

# Journal

of



**Assembly for the Teaching  
of English Grammar**  
National Council of Teachers of English

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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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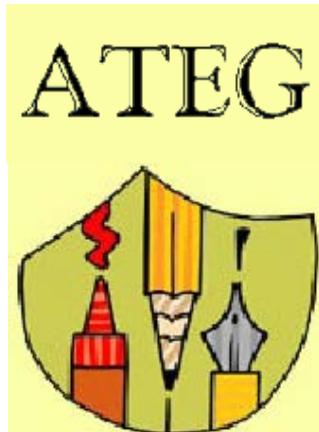
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# The ATEG Journal

Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar



An Assembly of  
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## Co-President's Message

We are delighted to share news of ATEG's impact and influence during our twenty-fifth anniversary year.

In February, Amy traveled to Taiwan to present a grammar teachers' workshop at the invitation of a school administrator who had been present at our NCTE Post-Conference Workshop in Boston this past November. In early March, Three ATEG members presented "Grammar at the Core: from Theory to Practice" at the Mid-Atlantic Regional Group meeting of the College English Association. Then at the end of March, six ATEG members presented the full talk at the national meeting of The College English Association in Baltimore. Because of the interest generated by these talks, there will be a grammar strand in the call for proposals for both groups next year!

The biggest news concerns our annual conference. We will be traveling to the Rocky Mountains on September 5-6 to the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs! The conference, hosted by ATEG member Kathleen Johnson, will provide an excellent geographic opportunity for our members west of the Mississippi to come together to explore the conference theme, *ATEG 25 – Rising to New Heights in Grammar Teaching*, along with members from across the rest of the country and around the world. See page iv of this issue of the *ATEG Journal* or the ATEG website <http://ateg.org> for information regarding Call for Papers, Proposal Guidelines, and Registration.

We invite you to join us as we celebrate our Silver Anniversary, an event that we see not as time to linger in the past, but instead as a time to prepare for the future. This is a most exciting time to be a grammar teacher! Come be part of our group – face-to-face at the conference, virtually through the website and listserv, and in print through the *ATEG Journal*.

Amy Benjamin and Sherry Saylor, Co-Presidents



Welcome to the 25th Annual ATEG Conference at  
The University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, Colorado  
September 5-6, 2014

*ATEG 25 – Rising to New Heights in Grammar Teaching*

In 1989, Martha Kolln, author of *Understanding English Grammar* and *Rhetorical Grammar*, founded the Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar – an interest group of the National Council of Teachers of English. From this beginning twenty-five years ago, ATEG has been offering a forum for discussing topics from theoretical research to the latest and most effective and practical teaching methods to teachers from kindergarten through college. And during these past twenty-five years, ATEG members have created a website, a listserv, an academic journal, and an annual international conference that brings together teachers and scholars from all over the world.

Our members usually fall into the following categories: community college teachers and college teachers of freshman composition; teachers and scholars of rhetoric, composition, literacy, and linguistics; college teachers whose students themselves intend to become teachers of future teachers; K-12 teachers; teachers of English Language Learners; publishers and editors of teaching materials; and independent scholars and consultants; in fact everyone who has an interest in teaching and studying English grammar – all are welcome as ATEG members.

For a quarter of a century, our diverse group has come together in print, on line, and face-to-face to advance the cause of grammar instruction. So our celebration will naturally include reflecting on the “pride and joy” of our accomplishments both old and new. And with your help, we’ll also be planning new ways to rise to greater heights in the teaching of English grammar.



## 25th Annual ATEG Conference Call for Papers, Proposal Guidelines, and Registration

ATEG welcomes proposals by teachers and scholars in the field of English grammar instruction that will help make grammar instruction durable, lively, authentic, and effective. Accepted proposals range from those grounded in classroom practice and pedagogy to those that are theoretically based.

In about 500 words, please summarize your proposal and how it relates to this year’s theme, *ATEG 25 – Rising to New Heights in Teaching Grammar*. Email it in an attachment to Amy Benjamin ([benjamin.amy@gmail.com](mailto:benjamin.amy@gmail.com)) and Sherry Saylor ([saylorsb@pgcc.edu](mailto:saylorsb@pgcc.edu)) no later than August 20, 2014. Immediately after the conference, you will need to provide a summary (about 1,000 words) to be included in a “Proceedings” issue of the *ATEG Journal*.

ATEG does not have copying facilities. Kindly supply your own handouts. As the date approaches, we will inform you as to the number of handouts that you will need. Generally, our conference sessions draw from 35 to 50 attendees.

**Conference Registration Fee: \$150**  
**(Pre-registration \$140 before August 20, Students \$75)**

Name/Title/Organization: \_\_\_\_\_

Postal Address (Street, City, State, Zip): \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Conference Fee: \$140 before (\_\_\_) or \$150 after (\_\_\_) August 20 Students \$ 75 (\_\_\_)

Please make checks out to ATEG and send with the completed form to:

**Amy Benjamin, P. O. Box 92, Fishkill, New York 12524**

Transportation and accommodations – information not available at press time.

Check the ATEG website: <http://ateg.org> for the latest conference information.



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## The Place of Grammar in the Common Core, and... What, *Exactly*, Is the Common Core Anyway?

Amy Benjamin, Educational Consultant and ATEG Co-President

Perhaps you've heard: the move to implement the Common Core State Standards is getting some bad press. More to the point, the Common Core has become something of a political football. Or to change metaphors entirely, if a politician needs some votes, it's handy to have a straw man to pick a fight with, and the way Common Core has been used by many a politician, you'd think that they'd have run out of straw by now!

So, before we talk about Common Core State Standards and expectations for grammar instruction, let's just get a few facts in order:

1. First, the Common Core State Standards are not federal. Forty-five states (Guess which ones have opted out!) have, through their own departments of education, adopted a set of standards (*not* a curriculum, *not* a methodology, *not* tests) in English language arts (aka literacy) and mathematics.
2. There are thirty-two Standards in the Common Core for English language arts, most of which apply to grades K-12. Of these, ten Standards apply to reading comprehension (for both literary and information-based texts), ten apply to writing (narrative, informational, and argumentation), six to speaking and listening, and six to what they are terming "language," by which they mean grammar and vocabulary. There are three Standards that address grammar explicitly, and these will be detailed later in this article.
3. It is "Race to the Top," not the Common Core, that is to blame (or, credit, if you prefer) for all the high stakes testing that you've been hearing about, as well as the policy of linking teacher performance ratings to those test results. In 2012, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, with the endorsement of the President, offered a whole bunch of money ("Race to the Top") to the states, but only to those whose applications for the funds included a commitment to (1) the Common



Core, (2) standardized tests on the Common Core, and (3) attaching “accountability” to schools, teachers, and principals based on the test scores achieved by students, with particular attention given to certain cohorts, such as students with disabilities, minorities, and English language learners. It is this process by which the actual learning standards get lost in the hullabaloo over high stakes tests.

So, now it is time to clear away all that extraneous noise about testing and accountability and have a look at the particular Standards that directly address grammar instruction. There are three; they apply to grades 2-12; and they are worded exactly like this:

- ◆ Language Standard 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
- ◆ Language Standard 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.
- ◆ Language Standard 3: Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening.” ([www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)).

What these Standards actually mean in application is that students will be able to code-switch from speech to writing, and from informal to formal registers in both speech and writing to accommodate a particular audience and purpose.

These are what the Common Core document calls “Anchor Standards.” The Anchor Standards name those skills that are to be addressed, in increasing levels of complexity, in each of the grades, 2-12: Whether you are teaching 2nd grade or 10th, then, you are expected to be addressing all of the thirty-two Anchor Standards to an age-appropriate degree. The Anchor Standards are overlapping and interlocking, so in any given school year, it is not going to feel like you are running through a checklist of thirty-two discrete Standards.

