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Relationship Between Traditional Grammar Terminology and Metacognitive Application of Grammar Concepts

Abstract

This literature review revisits the debate of whether grammar instruction can improve adherence to written English conventions. However, the paper focuses on the role of traditional definitions rather than on delivery methods. Two questions guide this paper: I. Do traditional terms and definitions hinder students' understanding of grammar concepts? 2. How can teachers define grammar terms in a clearer, more accurate manner? The paper uses prominent grammarians such as C. Weaver, R. Noguchi and M. Kolin and provides a history of methodology, noting researchers' observations of traditional terms and definitions. The paper concludes that secondary teachers can supplement traditional definitions with metaphors and use Noguchi's operational definitions and Kolin's rhetorical grammar framework to facilitate students' understanding of grammar concepts.

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The Relationship between Traditional Grammar Terminology and Metacognitive Application of Grammar Concepts

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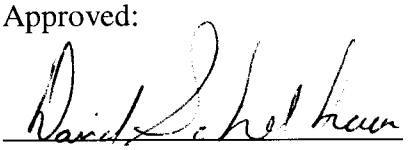
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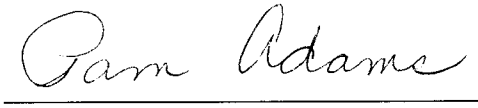
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Abstract

This literature review revisits the debate of whether grammar instruction can improve adherence to written English conventions. However, the paper focuses on the role of traditional definitions rather than on delivery methods. Two questions guide this paper: 1. Do traditional terms and definitions hinder students' understanding of grammar concepts? 2. How can teachers define grammar terms in a clearer, more accurate manner? The paper uses prominent grammarians such as C. Weaver, R. Noguchi and M. Kolln and provides a history of methodology, noting researchers' observations of traditional terms and definitions. The paper concludes that secondary teachers can supplement traditional definitions with metaphors and use Noguchi's operational definitions and Kolln's rhetorical grammar framework to facilitate students' understanding of grammar concepts.

Introduction

Howeasyisittoreadthissentencehowaboutthisoneorthisone? It never fails. The first day of grammatical instruction in ninth grade begins with the unanimous question: "Why do we have to learn this stuff?" My response is a copy of an email with all punctuation and capital letters removed, and I tell my students to read it quickly. They struggle. They get the point. However, a more critical question that my students have not thought to ask is this: "How will we learn this information in order for it to improve our writing?" Two crucial issues present themselves in this question. First is the issue of how to learn this information. How will students best understand grammar concepts in order to apply them metacognitively? It is this question of metacognitive application that is a central problem within high school grammar instruction, and it is this question that this paper will seek an answer to. Second is the issue of improving one's writing. What is to be improved by applying these grammar concepts? In the context of this paper, using grammar concepts metacognitively to improve one's writing refers to the ability to use grammar concepts during the revision process of writing in order to adhere to conventions of written English.

The problem statement

The overall problem with grammar instruction methods is that so far none have produced the desired result: a metacognitive application of grammar knowledge to improve one's adherence to conventions of written English. As students learn to write with more complex structures, they also need to learn to recognize and understand correct and incorrect applications of these written conventions such as usage and punctuation concepts. Researchers have been aware of these problems as far back as the 1950s according to Weaver (1979). Twenty-six years ago, she lamented that textbooks still utilized traditional grammar instruction despite the fact that research showed "there is little evidence" this instruction would result in improved writing. In

traditional instructional strategies, students spend several weeks on a concentrated study of parts of speech, rules of usage and rules of style such as commas and apostrophes. Explanations and definitions of these elements are followed up with "error-hunt" exercises, diagramming sentences, worksheets, quizzes and tests; within this model, students do not actually write. Noguchi (1991) echoed Weaver's criticism, suggesting that because most teachers still approach this study with traditional instruction, they make grammar "inaccessible" and "an exasperating undertaking" (p. 39). One of the popular responses to traditional strategies is the in-context strategy. Using this type of instruction, teachers present grammar terms and concepts in mini lessons while the students are working on a piece of original writing. The idea is that the students will learn the concepts within the context of their own writing rather than in an isolated unit.

However, the issue lies not only with traditional instruction methods. Others (Blasé, McFarlan, & Little, 2003; Ehrenworth, 2003; Johansen & Shaw, 2003; Sams, 2003) have asserted that the in-context strategies contain fundamental flaws, despite recent researchers' lauding the in-context method over the traditional method. Johansen and Shaw (2003) explained the problem, "We were told that teaching grammar through student writing was the better way. Unfortunately, no one showed us how to do this successfully" (p. 97). Sams (2003) proposed that the central flaw of both traditional and in-context strategies was that both separate grammar from the actual writing process.

Despite the fact that neither strategy (referred to as methods from now on) has produced improved long-term adherence to conventions of written English, each method has its merits. For example, traditional methods provide students with foundational knowledge of language structure. It gives them a foundation for analyzing the structure of their writing. On the other hand, in-context methods provide students with a meaningful context by enabling them to use their own writing for learning the foundational knowledge of language structure. It gives them a

context for structural analysis. However, the problem is getting the students to connect their learned grammar knowledge to their writing in order to improve it. While grammar research has been ongoing for over fifty years, researchers have yet to produce a methodology that accomplishes this goal of teachers' enabling students to edit, metacognitively, their writing to ensure adherence to conventions of writing.

One aspect of this problem is that by the time students reach school-age, they already "know" the grammar of their spoken language. Linguists (Fromkin & Rodman, 1993) have concluded that all children must have an innate ability to recognize "what generalizations to look for and what to ignore, and how to discover the regularities of language" as they are learning to talk (p. 411). In other words, children acquire not only words and their definitions, they also acquire the language's syntax, and they will form grammatically correct sentences despite having never formally studied grammar. Fromkin and Rodman (1993) explained this type of grammar acquisition as being "constructed unconsciously" (p. 75); Chomsky (1980) referred to this ability as "'instrinsic competence'" (as cited in Fromkin & Rodman, 1993, p. 33). Because grammar is acquired unconsciously, students of all ages are able to effectively communicate in conversation and on paper (once they learn to read and write).

