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WHY CAN'T THEY WRITE RIGHT? TEACHING GRAMMAR IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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WHY CAN'T THEY WRITE RIGHT?
TEACHING GRAMMAR IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

BY

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THESIS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

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ABSTRACT

WHY CAN'T THEY WRITE RIGHT? TEACHING GRAMMAR IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

By

Sarah J. Johnson

The discourse on grammar instruction in composition classes is highly polarized. In my thesis I explore various positions on this subject and conclude that grammar is an essential element of composition classes. However, I believe that grammar teaching methods of the past must be traded for more inclusive and focused instruction. My primary audience is new Teaching Assistants; with a wealth of information on either side of the debate on grammar in composition, this thesis seeks to delineate and clarify major ideas within the field and then present some practical guidelines for new TAs to consider while planning for class.

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Sarah J. Johnson
2009

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family

All four of you

For everything

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Introduction

If the students ... do indeed have this quasi-foreign relationship to the language they are learning to write, the teacher is in the position, first, of having to teach features of English he has seldom had to think about, features whose complexity and irregularity or arbitrariness have been masked by habit, and second, of having to search out the logic of his students' preferences for erroneous forms. – Mina Shaughnessy, 1979

As writers move further away from familiar ways of expressing themselves, the strains on their cognitive and linguistic resources increase, and the number of mechanical and grammatical errors they make shoots up. . . we should *welcome* certain kinds of errors, make allowance for them in the curricula we develop, analyze rather than simply criticize them. Error marks the place where education begins. – Mike Rose. 1989

Despite the fact that students claim to *want* to learn how to write correctly, they are slow to practice and reluctant to apply the fundamentals of grammar to their writing. In some cases this seems to be due to students' busy schedules and their unwillingness to commit time to the process of writing. Other students, however, who struggle through multiple drafts and appear to do all of the assigned work and revisions, seem unable to translate what they learn about grammar into their own language while writing.

Mina Shaughnessy, in her book *Errors and Expectations*, writes about basic writers and their instructors. Like my former students who said they wanted to learn grammar, Shaughnessy recognizes a desire for “one last chance to understand what is going on with written language so that they can control it rather than be controlled by it” (11). Shaughnessy is rightly focused on the roles of teachers, and she is convinced of the need for grammar instruction in composition classes.

I have taught three classes as a Teaching Assistant at Northern Michigan University, and I am currently teaching a fourth. During my first year as a TA, I

instructed two sections of EN111, the first 100-level composition course, and I was surprised by the needs of my students; their writing lacked focus, organization, purpose, and grammatical accuracy. During those semesters, I worked closely with my students, paying attention to their experiences; as a result, I learned several ways to engage them and encourage their questions, both about the writing process and final written products.

When I began teaching EN090, the developmental composition course, in the fall of 2008, I was shocked by my students' needs. Their diagnostic essays were riddled with incomplete thoughts, weak introductions and conclusions, illogical paragraph structure, and capitalization and punctuation errors. I felt ill-prepared and a bit frightened. I didn't know where to start.

My solution to the initial reluctance I felt was to take each week day-by-day, outlining small but connected goals to accomplish throughout the semester. I committed myself to keeping notes about the process in a teaching journal and began reading multiple grammar handbooks and rhetorics. I wanted to find as many ways as possible to introduce grammar exercises and approaches to revision to my students. In short, I wanted them to be able to create their own goals, both as writers writing and writers editing.

This self-study has worked well for me, but I am still a novice. I feel that I have learned some effective methods of helping students practice the writing *process*, but I worry that I have yet to discover a way to teach grammar, usage, and mechanics in my classroom. If the goals of the composition class are to engage students as writers, encourage their critical thinking abilities, and enable them to produce coherent, comprehensive essays so they can find success later in college and in the work force, then

I see the incorporation of grammar instruction as crucial to this task, and this thesis presents the research upon which I base my teaching philosophy.

In Chapter One, I explore how the composition class began in American colleges and how the incorporation of grammar instruction has been a controversial element since its origin. Also, I examine the ways different practitioners in the field of English studies have approached grammar, providing a history of the research, debates, and ideas about instruction.

In Chapter Two, I present the challenges and necessary considerations relevant to the developmental, or basic, composition classroom. Beginning with an introduction to Mina Shaughnessy and her experiences with open-admissions at CUNY, I discuss several contributing scholars who focus on the experiences of basic writers and the basic writing classroom.

The focus of Chapter Three is on the concept of error, and I use Joseph Williams' article, "The Phenomenology of Error," as a centerpiece. My goal with this short chapter is to address the subjectivity of errors, but also to consider the needs of our students beyond our classrooms.

Chapter Four revolves around two of my focal sources, Rei R. Noguchi and Constance Weaver; their approaches to incorporating grammar in the composition classroom are cited often by others in the field. Each of them advocates an approach that examines the benefits of teaching grammar by examining what unconscious knowledge students bring to the class.

In Chapter Five I examine more recent publications. While many of the articles I've chosen to discuss focus on the developmental classroom, they are all easily

applicable to any first-year composition course. These articles are about grammar instruction, but their suggested exercises and activities range from merging critical thinking with grammar to using various conference methods for grammar discussions.

Not only does my thesis outline key observations, by myself and many others, about first-year composition environments, but it also provides insights on how to stay focused and forward-thinking through the process of teaching. Addressing higher-order concerns and discussing essays critically with students are both necessary aspects of the composition class. These tasks can, however, be at times slow and time-consuming, but students seem to embrace these discussions and grow from them; fitting grammar instruction into such an already ambitious curriculum is a daunting, and often intimidating, goal.

I feel that TAs, entering this level of the academy, need a source that is as thorough and concise as possible: a resource that directly addresses the best strategies for grammar instruction that neither eclipses nor dulls the excitement of class activities. This thesis is my answer to that need.

Chapter 1: The History of Grammar in Composition

Upon entering the ongoing conversation regarding grammar instruction in college composition courses, one will quickly notice the proverbial line in the sand. There is a definitive divide between those who profess the uselessness and harmful effects of grammar instruction, and those who urge that there is a need for some degree of grammar know-how.

The varying perspectives opposite this divide can be traced back through the history of American colleges and the different ways grammar, and ultimately composition, fit into them. As John C. Brereton notes, in *The Origin of Composition*, American colleges of the late nineteenth-century were

much more language-based than the new university; classics masters taught grammar thoroughly and exactly, paying meticulous attention to detail through class exercises, recitations, and written compositions in Greek and Latin . . . Proponents claimed that the ancient languages provided mental discipline and trained the powers of the mind. (4)

These schools didn't feature English prominently into the curriculum, and despite the inclusion of language studies, "most colleges in 1860 had no course in composition or in English literature" (4).

Robert Connors echoes this observation in his essay "Grammar in American Composition: An Historical Overview." He begins by stating "the relationship between the teaching of writing and the various bodies of knowledge and prejudice called 'grammar' has always been problematical." On the subject of composition in the early

years, he writes, “grammar instruction—before 1850 or so—had nothing to do with composing essays or even with constructing sentences. It was an absolutely formal discipline that demanded a great deal of rote memorization of terms, complex analyses of given sentences, and suspicious patrols through other sentences searching for ‘errors’” (3-4). Connors goes on to describes the methodology of grammar instruction as threefold: the memorization of parts of speech and their respective rules, practice in the application and explanation of these rules through parsing, and the detection of errors in flawed sentences supported with an explanation as to how and why the sentence was corrected.

This methodology began to change, according to Connors, around 1850 when the influence of European pedagogies—inductive pedagogies—were introduced to American educators. William F. Woods discusses this influence in his article “The Evolution of Nineteenth-Century Grammar Teaching.” Woods explains that the schools of post-revolution America were “disastrous—in some cases, worse than they had been one hundred years before” (4). However, the effects of industrialization, bringing more middle-class people to urban areas, matched with the ideas of reform that can be traced to European influence led to an educational reform in America. Woods places these changes around the 1830s to 1840s.

While the educational reform was multifaceted, Brereton sums up the change that took place succinctly, “Almost all colleges put their students through a four-year program of required courses. There were no majors, hardly any electives, no sections, and precious little course work outside of classics, mathematics, and some science” (1). He adds, “The purpose of the college was to build character, not to supply useful knowledge. This school, dominant in 1860, would be swept away by 1900.” Brereton also explores

the impact of German-educated American professors returning to reshape the face of American colleges, and as a result of that re-modeling, the ancestors of our composition classes were born.

Grammar in Composition: Into the Twentieth Century

As descendants of those early composition classes, today's first-year writing course requirements are supported by a pedagogy that is more different than similar, despite a wealth of resemblances. The teacher-centered classroom of the past made way for the process pedagogies of today. What has remained, we can see, is the use of prescriptive inclinations in the instruction of grammar—we like to outline for our students how our language works and what they need to do to use it well. Best intentions aside, some things just don't work. Before grammar had situated itself comfortably into the composition classroom, teachers were starting to question whether or not it belonged.

Connors' description of the three prong approach to teaching grammar is a good summary of what is referred to as traditional grammar instruction, but the teaching methods of the old college were not the only thing questioned when schools underwent reform. Woods states that the "crucial difference" between old and new American colleges was the way teachers taught and interacted with students. Previously, students were expected to receive knowledge through memorization and activities generated for application; then, that knowledge was supposed to stick and be forever useful, or useable. As time went on, students moved from passive recipients and were called to participate in the learning process (9). Woods notes that the changes occurring in the English curriculum mirrored those that were happening throughout American schools:

The same change of emphasis from the student as *tabula rasa* to student as active agent—an agent with an active *imagination*, as the Romantic critics liked to say—occurs also in the microcosm of English grammar teaching during the course of the [nineteenth] century. In the classroom the memorizing and reciting of grammar rules give way to the parsing of sentences, and then to sentence “analysis” and the construction (“synthesis”) of sentences, as the old passion for correct usage accommodates itself to the new interest in self-expression. Written exercises steadily increase in length and complexity as more attention is given to language as “the vehicle of thought.” (5)

Woods describes these changes as the roots of progressive teaching, and calls this period an “evolutionary” or “formative” time in grammar teaching, a time that extended through the “reforms of the 1830s, to the eclecticism of the 1850s.”

Throughout his article, Woods discusses the way textbooks employ the old and new ways of teaching, both grammar and writing. While there is not enough room to explore this subject more fully, I wish to note that anyone interested in the details of this period, specifically the history of grammar in textbooks, would benefit from reading this article. What I do want to emphasize in this chapter is the way Woods examines how the “old” and the “new” grammars blended for a while, and how they were both utilized by different teachers, exclusively and concurrently. Woods names this an eclectic period and he notes that the two approaches, traditional and what he calls “reform pedagogy,” were able to coexist congruously because they shared a similar foundation: the faculty theory of psychology: “[b]oth were intended to develop such faculties as perception,

imagination, memory, and understanding” (11). Through his examination of this eclecticism, Woods examines the way the very definition of grammar began to change.

