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ATEG Journal Editorial Policy

Founded in 1989, the Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (ATEG) is an official Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English that provides a national forum for all those interested in teaching grammar. We welcome all views on the role of grammar in our schools.

Published twice a year, *ATEG Journal* seeks to foster discussion of teaching English grammar at all grade levels from kindergarten through graduate school. We solicit articles that describe, analyze, and/or critique any and all aspects of teaching grammar. For example, the following are some suggested topics:

- Classroom practices in the teaching of grammar
- Traditional vs. linguistic approaches to grammar
- Why and how grammar should or should not be taught
- How we handle language varieties in the classroom
- Teacher education and the teaching of grammar
- Integration of grammar with writing, speech, literature, and all forms of discourse

On these matters, we welcome articles, reports from the schools and from teacher education programs, as well as book reviews, textbook evaluations, and other critical responses. Submissions should conform to MLA style and should not exceed 3,500 words. All submissions will be reviewed by two anonymous referees. Please submit your submission as an MS Word .doc or .rtf file sent as an email attachment to:

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Messages from the ATEG Co-Presidents

Welcome to the 24th Annual ATEG Conference

Sherry Saylor, Co-President

Our conference theme, “Teachable Moments,” along with Amy’s keynote address, “Grammar and the Common Core,” are sure to inspire conversations about best practices in teaching grammar. As grammar teachers, we are currently on the cutting edge of education. I’m sure many of us have been called upon to share our understanding of grammar with others who are attempting to bring the core standards to reality in the classroom.

For example, thanks to a grant awarded to Prince George’s Community College, I will be enlarging my college classroom this summer to include a group of 160 “rising” high school students, those who are about to enter their senior year this fall. The College Awareness Preparation Program (CAPP) consists of 3-weeks of hands-on learning, including an orientation to college life that will give these students a taste of what to expect when they arrive. It is our goal to increase the skills necessary to pass the high school diploma exams and to test into college credit classes in English and math.

ATEG is involved here too. Amy wrote the curriculum, and I will be working with four other English teachers to present a program that integrates grammar seamlessly with writing. We will cover the following areas: clausal boundaries, code switching, sentence expansion, correction of surface errors, and finally improvement of sentence content and style by applying enhanced knowledge of the parts of speech.

All of you will have your own stories to share during our conference, which can only result in even more ideas and insights that you can take back to your students and colleagues.



Come to the ATEG Workshop at the NCTE Convention

Amy Benjamin, Co-President

We are delighted to announce that ATEG will be offering a one-day workshop as part of the NCTE Annual Conference in Boston. The workshop, “Grammar Instruction-Sentence Construction: Making the Link,” will be held on Monday, November 25. In addition to me, the instructors are Sherry Saylor, Geoff Layton, and Don Stewart, all of whom have given outstanding presentations at ATEG conferences.

The 6-hour workshop will consist of four presentations, all of which offer alternatives to the ineffective, shallow “work-booking” of grammar. We will model, explain, and engage participants in the kind of grammar instruction that draws from intuitive linguistic knowledge and is centered right in the heart of the writing process. Topics to include:

- Simplifying how we teach the parts of speech, whether to elementary students learning them for the first time, or to much older students who have been taught to memorize definitions.
- Generating a wide array of vocabulary in the pre-writing and revision stages by applying knowledge of the parts of speech
- Creating more sophisticated sentences, correctly punctuated, by consciously including (and deleting) specific grammatical structures
- Shifting focus and sharpening meaning by understanding end-focus, active and passive voice, and placement of modifiers.
- Applying the numbering system originally developed by Francis Christensen to achieve the fluency of good writing.

So come to Boston for the NCTE Annual Conference, and extend your learning by staying on through Monday, November 25th for the ATEG workshop. You’ll be glad you did!



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How to Succeed in the Grammar Instruction Business (Without Students' Being Really Trying): The Diagnostic Test as a Marketing Tool

Lisa M. Dresner, Assistant Professor of Writing Studies and Composition,
Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY

Some instructors may relate to the joy I experienced when, as a twelve-year-old student, I was presented with *The Elements of Style*—I adored this grammar classic and have returned to it frequently over the ensuing decades. Few of our students, however, enjoy learning grammar nearly that much, and it is becoming increasingly clear to me that many of them need to be “sold” on the whole endeavor. Over the last few years, I have taught grammar at several levels to both graduate and undergraduate university students, and I have realized that I’ve been unwittingly selling grammar instruction to some levels of students, but not to others, leading to understandable resistance in some cases.

Below, I describe first how my students have been generally receptive to grammar instruction; then, how the diagnostic tests I have used at the start of most of these courses may have inadvertently convinced many students that they could use further instruction; and finally, how my recent experience suggests that an initial diagnostic test may in fact be *necessary* in first-year courses that include grammar instruction.

Teach Me, (Please!): Students' Receptiveness to Grammar Instruction at Different Levels

It was comparatively simple to achieve the receptiveness I sought when I was teaching masters-level students in a required graduate grammar course. Taking over a section of a pre-designed graduate-level grammar class a few semesters ago, I was surprised to discover how anxious some of these more mature students—who generally aimed to become high school English teachers, English as a Second Language teachers, or Special Education teachers—were about learning grammar. In fact, the colleague who designed the course, Dr. Scott Harshbarger, wisely included a “true confessions” session in the activities on the



first day of class, a session in which students wrote and spoke about their previous experiences learning grammar. I was surprised to discover how traumatic the process of learning grammar had been for many of these future teachers, including one student who had faced the possibility of having to leave graduate school altogether because of having failed to absorb some basic grammatical concepts earlier in life. Paradoxically, though, even after such earlier unpleasant (and often ineffective) experiences in the grammar classroom, these future teachers proved quite tractable—they *wanted* to learn, not only for their own sakes but also for the sakes of their future students, so they truly wished to get things right this time. Moreover, most of them had already had some teaching and/or tutoring experience, a fact that helped them to be good students themselves. They all paid attention in class, and most of them studied effectively at home.

I also found a reasonably receptive audience in a grammar course designed for upper-level undergraduates who were mainly English or English Education majors, so the course included several future teachers, much like their counterparts in the graduate course. They, too, didn't need to be "sold" on the benefits of learning grammar. They had, after all, registered for a class called simply "Grammar," a required course for those who were English Education majors. Students in this class varied in their willingness to do homework consistently, but they were also generally attentive and able to study effectively.