What teachers need to make these “shovel-ready” is the grade-by-grade breakdown, also provided in the Core Standards site ([www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org).) For example, if you taught 3rd grade, this is what you would be expected to teach:

- ◆ Language Standard 1: (...command of standard English grammar and usage...): Explain the function of nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and



adverbs in general and their functions in particular sentences; Form and use regular and irregular plural nouns; Use abstract nouns; Form and use regular and irregular verbs.; Form and use the simple verb tenses; Ensure subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent agreement; Use coordinating and subordinating conjunctions; Produce simple, compound, and complex sentence.

- ◆ Language Standard 2: (...capitalization, punctuation, spelling...): Capitalize appropriate words in titles; Use commas in addresses; Use commas in quotation marks in dialogue; Form and use possessives; Use conventional spelling for high-frequency and other studied words and for adding suffixes to base words; Use spelling patterns and generalizations; Consult reference materials, including beginning dictionaries, as needed.
- ◆ Language Standard 3: (Use knowledge of language...): Recognize and observe differences between the conventions of spoken and written standard English.

Whew! That's a whole lot of grammar that third graders would be expected to know!

That situation might not be so bad except that third grade teachers would be expected to handle it as well. The problem is that your typical third grade teacher (and that applies to all of the K-12 grades) is nowhere near prepared to teach these discrete grammatical concepts and terminology. And what do teachers do when they don't know what to do? They default to teaching materials that have answer keys. The problem with such teaching materials (aka. workbooks, fill-in-the-blank, name-the-parts, pick-out-the-part-of-speech worksheets) is well known: They take up a great deal of time and have little to know transfer to authentic use of language. Now let's look at the breakdown of the same Standards for grade 10:

- ◆ Language Standard 1: (...command of standard English grammar and usage): Use parallel structure; Use various types of phrases (noun, verb, adjectival, adverbial, participial, prepositional ,absolute) and clauses (independent, dependent; noun, relative, adverbial) to convey specific meanings and add variety and interest to writing or presentations;



- ◆ Language Standard 2: (...capitalization, punctuation, and spelling): Use a semicolon (and perhaps a conjunctive adverb) to link two or more closely related independent clauses; use a colon to introduce a list or quotation; spell correctly;
- ◆ Language Standard 3: (Use knowledge of language...) write and edit work so that it conforms to the guidelines in a style manual appropriate for the discipline and writing type.

I believe that the Language Standards for grammar are attainable, but only under circumstances that do not exist right now.

Teachers need more and better knowledge about English grammar and they need to be able to teach it simultaneously with reading comprehension, literary analysis, and writing. They need to be able to teach grammar within the writing process, yes, but grammar instruction cannot be limited to fixing errors in the editing phase.

Teaching grammar takes significant time, particularly if we limit grammar instruction to memorizing definitions, picking out parts of speech from a worksheet of unrelated sentences, and decontextualized mini-lessons that supposedly address “problem areas.” Based on this strategy, we can expect to have to retread the same ground year after year, with students showing little improvement in authentic use of language.

However, when grammar instruction draws from quality thinking about authentic language, when it remains connected to literature and student writing, when the terms are used to achieve better observations about literature and better results in writing, when teachers understand that grammar instruction does not mean memorizing definitions, et. al., then we can get somewhere.

Now let’s talk about assessment. One (of many) good things about the Common Core is that assessments are not going to look like grammar worksheets. The Language Standards are assessed through the student’s writing, and in a more subtle way, so is reading comprehension. Therefore, if we have taught conjunctive adverbs, we should see some—correctly punctuated and used with awareness and control, in the student’s writing. We’ve always known that, so let’s not go off course because the Common Core expects us to teach



terminology. The assessments are not going to ask for identification of, let's say, noun phrases or relative pronouns. But, they are going to require a writing level that is rich and textured enough to include those structures. It is what ATEG has been saying for twenty-five years now—grammar instruction, at its best, can enrich the conversation between students and teachers.

The English Language Arts and Literacy Common Core needs to succeed. It needs to succeed because it raises and clarifies standards in reading comprehension, writing for various purposes, speech, listening, grammar and vocabulary. But teachers need better understanding of both the content and the pedagogy of Language Standards 1, 2, and 3—the ones that address grammar.



## Making the “Squ-EASE”: Error Analysis Self-Efficacy (EASE) as a Tool for Writing Improvement and Assessment

By Helene Krauthamer, Ph.D., with James Booker, Natalie Bridgewater,  
Latara Haynes, and Christopher Rothermel  
University of the District of Columbia

### **Introduction**

How can we “squeeze” grammar instruction into a content-based writing course?

As a writing professor in a recently revised General Education program, where the writing program classes have been converted to theme-based, collaboratively-taught classes, I am often challenged to find the time to teach grammar, a topic near and dear to me. I have never questioned the value of explicit grammar instruction, particularly since students have a natural curiosity about the topic, and even though by “grammar” they mean prescriptive grammar rules, our discussions often drift into the descriptive realm where we address grammatical terminology that they are quite eager to learn. Time, however, prevents us from frequently following this route, and only in the “Advanced Grammar” course do we truly explore this material. Nevertheless, the need continues to tap into grammar topics in other courses, in the belief that grammatical knowledge does indeed improve writing.

At a time when the writing classroom has become a place to focus on rhetoric and (in the theme-based class) content, how can we “squeeze” in grammar instruction? Also, how can we measure writing improvement? The answer to both questions lies in a simple tool that is flexible enough to adapt to all levels of writing instruction, from K-12 and on to the graduate level: Error Analysis (EA).

EA is simply the process of identifying usage and mechanical errors [see the Error Analysis Sheet (EAS) at the end of this paper for the distinctions between “usage” and “mechanical” errors] in written texts and counting their occurrences. The advantage of EA in writing instruction is that it reveals patterns of errors in student writing. For an entire class, it can inform teaching practices so that the



instructor may focus on those errors made by a majority of the students. Rather than rigidly march through all the topics in a grammar handbook, for example, the instructor can select those topics that are most problematic. For individual students, it can provide the student with a clear study path so that the student may focus exclusively on errors of high frequency in his or her own writing. Furthermore, it can provide a sense of self-efficacy to the students, making them responsible for analyzing their own errors and finding ways to remediate them. In general, EA provides a customized approach to grammar instruction with the outcome of improving writing.

When used for research, however, the process is not always simple. Some of the challenges of EA are in codifying these errors and, where there are several coders, establishing a method of ensuring reliability of coding, since errors may fall under several categories. For example, confusion between *its* and *it's* could be classified as an apostrophe error or a commonly confused word error; comma splices could be classified as run-ons or punctuation errors; word omissions may be regarded as omissions of particular grammatical categories (article omission) or an overly general “ESL/EFL” error; plural errors may be the omission of an inflectional morpheme (-s) or another case of article omission.

Some coders may also not agree on what constitutes an error, perhaps having differing degrees of tolerance for text features such as “stylistic” fragments or the Oxford (serial) comma. Comma rules are notoriously numerous and subject to personal taste. Some stylistic aspects are subjective, such as wordiness or repetition. Some usage conventions are hard to discern, such as misplaced modifiers or faulty parallelism, and some remain debatable, such as the appropriate possessive pronoun to use with everyone.

Overall, however, these issues are not very significant, particularly if our aim is to achieve a sense of the correctness of a given paper. For that, the concept of “Error Frequency” (EF), the number of errors per hundred words, can be used as a general measure of grammatical accuracy, where “grammatical” is understood to be adherence to the prescriptive and descriptive rules of a standard form of written English, including the usage and mechanical rules.



What do teachers generally do about errors in student writing? Some (Heyden, Holt) take the approach that grading every error will result in students' becoming intimidated and possibly discouraged from writing. Teachers, therefore, may mark only those errors that make a significant difference in the clarity of the writing. This "minimalist" approach (Haswell) has the advantage of being easier for teachers and less confusing for students who may grapple with only one or two errors at a time.