To emphasize the changes in grammar instruction, Woods analyzes various grammar texts (12). He begins with the definition of grammar from Lindley Murray’s 1795 *An English Grammar*: “the ‘art’ of being a body of rules to be memorized and applied as a skill.” Woods points out that this definition omits any reference to a speaker or a writer. He then cites a definition from 1846 which is similar to Murray’s, but does include the doer: “A knowledge of grammar enables us to speak and write correctly (Tower qtd in Woods). Peter Bullions’s 1862 book *A Practical Grammar of the English Language* shows a more drastic change. What is most significant, Woods illustrates, is that in Bullions’ text, grammar is defined only after the term language is: “the means by which we express our thoughts.” He also mentions that Bullion’s grammar has a double role; he defines it as a science that “investigates the principles of language in general,” and as an art that, “teaches the right method of applying those principles to a particular language” (qtd. in Woods). Then, citing Samuel Greene’s 1874 book, *Analysis of the English Language*, Woods observes that grammar is not even mentioned in the introduction. The introduction does, however, define language as, “the medium through which we communicate our thoughts (qtd. in Woods). It is clear to me that Green’s book, published in 1874, heralds the paradigm shift accompanying the process and expressivist movements that would follow in another hundred years.

While grammar was being defined and redefined, composition was starting to root itself in the academy. The changing face of American colleges due to European influence, affected the studies of English in different ways. A major effect was the move

from a primarily oral environment to a written one. Brereton explains that while some mistakenly consider the nineteenth-century college as relying on orality, “it seems more accurate to say that the nineteenth-century college had a more balanced mix of oral and written work, and that the new university dropped much of the oral emphasis” (4).

On the issue of the genesis of the composition course, Brereton cites four contributing factors as the most significant. First, he writes about the previously mentioned effect of returning Americans who studied in Germany. Second, Brereton discusses the “dramatic expansion of knowledge” (6): Because students began working toward specialization in specific fields, chiefly the sciences, the curriculum that centered around classic studies had to adapt. The third influence he cites is the growing student population, “College enrollments were relatively stactic in the years 1850-1880, growing much less than the population . . . Between 1890 and 1910 enrollments practically doubled, and by 1920 almost doubled again” (7). The final factor Brereton discusses relates to educators, including “individuals with a vision;” teachers and administrators who were the force behind American colleges growing into American universities, such as Andrew White, James Angell, Daniel Coit Gilman, David Starr Jordan, and others (8). Taken together, Brereton insists, these four factors outdated rhetoric and paved the way for composition. Connors’ research concurs, calling 1850-1900 the period where “systematic theoretical rhetoric” was discarded in favor of a more “intensely practical course in correct writing” (8).

Connors then describes the role Harvard played in creating a course to teach writing. The history of Harvard’s course, English A, is well documented. Connors shows how students’ required written admission essays horrified their instructors. The

Harvard faculty could not accept the “poor writing and the number of egregious grammatical errors produced by the graduates of America’s best academies” (9).

Connors notes that of the students who took the tests, more than fifty percent of them failed. In another light, Brereton describes Harvard’s English A class as a positive step forward, noting that the composition program “marks the only time a major university made such a total commitment to student writing” (11).

Connors most telling point is that the teachers at Harvard blamed students’ poor writing abilities on their previous schooling; they insisted that the students’ “earlier grammar lessons had not ‘taken’” (10). Connors notes that this assertion is illogical, insisting that the previous grammar lessons were not at fault; instead, what the students lacked was practice in writing: “Yet the power of grammar as a panacea for writing ills was still strong in the 1870s and 80s” (10).

The situation described by Connors mirrors the circumstances in grammar-composition studies today: On one side, advocates argue for the elimination of any and all grammatical terms or discussions from the composition classroom, while others argue for a reincorporation of grammar and composition studies and practices. In the next section I will briefly discuss some of the research studies on this issue. What I intend to show is that neither perspective is right or wrong, that this discussion too closely resembles a dichotomy that cannot be reconciled, and that the data and research is insufficient because the subject of grammar in composition is too intangible to be measured and quantified by the artificial situations created to study grammar’s efficacy.

The fundamentals of grammar are complicated. Even the students in my developmental composition course insisted that they wanted to *know* grammar, to *get* it.

But that motivation needs to be met with an equally committed instructor—on who doesn't rely on grammar handout to do the job for them. As Woods notes in his discussion of grammar in textbooks; once these books started using chapters and sections within those chapters, "it was easier to find a given definition, rule, or discussion. Just as important, it was easier to give assignments" (6). While this discussion refers to ease for teachers who instruct a classroom of various aged-students, I believe it can also refer to a hypothetical and unfortunate situation wherein an overworked or under-motivated teacher relies on such a text to do the job s/he is supposed to manage. My point here is that grammar isn't learned through reading—nor can students learn, memorize, and follow rules. The entire experience must take place within some sort of meaningful context.

Studying the Studies: Discordant Discourse

Perhaps the problems of grammar in the composition class began in 1906 when J.R. Hoyt structured an experiment wherein ninth-graders wrote timed essays and answered grammar questions about a poem.

More than a half-century later, the studies investigating grammar instruction in writing classes sought to be systematic and comprehensive. The NCTE's *Research on Written Composition*, written by Richard Braddock et al. and published in 1963, was just such a document—based on a collection of findings from other studies. The report's most famous quote is incorporated into most articles that address grammar in composition, if not in its entirety, then at least in spirit. New TAs do not need to know the dense history of research, studies, and articles about grammar in composition, but they should be aware of the importance of this issue and the heated arguments between opposing researchers. Since my primary audience for this thesis is comprised of fellow

TAs, I will not discuss the studies specifically. Instead, I will address the issues surrounding them, making appearances in the journals for this side or that.

In 1977, Janice Neuleib began her article, “The Relation of Formal Grammar to Composition,” by asking her readers to: “Assume that you are an English teacher who has been told again and again that there is no point in teaching formal grammar to your composition classes because all the research shows that learning grammar will not help students to write well” (247). She then asks us, her readers, if our reaction would be to find this research, read it, and give up grammar. Or, she wonders, would we try to confirm or dispute the research by conducting our own research.

From there, Neuleib discusses five studies that investigated grammar in composition: Harris, 1962; Braddock et al., 1963; Bateman-Zidonis, 1964; Mellon, 1969; and Elley, 1976. Neuleib, critical of each study for different reasons, spends the next three pages of her short article discussing what she finds problematic.

Before reading Neuleib’s 1977 article, I had read about her ideas while reading “Grammar, Grammars and the Teaching of Grammar,” by Patrick Hartwell. Hartwell’s article was recommended to me by a professor in my department during a discussion about removing grammar from composition classes. Hartwell minces no words; his stance is firm, focused, and unflinching. Unfolding like a rant, albeit a well sourced and thorough one, Hartwell’s piece begins with the Braddock quote:

In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or,

because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in composition, even a harmful effect on improvement in writing. (105)

Writing in 1985, Hartwell reflects on the previous decades of grammar studies, as well as how those studies have been accepted by some practitioners in the field, and notes, “seventy-five years of research has for all practical purposes told us nothing. The two sides are unable to agree on how to interpret such research” (106).

Ultimately, Hartwell concludes that the research makes a clear pronouncement: “any form of active involvement with language would be preferable to instruction in rules or definitions” (125). This conclusion mirrors the research of Ash, Ellen and Frogner, and Strom (126). Hartwell also mentions the research of Mellon and Bateman-Zidonis, whose studies on the effects of pairing sentence combining with transformational grammar, showed positive results. However, Hartwell introduces O’Hare’s research that omitted the grammar element and reached the same conclusion. The benefit was attributed to the sentence combining and not the grammar instruction (127).

Before Hartwell reaches this conclusion, he highlights the ideas of some of his contemporaries. In the second paragraph of his article he mentions Janice Neuleib’s comment that, upon reading Braddock et al.’s report she “is tempted, ‘to sputter on paper’ at reading the quotation, and Martha Kollin . . . labels people like me ‘alchemists’ for our perverse beliefs” (106). Hartwell summarizes their articles stating that, “Neuleib reviews five experimental studies, most of them concluding that formal grammar instruction has no effect on the quality of students’ writing nor on their ability to avoid error. Yet she renders in effect a Scots verdict of ‘Not Proven’ and calls for more research on the issue.” He is equally critical of Kollin, who also reviewed several studies, and writes: “she calls

for more careful definition of the word *grammar* . . . and she concludes with a stirring call to place grammar instruction at the center of the composition curriculum (106).

Hartwell believes that a great source of the discord between the two sides the “grammarians and the anti-grammarians” (106), is due to the two models of composition they each espouse. “Those of us who dismiss the teaching of formal grammar” have a model that highlights interactions between students and their environments of “mastering literacy.” On the other side, Hartwell defines the “grammarians” as having a model of composition “that is rigidly skills-centered and rigidly sequential” wherein the “formal teaching of grammar, as the first step in that sequence, is the cornerstone or linchpin” (108).

When I read Neuleib’s article, the passage from which Hartwell quoted: “If it were possible to sputter on paper, I would do so,” took on a new context. Initially, Neuleib, asserts that research data that are based on objective testing as opposed to studying writing samples are invalid (247)—Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer write: “Uncommon, however, is carefully conducted research which studies the effect of formal grammar on actual composition over an extended period of time” (qtd in Neuleib 248). Then her frustration comes from the fact that after this qualifying statement, Braddock et al. quickly summarize the Harris study and then write the passage that is so often quoted:

If it were possible to sputter on paper, I would do so. The latter sentence has often been quoted to cap the whole discussion of grammar and composition, but no one seems to have read the sentence just above it. In 1963, proof of the issue either way was quite sketchy. (248)

The Braddock quote has been cited by hundreds of articles (a quick search on google scholar lists 214), and Neuleib's article does indeed culminate in a call for more research. "It is no wonder," she writes, "that the hard sciences look at us a bit cynically; we need to clarify our findings by duplicating our experiments and by improving research controls" (249). Her assessment of the research includes a gradual outline of the various studies' shortcomings which I discuss below.

According to Neuleib, in R. J. Harris' study from 1962, five high-school classes being taught formal grammar were compared with five classes being taught "common composition errors using classroom correction and sentence-generation practice" (247). Although in this case the results came from compositions, and not objective tests, the result that the former grammar groups performed less well than the latter groups is challenged by researcher John Mellon, who believes the study was "constrained by error-oriented pedagogy" (qtd. in Neuleib).

