forms of discourse exclusive to certain “cliques” or groups within the school. Much like the term “Yo dog,” the usage of these cliques functions as a way to identify who does and does not belong within the group. Martin Porter, a seventh-grade teacher, points out how the students’ special interests and group identification affect their language use, saying, “We have a lot of kids who know a lot about rap, and there’s a lot of different lingos to go along with rap, and there are a lot of different lingos that go along with skating, skiing, and snowboarding that would be completely lost on someone of my dad’s generation. Some of it is lost on me.” Within this statement, Porter comments upon the way in which discourses are shared by certain age groups and by individuals who share common interests. These observations on the discourses used and maintained among adolescent students compliment Gee’s work. After all, the usage of these students clearly reflects their identity as they incorporate aspects of their values, interests, thinking, and being into their language.

As valuable as recognizing the unique discourses of these students is, I also wanted to know how teachers manage to help their students code-switch as they move between social contexts. Most of the teachers whom I interviewed in this study encourage their students to make their usage appropriate to the context of their writing by addressing the issue of voice, one of the features addressed by the six-traits writing method that is widely used in Cache Valley. While teaching students the concept of voice, the teachers give students opportunities to write for a variety of purposes and audiences. While writing in each of these situations, the students analyze what type of language would best suit the audience and purpose. For example, the language used in a personal narrative would be different than the usage of a formal essay or business letter.

When I asked the teachers how well students adjust their voice to fit the context of their writing, I got some varied responses. Porter, for instance, believes that all students have an innate ability to adjust their language to the pragmatics of a given situation and expresses this sentiment in the following statement:

Even when I was a kid, I spoke differently when I was speaking to a friend, to my Sunday school teacher, to a friend's dad. I think that's just being socially aware. I really don't hear informal language when [the students] ask a question or write a paper that doesn't call for a lot of voice; it's more information or whatnot. I really see them making an audience appropriate transition.

The view expressed by Porter and many of his colleagues is that students do not really need explicit instruction in code switching. Rather, students who are "socially aware" can easily make "an audience appropriate transition."

Other teachers, however, feel that only the more advanced students who feel more comfortable with their writing and speaking are able to make such transitions. Marrissa Olsen, who is a veteran eighth-grade teacher at Mount Logan, feels that students are "suspicious of trying to [code switch] because we value Standard English so much that they're afraid to try."

As a consequence of the students' desire to avoid failure and please teachers, says Olsen, "You watch most of them, especially the ones who struggle with English, trying very hard to sound very English. The ones that are a little bit more advanced are going to play around with, on purpose, putting the dialect in, but it's the more advanced student who will dare that." In order to encourage students to be more willing to experiment and take risks with voice in their writing, this teacher asks students to "translate" texts into a new dialect. For instance, a pair of her students, one of whom is from Africa and the other from Mexico, decided to rewrite the ending of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in Gangsta' English. Such assignments reward students for taking risks, validate the use of various dialects in writing, and help students to adjust their language use to the context of their writing.

With some students being more willing and able than others to switch to a discourse that appropriately fits the social situation they are facing, providing opportunities to practice this skill is important. After all, many students may be able to recognize how to code switch in everyday life. However, such students may not believe that this skill is valued in schools or may not realize how to apply this ability to writing. Therefore, explicit instruction and practice in using a voice suited to audience and purpose is valuable.

Although all of the teachers whom I interviewed value Standard English, many also try to expose students to a variety of dialects. Students need to learn Standard English in order to succeed in American society. However, being aware of the many dialects that surround them will help students to effectively adjust their language to social contexts.

Implications for Instruction

"Within the last few years, for a variety of reasons, grammar is back on the menu. The question now is, what will we do with it? Will we simply stare at it, will we forever debate about it, or will we get cooking and begin teaching it in interesting and useful ways," asks Ed Vavra in

an article titled, "Grammar Is Back, but When Will We Start Cooking?" (86). Up until this point, I have stared at grammar, examining it as an obstacle to tackle, a riddle to unravel. In order to sort through the many voices, pressures, and issues involved in the enigma of grammar, I needed to find a beginning.