The disadvantage, however, is that students may be misled into thinking that the uncorrected errors are correct, resulting in their appearance in future papers. In this paper we assume students have the maturity to deal with errors and will not be overwhelmed when faced with a multitude of error markings. In fact, we theorize that when students identify their errors, label them, quantify them, and finally correct them, they become better writers. We call this the "Error Analysis Self- Efficacy" or *EASE* approach.

### **Rationale for Study of Error Analysis**

Writing is an essential skill that students acquire during their academic lives and continue to hone thereafter. Therefore, it is a universal requirement that students learn and maintain the art of writing academic products that help them communicate effectively. Making errors remains one of the common weaknesses for students in producing quality writings (Greenwood). Errors in writing are systematic mistakes committed by the student that only the teacher or another proficient party can identify and correct. Errors commonly committed by students include the wrong use of words, incorrect punctuation, spelling, informal writing, wrong capitalization, inaccurate word order, and the errors related to content or context (Raimes). Analysis of the errors found in student work is a more inclusive way of proofreading. Keeping track of the errors helps to do the following:

- ◆ Enhance clarity of student work

The clarity of student written work is an important factor that helps the teacher to deduce the real meaning enshrined in the writings. Common grammatical errors that include misspellings and wrong use of



punctuation at times may divert the meaning in written information. This could end up confusing or misleading the teacher, who may, as a result, award undeserved marks to the student. On the contrary, keeping track of such errors helps the teachers to understand the work of their students and even helps them to deal with the various shortcomings (Ferris).

◆ Improve language proficiency

Language learning is a continuous activity for all who communicate verbally or non-verbally. Language skills remain significant for effective communication even between students and their teachers. To help students improve language proficiency, an analysis of the errors that they commit should always be performed (Greenwood). To help the students understand and improve on the shortcomings, teachers should always avail corrective feedbacks alongside the graded work.

◆ Build competency and reliability

Keeping track of the errors committed by students in the course of their writings helps in improving their competency. The students get the opportunity to understand their shortcomings and take the recommended actions (Greenwood). Most importantly, students studying new languages are assisted significantly by well analyzed and corrected feedbacks from their teachers. The reliability of student work primarily relies on its correctness in terms of language requirements. Secondly, the correctness of the content presented forms the secondary determinant of reliability. Teachers, therefore, need to keep track of the errors committed by students that compromise quality in terms of correct language and content.

◆ Simplify student work

In the course of reading the written work of students, teachers may encounter difficulties in comprehending the content. Such difficulties mostly result from errors committed by students while writing. The errors may result from a material fact, misrepresentations, or language errors. Keeping track and correction of such errors is of great importance



for teachers for grading and classification of the whole work. Simplified work also helps students to comprehend the best way of presenting their ideas in writing. It also helps third parties who may decide to use the written work for reference purposes (Ferris).

Students often commit errors in the course of their extensive academic writing engagements. As a result of uncorrected errors, teachers may make premature and wrong judgments on the work done. This happens to the detriment of students and the whole learning process. Therefore, keeping track of errors of students' written work remains of great importance at all levels. It helps to ensure that the correct content gets to be delivered for accurate grading and future usage.

### **Prior Error Analysis Research Studies**

This paper builds upon earlier research of Error Analysis (EA) and previous studies that developed methods of performing EA on student writing. In their 1988 article, "Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research," Connors and Lunsford compiled the data into a compendium of grammatical error analysis research. They discovered that most of the errors in college writing haven't changed over the past 100 years if not more. For example, comma use and spelling have always been a problem for writers. These researchers graded a nationwide sample of 3000 papers written by college students and published the top 20 errors, percentage of total errors per paper, number of errors found in 3000 papers by category of the 20 top errors, and other such valuable data. Their study was repeated in 2008 by Lunsford and Lunsford who found that, thanks to word processing, spelling is no longer the top error, that essays are longer, and that it is a lot harder doing this type of research 20 years later when researchers must contend with Institutional Review Board approvals.

Others have used EA mostly in the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Sampson uses EA to determine whether it is better to code or not to code errors for EFL writers in Colombia. Doolan and Miller used EA to distinguish Generation 1.5 writers from L2 and L1 writers. Futagi, Deane,



Chodorow, and Tetreault discussed a computer model for finding error patterns in essays written by EFL writers.

### **Current Study**

In this study, we continued research begun by graduate students (Kroll; Kroll and Krauthamer; Krauthamer, Burton, and Ferguson) at our university, a public, urban, Historically Black College and University (HBCU), whose students represent a diverse mix of ethnicities, ages, and backgrounds. Our first task was to develop the Error Analysis Sheet (EAS), a dynamic document that categorizes errors in student writing by classifying them into the five areas that compose the rubric for grading written assignments in these classes: Thesis, Organization, Development, Usage, and Mechanics (TODUM). The categories of errors are listed in the first column, the second column provides space to copy and paste sentences that embody the error, and the third column is where the number of errors is tabulated. (In a survey, one student made the recommendation to add a fourth column in which the student can make corrections of the errors.) When used as a teaching tool, the EAS follows a previous step where the teacher codes (but does not correct) errors in the student's paper, for example, "Student {U: plural} must be prepared before coming to school." When used as a research tool, the EAS is completed by each researcher for each paper, and the versions are later examined for consistency.

For the purposes of this study, the researchers focused exclusively on the Usage and Mechanical errors, where "usage" refers to the errors that can be heard if a paper is read aloud (e.g. plural, subject-verb agreement, word omission, run-ons, fragments, verb errors,...) and "mechanical" refers to the errors that can be seen on the page (e.g. punctuation, spelling, capitals, italics, ...). The error labels were and are still being developed in an effort to find terms that are clear to students and that can be used as Internet search terms to find these topics in Online Writing Labs (OWLs). Each label links to a website on the topic. The dynamism in the EAS is reflected in that the links may be modified either by teachers or students, that more labels can be added as other errors are found, and that new terminology can be inserted if more useful to students and teachers.



In this paper, we report on the results of an EA study performed in the Fall 2012 semester as a research project by a single undergraduate researcher majoring in English, another EA study conducted in the Spring 2013 semester as a collaborative research project by a group of four undergraduate researchers majoring in English, and a final EA study conducted in the Fall 2013 semester by the professor. The study focused on short (~ 200 words) writing assessments written approximately at three points (initial, middle, final) in the semester by students in second or third level writing classes in the General Education program. The research aims were (1) to determine what were the top ten errors so as to guide instruction, (2) to compare the results to previous EA studies to see if our students make similar errors, and (3) to see if EA can be used to document improvement in writing as defined by the reduction in EF over the course of a semester and from semester to semester.

### **Fall 2012 Semester: Methods and Results**

In the Fall 2012 semester, a student researcher (Rothermel) analyzed the errors in three written assessments for a second semester writing course (Foundations of Writing II) whose theme was “Food for Thought: The Socioeconomics of Consumption.” The intent of this project was twofold: as a formative assessment to see if there were any dominant grammar errors made by a majority of students that would become the focus of class sessions, and as a summative assessment to see if there was any reduction in the frequency of errors as the semester progressed. Although there were approximately 20 students enrolled in the course, only 11 students wrote all three assessments, which were optional, extra-credit activities done in a computer lab.

The researcher used the EAS to code the errors in these assessments and analyze the results. His findings indicate that the top ten errors overall were (1) run-on, (2) word omission, (3) wordiness, (4) faulty parallelism, (5) commas, (6) fragments, (7) spelling, (8) subject/verb agreement, (9) plural error, and (10) tense shift. As seen in Table 1, the EF (defined as the number of errors divided by the number of words) decreased significantly from Assessment 1 to Assessment 2, but not as significantly from Assessment 2 to Assessment 3. We



attributed this decrease to a more serious attitude on the part of the students towards these assessments as the semester progressed, as well as their being more aware of their writing errors.