It also was relatively easy to find a receptive audience for grammar instruction in students who had either already failed (or were afraid of failing) our university's required writing proficiency examination and had been placed in a course meant to remediate any writing deficits that remained after students had completed two semesters of composition. Granted, the effective *teaching* of grammar was somewhat challenging in this setting—a one-credit, pass/fail, one-hour-per-week course that was supposed to require minimal take-home work while covering many non-grammar topics such as thesis statements, organization, transitions, quotation format, and citation style. Nonetheless, the course at least re-exposed students to the notion that grammatical issues exist, revealing to them that while they *thought* they may know what fragments and run-on sentences



were, they really did not. Moreover, students paid excellent attention to the in-class grammar instruction, if only for the pragmatic reason that it could help them pass their writing proficiency examinations.

A Harder Nut to Crack: Teaching Grammar to First-Year Students

Occasionally, resistance to learning about grammar does arise in my regular composition classes—Writing Studies and Composition I and II, particularly in Writing Studies I. In these first-year courses, especially in Writing Studies I, I see my role as making sure that every student has the opportunity to master the basics of grammar and usage in addition to organization, quotation, and citation skills. This requires that they understand and apply the parts of speech, the proper use of punctuation (including commas, colons, semi-colons, hyphens, and dashes), and the ability to identify and correct fragments, run-on sentences, and homonym errors.

Unfortunately, however, it can be challenging to convince first-semester college students that expending effort on these activities is actually a wise investment of their time. While some first-year students know that they need help with these issues and therefore appreciate the chance to solidify their grammatical skills, others think they already know it all and that such study is a waste of their time. These last are usually students who remember some grammar training from middle school and/or high school and who therefore believe that there is nothing left for them to learn.

That belief seldom turns out to be justified, but it is difficult to convince students of that, at least initially. Instead, even the best students usually know only some, but by no means all, of what I'm trying to teach them, and the grammatical precision that separates reasonably competent writers from truly exceptional writers often escapes them. Worse, although the best students may have been exposed to these ideas before and even though they might make sense to them on a short-term basis (that is, immediately after I've finished reviewing the ideas in class or if I've answered questions right before a quiz), students are not necessarily able to implant all of the subtleties of these ideas into their long-term memories, in part, I propose, because they mistakenly think that they have



internalized grammar knowledge when they actually have not.¹ Nevertheless, students in my first-year classes generally come around to conceding some benefits of grammar instruction, particularly when I demonstrate the patterns of continuing errors in their papers.

“Are We Going to Be Doing This All Semester?”: A Challenging First-Semester Class

While I can usually work through such resistance to grammar instruction, I had a section of Writing Studies I a few semesters ago that was full of first-semester students who simply refused to go along with it. “Are we going to do this *all* semester?” huffed one student about grammar instruction in the middle of a class early in the semester. Unfortunately, students’ attitudes continued in that vein. Their resistance to learning what they mistakenly thought they already knew snowballed, and their dismissal of grammar lessons sapped the classroom’s energy.

Worse, I found that students’ resistance to learning grammar actually contaminated their approach to the *rest* of the course content, particularly their willingness to analyze texts. For example, one day, we read aloud and analyzed the first two paragraphs of the *Declaration of Independence* as a group, but when I asked students to read the rest to themselves before we returned to a full-group discussion of the text, they proved as resistant to that idea as they had been to learning grammar. Somehow, they had transferred their resistance to engaging in the kind of sustained thought required by grammatical analysis to engaging in the same sustained thought required by *any* kind of critical textual analysis. Thus, the same students who thought they knew all about grammar, those who believed that grammar was too *easy* for them and who would never deign to study it, couldn’t bring themselves to read our nation’s founding document—on the astonishing grounds that the work was too *hard*. An otherwise competent student even wailed: “I can run my eyes over it, but I won’t understand it!”

This seeming paradox suggests, perhaps, that the intellectual “muscles” used when we analyze a sentence for grammatical purposes also strengthen those used

¹ Zabrocky and Bays note the widespread nature of the problem of students’ faulty “calibration of [their] comprehension [of material that has been taught]” (123).



when we analyze texts for meaning and literary style. This is by no means a novel idea—grammar has a long history of being taught to strengthen students’ intellectual faculties generally (Weaver 3-4) in much the same way as teaching students foreign languages (an endeavor that generally requires grammar instruction in the new language) has been demonstrated to improve students’ overall intellectual abilities (Cooper 381).² All of these endeavors require effort, concentration, logic, and educated guesses based upon previously learned information. Therefore, it gradually dawned on me that if students could be “sold” on one kind of intellectual effort, they could also be “sold” on another.

More Than You Know: Convincing First-year Students That They Don’t Know It All Yet

In fact, I realized that “selling” students on the idea that they had make the effort required to master grammar was exactly what I had to do in order to ensure more robust student participation in a classroom focused on grammar instruction—what was missing in the presentation of grammar to my first-year students was that I hadn’t helped students see immediately at the beginning of the semester that they personally needed to work on the study of grammar, which made my choice of topics seem arbitrary to them and engendered unnecessary resistance. Accordingly, I considered how I might best convince my first-year students that they really *didn’t* know everything, so that they could be open to learning everything well.

Therefore, I decided to return to that old standby for starting the semester — a diagnostic test, but not so much for my information as for theirs. In fact, this process already happens at the three other levels at which I teach—first, the remedial students who have generally taken and failed the Writing Proficiency Exam and have often received an “M” code (for “trouble with mechanics”) on their exams; second, the upper-level undergraduates who start their course with a

² Cooper’s study demonstrates a stunning correlation between increased foreign language study and significantly higher SAT verbal *and* math scores, which may suggest that the mental discipline involved in understanding the grammar of a second language improves overall cognitive functioning (381).



diagnostic test (which is readily available in their course book, *Correct Writing* (Butler et al. xiii-xviii);³ and finally the graduate students who likewise start their course with a diagnostic test.

I would argue that these tests are most helpful as diagnostic tests not for the teacher but the *students* as all of these tests serve as a reality check to let students see how much they have yet to learn. For example, the very fact of having failed the Writing Proficiency Exam, along with having received the “M” code, shows remedial students that there are writing skills that they haven’t yet mastered. But the diagnostic test of both graduate and upper-level undergraduate grammar students can also produce low scores.⁴

I would suggest, then, that the apparent “failures” that begin these three classes are actually stepping-stones to the attitudes necessary for students to achieve success, because in none of the classes where students failed some kind of initial test did I have any problems with students resisting grammar instruction. Indeed, I think that putting students in an initial situation where they can and do fail paradoxically opens their minds up to do the work necessary to succeed—it prevents overconfidence that can be a barrier to true learning.⁵

However, I realized that I had unintentionally barred my first-year writing students from realizing the benefits of such prophylactic first-day “failures”

³ The book also comes with a convenient achievement test (Butler et al. 459-64) that I use for a final exam. Originally selected by our program in the 1980s, the book has been retained by Prof. Carol Porr, the lead teacher in the undergraduate grammar course, with whom I agree that it is the best and most thorough overall grammar exercise book currently available (Porr).

