

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

CHRISTOPHER R. FRIEND

1. INTRODUCTION

To be clear: This resource list is not likely to change the opinion of any reader. The literature is in the same state of stalemate that existed in 1904, when debate over the efficacy of grammar instruction began in earnest within the research community. To this day, teachers and researchers alike seem divided into two distinct groups, and no amount of banter is likely to shift anyone's firmly held beliefs. My goal here, then, is to identify patterns and trends in the literature to provide a more informed view of the conversation.

In brief, participants in the argument over grammar instruction tend to fall into two camps, thinking that grammar should or should not be explicitly taught. Those in the "should be taught" camp tend to take an approach that is critical of research, frequently picking apart the latest study by questioning the methods, the student group, or even the definition of the word 'grammar' in question. No amount of research will dissuade members of this camp because they seem generally convinced that the research is being done manipulatively, preferring instead to promote their own arguments through personal observations or experiences with students, claiming that the research cannot be right because of an observed outcome in the classroom, often citing anecdotes of "I'm so glad I knew [grammatical term] when [isolated experience exclusive to English instruction] happened."

Members of the other camp, however, give the appearance, if the mixed and absurd metaphor can be pardoned, of bashing their collective heads against a pedagogical brick wall. Articles in the "should not be taught" side feature extensive and exhausting lists of numerous studies that each indicate, in one form or another, the inefficacy of direct grammar instruction. These articles emphasize rational and deliberate deconstruction of arguments they consider fallacious. Anecdotes and ethos are rare; bewilderment is common. Broad statements in definitive terms are borne out of convictions strongly held.

In short, opinions of those who are *supportive* of the explicit study of grammar tend to present themselves emotionally, with the passion of their beliefs as their strongest rallying cry and a distrust of research as their motivation to produce more articles. Those who are *against* the study of grammar present themselves rationally, with the growing volume of research studies as their claim to validity and a sense of bafflement over a continued insistence to teach grammar as their primary impetus to write. This battle has been long-fought, and it shows no sign of abating in the near future. Studies will be done, and they will have their validity questioned. Rallying cries will be raised, and they will fall on irreverent ears. The resources listed below should help English teachers position their own thinking within this ongoing debate and should provide sufficient context to see how that position is encouraged and why it is hotly debated.

WORKS CITED

Barton, G. "Grammar Without Shame" (1998). Web. 7 Mar. 2010 <<http://geoffbarton.co.uk/files/english/Grammar1998.doc>>.

Position: Supportive

Type: Practical Example

Barton tells of his experience teaching sentence structure to secondary students, positioning it within the scope of the overall debate in the literature.

"We've been duped by the oversimplified sterile debates that have dogged all discussion of grammar teaching. In fact, *debates* is too dignified a word for the feeble ping-pong arguments that regularly rattle to and fro. [...] Our so-called debates about grammar, then, are rarely based upon valid research or placed in any meaningful context of children's grammatical development." (3–6)

Barton offers a view of grammar instruction that emphasizes confidence-building in opposition to authoritarianism, written practice with learned skills, and most uniquely, an emphasis on the written, rather than aural, functions of punctuation, starting with expecting students to follow along while reading. Overall, he argues that grammar is essential, but that finding the right kind of grammar to present to the right students at the right time is challenging—and perhaps to blame for the tension over grammar in the academic community.

Braddock, R.R., R. Lloyd-Jones, and L. Schoer. *Research in Written Composition*. NCTE, 1963. Print.

Position: Against

Type: Lit Review

By virtue of its content alone, this document should not be included in a study of grammar in composition pedagogy; however, the frequency with which it is cited as a definitive source of a complete and unqualified grammar rejection has inappropriately made it a principle source in the literature. This text contains little more than the

grammar-studies equivalent of “the shot heard ’round the world”: one summative paragraph consisting of but one sentence—amidst a total of only three paragraphs on the matter of grammar instruction—that is identified alternately as a rationale to abandon the teaching of grammar altogether or as a target for attacks against the lack of credible research in the field. See Kolln for a thorough and direct example of such an attack.

The authors make the following broad conclusion about the use of explicit grammar instruction in classrooms:

“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.” (37–38)

The most prominent source used by the authors is “The Harris Study” (cited below), which arguably lacks the convictions and confidence needed for a statement as bold as the one Braddock, et al. make.