Neuleib then discusses the 1964 study by D. R. Bateman and F. J. Zidonis; after summarizing the research (and noting that this study, too, used students' writing to assess their improvements), she criticized the "small size of the sample and the limited achievements of the students in the sample" (248). To make her point, she elaborates on this criticism by noting that the writing improved in, "sentence structure only and that only in four students."

When I read Martha Kollin's "Closing the Books on Alchemy," from 1981, I found (just like Hartwell) the Braddock quote on the first page. Like Neuleib, as Hartwell noted, Kollin discusses and critiques previous studies investigating grammar in composition. Initially, she questions whether the authors of the Braddock study could

have anticipated the far-reaching effects of their grammar passage. And if they did, she muses, might they have altered the statement by defining the term grammar or by toning down their language (139-140). Kollin elaborates, stating that “one of [her] main criticisms,” of the passage is

its undefined terms. The other is its “strong and unqualified” language. The authors’ conclusions in every other area of composition, without exception, are couched in tentative language, as well they should be: “with these cautions” [. . .] “some of his procedures . . . seem very questionable, and some of his conclusions seem to leap beyond the reasonable distance” [. . .] “it is not clear yet” [. . .] “certainly it has not been proved” [. . .] Such qualifications concern the methodology as well as the interpretation of data in every area except the teaching of grammar. (140)

Kollin’s analysis is similar to Neuleib’s, but it is much more thorough. The shortcomings Kollin names are due to: researchers who didn’t use compositions and based their conclusions on grammar test scores compared with class final grades (143), researchers who used a grammar test to check the efficacy of grammar instruction (145), and raters who may or may not have been trained, resulting in subjective scoring (142), among others. Kollin ends her article with the appeal to researchers to discover what grammar works (148), noting that “‘Grammar; need not be synonymous with diagramming or drillwork or memorizing rules; studying grammar can also mean thoughtful discussion of choices in generating and combining and manipulating sentences—at every level of the curriculum” (149).

Interestingly, R. Andrews et al. claim that their study, “The Effect of Grammar Teaching (Syntax) in English on 5 to 16 Year Olds’ Accuracy and Quality in Written Composition,” is the most comprehensive study on the matter of grammar in composition to date. And this study has been criticized for the same shortcomings listed above. The study has two parts: on syntax and sentence combining. In the study summary, posted online, the authors conclude:

In terms of practice, the main implication of our findings is that there is no high-quality evidence that the teaching of grammar, whether traditional or generative/transformational, is worth the time if the aim is the improvement of the quality and/or accuracy of written composition.

And on the subject of previous research and possible future research, they write

While we do not claim the final word on the question, the present review has been the largest systematic review in the history of research on the topic to date. This does not mean that other reviews of different aspects of the question of the relationship between grammar teaching and writing quality and accuracy cannot be undertaken.

Finally, the authors note that, “There are limitations to this particular review. The teaching of traditional grammar or syntax to improve written composition tends to ignore the levels of language immediately below and above the sentence” (Andrews et al.). It is interesting to note, however, that the authors conclude their summary with a statement encouraging further research to examine “what is effective, and to ask clearer and more pertinent questions about what works in the development of young people’s literacy.”

“Ways of Knowing: Writing with Grammar in Mind,” was published a year later, in 2005, in the English journal *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, by Debra Myhill. In her discussion about grammar in composition, she notes that while we have a firm understanding of the processes of learning to read, based on a “considerable body of well-respected research,” there is no similar body of empirical knowledge in the field about writing (77). Myhill observes that “the past forty years or so have been characterised by rather polarised (sic), ideologically-driven debates about whether teaching grammar improves writing, debates which have tended to reveal more about the proponent’s stance than about the issue itself” (79). Like Neuleib, Myhill describes the many studies’ oppositional conclusions, and like Kollin, she believes,

What would be so much more interesting, and valuable, would be to explore in more subtly nuanced detail what research can tell us about which aspects of grammar and knowledge about language are most relevant to writing, whether direct teaching of these features can help children improve their writing, and what teaching strategies are most successful in enabling this to happen. (80)

The critiques seem to match the studies, but the studies, over time, as Neuleib and Myhill note, fail to match each other. It is a snake eating its tail.

Finding a Path: For the TA

So what should one do while attempting to navigate the classroom during those first few years of teaching? When one is perched on the balance beam, prepared to dance for the students’ attention, that first batch of essays can be a shock: like looking down

and realizing that there is no safety net: only more essays and more graduate coursework to be tackled.

There are many excellent sources wherein authors discuss and analyze the research of the last sixty years and then present a personal pedagogical approach. Constance Weaver, in her book *Teaching Grammar in Context*, devotes a chapter “Teaching Grammar: Reasons for, Evidence Against,” to examining research studies and what they conclude. Beginning with earlier studies (NCTE’s Curriculum Commission, 1936; Encyclopedia of Educational Research, 1950), Weaver then touches on the linguistics’ structural and transformational grammar before moving into a close analysis of three studies: Macauley, 1947; Elley, 1976; and McQuade, 1980 (7-28). She ends the chapter quoting Rei R. Noguchi’s stance on grammar instruction, “In the end, less is more” (qtd. in Weaver 28). Similarly, Myhill discusses studies and analyzes how children learn. While both of these scholars tend to focus on grammar knowledge and usage among children, they each conclude by insisting that more research is necessary—that more questions must be asked.

Noguchi’s book, *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities*, preceded Weaver’s by five years, and although it differs slightly in its pedagogical approach, it also includes a brief introduction to some of the research in the field.

In Chapter Four I have included a close study of these two thinkers. Not necessarily representative of the field of “grammarians,” Noguchi and Weaver do represent the many teachers and thinkers who strive to create a middle ground—a pedagogy that is neither for nor against any particular *thing*, but is, instead, devoted to the

effective incorporation of some “grammar” into writing classes, grammar that enables and doesn’t detract.

Before I discuss these scholars, I want to touch on the specific challenges of teaching a basic writing course in the next chapter. From there I will spend a brief chapter on the nature of error and how we perceive and react to it.

Chapter 2: The Basic Writer: A Review of Some Literature

Just as composition was once only a seedling in the American college, so too has the field of developmental composition had to endure its sprout stage as it struggled to establish itself in academia. I had the opportunity to teach a section of our developmental composition course, EN090, during my third semester of graduate school. The challenges I faced were as varied as the students' personalities and previous composition experiences. Some students felt defeated by the very idea of composing a paper, while others were simply unaccustomed to being accountable for the work assigned to them. Equally difficult was balancing the students strengths and weaknesses. Where one student merely lacked practice in developing her complex and careful thoughts, another student was capable of crafting effective sentences, but their content was simple and underdeveloped. Throughout the semester, I was continually referring to published authors and online sources to help me maintain both my momentum and my focus.

One of the biggest names a student of composition pedagogies will come across, with respect to basic or developmental writing, is Mina Shaughnessy. She is so well-known because of her involvement with the open-door policy for all high-school graduates at the City University of New York in the 1970s, and her book *Errors and Expectations*, which is based on those experiences. At CUNY, all of the incoming students had to write a placement essay, and in the introduction of her book, Shaughnessy notes that the faculty response to these students was one of alarm:

[T]eachers announced to their supervisors (or even their students) after only a week of class that everyone was probably going to fail. These were

students, they insisted, whose problems at this stage were irremediable.

To make matters worse, there were no studies nor guides, nor even suitable textbooks to turn to. (3)

In *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy reflects on the initiative, stating that the “teachers who five years ago questioned the educability of these students now know of their capabilities and have themselves undergone many shifts in attitude and methodology” (3-4).

The CUNY initiative was one of the earliest such programs, and Shaughnessy was an obvious and sensible figurehead for the program, but she had her detractors. Joseph Harris makes some historical observations about the development of developmental writing, “There is no question that Shaughnessy brought a new sense of urgency to the problem of teaching underprepared writers. But it wasn’t a new problem” (425). Harris cites Bruce Horner’s article “Mapping Errors and Expectations for Basic Writers,” while criticizing Shaughnessy’s use of the terms pioneers and frontier. He writes that, “Horner points to the troubling, (indeed, almost unconsciously racist), implications of describing teachers and students in terms of pioneers and natives” (425), and then discusses others who were researching and dealing with developmental writers before and along-side Shaughnessy citing: *English for the Rejected* by Holbrook, 1961; *Growth through English* by Dixon, 1967; and *Talkin and Testifyin* by Smitherman, published the same year as *Errors and Expectations*, Harris looks more critically upon the *frontier* Shaughnessy claimed to be blazing. Ultimately, what Harris is most critical of is Shaughnessy’s focus on student errors. He writes, “what struggling students need, then,

is not more of the basics but a sense of what others find most exciting and useful about books, writing, and ideas” (429).

Critical Conversation: Various Voices

While it feels irresponsible to continue a discussion about basic writing classes without addressing the societal, cultural, and economic factors that make up a classroom of basic writers, and even further neglectful to abstain from an assessment of, or analytic inquiry into, institutional or attitudinal beliefs and fallacies that permeate this field of research, the goals of this chapter are to consider the experiences of others who have worked with basic writers and written about their classroom experiences, as well as to touch on some of the more complex considerations one should make while beginning to teach a basic writing class. Comprehensively, I hope this section serves as a brief background reading on the developmental composition class. In chapter five there is an overview of various activities that can be incorporated into the daily class periods and time spent with basic writers as individuals, and not a population of individuals.

The literature on basic writing pedagogies is rich with unique and challenging ideas and considerations for teachers of basic writing classes, but it is so vast and varied that it can feel impenetrable to the beginning TA. In *Errors and Expectations*, Mina Shaughnessy provides chapters dense with student writing samples that she deconstructs and reexamines with a considerate and careful eye for recognizing, categorizing, and understanding the errors that students produce.

One of Harris’ most poignant concerns about Shaughnessy’s text is the fact that she uses first drafts written by students who had to produce in a timed setting; there is “nearly [a] complete lack of interest in revision . . . her goal in teaching was not to have

students go back to edit and revise what they had written,” Harris argues, “but to write new impromptu pieces with fewer mistakes in them” (427).

