



A Comment on "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar"

Author(s): Thomas N. Huckin

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *College English*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Apr., 1986), pp. 397-400

Published by: [National Council of Teachers of English](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/377267>

Accessed: 05/07/2012 17:08

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Comment and Response

A Comment on "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar"

In "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" (*CE*, February 1985), Patrick Hartwell argues that teaching formal grammar to native speakers does not help them become better writers. As the centerpiece of his argument, he presents a flowchart depicting some basic principles of article-usage for ESL students, and asks *CE* readers to use it to complete a fill-in-the-blanks exercise. Hartwell considers the flowchart a good example of formal grammar. Hence, he seems to feel that if *CE* readers (who are presumably native speakers) have "a great deal of frustration" using it, as he assumes they will, his argument will be supported. He then devotes several pages to discussing some related research, claiming that it corroborates this demonstration.

Unfortunately, this section of Hartwell's article is filled with misrepresentations and nonsequiturs. As coauthor of the ESL material in question, I feel obliged to bring these matters to the attention of *CE* readers so that they will be in a better position to judge the worth of Hartwell's overall argument.

First of all, the flowchart in question is hardly an example of formal grammar, nor was it ever intended to be. It is a pedagogical rule, a rule-of-thumb, designed for use only as a simple prompt for students doing our exercises. Anyone who has looked into the complexities of article usage in English would immediately recognize this. Olsen and I based our flowchart on our knowledge of linguistics, but we deliberately simplified it for the sake of our students. For example, we used the term "noun" instead of more technically correct terms like "head noun," "noun phrase," or "N-bar" because we felt our students might be confused by such linguistic jargon; furthermore, in the many examples we provide in the book (not mentioned by Hartwell), we made it clear to students that "noun" was being used in a broad sense, close to that of "noun phrase." We used the term "unique referent" because we (and a number of linguistic philosophers) believe it captures the essence of non-idiomatic article usage and because we devote some twenty pages of our text to illustrating what it means in different contexts; but this term defies precise definition and therefore would not be included in any kind of formal linguistic rule. And we

made no distinction between proper nouns and common nouns, or between specific and generic reference, because we devote considerable attention to these topics elsewhere in our text.

This brings up a second point: The material that Hartwell presents to *CE* readers has been taken out of context, making it practically devoid of meaning. In our textbook, it is embedded in a 32-page treatment of the subject, including many examples, explanations, and exercises, supported by another 15 pages of material in the teacher's manual. (Given the notorious difficulty of the topic for ESL students, such coverage seems fully warranted.) Students are taken step by step through this material, so that by the time they reach the flowchart in question, they use it only as a convenient reminder of points already covered. They are familiar with the terminology contained in the chart, and they have already done many simpler exercises of this type. Hartwell provides none of this context to *CE* readers; in fact he does not even mention that it exists. Under such conditions, the flowchart is indeed, to use Hartwell's own description, "simply unusable." Consequently, his "demonstration" proves nothing.

Hartwell attempts to "corroborate" this demonstration, however, by citing research in cognitive psychology and second language acquisition theory. He asserts that experiments by Arthur S. Reber and his colleagues "have shown that providing subjects with formal rules . . . remarkably degrades performance: subjects given the 'rules of the language' do much less well in acquiring the rules than do subjects not given the rules" (117). But this was true only of Reber's 1967 and 1976

studies. What Reber and his colleagues found in their 1980 study (which Hartwell cites but which he apparently did not read very carefully) reversed these earlier findings. By creating more pedagogically realistic conditions (that is, by using a more structured presentation of data and by testing different mixes of implicit and explicit instruction), they found that the best method of instruction was one in which students are first given an explicit rule and then some examples illustrating it:

Of the various possible combinations of explicit and implicit training procedures, it seems clear that the optimum mode is that in which the subjects begin with explicit information about the structure of the grammar and then observe an extended series of exemplars generated by it. This finding is similar to that reported by Danks and Gans (1975), who found that the learning of the rule system of a miniature linguistic system (albeit a relatively simple one compared with that used in our experiments) was optimized by showing subjects the rule matrix early in the training phase. (500)

They characterize this method as being "akin to the common pedagogic device of giving students a general principle or rule followed by concrete instances" (497). This is precisely the method that Olsen and I followed in our 32-page section on articles. Rather than "corroborating" Hartwell's critique of our work, Reber's research actually undermines it.

Hartwell next turns to some research by Stephen Krashen in second language acquisition, and here too we find serious misrepresentations. For

example, after quoting Krashen as saying, "Some adults (and a very few children) are able to use conscious rules to increase the grammatical accuracy of their output, and even for these people, very strict conditions need to be met before the conscious grammar can be applied," Hartwell says that "In *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition* . . . Krashen outlines these conditions by means of a series of concentric circles, beginning with a large circle denoting the rules of English and a smaller circle denoting the subset of those rules described by formal linguists. . . ." This is simply false. The "very strict conditions" that Krashen is referring to are not concentric sets of language rules but *conditions on use of the Monitor*—namely (1) time, (2) focus on form, and (3) knowledge of the rule. These conditions are well known to second language learning theorists and are clearly explained and repeatedly referred to in Krashen's book. The concentric-circle schema merely illustrates one aspect of condition 3.