⁴ Following Dr. Harshbarger’s lead, I allow the graduate students to work together and consult their books if they wish, a practice that can produce better scores on the diagnostic test; nonetheless, the very act of having to consult a classmate or a book for most of the answers reinforces the point that most students *don’t* know the answers to this test.

⁵ Miller notes that to remember what they have been taught, students need to be both attentive and willing. Overconfident students, however, are likely to display neither characteristic. Miller says specifically: “Obtaining and holding student attention is critical, as is students’ willingness and ability to focus on the material at hand. Without attention, there is no memory” (Miller 121).



because I typically do not start the first-year courses with a diagnostic grammar test, a mistake I now regret.⁶

Choices, Choices: What Kind of Diagnostic Test(s) Would Work Best?

Our program requires an early diagnostic test in both levels of first-year writing to identify students who may need supplementary remedial help, but the particulars of this test are left to the instructor. In the past, what I typically did in Writing Studies I and II was use an early homework assignment to serve as this diagnostic test. But then, however, I decided to seek a more explicit diagnostic test that students would *recognize* as a test. But which test would best accomplish my goal of having students identify and acknowledge their grammar deficits?

The tests used in my other classes offered many models, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. For instance, taking a leaf from my class for remedial students, I thought about administering a practice Writing Proficiency Exam, the exam normally taken at the end of the two-course first-year sequence,

⁶ Instead, I have typically begun the first day of class for both first- and second-semester students with a get-to-know-you exercise, an overview of the syllabus, and a review of effective paper organization techniques. The rest of the first-semester course is organized to help students master one grammar or usage point per week – I introduce the point on Mondays; we review a worksheet on it briefly on Wednesdays; and students take a short quiz on it on Fridays. This scheme of repetition and frequent testing is designed to impress grammar points effectively into students' long-term memories and accords with the findings of recent research in cognitive psychology. For example, James M. Lang notes Michelle Miller's summary of research on memory as well as "the testing effect" that suggests that frequent testing of students' mastery of information helps students learn it more effectively. Indeed, Miller notes, "Frequent testing is not an interruption to the learning process; rather, it is central to it" (Lang; Miller 121-122). The other work on critical reading and argumentative writing in the first-semester course fits into the interstices around this basic framework that attempts to instill a fundamental understanding of grammar basics into students' memories. I organize the course to privilege issues of grammatical skill, organization, quotation, and citation because I believe that such a background provides the foundation for all other written work students will produce in college and on the job. Once students possess those skills, they possess the basic tools to write successfully in most situations. The second-semester course focuses more on a Writing-Across-the-Curriculum approach, with grammar instruction sprinkled in more incidentally.



an in-class essay test that incidentally tests grammatical ability while focusing primarily on organizational, evidentiary, and argumentative abilities. On the one hand, such a test is efficient for the teacher's diagnostic purposes because it assesses several abilities at once.⁷ On the other hand, being simultaneously tested on several areas of mastery may tempt students to minimize their grammatical deficiencies by focusing on other areas in which they've performed well.

Alternately, from my class for upper-class undergraduates, I could use the multiple-choice diagnostic test out of *Correct Writing*.⁸ The advantages of such a test are significant—it takes relatively little time for the students to complete, and it is easy to for students to grade each other's tests in class anonymously. After the grading, I ask students how many answers are correct on the papers they have graded, and we put the numbers on the board. The advantage of this procedure is that students get to see immediately that they *all* need to improve these skills, without the weaker performers losing self-esteem. I also collect these diagnostic tests as a way to judge which concepts the class as a whole needs the most help with. The disadvantages of this type of test, however, are that it doesn't show how students write or how well they can *apply* their grammatical knowledge.

I could also use the collaborative test created by Dr. Scott Harshbarger for the graduate grammar course, a test that aims to give students the background necessary to understand *why* a fragment is a fragment and a run-on sentence is a run-on sentence, as well as providing strategies for fixing them.⁹ One strength of

⁷ Moreover, as it is a handwritten test, it also removes from students the crutch of grammar-check, providing a truer portrait of what knowledge of grammar students have internalized.

⁸ This test focuses on identifying parts of speech, subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent agreement, pronoun case, adjective and adverb use, dangling and misplaced modifiers, faulty parallelism, and faulty pronoun reference, as well as the proper use of commas, semicolons, apostrophes, and quotation marks (Butler et al. xiii-xviii).

⁹ This test asks students to define a clause, explain how to find the subject of a sentence, define independent and subordinate clauses, list subordinating and coordinating conjunctions, define how fragments are created (either having no clause or having a subordinate clause), define how run-ons are created (by improperly joining independent clauses), explain how independent clauses can be properly joined, list transitional/



this test is that it may make students with strong grammar backgrounds recall things from memory, helping reinforce the concepts that they *do* know (Miller 122). Another strength is that it is also a difficult test, even for students with strong grammar backgrounds, which makes them aware that there are several areas that they have not yet mastered. But this test's greatest strength is that it gives students real theoretical background, using logic to explain why something fits into the category of a fragment or a run-on sentence.

Most students have never approached grammar this way. Even those who reliably avoid fragments and run-ons have generally internalized a sense of sentence boundaries intuitively from their reading and have trouble articulating the rules that they follow. By giving students clear rules, this test allows students at any level to apply guidelines to what they've written to self-test for fragments and run-on sentences.

Applying the Theory: Diagnostic Testing in a Second-Semester Writing Course

Due to a one-term leave last year, I haven't yet taught a first-semester writing course since the one that inspired this article, but I *have* tested my theories in a second-semester writing course. This past spring term, I began my Writing Studies II course with two diagnostic tests—the upper-level grammar multiple choice test and a practice essay test. We graded the multiple-choice test immediately in class as a group, with students grading each other's anonymous tests.

As I do in my upper-level grammar course, I counterbalanced the abysmally low grades by having students report on the score range of the tests, which they had graded anonymously, so that students would see that everyone was struggling. I then graded the essay tests myself and returned them to the students with specific grammar feedback on what they still had to perfect. By administering both the multiple-choice and the essay test, I was able to balance showing students in general that they still had much to learn with giving students

(*footnote 9 cont'd*) conjunctive adverbs that are commonly mistaken for subordinating conjunctions, and explain what punctuation needs to be used when a transitional/conjunctive adverb lies between two independent clauses.



individual feedback on their individual writing difficulties. Both strategies, I hoped, would convince students that it was worth attending to issues of grammar.