Another writer who voices a similar concern is Tom Fox. In “Basic Writing as Cultural Conflict” Fox is critical of approaches that marginalize or seek to quickly classify basic writing students as deficient. While Fox is discussing African American students in this article, I believe his analysis is meaningful to all basic writing instructors, regardless of the diversity or ethnicity of the students in their classes. Using a student essay, Fox outlines the feats that a basic writer is capable of harvesting and the need for instructors to see past the undergrowth of error-riddled paragraphs and sentences. This student writer, Leon, is capable of incorrect apostrophe usage, punctuation problems, missing words, incomplete sentences, subject-verb agreement errors and more; however, he is also capable of producing a thoughtful and analytic personal story, rich with details, and framed with a focused introduction and conclusion. As Fox observes:

To see Leon’s paper as evidence of ‘serious multiple skill deficiencies’ misrepresents the complexity of his writing. It ignores the very tricky rhetorical situation that Leon successfully negotiates . . . Leon successfully argues for a particular interpretation of his experience, developing it, supporting it with evidence. (77)

This approach seems to differ from Shaughnessy’s on many levels, yet similarities do exist when a review of Shaughnessy’s career is taken into consideration.

Neither *Errors and Expectations* nor its author are wholly focused on error, despite what other articles and writers may say while criticizing her and her book.

Toward the end of her book, Shaughnessy notes that students need not produce error-less

sentences before they begin to explore the other challenges of writing. “While it is true,” she states, “that papers with large numbers of errors in grammar and punctuation are likely to be poorly organized and inadequately developed as well, the two deficiencies are not causally connected” (274). Shaughnessy then argues, much like others do in direct criticism of her book, that student writers are likely to find more satisfaction in the “progress beyond the sentence.”

Kelly Ritter’s article, “Basic Writing at Yale, 1920-1960” examines developmental writers from a different perspective. Ritter describes the *Awkward Squad*, a group comprised of students who didn’t make the grade in Yale’s freshman literature course. “Thus, the remedial course was neither a placement mechanism nor a prerequisite to any required first-year literary course, but rather an amorphous site to which students were remanded by their writing instructors. It served a particularly separatist function” (21). On Shaughnessy, Ritter believes *Errors and Expectations*, “reified the pedagogy and, by extension, the politics of the basic writing classroom. She asserts the classification of developmental writers needs to change from deficient to underprepared,

shifting the origins from the student herself (and her own intellectual motivation) to the culture and community in which she was schooled. Such a shift rejects the edict to ‘make up’ neglected skills in favor of declaring these skills as never presented to the student in the first place. This is the right shift; it has helped many students where previously they would have been allowed to fail. (12)

However, Ritter is critical of Shaughnessy's legacy, asserting that it is unfortunate that we still define "basic" according to Shaughnessy's students at CUNY. Ritter asks the rhetorical question "why should we care about basic writers at Yale?" and then responds, "such 'caring' is the first step in truly re-defining the basic writing course—and by extension, the array of students who have inhabited it." Ritter sees this as an important advance in the way we identify and put an end to, "the social and intellectual stratification that plagues these students across all institutional types" (14).

David Bartholomae, writing in 1980, ponders the meaning behind the term "basic writers." He states that while we can deduce quite a bit about basic writing classrooms and textbooks, the term basic writer lacks a clear and consistent meaning: "We must begin by studying basic writing itself – the phenomenon, not the course of instruction" (20). From there, he argues, it is clear that those who produce basic writing are neither "simple nor childlike." Recognizing that they are beginners, he distinguishes a difference between "writers who need to learn to use language" and "writers who need to learn to command a particular variety of language – the language of a written, academic discourse – and a particular variety of language use – writing itself" (20). Firm in his belief that the basic writing class should not pander to a lesser goal, Bartholomae stresses the point that teachers shouldn't create activities specific to the developmental classroom, instead they should use complicated activities, on par with other academic levels, and then study the problems, or errors, that arise in those situations (21). Bartholomae is concerned that we do not have a better understanding of the process of learning that is necessary for a writer to develop, "the actual sequence of learning – that moves a writer from basic writing to competent writing to good writing" (21). This sentiment is echoed by one of his

contemporaries, Myhill, in her observation that we lack the “considerable body of well-respected research” that characterize the process of reading to define the process of writing (77).

The question remains: How is one to navigate the discordant philosophies and approaches to basic writing pedagogy?

There are many necessary considerations one must address before designing a syllabus for a developmental composition course. How will class time best be spent? How much can students be expected to read each week for homework? What should they be reading? Is a top-down approach more appropriate or beneficial than a bottom-up approach? What does that even mean? Eventually, one’s own personal pedagogy will solve a number of these problems—but what is the new TA to do?

Mark Blaauw-Hara compiled an extensive overview of the ongoing conversations about grammar in the journal *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*: “Mapping the Frontier: A Survey of Twenty-Years of Grammar Articles in TETYC.” On reviewing the twenty-four articles, Blaauw-Hara writes, “[they] reveal how two-year college teachers have struggled to take the theories of these writers and integrate them into the practice of two-year college teaching;” furthermore, he notes that “underprepared students” often end up at two-year schools when they commit to a college education (31-32). I believe that the students he refers to bear a striking resemblance to the same students who populate our basic writing course here at NMU—a striking resemblance to the students I met and worked with in EN090.

After a thorough depiction of the shift in focus toward a more rhetorical awareness of grammar conventions, Blaauw-Hara concludes,

We want to teach students to write like professionals without devaluing their native dialects, we want to offer corrections while supporting student agency, and we want to help students tighten their messages while relaxing our grip on the red pen enough to let them experiment. (38)

This valuing of students' meaning and language, as well as teachers' goals to discuss the higher order concerns of drafts seems to be a primary goal, if not the top priority, among teachers of composition at all levels. Yet, considering Braddock's 1963 warning about wasting valuable class time, how do we find the time to incorporate grammar into the developmental classroom?

What is meant by those who advocate turning away from grammar instruction? Are these theorists insisting that we no longer use the terminology in our classrooms? That we refrain from addressing incorrect sentences and punctuation problems? Initially, I felt repelled by these assertions against grammar instruction in composition courses. How, then, do we guide students toward creating powerful and meaningful sentences, paragraphs, and essays?

What is clear, after reading the literature on this topic, is that very few practitioners call for teachers to ignore the errors in their students' writing. What is advocated, instead, is a shift away from memorization of terminology; procedural handouts that ask students to study commas or semicolon usage with short, prewritten sentences; or any such practice that encourages students to use work that is not their own while studying the techniques and guidelines of grammar and usage. In chapter five, Practical Applications, I will discuss suggestions made in many of the articles from *Teaching English in the Two Year College*, as well as other journals. These exercises and

activities were created with students in mind—their comfort, their needs, and their inherent abilities. The field of developmental composition has surely sprouted, and with enough careful observation and patience in the classroom, we can be sure that our students grow too.

Chapter 3: On the Nature of Errors: Seeing the Forest and the Trees

Joseph Williams wonders why people respond so vehemently to the grammatical and usage errors they read in compositions. Contrasting the actual repercussions of a misused word to a social error like, “break[ing] wind at a dinner party and then vomit[ing] on the person next to us,” Williams finds much more of a violation in the latter situation (153). In his article “The Phenomenology of Error,” Williams points out that there is no definitive error list that readers consult (unconsciously or otherwise) while they read. One of his primary arguments is that people will find error, when presented a piece of writing and told to look for it, but the errors they find will vary among the readers. There is no consistency (154-55). And, Williams insists, too many error-finders rely on handbooks or other people assumed to be more familiar with the subject to define what is and is not effective—what is and is not an error.

To illustrate his point, Williams cites errors from handbooks on grammar. Most interesting are the errors that break the rule just defined in the handbook. Williams also demonstrates that we find error wherever we expect it to be and that we don’t tend to find it when we don’t expect it. He strengthens his article in a clever way; the thirteen pages have “about 100 errors,” planted into the text (165). While I noticed about five, I found them only when I slowed down to keep up with Williams’ quick conclusions. Truly, he makes his case:

In short, if we read any text the way we read freshman essays, we will find many of the same kind of errors we routinely expect to find and therefore do find. But if we could read those student essays unreflexively, if we

could make the ordinary kind of contract with those texts that we make with other kinds of text, then we could find many fewer errors. (159)

When we pause to consider what our goals are for our students, we may remember to keep Williams' words of caution in mind: First-year compositions deserve the same focus on content as do the articles we read for personal and professional purposes. "When we read for typos," Williams writes, "letters constitute the field of attention; content becomes virtually inaccessible" (154). However, what remains is the fact that our students will not be writing for composition teachers who encourage processes in writing. Our students will, eventually, have to learn to produce written documents for future teachers, employers, and possibly employees. They will not always have a "known, sympathetic audience," as the NMU course objectives qualify in their undergraduate bulletin. Although I recognize the validity of Williams' argument I am aware that we simply cannot ignore errors in students' compositions.

Students' Needs

In his article, "Mapping the Frontier: A Survey of Twenty Years of Grammar in TETYC," Blaauw-Hara begins, like many do, with Mina Shaughnessy. He cites her call to teachers to see beyond error and recognize the students' logic that creates mistakes, "to treat students as thoughtful—albeit underprepared—and to develop pedagogies based on solid research to help students learn to address their weaknesses" (qtd in Blaauw-Hara 30). From there, Blaauw-Hara insists that, based on his research, the writers of the journal "have been meeting her challenge" (30). And he points out that,

When underprepared students decide to come to school, they tend to come to *our* schools [two-year colleges], and while that underpreparation

manifests itself in many ways, a common one is in students' discomfort and difficulty with the grammatical conventions in academic writing. (32)

What Blaauw-Hara recognizes, from his analysis of the twenty-four articles, is two contemporary approaches to the discussion of grammar in composition, and he describes them using an analogy of two town squares. In one town center Blaauw-Hara finds a concentration on the relationship between grammar and power, while in the other town square he sees a shift from discussing grammar only in the context of correctness into a more subjective consideration that requires awareness of individual rhetorical situations (30-31).

In Chapters Four and Five I present a synthesis of many current approaches to teaching various aspects grammar in the composition classroom. Universities are opening their doors to more students, and with that influx there are “underprepared” students entering two- and four-year schools with a myriad of academic and career-oriented goals. How we best serve those students' needs in our composition classes is an issue still under debate.

Noguchi and Weaver have both found a middle ground, embracing some grammar instruction while discarding the rest. What Blaauw-Hara recognizes, an observation common to most of the articles that examine the changing face of grammar in composition, is a move from the traditional, prescriptive teaching of grammar toward a more flexible, rhetorical pedagogy. The backlash against traditional grammar is multifaceted, and as such, difficult to navigate. What follows is my attempt to do just that.

Chapter 4: The Forerunners of A Limited Grammar

Rei R. Noguchi and Constance Weaver might be considered forerunners of teaching a limited grammar in the composition context. Throughout my research, one, if not both, of their names were in nearly every works cited list I studied. It may be because I am only a second-year TA that I am so drawn to their assertions—I simply find books like Noguchi’s *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing* and Weaver’s *Teaching Grammar in Context* to be exciting and inspiring. However, I recognize that I am more curious than critical at this stage, so I may not recognize what rhetoric and composition scholars see as merely more of the same.

