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Introduction

In order for students to enjoy equal opportunity for success in both the academic arena and the workplace, I believe that it is my job, as an English teacher, to make certain that my students possess fundamental prescriptive grammar skills. P**roper** grammarand **speech are not necessarily thenorm but a form of elitism (Brown, 1997). This elitism is, unfortunately, a reality for the majority of Americans choosing to pursue higher education and jobs that require college degrees. Dunn and Lindblom (2003) assert that** prescriptive grammar instruction does not improve student writing, and argue that standardized “handbook grammar” as an ideal is discriminatory in that it recognizes only certain language conventions as being correct. **While the accepted conventions for speakers and writers of Standard American English (SAE) discriminate against other dialects of American English, the truth is that students must conform to the common model of “good” grammar to succeed. Individuals who are not proficient users of SAE are associated with lower socioeconomic status and the least amount of political power and recourse (Speicher and Bielanski, 2000). For the purposes of social and financial mobility, it is imperative that students are taught SAE, but ensuring that students speak and write effectively, using prescriptive grammar, is a challenging task for educators.**

Grammar, Does it Really Matter?

Most secondary and post-secondary English teachers deviate in their opinions on the significance of prescriptive grammar instruction in the classroom. Some educators argue that content is more important than correct grammar while others assert that grammar is the basis for being able to develop content and effectively express ideas. No matter which side of the argument English teachers take, they do agree that grammar instruction is sticky. The most pressing question, for me, is not whether or not grammar should be taught but rather how it should be taught. Should grammar be taught in isolation through a series of worksheets, using the “drill and kill” technique? Numerous educators reject this idea. “The typical weakness of many grammar drills and worksheets, like those used in preparing students for high-stakes tests, is that although they may help the learner gain competence in English usage, they too often do little to help the student gain competence in learning how to use the language for authentic and meaningful purposes” (Andrews, 2006, p. 140). My research aims to discuss the outcome of teaching grammar in authentic, relevant situations. Specifically, my study questions how teaching grammar in context through real life editing of news articles and student essays affects students’ grammar test scores and composition skills. I feel inquiry into this topic is crucial in aiding students to become competitive in the pursuit of higher education and professional careers. Many students are able to complete worksheets and successfully answer grammar-related questions, but these skills do not appear to transfer to composition. Proper punctuation seems to transfer, but it is important to note the distinction between punctuation and grammar. Most teachers do not think of grammar in a linguistic sense, as a description of the structure of language, but rather use the term to describe mechanics and usage, and most researchers, arguing the value of prescriptive grammar instruction, do not make the distinction clear either (Petruzzella, 1996). This is why when sifting through the vast amount of data pertaining to the efficacy of prescriptive grammar instruction, it is difficult to determine a true foundation for the argument in favor of or in opposition to prescriptive grammar instruction; however, since the course I teach, Composition Strategies, does not differentiate between grammar and usage, I use the two interchangeably, but I do make a distinction between mechanics, meaning punctuation, and usage.

Methodology

I used a variety of methods in order to collect data. First, I asked one class of students a couple of questions to determine attitudes toward grammar. Students were asked if they thought knowing grammar was helpful in writing and if they thought others judged them based on their use of “proper” grammar. This was done as an informal vote with a show of hands. A few students were asked to explain why they voted the way they did. Prior to the first test, all students were taught grammar only through a series of worksheets and text book exercises. Next, students were assigned a 500 word essay. Students were able to obtain assistance with their essays by submitting them for review to Pearson Online Tutoring Services, conferencing with me, or going to the Individualized Learning Center (ILC). I held test scores and essays for comparison evaluations. After the first test, three classes received varying amounts of grammar-in-context instruction and exercises, while one class did not receive any instruction other than worksheet and textbook exercises and lectures. All four classes were tested again on a different grammar component, and results were compared to the results of the first test. Three of four classes continued to engage in differing degrees of grammar-in-context while they were assigned a second 500 word essay. All classes were still able to utilize Pearson Online Tutoring Service, instructor conferencing, and the ILC; however, three of four classes were required to participate in peer editing sessions. Students were instructed to edit for pronoun antecedent agreement, fragments, run-ons, and commas. During the editing process, I observed students and made notations regarding the process and students’ responses to it. I then analyzed essays to determine whether or not the number of grammatical and mechanical errors was reduced. Following peer editing, I informally surveyed students who had participated to gauge their feelings toward the activity. They were asked the following questions:

* Do you think peer editing is helpful in terms of your own paper being grammatically correct?
* Do you feel that editing someone else’s paper helped you to become better at grammar and punctuation?
* What part of the process did you find to be the most challenging? Explain your answer.
* Is this an exercise you would like to participate in again? Why or why not?

