

Knowledge about the teaching of [sentence] grammar: The state of play

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ABSTRACT: Following the publication of an article summarising two systematic reviews on whether the teaching of grammar is effective in improving 5-16 year olds' writing (Andrews et al, 2006), the present article reflects on the relationship between knowledge about language and knowledge about grammar. It argues that there is no evidence for the assumption made by policy-makers and researchers in the UK that knowledge about grammar is a useful tool in helping school pupils to write more fluently and accurately. More research is needed to determine which approaches to sentence construction are effective in helping pupils in these respects; and there is an urgent need for curriculum reform on this topic.

KEYWORDS: Formal grammar teaching, knowledge about language, sentence-combining, sentence grammar.

INTRODUCTION

One particular aspect of knowledge about language is knowledge about the grammar of sentence construction. The function of such knowledge in helping young people to write more fluently and accurately is the subject of this article, as is the question of who needs this knowledge: teachers, students, or neither?

In late 2004, colleagues and I, based principally at The University of York, published two systematic research reviews on the Research Evidence in Education Library through the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) (Andrews et al. 2004a, 2004b). One was on whether the formal teaching of sentence grammar was effective in helping 5 to 16-year-olds to write better; the other was on whether sentence combining was effective in this respect. The two research reports were compressed and combined into an article, published in the *British Educational Research Journal* in early 2006 (Andrews et al. 2006). Essentially, what the research reviews concluded, after examining all the relevant papers published in Canada, the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand in English since 1900, was this:

First, the teaching of syntax (as part of a traditional or transformational/generative approach to teaching grammar) appears to have no influence on either the accuracy or quality of written language development for 5 to 16-year-olds. This does not mean to say that there could be no such influence. It simply means that there have been no significant studies to date that have proved such an effect.

Second, the teaching of sentence-combining appears to have a more positive effect on writing quality and accuracy. The studies are relatively more homogeneous, though they do reveal a difference of degree in the extent to which sentence-combining techniques help to improve writing development.

Readers are encouraged to look at the distilled article and/or the full technical reports for the background to these conclusions, and at the caveats and qualifications expressed. One caveat that is important to repeat here is that we did not claim to have covered all approaches to “grammar teaching”, nor to make more generalized claims about knowledge about language.

The initial publication of the full technical reports, and the media interest in them, incited controversy. At one extreme, those who associated the teaching of formal sentence grammar with a dream of order and discipline, and an assumption that such teaching was the key to standards in written English, were bitterly disappointed by our results. At the other extreme, there was a great deal of support and relief from those who had never believed in the teaching of formal grammar, and some interest in the fact that we had found that one approach – sentence-combining – held some promise. Both these extreme positions are premature and partial, because we still do not know enough to come to conclusions on the matter of whether sentence grammar teaching is effective or not, nor have we yet explored other kinds of grammar teaching.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

The immediate reaction from England and Wales’ Department for Education and Skills was interesting. It claimed that teachers in England, at least, used an eclectic approach to the teaching of writing, employing abstracted knowledge about the sentence construction of the language, and other methods, when and where appropriate. There is a great deal of common sense (as well as careful diplomacy) in such a position: good teachers will use whatever methods that they have at hand, according to the particular child or children they are teaching, at the appropriate time and place. As a practising English teacher, that is exactly what I did; I created my own mix of top-down (research-informed) and bottom-up (pragmatic, inventive, intuitive) approaches to the teaching of writing, and employed whichever method seemed right for the learners I was teaching.