Hartwell seems to think that Krashen sees little value in the teaching of formal grammar rules. But note what Krashen himself has to say on this subject:

There is, nevertheless, some real value in applying these rules when time permits, when rule use does not interfere with communication. Providing these local items, even though they make a small contribution to communication, makes writing and speech more polished, it adds a cosmetic effect that may be very important for many second language students.

Indeed, in the advanced second language class, providing such polish may become the main goal, one that is quite justified for many students. "Advanced" second language acquirers, especially those who have been in the country where the target language is spoken for a few years, may have acquired a great deal, but not all, of the second language, enough to meet communicative needs, but still short of the native speaker standard. Their chief need may be conscious rules to use as a supplement to their acquired competence, to enable them to appear as educated in their second language as they are in their first.

I do not object to this sort of grammar teaching. What is unfair is to emphasize accuracy on communicatively unessential, late acquired items in beginning language classes, with students who are unable to understand the simplest message in the second language. (112)

This is a key point, for it shows that while Krashen decries the teaching of formal grammar to beginning language learners, he favors such teaching to more advanced learners. Since American college students clearly qualify as "advanced learners of English," Krashen presumably would advocate teaching them the kinds of formal grammar rules they might need to help them polish their writing. Again, the research that Hartwell cites as supporting his position actually refutes it.

The experiments by Ellen Bialystock and Herbert Seliger that Hartwell describes both involved spoken, not written, English. Thus it is not obvious what relevance they have for the issue at hand, namely, helping students

become better *writers*. And neither experiment required subjects to perform tasks that would be expected to elicit conscious knowledge of grammar. Consider first the Bialystock experiment, where subjects were asked to make grammaticality judgments. According to Reber, such a task tends to elicit a holistic, “gestaltlike” cognitive process, not an analytic one. If subjects had been given a task involving linguistic problem-solving, i.e. a more typical writing task such as writing or revising sentences, Reber’s research suggests that they would likely have taken a more analytic approach (501).

Seliger’s experiment did not satisfy all three conditions that Krashen stipulates for the conscious monitoring of rules. Specifically, as Krashen himself notes in *PPSLA* (95), Seliger’s subjects were not instructed to focus on form. Thus, although a few of them knew the *a/an* rule, they were generally unable to apply it. Furthermore, Seliger’s subject population was so small—only four adults who knew the rule—that one can hardly draw any generalizations from his results. Yet Hartwell says, “A strong conclusion from this experiment would be that formal rules of grammar seem to have no value whatsoever” (119).

In short, Hartwell has mischaracterized my work and that of several others to such a degree that this section of his paper—pivotal in his overall argument—is virtually meaningless. Has he done likewise in the rest of his article? I have not had time to check the hundred or so additional references contained therein, so I cannot say. I certainly hope not.

Thomas N. Huckin
Carnegie-Mellon University

Patrick Hartwell Responds

I’ll wager the whole ballgame on one sentence: “Krashen presumably would advocate teaching [college students] the kinds of formal grammar rules they might need to help them polish their writing” (par. 7). If the embedded claim is true (formal grammar rules might help students polish their writing), then Professor Huckin is correct and I’m wrong. If the hypothetical main clause is true, then Professors Huckin and Krashen are correct and I’m wrong. But if these claims are not true, then I (and presumably Professor Krashen) are correct. (I’ve never been able to write “I are correct” before, by the way.) First off, I did acknowledge (120) that teachers and students might well perceive the need for formal grammar instruction, though, again, I see that perception in different terms than my respondents do.

Professor Huckin focuses on one section of my paper, that on the role of formal rules in second language learning and in the induction of the rules of artificial languages, which he sees as the “centerpiece” of my argument (par. 1), “pivotal” (last par.) to my claims, and he strongly implies that any weaknesses in this section will call into question my central claims. The section is, of course, peripheral, explicitly “cognate areas of inquiry.” He argues that I misrepresent his and Olsen’s work, and he cites Krashen to counter my Krashen and Reber to counter my Reber, brushing aside Bialystock and Seliger in the process.

I did not misrepresent the work of Professors Huckin and Olsen. Any quotation is by nature “out of context,” and one simply assumes that

readers have the real world knowledge to fill in the gaps any quotation creates. Does a diagram on article use in an ESL textbook come accompanied by explanations and examples? Would a native speaker who worked through the 32 pages in the Huckin and Olsen text find the diagram immediately usable? Does a scholar who accuses me of nonsequiturs create nonsequiturs?

Under such conditions, the flowchart is, to use Hartwell's own description, "simply unusable." Consequently, his "demonstration" proves nothing.

I can't take firm positions about the value of formal rules in second language instruction or in the induction of artificial languages—these are areas beyond my expertise. But we can mark out extremes: people can learn second languages without any formal grammar instruction; people can acquire the rules of artificial languages without being given those rules; and learners can acquire the features of written language without formal instruction. So even if I lose the bet in paragraph one (oh, maybe if Krashen and I lose the bet), I'll stand by my original claim: students and teachers may well perceive the need for "rules of grammar," but such perceptions have much more to do with "pedagogically real conditions" (Hartwell quoting Huckin paraphrasing Reber) than with any inherent value of formal rules of grammar as such. Formal rules of grammar, even if they existed, would have no value in the mastery of written English by native speakers of the language.

Indiana University
of Pennsylvania