After collecting data, I analyzed it by comparing test scores and essays between students who had received the grammar-in-context lessons and those who did not. Informal survey answers were evaluated to determine whether or not they supported teaching grammar in context.

Findings

In the group of students questioned about whether or not knowing grammar helped them in their writing, one hundred percent of students agreed that it did. When I asked them to explain their answers, responses ranged from, “That’s what we were always taught,” to “If you don’t know grammar, you can’t write” (class discussion, October 11, 2010). One student even responded by stating that “grammar helps your spelling” (class discussion, October 11, 2010). These answers indicated that students do not really understand what grammar is or how it functions in composition. Students see grammar as nothing more than a set of rules they must use to make their writing “correct.” What they fail to realize is that grammar helps to communicate meaning and provide clarity in writing. Often, students will attempt to make their writing grammatically or mechanically correct, but, in doing so, they lose the meaning they are trying to convey. For example, once students learned how to use a semicolon, they connected long strings of independent clauses, ignoring the period almost entirely.

When I asked students whether or not they believed they were judged by their use of proper grammar, all but two said no. Students who disagreed cited the following reasons: “That’s the way everyone talks. It sounds weird to use proper grammar. My friends would make fun of me if I talked like that. Only my teachers tell me to use proper grammar, so I don’t get judged when I’m not at school. It’s rude to judge people by the way they talk” (class discussion, October 19, 2010). Of the two students who did agree, one did not know why he agreed while the other responded, “If you don’t know proper grammar your boss will not hire you” (class discussion, October 19, 2010). Although the student who agreed offered a vague response, it is clear that she was thinking about the negative repercussions of not using SAE.

A comparison of test scores (see Tables 1 and 2) reveals little evidence that teaching grammar in context improves students’ ability to perform on grammar exams. Summative assessments were similar to practice worksheets and text exercises. Both the first and second assessments were identical in format and number of questions, and the same number of students took both tests. I taught all four classes the skills required to pass the tests, but only three classes were encouraged to dig deeper to strengthen their grammar comprehension through real-life editing exercises. One class, class A, did not receive any instruction in grammar-in-context. Instead, the grammar instruction in this class consisted of worksheets and textbook exercises, culminating in a test. Another class, class B, received some additional real-life grammar instruction, while two other classes, class C and class D, received the most real-life grammar instruction, including editing a daily grammar headline, a real news article containing intentional grammar and mechanical errors, and editing their peers’ essays for grammar and mechanical errors. Class A’s test scores dropped from an average of 80.74 percent on the first test to an average of 77.42 percent on the second test. The drop in test scores from the first to the second test in class A is inconclusive since this section did not practice any authentic grammar exercises before either test, only the worksheets and textbook exercises. Class B scored slightly higher on the second test with an average of 77 percent, up from 75.48 percent on the first test. The increase of scores between the first and second tests in Class B is negligible, less than three percent, making the data ambiguous. A slightly greater rise in the scores of Class C, from 76.18 percent to 79.23 percent, might indicate an increase in the ability of students to recall and apply the material after practice in editing authentic grammar; however, the unanticipated decline in scores between the first and second tests in Class D, from 75.68 percent to 73.28 percent, makes me believe that teaching grammar in context does not lead to improved test scores.

Although this study does not compare essay scores since grades are not based solely on grammar and mechanics, a closer look at students’ writing processes indicates an improvement in mechanical skills. A direct correlation between real-life editing for comma splices, run-on sentences, fragments, and missing or improperly placed commas is evidenced through the decreased frequency with which students commit these errors in composition. While observing peer editing sessions, I noticed students collaborating to come up with the answers to their grammar dilemmas. I overheard one student saying, “A comma needs to go here because it just doesn’t sound right” (class discussion, October 21, 2010). Another student explained to her partner that she should not use the term “back in the day” because “it’s like slang, and you can’t use slang in a college essay” (class discussion, October 21, 2010). Still, another student conferencing with her partner informed him that his sentence was a run-on because it was too long (class discussion, October 21, 2010). Perera notes that technical terms in grammar seem to confuse rather than enlighten (as cited in Andrews et al., 2006, p. 40), and as I analyzed my qualitative data, I realized that students often use grammar correctly, but they fall short when they have to explain it. For example, the student who added a comma because it “didn’t sound right” was correct in her placement, but the reason it didn’t sound right was because it needed to set off a dependent clause in the beginning of a sentence. The student who pointed out the run-on sentence was also correct; the sentence did indeed join two independent clauses without any punctuation, but she perceived the sentence to be a run-on simply because it was long.