**Table 1: Data from Fall 2012** (n = 11 students)

	Assessment 1	Assessment 2	Assessment 3
<b>Average error frequency</b>	14.14%	4.28%	3.95%

### **Spring 2013 Semester: Methods and Results**

Our second analysis consisted of essays written for a third-semester writing course “Discovery Writing” whose theme was “Climate Change.” Four student researchers (Rothermel, Bridgewater, Booker, and Haynes) did EA on three sets of student essays written in a computer lab at the beginning (Assessment 1), middle (Assessment 2), and end (Assessment 3) of the semester. Some of the problems with this analysis were inter-rater reliability raising valid questions for the undergraduate researchers about what constitutes error and the subjectivity of grading in general. It was difficult to analyze the “top 10 errors” since errors were not always characterized consistently. Consider, for example, the following sentence:

*“Being a writing coarse I expect to expand my knowledge on the art of writing.”*

The word “coarse” could be coded as “spelling error” or “frequently confused word”. The sentence could be coded as a “dangling participle” or “awkward.” This provided a good learning experience for the undergraduate researchers themselves who became far more aware of grammar issues in their own writing. In general, however, we were in overall agreement about the existence of an error, if not, necessarily its label.

Although there were 20 students in the class, only six did all three assessments, so theirs were the only essays counted in this analysis (Table 2), though many more were coded. Errors in the essays were coded using the EAS and tallied with the following results:



**Table 2: Data from Spring 2013** (n = 6 students)

	<b>Assessment 1</b>	<b>Assessment 2</b>	<b>Assessment 3</b>
<b>Average Error Frequency</b>	5.04%	5.07%	3.53%

As we see, the average EF goes down by the end of the semester for this class, though not as dramatically as it did for the previous class, which is the preceding course in the writing sequence. Admittedly, this is a limited sample for those completing all three assessments, but the results are compelling. For the entire group of 20 students, the overall average EF went from 4.88% in the first assessment to 1.74% in the final assessment supporting the point that grammar errors do decrease over the course of a semester.

**Fall 2013 Semester: Methods and Results**

In the Fall 2013 semester, I again taught a third-semester writing course “Discovery Writing” whose theme was “Climate Change” but did not have the advantage of having student researcher assistance, and I did the EA for these assessments. Although offered the option, the students did not do Assessment 2 at the midpoint of the semester, so it was not included in this analysis. The results are shown in Table 3:

**Table 3: Data from Fall 2013** (n = 11 students)

	<b>Assessment 1 (Initial)</b>	<b>Assessment 3 (Final)</b>
<b>Average Error Frequency</b>	6.33%	3.00%

As we see, there was a dramatic reduction in EF from the beginning to the end of the semester, similar to the results of the Spring 2013 study and also of a similar degree. Again, these numbers represent the overall average EF.

**Student Satisfaction**

Student satisfaction, as measured through the use of SurveyMonkey surveys, has been high, where students, on a general course survey, identified the Error Analysis Sheets as being “Extremely Helpful” (80%) or “Helpful” (10%),



eliciting the comment, “I really like the Error Analysis; it is helpful in correcting errors and learning how to prevent them in the future.” It seems to be particularly good for ESL students who have expressed the need for more grammar instruction and feedback on their writing. In a more detailed survey focused exclusively on the EAS, none of the 16 respondents found the process difficult, and 12 of the 16 respondents found it “Helpful” or “Extremely Helpful” with only one who found it “Not at all helpful” and four who were “Neutral.”

### **EASE in Teaching Grammar in College/High School**

Insofar as the courses were content-focused, there were few opportunities to devote to grammar lessons in class. Using the EASE (Error Analysis Self-Efficacy) approach with the EAS allows the students to select topics that are pertinent to their writing styles, as well as to become more self-directive in their learning of grammar. The process is as follows:

1. The teacher identifies and labels errors, without correcting them, in the student’s essay, using Track Changes or Insert Comment, generally using brackets to set off the comment, e.g. {subject-verb agreement}. Highlighters are also effective in identifying troublesome phrases or sentences. Color-coding errors may also help some students, though I have not yet use this approach.
2. The student is then responsible for tallying up the number of errors of each type on the EAS, copying and pasting examples of the errors in the appropriate columns. Ideally, this can be done in a computer lab, with the student saving the EAS on a thumb drive or whatever method is viable. Over the course of a semester, the student should be able to compare an EAS from an earlier assignment to a later one to see if there’s been progress, i.e. reduction of errors.
3. The student then clicks on the topics in which there are the most errors. Each of the topics on the EAS leads to a link from a variety of Online Writing Labs (OWLs).
4. The student then corrects the error in the next draft of the paper, assuming the instructor allows revision.



5. This process is repeated for each assignment, with the student tracking improvement in these error categories.

The flexibility of the EAS, which is simply a Word table that can be modified, allows teachers or students to select which OWLs provide the most appropriate format for their learning styles, as well as which labels are the most appropriate fit for their learning levels. The EAS could also be an Excel document, in which case the students can graph their error patterns and make their own computations about their personal error frequencies.

Using the EASE approach in a computer lab allows the students to explore the range of OWLs and discover which ones they like best. When the students start to tally their own errors, they can see their error patterns and come to understand them better. Another advantage of conducting this activity as a class session is that it de-stigmatizes errors as students see that everyone makes them. In fact, it can be turned into a treasure hunt activity if the teacher asks questions such as “Can you find us an example of a dangling participle in your writing?” or a debate with a question such as “Do you have a stylistic fragment you would like to defend?”

### **EASE Elsewhere**

The EAS is also flexible enough to be edited to suit students at every level of writing, insofar as teachers and/or students can change the categories into more familiar terminology. For example, “frequently confused words” can be modified to a higher college level to be “homonyms/ homophones” or to elementary level to be “look alike/ sound alike”. The rows can be increased to add other errors, and, if there are no immediate terms that come to mind when finding an awkward sentence, to add invented terms. Creating names for errors is another way to lessen the intimidation students may initially feel, particularly if the names are humorous and personalized. For example, a sentence that is very long, though not a run-on, could be labeled a “Never-ending Sentence” though this label does not appear in most grammar books.



## Conclusion

The EASE approach is a useful and flexible method for both assessment and pedagogy that is adaptable to any educational level. It takes advantage of the numerous and changing online resources, and it is low-cost. Quantifying error frequencies allows us to confirm error reduction over the course of a semester, thus serving as a strong assessment tool. Although it may seem to be too focused on errors in the student's writing and thus be a negative approach, the student satisfaction surveys reveal that students see it in a positive light as a helpful tool. By turning errors into items of inquiry, this approach also transforms students into researchers, destigmatizes errors, and provides a "flipped" approach to grammar learning where students are investigating their own error patterns. Ultimately, the greatest benefit of this approach is that it places responsibility for learning in the hands of the students, perhaps the most effective pedagogical tool available.

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## Language Study as Inquiry: Rediscovering Parts of Speech

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Many of the teachers I work with teach about language in a way that leads to further investigation and inquiry by their students. They find the effects of language study to be many and varied and to need little justification to their students or to the teachers themselves. But we all know that language study does come under scrutiny, particularly when one uses the word “grammar.” And, of course, being able to clearly articulate why we are studying a particular topic and to what end is always important. I tackle here the study of parts of speech in particular, which have a long history in the Language Arts curriculum, and even when teachers “don’t teach grammar,” there is usually at least some expectation that basic lexical categories should be known to students and used in the context of other endeavors, primarily writing. To better articulate why we should undertake such language study, I examine the following questions:

- ◆ Why talk about parts of speech and what are some of the benefits of direct discussion of the distinctions among the various kinds of words?
- ◆ What are the best ways to teach about them and why?
- ◆ What are the applications of such study?

Current accountability requirements and assessment pressures, including the Common Core Standards Initiative, demand that students demonstrate high-level literacy skills and expert control of text and sentence structure, as well as vocabulary. Identification and understanding of lexical categories and their functions is a central aspect of those expectations.