Realistically then, classroom grammar instruction can only attempt to achieve two goals. The first goal would be to raise students' unconscious, already-acquired grammar knowledge to the conscious level by categorizing their knowledge as "nouns," "past perfect tense verbs," "participle phrases" and so on. The second goal would be to get students to conform to conventions of written English (e.g., misplaced modifiers and semicolons), which are simply surface features. Therefore, grammar teachers must be able to get past the student's initial, very valid question of "why are we learning something we already know?" An answer is that for students to follow these conventions, they must be able to recognize those conventions within

their writing. No matter how arbitrary these conventions are, students must know what makes their application of conventions correct or incorrect. Because the conventions are based on grammatical structures, students must understand some very basic grammatical structures. For example, to correctly apply the "two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction" comma rule, students must understand what makes a clause independent and what a coordinating conjunction is.

A second aspect of this problem is that grammar research tends to focus either on where and/ or when to teach the content. Traditional methods involve a concentrated grammar study. Students devote an entire unit (several weeks usually) to learn grammar terms such as parts of speech and work on textbook editing exercises. In-context methods involve a needs-based approach. Students learn only the concepts and terms when it is absolutely necessary to correct their own writing; grammar instruction is ongoing throughout the course with grammar mini-lessons taught here and there and is always in the context of students' writing. However, both in-context and traditional methods use traditional terms and definitions. In other words, the difference between traditional and in-context methods is the way that the information is delivered. For example, both methods use traditional grammar terms such as parts of speech, clause, misplaced modifier, etc., and both methods define those terms the same way: a noun is a person, place, thing or idea, etc. Traditional grammar, however, presents this information within its own unit of exercises and activities while in-context grammar presents this information piece by piece as students write within other units. For example, in the novel unit for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, students write informative essays on civil rights issues. During the editing process of this writing assignment, the teacher presents a mini-lesson on run-on sentences so that students can immediately apply that knowledge to their current piece of writing.

To date, only a handful of studies have looked at the curricular content of grammar study as possibly part of the grammar instruction problem. A few researchers such as Kolln (1996) and Noguchi (1991) have begun exploring the curricular content issue, suggesting that perhaps redefining the grammar content would yield metacognitive application of grammar to improve writing. What is significant here is that Kolln leans toward traditional instruction methods while Noguchi leans toward in-context methods, yet both have come to the same conclusion: traditional terms and definitions are problematic. From their research, ideas such as rhetorical grammar (Kolln, 1996) and operational grammar (Noguchi, 1991) have surfaced. Like traditional grammar, rhetorical grammar includes traditional terminology, but it uses a structuralist approach to understand these traditional terms. Therefore, the structure of a noun clause is the basis for understanding nouns, pronouns and adjectives. For operational grammar, traditional terms such as noun and pronoun are defined by their function rather than by other technical terms. Because both traditional and in-context methods focus on where or when to teach grammar, a key research question remains unanswered: Is the use of traditional grammar terms and definitions undermining teachers' efforts to help students metacognitively apply grammar knowledge to improve writing? A second key question must also be answered: How can teachers define grammar terms in a clear, accurate manner in order for students to truly understand grammatical concepts?

Definition of terms

Grammar can fall into several catagories, which is why a spectrum of grammar instruction methods exists. Hartwell (1985) distinguished five aspects:

1. The grammar in our heads – our native competence [unconscious knowledge base];
2. Scientific descriptions of the grammar in our heads;
3. Usage – often called "linguistic etiquette";

4. School grammar;

5. Stylistic grammar (as cited in Kolln, 1996).

Traditional instruction begins with the second aspect, the "scientific description," and moves into the third and fourth aspects, "linguistic etiquette" and "school grammar." Traditional grammar focuses on learning the eight parts of speech, diagramming sentences, and completing drill exercises over various usage and punctuation concepts such as pronoun case and commas (Kolln, 1996). The in-context method begins with studying usage and school grammar on a "need to know" basis as indicated by students' writing. For example, if several students struggle with run-on sentences, teachers will instruct students on this usage concept. In order to understand run-ons, teachers will present only the bare essentials of grammar terms such as subject, verb, clause, and conjunction.

In the middle of this traditional versus in-context spectrum are two other methods: operational and rhetorical grammar. Noguchi's (1991) operational grammar approach focuses on the operational aspect, or functional aspect, of grammar structures. Instead of using traditional grammar definitions, operational grammar focuses on what the part of speech "does or can have done to it" within the sentence. For example, a traditional definition of a personal pronoun is a word that is substituted for a noun, which is defined as a person, place, thing or idea. However, an operational definition is that a personal pronoun takes the place of any word or phrase that functions as a noun. The key word here is *function.* Also in the middle of the spectrum is Kolln's (1996) proposed rhetorical grammar, which uses a syntactic basis for teaching grammar. For example, rhetorical grammar will define a noun phrase using terms such as noun, adjectives, articles, etc. However, students will come to understand a noun phrase not through parsing the components but through identifying "the formal, systematic nature of the noun phrase." This idea means that students learn what an adjective is by learning that adjectives are words that come in

a particular order in a noun phrase: before the nouns. For example, in the phrase "the blonde Penn State student," the order of the words is pre-determined by the unwritten rules of the English language. That sentence would never be phrased "the Penn State blonde student."

Kolln (1996) refers to rhetorical grammar as a "positive" approach to grammar in which students learn about grammar structures in order to "select effective structures" as they write and as they revise. This approach is different from traditional instruction and most in-context methods since they approach grammar as knowledge to correct poor choices that the writer has already made. Regardless of a positive or negative approach, the goal of traditional and in-context grammar instruction remains elusive: improved writing and editing skills that are retained by students because of the metacognitive knowledge of language structure.

Summary

Whether researchers focus on instructional strategies or curricular content of grammar instruction, the question remains: can teachers use grammar instruction to improve students' adherence to conventions of written English? To answer this question, I will include a brief historical account of the move from traditional to in-context methods. I will then focus the literature review on the content of several in-context methods to respond to the key research questions on the effectiveness of traditional definitions. In addition, I will review new theories of instruction including Noguchi's (1991) operational grammar approach, Purser's (1996) "Grammar in a Nutshell" approach and Kolln's (2003) rhetorical grammar to determine whether these offer hope to grammar educators in terms of making grammar terminology and concepts more accessible. The following literature review represents just a cross-section of the various theories and methods of grammar instruction.