For me, the battleground served as a starting ground. After all, contention within a subject demands an audience, making "The Great Grammar Debate" the most audible component of this topic. Moreover, I think that, before looking at the way in which teachers are actually teaching topic. Moreover, I think that, before looking at the ways in which teachers are actually teaching grammar, it is important to examine the various factors that influence their instructional decisions. Scholarly research and concerns regarding diversity, after all, significantly impact the form that language instruction takes in the classroom. Debates involving grammar, therefore, are an important stepping-off point, or, to use Vavra's culinary metaphor, the perfect way to heat things up. Still, simply discussing the pros and cons of teaching grammar can leave teachers with few instructional tools to take to the classroom. Teachers need something tangible; they need something of direct value to students. It's time to start cooking.

Although I agree with Vavra on the importance of moving beyond the questions and debates surrounding grammar instruction, I feel that he is misguided in his belief that "too many cooks spoil the soup" (86). After urging language arts practitioners to move beyond theory into application, Vavra squelches the notion that educators should take an eclectic approach to teaching grammar. Instead, Vavra argues that drawing from structural, transformational, and contextual conceptions of grammar is ineffective because "sugars and spices from different grammars are being mixed into the traditional soup, thereby creating an unpalatable mess" (86). This position is counterintuitive. After all, combining the strongest aspects of various approaches seems to be a way in which teachers can accommodate the various needs and

learning preferences of different students. For instance, while visual learners may actually benefit from diagramming sentences, other students may find this approach tedious and confusing. Additionally, different topics lend themselves to specific methods. Knowing when to use inductive versus direct instruction is a prime example of how the form of a lesson needs to be tied to its content.

Sadly, most educators lean toward the idea that there is one correct approach to teaching grammar just waiting to be discovered. In their quest to find this Holy Grail of the language arts curriculum, teachers often ignore the fact that different approaches and theoretical perspectives can actually complement instead of conflict with one another. Peter Elbow, a famous scholar of writing theory, focuses on the fact that dichotomies do not necessarily have to exist between competing expectations. In his article titled, "Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process," Elbow focuses on the way in which a commitment to students and a commitment to state and district responsibilities sometimes interfere with one another. He then points out that "opposite mentalities or processes can enhance each other rather than interfere with each other if we engage them in the right spirit" (39). I think that Elbow's idea can be extended to different philosophies on the teaching of grammar. With competing linguistic and educational philosophies underlying the many approaches to teaching grammar, these practices often interfere with one another, turning grammar instruction into an "unpalatable mess" (Vavra 86). In such circumstances, different instructional approaches oppose each other, leading to an understanding of grammar that is fragmented or blurry. However, when teachers draw from the strengths of different approaches, mindfully using them to balance the weaknesses of other methods, conflicting techniques can enhance rather than interfere with each other. Different spices can come together to form a savory learning experience.

Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing:

The strategy of teaching grammar in the context of writing, pioneered largely by Constance Weaver, is by far the most popular approach to grammar instruction. Within this social-constructivist approach, students are asked to engage in writing tasks that are both meaningful and authentic, receiving help from the teacher and their peers in the composing process. During this composing process, mini-lessons serve as the vehicle in which grammar instruction is delivered. After students have produced and revised written drafts, Weaver suggests that teachers use mini-lessons to help students edit and polish their work.

In order for these mini-lessons to be successful, Weaver recommends that teachers follow several guidelines. The most important of these guidelines is that the lessons be brief. "Typically," Weaver says, "they take no more than five to ten minutes" (151). Essentially, these lessons are meant to be a brief exposure to the concepts being taught. Students are not tested on the concepts presented nor are they asked to complete exercises in which they practice using this knowledge. Weaver also emphasizes the importance of not immediately expecting everyone in the class to understand and be able to apply the grammatical concepts taught during the mini-lessons. Instead, according to Weaver, "the ideas are simply added to 'the class pot'"(151). The teacher realizes that she "will have to help individual students apply what has been taught, to encourage students to help each other apply it, and possibly to teach similar mini-lessons to the whole class or small groups again [. . .]" (151). Rather than really forcing students to learn the concepts being presented, teachers are to present the information frequently and hope that the class will pick up these skills. A final recommendation Weaver makes is that teachers should watch students closely to see when they have a need and readiness for a mini-lesson on a certain grammatical concept. "In other words, teachers must be 'kidwatchers' in order to decide when