I now wonder, however, whether such a catholic approach does not seem a little too amateurish, a little too uninformed. It appears to be the orthodoxy in policy and practice in the 1990s and the first years of the Twenty-First Century in schools in England, as enshrined in *The Grammar Papers* (QCA, 1998), *Not Whether but How: Teaching Grammar in English at Key Stages 3 and 4* (QCA, 1999) and the National Literacy Strategy’s *Grammar for Writing* (DfEE, 2000). These papers, which will have informed continuing professional development for thousands of teachers in primary and secondary schools in England and Wales over the past six or seven years, derive from the broad consensus established by The Kingman Report (DES, 1988), which suggested that *knowledge about language* was the key to raising standards in writing and reading. The problem facing policy-makers and teachers was well framed in *The Grammar Papers*:

How can grammar teaching be systematic and progressive if it is only taught when it arises, either naturally or by chance, in the context of pupils’ own work? At the same time, how can a systematic treatment of grammar avoid being a study of form, divorced from the living language it is meant to represent? The challenge now is to develop

appropriate ways of teaching grammar that will increase pupils' competence and confidence in their language use (1998, p. 16).

The logical short-circuit in this argument is that, faced with a dilemma about the nature of grammar and of grammar teaching, the writers have side-stepped the problem and reinvented the challenge as one that is about pedagogy ("how") rather than about whether we should be teaching such knowledge at all.

One of the key questions is what degree of knowledge about language (specifically, the construction of sentences) should teachers and pupils have? To take pupils first, the *Grammar Papers* state that:

Pupils should become familiar with grammatical terminology, at a level of detail appropriate to their understanding, to enable them to make independent use of their grammatical knowledge in relation to their own and others' work (1998, p. 17).

Another logical short-circuit here is that although grammatical terminology, at whatever level, might be helpful in analysing (critically reading) material, it does not necessarily translate into improvement in producing (writing) material. The two short-circuits – assuming that pupils need to know about sentence grammar through a terminology, and assuming that it is *how* that knowledge is conveyed rather than *whether it is* – are the two flaws in the argument that has been built up by advisers to the Government and enshrined in government documentation and edict. The recent results of the end-of-key stage tests in England suggest that the policy is having an unintended but predictable effect: reading scores are up on average nationally at age 11, but writing scores lag worryingly behind.

SOME DEFINITIONAL PROBLEMS

Before moving on to research implications, it is worth trying to clarify the relationship between "knowledge about grammar" and "knowledge about language". It is going to be difficult, because the former is an abstraction of an abstraction, and the latter is a curriculum *notion* and set of practices, rather than a concept.

Even descriptive sentence grammars are abstracted from the actual use of the spoken or written (or written/graphical/visual) language in that they purport to describe patterns of usage. With descriptive grammars, we get an often rich, and always wide-ranging and varied set of categories. These categories, often erected into taxonomies, operate at one step removed from actual use. Their very abstraction from use requires a terminology to denote the various classes of use, and a set of terms to describe the ways in which sentences and other utterances are articulated (in the sense of "joined together"). Prescriptive sentence grammars fossilize these patterns into rules for the generation of meaningful communication.

Whether sentence grammars are descriptive or prescriptive, they are always abstracted – although they are usually accompanied by examples or illustrations. The illogical leap that many grammarians and teachers make is that these patterns or rules can be taught back to the (young) people who make utterances or construct sentences in order to help them do it better. "Knowledge about grammar" can only be an

abstraction of an abstraction, and begins to evaporate as a useful concept or level of knowledge in terms of helping young people to write or read more fluently or accurately than they already do.

“Knowledge about language” or “language awareness”, rather differently, is a curriculum notion and set of practices that has emerged from the work of Hawkins (1987) and the Kingman Report (1988). It suggests that a wide-ranging awareness of language forms and varieties is useful in acquiring greater competence in language use, either in a first or in additional languages. On a dialectical level, it reacts to narrow concerns with language form (sentence grammars) or even systematic-functional descriptions and analyses of language, to advocate a more liberal, more eclectic approach to language study and acquisition. Looking at its relationship with grammatical knowledge from another perspective, it appears only loosely related; one could say that grammatical knowledge is subsumed by knowledge about language or language awareness, but such relativity is loosely conceived and of limited interest. The question would have to be asked: what is the value of such a relationship, and how (in the educational sense) does it help matters?