For example, the standards for English Language Arts for 3rd grade include the following:

*CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.1a Explain the function of nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in general and their functions in particular sentences.*



Those for 5th grade say students should be able to:

*CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.1a Explain the function of conjunctions, prepositions, and interjections in general and their function in particular sentences.*

And by 7th grade, they should be able to:

*CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.7.1a Explain the function of phrases and clauses in general and their function in specific sentences.*

So students are expected to be able to identify the categories of words and explain their functions.

Motivation for focus on understanding word categories extends beyond the Common Core, of course. My work with teachers over the last decade has demonstrated that exploration of language – focusing here on grammatical categories – pays off not only in terms of conscious knowledge of those word categories, but also in much broader ways: critical thinking, scientific methodology, and extension of that knowledge to writing and to analysis of literature. These benefits occur, however, not when one follows traditional methods of parts of speech identification, but when a much more exploratory, investigative, tool-based approach is employed.

Let's first explore the traditional, meaning-based approach to parts of speech. Definitions such as the following are ubiquitous. Even if these are not taught directly in "grammar lessons," most upper elementary students have encountered them.

- ◆ Noun – a person, place, thing, or idea
- ◆ Adjective – a word that describes a noun
- ◆ Verb – an action or state of being

While these kinds of descriptive, meaning-based definitions do capture the essence of the category distinctions, there is evidence that definitions of parts of speech such as these are typically not helpful for students (or teachers) and can lead to confusion and self-doubt.

Consider, for example, how traditional definitions can mislead with examples such as the following.

*The horse's jumping was impressive.*



Is jumping an action? Yes, sure. But is it a verb here? No, it's a noun. Or in the next example, is Eiffel Tower an adjective since it describes keychain?

*The Eiffel Tower keychain broke.*

No, it's a noun phrase. Or in the next sentence, is *seem* an action or even a state of being?

*This test seems important.*

No, not really, but it's a verb nonetheless.

Schuster has a number of examples of how such meaning-based definitions can mislead in his chapter, "Traditional School Grammar: Definitions that do not define." He offers a personal example with pronouns. As a tenth grade student, he was told this definition of a pronoun: "A word that takes the place of a noun" (2003, 22). Taking this to be true, in a sentence like *The author writes a new novel* Schuster notes that "It seemed obvious to me that one could replace author with writer and that novel could be replaced by book. It short, it was clear that words rather general in meaning – like writer and book – had to be pronouns" (22).

David West Brown also notes in his study of linguistically diverse language curriculum that "the participating class seemed to struggle with parts of speech during the study. Much of the class's difficulty appeared to stem from a reliance on semantic definitions of parts of speech (i.e., a noun is a person, place or thing; a verb is an action; etc.). I posited that it might be more useful for teachers and students to think about both the function and the form of a word when trying to determine part of speech" (2008, 173).

In Schuster's book *Breaking the Rules*, he even asks students to put these traditional definitions to the test in order to demonstrate their inadequacy. He also includes an excellent appendix ("An Updated Treatment of the Parts of Speech") that offers clues for each category and encourages students to use their knowledge of those categories.

While the meaning-based definitions can be a starting place for discussion of the parts of speech categories, and while they may suffice for younger students, by upper elementary, middle, and high school, students can benefit from a closer look at the evidence for these distinct categories and should also consider why it can be useful to investigate the categories more deeply.



NCTE's Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (<http://www.ateg.org/grammar/qna.php>) supports using students' knowledge of morphology and syntax to identify the categories. The traditional definitions of the parts of speech can be difficult to apply. Students recognize the basic parts of speech more reliably and quickly by looking at the form of a word and by using sentence "frames." If a word can be made plural or possessive, or if it fits in the sentence *The \_\_\_\_ went there*, it is a noun. If a word can take both -ing and -s endings, it is a verb.

Such ideas about parts of speech are anything but new, but have had a hard time getting a firm foothold. Strickland in *The contribution of structural linguistics to the teaching of reading, writing, and grammar in the elementary school in 1964* writes that "[Meaning-based] definitions are more confusing than helpful and do more harm than good. Typical were definitions which stated that 'a sentence expresses a complete thought,' 'a noun is the name of a person, place, or thing,' 'a verb is an action word.' None of these are helpful because they do not tell the whole story, and children come upon both oral and written sentences, nouns, and verbs which seem to them not to fit the definitions" (18).

Even earlier, Sumner Ives in a textbook for use in schools writes that "Some terms, e.g., adverb and pronoun, are in use without a genuine referent (the supposed referents of these terms lack identity as single classes or categories of items); finally, some terms, e.g., noun and verb, are identified, not by definitions, but by statements which may well be true, but which do not name the particularizing characteristics of the classes which the terms refer to" (170).

Despite the criticisms, such "traditional grammar" definitions persist in many classrooms, especially elementary classrooms<sup>1</sup>. We must strive to teach a more

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<sup>1</sup> Fries (1952), noting the slow response of schools to bring research by linguists into the curricula, makes an analogy between the discoveries of the linguistic scientists and Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood in 1761. He points out that 200 years after Harvey's discovery, George Washington was bled to death by physicians. Such is the power of strongly-entrenched traditions. That there is a time lag, too, between discoveries in linguistics and their adoption in the K-12 classroom is obvious. Strom (1960) writes about this same issue, "The persistence and extent of that lag are problems that saddle all who want to improve the teaching of English today" (13).



informed approach to parts of speech by using morphology and syntax to help students recognize and take advantage of their unconscious knowledge of the category distinctions.

The best way we have found to introduce students to this more analytical approach to parts of speech is to examine a sentence containing made-up words. Take a nonsense sentence. Make up your own or use something like

*The dorbling groobies frandled a bonkled slank.*

Ask students to identify the part of speech of various words. They will quickly tell you that groobies and slank are nouns. They will likely add that frandled is a verb. They may stumble a bit on dorbling and bonkled, but will soon label these as adjectives. (If they do stumble, it's because these forms, in other positions, could be verbs; they're aware that those -ing and -ed endings are typical verbal endings.)

So how do they know all this? How do they know that groobies and slank are nouns? It's certainly not because they are "persons, places, things, or even ideas" since these "things" don't even exist. They know because of the morphology and syntax, because of the suffixes, in this case, on the words (their morphology) and because of the position of the words in relation to the other words (some of which are "real" words) in the rest of the sentence (the syntax). It is that kind of knowledge that we make use of all of the time to identify parts of speech and to learn real new words and how they function.<sup>2</sup>

I offer here examples of the "content" (also known as form-class) words, followed by a collection of some clues, tests, and frames that you might use for word category identification. Teachers who have used these have allowed the students to come up with the tests and clues on their own through collaborative discussion and analysis, rather than presenting the charts to them. This bottom-up

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<sup>2</sup> See a related lesson at <http://middleschoolling.blogspot.com/2013/09/lesson-1-on-nouns.html>, and many other examples of using nonsense sentences as a starting point for analysis, from Fries (1952), who suggests students analyze the sentence *The vapy koobs dasaked the citar molently* (111), to Benjamin (2007) who suggests analysis of *I found a flindering fleek on the floot* (63).



method is critical, in fact, to allowing students to discover the knowledge they already possess and to then be empowered by that.

For completeness, Table 2 contains the function words (also called “grammatical-” or “structural-class” words) categories; these are the closed class (“closed” since we do not typically add new members to these categories) that express more grammatical rather than meaningful, or “contentful” information. Depending on your goals, you may not need to focus on these at the same time as exploration of the open class/lexical category words. If you are discussing types of clauses, for example, discovering the differences between the kinds of words that link independent clauses (conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs), and distinguishing those from the types of words that introduce subordinate clauses (complementizers, subordinating prepositions, relative pronouns), for example, would be useful.