Some Cautionary Words

With the intent to be as thorough as possible, I sought articles, beyond Hartwell’s, that are critical of these two thinkers and the concept of teaching grammar from a new perspective and with a new vocabulary. While R. A. Buck’s article, “Marginalizing Grammar,” tackles many of the issues about grammar in composition that one might expect, his argument grows out of his foundation in linguistics. Ultimately, he is calling for a reunion of the two fields of study, linguistics and English, as a means to boost all undergraduates’ comprehension of correct grammar usage. Buck’s focus is not limited to this assertion. Like Kollin and Neuleib, he expresses concern about comprehensive research studies, specifically the 1986 *Research on Written Composition* study, stating that “many [of the] studies they looked at showed methodological problems . . . and . . . there was no theoretical consistency even in terms of how researchers defined the notion of grammar” (32).

Although he echoes the concerns of many composition teachers and scholars, Buck is also critical of pedagogies based on the concept of teaching grammar in the context of writing: “Though I enthusiastically support the study of grammar in the context of a student’s own writing experience, and believe this should be an integral part of a composition class,” he states, “how will any student understand individual parts of that experience if we do not at the same time equip them with a foundational base in the ‘content material’ of grammar?” (33). To make his point, Buck mentions articles wherein teachers advocate teaching grammar without using the terminology commonly associated with the study. Making it clear that he has “respect” for the “constant effort” to engage their classrooms, he remains critical of this method. Ultimately, Buck sees the profession as the main problem, and he insists that change needs to start with the way English and Linguistics departments “conceive of grammar, support the study of grammar, and pass along these attitudes to [their] students” (33).

Another voice that is critical of researchers like Noguchi and Weaver is Keith Rhodes; in his “Cautionary Introduction” to the section on grammar in *Strategies for Teaching First-year Composition*, Rhodes professes a genuine interest in new approaches to teaching grammar alongside his critical assessments of these methods. He is definitely a more critical than curious reader of Noguchi and summarizes Noguchi’s book as founded on a “logical formula” akin to one “by which wishes become horses,” when he describes Noguchi’s hypothesis: “‘If grammar is potentially transferable to style, and if (ineffective grammar teaching and learning) are negated in some way, then formal instruction in grammar can be of help in the area of style’” (qtd in Rhodes). Rhodes begins his essay acknowledging that, “most teachers, myself included, do include lessons

on usage, grammar, and correctness in their own composition classes” (523). And he continues by noting that those teachers, himself included again, will read the section on grammar “more eagerly” than the other selections in the anthology. But he cautions, “We should feel ambivalent at best about the wisdom of including such a section in a book of this kind.”

Rhodes then describes a situation others (Devet, Blaauw-Hara, Connors) address: Practitioners in the field of composition do not want to be associated with a “skills” course, that is, the teaching of a subject that anyone is capable of teaching. “Whatever grammar is,” Rhodes writes, “most everybody is for it, and most everybody is fairly convinced that it can be taught directly and simply by anyone deserving of a bachelor’s degree in English” (523). Furthermore, the idea that grammar is simple to teach, when coupled with the idea that first-year composition is a class that teaches mostly grammar, perpetuates the “underfunded” and “undervalued” perception of composition as held by administrators and others in academia.

Interestingly, Rhodes playfully betrays his critical assessment, explaining that he, too, will eagerly read and then try the suggestions in the chapters that follow his introduction (525). He concludes, “Like nearly all writing teachers, I know viscerally that something in the argument against grammar rings hollow, that some day we will find a way back to a language about language that can support better writing,” (525-526), but cautions his readers to refrain from furthering the “myth” that composition is the rote, procedural teaching of grammar lessons.

Two Tall Trees: An Overview of Resources for the New TA

Unlike Rhodes, when I read Noguchi's book, my reasoning did not jump into an offensive position, I accepted his suppositions and followed along as he explored his hypothesis. Although Noguchi calls his book a study in its preface, that term is misleading. There are no experimental or control groups; Noguchi merely explains his reasoning behind teaching "a limited grammar" in composition classes. A more realistic term for his work might be an "approach" or, perhaps, a new idea.

That aside, what I found most compelling about Noguchi, much like Kollin and Neulieb, is his response to the research indicting grammar instruction by asking more questions. He begins, "Assuming that such studies are valid and reliable," and then asks, "*why* does formal instruction in grammar fail to produce any significant improvement in writing quality?" Noguchi wonders if the "failure [is] due to the very nature of the approach . . . due to the way grammar has been taught?" (3). He then asks, laying the foundation for his thesis, if these studies have highlighted only aspects of instruction that do not work, consequently obscuring any instruction that would be relevant to writing and thus effective: "Could it even be that the relevant parts of the approach have failed because we have implemented the in the wrong way?"

These questions, although chided by Hartwell and others who advocate complete removal of grammar from the classroom, seem only to serve our students—not detract from or obscure their goals. Before he starts describing his methodology for incorporating grammar instruction in composition classes, Noguchi considers the overlap between grammar and the issue of style in writing. After seeking possible areas of overlap between "grammar and organization" and "grammar and content," he concludes

that there is no case for teaching grammar for the benefit of more effective student writing in the areas of either one. Only in the area of style does Noguchi see a place, indeed a need, to incorporate grammar instruction.

Once Noguchi establishes a specific context in writing where grammar instruction can be well situated, he then discusses the different types of errors students make when composing. In summary, his findings indicate that many errors can be addressed without the use of grammar knowledge or application. These errors include spelling, pronoun reference, and diction (33). Noguchi acknowledges that there are a number of syntactic errors that “require some minimal knowledge of formal grammar,” but notes that some errors warrant more attention than others. To identify those errors that teachers and students should address in the classroom, what he calls the “minimal set of categories,” Noguchi believes there are issues to consider: “the general utility of the category, the nature of the overlap between grammar and writing, and the relationship between the frequency and the social consequences of errors” (33).

Using his analysis of two studies published in the 1980s, Noguchi weighs the errors that appear more frequently with the errors that have greater social repercussions. His comparison of the findings from these two studies shape his minimal set of categories: “sentence (or independent clause), subject, verb, and modifier (33).

The first study he describes is, “Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research.” From Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford in 1988, this study assessed the frequency and type of errors students made in 3,000 essays. From there, Noguchi presents Maxine Hairston’s 1981 study, “Not Errors Are Created Equal: Nonacademic Readers in the Professions Respond to Lapses in Usage.”

Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford collected more than 21,500 student papers from composition teachers across. With the help of fifty volunteers from Ohio State University’s English Department—TAs, instructors and professors—they read and rated a random and stratified sample of 3,000 papers. “As we worked on this error research together,” they write in their introduction, “we started somewhere along the line to feel less and less like the white-coated Researchers of our dreams and more and more like characters we called Ma and Pa Kettle—good-hearted bumlbers striving to understand a world whose complexity was more than a little daunting” (395). They briefly describe past studies of error frequency and then presents the top twenty errors they found in the papers. Also included is a thorough assessment of error types as well as their methodology for defining and finding those errors. From there, Connors and Lunsford assess teachers’ reactions to errors in papers: “On average, college English teachers mark only 43% of the most serious errors in the papers they evaluate” (402), they note. Table 1 shows the frequency and type of errors they focused on in their study.

Table 1 Frequency and Type of Errors in Student Papers, 1988

Frequency	Type of error	Frequency	Type of error
1	No comma after introductory element	11	Unnecessary shift in person
2	Vague pronoun reference	12	Sentence fragment
3	No comma in compound sentence	13	Wrong tense or verb form
4	Wrong word	14	Subject-verb agreement
5	No comma in non-restrictive element	15	Lack of comma in series
6	<i>Wrong/missing inflected endings</i>	16	Pronoun agreement error
7	Wrong or missing preposition	17	Unnecessary comma with restrictive element
8	Comma splice	18	Run-on or fused sentence
9	Possessive apostrophe error	19	Dangling or misplaced modifier
10	Tense shift	20	Its/It’s error

Source: Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford, “Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research,” *College Composition and Communication* 39 (1988): 403.

The data presented in Connor's and Lunsford's study is much more comprehensive, including: the number of error types found in all the papers and the percentage of errors that number represents, the number of errors that were marked or corrected by a teacher and the percentage that number represents, as well as the ranking of teacher responses to the errors—so the omission of a comma after an introductory element may have been the most frequently occurring error, but teachers were more likely to mark an incorrect word.

Hairston's assessment of errors took a different approach; she sent a questionnaire with problematic sentences to people working in different professions. She asked the recipients to decide whether the (unmarked) error type in each sentence bothered them a little, a lot, or not at all (796). Hairston's reason for creating this study mirrors the confusion many of us feel about grammar in composition:

I think English teachers who want to be responsible yet realistic about teaching usage and mechanics to today's writing students face a chronic dilemma. What should our priorities be? Is it practical to penalize students for sentence fragments and comma splices when they frequently encounter such constructions in magazines and newspapers? (794)

This logic is reminiscent of Williams' considerations in "The Phenomenology of Errors," and Hairston's questions are still valid today.

Noguchi, after a thorough discussion about the findings from each of these studies, focuses on the numbers. Table 2 outlines Noguchi's data from Figure 1 in his book.

Table 2 Hairston’s error classification, 1981

Error Classification	Error Type
Status Marking	Lack of subject-verb agreement Nonstandard verb form in past or present participle Double negatives Objective pronoun as subject (<i>him</i> and <i>she</i>)
Very Serious	Sentence fragments Insertion of comma between the verb and its complement Lack of Subject-verb agreement Noncapitalization of proper nouns Nonparallelism Faulty adverb forms (i.e. He treats his men <i>bad</i>) Use of transitive verb (<i>set</i> for intransitive <i>sit</i>) Run-on
Serious	Predication errors (<i>the policy intimidates hiring</i>) Dangling modifiers <i>I</i> as an objective pronoun Lack of commas to set off interrupters like <i>however</i> Lack of commas in a series Tense switching Use of a plural modifier with a singular noun (<i>These kind of errors</i>)
Moderately Serious	Lack of possessive form before a gerund Lack of commas to set off an appositive Inappropriate use of quotation marks Lack of subjunctive mood Writing <i>That is her across the street</i> Use of <i>whoever</i> instead of <i>whomever</i> Use of the construction <i>The Situation is...when</i> Failure to distinguish between among and between Comma splice
Minor or Unimportant	Writing <i>different than</i> instead of <i>different from</i> Use of a singular verb with <i>data</i> Omission of the apostrophe in the contraction <i>it’s</i> Use of a colon after a linking verb: <i>Three causes of inflation are:</i> Use of a qualifier before <i>unique</i> : <i>That is the most unique city</i>

Source: Rei R Noguchi, *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing*, (Urbana: NCTE, 2001) 25.

