Fostering Metalinguistic Awareness in a Grammarless Curriculum

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the methods and effects of instruction which fosters metalinguistic awareness (the ability to reflect upon the nature and use of language and utilize a metalanguage during its exploration) and how the fostering of such awareness helps students learn to read and write. While traditional grammar instruction often provided categories and labels with which to identify the form and function of words and phrases in a sentence, this instruction was often decontextualized and consisted of rote memorization, worksheets, or sentence diagramming, rendering "grammar" a frustrating and inconsequential subject for students to learn. However, contextualized approaches to grammar instruction allow students to engage with the material and recognize it as a valuable tool in reading comprehension and in the development of composition skills; these approaches help students comprehend challenging grammatical constructions in literature, allow students to understand the social consequences and rhetorical effects of their use of language in their own writing and speech, and provide students with a vocabulary which they can use to analyze and manipulate the structures of language.

The methods and goals of grammar instruction vary widely as the controversial debate about its usefulness continues to rage. In addition, many educators do not feel the need to teach students the labels and categories of traditional grammar, while others maintain the usefulness of a shared metalanguage between student and teacher for the improvement of writing. Utilizing a metalanguage in the instruction of English/Language Arts is vital for student understanding of the meaning-making role of grammar, as well as its value as a problem-solving tool for overcoming specific language obstacles. Teaching students to think and talk about language can also foster higher-order thinking skills

when examining and interpreting the semantics and rhetoric of a text, whether it is an editorial, a model text, or a piece of literature.

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Introduction

Until the new millennium, research in the field of grammar instruction focused on evaluating pedagogical approaches to English grammar. Scholars continue to debate the effect of grammar approaches to student success in composition, writing development, reading comprehension, critical thinking skills, and bidialectalism. Scholars, critics, and teachers continue to search for answers to the most important questions of this debate. What is the most effective way to teach grammar? Are children born with an innate ability to use grammar, and if so, does grammar need to be taught at all? Do students need explicit knowledge of grammar in order to speak and write effectively? There are decades of research on the matter, but the effect of different approaches to grammar instruction is difficult to quantify using traditional methods like standardized testing or Lexile reading measures; as a result, research on the subject is largely based on observation, inference, and experimentation in classroom settings.

The lack of consistent data, and the idea that teaching grammar might have a harmful effect on student writing, have contributed to the widespread abandonment of grammar instruction in the secondary classroom. This neglect should concern educators in every subject and employers in every field, because strong communication skills are essential to success in higher education and the workforce. Not all teachers fear grammar practice; many use methods to draw attention to various grammatical choices in order to reveal the rhetorical effects those choices have on the reader or audience. This rhetorical grammar can contribute to a student's metalinguistic awareness, understanding of grammatical labels to enhance communication between instructor and student, and bidialectalism, proficiency in switching between his own dialect and Standard American

English to enhance communication between speaker and audience, improving communication in a variety of interpersonal, public, written, and electronic contexts.

It is also important to address educator concerns about how teaching rhetorical grammar will meet the national and state standards that teachers must reach. While many states have adopted the national Common Core standards, which claim to provide "clear expectations for instruction, assessment, and student work" (Information Resources Management Association, 44), many K-12 grammar and usage standards remain open to interpretation. English-Language Arts (ELA) standards provide teachers with inadequate guidance about when to introduce various grammatical concepts for learners at different stages of language development. For example, in the Common Core ELA standards, some grammatical skills are considered to be progressive, meaning they require additional practice in higher grades as they are "applied to increasingly sophisticated writing and speaking" (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 56). According to the *Progressive Skills* Chart, these standards "should be added" to the strand of standards that teachers use to plan lessons (56). This warning is written intentionally in the passive voice, leaving educators to wonder who it was written for ("*Who* should add it and why didn't the Common Core add it themselves?") and the importance of the progressive skill ("If they neglected to place the standard where it can be readily accessed, is it even a relevant skill?"). The ambiguous wording and structuring of standards contributes to the inconsistent delivery of grammatical concepts across the course of a student's education, and the standards remain inadequate as guidance concerning the role of grammar instruction in fostering communication skills. Fortunately, educators have the academic freedom to decide how to implement the standards for the benefit of their students;

teaching rhetorical grammar can meet the standards and provide students individualized and contextualized practice with grammatical choices and rhetorical effect.

In addition to the controversy in academic circles, the debate about grammar instruction has also taken place in popular culture. While researchers and educators try to find a clear answer to the question of how to teach grammar (if at all), the news media and other public figures continue to bemoan a purported decline in literacy. Media reports argue that the quality of student communication does not meet the expectations of employers, a claim promulgated by *Newsweek* with the publication of a 1975 article titled "Why Johnny Can't Write" (Shiels, 61). This argument has been rehashed over the last four decades in similar reports, which often reference the steady decline of standardized test scores in reading and writing. Despite reports published by the College Board that indicate a steady decline in critical reading scores since 1972 and in writing scores since the 2005 inception of the writing section, several educational researchers and policy analysts argue that college placement tests, and standardized tests in general, are not a valid indicator of a literacy decline, or as some commentators call it, "a rising tide of mediocrity" (Gardner 6). Unfortunately, policymakers rely heavily on standardized test scores as indicators of student success, and declining test scores motivate them to create more educational standards, creating a cycle of standard-setting and testing that seemingly knows no bounds and provides even more (invalid) measures for cultural critics to cite as evidence of the ostensible "new illiteracy" (CNBC). Many critics slam the education system for losing focus on written and oral communication, using declining test scores to back up their claims, which seems contradictory if the increased focus on

testing leaves teachers with less time to provide instruction and practice in communication.

The misguided belief in a literacy breakdown has characterized the critical conversation of grammar instruction since 1963, when the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) published a report, *Research in Written Composition*, encouraging teachers to limit or completely exclude grammar instruction. The report analyzed 485 empirical research studies in an attempt to define a discernable theory of composition; researchers hoped to find patterns, agreements, or relationships that would illuminate the best practices for writing instruction. The report concluded that "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" (Braddock, Reed, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer, 37), a position that has not changed since its publication, regardless of the observable decline in literacy test scores. Later research has found the report to be unreliable because the experiments referenced in the report vary in terms of validity, reliability, and accuracy; therefore, the concluding observations of the report are not generalizable to composition pedagogy. Despite the report's inconsistent research criteria, many educators accepted the report's conclusion that formal grammar instruction is not an effective way to improve student writing.

The problem with the NCTE report is not that it was wrong about the inefficiency of formal grammar instruction, but that it never clarified the definition of "formal grammar," which obscured the fact that the NCTE was criticizing traditional approaches to grammar pedagogy. Formal grammar is prescriptive, according to arbitrary rules based on the application of Latin, logic, and 18th century English, rather than descriptive; it

emphasizes the idea that communication is a standardized skill, rather than evolving and adapting to different rhetorical situations. Formal approaches to grammar instruction emphasize the analysis of the form of words in a sentence (e.g. labeling words and phrases and following rules about word order) with little regard for how the words create meaning. The NCTE's definition of formal grammar remained unclear until 1985, when the organization released a position statement to reiterate their 1963 conclusion. The statement clarified that formal grammar means grammar taught in isolation, specifically "repetitive grammar drills and exercises" that are disconnected from the writing process. They added that any approach to grammar instruction that is not taught in the context of what students are learning to do inevitably "hinders development of students' oral and written language" (National Council of Teachers of English, 1974). Approaches that separate grammar instruction from actual writing practice, such as rote memorization, repetition, and sentence diagramming, only provide students with labels for the form and function of words, but do not actually show students how to use that information to their advantage. These approaches, when performed outside the context of writing, will not benefit student writing. However, this reality should not serve as a justification for abandoning grammar instruction altogether; on the contrary, grammar should be contextualized in its application to the skill that students are learning to perform.

Understanding the modern and historical context of the critical debate is not enough to answer the burning question that remains: If teachers must avoid traditional approaches to grammar instruction, then how should they approach it? While grammar can have applications to a wide range of communication pedagogy, educators must adopt a functional approach to its instruction; this means making connections between grammar

and what students already know, and showing them how to apply the knowledge to what they are learning. This approach relies heavily upon Constructivist theories, specifically the concept of a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which imagines an area between what a student already knows and what he is trying to learn (Vygotsky, 1978). In this zone, a student cannot master a skill on his own, but can achieve the task at hand with guidance from a more knowledgeable person. Once a student can master the task with this guidance, the "scaffolding" can be removed and the student can repeat the task on his own. In order for the student to advance, he must be able to connect the new knowledge with knowledge he already has. The ZPD is vital to grammar instruction because students must make connections between their intuitive mental grammar and the prescriptive school grammar (rules and labels) they are still learning. Once they make these connections, and with the help of "scaffolding", they can begin to apply the skill: manipulating grammar for rhetorical effect.