Devet, B. “Welcoming Grammar Back into the Writing Classroom.” *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 30.1 (2002): 8–17. Print.

Position: Supportive

Type: Theory

Rather than suggesting some generic grammar as the cure-all for student writing, Devet places new approaches to grammar instruction into three categories that each take into consideration many of the concerns of recent research. While Devet presents no original teaching strategies, her categories can help teachers who are interested in providing helpful instruction choose approaches and find supporting research that align with the teacher’s pedagogical perspective. In brief, her categories are:

- (1) *Reformed Traditionalism*—Students are taught general structures of grammar (such as subjects and predicates in complete sentences), then investigate the application of those general rules to sentences of their own construction, seeing how the structure can be used and manipulated in writing.
- (2) *Humane Innatism*—Students are taught to exploit their intuition as native speakers in order to discover solutions to common problems. Rather than teaching formal grammar rules, simple ‘tricks’ for identifying and correcting errors are used to improve student compositions.
- (3) *Revived Classicism*—Students are taught to emulate, but not copy, sentences of various styles from various authors, picking up the structure, style, of other writers. This process, in effect, “instills patterns of thinking” and “variety in syntax” that students then can re-use in their own compositions.

Devet concludes with a plea to resume grammar instruction, but in a form different from the traditional one: “Rather than give up on grammar, teachers need to explore new ways to make the topic more accessible and more relevant to their students, while retaining the fundamental concepts” (Krauthamer, qtd. on 15).

Ferris, D. “The Case for Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes: A Response to Truscott (1996).”

Journal of Second Language Writing 8.1 (1999): 1–11. Print.

Position: Supportive

Type: Theory Rebuttal

This brief article provides an illuminating rebuttal to an extensive and research-laden Truscott article discussed below. The pair provide a quintessential example of the traditional opposing approaches being taken by authors in the field. Here, Ferris questions the validity of specific research studies, relying heavily on her personal convictions developed through classroom experience to argue in favor of using grammar correction in second-language (L2) classes. She reaches the standard supportive conclusion: we should not stop teaching grammar, a study presumed to be useful, because the article’s

author has seen it work in her own classes. Ferris analyzes the research cited in Truscott's article and relies on ethos to reinforce her point:

“Based on limited, dated, incomplete, and inconclusive evidence, [Truscott] argues for eliminating a pedagogical practice that is not only *highly valued* by students, but on which many thoughtful teachers *spend a great deal of time* and mental energy because they *feel* that helping students to improve the accuracy of their writing is vitally important.” (9, emphasis added)

Those emotional appeals sound reminiscent of student thinking: because a thing is wanted, it should be had; because time was spent on a thing, the thing must represent quality; if one believes that something is good, it must be good. Comparing Ferris's approach here to Truscott's (below), the distinction between styles could not be more pronounced.

Harris, R.J. “An Experimental Inquiry Into the Functions and Value of Formal Grammar in the Teaching of English, With Special Reference to the Teaching of Correct Written English to Children Aged Twelve to Fourteen.” *Research in Written Composition*. Unpublished dissertation.

Position: Against

Type: Original Research

Noted for its two-year duration, this study compares groups of London students whose teachers used either formal grammar instruction using textbooks and grammar terminology or “direct method” instruction, which instead used trends in student writing as examples for in-class group correction. Classes using the “direct method” were not exposed to the formal terms of grammar studies, and the instructional time saved was devoted to a full-class writing project.

The study concluded with a composition task that was assessed for correctness in a strict formalist tradition. Extensive and detailed data sets report errors made and sentence structures used across the classes and instructional methods. The researcher concludes that the lack of connection “between a relatively high grammatical score and

improvement in the measured items of the essay” suggests that “the study of English grammatical terminology had a negligible or even a relatively harmful effect upon the correctness of children’s writing...” (qtd. in Braddock, et al. 83).

Hartwell, P. “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar.” *College English* 47.2 (1985): 105–127. Print.