When Noguchi examines the data from these two studies, he sees his minimal set of categories as effective and versatile: “the categories are applicable not only to many of the most serious kinds of stylistic errors but also to many of the less serious but highly frequent kinds of stylistic errors” (34).

Noguchi insists that teachers need to make grammar more accessible to their students. In chapter three, “Teaching the Basics of a Writer’s Grammar,” he begins by examining how difficult it is to define what seems simple, such as a defining a sentence as a complete thought, to students who are not comfortable navigating their own writing:

How can [students] gain a working knowledge of basic grammatical categories such as sentence, subject, verb, etc., if such categories are defined in terms of other categories? Isn’t it much like looking up the word *structure* in a dictionary and finding the definition ‘form’ and under the entry for *form* finding the definition ‘structure’? I believe students can crack the grammar code but not by the time-consuming and frustrating methods of the past. (42)

Noguchi’s solution to escaping the metalanguage of grammar is to use “operational” definitions, “a definition which defines by means of what an entity does or can have done to it rather than what comprises the entity” (43). As a means to finding the operational definitions, Noguchi suggests that teachers should help their students access their unconscious, “underlying knowledge” of grammatical principles (43).

In the third chapter of his book, Noguchi outlines methods for helping students to recognize and utilize their unconscious understanding about English grammar. By discussing how students can use their knowledge about what a pronoun does—as opposed to what the term pronoun means—a teacher can incorporate a discussion about how pronouns and nouns behave in a sentence: “ If students already unconsciously know that a personal pronoun can substitute for a noun, noun phrase, or some construction that functions as either,” he states, “then they must also know that these elements which

accept pronoun substitution are all syntactically (though not necessarily semantically) similar” (45). To help students recognize where pronouns belong, Noguchi outlines an exercise where sentences and pronouns are presented to students; then, students are asked to substitute a pronoun for something in the presented sentence. The fact that students will not replace a verb or an adjective with a pronoun underscores Noguchi’s argument that teachers do not need to teach definitions of these concepts since the students already have a knowledge of how they work (44).

As the chapter progresses, Noguchi shows how the underlying knowledge students come to class with can be tapped further to explore the concept of subjects, main verbs, sentence, and presentence modifiers. The following discussion delineates his methodology.

For subject identification, Noguchi created a method of using “tag questions” and “yes-no questions” for students to use while analyzing sentences. The tag questions are added to the end of a sentence and the yes-no questions to the beginning. Here is one of Noguchi’s examples:

- a. Jim and Sue can dance the tango.
- b. Jim and Sue can dance the tango, can’t they?
- c. Can Jim and Sue dance the tango? (46)

By creating a tag question at the end of a sentence, students can discover the subject of that sentence by examining what words the pronoun in the tag question stands for.

Similarly, in creating a yes-no question at the beginning of a sentence, students first identify the auxiliary verb (or use a “do” verb), then move that auxiliary verb to the beginning of the sentence. With the newly formed sentence, students will find the subject

immediately following the auxiliary verb (45). Noguchi also discusses how sentences that are exceptions to these rules can be identified since they will work with either the tag or the yes-no questions. He provides examples of these as well:

- a. For Tommy to pass now isn't going to be easy.
- b. For Tommy to pass now isn't going to be easy, is it?
- c. *Isn't for Tommy to pass now going to be easy? (47)

And

- a. I believe that a good education makes a big difference in life.
- b. *I believe that a good education makes a big difference in life, doesn't it? (instead of the syntactically corresponding "I believe that a good education makes a big difference in life, don't I?")
- c. Don't I believe that a good education makes a big difference in life?
(48)

After providing other exercises to help students access their underlying knowledge of subjects, main verbs, sentences, and presentence modifiers, Noguchi shows how the tag and yes-no questions can be used to help students recognize and understand comma splices, as well as how to fix them (76). Furthermore, in chapter four, Noguchi also addresses how to help students struggle through more complex sentences that can become jumbled when students try to apply the tag and yes-no questions to assess them. Noguchi argues that the learning process, when coupled with these challenges, is more beneficial to the students, who are ultimately able to figure out the problem and apply a solution (77-81). In chapter five, Noguchi applies the same methodology to different sentence

problems including fragments, pronoun reference, coherence, as well as a discussion on “given and new information” (92).

Noguchi believes that an approach to incorporating grammar in the writing class that uses his “given-new” concept, “means that we can introduce the principles and values of good organization and content,” much sooner than through the use of a syntax-based approach to teaching grammar (109). Essentially, Noguchi’s belief is that through carefully constructed conversations about grammar, involving yes-no and tag questions as well as his given-new approach, teachers can spend their time teaching grammar, leading their students toward, “a healthy awareness and appreciation of language and its uses, not just of limits but also of possibilities” (121).

Constance Weaver also sees that something is lacking in the collective research and believes there are questions about grammar and composition that needs to be explored further. She discusses theories about learning and the needs of students to be actively engaged in their schooling. Current-traditional, or formal grammar instruction, is not an option for teachers who are looking for the next stage in composition pedagogies—one that creates a new path between prescriptive grammar instruction and the omission of grammar instruction. In the preface to her book, *Teaching Grammar in Context*, Weaver writes.

As much as anything else, [this] book is informed by my experiences as a teacher/researcher, always taking new risks and trying to figure out why something has or hasn’t worked. Thus, what I currently think about teaching grammar in the context of writing reflects an amalgam of research and experience, which is always to some degree in flux. (xi)

Weaver continues by welcoming her readers into “this evolving theory” and states that her book is intended for teachers at all levels, but especially junior high and secondary education—primarily because those are the years during which “grammar has been taught more intensively.”

I find the information and ideas presented in Weaver’s book tremendously relevant to first-year composition teachers, especially TAs. Furthermore, based on my experiences in the composition class—teaching developmental, 100-, and 200-level courses—students are coming to us without previous schooling that provided “intensive” grammar instruction. *Teaching Grammar in Context* is comprehensive in scope, providing historical and contemporary information, while also maintaining a level of practicality that is essential for a new TA trying to manage his or her own course work while finding a trail through the woods.

After providing an overview of the history of grammar in composition, Weaver moves into a brief discussion about how we learn to speak in the chapter, “Acquiring Grammatical Competence.” In another chapter, “Toward a Perspective on Error,” Weaver starts discussing the issue of error, citing Joseph Williams’ “Phenomenology of Error” among other scholars. This is where Weaver’s book becomes most relevant to the new TA. Weaver cautions teachers not to pay too much attention to errors in their students’ writing because the students will be less likely to experiment with their work, and they will be more likely to produce, “less interesting pieces of writing” (81). In the classroom, Weaver suggests, teachers should encourage students to recognize the processes of writing and concern themselves first with an essay’s content and organization and then with sentence structure (83). In summary, Weaver argues that we

must be “an advocate, rather than an adversary” responding to our students “as editor, rather than as a critic or judge” (84).

What follows is a section Weaver calls “Alternatives to the Error Hunt” (87-101), wherein she describes approaches a teacher can take when addressing students’ writing and their errors and mistakes. She enumerates several options and methods, incorporating ideas from Lois Rosen’s article “Developing Correctness in Student Writing: Alternatives to the Error-Hunt.” These suggestions range from ensuring that students have time to read in school (issues more relevant to teachers in secondary education) to having students participate in an editing workshop (an option well-suited to the college composition class).

Acknowledging that the research does not support the teaching of grammar in composition classes, Weaver reiterates the fact that children acquire grammatical know-how as they learn to speak (this is quite similar to Noguchi’s underlying knowledge argument). She states, “children ‘know’ grammar, even though they don’t ‘know about’ grammar” (104). And, echoing Noguchi again, Weaver argues that with the intent to help students improve their writing, an approach that is “more limited and more focused . . . has a better chance of being effective” (104).

In her assessment and discussion about the study by Connors and Lunsford, Weaver writes, “It is interesting to note that only six of the twenty kinds of errors were marked by the students’ classroom teachers more than 50 percent of the time. The most frequent errors are not necessarily marked the most often” (105). In their article, Connors and Lunsford discuss the teachers’ responses to error and the different reasons for certain markings. Noguchi also notes this discrepancy and concludes, “on the basis of their

collected data, Connors and Lunsford find that college English teachers mark considerably fewer errors than is popularly believed” (22). Noguchi sees this as a positive thing. Weaver appears to be more curious. Contemplating the different reasons for the teachers’ behavior, Weaver suggests four possibilities: teachers fear that marking every error could send the wrong message to students, they did not want to “deflect their own attention from content” by searching for errors, they may question the efficacy of marking errors in order to reduce errors in future papers, or they might “have chosen to focus on one or two kinds of errors at a time, either the easiest to mark, the seemingly most serious, or their own pet peeves” (105). Weaver’s assessment is similar to the one Connors and Lunsford included in their study. Essentially, they agree that teachers’ responses vary as much as course objectives, specific assignment criteria, students’ development and personal taste.

Like Noguchi, Weaver examines this study by comparing it with Maxine Hairston’s study. She, too, finds overlapping problems in the two lists, and, consequently, develops her own limited grammar list: “Following the line of Noguchi’s argument but not the details,” she begins, “I would suggest that only a few of the frequently occurring errors in the Connors-Lunsford study and only a few of the status marking, very serious, or serious errors in Hairston’s study require for their elimination an understanding of grammatical concepts commonly taught” (115). Where Noguchi’s minimal set of categories include: sentence, subject, verb, and modifier, Weaver’s “critical concepts” include, “subject and verb (verb as predicate), independent (main) and dependent (subordinate) clauses, and phrases” (115-116).

To address the multitude of errors in students' papers, Weaver suggests (again, much like Noguchi) that a teacher begin with the errors that can be understood and fixed without any grammatical conversation; indeed, errors such as "no comma after introductory element . . .no comma in nonrestrictive element . . .[and] unnecessary comma with restrictive element" can be identified and addressed by students who read their work aloud and, with their teacher's help, learn to notice "intonation" (116). From there, Weaver introduces ways to use examples to help students recognize errors, and then cautions teachers to pay attention to the specific needs of each individual class (117).

Ultimately, Weaver supports a grammar instruction method called "mini-lessons" (150). This term, Weaver notes, was first used by Lucy Calkins in 1986, "and further elaborated by Nancie Atwell." Defining the term, Weaver explains that mini-lessons are a teacher delivered "brief explanation" of a concept, lasting between five and ten minutes, and she notes that they are effective for many types of grammar issues. Weaver's exploration of various theories about how knowledge is attained informs her distinction between cognitive and behaviorist approaches to teaching. Weaver concludes that mini-lessons embody the principles touted by educators who embrace a more cognitive theory of learning (153). This is yet another turn from the traditional approaches to the teaching of writing and grammar.