Some may argue that proficiency in rhetorical grammar can be achieved without explicit instruction in the rules and labels that constitute school grammar. They may ask: Why teach a skill that linguists argue is instinctive? What is the point of teaching the metalanguage of grammar, anyway? Do students really need to know how to identify the form and function of words, phrases, and clauses, or should teachers avoid labels altogether? To answer these questions effectively, one must understand what linguists mean when they refer to mental grammar. Linguists have studied grammatical patterns and found they are common to all languages; they theorize that this commonality must indicate the presence of an "internalized system" in the human brain that guides people's acquisition of their language. This system allows a native speaker to sense if something

sounds correct or incorrect, without being able to explain why. This is an unconscious decision-making process that allows a person to distinguish proper from improper syntax without the ability to justify that decision (other than "it just sounds right"). Patrick Hartwell demonstrated this brilliantly in a 1985 article when he proposed a "thought experiment" that provided five out-of-order words. He asked participants to arrange these words in the correct order: *French*, *the*, *young*, *girls*, and *four*. Native speakers could arrange them, but could not provide a specific "rule" to explain why the phrase is only correct when stated as "The four young French girls." According to Hartwell, "The rule is that in English the order of adjectives is first, number, second, age, and third, nationality," but this is not a prescriptive rule that would be taught in an English class, it is merely a rule that exists in the minds of native speakers (111).

This is precisely why it is important for students to learn the "rules" and "labels" of formal grammar: so that they have the ability to talk about grammatical choices with their instructors and can make progress to improve their writing or speaking. Teachers often use sentence-combining techniques to show students how to improve their choppy sentence structure, but it would be difficult to convey this information without terms like "dependent clause" and "independent clause." Rather than administering tests to ensure that students are memorizing these labels, teachers should use the metalanguage when they describe how language is manipulated and provide exemplar texts to show the rhetorical effect. In other words, students should not just memorize rules and labels for the sake of knowing the information, but should utilize this metalanguage to serve a purpose: to communicate about language in order to learn a more effective way to write or speak.

To use the ZPD concept in grammar instruction, teachers may find it increasingly difficult to demonstrate how to apply new knowledge to the act of communicating in real-world situations, which continue to evolve because of rapidly advancing technology and its role in social and professional communication. While many school districts have made efforts to incorporate technology in the classroom, adapting instruction involves much more than equipping classrooms with iPads: educators must help students be aware of their ability to manipulate grammar for a variety of audiences and provide a realistic idea of what those audiences might look like. For example, a teacher may want to teach a lesson about eliminating wordiness, which is a skill that a student may already practice on Twitter. This type of skill may be valuable for a career in any field which relies heavily upon social media to communicate with the public. Teachers must emphasize the social, cultural, and digital contexts in which students will have to communicate in their future careers, but they often feel disconnected from technology and view digital tools as a hindrance to student writing. Technology allows students to write in more formats than ever before, but also creates unique challenges for teaching writing in a digital age. Some teachers complain that truncated writing, which is necessary for text messaging, Instagram, and Twitter, is creeping into formal writing assignments and limiting student willingness to write longer texts or analyze complicated topics, and many teachers feel the need to spend more time educating students about modifying their wording, tone, and style for different audiences. Some do see a positive side --- many teachers noticed that students are less likely to make grammar and spelling mistakes --- but of course, this is likely because most word processors have software to check for these problems, and

since the software sometimes gets it wrong, this is yet another opportunity to create a lesson based on an issue that arises because of technology.

While today's middle and high school students are nicknamed "digital natives" because of their lifelong familiarity with technology, many teachers witnessed the expansion of technology after they were adults and feel as though student reliance on technology can serve as a barrier to classroom instruction, student participation, and learning in general. Even recent college graduates of the Millennial generation have difficulty pinpointing technology's effects on how students live, communicate, and learn. Regardless of personal feelings toward student reliance upon their devices, modern workplaces will require some form of digital literacy, and students need to be prepared to write in a variety of digital contexts.

While scholars debate the effect of grammar instruction and cultural critics bemoan the breakdown of literacy, none has been able to pinpoint a specific cause-and-effect relationship to explain the communication problems that students face in academic and professional settings. The precise nature of such a relationship may never be discovered, and it may be a waste of time to continue trying to understand why literacy test scores continue to decline. Instead, scholars and educators should focus their efforts on instructing students in rhetorical grammar, encouraging students to view the manipulation of language as a social practice dependent on the communicator, the audience, and the situation. By using the rhetorical triangle as a springboard to teach grammatical concepts, educators can foster an understanding of grammar that reaches beyond labeling words in a sentence. They can demonstrate how language is manipulated to achieve different effects among different audiences. Students will come

to appreciate their ability to establish their credibility in a variety of speaking or writing contexts, whether they are establishing social identity, professional capability, or academic competence. The rhetorical approach to grammar instruction fosters critical thinking skills as students constantly re-evaluate purpose, audience, and context; these are analytical skills that will transfer from the academic setting into general life skills, enabling students to solve problems they experience on a day-to-day basis.

Most educational researchers agree that there is a valuable connection between reading and writing. In the words of novelist Richard Peck, "Nobody but a reader ever became a writer" (Gallo 88). Where this agreement usually ends, however, is in how to approach instruction to improve reading, writing, and speaking. In the 1980s and 1990s, as the whole language approach to Language Arts education increased in popularity, critics lamented the de-emphasis on direct instruction of "phonemic awareness, spelling, phonics, [and] grammar," and the heavy reliance on context clues as a strategy to decipher the meaning of words (Moats 19). In the new millennium, many educators are adopting a balanced literacy approach as a result of the new Common Core curriculum. Balanced literacy integrates whole language and direct instruction in phonics, emphasizing a child-centered instructional approach in which students select books that interest them and practice reading comprehension strategies on their own. This approach faces criticism, with some educational researchers arguing that the approach demands too little teacher-led instruction (the approach requires daily mini-lessons centered on the teacher's role as facilitator) that may leave students without enough support and cause confusion about how to apply the strategies to their reading. Balanced literacy demands that students spend more time reading self-selected texts, but critics argue that the

approach "focuses on the skills divorced from any content," which can lead to student confusion because they may lack background knowledge for the text they selected, a problem which acts as a barrier to comprehension (Wall 1). Even more recently, educators are advocating an approach they call "prime literacies," arguing that a truly balanced literacy should also include digital and media literacies, such as "the reading of digital texts, online research, assignment submissions, assessments, social hangouts, and communication in technology-integrated classrooms" (Cassidy 22). This debate has been nicknamed the Reading Wars, and it represents just one area in which educators are responding negatively to the implementation of Common Core State Standards in the Language Arts classroom. The politics of literacy instruction may be an intrinsic barrier to the improvement of literacy; educational policy analyst Diane Ravitch frequently criticizes large-scale educational policy because of a "pattern of conflicting conclusions" and "incompletely controlled" studies in which many "key classroom variables remain unmonitored and unknown" (qtd. in Hirsch 16). Heated policy debates rely too much upon conflict and controversy and not enough on scholarly inquiry; this takes away emphasis from the inseparability of reading and writing and directs attention from the important question of the best approach to prepare students to write effectively.

The Reading Wars debates highlight disagreements about new and popular approaches to literacy, and some critics place this debate within the context of a much larger political debate about the government's role in manufacturing a "reading crisis" while advocating approaches to literacy that ignore scientific evidence (Allington 4). These debates demonstrate that popular opinion and scholarly inquiry are much less focused on grammar instruction than they have been in the past; in fact, grammar

pedagogy seems to have declined as a hot topic in literacy education. Some researchers still focus on the usefulness of grammar instruction to student composition: a systematic review published in 2014, analyzing the effect of grammar instruction on improving composition for students aged 5-16, concluded that direct instruction in syntax "appears to have no effect on the accuracy or quality of writing," but sentence combining does have a positive effect because it is "knowledge applied in situations of contextualized learning" (Andrews, Torgerson, Beverton et al. 52). These conclusions are consistent with those of Braddock, Reed, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer (1963) and George Hillocks (1986), but there is no doubt that researchers need to perform comprehensive and critical reviews to determine the usefulness of grammar instruction on other types of literacy.

Many of today's scholarly articles on the topic serve as resources for teachers, providing teaching ideas, methods and materials. Resources published in the last ten years demonstrate that today's educators agree: the drill-and-kill approach to grammatical labels should be abandoned in favor of contextualized approaches. Much of the scholarship focuses on approaches improving reading comprehension, composition, analytical skills, and oral communication, and some have even demonstrated how to integrate grammar lessons into digital contexts. In addition, some scholarship demonstrates how second-language learning can improve a student's understanding of English grammar, and other scholarship focuses on teaching Standard English to students who speak nonstandard dialects, emphasizing the importance of a student's ability to code-switch for different rhetorical and social situations. To improve proficiency in reading comprehension and composition, students benefit most from skill-based approaches which provide them with a metalanguage to discuss rhetorical choices and

foster linguistic analysis of the structures within model texts, providing them with the ability to evaluate meaning and shape it within their own writing.

Chapter 1: The Importance of Metalanguage

As a college composition instructor, I realize the importance of metalanguage as a tool for guiding students through the writing process, specifically the revision stage. During writing conferences, I must explain to my students how they can revise their prose to meet the standards of "good" writing—writing that is clear and concise, correctly punctuated, with ideas that flow logically between sentences and paragraphs. The best way to communicate with students about their writing is to have a shared vocabulary to describe the structural features of language. This way, the instructor can help students understand that the choices they make will either help or harm the message they are trying to convey. Although some instructors expect students to arrive on campus prepared to discuss common features of language, such as subject-verb agreement and straightforward sentence structures, realistic instructors understand that student knowledge of these features, and how to talk about these features, is as varied as their hairstyles and fashion choices. Each student brings to the classroom different understandings of how words are strung together to form meaning. Those students who read often, engaging with texts for both pleasure and academics, will naturally develop an awareness of these features; those students who are not avid readers will be less aware of linguistic features and how they are used to create a certain effect. In either case, the instructor must explain how to use common features of writing for rhetorical effect. To do this effectively, both students and instructors need to be able to talk about, and reflect upon, the language they interact with while reading, writing, and speaking.