My initial results have been positive. Beginning the semester with these strategies worked swimmingly—I faced no resistance at all when we covered grammar, and the second-semester students were delightfully co-operative and enthusiastic.

Two caveats apply, however. First, unlike Writing Studies I, in Writing Studies II, I cover grammar only on selected days—it's not the organizing principle around which much of the course is based, as it is in Writing Studies I. Thus, these students' lack of resistance to grammar instruction may have been influenced by the fact that they didn't encounter it as often. Second, another factor that might influence these results is that I also took a more student-centered approach in that course than I usually do to the teaching of grammar, having students peruse *A Pocket Style Manual*, find a grammar point with which they had previously been unfamiliar, and then teach it to their classmates (while I stood by to fill in any gaps in the explanation if needed). That approach, however, is less suitable for students in the first-semester course, as those students need more rigorous grammar instruction than students in the second-semester course do.

The Proof Is in the Pudding: Future Testing

Thus, the best test of my new approach will come this fall term, as I try it in Writing Studies I, the grammar-based first-semester composition course. This time, I'm going to combine the practice essay test from the remedial course with the short-answer test from the graduate course, since the latter provides such a strong theoretical foundation for the further teaching of grammar.

Furthermore, in addition to using the diagnostic tests themselves, I also plan to add a requirement to help students do some reality checking. I'll be asking them to predict their diagnostic test results and then compare them to the scores they have actually received. As Karen M. Zabrocky and Rebecca B. Bays have noted, such a requirement forces students to recognize that they "are likely to overestimate their understanding and test readiness" (Zabrocky and Bays 123).



If my tests succeed, I should have an enthusiastic group of grammar students this term; if not, it's back to the drawing board. Either way, both this fall and in future semesters, I should be able to determine whether my newly rigorous diagnostic testing strategy will pass the test of time.

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An Alternative Approach to Error Analysis Within a First Year Learning Community

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Abstract

Error analysis has been viewed as a part of the corpus of structured approaches in composition that emphasizes grammar while de-emphasizing student-centered learning styles and preferences. The findings from this study indicate the potential against negative bias in grammar-based instruction. By incorporating Spoken Language Interference Pattern (SLIP) considerations into student error analyses sheets, this study reveal new benefits in electronic error analysis and task-based developmental writing.

Review of the Literature

Proponents of error analysis have new arguments supporting the merits of grammar-based instruction. Developments in electronic formatting and presentations allow alternative ways for guiding students towards self-instruction during pre-teaching, in-teaching, and post-teaching exercises. The plethora of Online Writing Labs (OWLs) has transformed the nexus of language learning and grammar into more individualized and learning-centered processes. For instance, at the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) Writing Center students are able to self-select grammar exercises based upon student Error Analysis Sheets (EASs). Electronic self-assessment in grammar has yet to be incorporated into the annals of compositional research.

While Lunsford and Lunsford's 2006 study did reflect a post-modern complexity of error typologies, it touched only lightly upon the advent of electronic correction feedback. The authors mentioned several plausible factors influencing error counts stemming from or linked to the digital revolution. For instance, it appears that essays are longer and frequently feature research topics or persuasive arguments (Lunsford & Lunsford 792). Spelling errors have also



dropped from number one in frequency in the Connors and Lunsford study (1988) to number five (Lunsford & Lunsford 796).

The use of grammar checks has also created differences in error ranking, such as in capitalization and punctuation. Lunsford and Lunsford were puzzled over the limited use of technology for corrective feedback whether it was for grading and commenting on papers using word processors or other forms (794). For a variety of reasons, professors seem to continue to prefer grade papers by hand, including the exam graders in the study. Thus, the advent of electronic error analysis sheets has remained by and large a peripheral topic.

The potential of electronic error analysis sheets (EAS) was explored by Krauthamer, Burton & Ferguson at the University of the District of Columbia in 2008, when they used a specifically designed, model EAS to code a sample set of English Composition I final exam essays (Krauthamer, Burton, & Ferguson 23). The pilot study analyzed the validity and frequency of error categories in the EAS in order to refine the typologies used. The EAS was also deployed at The Writing Center to assist tutors in helping students “better understand their patterns of error” (Krauthamer, Burton, & Ferguson, 2008 23). The pilot study found potential for longitudinal applications. By 2010, the model EAS had generally become fully integrated in all tutoring routines and self-monitoring routines both at The Writing Center, and its sister lab, *The Online Writing Center* (Dessaso & Krauthamer 2010).

The opportunity to measure the validity of the EAS as a learning tool surfaced when this researcher worked as a graduate assistant with the First-Year Learning Community’s (FYLC) “Scholars-On-A-Roll” (SOAR) at UDC with the goal of “increasing student persistence and achievement; promoting integrative learning; and enhancing students’ experiences of learning in the classroom” (UDC Project SOAR 4). Since the FYLC students were trained to use the EAS in ways which encouraged self-monitoring and self-correction (revising of e-portfolio essays), this researcher decided to explore how the EAS nurtured growth in writing over the semester (Kroll 29).



Methodology

◆ In-Semester Research

During the semester, there were several concurrent activities using the Error Analysis Sheet (EAS) (Refer to Figure 1). First, fifteen FYLC students in one section of Fundamentals in Writing were introduced to the EAS at The Writing Center. Second, all students received a customized EAS from their midterm that included noted error tendencies. Third, students were shown how to use their EAS for student-centered tutoring or self-instruction by clicking on embedded hyperlinks that connected to grammar-based websites. One of the developmental writing goals was to encourage students to self-assess and to arm them with opportunities for resubmitting thoughtfully revised essays for inclusion in their project portfolio.

◆ Post-Semester Research

This researcher corrected final exams and tabulated the errors on EASs for the FYLC Fundamentals in Writing class. These findings were compared with previously tabulated class EASs to identify improvements; however, there were several concerns. One was whether or not there was adequate grading consistency, since the rubric for essay grading required a balance of content along with grammar. Another was the weight factors in consideration that many students “write like they speak.”

In fact, if in the interest of encouraging students to write more and take more relaxed approaches to writing, the instructors later exhibited an overriding concern for correctness, this would be detrimental and compound the effects of negative conditioning. Specifically, if errors are indeed traceable to spoken language interference patterns, then the errors are essentially more descriptive in nature.

Helene Krauthamer has explored the impact of spoken language in *Spoken Language Interference Patterns (SLIPs) in Written English* (1999). For instance, she analyzed and quantified SLIPs in an example of Early Modern English, contemporary writing, scientific writing, and a student essay. Such methods provide background and characterization of the



descriptive-prescriptive relations in Spoken Language Interference Patterns (SLIPs) (Krauthamer 21-49). While Krauthamer based her methodology on the work of a variety of researchers, her work is unique due to the uniformity with which SLIPs analysis may be applied. In effect, Krauthamer argues that “we may expect SLIPs to pervade whatever writing is done” (Krauthamer 113); thus, a continuum model can be applicable for instruction.