Chapter 5: Current Theories and Theorists

Ellery Sedgwick, writing in 1989, summarizes perfectly the Catch-22 of grammar instruction and research, and these observations serve as a perfect transition from the previous chapter to this one on current theories and practices, so I want to quote them in full. To begin the article, “Alternatives to Teaching Formal, Analytical Grammar,”

Sedgwick states:

Many English teachers currently face a frustrating dilemma in teaching syntax and usage. Most of us believe strongly that our students need to be able to write syntactically fluent standard English; that college teachers, employers, and others who will make judgments affecting our students’ lives still consider correctness very important; and that, like it or not, we are responsible for teaching it. We may also feel pressure from parents and administrators to teach standard English as one of the educational “basics.” (8)

“On the other hand,” Sedgwick continues, “we are aware that 80 years of research, much of it flawed but some of it impressively designed and in composite overwhelming, concludes that the study of formal grammar taught by traditional methods has very little or no effect on students’ use of language” (8 This chapter of my thesis is about the contemporary scholars and thinkers and the advice, ideas, and methods they are publishing. I’ve included “Alternatives to Teaching Formal, Analytical Grammar,” because of the section “Developing Syntactical Patterns,” wherein Sedgwick first references Constance Weaver’s 1979 article “Grammar for Teachers” and then discusses a form of teaching called, “Inductive grammar instruction” very similar to Noguchi’s

“underlying knowledge” assertions. It is evident that there is a cyclical nature to this issue, and I believe it would serve to reiterate Rhodes’s comments here: “Like nearly all writing teachers, I know viscerally that something in the argument against grammar rings hollow, that some day we will find a way back to a language about language that can support better writing” (525-526).

There are many articles, published more recently, that address how teachers ought to incorporate grammar instruction in their writing classes. Some of them include a theoretical approach while others merely present strategies and techniques for teachers to try. The challenge of finding one’s own method for teaching grammar, mechanics and usage to a composition class is well documented. Just as reading and writing were once considered two divergent studies, so now are grammar and composition being weighed on separate scales: I believe they need to be integrated, but each teacher must find his or her own method. What follows is a brief introduction to the activities and theories being published in contemporary journals. For the exercises that I’ve adapted for my classrooms at NMU, I have included notes on my experiences, both positive and critically reflective.

Mark Blaauw-Hara

In his article, “Why Our Students need Instruction in Grammar, and How We Should Go about It,” Blaauw-Hara describes the need to frame a rhetorical context for conversations about grammar. To make his point, Blaauw-Hara explains that early in the semester he tells an “anecdote” to his class. The story is about about an airline losing his luggage while travelling for a job interview:

I tell them how I frantically cobbled together a motley collection of dress clothes from the local shops still open when I got into town, and how, despite the new clothes, I stayed awake out of nervousness until the airline dropped off my recovered suit at three in the morning. (170)

Blaauw-Hara explains that he and his students laugh at his anxiety. He then asks the question: Why did his physical impression matter so much? The students, he explains, understand his point immediately and provide a number of reasons to justify his anxiety, including fear of “a negative first impression, a distracting appearance, [and] a lack of confidence. . . . From there,” he continues, “it’s an easy transition to a discussion of how one’s competence as an editor can have real bearing on how one’s writing is read, and how one is perceived, regardless of whether the ideas are solid or not” (170-171).

During the semester I taught EN090, NMU’s Developmental Composition course, I used this analogy with a student who was reluctant to spend any time editing or revising work. It is hard for a student to deny that the conclusions is valid; subsequently, my mini-conference with that student was more successful than any we had previously shared.

Blaauw-Hara also acknowledges the need to use each students’ own work when focusing on grammar. He quotes Muriel Harris to explain why using the context of a student’s own work is so important: “We are no longer merely working on formal grammar, grammar in the abstract, but working with the student on his or her own prose structures” (qtd in Blaauw-Hara). In an effort to keep students interested and engaged in learning about revision and rewriting, I realized the need to use students’ own work during my first semester as a TA. To begin, I started pulling strong sentences out of my

students' drafts and then writing them on the chalkboard for the class to analyze. I kept the authors anonymous, but students often claimed their fame by announcing the sentence's context or elaborating on its content. I noted that the attitude of a class shifted when the subject matter was more relevant, and that relevance was actualized through interest, familiarity, or proximity. Students seemed to pay attention to the work of their peers.

This method worked just as well for examining problematic sentences, and by my third semester teaching, I realized that having students work together in smaller groups helped them stay focused and interactive. To begin, I collected two or three ineffective sentences from each student's draft. I tried to find different types of problematic sentences for each student (I soon started asking them to email their essays to me so I could use the copy and paste function). Keeping track of the authors of the sentences, I opened a new document and started putting the students together in groups of five. I would then list their sentences all on the same page. This master document was for me; only after I deleted the students' names would I print out worksheets for each group member. To encourage full participation, I required them to help each other identify each sentence's weakness, or error, and to help with the rewrite. Students were given credit for having all the sentences on the handout rewritten with a brief explanation as to what was wrong with the original.

Blaauw-Hara, referencing many other contributors to the literature on the subject of grammar in composition, discusses "error logs" and "fix-it pages," from Josephine Tarvers and Helen Collins Sitler, respectively. The error log is a place for students to "diagnose" their own writing. This method, according to Tarvers, also helps students

start to recognize where errors tend to occur in their own work and can help them to be more thorough editors of their own writing (qtd in Blaauw-Hara). Sitler's fix-it pages is another method to help students recognize their own errors. When reading students' final drafts, she marks only the errors "that most detract from the writer's conveying a meaningful message," and then asks her students to keep track of these errors, alongside columns that define fix-it ideas; a reference to their handbook and the rule that was broken; and whether or not the frequency of that error is improving in their work (qtd in Blaauw-Hara).

In his comprehensive article, Blaauw-Hara touches many of the challenges teachers face when trying to include grammar studies in their composition classrooms: from students who are "violently resistant to grammar instruction," a resistance he finds "understandable (167), to the challenge of going beyond analogies and anecdotes to discuss the truth about language and socioeconomic markers (169). He lists other practical ideas for including grammar in the composition classroom that I plan on trying in my future classes. Furthermore, Blaauw-Hara reminds us that our students "*want* to be successful in the academic and work worlds," and that, "we need to help them understand—and believe—that a command of standard written English can help them achieve that success" (170). I have witnessed this eagerness, however cloaked in insecurity and fear it may be, within my own students, who have exclaimed to me, exasperated, "I never learned this stuff!"

Based on my experience and feedback from my colleagues, one of the most challenging aspects of responding to and grading papers for new TAs is learning to step back from a student's work in order to let him or her maintain authorship. Blaauw-Hara

addresses this when he writes: “One common theme in current research is that correcting grammatical problems in a student’s paper actually undermines our goals as writing teachers” (175). Under the section of the article titled “Assign Agency to the Student—Don’t Correct,” Blaauw-Hara continues, “we should focus on talking and listening, drawing the student’s attention to key elements in the paper, and giving him or her support.”

Blaauw-Hara concludes his article with hopeful insight. He believes that even when student errors veer away from “those aspects of writing with which we feel comfortable . . . with an awareness of current research, coupled with a spirit of openness and flexibility in the classroom, it may be possible to teach grammar effectively” (176).

David Miller

One of the most encouraging articles I read for my research is by David Miller: “Developmental Writing: Trust, Challenge, and Critical Thinking.” Miller believes teachers must help their students to recognize the metacognitive abilities they bring to college because, “they do not trust the knowledge they already possess” (94). Miller stresses the need for students to feel safe in class and to recognize their successes, and he explains an assignment he uses to facilitate his students’ reaching both of these goals. The activity is one of critical comparison wherein students analyze two pieces of “safe” writing, narrative and descriptive essays they wrote early in the semester (100). By completing this assignment, writers will have the experience to “elicit a critical, third-person response to earlier texts, much like the analyses they will have to perform in freshman composition.”

This analytic activity provides “safety as well as challenge:” safety because the students can practice analytical thinking while they are true authorities on the subject matter (themselves); and challenges because they have to reach a conclusion about the two texts, a result that can come only from a serious analysis.

Miller states that he begins the activity by asking students to compare readings from the textbook. This scaffolding enables the students to learn how to analyze before they are asked to do so on their own. Miller then describes the assignment steps that follow. First, students write a synopsis of their narrative and descriptive essays. Next, they are told to find “commonality, contradiction, paradox, similarities in point of view, subject matter, voice, or any of a host of other possibilities” (101). Students are then asked to critique their work and reach a conclusion, or opinion, about the essays; Miller welcomes his class to work together in this stage, encouraging peer feedback. Miller’s role is not that of an enforcer; instead, he circulates and asks “open-ended” questions prompting his students to consider a new perspective (101).

The end result of this self assessment is one of “surprise and elation” from the students. Miller notes that the students may come to an opinion about their work that is focused on grammar or structure, or they may notice something about the content that is recurring.

Miller’s analytic activity can be utilized in any composition classroom. In 100- and 200-level first-year composition classes, many students still struggle with analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Furthermore, activities modeled after Miller’s can be focused toward any issue a teacher wants her or his class to address. The concentration I envision, of course, is grammar-centered. While I have not yet tested an analytic activity

based on Miller's, I intend to in the future. An exercise like this can lead students toward more complicated and challenging thinking, and invites students to assess as well as redirect themselves for future writing projects: it assigns agency to them.

Inspired by Miller, I did ask one of my classes to participate in presentation groups during which they were to define, explain, and discuss a grammatical rule or topic that the class could benefit from studying. This experience was not a positive one. Since I know other TAs in our English department had successful student presentations, I reflected on my class's struggles and concluded that I had let them down. I neglected to give students enough guidance, time, and feedback to do well. I failed to properly model what I wanted them to do and relied, instead, on a rubric that itemized my expectations. Despite the flailing performances each presentation group gave, the classroom was alert and supportive; many incorrect assertions were made, and many questions were asked of the teacher—I probably spent more time clarifying the topics students had presented than they did presenting them. It was a humbling, yet enlightening, learning experience for me, for sure.