How can a composition instructor help her students improve the clarity of each student's draft when they are all entering the classroom with different understandings of

common features and the vocabulary used to discuss them? The truth is, it will require a differentiated approach, and the revision process can be especially difficult for students who lack an awareness both of structure and of terminology. Instructors *must* define terms before using them in the classroom. For example, at the beginning of the semester, I told my students to avoid using the passive voice unless their intention was to emphasize the receiver of an action instead of the doer of the action. One student raised her hand to ask in a small, quavering voice, "What is the passive voice?" In this instance, I had forgotten that teaching college freshmen is completely different from teaching in a high school; each student had not been exposed to the same curriculum, and their metalinguistic vocabularies varied as a result. Some students knew exactly what I was talking about, and others had no idea, but only one was brave enough to ask for clarification. My intention was to let them know that, despite what their high school English teachers had taught them, there are situations in which it is appropriate to use passive constructions. Instead of teaching my students about a new concept, I was the one who learned a lesson that day: always define metalinguistic terms when speaking in front of the whole class, and more importantly, limit classroom discussion of structural issues unless they affect a majority of the class. Since that day, I address individual sentence-level issues in written feedback and student writing conferences, devoting class time to explaining higher-order issues of content and organization. Using this differentiated approach, I hope to foster metalinguistic awareness in the grammarless curriculum of my freshman composition class.

This approach has proven to be effective for addressing individual issues, but it does not eliminate every problem that will arise. For instance, I may use a metalinguistic

term that differs from the vocabulary that the student learned in high school, though this problem is easier to rectify with a simple explanation. As long as both participants can identify the structure in question based on its attributes, it will not matter that the terminology is different. Some people use the word *predicate* and others use *completer*, but as long as the student and instructor both recognize that they are discussing the same feature of the sentence, effective communication will take place (unless, of course, one has a fondness for arguing semantics).

Another common problem may arise when a student can identify and use a particular structure, but does not use it in a manner that enhances rhetorical effect. For example, each semester I have at least one student whose sentences all follow the same pattern: an introductory participial phrase followed by a comma and the main clause. This construction can be useful, but I have to stress the importance of sentence variety. Since the construction is grammatically correct, students may have difficulty understanding why it is a problem at all. Similarly, many students are so afraid to commit a grammatical mistake, such as a comma splice, that they avoid compound and complex sentences altogether, resulting in disjointed sentences that seem harsh and abrupt. Again, this type of writing can be used to achieve a specific rhetorical effect, as in the staccato prose of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, but is not appropriate for expository or argumentative writing. In addition, a metalanguage can be used to improve punctuation as well as style, depending on the metalinguistic competency of the student, but it will be much easier to explain a recurring punctuation error to a student who understands coordination and subordination than to one who cannot distinguish between a dependent and independent clause.

These examples demonstrate the need for a shared metalanguage between instructor and student. How else would an instructor explain how to revise short, choppy sentences into a more lively and rhythmic structure? Or why it is appropriate to use a variety of sentence lengths and complexities to keep a reader's attention? Or when it is appropriate to use short sentences to emphasize a critical point? Understanding structural labels can enable a student to develop strategies for resolving a variety of stylistic issues. A student may need help with grammatical parallelism, logical progression of ideas, or eliminating wordiness or ambiguity. Without a metalanguage to identify and reflect upon the structures of language, and how these structures can be manipulated for rhetorical effect, students will face an enormous challenge every time they attempt to revise a draft.

Despite the challenges that students face during the writing process, many teachers are skeptical about explicit instruction in rules and labels. This hesitancy is a common, if not widespread, outcome of the 1963 NCTE report that criticized formal approaches to grammar instruction, identifying exercises such as sentence diagramming and sentence parsing as ineffective for the improvement of writing. If it is imperative that students have the ability to label these units, then why won't diagramming or parsing a sentence be an effective exercise for their writing development? The problem lies in the fact that such exercises are completely disconnected from the writing process. It is important to know terminology, but it is more important to be able to use it to identify and apply structural knowledge. Students need to know structural labels, not for the purpose of picking apart a sentence, but in order to develop a strategy to enhance rhetorical effect. Without a contextualized approach to teaching these labels for the purpose of improving coherence, teaching labels will only provide students with a useless

vocabulary; few will actually make the connection between knowing words to describe language and applying that knowledge to their own writing.

Some secondary teachers have abandoned teaching labels entirely, regarding them as a hindrance instead of a set of vocabulary designed to enhance communication about the writing process. Teachers have advocated for this label-free approach in articles published as recently as 2006. For example, Eileen Simmons, a ninth grade English teacher, demonstrates her use of label-free grammar instruction to help her students with reading comprehension; specifically, to understand the fact that gerunds and participles look like verbs but do not function like verbs. Her students were misinterpreting the phrase "rosy-fingered dawn" as an action, not a description. Simmons addressed this problem with a grammar lesson, emphasizing a strategy for determining the function of the word, but avoiding the terms *gerund* and *participle* because she considers labels to be a "barrier" (51). Instead, her approach focused on semantic analysis: she instructed her students to determine if the phrase *acted* like a noun or if it *described* a noun, in order to "help them understand the connections within the sentence, to show how words work together to convey meaning, [and] not to belabor grammar terms" (49). Using this approach of semantic analysis, she taught her students how to develop a strategy to differentiate between verbs and verb derivatives. However, she describes a deliberate avoidance of grammatical terminology when working with students on both reading and writing --- which makes me wonder how the students will identify, and use, gerunds and participles by *form* as well as function (a participle can be past or present, and can be irregular in the case of the past participle, while a gerund, as a noun, cannot have tense). Should students be exposed to some grammatical terminology about gerunds and

participles, to gain an understanding of how to use them when writing? Or is it only necessary that students distinguish between them based on their function in a sentence? How can we know that this is enough exposure to enable them to use these verbals effectively in prose?

Jeff Anderson, a sixth-grade teacher who expresses the same opinion about grammatical labels acting as a barrier, details his approach to writing development, which involves abandoning labels, but teaching the concepts they represent, using model texts and stylistic imitation. He calls this approach "label-less grammar," which he endorses as "a grammar instruction that actually improved writing" (29). His use of the qualifier *actually* appears to attack the use of metalanguage, denouncing it as characteristic of ineffective grammar instruction and expressing doubt that a student's understanding of labels could ever enhance their writing. Indeed, his contextualized approach to rhetorical grammar successfully enriched his students' writing, but the problem lies in this statement: "[students] didn't even know they were using participles or writing complex sentences" (29). The argument in favor of label-less grammar relies on the assumption that students will never need to know this terminology, which may not be the case as they progress in their education. Many students will eventually arrive in an advanced composition classroom, whether it be in high school or college, lacking the vocabulary needed to communicate effectively with the instructor as a result of methods which understate the usefulness of metalanguage.

This breakdown of communication has been addressed by Paul E. Doniger, a high school English teacher who describes his approach to grammar as a tool for improving reading comprehension. He explains the usefulness of metalanguage for clarifying

meaning in challenging texts, noting that students encounter problems when "trying to interpret meanings in texts because they have misread or not understood the grammatical context" (101). Doniger addresses these issues as they arise, using the literature to teach the grammar that students have not been exposed to, and demonstrating how grammar aids in interpreting a confusing sentence or passage. However, the clarification-interpretation process is hindered when his students lack the vocabulary of metalanguage. For example, "when a student can't distinguish a verb from a preposition" he must take time to explain basic terminology that students should already know, which directs discussion away from clarification and interpretation and renders instruction "slow and painstaking" (101). Not only does Doniger lose valuable class time, he must sacrifice his grade-appropriate lesson plans to ensure that all his students understand grammatical concepts that they should already have learned. If Doniger chose not to do this, the student's lack of grade-appropriate terminology might have far-reaching consequences on his ability to communicate about writing.

Guiding students through the writing process is already complicated by the fact that a teacher must differentiate instruction based on each student's individual competencies, so any additional barriers to communication will only serve to frustrate both participants. Therefore, promoting a label-free approach to grammar instruction may serve a short-term goal of avoiding the perception of grammar as error correction, which fills students with dread, but this approach will only mask and perpetuate a deeper problem: an inability to talk about, and reflect upon, rhetorical choices. Instructing students in terminology should not be something a teacher should fear; instead, it should be embraced and celebrated. Knowledge of metalanguage will foster metacognitive skills

(such as identifying strengths and weaknesses and developing strategies to overcome them) that could translate to a more desirable outcome in later writing practice.