Procedure

This researcher adapted the critical analysis method used in Chapter 4, “SLIPs in Student Writing,” (Krauthamer 51-57) by developing a spreadsheet to tabulate SLIPs errors for the FYLC exams (both finals and early midterms). Eventually, all the artifacts were re-examined via SLIPs Analysis (Refer to Table 2). Ultimately, each Error Analysis Sheet (EAS) was updated to include a more uniform process in error tagging. Additional typologies were added and recommended for inclusion in the EAS. Error Analyses Summary charts were prepared and updated for comparing overall writing improvement.

Analysis of individual EAS and semester chart summaries consisted of evaluating the ease in which error patterns are detected; recording and identifying error patterns; measuring improvements over the semester; identifying and contextualizing errors as SLIPs; evaluating the overall impact of SLIPs upon error tracking; and finally, comparing the error analysis compilations from UDC with prior studies (Kroll 30, 50-54).

Results

◆ Improved Accuracy

Prior to the SLIPs Analysis, the Error Analysis records contained irregularities which transferred to the class Error Summaries, so the impressions were approximate. For instance, the essays were graded holistically, and the focus included content, development, and organization. After the SLIPs Analysis, the counts in grammar errors were more focused and specialized. This researcher was able to definitively identify the top four error categories (commas, spelling, verb-tense, and run-on sentences). The



availability of ample student papers to practice, free from grading pressures, seemed to produce more regularity (See Table 1).

◆ SLIPs Error Tallies

The SLIPs Analysis records provided a linguistic imprint which foregrounded spoken language qualities (Table 2). The typologies used in tabulations were recorded as the errors occurred. Mostly these placed in phonological, morphological, semantic, and syntactic categories. In this way, individual SLIPs became noticeable, such as the tendency for homophonic misspellings (phonological), fragments (syntax), and so forth. More importantly, the process of reviewing (more than once) encouraged close reading; instead of hurriedly marking up the essay, one was forced to read in terms of context and serve as a supportive enabler.

As for tallies, it was easier to consider redundant errors (those occurring more than once) as “non-errors.” Creating this “non-error” column helped to establish the concept of “error forgiveness” – that is, forgiving errors of a more descriptive nature, such as spoken slang (common in conversation), and missing commas (people often do speak without noticeable pauses). Expression and grammar were not at odds, then, but rather inter-related with the person. Even misspellings could be identified as SLIPs, such as an ELL’s accented pronunciations.

◆ Additional error typologies

Several new typologies were suggested as they occurred on the exams: “Dangling Modifiers,” “Participles/Gerunds,” “Word Order,” “Coordinating/Conjunctions,” “Inflections (Adverb/Adjective),” and “Comma Splices.” The ability to add typologies to the EAS had not been restricted by the network administrator or by The Writing Center (TWC) Director. Tutors were allowed to electronically modify individual EASs, if the need arose, to accommodate error tendencies. However a major function of the electronic EAS was the ability not only to tally errors, but also to click on the typology’s hypertext link. Tutors did not have to rely on their own instructional resources to tutor students but could direct them to a website



which allowed them to self-instruct and practice both on-campus and off-campus. New online reference sites were also embedded for the suggested additional typologies (see Figure 1 – Revised Error Analysis Sheet). For instance, in the electronic version of the revised EAS, clicking on the hyperlink for “Adjective/Adverb Inflections” transports the tutee to a practice page at Towson University’s Online Writing Support (OWS).

New Indicators for Comparison (Summary)

Based on grading practice and repetition, this researcher realized that correcting is as much a science as an art. The benefits of re-reading also include improved ability to contextualize ideas, development, and organization from the student’s perspective. As Peter Elbow advises in “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking,” it is as important for the teacher as the student to “see what is only potentially good . . . and . . . encourage it” (Elbow 401). The addition of new indicators such as Total Word Count, Number of Errors, and Error Ratio allowed this researcher to better contextualize the extent of class improvement over the semester. For instance, for the SOAR FYLC, the average length of the essays had increased by 53%, while the error incidence on the Final had decreased 28% compared with the Midterm.

Analysis and Comparison

◆ Comparison with Prior Studies

Findings from the 2010 SOAR FYLC error analyses compared side-by-side with the 2008 UDC Pilot Study of the Error Analysis Sheet (EAS) indicate the positive benefits of error analysis in the classroom (Krauthamer, Burton, & Ferguson, 2008). The comparison on the Finals indicates that the error ratio was lower (5.6 vs. 6.7 per 100 words), and that the types of errors which the 2010 SOAR FYLC students committed were less severe syntactically. For instance, in the 2008 Pilot Study on Freshman Composition, the Error Analysis indicated that the top usage errors were as follows: run-on sentences, fragments, verb-errors (tenses), and subject-verb agreement. In contrast, for the 2010 SOAR FYLC, the top usage errors were



verb-errors (tenses) and run-on sentences. One may infer that the FYLC writing quality was less severely error-prone.

The only other significant study to reference in recent years has been the Lunsford and Lunsford study. However, direct comparisons cannot be made because this study was based upon essay assignments, not timed final exams. Nationwide, the more outstanding errors appeared to be related to comma use, although “Faulty sentence structure” ranked 10th (Lunsford & Lunsford 795).

The evidence that students used their time to focus on strengthening their grammar skills was supported by improvements in revisions, along with lower EAS tallies in spelling, pronoun usage, plural/possessive errors, frequently confused words, and diction errors (Table 1). These findings are further substantiated when this researcher factored in the effects of skew by analyzing the median numbers. For instance, while fifty percent of the class made one or fewer errors in “Run-on Sentences,” “Subject-Verb Agreement,” “Verb Tense,” “Word Omission,” and “Prepositions,” skew was caused by one or two students. One student wrote six “Run-on” sentences; another committed eight “Verb-Tense” errors; and another was responsible for eight “Capitalization” errors. The improvements were also proportional to the longer essays written for the Finals.

◆ SLIPs and Non-Standard Dialect

This researcher examined and compared error types against those typical for African-American dialectal interference. Although misspellings resulted from spoken language interference patterns (i.e., “intire,” “enmprove”), such phonologically driven errors cannot be said to be limited to specific groups. Other misspelled verbs involved replacement of velar nasal “-ng” with alveolar nasal “-n” included “usen,” and “chargen.” Elisions based upon spoken contractions included “tryana” and “gonna.”