Literature Review

History

The grammar problem has existed in English education for over 50 years. Therefore, researchers have continually developed and tested new methods of grammar instruction even though most methods are based on either the traditional Latin-based analysis or the transformational analysis. The traditional Latin-based analysis – and its subsequent methods – focuses on syntactic analysis of sentences in order to apply prescribed rules of usage and style. The transformational grammar analysis – and its subsequent methods – focuses on how "deep structures" or core meanings are transformed into sentences containing specific types of surface features including syntax, rules of usage and style, Because researchers view the problem differently and possibly adhere to differing grammar analysis systems, they naturally arrive at different and sometimes opposing solutions.

One of the earliest shifts away from the traditional instruction methods was the sentence-combining method, a resulting method of transformational grammar analysis. In the 1960s, three researchers (Bateman & Zidonis, 1964; Mellon, 1969) pioneered studies using the sentence-combining method as the "formal" grammar instruction in classes. Bateman and Zidonis concluded that this method results in students' writing content that has both "fewer errors" and "more complex" syntax when compared to the writing of students who have not studied grammar through sentence combining. Mellon (1969) concluded from his study that the "combining practice, not the grammar, enabled his students to write differently" (as cited in O'Hare, 1973, p. 15). After reviewing both studies, O'Hare (1973) concluded that one could not determine whether grammar or sentence combining actually improved student writing. This conclusion led to O'Hare's own study to test the hypothesis that sentence combining instruction may improve descriptive and narrative writing.

In O'Hare's (1973) sentence-combining study, students did not formally study traditional grammar. Instead, students practiced combining simple sentence structures into complex, compound and complex-compound sentences using relative and dependent clauses to embed information. For his study, O'Hare divided 83 seventh-graders into four classes; half were in two experimental classes and half were in two control classes. Two teachers were assigned these classes with each teacher taking a control class and an experimental class. The control class did not formally study grammar while the experimental class did a shortened version of the same semester curriculum with a unit on sentence-combining added in. To measure improvement in writing, O'Hare used six factors of syntactic maturity within complete sentences as his criteria: words per sentence, clauses per sentence, words per clause, noun clauses per sentence, adverb clauses per sentence and adjective clauses per sentence. His experimental group overall ranked higher in syntactic maturity than the control group, writing "well beyond the syntactic level typical of eighth-graders and on five of the six factors of syntactic maturity, their scores were similar to those of twelfth-graders" (p. 66). O'Hare concluded that as long as sentence-combining methods were presented in a way that did not require a traditional grammar knowledge base, they can have "a favorable effect on the writing of seventh-graders" (p. 68).

O'Hare's study sparked a trend in transformational grammar methods and in transformational grammar research. Elley, Barham, Lamb and Willie (1976) checked the popularity of this instructional method with their three-year study focusing on three methods: no formal grammar instruction, transformational methods and traditional methods. The results are significant to the great grammar debate. In their study, the initial 248 students were divided into the three groups (166 original subjects remained in the study at its conclusion). At the end of the first year, Elley et al. found no significant differences among all three groups in regard to improved writing in both content and form. At the end of the second year, the traditional

grammar group performed better than the no grammar group on essay content, and the transformational group's attitude toward writing and literature was lower than the other two groups. At the end of the third year, the transformational and no grammar groups performed better than the traditional grammar group on the cumulative sentence-combining test. This reason is perhaps why sentence-combining is still being taught. However, "there were no statistical differences in the quality or correctness of students actual writing" (as cited in Hillocks & Smith, 1991, p. 596-597). Despite the fact that O'Hare (1973) and Elley et al. (1976) came to contradictory conclusions regarding improvement in students' adherence to conventions of written English, sentence-combing has remained a popular method of grammar instruction. As well, research on this transformational grammar method has continued.

Murdick (1996) revisited transformational grammar and its corresponding methods and came to some interesting conclusions. First, Murdick raised interesting discussion on the shortcomings of traditional grammar methods, specifically with the definitions of traditional grammar concepts. He argued that core "deficiencies" in this grammar content undermines grammar instruction. He then cited Warner's (1988) point that pronouns are inaccurately defined as words taking the place of nouns when in reality they often function as substitutes for phrases and clauses. As well, adjectives do not always have clear reference to specific nouns. Murdick (1996) stated that "similar problems occur with all the major part-of-speech definitions in traditional grammar" (p. 39). He concluded that transformational grammar allows teachers to understand the depth of prior knowledge that students have about correct and incorrect structures. For example, Murdick included three sample sentences from Cowper (1992) to illustrate this inherent knowledge of grammar. He agreed with Cowper that students can pick out the incorrect sentence of the following three:

... slowly lifted the cup

... lifted the cup slowly

... lifted slowly the cup [not permitted or not normal in English] (as cited in Murdick, 1996, p. 40).

While Murdick does not believe that grammar instruction should be abandoned in schools, he adopts Chomsky's (1985) viewpoint that teachers should not expect "grammar instruction to improve writing." In other words, metacognitive application of conventions of written English is not a worthwhile goal in his estimation. Instead, grammar should be studied for its "'own intrinsic interest and importance" (as cited in Murdick, 1996, p. 44). Murdick is a minority voice in the grammar debate as researchers and teachers have more readily returned to traditional grammar analysis and yet shifted away from traditional instructional methods to in-context methods.

In-Context Methods

This second shift in instruction methods became prominent in the late 1970s with Weaver's (1979) research reviews on teaching grammar in context. Rather than shifting from the traditional grammar analysis, Weaver simply shifted to a different instructional method. Weaver did not just address where to teach grammar (in context). She also emphasized teaching only the "bare necessities of grammar concepts and terminology" in order to enable students to write "more effectively" (p. 68). After reviewing the research, Weaver (1996) advocated that teaching through multiple examples is more effective in producing better writing in terms of content and written English conventions than instructing students in formal grammar knowledge. Weaver argues that the traditional definitions and terms, especially parts of speech, are not useful or entirely truthful. She (1979) originally concluded that instead of a formal study, students would benefit most from "individualized instruction on selected aspects of grammar and writing" (p. 94). Giving students the time to write and the examples of grammatical concepts in action were

the keys to improving writing grammatically correct; metacognitive application of conventions is arrived at gradually over time.