**Table 1: Lexical Categories or “Content” Words – Open Class**

<b>Noun</b>	<b>Verb</b>	<b>Adjective</b>	<b>Adverb</b>
book, friendship, Seattle, cork, mud, email, Snapchat, text	sing, text, wonder, catapult, forgive, stand up	glad, curious, funny, silky, weird, tight, interesting	carefully, often, sometimes, fast

**Noun Tests and Clues (morphological and syntactic facts about nouns):**

- ◆ Nouns can be pluralized: *rats, spiders, bunnies*
- ◆ Nouns can be made possessive: the cat’s tail, the *truth’s* inevitability
- ◆ Nouns can have certain other “nominal” suffixes: *–ance/ence* (performance), *–ion* (formation), *–al* (refusal), *–age* (leakage).
- ◆ Nouns occur after Determiners like *a, the, and an* (also called articles); *this, that, these, those* (also called demonstrative determiners); and possessive determiners (*my, your, her, etc.*).
- ◆ Nouns occur after Numerals, both the Cardinal ones (*six, eleven, four thousand*) and the Ordinal ones (*second, fifteenth*).



- ◆ Nouns occur after Quantifiers, words that express quantity like *all, each, both, every, some, several, many, more, less, much, few*.
- ◆ Nouns can be modified by (or described by) Adjectives: the *furry* kitten, a *rainy* day. The term modification is one we'll be exploring in more depth later.
- ◆ Frame: The \_\_\_\_ is here.

### **Verb Tests and Clues (morphological and syntactic facts about verbs):**

- ◆ Verbs express tense – present and past
  - ✓ She **walked** to school.
  - ✓ He eats pizza.
  - ✓ Sue **caught** the ball.
- ◆ Verbs can have certain other “verbal” affixes: dis- (disappear), re- (rediscover), -ate (activate), -ize (regularize), -en (tighten), and others.
- ◆ Verbs can occur with auxiliary verbs (forms of have, be, and do) and modal verbs (*can, could, shall, should, may, might, must, will, would* – *She will eat. They must swim. We are running*).
- ◆ Frame: She will \_\_\_\_\_. He is \_\_\_\_\_ing the X.

### **Adjective Tests and Clues (morphological and syntactic facts about adjectives):**

- ◆ Adjectives have comparative (*-er/more*) and superlative (*-est/most*) forms: bigger, biggest; more interesting, most interesting
- ◆ Adjectives can follow a linking verb (such as *seems, is, appears*), which “link” a subject to what follows: *The cat seems sick. The paint is thick.*
- ◆ Adjectives can be preceded by a degree word like *very, so, or too*: *Her foot is very bruised. She is so ecstatic.*
- ◆ Frames: The block seems \_\_\_\_\_. They are very \_\_\_\_\_.



**Adverb Tests and Clues (morphological and syntactic facts about adverbs):**

- ◆ Adverbs sometimes end in *-ly* (but not always<sup>3</sup>): *quickly, slowly, awkwardly*.
- ◆ They can have no suffix, or they can have other suffixes: *-wise, -like, -ward, -ways*, among others. *We are eating fast. He wrote on the page sideways.*
- ◆ Adverbs, like adjectives, can have comparative (*-er/more*) and superlative (*-est/most*) forms: *She ran faster than you. He is the fastest of all.*
- ◆ Adverbs can modify not just verbs, but whole sentences: *Carefully, he unwrapped the sandwich. Fortunately, we don't have to walk home in the rain.*
- ◆ Frame: We walked \_\_\_\_\_.

**Conjunctive Adverbs** – This subtype of adverb can conjoin independent clauses: accordingly, again, also, besides, consequently, finally, further, furthermore, hence, however, indeed, instead, likewise, moreover, nevertheless, otherwise, still, then, therefore, thus.

**Table 2: Function Word Categories or “Grammatical” Words – Closed Class**

The words in these categories convey more grammatical meaning, and we do not typically add new words to these categories.

<b>Determiner</b>	the, a, this, that, these, those, his, my	<b>Preposition*</b>	across, beneath, under, in, on, during
<b>Numeral</b>	two, seven, twelfth, first	<b>Conjunction</b>	and, or, yet, for, but, so, nor
<b>Quantifier</b>	all, each, every, both, some, most, much, less	<b>Degree Word</b>	very, so, quite, somewhat, too

<sup>3</sup> Some *adjectives* end in *-ly*: *friendly, cowardly*, and lots of *adverbs* don't end in *-ly*: *fast, often, sometimes*



<b>Pronoun</b>	I/me, you, he/she, him/her, we/us, they/them, mine, who**	<b>Auxiliary Verb</b>	have (has, have, had) be (am, is, are, was, were), do (does, did)
<b>Interjection</b>	ouch, lordy, oh my!	<b>Modal</b>	may, might, can, could, will, would, should, must

\* *Subordinating Prepositions – This subtype of prepositions can introduce clauses: although, because, before, even though, since, until, when.*

\*\**Relative Pronouns – This subtype of pronouns stands in for a noun and introduces a relative clause, a clause that modifies a noun: the woman [who I know]. Others include that, which, when, and where.*

Regardless of your goals for using these word category labels (talking about writing, analyzing literature, laying the groundwork for other grammatical investigation), the process will be beneficial: it encourages critical thinking, it encourages scientific thinking, and it empowers, making us all experts. Inevitably, there will be uncertainty about which categories some words fit in to. Debates and discussions about language are welcomed and lead to useful conversations that students are engaged in. It can be intimidating to begin a linguistically-informed approach to language in your classroom, especially when you may not necessarily be that confident about your own knowledge of language and grammar.

This, fortunately, is one of the main goals of such an approach to language; that is, to understand that language is something to be studied and analyzed, and that there may not be a single correct answer for many aspects of language study. If you aren't certain whether a particular word is, say, an adjective or an adverb, well, then, that becomes an interesting question. It becomes something to investigate and discover.

Sandra Wilde, in *Funner Grammar*, suggests that many teachers' hesitation at delving in to teaching about word categories is, well, "a hang up," not a real barrier founded on actual difficulties, at least not once we realize that such exploration is just that - exploration. "Introducing eight new words in a science



unit on the solar system wouldn't faze us at all, and these [introducing parts of speech] shouldn't either" (29).

David West Brown acknowledges that in his lessons, "students are advised that such tests have exceptions (e.g., standard English modal auxiliaries do not take the -s inflexion for third person singular)" (2008, 174). And he adds that "the exploration of grammatical function and form may not eliminate teachers' and students' struggles with parts of speech, but it can move them away from the kind of person-place-or-thing tests that seem to be more confusing than helpful, and it supports the overall goal of a more linguistically informed curriculum" (174).

Schuster also notes that getting the labels exactly right is not necessarily the main goal. He writes, for example, with respect to labeling words that precede nouns as adjectives: "Nothing dreadful will happen if you continue to call all modifiers of nouns adjectives, but if you prefer to distinguish true adjectives from other types of modifiers of nouns, here are some clues for the former..." (201), and he goes on to offer the clues and frames that can help one determine the word's category.

Beth Keyser, a junior high school teacher from Montana who employs this investigative method in her classroom writes, "One of the major strands in Common Core is problem solving. Completing these [language] lessons turns students into scientists of language. They have to discover the rules for themselves based on evidence that they look for. Also, students use their own intuitions to understand the rules. This approach is more engaging because every student works on this together in small groups and they collaborate to discover, using evidence, the most appropriate analysis. From my experience, most students do well with this regardless of their reading and writing abilities" (personal communication).

There are a number of engaging, inquiry-based approaches to discovering parts of speech categories and other grammatical functions that many upper elementary, middle, and high school teachers use, some of which are accessible on the website *TeachLing* (<http://www.teachling.wvu.edu/node/4>), others on the blog *Middle School Linguistics* (<http://middleschoolling.blogspot.com/>), as well



as in Benjamin's, Schuster's, Brown's (2008 and 2009), and Wilde's books, among others. These all focus on students' intuitive knowledge and offer tools to access that knowledge.