Generally the evidence that such spoken interferences are attributable to classified dialect was not significant. The reasons may be first that with integration and higher living standards, more urban Americans routinely



practice code-switching, just as minorities attending school in the suburbs do; and second, that such misspellings can equally trace to learning challenges or other dialects besides Vernacular Black English (VBE). Accordingly draws in vowels or word contractions are also common to Coastal Southern English or Appalachian English (Vajda 3-8).

◆ Errors as Growth Indicators

One way to redefine error is in terms of the potential for growth against standards of achievement over a semester. The English Fundamentals syllabus stated that “the major objective of this course is to enable students to compose and edit, within an hour, a unified 250-300 word paragraph or short essay that is free from most errors” (UDC English Dept. 2). Encouraging fluency and volume in writing mattered when on the pre-midterms, the average word count had only been 218 words. Essay and in-class journal writing prompts were designed to solicit student engagement and opinions, always with the dual purpose of building upon content matter and understanding of Standard American English. To this end, the average Finals Exam word count of 333 represented an improvement ratio of 1.53 or 53%.

Students’ writing styles or errors, however, may have had as much to do with individual spoken language interference patterns (SLIPs) as classroom discussions. According to Biber, Conrad, Reppen, Byrd, & Helt’s 2002 study, “Speaking and Writing in the University,” instructors and teaching assistants often teach using involved, narrative, situation-dependent, overtly persuasive, and more non-impersonal styles in spoken than in written academic registers – quite the opposite of the registers used in most college textbooks (Biber et al. 24-37). Recalling that FYLC students experience challenges such as coming from stressful urban backgrounds and being first-generation students in college, the FYLC staff sought to ease their transition through techniques like orally supportive dialogue that may have included SLIPs.

A record of types of errors over the semester did indicate that the number of “Comma Errors” increased from 22 to 45 on the Finals (refer to Table 1),



even after several errors had been “forgiven” using SLIPs Error Analysis. There was also an increase in “Comma Splices” from 7 to 12 on the Final. In retrospect, and upon closer analyses, the two-fold increase in “Comma Errors” may be interpreted less with dismay than as a sign of intermediary growth in rhetorical development.

A review of the Finals revealed that there was improved sophistication in the use of auxiliary verbs, particularly inflections of “have,” “will,” and “be,” and a marked increase in the use of subordinating/coordinating conjunctions such as “when,” “which,” “because,” and “but” (Kroll 57). Here are two examples:

- (1) I have now set a goal which is to beat global warming [] but it’s definitely not easy when trying to complete this task alone.
- (2) Many people feel as though things to [] not need to be looked at again if nothing goes wrong with them as [] for instance [] In 2007 a bridge collapse [] because of how old the material on the bridge was.

The above sentences contain “Missing Comma” errors, which would have been tallied under “Comma Errors.” What is important, however, is that both students experimented with modifying phrases and conjunctions. Even though Sentence (2) also contains a Frequently Confused Word (“to” for “do” as a phonological SLIP), unnecessary Capitalization (“In” as an inverse SLIP), and Verb-Tense error (should be “collapsed” – a morphemic SLIP), the idea expressed by this student was unique; it didn’t come from *The Green Collar Economy* or class discussions. A thoughtful teacher considers the context and evidence pointing towards “syntactic growth” (Lunsford & Lunsford 798).

Discussion

Use of Error Analysis Sheets (EAS), as well as incorporating such methods in tutoring and correcting student work, guided students to recognize rhetorical parameters such as topic, audience, and purpose. A strong factor in improvement must have been the higher levels of engagement stemming from participation in the First-Year Learning Community (FYLC) program. Project SOAR consists of a block of integrated courses linked around a chosen theme combined with



learning activities designed along experiential and constructivist axes. During 2009-2010, this included a cluster of integrated courses “linked around two public issue themes – the urban garden and the green economy” (UDC Project SOAR 3). For instance, a reading of Van Jones’s *The Green Collar Economy* produced the concept of an all-inclusive green economy that was translated to career exploration. This enmeshed “green collar” with the cluster goals stated for Project SOAR which included building connections between the self, community, and academic learning. A variety of enrichment opportunities included coordination among instructors for a Capstone Project/Presentation Day, and field trips, and other networking opportunities. An end-of-semester survey indicated that not only did students express strong satisfaction with the program, but the retention rates for freshman participants had also improved (UDC Project SOAR 6).

The fact that students were oriented towards assignments which involved task-based, communicative learning is very much the kind of fluency-based, collaborative, immersion approach to grammar instruction which is supported by language learning theorists such as Jack Richards. In “Addressing the Grammar Gap in Task Work,” he writes: “Task work is not intended to promote development of a nonstandard form of English but is seen as part of the process by which linguistic and communicative competence is developed” (Richards 155).

Although English language instruction may have been “embedded in a more complex pedagogical context” (that is, in combination with concurrent subject assignments), grammar challenges were addressed prior to, during, or in stages within and after essay assignments (Richards 155). Journaling exercises such as “What Will You Do When It’s Due?” combined project planning discussions with theory and a game on homonyms.

Use of e-learning methods was in line with general objectives for first-year students, which include understanding how to conduct self-directed learning using a variety of media, and working individually or collaboratively on internet research projects. During this project, this researcher observed that while some of the older students were initially reluctant, by the end of the course, they were



among the most enthusiastic technology skills learners, possibly owing to the appeal of interactive, task-based assignments.

Conclusion

The advantages of Error Analysis appear to have been relegated to grammatical applications, but this study indicates it can be useful in interactive formats, such as the Error Analysis Sheet (EAS) with its diagnostic features and web links. By incorporating the EAS into semester-long learning community project activities, the setting for grammar learning was more functional and communicative. Grammar instruction did occur in traditionally explicit ways when needed; for instance, after the midterms there was a lesson about sentence fragments.