to teach mini-lessons,” says Weaver (152). Teachers should use mini-lessons in order to gear grammar instruction to the individual needs and capabilities of the students in their classroom.

Although mini-lessons are the primary mode for teaching grammar in the context of writing, Weaver’s approach to grammar instruction also includes several other aspects. For instance, Weaver argues that teachers should only teach a handful of grammatical concepts in order to address those errors that occur most frequently and are most stigmatizing in our society (145). Additionally, Weaver expresses her belief that this handful of grammatical concepts should be taught casually, saying that many concepts “can be learned sufficiently just through incidental exposure” (144). She goes on to explain that “for many grammatical terms, receptive competence is all that’s needed; that is, students need to understand what the teacher is referring to, but they do not always need enough command of the terms to use such terms themselves” (145). Essentially, what Weaver is saying is that grammar instruction need not be thorough. Teachers should provide grammar instruction on a need-to-know basis so that grammar does not take up valuable instruction time that could be spent on actual reading and writing activities.

This idea of teaching a minimal amount of grammatical terminology and teaching it in the context of writing holds great promise. One of the most obvious strengths of this approach is the fact that the students easily transfer grammatical skills to their own writing since their writing is what provides the context for learning grammar in the first place. Secondly, because students are engaged in the process of applying the knowledge of grammar and usage they learn to their own writing, this technique is much more motivating than the workbook drills and sentence diagramming that can be found in more traditional approaches. Finally, with students having the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and use their errors to develop a more sophisticated understanding of grammar, the students have the opportunity to engage in an inductive learning activity that helps them develop critical thinking skills (Weaver 149).

In addition to these strengths that Weaver lists in favor of teaching grammar in context, several other independent studies point to the positive gains that can be made by teaching grammar within the writing process. One study, conducted in 1980 among third-graders, compared understanding of punctuation rules among students who learned punctuation through workbook drills and others who learned the same information in the context of their own writing. At the end of the year, researchers interviewed the students from both groups. On average, the students who learned grammar traditionally were able to explain 3.85 marks of punctuation. The third-graders who learned how to punctuate with their own writing, on the other hand, were able to explain 8.66 marks of punctuation and demonstrate how to use them (Weaver 177). Obviously, these children were best able to learn how to write by actually writing, suggesting that students pick up the most knowledge of grammar when they are realistically applying the concepts they have learned.

While the benefits of teaching grammar in the context of writing are strongly documented, many practitioners dislike the approach because its implementation is difficult and confusing. One veteran English teacher, David Noskin, criticizes the impracticality of trying to conduct the mini-lessons Weaver advocates, saying, "We were encouraged to provide mini-lessons when the need arose. With over one hundred students, how does a teacher do that" (38)?

Another critic of Weaver's approach, David Mulroy criticizes the vague terminology Weaver uses to describe what knowledge of grammar students should actually have. Mulroy argues that terms such as "'receptive competence' looks like jargon used to promote an idea that is implausible when expressed in plain words. The fact that people cannot use certain terms themselves is a clear sign they do not fully understand them. If so, they are quite likely to misinterpret what other people mean by them" (Mulroy 7). From Mulroy's point of view, Weaver uses unclear terms to hide aspects of her approach that simply do not make sense from a

pedagogical viewpoint. Instead of conceding that students do need to be familiar with a variety of terms from Grammar 2, Weaver, it seems, hides behind vague ideas and professional jargon.