Other researchers as well have raised the issue of problematic definitions for traditional grammar terms. Miller-Cleary and Lund (1989) presented seven myths of traditional grammar instruction based on their research reviews. The first myth that they debunked was that traditional grammar concepts are correct descriptions of the English language. Miller-Cleary and Lund further explained that traditional grammar structures come from the Latin language grammar, which was imposed on the English language in the past two centuries by neoclassicists. "Crunching the English language into the Latin structure was like crunching a foot into an ill-fitting shoe" (p. 1). In the discussion of the second myth ("learning grammar disciplines the mind"), Miller-Cleary and Lund discussed the nature of traditional definitions; they reiterated Weaver's (1979) position that these traditional definitions are confusing. For example, they pointed out that a pronoun's traditional definition is that it takes the place of a noun; however, the word "boy" can take place of the name "Scott," yet "boy" is a noun and not a pronoun. Miller-Cleary and Lund (1989) concluded from their research review that grammar instruction should include in-context mini-lessons and even perhaps sentence-combining activities in order to improve students' overall writing.

Noguchi (1991) echoed Weaver's (1979) early concerns with definitions, and he echoed Miller-Cleary and Lund's (1989) insights into the problems with definitions and terms used in traditional instruction. The foundation for his research study was that grammar has been "non-transferable" to writing because teachers have been "conceiving and presenting" it wrongly" (p.15). Noguchi said the key issue was with the problematic traditional definitions of parts of speech: English is a Germanic language crammed into Romantic language categories (noun, pronoun, verb, etc). Thus, the nature of the English language is that words cross categories

depending on their function within context of sentences. Students, then, can become confused "why a word can sometimes take the form of a verb but function as a noun yet not be a 'person, place or thing'" (p. 5-6). Consider for example the following sentence: *Swimming is my favorite activity.* As used in this sentence, *swimming* is the subject of the sentence and functions as a noun. However, *swimming* has the form of an *ing* verb and is not technically a "person, place or thing," yet in this sentence, the word *swimming* is a noun. Because of this fundamental problem with definitions, Noguchi asserted that teachers should only teach minimal grammar concepts in small, need-based, in-context lessons. However, he also claimed that grammar teachers should teach these concepts using definitions other than the traditional ones.

To solve the problem of definitions, Noguchi (1991) created a system of operational definitions to reveal the true relational nature of grammatical conventions. These operational definitions are arrived at through the use of tag questions and yes-no questions. For example, to identify the subject of a declarative sentence, students could first add a tag question such as "... doesn't she?" to the end of a sentence to isolate the subject: *Jane loves to ice skate and cross country ski, doesn't she?* Then, the students would turn the same statement into a yes-no question: *Doesn't Jane love to ice skate and cross county ski?* Both question types emphasize the "who" of the sentence: Jane, which is the subject.

In addition, like Weaver (1979), Noguchi (1991) concluded that only minimal grammar concepts should be taught. However, unlike Weaver, Noguchi concluded that students needed direct instruction of these minimal concepts in order to improve writing. "If grammar is potentially transferable to style ... then formal instruction in grammar can be of help in the area of style" (p. 12). The four categories that he encouraged teachers to teach are independent clause, subject, verb and modifier. In his proposed curriculum, he defined all four of these categories with operational definitions. However, since Noguchi (1991) presented his study and proposed

curriculum, much of the in-context grammar research has still remained focused on how to determine the essential grammar concepts that students need to know and how to teach those concepts in mini-lessons rather than following Noguchi's lead on redefining grammar concepts.

For example, Weaver (1996) revisited her original research and presented several instructional activities designed with guidelines for teaching grammar in context. She opened with a critical review of the three research studies (Elley, Barham, Lamb & Willie, 1976; Finlay McQuade, 1980; Macauley, 1947) to provide a research basis for her curriculum. The Macauley (1947) research study played a significant role in Weaver's (1996) curriculum designs. In Macauley's (1947) study, students were tested on their grammar knowledge by identifying words in sentences according to their part of speech. Weaver (1996) was critical of this particular study because of its confusing directions and purpose of the overall study. She identified a central problem with this study: the problematic definitions of traditional grammar concepts such as pronoun. She noted in one sample sentence that "the underlined word is a pronoun in form but an adjective in function" (19-20). Because of the confusing nature of traditional definitions, Weaver (1996) held to her original conclusion that in-context grammar instruction should cover the least number of traditional terms necessary to teach a usage or punctuation concept. She did not, however, approach the idea of redefining these traditional terms. Instead, Weaver reasserted the need of using multiple examples of grammar concepts in action rather than instructing students in formal grammar studies. She concluded, "It does not seem necessary for students to learn these terms themselves in order to see how to change [or metacognitivly apply grammar concepts to] what they've written to the structure or form expected in Edited American English" (p.117). Weaver recommended teaching only the following concepts: subject, verb, clause, phrase, sentence, run-on, fragment and usage. Of course, in keeping with her original premise, all lessons should be on a need basis and should be within context of students' writing.

To further avoid the problem of confusing terminology and contradictory definitions, Rosen (1998) identified the need for students to write and to read as her top two keys for helping students improve their writing and for helping teachers to select grammar concepts for instruction. The more students write, the more teachers will be able to recognize which grammar concepts need to be taught in class. She recommended that teachers avoid treating grammar instruction as an "error hunt" and instead select only a few concepts to tackle. She concluded that researchers perform case studies in K-12 language arts classrooms to test "mechanical/grammar skill development in a variety of classroom contexts and with a variety of methodologies" (p. 152). She also concluded that teachers perform "informal" studies in order to find an in-context method that would work in their classroom. Teachers have spent the last seven years heeding the call for informal studies and research reviews; however, only a handful (Murdick, 1996; Noden, 1999) have questioned the definitions that are being taught.

One of these more recent additions to the grammar spectrum is Noden (1999) whose "Image Grammar" curriculum is based on experience and extensive reviews of research. The basis of his grammar curriculum is the viewpoint that using grammar is akin to "the process of creating art" (p. ix). In other words, a writer is an artist who uses specific grammatical structures rather than paint to create images that will evoke an emotional response from readers. Understanding grammatical concepts then helps writers construct what Kolln (1996) would call "effective structures." By this statement, he means that Therefore, he supplemented traditional definitions with metaphors to help students visualize the connections and relationships between words, phrases and clauses within sentences. For example, he defined a participle as "an *ing* verb tagged on the beginning or end of a sentence" (p. 4). Noden acknowledged that this definition is simplified and explained that this definition is just an introduction to the concept participle, noting that its *–ed* form can be taught later. However, this initial definition simply allows

students to begin working with active images without needing a full understanding of a participle. This simplified definition also gives students the ability to recognize the commonly used participle phrase structure in order to correctly punctuate. He defined "an appositive as a noun that adds a second image to a preceding noun" (p. 7). Noden (1999) then organized these traditional concepts – parts of speech, absolutes, participles, etc. – into different visual effects categories such as "brush strokes" (p. 13-14). His overall belief was that students would develop a syntactic maturity if they recognized grammar as the rhythms and patterns of the English language. Noden (1999) agreed with Weaver regarding the importance of teaching with multiple examples of correct grammar structures because he believed that students only "need to begin hearing, seeing and creating rhythms [by learning] simple explanations accompanied by models" (p. 54). Like other in-context methods, the backbone of his curriculum is teaching these concepts in the context of student writing.