Electronic Error Analysis has yet to be fully automated – maybe English teachers will go out of business when this happens. Nevertheless, having such a worksheet available and learning to use it for grading is definitely a consciousness-raising experience, both for teachers and students. When combined with SLIPs markers (as shown in Figure 1), it furnishes potent socio-cultural registers about the setting in which language is truly functional, for as Monique Akassi ascribes, “if more teachers would adjust their teaching styles according to African American students’ culture and social discourse, such a movement can aid students’ ability to identify with the educator and instructional methods that ultimately will improve student writing and increase student retention in Historically Black Universities” (Akassi 35)

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Appendix for “An Alternative Approach to Error Analysis”

Table 1. Class Error Summary - Before versus After SLIPs Analysis

(not all typologies shown)	Pre-Midterm		Final	
	Before	After	Before	After
SAGE ERRORS				
Faulty Parallelism				2
Fragments	4	3	5	6
Run On	9	8	17	20
Subject Verb Agreement	5	9	2	12
Verb Error (Tense) (-ed, -ing)	5	11	26	23
Plural/ Possessive Error (-s)	1	7	5	4
Pronoun Error	2	4	12	7
Diction	6	7	32	12
Frequently Confused Words		18	12	12
Wordiness		4	13	16
ESL ISSUES				
Prepositions	2	9	18	15
Articles		2	9	5
MECHANICAL ERRORS				
Punctuation	10	3	6	4
Commas	3	22	36	45
Spelling	57	49	22	31
Quotation Errors		1	6	1
Apostrophe		2	3	6
Capitalization	3+	4	14	16

Table 2. Sample SLIPS Error Analysis Record

Tally of Spoken Language Interference Patterns (SLIPs)				
SLIP Category	type	error	Non-error	sentence#/detail
Phonological slip	misspelling	1	3	(3); (5); (9);
	homophones	4		(5); (7)
	missing comma		1	(3); NSD*
Morphological slip	extra word	1		(6);



Morphological slip	s-v agreement	2		(4); NSD; (9); (NSD)
	adverb inflection	1		(7); NSD
	pronoun use	2		(3) NSD; (9); NSD
Semantic	slang	1		(5); NSD
Syntactic	fragment		2	(1); (2);
	run-on	1		(7);
	sum	13	6	
Total Word Count= 147				
Error Rate= 11		*non-standard dialect		

Name of Writing Student:	SLIPs Code	Comments/ Examples	Non-Errors	Errors
THESIS	New			
Is there a thesis?	Pr			
Is the thesis clear?	Pr			
ORGANIZATION ERRORS				
No Outline	Pr			
Clear Paragraph Structure	Pr			
DEVELOPMENT				
Paragraph Development	Pr			
Research & Documentation	Pr			
USAGE ERRORS				
Faulty Parallelism	Sy			
Fragments	Sy			
Run On	Sy			
SubjectVerb Agreement	M			
Verb Error (Tense) (-ed, -ing)	M			
Plural/ Possessive Error (-s)	P			
Pronoun Error	M			
Diction	Se			
Frequently Confused Words	P			



Wordiness	Se			
Word Order (Syntax)	Sy			
Person Shift	M			
Tense Shift	M			
Word Omission	M			
Dangling Modifiers	Sy			
Participles/ Gerunds	M			
ESL ISSUES				
Prepositions	M/Se			
Articles	M			
Coordinating/ Conjunctions	Sy			
Inflections (Adverb/ Adjective)	M			
MECHANICAL ERRORS				
Punctuation	P			
Commas	P			
Comma splices	Sy			
Spelling	P			
Quotation Errors	P			
Apostrophe	P			
Capitalization	P			
DOCUMENTATION ERRORS				
MLA				
APA				
ERROR RATE				
Total Word Count (TWC)				
Number Errors				
Ratio TWC/Errors				

Figure 1. Revised Error Analysis Sheet (EAS), Copyright © by Krauthamer, Burton, Ferguson, and Kroll (excluding websites) 2011.



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Bringing Grammar Back into the Writing Center

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Since the 1970's, when writing centers started to proliferate on college, university, and high school campuses, centers have tried to avoid being labeled as "comma clinics," "grammar garages" (Waldo 415), or even "fix-it shops." These unhappy labels would have portrayed centers as helping only with grammar, when, of course, the mission of centers was to assist with all parts of the writing process. Centers should not be faulted for eschewing these labels. After all, in order to establish their credibility, centers were trying to show their campuses the full scope of their services.

But something was lost. By stating they did more than merely handle commas and semi-colons, centers cast a pall over the study of grammar, limiting its role to that of "being correct." Today, however, the Writing Center at Prince George Community College (PGCC) in Largo, Maryland, with a campus of 18,000 students, is reversing this misconception of grammar. Instead of characterizing grammar as a cleanser and corrector, the PGCC Writing Center envisions grammar to be "the sum total of our language expertise, the building blocks of words and the principles on which we assemble them in meaningful ways" (Saylor). To bring about this sea-change for grammar, the PGCC Writing Center is staffed entirely by faculty and has designated at least one of its tutors as the resident grammarian: Sherry Saylor (MA—University of Tennessee-Knoxville). By doing so, the PGCC Writing Center is returning grammar to its vital, important role in the writing process, thereby serving as a model for other writing centers.

When students need grammatical help, they sign up for an appointment with the Center's grammarian, who does *not* proofread students' papers. Instead, Saylor teaches clients how to use grammar to reflect their thoughts and intentions, the seminal role grammar has played in language since the days of the medieval trivium of rhetoric, logic, and grammar (Glenn). As she works with students to help them understand the structures underlying English sentences,



they begin to see, for example, that run-ons and fragments reflect not “errors” but problems in thinking about relationships. In effect, she shows clients how structure and intention (form and function) go hand in hand, like a couple walking on a beach.

Her other technique is to ask student writers to identify what they think are their most significant problems. Then, when clients read their papers aloud, the editing problems, according to Saylor, “pop right out” so that she is merely guiding them in the editing process. With about 70 out of 100 of her tutorials focused on developing grammar expertise, Saylor believes an appointment with her becomes a time for the clients to learn structures of English and to use those structures for the best effect.

The PGCC Writing Center does even more to promote a new view of grammar. Through the auspices of the Writing Center, Saylor also offers a weekly 90-minute Grammar Clinic, an idea that came from the PGCC Writing Center Director Abby Bardi. Starting in the third week of a semester, Saylor presents ten non-credit sessions. Unlike other centers that might offer sessions on avoiding errors such as comma splices and fragments, the Grammar Clinic presents a more comprehensive view of grammar as “a net to capture meaning” (Saylor). Because Saylor stresses the fundamental structures of English grammar, the medical connotation of the word *clinic* disappears, replaced with the concept of a place where students become better writers and readers.

To reveal this power of grammar, the Grammar Clinic begins with Pamela Dykstra’s famous bicycle analogy for the English sentence where the first wheel represents the subject, and the back wheel is the predicate; baskets, symbolizing prepositional phrases, participial phrases, subordinate clauses and the like, can be loaded in the front, the middle, and the back of the bike-sentence.

In subsequent weeks, with this fundamental analogy in mind, students progress to recognizing nouns, verbs, adjectives, and structure words not by using the traditional (and contradictory) definitions for the parts of speech, but by applying linguistic definitions. For example, nouns are words that have determiners (a, an, the) and can be made possessive (a book and a book’s title). Thus, the Clinic gives attendees an overview of how English functions—the parts



of its machinery—so that students can work with their sentences in creative ways.