Although the focus here is not necessarily on the effects of study of word categories on writing, Noguchi does emphasize, when discussing how to teach about run-ons and fragments, how using similar intuitions and the tests that fall out from them develop self-reliance and self-confidence "because it emphasizes what students already know rather than what they do not...The method brings to the surface the immense, often untapped (and often unappreciated), store of linguistic knowledge that students bring to the classroom everyday" (35). The teachers I collaborate with see their students using their meta-knowledge about word categories in relation to writing as well: using the terminology in discussions of writing revision, in checking for subject-verb agreement in their own writing, in simply analyzing what makes "good writing," and in discussions of genre.

I summarize briefly the responses to the questions posed at the beginning:

**Q:** Why talk about parts of speech, and what are some of the benefits of direct discussion of the distinctions among the various kinds of words?

**A:** We talk about parts of speech for what it can reveal about our unconscious knowledge of these distinctions that all speakers of any language have. The distinctions are as real as those between mammals and birds or between two chemical elements. And those distinctions are even more relevant, one might argue, because they are part of our human endowment. And important benefit of such inquiry is that it empowers; students learn that they do have this knowledge and they are experts. The effects of this are enormous and are quite distinct from the insecurity about language and grammar that traditional methods often induce.

**Q:** What are the best ways to teach about parts of speech and why?

**A:** There is evidence that an investigative, inquiry-based approach to parts of speech is extremely effective. It allows the students to be the experts. It reveals knowledge they didn't realize they had. It reveals that these distinctions are actual ones, not arbitrary labels. It employs scientific



methodology (making hypotheses, testing them, collecting data, revising hypotheses) in order to discover the most appropriate category.

**Q:** What are the applications of such study?

**A:** The applications are numerous. In addition to the ways of thinking mentioned above, teachers find direct applications to the study of literature, to writing, and to students' discussions about language generally.

Simply put, allowing students to discover their intuitive knowledge about parts of speech categories is an excellent place to begin language analysis and doing so will pay off in spades. And it doesn't hurt that it will help students meet some of those Common Core standards!

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## **Book Review: Views on a Text by Teacher and Student**

**Lobeck, Anne and Kristin Denham. 2014. *Navigating English Grammar: A Guide to Analyzing Real Language*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2013, 288 pages.**

**Reviewed by Susan Behrens, Professor, Communication Sciences and Disorders, Marymount Manhattan College, and by Joséphine Ancelle, BA, Speech-Language Pathology and Linguistics, Marymount Manhattan College**

Having recently received approval to introduce “The Structure of English,” a course on English grammar into the undergraduate curriculum at my college, I started looking around for texts that would work with students taking the course in the speech-language pathology major, minor, and our new linguistics minor. This new offering also targets majors in English and other humanities disciplines. There is no shortage of texts on the market, and in fact (full disclosure), I have one out myself, *Grammar: A Pocket Guide* (2010). My text, however, is more a review of grammar concepts for the curious, not a text with exercises and semester-long assignments.

I know well the work of linguists Anne Lobeck and Kristin Denham from their mission to infuse linguistics into the K-12 pedagogy. They have authored a college-level introductory linguistics text (*Linguistics for Everyone*), and Anne Lobeck published a grammar text (*Discovering Grammar*). And now their *Navigating English Grammar* has come along.

This past winter, I had the good fortune of pre-testing *Navigating English Grammar* in an independent study with a senior who is graduating with a major in speech-language pathology and audiology, and with a minor in language sciences. This student, Joséphine Ancelle, is clearly very tuned into language. She is also bilingual, with French her first language, and has proven herself to be an excellent independent worker. When the term was over, it occurred to me that the *ATEG Journal* readers might enjoy a peek into the experiences of a teacher and student as we together explored a newcomer to the grammar text market. Below is a joint narrative about our experiences using this new book.

### **Teacher’s Point of View (Susan Behrens)**

When I am selecting a text for a course, I first read the introductory message to the intended audience. Here I find that Lobeck and Denham’s preface offers clear, appealing, and realistic motivation for those picking up the book to study



grammar. By doing so, learners use existing, sometimes unconscious, knowledge about language. Further, studying grammar leads to social realizations about stereotypes and pre-conceptions. It also supplies tools for further analysis as we embody the roles of producer and receiver of language. Grammar also offers a wealth of meta-vocabulary so that we can articulate all this knowledge, and it allows us to make more informed (language) decisions and choices. Overall, the book contributes to Lobeck and Denham's ongoing "commitment to raising awareness of language" (xv).

It is evident that the reader Lobeck and Denham have in mind is the student, as opposed to the instructor of grammar. With an academic press and textbook trappings (exercises, notes and reference items), *Navigating English Grammar* will most likely not be found on the shelves of airport bookstores. No matter: a text that talks directly to students about potential fears and the preconceptions they bring to the study of grammar is welcome.

With a new text, I next look at the overall organization to see if the material and its order fit the flow of a semester. Chapter 1 ("What is Grammar and How Do We Study It?") offers basic concepts and definitions, laying out the foundation and philosophy of descriptive linguistics that will serve for the rest of the text. Chapters 2-5 ("Nouns, Noun Phrases, Verbs, and Verb Phrases") cover nouns and verbs from syntactic and morphological perspectives. Chapter 6 ("The Clause") discusses clause structure. Chapters 7-9 ("Adjectives, Adverbs, and Prepositions and Particles") move into modifiers and prepositions as complements and modifiers. Chapter 10 ("Independent, Coordinate, and Subordinate Clauses") returns to clauses, specifically their use in subordination, coordination, and with clause complements. Chapter 11 ("More on Complementation and Modification") continues with clauses: complements, modifiers, and relative clauses. A short epilogue reviews the descriptive vs. prescriptive dichotomy and encourages readers to question labels of lazy, sloppy, and bad when it comes to varieties of English. The text ends with an index.

Each chapter includes sidebars with four separate features:

- ◆ "You Don't Say!" points up specific prescriptive vs. descriptive distinctions, such as attitudes about singular "they";
- ◆ "What About Other Languages?" takes readers beyond examples of English;
- ◆ "Things Ain't What They Used to Be" shows specific examples of how English evolves, such as the word "fun" accepted as an adjective but not



as comparative “funner”; and

- ◆ “You Say Tomato” provides more discussion of language variation, such as the regional US difference of “by accident” and “on accident.”

Each feature is useful, relevant, and entertaining. I do think that some of them could have been combined. For a traditional-aged student, these features might work well to break up big blocks of text. As an instructor of a certain age, I prefer less variety in such offerings.

(I asked Joséphine about her experiences with the sidebars: “I agree that these sidebars were quite frequent but I have to say, I did not mind them. I thought that they were nice little breaks. And if I was in the middle of focusing on a concept, I just skipped them and came back later if it seemed interesting.”)

Exercises at the end of each chapter allow students to play with the material covered in various ways, always ending with a short excerpted text to analyze. A short list of references (one or two) end each chapter, in lieu of a fuller reference list at the end of the volume.

As is evident from the outline, the book is organized cyclically, so that later chapters build on earlier ones since (as the authors note) parts of speech do not work in isolation. In fact, Lobeck and Denham suggest that readers approach the book in the order presented. In other words, flipping around won’t work.

Other attractive features of this text include its balance of accessibility and sophistication. The embedded mini history lessons and socio-linguistic connections keep the material relevant to the reader. And it puts language variation in the context of logical patterns and predictable linguistic change. Readers are often invited to use intuitive tests of some structures, such as what counts as a subject of a sentence by using the tag question test. These exercises are more empowering for the grammar-shy than being asked to remember rules imposed by others. While readers are introduced immediately to constituent structure trees, the diagrams never seem intimidating. There is no assumption that visualizing a grammatical structure need be scary or approached cautiously.

(Again I asked Joséphine what she thought: “The structure trees are well done and easy to understand. Again, they slowly increase in complexity, giving us an opportunity to become familiar with them.”)