Answers to the follow-up questions regarding the peer editing session suggest that students found the exercise to be beneficial. One hundred percent of students surveyed believed that peer editing helped them understand how to ensure that their own essays were grammatically correct and that editing their partners’ papers helped them to become better at grammar and punctuation. The most challenging part of the process for one student was “not being sure if I was right when I corrected something” (class discussion October 25, 2010). Two-thirds of the class reported that they would like to participate in peer editing again. One student of the third who did not want to participate in peer editing again stated that “it is uncomfortable telling someone else he’s wrong” (class discussion October 25, 2010). Although there were mixed feelings about peer editing, the outcome was, for the most part, positive.

While mechanical skills improved, usage skills declined with prescriptive grammar instruction, particularly in relation to pronoun antecedent agreement. Many of my students demonstrated precision in pronoun antecedent agreement after I taught it, but their new found aptitude led them to write convoluted, awkwardly-constructed sentences, thus confusing the reader rather than clarifying meaning. For example, an excerpt from a student essay on divorce reads, “One spouse may lose his or her figure and decide that because he or she is now married that he or she should have no reason to impress his or her partner with his or her looks, but impressing his or her partner is a very big necessity because then he or she is showing his or her spouse that he or she is worth trying to look good for” (student essay, October 25, 2010). Obviously, this student comprehends and can demonstrate pronoun antecedent agreement, but the tangled and lengthy construction she employs detracts from her intended message. Subsequent to reading my suggestion for rewriting this sentence, (“Often after a couple is married, fitness and grooming do not have the same importance as they did during courtship; however, spouses need to keep in mind that attractiveness still counts, even after marriage.”), the author became very frustrated and argued that if it the sentence was grammatically correct that she should not have points deducted from her essay. Based upon what she learned in my course, she is correct. For this very reason, it is vital to marry grammar instruction with writing. “Decontextualized grammar teaching unrelated to pupil’s other language work is likely to do more harm than good” (as cited in Andrews et al., p. 2006, p. 40). Grammar taught in isolation does not translate to improved composition skills, and the previous student writing sample confirms this notion.

Discussion

Grammar taught in an authentic context, using real examples, perhaps even samples from student writing, could help students better utilize grammatical correctness in their writing. I strongly believe that students must learn grammar, but now my feeling is that rather than make grammar and composition instruction mutually exclusive, the two ought to be taught synchronously. Teaching grammar through a series of worksheets and lectures does little for improving writing, yet because this method has shown some promise in improving mechanics in student writing, I am not in favor of abandoning practice worksheets altogether. Instead, I plan on incorporating more real-life editing next semester, including news stories and peer editing. In addition, I think that introducing a grammar unit and teaching just one feature of it, such as using coordinating conjunctions to correct run-on or fused sentences, and then directing students to write a short paragraph to demonstrate mastery of the concept would be a better option than just handing out a practice worksheet filled with unrelated sentences.

The implications of my findings are important for all English teachers. Many teachers are perplexed when it comes to teaching grammar and spend as little as three to five minutes on the subject per week. Other teachers instruct students to memorize grammatical features in isolation, essentially teaching to the test. I think that English teachers can find a happy medium if they consider explaining the concept and function of grammar and giving students both editing and writing exercises to practice the feature. This way, students will be able to perform in the standardized test as well as apply the grammar feature to meaningful writing.

After completing this research project, my greatest insight into my own teaching is that I can trust myself. I had been conditioned to believe that only quantitative data was relevant to teacher research; therefore, I often questioned every step I made in the teacher research process. Since completing the project, however, I now know that qualitative data is equally as important in research, and I have learned to use my observations of students to trust my own instincts as a teacher. I also learned that I am a teacher who can easily adapt to different classroom situations. When some part of my lesson did not benefit my research or my objectives for my students, I quickly adjusted it so that it was more on par with our needs. I learned that my students are equally adaptable. I broke my regular routine with them so that I could try new lessons, and they readily stretched themselves beyond their comfort zones to meet the challenges I presented.

The teacher research project has informed my practice in two ways. First, it has set me on the appropriate course for improving my grammar instruction. While I did not get a firm answer to my inquiry, I do have some perspective on the right trajectory to continue refining my research question. Next, completing teacher research has empowered me to take on new research projects. The spiraling nature of teacher research will compel me to embark upon new inquiries to continue to improve my practice.

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Table 1

First Grammar Test

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Class | Average | Median Score |
| A (19 students) | 80.74 | 77.42 |
| B (23 students) | 75.48 | 80 |
| C (22 students) | 76.18 | 78 |
| D (19 students) | 75.68 | 76 |

Table 2

Second Grammar Test

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Class | Average | Median Score |
| A (19 students) | 77.42 | 79 |
| B (23 students) | 77 | 81 |
| C (22 students) | 79.23 | 80 |
| D (19 students) | 73.28 | 72.50 |