Bonnie Devet

In her article, "Welcoming Grammar Back into the Writing Classroom," Bonnie Devet points to the emergence and adoption of process pedagogies as one reason instructors stopped teaching grammar in composition classes. Because process theory calls for active students and a student-centered classroom, the traditional approach to teaching grammar could not fit the mold. It was too teacher-centered, too prescriptive: "Under current-traditional rhetoric, professors frequently graded for school grammar as well as for usage. But during the shift in the paradigm, grammar was consigned to a

minor role in various process theories” (9). Devet explains that “In both the early stage model for process (prewriting, writing, rewriting) and in the later cognitive process theory of Linda Fowler and John R. Hayes, grammar became only editing or revising (Connors and Glenn).” Devet then points to another reason the field rejected grammar—it wanted to be considered a specific and serious field of study and grammar smelled too much of a skills or service course.

These issues aside, Devet also concedes that the grammar instruction of the past is also to blame:

Grammar, though, was not merely the innocent victim. The methods usually associated with its teaching were—let’s face it—a major reason for composition’s excluding the subject from the process classroom. Drill-and-kill exercises (like filling out endless purple ditto sheets) or the constant breaking down of sentences (like naming a sentence’s parts of speech and functions) evoked images of the Marine Corps. (10)

By forcing students to “label” sentences, Devet charges, they were not given sufficient opportunities to write their own. Her article, as its title suggests, is not meant to be a history of the field; instead, she aims to outline ways that grammar can be incorporated into different types of classrooms, taught by different types of teachers. She uses the terms “reformed traditionalism,” “human innatism,” and “revived classicism,” to describe three different pedagogical approaches that could work with grammar, instead of against or in spite of it (11).

Human innatism is the “-ism” that I want to focus on. I’ve included Devet’s article because her approach is heavily influenced by Noguchi and Weaver in that it

“emphasizes that writing teachers [should] start with what students know intuitively about language” (12). Within an ongoing conversation (or argument) such as the issue of grammar and its potential role in composition classes, I find it compelling that that Devet’s methods reiterate ideas of the previous decade. Devet writes, “like a petroleum field, the students’ knowledge is ready to be tapped, refined, and used in various ways.” Not only does Devet reference Noguchi’s tag questions, she also discusses Weaver’s mini-lessons. She then provides her belief and approach to addressing student errors: only when a student’s writing breaks a grammatical error should a teacher discuss that error with that student: when a teacher recognizes that a student is writing sentences with comma splices, then he or she should provide “mini-lessons based on cognitive, not behavioral approaches” (13).

I used Weaver’s mini-lessons while teaching developmental composition. Coupling Weaver’s method of keeping the focus of a lesson short and specific with the advice from my Teaching Colloquium instructor Professor Soldner, who suggested that when we’re providing examples in front of the class we should use our students as characters in our examples, I was able to engage my reluctant classroom to participate in concocting long compound-complex sentences wherein one classmate has to go to the store to buy beer for another classmate who may or may not own a monkey... Although silly, these sentences were fun. That element of enjoyment carried us through many productive grammatical conversations that could have been shadowed with boredom.

Linda Boynton

Linda Boynton’s strategy for teaching grammar in the composition classroom is unique because of its focus on the interactions between teachers and individual students.

Boynton's article, "See Me: Conference Strategies for Developmental Writers" is geared toward teachers of developmental composition classes, but the methods she outlines are applicable in any writing course. Citing Thomas Carnicelli's assessment about the benefits of individual conferences over instruction given to the entire class, Boynton argues that, "a conference is the most productive use of the teacher's time," since that time is spent with one student and is focused on that student's work in a "private" environment (391).

Covering a range of considerations, Boynton addresses pre- and during-conference strategies before she briefly discusses post-conference strategies. Despite the fact that I'm an experienced teaching assistant (admittedly, still a novice in my fourth semester), it never occurred to me to explicitly discuss my conference expectations and goals with my students. Boynton's first preconference strategy does just this. She describes a "'Conference Behavior' Handout:" that explains what students should do prior to a one-on-one conference (392). Beginning with "Come prepared (bring prewriting, previous drafts, especially those I have written on, and your current draft)," the handout can also instruct students to bring a writing utensil and any text or source that an essay addresses. Boynton's handout also states, "jot down questions while you write or review your work and bring those too . . . come prepared to talk . . . [and] make sure you ask me to clarify any of my comments that appear vague or confusing" (392-393).

Another preconference suggestion Boynton includes is called "Walk-arounds." She describes this strategy as a chance for teachers to observe students' writing habits to identify any that may be detrimental to students' writing skills. I adopted this strategy. While students wrote five minute freewrites, I watched to see who struggled to keep their

pencil moving throughout the short period of time. Sometimes a playful prodding, “Hey! Don’t get lazy on me,” would get a student to refocus on his or her work, but I noticed that some students routinely struggled with the act of translating their thoughts into words on the page. The observations a teacher makes about students when they are engaged in the writing process, Boynton states, can be discussed during a conference (393).

The ideas Boynton shares in her article provide a new approach to discussing grammar with students. Focusing on students’ specific needs can be a difficult task when lesson planning, so the one-on-one strategy of conferencing is an effective way to help students with the errors they struggle with the most.

Our Experience: In the Classroom

Whether our students are labeled developmental, first-year, nontraditional, or exceptional, we must remember to approach each classroom, indeed, each student, individually and patiently. Only by listening and watching our students make errors, will we be able to help them identify and deconstruct those mistakes. And only when they know how to recognize the errors they create will they learn to eliminate them from their final drafts. There is a wealth of literature that I cannot fit into this thesis. For those of us who strive to “find a way back to a language about language,” to quote Rhodes, yet again, the paths appear to be limitless. This thesis is only a humble first step into those trails.

Conclusion

In 2008 Andrea Lunsford and Karen Lunsford published, “‘Mistakes Are a Fact of Life’: A National Comparative Study.” This study mirrors its predecessor from 1986 by Connors and Lunsford. It is revealing on many levels: from the difficulty the researchers had obtaining permission to use students’ work from *each* university that contributed papers, to the introduction of research and documentation errors on the top-twenty list.

Lunsford and Lunsford make a special note of the changes technology brings to the classroom, “To take only the most obvious example, [in 1986] almost all students were writing by hand,” they note, adding that, “Today, students not only use basic word processing but have available many other tools” (786). These tools, including spelling and grammar checkers have altered the way students write, bringing “opportunities and challenges for writing that students and teachers twenty-two years ago could scarcely imagine.” Another observation about the contemporary composition classroom is that students are writing longer essays than the ones submitted in 1986 (791). In Connors and Lunsford’s study, the average student paper was 422 words long; in 2006 that number jumped to 1,038 words (792). Furthermore, in the 1980s most of the papers written by students were personal narratives, but in Lunsford and Lunsford’s study, research and argumentation were the most common modes (793).

The new list of errors, Lunsford and Lunsford’s top twenty, contains some of those featured in its predecessor, but also many new errors related to research and

documentation. See Table 3 below for an outline of the frequency of errors found in student papers from 2006.

Table 3 Most Common Formal Errors, 2006

Frequency	Type of error	Frequency	Type of error
1	Wrong word	11	Missing comma with a nonrestrictive element
2	Missing comma after an introductory element	12	Unnecessary shift in verb tense
3	Incomplete or missing documentation	13	Missing comma in a compound sentence
4	Vague pronoun reference	14	Unnecessary or missing apostrophe (including <i>its/it's</i>)
5	Spelling error (including homonyms)	15	Fused (run-on) sentence
6	Mechanical error with a quotation	16	Comma splice
7	Unnecessary comma	17	Lack of pronoun-antecedent agreement
8	Unnecessary or missing capitalization	18	Poorly integrated quotation
9	Missing word	19	Unnecessary or missing hyphen
10	Faulty sentence structure	20	Sentence fragment

Source: Andrea Lunsford and Karen Lunsford, ““Mistakes Are a Fact of Life”: A National Comparative Study,” *College Composition and Communication* 59 (2008): 795.

To recognize the changing nature of our students’ compositions and errors, I will also include Table 1 here for comparison:

Table 1 Frequency and Type of Errors in Student Papers, 1988

Frequency	Type of error	Frequency	Type of error
1	No comma after introductory element	11	Unnecessary shift in person
2	Vague pronoun reference	12	Sentence fragment
3	No comma in compound sentence	13	Wrong tense or verb form
4	Wrong word	14	Subject-verb agreement
5	No comma in non-restrictive element	15	Lack of comma in series
6	<i>Wrong/missing inflected endings</i>	16	Pronoun agreement error
7	Wrong or missing preposition	17	Unnecessary comma with restrictive element
8	Comma splice	18	Run-on or fused sentence
9	Possessive apostrophe error	19	Dangling or misplaced modifier
10	Tense shift	20	Its/It’s error

Source: Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford, “Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research,” *College Composition and Communication* 39 (1988): 403.

Unsurprisingly, some of the problems students struggle with today recall the difficulties of students twenty years ago. However, as any teacher who has incorporated research into essays knows, the difficulties students have while trying to synthesize information and document sources correctly are numerous. What, then, do we do now? How do we make this information useful and applicable to our lesson plans and syllabi?

I believe we need a new study like Maxine Hairston's. Williams makes the observation that the way we recognize and react to error is subjective—varied:

Great variation in our definition of error, great variation in our emotional investment in defining and condemning error, great variation in the perceived seriousness of individual errors. The categories of error all seem like they should be yes-no, but the feelings associated with the categories seem much more complex. (155)

That we are all “looking for error in different places,” reminds us to consider the needs of any given task. While we may be preparing one student to apply to graduate school, her classmate may be seeking an Associate's Degree to raise the salary he is currently earning. Assaulting the latter student's essay with corrections and marginal notations will not serve his needs; in fact, it may only create greater anxiety about composition and the processes of writing.

I have found that students recognize and respond well to solid information—statistics and details that present the world awaiting them *after* college. If we can present our classes with data collected from real world employers, statistics and value judgments like those that Hairston presents, then we can convince them to pay attention to what is

expected of them beyond the college classroom. Furthermore, with initiatives like Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines, we invite students to recognize real and relevant writing situations and audiences that appeal to their academic and career goals.

In conclusion, I would like to quote Mark Blaauw-Hara one last time:

The teaching of grammar is a problematic task, but with an awareness of current research, coupled with a spirit of openness and flexibility in the classroom, it may be possible to teach grammar effectively. Let's hope it is. As instructors, we must move beyond what hasn't been working and find what will. (176)

My goal with this thesis was to discover helpful, effective, and engaging ways to teach grammar. I wanted to find a grammatical pedagogy that will work for students in all levels of first-year composition classes. With such a daunting task, I simply dove in—uncertain of the outcome. In the end, I feel that I have succeeded on many levels, as this thesis is written, essentially, to myself two years ago—as a first semester TA in her first composition classroom, I know that the information provided herein would have been useful to me. And I hope that it will be useful for new TAs as a reference to theories and as a practical resource.

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