How can English grammar be covered in only ten weeks? Saylor compares the course to the famous Reduced Shakespeare Company, which presents all thirty-seven of the Bard’s plays in only ninety-seven minutes; and so she sees herself as the “Reduced Grammar Company,” highlighting the fundamental structures and forms of English in order to remind students of how much they already know about the language.

Saylor has other plans to help revitalize the role of grammar in writing. As co-president of the Assembly for the Teaching of Grammar (ATEG), an NCTE-affiliate that stresses new ways to teach grammar, Saylor hopes to start a Grammar Guild composed of professionals interested in grammar and writing who would serve as resources for schools, perhaps leading workshops for faculty and going into classrooms to teach grammar’s role in writing. This service would focus on all levels from elementary to high school. The need to see grammar in a new light never ends for the resident grammarian in the PGCC Writing Center.

For over thirty-five years, the famous grammarian Diana Hacker taught at PGCC and tutored in its writing center, leaving behind a legacy of caring about students and their writing. Saylor, who worked with Hacker, continues that grammatical tradition, fostering a new perception of grammar in writing centers and among students. Although Moliere famously said, “Grammar lords it over kings,” Saylor and the PGCC Writing Center hope that students will be “the kings who lord it over grammar,” so that they develop their writing and become confident with the language.

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Book Reviews

McWhorter, John. *Our Magnificent Bastard Language: The Untold History of English*. New York: Penguin Books, 2008, 268 pages.

Reviewed by Susan Behrens, Professor, Communication Sciences and Disorders, Marymount Manhattan College, author of *Grammar: A Pocket Guide*, and co-editor of *Language in the Real World: An Introduction to Linguistics*.

Much like its subject, the English language, *Our Magnificent Bastard Language: The Untold History of English* by John McWhorter is a fast read. It is (to use the author's own description of English grammar) weird and messy, but to understand English, it is worthwhile to tune in, pay attention to the details, and look beyond mere words. Such an approach to understanding the language's history, especially at the grammatical level, contributes to a more tolerant view of dialectal differences. In turn, we are able to put the prescriptive rules of Standard English in better perspective. In the end, no language is "pure"; hence the spicy title of the book.

McWhorter works hard to tell a story that is lively, suspenseful, and accessible, and he mostly succeeds. Overall, the book could use some tightening up as many passages are redundant. He likes to build suspense by stringing us along, circling around a particular odd aspect of English before revealing his explanation. Further, two of the five chapters could easily be from different books. Chapter 4 on the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and linguistic determinism, for example, seems disconnected from the main thesis, while Chapter 5 switches from grammar to a discussion of phonology. He needs to convince us that these chapters connect to his story.

So what is his story? Specifically, that language contact is a force to be reckoned with. For example, he proposes a Celtic origin for two traits of English grammar – the insertion of the auxiliary *do* to form interrogative and negative sentences (e.g., *Do you like coffee? I do not like tea*); and the use of the present participle in present tense constructions (e.g., *I am reviewing this book*). He traces these apparently rare constructions back to the contact that Anglo-Saxons



had with the British Celts. We are shown how Welsh and Cornish both have this do-insertion and –ing form (albeit a gerund, or verb-noun) in the present tense.

Crucial to his argument is that English is the renegade when compared to other Germanic languages. German, Dutch, Danish – they don't use *do* and –ing the way English does. It seems a simple conclusion – we got this odd syntax as a result of the Germanic Anglo-Saxons making contact with the original inhabitants of the British Isles. But most scholars think otherwise. While McWhorter claims that our Modern English grammar is a product of contact with speakers of other languages, he thinks that other scholars are missing the “big picture,” settling for spontaneous change as the explanation (2). In other words, there is no reason; change just happens.

McWhorter claims that these scholars are wrong for several reasons, including their belief in a string of false assumptions. One in particular is worth repeating – the belief that *written* language *is* the language. We don't see written records of “meaningless *do*” and the “verb-noun present” until after the Celts were long gone; thus, goes the anti-McWhortian argument, they couldn't have influenced those changes. But living language moves more quickly than the written form. From 1100 to 1300s in the British Isles, French was the language of written documents, so while the changes in English might not have been set down in writing, they could have been alive in spoken English. Changes from contact with Celtic languages “thrived below the radar” before they showed up in print (44).

Besides meaningless-do and verb-noun present tense, McWhorter tells about other grammatical changes that “clearly” are due to language contact, not chance. Old English was full of case markings while Middle English was left with only the genitive. Why is that? The Vikings! It was Old-Norse speaking male invaders rather than whole families who, after arriving in Britain and settling into English-speaking families, commenced to “beat up” the grammar – resulting in, for example, the loss of gender, conjugation, and most case markers. Old-English and Old-Norse just happened to have the same third person singular suffix, so that inflection remained. So much else (“grammatical frippery”) was lost as the next generation spoke a hybrid English “shaved” of grammatical distinctions.



One reason why McWhorter (at least according to McWhorter) is the only linguist to “get it” (that language contact is everything) is that academic scholarship is marred by a silo-effect of working in isolation. McWhorter claims that few academics have looked across time back to Proto-Germanic, at the full range of English grammar, *and* compared English to its Germanic cousins. Hence, most histories of English are “static” (194), the “vanilla version” (197), or just plain wrong by claiming that these changes happen solely by chance.

While other scholars settle for description, he goes in search of the explanation. His urge to please and keep the story accessible sometimes leads to a “gee whiz” quality to his writing. We are told to “Check this out!” and “Get this!” Masculine and feminine words are “boys and girls,” in spite of a footnote explaining that grammatical gender isn’t biological gender.

Yet to his credit, McWhorter is clear, conveys his enthusiasm, gets his message across, and keeps our attention. There is a personality in this book, just like in English. And his message is useful. By taking the historical perspective, we can see that our current Standard English is not forever and always. Even Proto-Germanic was a misfit, deviating from Proto-Indo European in rebellious ways, probably from contact with the Phoenicians.

Modern English, then, is a product of adults learning a new language badly. McWhorter would therefore ask us to give innovations a break rather than cling, “like Linus to his blanket,” to our Standard English grammar rules (65). Modern English has the grammar that it does because of “random novelties that floated in...” from contact with other speakers (74). Dialects that work to regularize the messiness (*amn’t*) or fill gaps (*y’all*) are ultimately stigmatized. So while prescriptivists try to plug holes in a leaky language, keeping words in their cages, prescriptivism itself ultimately has little solid ground on which to stand.



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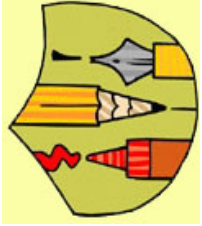
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