Despite the reluctance of some English teachers to explicitly label grammatical structures, there are other remedies to this conundrum: a student's exploration of a foreign language may compensate for the lack of knowledge many Language Arts students possess about English grammar, because comparing and contrasting the grammatical structures of two or more languages can provide a student with a linguistic awareness that promotes the development of verbal and written English skills. Patrick Hartwell has attempted to shed light upon the abandonment of grammar instruction in the Language Arts curriculum, providing an often-cited framework in which to define the various components of grammar: the five types of grammar (108). Hartwell's first type of grammar is the unconscious rules that exist in the minds of native speakers, and the second type is our attempt to describe these rules. The third type is "linguistic etiquette", or what prescriptive grammarians think is the proper way to use language. The fourth type is "school grammar," or the rules and labels that students learn in school, relying heavily on rote memorization of concepts like sentence fragments, main clauses, and types of sentences (simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex). Lastly, the fifth type of grammar is not actually grammar at all, but usage, which means stylistic choices an author makes for a specific purpose and audience. This framework provides teachers with a categorical vocabulary to describe which sense of the term "grammar" they are using in rationales of their instruction, allowing for more productive discussion about issues of error and correctness.

One method for learning metalanguage is studying a foreign language, which provides an understanding of English grammar because of the comparisons and metalinguistic vocabulary that foreign language instructors must provide in order to teach the grammatical structures of the foreign language. Hartwell's first type of grammar is the unconscious knowledge of language which is found only in the minds of native speakers. The second type of grammar is the rules that we try to abstract from this knowledge. Hartwell explains the difference between the first two types of grammar: the first is intrinsically "knowing how" to manipulate grammatical structures, the second is "knowing about" this manipulation (112). A native speaker will automatically understand the order in which the adjectives should appear without needing to know the grammatical rule or the labels we place on words. Exploration of a foreign language could help students gain an awareness of language manipulation and provide a vocabulary with which to discuss it, because foreign language instructors must demonstrate a comparison between English constructions and foreign language constructions in order for students to understand the grammatical structures of the foreign language. According to W.F. Twaddell, the foreign language teacher must focus "his grammatical formulation on the conflicting portions of two languages' grammar" for the student to gain an understanding of word order (20). These comparisons highlight Hartwell's first and second grammar types: the grammar that native speakers are intuitively aware of, and the knowledge they must acquire to explain how they work.

When students of a foreign language learn its vocabulary, they also become aware of syntactic structures to develop an understanding of how to use this vocabulary. Students must understand how the words are ordered in a sentence, and how to make

those words agree with one another grammatically. An example of this conflict is where to place the object pronoun of a sentence in English and in Spanish. In English, the object pronoun follows the verb, but in Spanish, the object pronoun precedes the verb; foreign language instruction requires students to learn a metalanguage that includes the word "object" in order to negotiate this difference. Twaddell notes, "The learner will be even less able to formulate a description of his English grammatical habits than those of a foreign language, because he is equally naïve and expert as a speaker of English. Without help he cannot describe his own intricate habits of grammatical word order with English adjectives and adverbs, for example" (20). Learning a foreign language will remedy this lack of knowledge about intuitive grammatical habits, because the student will compare and contrast the grammatical constructions of the foreign language with his own intuitive habits. Foreign-language learners must compare the differences in grammatical features (for example, gender systems and how they are used to make nouns agree with pronouns and adjectives) and grammatical machinery (for example, the position of subjects and objects in a sentence). This comparison would be impossible without assigning categories and labels to the grammatical structures that come naturally to a native speaker; the teacher must scaffold student learning by initially providing these labels and categories, allowing students to make the comparisons between the syntactical structures of both languages, gradually providing less support as the students begin to make these comparisons on their own.

The comparison of grammatical categories and machinery provides an overlap of concepts which allows skills to transfer from the foreign language classroom to the English language arts classroom. In discussing the correlation between the study of Latin

and an improvement in academic performance in other subjects, Lisa R. Holliday notes, "in order for skills to transfer from one discipline to another, it is necessary that the disciplines have common elements; Thorndike (1924) held that there must be overlap" (qtd. in Holliday 6). She points out that even though English and Latin have little in common structurally, teachers have to compare the grammatical constructions of both languages for students to learn the foreign language. This instructional approach promoted "linguistic awareness" and the "development of English skills" (6). It would be impossible to teach a foreign language without also teaching grammar, and it would be very difficult to teach the grammar of a foreign language without comparing and contrasting the grammatical constructions of the foreign language with those of the English language.

In the process of learning a foreign language, students must also retain the labels and categories which describe the form and function of the language; the ability to apply these labels and categories is a skill that students will retain. This skill will continue to benefit students throughout their secondary and post-secondary education because it provides students and teachers with a shared vocabulary that they can use to talk about a learner's writing and communication skills. It is difficult to explain to a student when to use a semicolon if they do not know how to identify an independent clause. The acquisition of a foreign language fosters this type of metalinguistic skill and promotes productive communication between students and teachers as learners progress through secondary and post-secondary education. Hartwell's third type of grammar is linguistic etiquette, which he describes simply as *usage*. Studying a foreign language may provide the vocabulary to be able to conform to SAE conventions and improve their ability to

alter their prose for rhetorical effect. Making comparisons between the grammar of two languages may improve learners' understanding of Hartwell's fourth and fifth types of grammar: prescriptive rules (e.g. the need for a semicolon to separate two independent clauses) and stylistic choices with regard to purpose, audience, and tone.

Metalinguistic skills are useful not only in a language classroom, but in any classroom that requires composition and any workplace that requires professional communication skills. A problem arises, however, in the reality of the structure of secondary education today: many students do not begin to study a foreign language until eighth or ninth grade, after at least seven years of Language Arts education in which they either have no instruction requiring a metavocabulary, or decontextualized instruction which provides them with labels that they likely cannot use for language manipulation. In addition, some students never study a foreign language at all. Despite this flaw, there are approaches to grammar instruction which have a positive effect on a student's metalinguistic awareness; although Simmons's and Anderson's approaches to grammar instruction do not include explicit instruction that would provide students with a metalanguage, there are some valuable aspects to their approaches. They, as well as Doniger, focused specifically on teaching grammar in the context of what the students were already learning, in order to help students develop strategies for improving reading comprehension and the rhetorical effect of their own composition.

Chapter 2: Skill-based Approaches to Grammar Instruction

Although some of the English teachers discussed in the previous chapter choose not to teach grammatical labels explicitly, their approaches do not necessarily preclude metalinguistic awareness. Their justifications for label-less grammar instruction are quite reasonable in the context of skill-based learning, in which students are taught to apply knowledge to solve real-life problems, rather than knowledge-based learning, which encourages students to process information and store it in their long-term memories. The importance of a shared vocabulary between students and instructors cannot be overstated, especially given the time constraints on both high school teachers and college instructors; however, a student's capacity for language manipulation will rely upon much more than their ability to differentiate between words, or groups of words, and their referents. Although I disagree with Simmons's and Anderson's argument that knowledge of these referents is unnecessary, and that teaching labels is an arbitrary imposition on student learning, their reasons for abandoning traditional approaches to grammar instruction are valid and pragmatic: their methods focus on developing strategies for problem-solving, rather than developing a wide, but abstract, vocabulary of referents. Effective grammar instruction should allow students to acquire proficiency in language manipulation and recognize the different situations in which a particular manipulation will be appropriate. In other words, instruction should be skill-based, requiring the direct application of a strategy to solve a problem, rather than knowledge-based, focusing on error correction and memorization of rules and labels.

Approaches to skill-based grammar instruction vary, depending on the particular skill an instructor wants to teach or the problem the student attempts to solve. This type

of grammar instruction requires the student to develop a set of strategies which will then transfer to other rhetorical contexts. For example, an instructor who wants to help her students improve sentence structure and variety in their own writing might use a skill-based approach, such as sentence combining, or a knowledge-based approach, such as sentence correction.

Sentence combining involves helping students transform short, choppy, and seemingly unrelated sentences into more developed and logically connected sentences; in addition, the method may even be reversed to simplify poorly-structured or long-winded sentences. Research has shown that sentence combining has a positive effect on writing quality and accuracy because "it is knowledge applied in situations of contextualized learning" (Andrews, Torgerson, Beverton et al. 52). Unlike traditional, knowledge-based approaches to grammar instruction, sentence combining exercises help students recognize when they should employ strategies of coordination, subordination, and embedding; this approach also allows students to expand their knowledge of punctuation, allowing them to understand its value as a visual indicator of the structure and meaning of a sentence. Sentence combining is a valuable exercise because it allows students to work with their own writing, and many teachers appreciate that it does not require explicit instruction in grammatical labels.

Knowledge-based approaches such as sentence correction attempt to teach the same concepts (coordination, subordination, and embedding); however, they can be much less effective because teachers fail to apply the exercise to their students' own writing process. Sentence correction exercises require students to memorize grammar and punctuation rules and apply that knowledge to sentences, which are usually provided by

an instructor, not written by the student. Such exercises are removed from the writing process, which decreases the likelihood that students will develop a transferable skill or strategy to improve their own writing as they revise. While sentence correction utilizes some of the same concepts as sentence combining, it provides little practical application for improving the student's own writing. This is the type of grammar instruction that the 1963 NCTE report advised against because "it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition" (Braddock 38). This type of exercise focuses on correcting someone else's sentences, or sentences specifically designed to be confusing; it allows students to understand why they need revision (for example: a given sentence might be structurally ambiguous so that the student can find a way to correct this ambiguity), but is less effective than correcting a sentence they have written themselves.