A final criticism of *Teaching Grammar in Context* revolves around the fact that, while teachers are repeatedly told to teach grammar through students' writing, few models show them how to do so effectively. Deborah Johansen and Nancy Shaw, English teachers at Yarmouth High School, vent their frustration with this aspect of Weaver's approach, saying, "We were told that teaching grammar through student writing was the better way. Unfortunately, no one showed us how to do this successfully. Hence, some of us stopped teaching grammar altogether" (97). Told to use the contextual approach to teaching grammar without ever being explicitly taught how to do so, many teachers get frustrated and give up. Literature on grammar instruction tells teachers to teach grammar in context, but they are not given the assistance they need to implement this approach in their classrooms. In the face of such trials, the most likely and common reaction is indifference to the subject of grammar altogether.

When interviewing the English teachers of Cache Valley, I was able to find a few teachers who were able to successfully teach grammar in the context of writing. One eighth-grade teacher at Mount Logan Middle School taught her students grammar while having them work on a class magazine that would later be circulated among the other students in the school. This teacher noted that the students were very motivated to attend to the mini-lessons about grammar because they did not want their peers to see their mistakes. Commenting on how she values teaching grammar in the context of writing, this teacher gave the following description of how she uses mini-lessons:

I always integrate [grammar]—always, always. So, if we are working on a magazine, and we've done a draft, and we've brought them to, a couple of times, the writing groups, then I'll introduce some conventions concepts, and we'll go through them in class a little bit. And we'll play some games looking for end marks and looking for how much of a pause do we want to use. But I would never do that until they had their own work in partners and groups.

This teacher, by first having students give feedback on each other's papers and developing a real purpose and audience for writing, has been able to make mini-lessons a manageable tool to use in her approach to teaching grammar in context. Because students want to know how to edit their text to meet standard conventions and have already received help from their classmates in editing, the teacher can fill in the gaps that are left after the students have taught each other these grammar skills. This teacher does not face the nearly insurmountable task of trying to teach each student everything she needs to know about Grammar 2 and 3. Instead, she determines what the whole class needs after the peer workshops are completed.

Although this scenario makes teaching grammar in the context of writing seem like the best approach teachers can use, other teachers have had less success with this method. One teacher who works with seniors at Mountain Crest reports feeling a little frustrated with the idea of just helping students to develop "receptive competence" through "incidental exposure" (Weaver 144-145). She points out that she has to describe each of the grammatical terms whenever she wants to discuss them with students. This process is frustrating and time consuming, and, as this teacher laments, "It's hard for me to talk to [the students] about even just the use of active verbs sometimes because they don't have a handle on what those are." From this teacher's perspective, teaching grammar in context amounts to not teaching it at all. Instead, by incidentally exposing students to grammatical terminology, she just hopes that the students pick up enough so that they can "understand the base-base-basic stuff."

With the approach to teaching grammar in context being so difficult to implement successfully in the classroom, many teachers have become frustrated and abandoned teaching grammar altogether. Others, still wanting to draw from the strengths of this approach, have turned to commercially produced mini-lessons such as the Daily Oral Language program.

Daily Oral Language:

The Daily Oral Language Program—originally published in McDougal-Litell’s set of twelve teacher’s manuals (for grades 1-12)—includes mini-lessons on punctuation, capitalization, usage, and other writing skills (Weaver 172). This program provides teachers with thirty-six weeks of mini-lessons, each of which contain five lessons per week. For each lesson, the teacher’s manual instructs teachers to write two sentences on the board before the students come into class so that these sentences will immediately catch the students’ attention. The teacher is then supposed to ask all of the students to write down the sentences and spend a couple of minutes correcting them. Going over the needed revisions as a class is the last step in this lesson (Weaver 172). With these highly structured and very usable lessons, the Daily Oral Language program offers support for teachers who want to help students understand grammar in the context of writing and do not want the bulk of language arts instruction to be centered on grammar. Observing the strengths of the Daily Oral Language program, Constance Weaver says, “When teachers first give up the security of traditional grammar books, they may find it reassuring to teach such commercially prepared mini-lessons” (172). After all, for a teacher uncomfortable with both her own understanding of grammatical rules and her ability to teach these rules to students, having a list of concepts to be covered, examples to be used, and answers to be presented turns teaching grammar in context into a manageable feat.