Backlash to In-context Methods

However, not all researchers agree with the solution of the in-text method. For example, Blasé, McFarlan and Little (2003) and Sams (2003) argued that the in-context method still misses the mark because it separates grammatical conventions from actual writing. However, both research teams reached different conclusions. Blasé, McFarlan and Little (2003) piloted an integrated teaching program to research their theory that interdisciplinary grammatical instruction – using both traditional, direct and in-context methods – would resolve the problem. In this program, students learned grammatical concepts in their English and foreign language classes during a Saturday morning colloquium. Students began class by responding to a writing prompt that would elicit a response containing applications of the day's grammar concepts. For example, one prompt asked students to discuss changes they would make in their communities and explain the impact of those changes on residents. Blasé, McFarlan and Little explained that

this prompt would "elicit use of the conditional and subjunctive in English," which were the two concepts to be studied that day (p. 53). Direct instruction of conditional, subjunctive and active / passive voice was then followed by reading examples of these concepts in poetry and non-fiction and evaluating the effectiveness of these applied concepts within the writings. At the end of the day, students revisited their original journals and applied these concepts within their writing as they translated these journals into the foreign languages students were learning. In the end, the students responded positively to the interdisciplinary approach, citing that they improved in their understanding of language grammar (pp. 53-55). Blasé, McFarlan and Little did not offer any examples of punctuation or usage lessons although they stated their premise was that they were frustrated that students "still could not master those pesky grammar/usage rules such as correct comma placement, ... subject/verb and pronoun agreement ..." (p. 51). Therefore, adherence to conventions of written English is apparently important to these researchers; however, the lack of lesson examples and the lack of anything more than qualitative responses from student interviews makes it difficult to reach any conclusive findings.

Sams (2003), meanwhile, concluded that the reason traditional methods such as diagramming fail is that teachers are not using those methods properly: "Thorough analysis [diagramming] accomplishes in depth what sentence combining only touches upon" (p. 61). Because both traditional methods and in-context methods are both based on traditional grammar analysis, she concluded that a balance of traditional and in-context methods would produce desirable results. What Sams did not acknowledge is the fact that most in-context methods simply used the same traditional grammar concepts as traditional methods; the difference is the context of student writing.

Purser (1996) took a slightly different angle with her critique of in-context methods. She recognized that most in-context methods, such as sentence combining and mini lessons, are in

themselves good techniques; however, in the broad scope of grammar instruction, they are "hit or miss" in that they do not provide students "a full grasp of the amazing intricacies of our language (p. 108). The result of this critique was her developing "Grammar in a Nutshell," a grammar curriculum that is used in context of students' writing and that is structured by "chunking" traditional grammar concepts together by their core relationships. Purser designed "Nutshell" to provide a thorough foundation of traditional grammar concepts such as parts of speech, types of phrases and clauses, types of verb complements and the inter-related nature of these concepts. The grammar concepts are introduced piece by piece on a visual map to help "students see the relationships of the new puzzle pieces with the previous ones" (p. 109). Purser also introduced metaphors to supplement the traditional definitions, such as "tape" to describe the function of coordinating conjunctions and "glue" to describe the function of semicolons and transition words used together within a sentence. Purser designed "Grammar in a Nutshell" based on the premise that students of the English language need to know grammar thoroughly in order to "solve those sticky usage problems for themselves" (p. 110). She concluded that students need to study grammar theory much in the same way that music students need to study music theory. Music theory enables music students to see and understand the structures of music while traditional grammar concepts (theory) enable writing students to see and understand the structures of the English language.

Along the same line of thinking, Thompson (2002) also directed his critique toward the short-comings of the whole language basis of in-context grammar instruction. He asserted that teaching anything in context "must be weighed against the probability that essential knowledge will not be taught at all" (p. 64). As he developed his critique, three beliefs became evident. First, grammar study in itself is beneficial because of the higher order thinking skills that must be employed by students. Second, students must first acquire a foundation of traditional grammar

structure concepts such as clause, phrase, noun, verb, etc. in order to truly learn usage and punctuation rules. "Any attempt to learn tricks to punctuate without understanding grammar will misfire because it is specifically the grammar structures that are set off by punctuation" (p. 65). Third, students must be taught traditional grammar usage and punctuation rules because language standards exist in the "professional world" (p. 65-66). Thompson saw two distinct benefits from traditional grammar instruction: students are engaged in critical thinking throughout the study and students are assured a complete knowledge base for learning professional language standards. Overall, Thompson advocated for an inclusion of traditional grammar instruction to ensure students' getting all the information they need in order to metacognitively apply grammar concepts within their writing.

The issue, however, is not simply traditional methods versus in-context methods. For example, Connatser (2004) suggested that grammar instruction might not merely be a waste of time; rather it may be harmful to developing reading fluency. To test this theory, he administered a two-part experiment for his engineer colleagues that first tested their "organic" grammatical knowledge – Hartwell's (1985) first category of native competence – and then their prescriptive grammar knowledge – Hartwell's (1985) fourth category of school grammar. The experiment challenged the grammar usage rule of agreement with mathematical units and values. For the first part, 16 engineers responded to a technical survey that focused on solving math problems. For the second part, 13 of the 16 responded to the same survey with a new focus on correct agreement statements. While prescriptive grammar declares that the value between 1 and –1 is singular, Connatser (2004) hypothesized that organic grammar knowledge will treat a value between 1 and –1 as plural (e.g., .003 inches instead of .003 inch). His experiment confirmed this hypothesis and led to the following conclusion. "Purist grammarians" should broaden their instruction from inflexible prescriptive rules to flexible conventions based on natural expressions

so that students are not distracted by irreconcilable differences between prescriptive and organic instruction. In other words, if it sounds good, let the students write it that way. Connatser would presumably be against the metacognitive application of grammar. His conclusion reflects the theory of unconscious grammar acquisition of children as explained by Fromkin and Rodman (1993). In the end, however, Connatser's experiment questioned only whether the inflexibility of traditional grammar (conventions of written English) might be harmful to reading fluency rather than whether the actual content (terminology and definitions) of any type grammar instruction might be the real problem.