The distinction between skill-based and knowledge-based grammar instruction raises an important consequence of decontextualized instruction: a student may become distracted by a confusing exercise, and this confusion might inhibit skill development. For example, when a student encounters practice sentences that have been removed from their original context, the student must attempt to correct them based on what the authors *might* have intended to communicate, rather that working on their own sentences, in which they already understand exactly what they intended to communicate. Consider the following sentence that I encountered recently in a sentence revision exercise: *Delays of aircraft and improper procedures create unhappy customers who are less apt to fly Northeast Airlines and safety hazards for both workers and customers.* Students were initially confused about how to correct this sentence because the problem does not involve grammar or punctuation at all, but logic. In order to "fix" this sentence, one

should establish a distinct cause-and-effect relationship between each subject and its corresponding direct object. Although this exercise seems straightforward in retrospect, the instructions never mentioned correcting the logic of a sentence; rather, they directed students to underline the finite verbs and their subjects, place brackets around the subordinate clauses, place parentheses around the prepositional phrases, and make corrections according to concision guidelines. These exercises are intended to teach students how to recognize and manipulate structural patterns, but can cause problems when applied outside the context of the student's own reading and writing; it is difficult for students to understand how this type of exercise will benefit them if it is not being used to improve their own comprehension or concision.

The example sentence confused students because they couldn't see why the sentence needed to be changed at all; it was perfectly grammatical, yet its meaning was somewhat ambiguous, or at very least, logically unsound. Noam Chomsky demonstrated the distinction between syntax and meaning with the grammatically correct sentence "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously" (Pinker 88). The sentence is completely grammatical, yet no meaning can be derived from it. Although no meaning can be derived from this string of words, they somehow form a complete sentence. A similar problem occurs in the example sentence correction example; however, the students' confusion dissipated when the sentence's flaw was presented in a more familiar context: *Spilling the wine and burning the French fries made Courtney thirsty and Melanie hungry.* This anecdote reveals the problems of decontextualized revision exercises: a sentence read out of context can confuse students and obscure the realization that not all sentence revision involves error correction. Composition instructors must employ an

approach to writing which allows students to apply new skills to their own writing instead of to artificial, poorly-written sentences; a skill-based approach, such as sentence combining, will do more to improve fluidity, idea development, and logical connections in student writing than any sentence correction exercise.

In order to provide a meaningful context for grammar instruction, Anderson argues that "context is about meaning. Any chunk of meaning is a context" (28). His philosophy relies upon the belief that grammar lessons should empower students to make meaning, unlike knowledge-based approaches to grammar and mechanics, which are "just one more way [for students] to be told that they are wrong" (29). To this end, he abandons teaching grammatical labels in favor of practice with the specific problems his students encounter in their own reading and writing, scaffolding their understanding of meaning at the sentence level and moving toward an understanding of the function of concepts within the larger context of a work; this "zooming in and out" between the smallest and largest chunks of meaning allows students to shift focus from whole texts and develop strategies to apply specific concepts in grammar and mechanics to both reading and writing. By learning one concept at a time, his students gain the ability to recognize a construction in their reading, then apply it to their own writing.

His zooming methods rely upon a process of separated, simulated, and integrated instruction. To begin, he discovers the construction that his students struggle with in their reading, finds a sentence containing that construction in their literary text, and reveals the patterns of grammar and mechanics and how they create meaning within the text, which highlights the targeted skill. Next, the students imitate the sentence together in class exercises and individually in their writer's notebooks, which allows students to

practice the targeted skill. Finally, students integrate these patterns into their own writing, which allows them to apply the targeted skill for a specific purpose. Throughout this process, he reinforces the idea that grammar is not about a right or wrong answer; he frequently asks students to locate examples of a grammatical concept within their model texts, evaluate why the author uses it, and describe the effect it has on the author's message. Although he chooses not to refer to concepts with grammatical labels, his approach to grammar instruction encourages students to develop a strategy, moving beyond identification of language components toward their direct application to solve real-world problems. Students have not developed a metalanguage, but Anderson's approach empowers students to see grammar and mechanics as more than error correction; instead, it allows them to interpret texts and create meaning in their own writing.

Skill-based grammar instruction allows students to develop skills of linguistic analysis; if it is executed successfully, students develop a strategy for recognizing the structure of language and how an author manipulates it to create a specific meaning, with or without knowledge of labels. Simmons developed an approach to grammar specifically to improve her ninth graders' reading comprehension; she views her students as "poster children" for ineffective, knowledge-based approaches, describing their previous grammar instruction as "singing songs and doing worksheets" (48). She narrates her frustrations as her students struggled with their text, when she realized that they were not making connections between pronouns and their antecedents; despite her attempts to foster an understanding of the overall context of a story as a means to interpreting individual passages, their inability to make connections between pronouns

and antecedents was a barrier to comprehension. Once they understood the function of pronouns as referring to a previously mentioned character, it became much easier for them to use the story's overall context to understand an isolated passage. Her approach allowed students to apply the knowledge they had learned from songs and worksheets (e.g. a list of personal pronouns) to improve their understanding of a text. Simmons also describes how her students struggled with the visual aspects of some words, automatically identifying *–ed* and *–ing* words as verbs, without first determining their function in the sentence; she explained that these words can function as descriptors (adjectives) or things (nouns), despite their appearance as action words; she helped them determine how these words functioned in the sentences they were reading, allowing them to differentiate between verbs and verb derivatives.

Simmons's approaches allow her students to recognize patterns, see how an author can manipulate language to create meaning, and recognize a word by its use in a sentence; this helps students anticipate these words and patterns "visually and contextually," allowing them to unpack complex sentences with much less effort (52). She also employs a strategy called sentence layering, which allows students to analyze a long, difficult sentence from a text and display a visual representation of clauses and phrases. Once a sentence is broken down, students can recognize how each group of words functions within it; a knowledge-based approach would not allow for such a straightforward, visual strategy for linguistic analysis. Following this analysis, students create their own sentences using stylistic imitation; this allows them to see the reading-writing connection and use the same structural patterns in their own writing, reinforcing their awareness that the structure of language can be manipulated for rhetorical effect.

The value of these approaches lies in their ability to develop analytical skills which will translate to other subjects, improving comprehension across the curriculum for any subject requiring reading and writing. In addition, some teachers have discovered approaches to grammar instruction that can foster analytical skills for a broader range of purposes. Taking into consideration the increasing demand for a balanced approach to Language Arts education that emphasizes digital literacy, some scholarly articles have addressed ways to integrate digital tools for the purpose of grammar analysis. One such article, published in 2014, addresses the successful incorporation of grammar-checking software within word processors, not because they are helpful tools in pointing out errors, but for the opposite reason. Grammar-checking features of popular word processing software often overlook errors or identify something as an error when it is actually correct, which motivated two English teachers (Reva Potter and Dorothy Fuller) to utilize these flaws, designing a research project in which students recorded and analyzed the software's recommendations. The teachers designed a four-month study to determine whether students would develop the critical knowledge to accept or reject the recommendations, improve their understanding of key grammar concepts, and whether the seventh-grade English classroom was an appropriate place to utilize the software for grammar instruction (Potter 37). Throughout the course of the study, students practiced writing grammatically correct sentences that would trigger an error response, compared the grammatical terminology of their textbooks with that of the software, and typed pre-test questions from their textbooks into the software to hypothesize why it would overlook or misidentify an error. As a result of their experiment, students developed the ability to recognize when the checker was faulty, improved their ability to evaluate

stylistic choices in their writing, and showed a marked improvement on standardized test scores compared with students from previous years.

Critics of this method would be correct in pointing out this experiment's limitations. It is possible that the teachers could have expectancy bias, and the sample size was small. In addition, the test scores were compared against those of previous students, rather than a control group, which means they do not reflect a measurable improvement in the writing and grammar competency of the experimental group. One could also argue that teachers saw improved results based on the direct grammar instruction they provided to students, but I see value in having students decide which grammar rules they want to analyze and compare the software's terminology with that of their textbooks, because it provides them with knowledge about the different labels that exist for the same structures, which they may come into contact with in interactions with future writing instructors. The experiment also got students engaged with the material in a way that connected to their daily and future interactions with word processing technology, providing valuable practice in composing prose on a computer instead of with paper and pen. Teachers reported that students demonstrated a newfound motivation to engage with the subject matter, which is an important aspect of learning that traditional approaches to grammar instruction have failed to provide. This experiment seems to reflect the theories of developmental psychologist Jean Piaget; in "The Origins of Intelligence in Children," he described children as "little scientists" that actively inquire about problems and construct knowledge (21). The natural tendency of learners to inquire about the world around them might explain why the authors' students seemed more motivated to engage with the process of inquiry, experimentation, and

analysis that this research project demanded. This type of exercise is valuable because it helps students understand that a computer algorithm is an imperfect tool; it may catch some common errors, but will often overlook errors of homonymy and commonly confused words (for example, definitely and defiantly), and can often provide incorrect suggestions for agreement errors (e.g. "*Little Women* were a great book"). Even more sophisticated grammar checkers, like the one provided to many college students on Grammarly.com, are also flawed because they often attempt to correct stylistic choices: the Grammarly software will suggest correcting every instance of passive voice, whether or not the student used it to place emphasis on the receiver of an action instead of the doer. Students must develop a strategy for recognizing the software's flaws so that they can evaluate the reliability of suggestions provided by modern tools. Students who have not received this type of instruction may not view the software critically enough, instead relying upon it as an authoritative voice and blindly accepting every suggestion it makes.