Position: Against

Type: Theory Review

While this article includes no original research and no revolutionary theories, it does contain organized, systematic, thorough, and fair acknowledgement of the tensions that currently exist in the field. **Of all the texts in this bibliography, this is the most worthy of reading, review, study, and attention.** The author’s organization conveniently helps toward that end, as well. The first discussion is a remarkably compact survey of the existing literature, laced with several poignant and revelatory remarks:

“[S]eventy-five years of experimental research has for all practical purposes taught us nothing. The two sides are unable to agree on how to interpret such research. Studies are interpreted in terms of one’s prior assumptions about the value of teaching grammar: their results seem not to change those assumptions.” (106)

“Any experimental design can be nit-picked, any experimental population can be criticized, and any experimental conclusion can be questioned or, more often, ignored. In fact, it may well be that the grammar question is not open to resolution by experimental research.” (107)

Hartwell also highlights a pedagogical difference: formalistic thinking requires that the teacher be the source of all knowledge (or, in this case, all rules), and the students are to struggle to obtain all that is being offered. Conversely, social-epistemic thinking requires that the students be guided into seeing how their writing fits within the cultural expectations; in this case, rules of grammar are restrictive, inconsequential, and inconvenient.

The article continues with an exhaustively detailed analysis of five varieties of authors' definitions of 'grammar,' with practical examples of how each type of grammar applies to composition. After enormous efforts toward explanation, categorization, and explication, Hartwell concludes that "much current research is not informed by an awareness of the past. Put simply, we are constrained to reinvent the wheel. My concern here has been with a far more serious problem: that too often the wheel we reinvent is square" (127). The conversation about grammar's role in composition shows no sign of ending, but it seems as though the only thing preventing a conclusion is the steadfast refusal of teachers to accept the research that continues to present the same findings: direct grammar instruction will not produce better writers.

Hudson, R., et al. "Grammar Teaching And Writing Skills: The Research Evidence." Web. 1 Mar. 2010 <<ftp://ftp.phon.ucl.ac.uk/pub/Word-Grammar/writing.rtf>>.

Position: Supportive

Type: Lit Review

One consideration raised (and then promptly dismissed) in this article is the accessibility of grammar. Hudson questions whether grammar is simply too difficult or too complex to be taught to students; his response is to list a dozen studies that show efficacy for students in both secondary and primary schools. Teaching sentence combining is offered as the only form of grammar instruction that can have predictable, measurable, and beneficial results with students. Sentence combining is the most method of student learning among academics who favor the preservation of grammar instruction. Hudson concludes that "the idea that grammar teaching improves children's writing skills is much better supported by the available research than is commonly supposed," but, astonishingly, states that "there is no denying the need for more research in this area..." (4). While most academics are calling for a cessation of hostilities and a dropping of the subject, Hudson wishes to go further, believing that the battle hasn't been defined clearly enough to have been fully fought.

Hunter, S. and R. Wallace. *The Place of Grammar in Writing Instruction: Past, Present, Future*. Boynton/Cook Pub, 1995. Print.

Position: Measured Middle Ground

Type: Anthology of Essays

This text is organized more or less chronologically, with divisions that discuss the state of grammar studies in the past, present and future of composition studies. The editors' goal is to position grammar teaching in college-level composition courses within the larger context of composition, both pedagogically and historically. The introduction highlights the uncertainties or confluences in the field, including the observation that "pro-grammar and anti-grammar camps...represent variations of a similar pedagogical position—that of teachers who assume that we teach writing *to* students" (3).

This position, along with the social-epistemic thinking that often opposes it, is presented in the introduction to suggest that the book does not place itself within any particular pedagogical stance; rather, it is critical of the "gatekeeping function" grammar use often serves in its use as a "demarcator of social class" (2–3). Within the context of that criticism, this text attempts to question what approaches to grammar are potentially the most effective for improving student writing. The authors collected here do not advocate doing away with grammar; rather, they present a remarkably diverse set of approaches for thinking constructively about its use.

Kolln, M. "Closing the Books on Alchemy." *College Composition and Communication* 32.2 (1981): 139–51. Print.

Position: Supportive

Type: Lit Review

This author cites Braddock and Meckel as the seminal and divergent publications in the modern debate over grammar use in the classroom, analyzing the two based on the validity, or perceived lack thereof, in their respective sources, recommendations, and conclusions. Kolln's charged language is noted throughout the literature, offending several antigrammarians who resent being labeled as 'alchemists'. The central argument

of this text is that, while its definition is often too limited in scope, grammar must be taught. In her conclusion, Kolln asserts that grammar

“need not be synonymous with diagramming or drillwork or memorizing rules; studying grammar can also mean thoughtful discussion of choices in generating and combining and manipulating sentences—at every level of the curriculum. [...] Nothing is more important to our students than an understanding of language, the mark of their humanity, which they use every hour of every day.” (149–150)

Such effusive support makes this article a target on rhetorical, as well as theoretical, grounds. However, the article also effectively summarizes the dispute between the two sides of the debate, questioning studies and encouraging authors such as Braddock, et al. to make claims that are more measured—an irony, given that her style is frequently seen as more hostile than that of those whom she confronts.