Ehrenworth (2003) came to a different conclusion altogether. Based on her experiences with both in-context and traditional instruction, she proposed that instead of teaching students formal grammar, teachers need to allow students to write naturally and then give them the grammatical convention knowledge, not to change their writing, but to simply understand it. "I see a way to work around Jenny's unfamiliarity with grammar usage, by naming what she is doing" (p. 96). Several of these researchers' (Blasé, McFarlan & Little, 2003; Ehrenworth, 2003; Sams, 2003; Thompson, 1991) conclusions reveal not a difference in ultimate goals but a too-narrow research scope: on methods of delivery rather than delivered content. Only Purser (1996) inadvertently tackled the core issue of problematic definitions by creating a new grammar curriculum that included supplemental definitions that used functional metaphors to clarify traditional terms.

Discussion

Summary

The fact that all the above researchers saw improvements in their students' writing or saw their hypotheses proven is understandable. After all, in general, teachers' instructional methods are biased toward their assessment methods. Also, teacher researchers came to conclusions based on their own experience and success within their classrooms, which does not allow for generalization of the results. Much of the research done (Miller-Cleary & Lund, 1989; Ehrenworth, 2003; Noden, 1999; Purser, 1996; Rosen, 1998; Thompson, 1991; Weaver, 1979 & 1996) was informal at best, and this reality is significant. Consider the assertions made by Blasé, McFarlan and Little (2003), Purser (1996), Sams (2003) and Thompson (2002) that in-context methods fall short. These assertions are not based on actual research evidence and instead reflect simply a methodology bias on the part of these teacher-researchers. For example, Thompson (2002) directed much of his critique against the delivery system of introducing new ideas on a need-to-know basis rather than in one concentrated study to ensure that all the "essential knowledge" will be covered. These researchers' recommendations must be taken cautiously as none are based on actual research evidence. The deficiencies go further. Most of the studies (Miller Cleary & Lund, 1989; Murdick, 1996; Noden, 1999; Noguchi, 1991; Purser, 1996; Thompson, 2002; Weaver, 1979 & 1996) acknowledged that a core problem with any grammar instruction method lies with the traditional terms and definitions. However, only a handful (Noden, 1999; Noguchi, 1991; Purser, 1996) attempted to resolve that core problem.

The natural question here that should be addressed is whether students really need to have the ability to metacognitively apply grammar knowledge. My answer is that they do. Despite the innate understanding of syntax and most of the guidelines of usage, people do not seem to have the innate understanding of many written English conventions. Without conscious knowledge of

these style guidelines, writers most likely will not naturally adhere to them. Without adherence to these guidelines, writers can be misunderstood by their audiences. Consider the following classic example of this unpunctuated sentence: "woman without her man is nothing." Is this sentence saying, "Woman: Without her, man is nothing" or "Woman, without her man, is nothing"? Punctuation is critical in producing a final sentence that illustrates the intended meaning of the author. As Hillocks and Smith (1991) noted:

> We assume that to proofread with any care, some knowledge of grammar must be necessary. What knowledge that is and how it is acquired are questions that have not been explored .... Research in these areas may provide some solutions to the nagging problems of correctness (p. 600).

Like it or not, teachers and students must deal with the reality of the professional world. Graves (1984) asserted that students need to be able to "handle the surface features" such as punctuation on their own so they produce writing that is readable. "If a sentence is not punctuated properly, is illegible or convoluted, the reader has to struggle unnecessarily, [and] it appears that the writer cares little for their information or their audience" (as cited in Peterson, 1998, p. 76). Peterson also noted the growing role of standardized tests in education and the need for teachers to prepare students for those tests as well as for the real world or professional world. In order to prepare their students for tests and for the professional world, teachers must enable their students to write effectively on their own, which includes being able to produce grammatically correct sentences. To do that, students need to reach the level of metacognitive application written English conventions. In order for them to employ these conventions, students must understand the structures within their sentences.

Conclusions

Traditional terminology

Is the use of traditional grammar terms and definitions undermining teacher's efforts to help students metacognitively apply grammar knowledge to improve their adherence to the conventions of written English? Regardless of their different methods, grammar researchers find common ground in answering this question. Researchers based their studies, literature reviews, proposed curriculums and conclusions on the belief that the traditional terminology is undermining efforts to use grammar to improve writing with regard to improving their adherence to conventions of written English.

For example, Murdick (1996) asserted in his research review that traditional terminology undermines the effectiveness of grammar. His approach and/or solution mirrored that of O'Hare (1973): teach grammatical concepts without directly teaching grammatical concepts. In other words, use sentence-combining exercises so that students see several examples of correct grammatical structures. However, teaching through multiple examples of correct and incorrect structures and how they are created will not produce any sort of grammar knowledge base. The sentence-combining method does not directly explain the conventions used within the sentences. Therefore, there can be no metacognitive application of written English conventions if students do not know what those conventions are. Another issue with Murdick's (1996) approach is that he did not clarify how to teach students to form correct and incorrect sentence structures without using grammar terms such as noun, adjective, verb, etc.

Weaver's (1979) response to the terminology problem was to simply cut back on the number of concepts that she taught to students. There is merit to simplifying the system; however, it is not enough in order to make grammar instruction more effective. The problem is that if teachers presented even a minimum of grammar concepts, teachers have not made

grammar more accessible because many definitions would still be inaccurate. This initial research focused not on the question of *what* to present during grammar instruction but merely *where* to present grammar instruction. When she revisited her research 17 years later, Weaver (1996) again acknowledged and partially resolved this terminology problem. For example, she provided a lesson on correcting comma splices (CS) and run-on (RO) sentences by first defining a "clause as a subject-verb unit" (p. 117). Subject and verb concepts fall within the minimum set of grammar concepts that students need to know; therefore, students should be able to write clauses correctly and be able to correct sentences with CS and RO errors.