As the mainstream literacy debate continues to distance itself from the topic of grammar instruction, many college instructors are facing a grammar conundrum of their own: many incoming freshmen demonstrate little knowledge of the structure of language. Often, first-year composition curricula focus on higher-order writing concerns, such as organization and idea development, rather than lower-order (or sentence-level) concerns, which may be considered remedial. In addition, there are few resources available to compensate for the lack of instruction students received in secondary education. In my own experience working with undergraduate writing tutors, I have noticed that most are not adequately trained to work with students facing these sentence-level concerns. In

fact, many tutors express frustration when the students they work with expect them to act as proofreaders rather than instructors.

Instructors and writing tutors do have the option to direct students to other resources, such as online tutoring services purchased by universities, to address sentence-level issues with grammar and punctuation. Unfortunately, this option does not allow the type of practice needed for developing linguistic analysis skills; the online tutors simply highlight errors within student drafts and leave in-text comments in the form of a Socratic question (for example, "What other punctuation can you use to fix this comma splice?") or other suggestions ("Consider doing X because of Y"). This method may solve the short-term problem of improving the student's draft, but may also have far-reaching consequences for the student upon entering the workforce. In fact, Susan Denton, who advocates asynchronous online writing tutoring, admits the absence of data to support its usefulness, and even includes screenshots in which a "grammar informant" appears to re-write sentences in a student's draft. The author praises the online tutor's methods, concluding that the online tutors she studied "employ strategies to promote engagement on the student's part and encourage revision" (Denton 106). While I can see the value in online tutoring services to assist a struggling student, the author's claim that this method encourages revision seems questionable. Not only does this method discourage practice in revision, it performs the revision for the student, raising questions of academic dishonesty and invalidating the author's conclusion that the student learned how to revise.

The grammar conundrum in higher education demonstrates how crucial it is for secondary teachers to assess the individual needs of their students and utilize skill-based

approaches rather than knowledge-based approaches. It also highlights the indispensability of teachers who take the time to publish resources which emphasize the importance of meta-linguistic awareness, strategy development, and practice in sentence combining and layering, stylistic imitation, and linguistic analysis; teachers must protect and maintain best practices as government-mandated education standards continue to evolve.

Chapter 3: Critical Approaches to Fostering Metalinguistic Awareness

Language is a fluid, ever-changing tool of communication which shifts and evolves from generation to generation. Unfortunately, cultural critics and prescriptive grammarians often view these changes as degeneration, rather than evolution. Ideas about the degeneration of language have existed since antiquity (Grafton, 2010), and yet language continues to evolve to reflect societal changes. These ideas are still reflected in modern discourse, blaming the rise of Internet communication for the gradual decline of the English language. Such critiques can be frustrating for English teachers who feel pressured to enhance their instruction with technology in the classroom. Many teachers want to expose students to digital communication platforms like blogs, social networks, and online discussion forums, but also worry that the shortened communication demanded by instant messaging, text messaging, and character limits on social networking platforms may inhibit the clarity of communication in formal writing and speech.

In addition, Language Arts teachers face many challenges as student bodies become increasingly diverse. Students from a variety of socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds bring with them a variety of spoken dialects, which may interfere with their ability to read, write, and communicate effectively in an educational environment. Language Arts instructors may feel conflicted when addressing issues of dialect. Although dialects are an expression of heritage and culture, students are expected to conform to the conventions of Standard American English in their speech and writing. Cultural critics often associate linguistic evolution with a decline in literacy (Shiels, 61), but there are additional, and more nefarious, sociopolitical implications that

accompany nonstandard dialects: nonconformity to Standard American English (SAE) can often invite assumptions about a speaker's credibility, integrity, intelligence, and even morality (Lindblom and Dunn, 72). The use of a nonstandard dialect, whether it be rural, urban, or ethnic, demonstrates or implies certain aspects of the speaker's social status. Both positive and negative consequences may result from its use, depending on the audience. For example, speaking in a nonstandard dialect may demonstrate unity and identity within a social group or community. However, some people may associate the dialect with negative stereotypes, resulting in negative assumptions about the speaker.

Language Arts educators want more for their students than just basic literacy: students should also learn to speak and write effectively for a variety of purposes, audiences, and contexts. Language evolution and diversity complicates this goal: in addition to the reality that language evolves, we must face the additional challenge of respecting the rights of students to communicate in "their own patterns and varieties of language" (National Council of Teachers of English, 1985) while also preparing them to communicate in SAE in higher education and the workforce. This dual goal can seem contradictory. How can teachers respect dialect rights if students must conform to the conventions of SAE? Is it even possible to do both?

There are two competing philosophies about grammar instruction, which also complicate the role of the English teacher: the descriptive approach, which emphasizes rhetorical effectiveness, and the prescriptive approach to editing text for correctness. The former approach emphasizes the analysis of language as it is actually used by speakers and writers, while the latter approach emphasizes the analysis of language as it should be used according to Standard American English conventions. Both approaches have

practical applications for writing instructors, but their application relies upon opposing values: prescriptive approaches to grammar instruction demand conformity to an ideal dialect of prestige and power which inevitably, whether intentionally or not, marginalizes those who do not conform to the standard. Conversely, descriptive approaches challenge this ideology, positing that "all dialects are equally effective forms of language" (Akmajian 281). While one approach attempts to force arbitrary rules upon the English language, the other approach insists that language will continue to evolve despite prescriptivist attempts to standardize it.

Although instructors face enormous pressure to preserve the conventions of Standard American English, this should not be the main goal of communication instruction. Rather, educators should provide all students with an understanding of the sociopolitical consequences of language use, whether they speak a standard or nonstandard dialect. Teachers can utilize a critical approach to grammar instruction which emphasizes the rhetorical triangle as a springboard to developing communication skills; in other words, every opportunity for communication is a rhetorical situation involving a speaker who must maintain credibility with his audience. In every aspect of their lives, students are rhetors whose ethos may be damaged or enhanced by their rhetorical choices. They need the ability to manipulate language in a variety of discourses. Students need to understand how to navigate the rhetorical situations they will face during and after their education. The teacher, then, should strive to make all students bi-dialectal, demonstrating how to manipulate their use of language for school, home, digital communication, and other social contexts. In addition, instructors can uphold the students' right to their own dialect by teaching these conventions in a way that

does not denigrate those who prefer nonstandard usage, emphasizing that a person's conformity to language standards is completely unrelated to that person's character and intelligence. Even in situations that require the use of SAE, one should not make assumptions about a speaker if they slip into nonstandard usage.

A critical approach to grammar instruction is necessary to eradicate linguistic discrimination in education and the workplace. Students need to know how to navigate the societal hierarchies which reinforce this discrimination. One way teachers can achieve this is to demonstrate the importance of code-switching in different rhetorical situations. For example, dialect speakers can change their voices in certain situations to avoid linguistic profiling, also known as accent discrimination, which is "the auditory equivalent of racial profiling"; such discrimination can be difficult to prove, but it has been used to discriminate against job applicants, criminal defendants, and people seeking housing (Makoni 156-159). Students should understand the impact of dialect in professional situations. Although linguists maintain that all forms of language are equally expressive and complex, many admit the importance of having fixed rules for English to remain decipherable, and that some forms are more appropriate than others for education and business purposes; Elgin states "I try very hard to get straight in the minds of my students the distinction between 'good' and 'appropriate.' My native Ozark dialect is not 'appropriate' for conducting diplomacy at the United Nations. That does not mean that it is not just as 'good' as the dialect of Walter Cronkite, which in my classes is designated as representing the so-called Standard English" (Elgin 31). English teachers must place special emphasis on rhetorical grammar, demonstrating how language can be manipulated for different purposes and audiences. This will help to level the playing

field for speakers of nonstandard dialects in the workforce. According to W. F. Twaddell, an English teacher's goal is to make a student bidialectal. Teachers demonstrate comparisons when explaining the difference between written and spoken English, formal and casual English, and standard and nonstandard English (20). These comparisons demonstrate Hartwell's third type of grammar, linguistic etiquette, which is not really a grammar, but more of a linguistic action that is made appropriate for a particular communicative situation. Hartwell writes that English teachers understand the necessity of grammar 3 when they attempt to foster a sense of formal versus informal communication in students (109). Understanding this dichotomy is necessary for workplace or academic communication. Although bidialectalism develops somewhat naturally to students in the form of code-switching (speaking one way at home and another way at school, for example), these skills still need to be explicitly demonstrated for students so that they understand why and how to speak differently in formal and informal situations.