Finally, both research reviews mentioned at the start of the article acknowledge that by “grammar” they mean sentence grammar. The review of formal approaches to grammar teaching focuses on syntax; the other one looks at practice of sentence-combining. Both reviews are aware that “grammar” can also refer to word- and text-level grammars, and that there is a complex relationship between the three levels.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS, OR THE PROBLEM WITH “THE ENGLISH PATIENT”

There are two aspects of the argument about the teaching of grammar that I would like to address in this section: firstly, the problems with the approach taken in Dick Hudson and John Walmsley’s paper “The English Patient: English grammar and teaching in the twentieth century” (Hudson & Walmsley, 2004); and secondly, the implications for future research arising from the two systematic reviews on grammar teaching mentioned in the introductory section, and from the current concern about the quality and accuracy of pupils’ writing.

The first problem with the paper is that its fundamental premise, that English schools stopped teaching grammar in the 1960s, is flawed. It is true that there was a renewed emphasis on creativity and the personal voice in writing set by primary and secondary schools; but even a rudimentary survey of the textbooks published in the 60s through to the 90s would indicate that although the initial stimuli and contexts for writing may have changed, the concern for accuracy, clear expression and a degree of knowledge about language persisted. Furthermore, we do not know the degree to which teachers themselves addressed issues of accuracy and quality of writing, as well as knowledge about language, during this period. When the Kingman Report was published in 1988, advocating that attention should be placed on language awareness and knowledge about language, it will have come as no surprise to a generation of English teachers who had been plying their craft with pupils without a break since the 60s and 70s. Supporting the premise that English schools stopped teaching grammar in the 1960s is an interesting analysis that the “decline” of grammar teaching has partly been a

result of a lack of support from universities – or, more specifically, a widening gap between what linguists are interested in and what school teachers teach.

A second problem is in the sliding between premises and conclusions: “Language is more effective if it is better understood, *so* we take it for granted that school leavers *should* understand how language works; this understanding will help them not only to use their existing resources better but also to acquire new resources...our view is that the understanding *must* include some of the technicalities of grammar” (p. 3).¹ Even the opening proposition in that statement is contentious: language is *more effective* if it is better understood. I wonder if orators or novelists – and their audiences – would agree with that opening statement? The italics throughout are mine; they indicate to me articulations in the argument that are either non-sequiturs or poorly supported imperatives.

A third area in which to take up a critical stance is in relation to the view expressed in the statement: “The expulsion of grammar from the curriculum can be viewed as an almost ineluctable side-effect of the long-drawn out campaign of a new discipline to establish itself in the curriculum of schools and universities: English Literature” (p. 17). Again, it is true that the rise of English Literature in the late Nineteenth Century and its establishment as the central humanizing subject in the school curriculum in England from about 1920 has framed practice and curriculum design in terms of literature rather than rhetoric or language studies; but that does not amount to an “expulsion of grammar from the curriculum”. The discussion of literary effect (a form of stylistics) has been, and continues to be, central to many English classrooms. Despite Eagleton’s recent (2005) argument that the theorists of literary study have opened up an almost insurmountable gap between themselves and the stylists or students of literary form, practice continues in schools in terms of response to the linguistic effects of literature and other art forms as if there had been no such split between rhetoric and literature in the Nineteenth Century, and without reference to literary theory.

I do not want to labour the weaknesses in the argument for a fuller knowledge of the technicalities of sentence construction and wider applications of language awareness, partly because I agree with many of the conclusions, but also because the article as a whole is a fascinating and scholarly insight into the relationship between linguists’ knowledge and the *praxis* of the school classroom. In particular, I agree with much of what is stated in the last sections on grammar in schools from the 1960s to 1988; and since 1988: the shift to descriptive grammar; the exploration and integration of the various levels at which language can be described (of which sentence grammar is only one); the differences between spoken and written English; attention to language in use.