The Daily Oral Language program is easily implemented and follows Weaver’s suggestions to use grammatical terminology incidentally and spend a minimal amount of time on explicit instruction. However, its major weakness lies in the fact that mass-produced lessons can never target the specific language needs and characteristics of a particular group of students. Because the creators of the Daily Oral Language program have developed a curriculum targeting the “average” student who speaks a dialect close to the one being taught in schools, the examples and sentences drawn from these materials may not help certain groups of students edit their

writing to fit the conventions of Standard English. Moreover, the pace and sequence of these lessons may either be too slow and easy or too rapid and difficult for any given classroom.

In order to overcome these weaknesses, many teachers choose to use the lessons in the Daily Oral Language program as a starting point, later deciding to focus on the errors their own students are actually making. Constance Weaver reflects on this tendency to abandon these prepackaged grammar lessons, saying that teachers "soon realize that the kinds of errors in the sentences being corrected are often not the kinds of errors their students are making most frequently. When this happens, many teachers abandon the teachers' manual and create mini-lessons using their own students writing" (172). The Daily Oral Language Program, then, provides a foundation that teachers can use for building their own language program. These commercially produced mini-lessons should not be viewed as the ultimate solution on how to teach mini-lessons.

Mount Logan Middle School teachers were by far the biggest fans of this approach to mini-lessons. One veteran seventh-grade teacher explained how she has adapted the Daily Oral Language program in her classroom, saying, "Well, the main thing I do is . . . I do DOL, which is something I really like. It's called Daily Oral Language, and it's grammar instruction, and I address students' needs through the sample sentences I give the class [. . .]. But, really, it is just a positive reinforcement of the rules students already know about Standard English." Creating sentences based on her students' needs and linguistic maturity, this teacher structures whole-class mini-lessons that use the Daily Oral Language format. By using this format, this veteran teacher has helped her students to draw upon their innate knowledge of grammar (Grammar 1) in order to correct mistakes they make in their writing. When asked if she felt that grammar instruction really transferred to the students' writing, this teacher professed that she sees more transfer with DOL than any other method she has used for teaching grammar. Because she uses

this strategy in a way that focuses on the students' actual needs and builds upon their background knowledge, this teacher has been able to implement a version of the DOL program in her classroom.

Another seventh-grade teacher at Mount Logan Middle School, puts a different twist on this same strategy. First of all, he gives all of the students a participation grade for each daily exercise. Therefore, as he explains, "in a little exercise on non-sentences, a kid can get one of ten and a kid can get ten out of ten, and as long as they participate they are going to get the full amount of points possible." All students receive some credit just for experimenting with grammatical concepts. However, this teacher takes the Daily Oral Language program beyond a low-stakes, exposure exercise. Every two weeks, his students turn in the practices, and the class discusses the sentences they found most problematic. Students who continue to struggle with the concepts are asked to come in before or after school for some individualized instruction. By uniquely tailoring the amount of instruction he gives to individual students' needs, this teacher is following Weaver's advice in not expecting all students to understand the concepts presented in mini-lesson the first time. Instead, he presents the concept to the whole class and then gives further assistance to individual students or small groups of students who still need help. Having the students turn in their DOL exercises every two weeks, this teacher is able to assess which of his students have mastered a grammatical concept and which of them need more help. With this assessment strategy, his variation of DOL makes teaching grammar through mini-lessons a more practical teaching strategy.

While Daily Oral Language provides teachers with an effective and manageable way to incorporate mini-lessons into grammar instruction, this strategy only helps students to improve local, surface-features of their texts. Correcting two isolated sentences every day, students never have the opportunity to see how surface features can relate to the larger structure and meaning of

the entire text. They never have the opportunity to see how form and meaning are connected. Critics of this weakness in the Daily Oral Language program advocate a different approach to teaching grammar. They suggest teaching grammar through a focus on style and meaning.