When one works with a cyclical organization, there can be pitfalls. Some grammar issues circle back in more sophisticated ways than others, so there is a bit of asymmetry to the book. For example, the clause dominates the latter half of the text, but then again for good reason. I wanted some concepts to be more



fully elaborated when first introduced but knew that was being saved for later chapters. If the book goes to a second edition, the following is my wish-list for revisions.

- ◆ A glossary: I like summaries and places where data are gathered.
- ◆ Answer key, possibly on the website: Such a feature could help independent workers.
- ◆ Separate section addressing how variable the linguistic terminology can be. One book might use the term “progressive,” another “continuous,” for example.
- ◆ More discussion of form vs. function. While the distinction between a word or phrase’s semantic and syntactic roles is nicely outlined, students might need more overt discussion about how a phrase like “in the evening” can be both a prepositional phrase (form) and an adverbial phrase (function).

### **Student’s Point of View (Joséphine Ancelle)**

At the end of each semester, professors often ask their students to give constructive criticisms or provide suggestions about possible improvements for their class. The comment that I most often hear is that the textbook was “hard to read,” “too wordy,” “too detailed,” “too long,” and similar complaints. In fact, most of the time, students do not buy the textbook. The necessary pages are copied, but I have heard more than once students boast in the hallways about getting a B+ or an A- in a class, having never even opened the book. It would be easy for a book on grammar to fall into this category, as let’s face it, most students do not find the topic fascinating, and even those who do can discover a lot of grammar information on the internet. However, I believe that Anne Lobeck and Kristin Denham’s book, *Navigating English Grammar: A Guide to Analyzing Real Language*, has a good chance of being opened and read.

As a book geared toward college students, its main quality is its accessible writing. The authors do not use stuffy language, they write short paragraphs, and repeat the information in multiple ways to clearly get the message across. Further, as we read the book, Lobeck and Denham give us multiple and informative breaks with fun facts sections about dialect variations (“You Say Tomato”), comparisons to other languages (“What About Other Languages?”), the evolution of English over time (“Things Ain’t What They Used To Be”), or the differences of perspectives between descriptivists and prescriptivists (“You



Don't Say!").

When grammatical facts are put into context with a memorable story, it becomes easier to grasp or remember. For example, I was on a plane while reading about the function of “do” as an auxiliary and the various ways it appears in English. In order to emphasize the evolution of the language, a small section discussed the use of “do” in what the authors called “Airline English.” A few moments later, the flight attendant requested that we “do put away our electronic devices in preparation for landing.” I will not forget the difference between do-insertion and emphatic do. Furthermore, I did appreciate when Lobeck and Denham compared grammatical rules in various languages. It was particularly useful when they compared English to French, since French is my first language, but even as I read about other languages, the differences and similarities in language rules helped the main information stand out.

Another quality of Lobeck and Denham’s book is its gradual and cumulative analysis of grammatical rules. The authors detail the reasoning process in order to help the readers understand why parts of speech are labeled the way they are. To understand the background of a rule makes grammatical analysis easier. Chapter 6 on clauses is a good example of this progressive analysis of the rules. For example, the authors explain the formation of yes/no questions and provide a rule that they revise a couple of times based on the additional information that they provide. The initial rule is the following: “To form a yes/no question in English, move the auxiliary or modal in TNS to the front of the clause” (119) (e.g., *He can jump really high – Can he jump really high?*).

The authors then revise the rule after explaining that the rule is not quite right when considering clauses that have a lot of material at the front (e.g., *Although he broke his leg two years ago, he can jump really high – Can although he broke his leg two years ago he jump really high?*). The new rule therefore becomes, “To form a yes/no question in English, the auxiliary or modal in TNS inverts with the (syntactic) subject” (120). Then, Lobeck and Denham introduce “do” as an auxiliary for sentences that only have a main verb (e.g., *He jumps really high – Does he jump really high?*). They further describe the formation of the clause and conclude with the following final rule: “To form a yes/no question in English, TNS inverts with the subject” (125). Adult learners do not want to be force-fed rules without an explanation. This method is therefore more than adequate as it describes why rules are written the way that they are.

Finally, I appreciated the book’s variety of exercises. They were appropriate,



used funny examples, and I liked that some of them required deduction skills. It can be boring to look for an answer in the chapter and simply copy it word for word.

However, one critique that I would have for Lobeck and Denham's book is the absence of an answer key. Exercises always are a great way to integrate the information and review the information given in the chapter. Nonetheless, sometimes seeing the answer to a question is what triggers the student's comprehension. I understand that it may make it too easy for students to be provided all of the answers at the end of the book since they might be very tempted to look and not think, but providing at least part of the answers, either in the book or on the website would be very helpful. Teachers do not always have time to go over all of the exercises with their students to explain why a particular answer is correct and another is not, so on top of providing the answer, a reference to the rule in the book or a reiteration of the rule would be valuable. I assume that the authors thought that the teacher is supposed to be providing the answers to his/her students, but this book addresses student readers directly, and as previously mentioned, teachers do not always have time to go over every exercise.

An example of an exercise that required deduction skills but failed to provide all the clues is one in Chapter 5. Exercise 4 ("Phrasal Verbs, A Passive Puzzle") asks why similar verbs can be put in the passive forms, and others cannot (e.g., *Mabel laughed with Sue* versus *Mabel laughed at Sue*. The first sentence cannot be put in the passive form, whereas the second one can, even though they seem to have the exact same form (110). I ended up understanding that *laughed at* was the verb in the second sentence, while *laughed* was the verb in the first one and therefore, that the preposition made the difference in the verb's transitive or intransitive form. However, I had to look up the term on the Internet because the book had not mentioned "phrasal verbs" yet; they are mentioned for the first time in Chapter 9. Either this exercise should appear later on in the book, or an answer key could direct the student to another part of the book where he/she would find clues towards the answer. A problem like that is likely due to the cyclical organization of the book, which, as previously mentioned, has positive as well as negative aspects.

My main suggestion, in order to make the information easier to find, would be to add tables at the end of the book that summarized all the final rules and listed the various parts of speech covered in each chapter. I believe that the



information in table forms would fill some of the gaps that can occur in a narrative. For example, I had to look in other texts to find a clear table that indicated the differences among present, past, and future in their major forms (simple, progressive, perfect, and perfect progressive). Also, I had to compile my own tables of degree words, adverbial types (e.g., manner, possibility, negation, conjunctive, flat, etc.), prepositions, conjunctions, and such. There are some tables that are useful throughout the book, but they should all be gathered in one place. This would add clarification for those words that can take on multiple labels (e.g., “so” can be a coordinating conjunction, a subordinating conjunction, or a degree word, although not all grammar books use that term and define “so” as an adverb). Further, to gather all the rules and various parts of speech in one place would help the novice grammar student understand how all the rules and types of words relate to and interact with each other.

As a final exercise, my professor asked me to record someone speaking and to transcribe that sample for a grammatical analysis. This exercise was difficult but also a great way to truly integrate the information. However, a few questions arose that were not directly addressed in the book, such as the way people use “get” in informal speech (e.g., *I got stuck on the subway – You gotta do what you gotta do*). It is clear that not all information can be covered in an introduction to grammar book, but the language sample analysis was a very good exercise to relate all of the information that I had learned so far. A version of this exercise provided by the authors might be a useful tool for students to understand grammar in context and see that all rules are related. Grammar is a bit like mathematics – once the rules are clear and memorized, the answers come easily. However, this requires a lot of practice.

Grammar can be intimidating, and Lobeck and Denham do a good job of making it non-threatening. The authors understand who their target-audience is, and they serve them well. For example, who knew that the suffix *-ass* can occur only with adjectives in prenominal positions? So it’s OK to put *It was a cold-ass winter* on your writer’s list of phrases. But *The winter was cold-ass*? No way!

So yes, this book is definitely for college students!



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