Meckel, H.C. “Research on Teaching Composition and Literature.” *Handbook of Research on Teaching*. Ed. N.L. Gage. Rand McNally Chicago, 1963. 966–1006. Print.

Position: Measured Middle Ground

Type: Lit Review

Presenting a general survey of the literature on composition courses available in 1963, Meckel devotes considerable space to a discussion of grammar-related studies (974–982). Within this exhaustive discussion, Meckel establishes categories of grammar-related studies, specifies the abilities measured by various grammar tests, indexes studies by grade level of students studied (6–11 plus college freshmen), evaluates the potential transfer of learning from grammar to writing, and lists of questions needing further research.

Notable in Meckel’s report is the broad view taken to analyze prior research: in addition to concluding that “[t]here is no research evidence that grammar *as traditionally taught in schools*” improves writing, he offers the caveat that “[t]he training periods involved in transfer studies have been comparatively short, and the amount of grammar

instruction has frequently been small” (981, my emphasis). Just as the exhaustive and organized collection of studies builds a convincing case for his conclusions, the qualifications Meckle places on those conclusions construct a more measured ethos than those of his contemporaries.

Noguchi, R.R. *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities*. NCTE, 1991. Print.

Position: Measured Middle Ground

Type: Theory

Noguchi delineates three goals in the introduction to this text:

- (1) to identify “those areas where grammar and writing overlap,”
- (2) to use existing “yet unconscious knowledge that all native writers have of their language,” and
- (3) to show how this “streamlined ‘writer’s grammar’” can integrate “with style, content, and organization” (viii).

The author includes one popular practical strategy for use with students: his “tag questions” that employ basic sentence manipulations most native speakers would consider almost instinctive. Naguchi also lists potential reasons why grammar instruction may fail (4), but these reasons are neither supported by research nor applied directly to theory to show how they might be overcome. The text ends with a list of potential reasons why teachers persist in teaching “formal grammar” in spite of overwhelming research that does not support this practice (119). Again, though, these ideas are neither supported by nor applied to any research findings; they are simply mentioned as reasons why the author’s theories might be useful.

Rhodes, Keith. “The Anti Anti-antigrammar Article.” Web. 5 Mar. 2010 <<http://web.archive.org/web/20071130010329/http://home.earthlink.net/~dkaa4/AAAG.html>>.

Position: Against

Type: Lit Review

While it has never been published and has been removed from the internet, this essay seeks to put an end to the centuries-long debate over the place of grammar instruction

in composition classes. This article compares roughly to Kolln in terms of directness of language but contrasts directly in terms of conclusion. The lack of success the author had in publishing the text is directly discussed in the paper as evidence that the ongoing debate is far from over.

Truscott, J. "The Case Against Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes." *Language Learning* 46.2 (2008): 327–369. Print.

Position: Against

Type: Lit Review and Theory

This extensive article and its prominent rebuttal (see Ferris, above) are a quintessential example of the traditional approaches being taken by authors in the field. Here, Truscott takes a thorough and deliberate approach to analyze and categorize a healthy collection of relevant literature to show what he says is conclusive evidence against the use of grammar correction in second-language (L2) classes. Reaching the standard conclusion—that teachers know what the research argues but choose to ignore it based on perceived personal experience—Truscott highlights the tension between feeling and evidence:

"Unfortunately, teachers (and nonteachers) show great reluctance to accept the conclusion that grammar correction does not work. No doubt, all have strong intuitions on the subject and this conclusion clashes with those intuitions. It is difficult to escape the feeling that grammar correction must work, that it has to help students. In the face of these strong intuitions, probably no amount of evidence will convince many teachers, students, or researchers that grammar correction is misguided." (341)

This article is unique in that it not only promotes a position, but it also acknowledges the reasons behind the potential futility of the argument: the opposing side uses a different strategy. To see how accurately his conclusions became predictions, see Ferris's direct response article, published three years later.