What further research is necessary in order for teachers, policy-makers and researchers themselves to feel they have a better foundation for their work? Such research would include further systematic reviews of aspects of teaching grammar, like grammatical awareness, the non-teaching of grammar, working with emergent

¹ This paper became the basis for Hudson, R., & Walmsley, J. (2005). The English patient: English grammar and teaching in the twentieth century, *Journal of Linguistics*, 41 (3), 593-622.

grammars, the use of systemic-functional grammars and the links between sentence grammars and other levels of language description, like word- and text-level grammars. To date there have been a large number of reviews on traditional, formal grammar teaching, but most of these are narrative reviews and are based on empirical studies that are controlled, rather than randomised controlled trials. There is still a dearth of evidence for the effective use of grammar teaching of any kind in the development of writing.

Research would then move on to empirical and possibly experimental studies of the efficacy of different grammar and different teaching approaches, complemented by prior small-scale and highly contextual studies into the development of writing, and by subsequent applications and trials of new approaches. It would also take into account changes in the nature of writing, ranging from texting through multimodal forms of writing and visualization through to extended narrative, argumentative, informational and other forms of writing. Such a research programme would take at least five years, and would need to be undertaken by a team of researchers.

WHAT DO TEACHERS AND PUPILS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT LANGUAGE?

What teachers and pupils need to know about language would need to be informed by the kind of research programme – as far as grammatical awareness is concerned – set out in the previous paragraph. In the meantime, what indications do we have from what we know so far?

One of the features of the National Literacy Strategy (as represented in *Grammar for Writing*) welcomed by Hudson and Walmsley (2004, p. 44) is a glossary, intended for teachers at Key Stage 2 (7 to 11-year-old pupils). The glossary is welcomed because it indicates a coming together of linguists' expertise (they were consulted in the creation of the glossary) and teachers' knowledge. The glossary itself is appended to *Grammar for Writing*, and supports the many examples of how language can be brought alive for pupils while at the same time eliciting and teaching aspects of grammar and language awareness. Hudson and Walmsley bewail the fact that initial teacher training seems unable to find time for such detail, but welcome the fact that most of the work since 2000 has been undertaken with serving teachers.

It seems reasonable that both initial and continuing teachers should have access to this kind of knowledge, whether their initial degree is in English Language or not. The mistake would be, however, to assume that knowledge of such terminology, and of the features and workings of language that the terms represent, will necessarily solve the problem of writing quality, accuracy and development in young people. No research to date has shown that either the teaching of abstracted grammatical rules or a more diffuse "awareness" of their existence helps in the improvement of development of writing *per se*. It is more likely that such knowledge *may* help in the analysis of existing writing; and such analysis *may* help in the subsequent production of writing. But so far, we have a situation of cases not proven.

It is more likely to be the case that a teacher with a rich knowledge of grammatical constructions and a more general awareness of the forms and varieties of the language

will be in a better position to help young writers when they are “shaping at the point of utterance” (Britton, 1983) than one who does not have such knowledge. How the informed teacher uses that knowledge – for example, whether he or she uses a grammatical term in helping a young writer to write a better sentence – is a matter for pedagogical and professional judgement.

What we do not yet know is which forms of “grammar teaching” are the most effective. It could be that an eclectic approach is too broad, and that much of the time spent by teachers using a wide range of techniques is less productive than it might be. On the other hand, it is unlikely that a single approach, however well tried and tested, will be the panacea to improving young people’s writing. As ever, we need more research to answer some of these questions and to attain a better balance of well-informed pedagogical approaches.

From the pupils’ point of view, despite a move to more descriptive approaches to language study and use, the *prescription* inherent in the National Curriculum and the National Strategies at both primary and secondary levels in terms of what pupils *should* know remains based on unsubstantiated ground. It has been our aim to begin to clear the ground so that future research, policy and practice can build or – to change the metaphor – grow more steadily, and with more sustainability. Our aim is to help young people to write more fluently and accurately, and to do so as efficiently, creatively and purposefully as possible.

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