Linguistic profiling is not a hidden issue; in fact, it is often demonstrated in the news media. One does not have to look far to find evidence of linguistic discrimination based on the way a person speaks. A recent example occurred during the televised coverage of the George Zimmerman trial in the Florida "stand your ground" case. During this coverage, a woman took the witness stand to testify, and news commentators immediately questioned whether she was truly a credible witness because of her use of non-standard English and (for some strange reason) inability to use cursive handwriting. According to linguist John R. Rickford, part of the reason that justice was not served in the case was that "testimony in the African American vernacular was discredited"

(Rigoglioso 2014). Because of her dialect, and her inability to switch to SAE when speaking to attorneys, her credibility was called into question.

Cultural critics often express unfair assumptions about a person's integrity when discussing grammar usage. In 2003, political commentator Bill O'Reilly made the following statement: "If a working-class or poor child rejects education, does not learn to speak properly, does not respect just authority and does not understand that having babies at age 14 is a ticket to ruin, then that child's life will likely be tragic" (Lindblom and Dunn, 2006). This statement is a significant revelation of cultural stereotyping. Although many prescriptive grammarians argue the importance of keeping the English language standardized, many negative assumptions are deeply rooted in disdain for poor and minority populations. Stephen Pinker notes that many self-appointed authorities on the matter of language standardization demonstrate "dedication to implementing standards that have served the language well in the past" with some even claiming that they "are actually safeguarding the ability to think clearly and logically" despite the fact that they are "alien to the natural workings of the language system" (384-385). However, he also argues that "Linguists repeatedly run up against the myth that working-class people and the less educated members of the middle class speak a simpler or coarser language. This is a pernicious illusion" (15). It seems as though the most powerful in society will always find ways to vilify disadvantaged populations to maintain the status quo, even if that means equating a person's nonstandard dialect with a morality deficit.

This problem is rooted in our country's history of injustice: many activists during the Civil Rights Movement attempted to distance themselves from the dominant culture by rejecting the standard dialect. Students of color can become alienated by their peers

with accusations of "acting white" if they are too successful in education and speak SAE. Conversely, many middle-class and educated black Americans attempt to distance themselves from African-American Vernacular English to avoid association with its political implications of resistance to the dominant culture. In John Bean's discussion of dealing with issues of grammar and correctness in student composition, he explains the historical context for resistance to linguistic conformity: Although some speakers of nonstandard dialects prefer to "expurgate all vestiges of their home dialects in order to speak (and write) standard English" in an attempt to gain a higher social status, others might "resist standard English as a badge of pride, defiance, and social identity" (71). He provides the example of the Black Panthers, who consciously resisted conforming to the language of their oppressors.

Maintaining one's dialect is important for expressing solidarity within his or her native discourse community; additionally, becoming fluent in multiple dialects is important for discourse outside of that community. Instructors should emphasize the importance of students' becoming fluent in both SAE and their native dialect and maintaining the ability to switch between standard and nonstandard dialects for different rhetorical situations, whether they be oral or written. However, there are many who demand conformity to prescriptive rules, finding it necessary to defend the English language from corruption in order to avoid some type of impending doom. Stephen Pinker argues against the ideology held by prescriptive grammarians, quoting linguist Dwight Bolinger, who said that "the same number of muggers would leap out of the dark if everyone conformed overnight to every prescriptive rule ever written" (qtd. in Pinker 398). Some "language mavens," as Pinker refers to them, seem to believe they are

upholding literacy and high standards, when in reality they are ignorant of how language works and use that ignorance, and whatever media platform society will allow them, to make "unrelentingly offensive" statements to gain attention (399). This dogmatic belief in the established authority of linguistic tradition is reminiscent of religious or political ideologies that deride anyone who dares to disagree; language mavens are equal in stubbornness to the powerful in society who express hypotheses, but refuse to back them up with any reasonable evidence.

There are more diplomatic and efficient ways to address the problem that characteristics of speech can transfer to written prose; the problem can be addressed without shaming people and questioning their moral character. Bean advocates Richard Haswell's Minimal Marking strategy, which emphasizes the revision-oriented philosophy underlying the writing process. This approach would allow students to develop their own strategy for finding and correcting errors, and would allow teachers to spend significantly less time acting as editors and more time helping students develop coherent, well-thought-out ideas (82-83). Bean's advice supports the idea of teaching writing as a way to encourage critical and creative thinking, rather than demanding rigid conformity to established conventions.

The revision-oriented approach to addressing issues of grammatical correctness, while still emphasizing the importance of conventions, places them in a secondary position to critical thinking. In addition to allowing students to improve their writing through extensive drafting and revision, another critical approach to grammar instruction known as "grammar rant analysis" allows students to seek out examples of problematic grammar choices and analyze why they are considered to be problematic (Lindblom and

Dunn, 2006). Students are given a list of questions to help them analyze cultural prejudices that link language use with implications of declining morality, education, socioeconomic status, and intelligence. The questions do not require a specialized knowledge of linguistics, so students of all ability levels can participate in discussion and debate about what proper grammar is; in addition, this method draws their attention to assumptions made by powerful people in society. Using these worksheets as a springboard for discussion, students can make lists of what people like Bill O'Reilly would consider proper and improper speech, and can reflect upon their own experiences of being corrected, as well as look up what grammar and usage handbooks have to say about the "broken rules" in order to find out if the language issues involved in each case are actually more complicated than the grammar rant acknowledges. This approach can even be modified to include extensive research, persuasive writing, and public speaking components. English teacher Jeff House modified this approach for his own students, who were especially engaged with the material because they were given a real reason to be mindful of their rhetorical choices, rather than simply being told to memorize a rule. He describes the experience as an open forum in which students can "share their frustrations and questions, which makes the class something between a grammar lesson and therapy" (100). This approach can be used to meet educational standards and foster metalinguistic awareness; students become cognizant of the cultural assumptions accompanying language use, think critically about how they may be perceived in their speaking and writing, and develop a strategy for switching between formal and informal conventions in their day-to-day communication.

These approaches align with Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, which combines education with critical theory. Freire maintained that educators can either manipulate students into accepting the status quo, or they can encourage students to transform it. He argued that education "either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Mayo 5). A critical approach to grammar instruction would provide an understanding of the conventions of spoken and written English, but would also encourage students to question language authorities who force arbitrary rules upon spoken and written language; to analyze the assumptions of cultural critics who equate the violation of these rules with some sort of moral or cultural inadequacy; and to utilize both standard and non-standard dialects for appropriate rhetorical situations with the inevitable goal of reclaiming the social and political power to advocate and create social change.

If more teachers taught grammar this way, students might actually be interested to learn about it. One consequence of a critical approach to grammar instruction might be the evolution of spoken and written discourse conventions, a prospect that likely seems radical for those expecte to uphold the conventions of their discourse community, particularly that of composition instruction. However, I believe that education should be liberating, rather than limiting. We cannot expect marginalized students to rise above, without giving them the skills they need to do so, and we cannot expect privileged students to have open minds, if we never ask them to question the status quo.

Conclusion: Grammar Instruction for Success in Academic, Personal, Community, and Professional Life

There are a variety of approaches to grammar instruction that engage students, allow them to deconstruct the complexities of literature to understand how the parts of language are strung together to make meaning, manipulate language in their own writing to create rhetorical effect, understand the social consequences of rhetorical choices in their own speech and writing, develop strategies for navigating the shortcomings of digital writing tools, and approach language with an impartial, pro-diversity attitude that acknowledges the evolution of language and appreciates the complexities and contributions of nonstandard usage. I have established the value of these approaches, and the need for a revision-oriented philosophy to writing instruction, which will allow students to see writing as a process, rather than a punitive exercise in correctness. Students need an intimate understanding of how language continues to evolve to reflect cultural changes and allow for the expression of new ideas. However, there are several obstacles to address when considering the implementation of these approaches. Before implementing any new approach to instruction, educators must ask themselves an important question: am I preparing my students to regurgitate information from established authorities, to assimilate to society's expectations of correctness, or to view the world through a critical lens?

Over the past few years, grammar has disappeared from literacy debates; today's educational climate is increasingly politically charged because of recent attempts to standardize education under the Common Core State Standards Initiative. Education critics, teachers, and scholars still strive to answer the question: what do students need to

learn to communicate effectively? In the '80s, the search to answer this question focused on grammar, but the debate has now shifted to approaches like whole language and digital literacy. Regardless of the state of the debate, the rhetoric of declining literacy still continues in the news media, with cultural critics, and among educators, policymakers, and policy critics. This rhetoric, coupled with the heavy emphasis on standardized testing, can pressure instructors to demand conformity to prescriptive rules of grammar and overlook the importance of fostering metalinguistic awareness.

Many students view issues of correctness as just another obstacle to earning adequate grades in school or on college entrance examinations, while instructors view correctness as an important aspect of maintaining credibility in professional and academic communication. Although most educators do not arbitrarily demand conformity, they often expect students to conform to established conventions, rationalizing this expectation with the desire for their students to be successful in higher education and the workforce. Teachers want their students to be successful in their future careers, but mindless conformity to established rules of writing should not be the purpose of composition instruction. Such an expectation could promote language discrimination and obscure the reality of language evolution, the complexities of nonstandard usage, and the need for language to allow expression of new concepts. Teachers should evaluate the behaviors their classroom environments promote, remaining mindful of behaviors that may inhibit development of the skills needed to achieve success and fulfillment in all aspects of students' lives, not just their success in the workforce.