Teaching Grammar through a Focus on Style and Semantics:

If research citing the shortcomings of traditional grammar instruction is accurate, there are several reasons why grammar instruction fails to produce significant improvements in student writing. First, either finding grammar too uninteresting or too difficult, students may not be adequately learning the subject matter. When students fail to learn these grammatical concepts, they have no additional knowledge to apply to their writing. Naturally, no writing improvement comes from instruction that students fail to grasp. As linguist Rei Noguchi shrewdly observes, "All will agree that students who do not acquire a body of knowledge cannot apply it" (5). As students often do find studying grammar to be dull and difficult, this cause may partially explain why traditional grammar instruction has not helped students to improve their writing (Noguchi 4).

While failing to learn grammatical rules and concepts may be one of the reasons why grammar instruction does not necessarily improve writing skills, researchers such as Rei Noguchi argue that formal grammar, even if adequately learned, either is not transferred or is not transferable to writing situations (4). What Noguchi suggests is that learning grammatical rules and concepts is not enough to improve writing. For one thing, students may not be able to apply the abstractions they have learned in grammar skills and exercises to a practical situation such as their own writing. Students require guided instruction in using concepts derived from Grammars 2 and 3 in their own writing (Noguchi 4).

Suggesting that students need assistance in applying formal grammar to writing situations, however, implies that knowing grammar can significantly improve student

composition. Noguchi suggests that, because grammar instruction mainly focuses on the syntax of sentences, a traditional study of grammar neglects content and organization, two of the most global and crucial areas of composition. With this focus on syntax, teachers emphasize the “identification, organization, and functions of the various syntactic constructions with respect to one another, but usually not on the semantic content of these constructions” (Noguchi 9). Basically, this focus on syntax concerns itself with form, not meaning. Explaining the limitations of traditional, syntax-oriented grammar instruction, Noguchi states, “To make grammar instruction more productive in writing instruction, teachers will have to reduce significantly the current focus on the syntax of sentences, not because syntax is unworthy of study, but rather because syntax alone, as research seems to indicate, does not—and probably cannot—produce significant writing improvement” (110). Therefore, in order for the areas of organization, content, and grammar to overlap in writing instruction, teachers must find methods that will help students improve writing in terms of each of these areas.

Finding a method for teaching writing that will increase skill in content, organization, and grammar can be difficult. After all, a syntax-oriented approach is easier for teachers to use because, as Noguchi points out, “by separating content from form, we, of course, make talking about form easier.” The task of teaching both syntax and semantics is certainly more difficult than talking about syntax alone. An additional challenge is the fact that teachers themselves receive most of their training in the analysis of syntactic forms rather than the analysis of meaning (Noguchi 9). Ill-equipped to teach the connection between content and form, the majority of teachers present lessons on the parts of speech, parallelism, or other grammatical rules and techniques with no regard for the different ways these structures convey meaning.

In order for teachers to provide students with skills that will improve various aspects of writing, Rei Noguchi suggests that they teach the concept of “given” and “new” information

because an understanding of this concept helps writers with organization, content, style, and grammar. Noguchi points out the fact that “information in sentences of coherent texts is not arranged randomly. More specifically, information is separated into ‘given’ and ‘new’ information, with each typically parceled out to certain parts of the sentence” (92). Given information includes all content that the writer has previously mentioned or anything that is considered to be common knowledge between the author and her audience. New information, on the other hand, refers to any fresh knowledge the reader is gaining from the text. Within communication, both written and oral, given information almost always comes before new information. This order of presenting given and new information as readers move linearly from left to right is crucial in understanding an English text. Therefore, students need to know this concept of “given” and “new” information in order to write coherent and effective sentences, paragraphs, and entire compositions.