As well, Weaver (1996) defined a subject (and therefore a noun or pronoun) according to its function in a sentence: "who or what is doing the action or existing in the state of being" (p. 257). This definition is helpful because it is functional; any word acting as a "who" or "what" in this situation will be a noun or a pronoun and the subject. However, she continued to use traditional definitions for other parts of speech. For example, she defined a preposition as "a word that comes before a noun or other nominal" (p. 255). Using this definition, students would immediately run into a problem of distinguishing a preposition from an adjective since most adjectives tend to come before nouns. Fries (1952) best summed up the problem inherent to the English language:

> A word like blue is the name of a color but, at the same time, can be used to modify a noun. It fits two definitions. The definition for nouns attempts to classify words according to lexical meanings while that for adjectives classifies words by function (as cited in Hillocks & Simth, 1991, p. 592).

Weaver is unable to solve this problem with her definitions because the issue of cross-category words is inherent to the English language. Because English does not fit neatly into categories, every grammar methodology, whether traditional or in-context, is an incomplete picture of the

complexity of how the language behaves. However, if the "big picture" of grammar as defined traditionally was already confusing, cloudy and incomplete, Weaver's suggestion of simply limiting the number of concepts taught would actually result in presenting a still confusing, still cloudy and now more incomplete knowledge base for students to work with.

While Miller-Cleary and Lund (1989) immediately pointed out the deficiencies of traditionally defined grammar concepts, they acknowledged the benefits of students' learning these concepts such as parts of speech and sentence structures. That way, students and teacher have a "common terminology" when they study grammar (p. 6). "If students talk about their writing with other students and the teacher, the students will remember these terms, and they will not have to learn them over every year" (p. 6). However, Miller-Cleary and Lund did not address the contradiction between two of their premises: 1. Traditional terminology is incomplete, confusing and inaccurate and 2. Traditional terminology is useful for a common grammar jargon to use in classes. Without clarity and accuracy, a common jargon is not very helpful. Students struggle to grasp this "common terminology" every year because their understanding is limited by the incompleteness and inaccuracy of traditional terms. That seems to be a core reason for why students do not retain the grammar knowledge they are learning every year whether the knowledge is presented in-context or through traditional direct methods.

Purser (1996) did not directly acknowledge the problematic nature of traditional definitions; however, her proposed grammar curriculum and discussion surrounding it revealed the belief that traditional definitions are confusing. Purser based her "Grammar in a Nutshell" curriculum on the premise that grammar concepts are interrelated in that to understand one concept, students would most likely have to understand other concepts. She arranged the grammar concepts on a visual map to show the relationships between the concepts, and she provided metaphorical definitions to clarify the function of specific concepts. This last piece

clearly indicates the latent belief that traditional definitions in themselves are at best confusing and perhaps even inaccurate.

To date, no research exists that proves traditional terms and definitions actually hinder students' ability to understand and metacognitively apply grammar knowledge to improve their writing. This lack of research evidence is not a result of failed research hypotheses; rather, it is a result of no research done in this area. There may be good reason for that. Because of the nature of the English language, there may not exist any perfectly accurate terminology to encompass the complexity and "exception-filled" conventions that govern English grammar. However, a handful of teacher researchers are reporting some success with alternative definitions through their informal, classroom-based research. As stated previously, this success is the result of classroom experience rather than formal research, and so this success is biased. Therefore, teachers should pursue formal research to see whether the use of traditional definitions significantly hinder students' conscious understanding of grammar conventions.

Another reason that a lack of research exists may be due to the prevalent belief that most students can produce decent writing despite their lack of grammar instruction or grammar understanding. After all, if the majority of students can write clearly without metacognitively applying conventions of written English, why should researchers spend time on improving a system that can never be perfectly improved? One response is that students' "native competence" does not include conventions of written English because these conventions are not inherent to the English language. Instead, these conventions, such as comma rules, are arbitrary. As illustrated earlier with the "woman without her man is nothing" sentence, clarity of writing can be dependent on correct punctuation. Clarity can also be dependent on correct usage conventions such as pronoun/antecedent agreement or misplaced modifiers. Regardless of the incompleteness and inaccuracy of the Latin-based grammar components, conventions of written English are

based on them, and therefore, students need to have some basic understanding of concepts such as parts of speech and clause in order to understand the conventions. The answer may not be to create a new terminology, but rather clarify the definitions of the current terms to become more complete and more accurate.

New definitions

Can teachers define grammar terms in a clearer, more accurate manner in order for students to better understand grammatical concepts? This question also remains largely unresearched. Only a handful of researchers (Kolln, 2003; Noden, 1999; Noguchi, 1991; Purser, 1996) have pursued clearer, more accurate definitions and not always intentionally. Noguchi (1991) attempted to resolve the problem of traditional definitions; however, his new definition process is time-consuming: students ask a series of tag questions and perhaps yes-no questions in order to define a part of speech. Noguchi is a proponent of teaching only the bare essentials although he recognized that teaching one grammar concept with a traditional definition often necessitated teaching all of them because of how interdependent traditional definitions are. For example, to understand that a pronoun replaces a noun or that an adjective describes a noun, students must understand what a noun is and is not. His belief was that if grammar concepts were defined by their functions, then the three areas of writing – content, organization and style – would all improve since they would be taught together. While his research opened the door to new possible ways of understanding grammar concepts, Noguchi did not resolve the issue of the piece-meal nature of in-context instruction. He noted the interrelated nature of grammar concepts, and yet he did not create operational definitions for all of the traditional grammar concepts nor did he present ways to circumvent teaching all of these interrelated terms. Still, regardless of the faults of his operational definition system, Noguchi identified the next direction

that grammar research needs to take: creating clearer, more accurate definitions for grammar concepts.

Although it was unintentional, Purser (1996) did address the definition problem within her new "Grammar in a Nutshell" curriculum. Purser rightly recognized that grammar terms could be better understood if defined by function and through metaphor. For example, students understand the properties of glue and tape, and older students should be able to transfer that metaphoric understanding to parts of speech. As well, Purser's visual map of the grammar concepts enables students to see the relationships among the concepts, which could theoretically assist in their learning and retaining grammar knowledge. Even though Purser did not define every element on her map metaphorically or by function, her "Nutshell" curriculum is another step in the right direction.

Even though the problem of definitions is currently unsolved, grammar teachers can take steps to help students better understand the grammar concepts that are required portions of classes. First, however, teachers must remember that teaching grammar is raising unconscious knowledge to the conscious levels and giving name to much of what writers already do, grammatically speaking. Second, teachers must acknowledge that there is no cure-all method that will work for all grade levels. Elementary and early middle school teachers work with concrete thinkers while later middle school and high school teachers work with students who are able to think abstractly. This difference in thinking is key to what teachers can do to improve their grammar instruction.