The demand for grammatical correctness in written and spoken English, whether on standardized tests or in everyday communication, is just one reflection of the

politically charged educational environment that places a heavy emphasis on the business model of education. The business-as-education approach dictates that students should be prepared to function as human resources in a global economy. Students must be trained to satisfy the demands of contemporary society's economic structure of production and consumption. While this approach may be important to student success in their future careers, it overlooks several other goals of education: promoting an analytic approach to participation in civic life, preparing students to contribute positively to their families and communities, and opening the doors of opportunity to upward social mobility (Hunt 8). A critical approach to grammar instruction provides the foundation for students to achieve success in all of these areas; the development of metalinguistic awareness has positive implications for all aspects of our students' lives by preparing them to communicate effectively in their own families and discourse communities, as well as in professional writing and speaking contexts. This approach allows students to evaluate literary and historical texts to gain insight into a diverse range of human experiences, and promotes the skills needed to analyze the rhetorical choices of community and political leaders; understanding how language is manipulated for every rhetorical situation will prepare students to think critically, communicate effectively, and make positive contributions to society.

A critical approach to grammar instruction should promote language diversity, encouraging students to maintain their native dialect when communicating with their families and native discourse communities. This approach emphasizes the *ethos* aspect of the rhetorical triangle: one must communicate effectively using their native dialect if they plan to maintain credibility among their family and peers. John Bean discusses the

tendency of some speakers of non-standard dialects to "expurgate all vestiges of their home dialects in order to speak (and write) standard English" in an attempt to gain social mobility (71). Bean's poignant observation is a reality for many students in higher education today; those with the inability to switch from their home dialect to SAE face varying degrees of ridicule and discrimination in the classroom, but even worse, the families of those students subject them to the same humiliation when they return home from college and speak in a more standard dialect. Many students do not even realize their speech patterns have changed, but their families and friends are quick to draw attention to it.

In my own experience with this phenomenon, I have attempted to eradicate any evidence of my upbringing in rural Virginia, fearing that people would associate my dialect with intellectual deficit. The type of discrimination I was trying to avoid is demonstrated often in dialect-shaming Internet memes frequently posted on social media; I recently saw one that read "When you say 'I seen,' I assume you won't finish that sentence with 'the inside of a book.'" My family uses *seen* instead of *saw* in their spoken dialect, and I worked hard to eradicate this type of perceived error from my own speech. Although this strategy was effective for navigating higher education and the workforce, years of speaking and writing SAE have diminished my ability to switch back to the southern drawl of my native Virginia Piedmont dialect. As a result, my spoken language appears to reflect an attitude of superiority or pedantry in interactions with people in my hometown. Some family members joke that I have turned into an "aristocrat," which is humorously ironic to me because of the Virginia Piedmont dialect's association with the aristocratic plantation culture of the Old South. Looking back on my attempts to

eradicate my dialect entirely, I wish someone had explained the importance of maintaining it for use in communicating with the members of my hometown community.

These kinds of stories are important to share with students, and English teachers should resist the type of linguistic imperialism that encourages speakers to conform to SAE to the extent that they cannot switch back. According to A. Suresh Canagarajah, teachers should demonstrate the "contextual appropriacy of different Englishes and teach students as many variants as possible" and emphasize that "any dialect has to be personally and communally appropriated to varying degrees in order to be meaningful and relevant for its users" (181). Canagarajah's argument is especially relevant for today's students, especially those from economically depressed communities or communities that are still struggling to recover from the financial collapse of 2008. During the financial struggles of the new millennium, many students were encouraged to pursue education to escape poverty, but are now treated with contempt when they return home speaking the prestige dialect of SAE. This might complicate their ability to gain political power or work in community organization, because they are seen as outsiders in their own hometowns. Thus, their education has improved their own ability to escape poverty, but has hindered their ability to bring economic prosperity to those they left behind. A critical approach to grammar instruction should emphasize the need for students to switch between dialects to avoid alienation from their home communities, so that they can contribute positively to their communities when they return.

In addition to allowing students to maintain their native dialect, a critical approach to grammar instruction should promote an understanding of effective communication in professional writing and speaking contexts. An effective method for

fostering this type of metalinguistic awareness involves the practice and analysis of business communications. Students should be exposed to the types of professional documents they may be expected to compose in their careers: memos, progress reports, requests, emails, and formal letters, among others. Students can gain insight into the rhetorical choices of business professionals when analyzing and composing documents that communicate different messages, whether they be positive, negative, or neutral, and whether the intention is to express a need for the audience to take action (urgent requests, for example) or express a need for the communication to end after the document has been sent (letters of rejection or termination, for example).

Rhetorical analysis of professional documents, in addition to the analysis of literary texts commonly seen in English courses, should address the effect of the author's linguistic choices. Many students come to college with the idea that the passive voice is never appropriate for formal writing; I always tell my students only to use it when they want to place emphasis upon the receiver of an action, rather than the doer. But how can students determine which is more appropriate for what they are writing? Rhetorical analysis exercises can help students to find the answer, and these exercises are often engaging because they are directly related to current controversies.

I recently attended a demonstration in which students were asked to evaluate the rhetorical choices of the president of Pennsylvania State University. The president, in the midst of allegations of a fraternity scandal involving highly inappropriate and potentially criminal behavior, penned a letter to address the controversy; it was filled with passive voice, ambiguous pronoun references, and vague jargon about "values" and "honor" (Barron 2015). In other words, it contained several moves that first-year composition

instructors encourage our students not to make in formal writing, whether it be academic or professional. However, each of these moves is made with a purpose, and helping students determine that purpose will allow them to understand that rhetorical choices in professional writing are always tailored to a specific audience, or several audiences, and can increase or undermine the credibility of the author. Students need to know when it is appropriate to use different rhetorical strategies in different professional contexts, and allowing them to analyze real-world examples of professional rhetoric, and practice composing and revising them, will prepare them for writing in the workplace. Such an activity may also help students practice using metalanguage that allows for discussion of rhetorical choices like passive voice or vague pronoun reference, so that when they are working on their own writing, they are not confused by this terminology.

Metalinguistic awareness allows students to evaluate their own use of communication in personal and professional contexts, but it can also be a valuable tool for analyzing literary and historical texts to gain insight into a diverse range of human experiences and how those experiences are represented in written and spoken discourse. For example, Paul Doniger discusses his approach to grammar instruction for reading comprehension, asking his students to make observations about the "themes of alienation and modality" in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* suggested by a language "empty of verbs" (102). Similarly, students can analyze the hectic, staccato prose of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* to find out what point he is trying to make about those who shamelessly profit from the economic hardship of others; or they might analyze the stream of consciousness style of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* to compare and contrast the complexity (or lack thereof) of the different narrators.

Once they have practiced such a rhetorical analysis of written discourse, these skills can transfer to a similar analysis of the spoken discourse of community and political leaders, or the discourse of news and internet media, so that they do not automatically accept everything they read or hear from established authorities as indisputable truth. In *Teaching as a Subversive Activity,* Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner advocate an approach to education which engages students in activities which produce knowledge, rather than those which ask them to regurgitate it. He states, "[students] are required to believe in authorities, or at least pretend to such belief when they take tests. They are almost never required to make observations, formulate definitions, or perform any intellectual operations that go beyond repeating what someone else says is true" (20). But how can we apply this process using metalinguistic awareness in grammar instruction? Some of my favorite classroom activities involve using contemporary politics and the news media to help students learn the difference between summary and analysis; these types of activities can easily be adapted for developing metalinguistic awareness through rhetorical analysis.

For example, students might evaluate former President George W. Bush's use of a Texas accent during various speeches throughout his presidency. Teachers might ask students to evaluate his attempt at achieving the image of a folksy Texan. For example, *Why does he speak with this particular dialect, if he was born in Connecticut and attended college in Connecticut? What kind of audience is he trying to reach? What kind of people is he trying to distance himself from? Who might identify with his use of common linguistic slip-ups? Who might feel as though he's speaking to the American populace as if they are stupid? How do you think this linguistic strategy affected*

American sentiment about going to war in the Middle East? How does this relate to Joe the Plumber acting as the face of the McCain-Palin campaign? When might it be appropriate for you (the student) to adopt a similar linguistic strategy? This is just one example of how rhetorical analysis can help students understand how skillful control of language can benefit them in both formal and informal communication. Metalinguistic awareness is, in effect, analysis of rhetorical choices, allowing students to participate in the activities that the authors advocate: defining, questioning, observing, classifying, generalizing, verifying, and applying (Knowles, qtd. in Postman and Weingartner 94); these activities are foundational, as all knowledge results from them.

A critical approach to grammar instruction, which acknowledges grammar as a tool for rhetorical analysis and application, will allow students to conceptualize language as a structure that reflects societal change and the world they live in, engaging the student in a more intimate relationship with language and meaning. Instruction which acknowledges grammar as a tool, rather than a punitive set of red marks on a page, will allow students to understand language as a structure that reflects societal change and the world they live in, engaging the student in a more intimate relationship with language and meaning. Linguistic Awareness will allow a novice at language manipulation to discover the "bigger picture" of language: the importance of dialects and foreign languages in relation to Standard American English, and how a student's skillful control of language can benefit him or her in both formal and informal communication: academically, professionally, and socially.

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