On the sentence level, an understanding of the given-new concept can help writers fix problems such as fragments, vague pronoun references, and incorrect use of definite and indefinite articles. In using the given-new concept to help students correct fragments, for instance, Noguchi recommends highlighting the way in which fragment use in conversation implies an understanding of the given-new concept. He gives the example of a teacher asking, “What city do the Yankees play in?” and a student giving the following response: “New York.” In this example, the student, as a native speaker of English, realizes that “New York” is new information and the city in which the Yankees play is given. Noguchi argues that students write fragments in papers because they do not realize that, unlike oral communication, omitting given information is unacceptable in writing. By recognizing this difference between oral and written communication, students are less likely to write fragments in their essays (Noguchi 94).

When students use vague pronoun references and incorrect articles, they have failed to establish what the given information in their writing is. For instance, with vague pronoun references, writers do not distinguish the antecedent of pronouns as given information. These writers assume the establishment of antecedents where readers do not. Using incorrect articles occurs when students do not recognize that the article *the* suggests given information, and *a* implies new information (Noguchi 97). Although this concept of “given” and “new” information is not a cureall, it can help struggling writers address some of these common stylistic and grammatical errors.

Moving beyond sentence-level errors, the given-new concept can also help students improve more global writing issues such as content and organization. Noting the importance of integrating grammar instruction with organization and content, Noguchi says, “Without this integration, there is probably little hope of grammar instruction ever contributing significantly to writing improvement” (110). After all, adhering to standard conventions is of little value if a writer has nothing to say or has no logical means of sharing information. Noguchi goes on to argue that teachers of composition should not view writing as “a creation of organized form (as conventional grammar approaches force us to do) but rather as a creation of organized meaning” (Noguchi 111). Focusing on syntactic forms only leads to other syntactic forms, making it difficult to examine the content and organization of any unit larger than a sentence.

The concept of given and new information can easily be applied to all levels of a text “because given and new information are semantic/pragmatic units rather than syntactic ones” so they “already constitute part of the content, or meaning, of writing, as opposed to, say, noun phrases or verb phrases, which constitute part of the form of sentences” (Noguchi 111). Stated simply, unlike syntactic forms, the concept of given and new information requires no special integration with content because it is already a part of content (Noguchi 111). By having

students practice applying the concept of given and new information to improve content and organization at the sentence level, teachers are giving burgeoning writers skills that will also help them at the paragraph and essay level. Noguchi highlights this point, saying, "If students learn and practice on the sentence level that given information precedes new information [. . .] they are, on a smaller scale, also learning about and practicing an organizational principle that applies to many kinds of paragraphs and essays" (109). Time spent on the given-new concept, therefore, is time well spent because using this semantic approach helps students with all levels of writing.

Other educators have also tapped into the idea of using a more semantic approach to teaching grammar. Harry Noden's book, *Image Grammar*, is just one example of the ways in which language arts teachers are showing student writers the connection between the form and content of a message. Within *Image Grammar*, Noden invites both teachers and students to examine the techniques that professional writers use in their writing in order to understand "the infinite power of grammar, a power derived from images" (ix). Focusing mainly on creative writing and the ways in which the writer is an artist, Noden suggests that syntactic structures are actually "brush strokes" that come together to form an image. While Noden's work departs somewhat from Noguchi's concern with the given-new concept, he still tries to "show how grammatical structures contribute to the whole and how the whole reflects back on smaller structures" (ix). The *Image Grammar* technique, therefore, reflects one of Noguchi's main concerns for teaching students techniques that will improve both content and structure on both the sentence and composition level (ix).

In order to understand the approach to teaching grammar that Noden proposes in *Image Grammar*, it is helpful to examine his discussion of "the five basic brush strokes," one of the main techniques he describes in this book. According to Noden, the five structures that students need to know in order to create images with words are participles, absolutes, appositives,

adjectives shifted out of order, and action verbs (4). In teaching these basic strokes to students, Noden suggests that teachers “simplify definitions, relying on modeling and expanding definitions as students increase their fluency” (4).

For example, Noden defines participles simply as being “an *ing* verb tagged on the beginning or end of a sentence” (4). He tells teachers to hold off on introducing the *ed* variation until students are more comfortable with the concept. Finally, Noden recommends showing models of participles being used in literary texts such as *Old Man and the Sea*, afterwards asking the students to replicate the techniques they see in the model (Noden 5). With this method, telling students the purpose of participles as a method for conveying action is essential. After all, form and content are tied together in Noden’s approach. Therefore, he encourages teachers to present the basic brush strokes as ways to enhance meaning by evoking action, amplifying still images, and making important pieces of information stand out.