The first step in clarifying grammar terms and definitions is to determine age-appropriate definitions that will enable students to master the concepts that are taught. While the traditional definitions are incomplete and oversimplified, they are concrete, which is age-appropriate for third through seventh grade. Keeping with traditional terms and definitions will still enable

students to begin to understand what they already know. At the bare minimum, students in these grades should study at least some of the parts of speech: nouns, pronouns, verbs and modifiers (adjectives and adverbs). Studying these, even with the incomplete and inaccurate definitions, students would become familiar with the terms of Latin-based grammar analysis, which most students will run into in higher grade levels.

Teachers of eighth through twelfth graders can augment or redefine these traditional terms to become age-appropriate. For example, defining a noun as a "person, place or thing" is only appropriate when teaching concrete thinkers. Once students are able to think abstractly, definitions should be fleshed out with metaphors and the idea of "function" to enable students to reach deeper levels of understanding of the complex, intertwined and abstract nature of grammar. Thus, students' understanding of nouns and pronouns can be deepened by defining nouns and pronouns as any word that functions as a "who" or a "what" within a sentence. With this definition in hand, abstract thinkers easily recognize that *swimming* can function as a "what" in the sentence *swimming is my favorite hobby*. A conjunction can be thought of in terms of "glue" or "tape" as Purser (1996) defined it. A preposition can be defined as a word that fits the following test: anything a plane can do to a cloud (a plane can fly in/around/below a cloud). For teachers who are not required to cover many traditional terms and concepts, defining the few parts of speech necessary for teaching the usage and style rules should enable students to reach a more accurate and deeper understanding. For teachers who must teach more traditional formal grammar concepts (predicate nominative, gerund, infinitive, etc.), simply using redefined parts of speech should suffice in helping students grasp these more abstract concepts since most are defined through reference to the basic eight parts of speech.

Regardless of how many or few concepts required in a course and regardless of delivery methods, teachers should see deeper understanding of grammar on the part of their students if

clearer, more accurate definitions are used. Teachers can look to Noguchi (1991) and Kolln (2003) for instructional techniques that teach common written English conventions without having to use the traditional definitions.

First, Noguchi (1991) provides a useful technique to teach students how to revise run-ons/comma splices and fragments. He explains that the traditional definition of a run-on sentence – two independent clauses that are joined together without any punctuation – requires students to learn more than they have to in order to revise these errors. After all, students must understand and recognize a clause, which requires their knowledge of subject and predicate, which requires their knowledge of noun and verb and possibly verb complement. His solution is to use the tag question formula (adding a question about the subject at the end of the sentence) for two reasons. One, tag questions are "instinctive" to native English speakers. English speakers know that they can turn any declarative sentence into a question regarding the subject such as "isn't he?" or "won't they?" Two, it is impossible to transform a run-on/comma splice into a tag question without identifying the sentence boundary error. He offered the following sentence for an example: "Your next-door neighbor is going to sell his car for $400 he should sell it for $800" (p. 77). The tag questions simply add the phrase, "isn't he?" and "shouldn't he?" Therefore, students initially ask the tag question: "Your next-door neighbor is going to sell his car for $400, isn't he?" Then, they ask, "He should sell it for $800, shouldn't he?" This process immediately makes the error apparent, and students can move on to possible revisions of the run-on/comma splice. The tag question formula also works for fragments because they are impossible to make into tag questions. As long as teachers take the time to teach the tag question formula and provide several examples of these questions, students should be able to use the formula during the revision process to correct these sentence boundary errors.

Second, Kolln (2003) provides a helpful framework for grammar instruction. Her perspective on grammar instruction is learning grammar for its rhetorical sake has merit. In other words, students need to learn the choices they have with syntax, sentence complexity and punctuation and the impact those choices have on the rhetorical situation – the audience. She gives the example of the difference between writing a letter to a friend and writing a letter to an older relative. Kolln explains her general framework that views a sentence "as a series of slots": the noun slot, the adjective slot, the verb slot and so forth (p. 4). This framework allows students to "appreciate both [the sentence's] systematic nature and its potential for variation" (p. 4). This slot concept also aids in learning punctuation conventions such as not using a single comma to separate the subject slot from the verb slot. In several places in her book, Kolln explains that punctuation choices evoke an emotional response from an audience. For example, the comma can do more than make the reader slow down; it can be thought of in terms of creating a difference in a sentence's rhythm: the comma in this sentence increases the strength of the word "example." Therefore, writers can use commas to affect the overall rhythm of a piece of writing by "adding length and stress to the preceding word" (p.63). Punctuation conventions become significant to writer's voice and style within Kolln's framework.

Also useful are Kolln's form class definitions for the major parts of speech. Students gain a more complex understanding with a form definition than with the simple traditional definition. A noun is more than a person, place, thing or idea; it is any word that can be made plural or possessive. A verb is any word that had an *–s* or *–ing* form, and an adjective is a word that can either take on the *–er* or *–est* forms or follow the word *more* or *most*. Even though many adjectives do not fit the comparative/superlative test, they can fit into the "adjective test frame": "The _____ NOUN is very _____" [The cuddly puppy is very

cuddly] (p. 245). Of course, Kolln noted the exceptions to these definitions; however, those exceptions are surprisingly few.

While the focus of Kolln's rhetorical grammar is on increasing syntactic maturity, Kolln acknowledges the importance of following written English conventions. She repeatedly comments that most rhetorical situations include the expectation of following these conventions. "You can be sure that using punctuation well – using it to help the reader and doing so according to standard conventions – will go a long way in establishing your credibility" (p. 193). For that reason, she includes punctuation emphases in each of her chapters that focus on becoming a more mature writer. For instance, the chapter on compound sentences presents the following comma rule: "Use a comma before the coordinating conjunction between the two independent clauses of a compound sentence" (p. 93). Of course, it is now necessary for students to decipher what that rule means; what is a coordinating conjunction, what is a clause and what makes a clause independent? A unique quality in Kolln's method teaching written English conventions lies in her framework; students learn punctuation conventions in the context of learning techniques to develop sentence complexity.

Presently, the overall goal cannot be to get every eighth through twelfth grade teacher to use the same set of metaphorical or abstract definitions for every grammar concept or the same techniques that Noguchi (1991) and Kolln (2003) offer. Formal research, curriculum piloting and marketing must occur for the gradual change-over to clearer, more accurate definitions, a change-over that could never happen overnight but a wise change-over nonetheless.

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