Among the Cache Valley teachers whom I interviewed, none taught their students Noguchi’s given-new concept. *Image Grammar*, on the other hand, has gained quite a following among the teachers at Skyview High School. Coleman, who teaches tenth and eleventh-grade English at this school, gives the following description of how she uses Noden’s technique in her classroom: “I try to just fit the grammar in with the writing techniques. And if we’re going to learn something, like . . . if we’re going to learn nouns and what they are, I try to teach that concept within the framework of using specific nouns in writing. So, I try to pair writing techniques with each of the parts of speech.” Coleman’s description details the way in which she has drawn from the work of Noden because of her concern for tying grammar in with artistic techniques. Recognizing that the desire to make their message stronger motivates student writers to want to learn grammar, both Coleman and Noden present grammar as being the vehicle by which the message of a text is conveyed by its form.

Nathan Harris, another teacher at this school, is an even more adamant disciple of Noden's theory on teaching grammar. Walking into his classroom, I was surrounded with posters detailing the five basic brush strokes. Student paintings are mounted on the wall, which is unique in an English classroom. "We actually paint in class to get the feeling of what it's really like to make brush strokes and relate that to how they write," says Harris. Harris goes on to describe how he is currently helping his students to use more action verbs in their writing. As Noden suggests, he provides students with literary models and asks them to apply this brush stroke to their own writing. When asked how easily students are able to apply the five basic brush strokes to their own writing, Harris replies, saying, "For most it transfers pretty easy." He concludes by pointing out that the visual component of the approach makes grammar more concrete for the students and more accessible for students with visual learning preferences. Additionally, he highlights the fact that this approach shows students how knowing grammar will improve their writing.

Making grammar more concrete, relevant to content, and motivating, this approach offers educators a promising method for helping students transfer their knowledge of grammar to writing situations. Although many teachers are untrained in and unfamiliar with semantic approaches to grammar instruction, such as the works of Noguchi and Noden, once mastered, these techniques prove to be very cost effective. Because they can be used to improve content, organization and conventions, the given-new concept and the five basic brush strokes strengthen writing on a more global level than is possible with traditional grammar approaches.

Concluding Remarks

Leaving behind the extreme viewpoints surrounding the grammar debate that has occupied the latter half of the twentieth century, we can no longer pretend that grammar does not matter; it does. In her interview of twenty-five teachers, a research study that partially inspired

my own, Brenda Arnett Petruzzella quotes a novice teacher who reports feeling frustration with his university's dismissal of grammar's importance. This teacher says that his university courses "really piss me off. All my ed. courses said grammar wasn't important, and now I find out that it is" (69). Indeed, I have found the knowledge of grammar that I have gained during my university education to be indispensable during my student teaching.

After having had the opportunity to meet with other teachers and hear their views on grammar instruction, I learned that, for the majority of teachers, grammar is neither the all-important mental discipline nor the trivial focus on minutiae that researchers on both sides of the debate have made it. Grammar, according to most of these Cache Valley teachers, is simply a way to help students to write in a way that will be more comprehensible and respectable among members of our society.

In addition to preferring a moderate attitude toward grammar's purpose in the classroom, these teachers do not cling to one tried-and-true approach to teaching Grammars 2 and 3. Rather, these teachers vary the instruction they provide, examining the impact their methods have upon student learning. By varying their instructional techniques, these teachers can overcome the weaknesses that are inherent in any one method.

Within the instructional debate surrounding grammar, there are no simple answers. Each viewpoint has its fallacies, and all methods--whether due to gaps in relevancy, application, or practicality—are flawed. The challenge that all instructors must face is to create a truce in the grammar war, to turn the battleground into a middle ground. Educators must develop a balanced approach to teaching grammar.

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