



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

Author(s): Martha Kolln

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *College English*, Vol. 47, No. 8 (Dec., 1985), pp. 874-877

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

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/376626>

Accessed: 05/07/2012 17:09

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



National Council of Teachers of English is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *College English*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

A Comment on ‘‘Grammar, Grammars, and The Teaching of Grammar’’

Patrick Hartwell tells us that the grammar issue was settled for him twenty

years ago ("Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" [CE, February 1985]). He dramatizes the point by quoting what I call the "harmful effect" statement from the NCTE's 1963 report *Research in Written Composition*, then tops it off with the catchy phrase "magical thinking," a quote from Janet Emig.

Hartwell quotes a lot of other people, too, including me, but he spends most of his space rehashing definitions of the word *grammar*, as if such information would somehow settle the "grammar issue" for everyone. Not only does that list not settle the issue, it does not even suggest what the issue is.

The source of the misunderstanding of the grammar issue is tied up with a problem of definition, it's true. But the term we need to define is not "grammar," but rather "formal grammar." We need to clear up the distinction between the two terms. The failure of Braddock *et al.* to do so in that 1963 report has been the source of a great deal of misunderstanding in our profession. What did they mean when they declared in "strong and unqualified terms" that the "teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in composition, even a harmful effect on improvement in writing"?

What exactly is "formal grammar"? The term refers to a separate class in the curriculum in which students study grammar in a "formal" rather than an applied or functional way, grammar taught with no connection to writing. I remember such grammar classes myself, from the 1940s, when we learned definitions, when we parsed and diagrammed sentences; in those days we

even memorized a long list of prepositions.

Every one of the research studies that Hartwell mentions, the research that helped settle the grammar issue for him, has to do with "formal grammar." That's the grammar that Hoyt worried about in the curriculum for young children back in 1906; that's the grammar that Ash and Frogner were experimenting with in the 1930s; and that's the method of teaching grammar that the widely touted study by Elley *et al.* in New Zealand was all about.

Professor Hartwell complains that "the two sides [of the grammar dispute] are unable to agree on how to interpret such research." He despairs of critics and nitpickers like me who refuse to put the "grammar issue" to rest. Just look at the high marks given to the New Zealand study, he reminds us; it was carefully designed and carried out, its validity unquestionable, etc., etc. But what do we critics say? "Martha Kolln, when her attention is drawn to the study, thinks the whole experiment 'suspicious.'"

You're wrong about me, Professor Hartwell. I am quite willing to put to rest the issue of "formal grammar." I agree with you—and with Elley *et al.* and with Braddock *et al.* that formal method is certainly not the way to teach grammar.

There must be a better way.

As far back as 1935, the NCTE recommended a better way. In *An Experience Curriculum in English*, an NCTE Curriculum Commission called for an end to formal grammar and advocated instead "instrumental grammar"—what is now often called "functional grammar" and what I choose to call "rhetorical grammar." Their lesson plans, which begin with the study of

adverbials in the second grade, include some twenty-five structures that the students should be familiar with by twelfth grade. The purpose of this kind of grammar study is to help students understand their language as they learn to use it, and to do so developmentally, throughout their school years. This is not the kind of grammar that researchers, such as Elley *et al.* are testing.

When I characterized the New Zealand study as “suspicious,” I was not referring to its methodology. I was referring to the whole enterprise of grammar research that continues to flog the long-dead corpse of “formal grammar.” All of those studies that we have been hearing about all of these years, from Hartwell and from others—studies carried out over the past eight decades—have asked the same question. Does the study of formal grammar improve writing?

And how is the answer pursued? The New Zealand study is typical: The experimental groups studied grammar in a formal, nonrhetorical way; the grammar they studied was completely isolated from their composition classes. Take the passive voice, for example. The group using *The Oregon Curriculum*—that’s the group who “proved” that studying transformational grammar has little or no effect on the improvement of writing—learned about the passive voice as a transformational rule, a formula; in their text the passive is never mentioned in connection with rhetoric or style or sentence effectiveness.

Let me put my use of the word *suspicious* into its original context, (“Reply to Ron Shook,” CCC 32 [1981]):

Am I the only suspicious person around? Doesn’t anyone else suspect

that grammar is being set up in studies like those of Elley *et al.*? What would be the result, I wonder, if someone who really believes in the usefulness of teaching grammar designed an experiment in which grammar was deliberately brought into the composition class as a teaching tool, if the teacher made every possible effort to help students write, using traditional or structural or transformational grammar, or all three—whatever works.

I don’t understand the objection to that kind of “rhetorical grammar.”

Back in 1963 when we saw the words *grammar* and *harmful* there in the same sentence, we panicked. And some among us translated that fear into pedagogy. The result? We’re not to waste our time on grammar anymore; and we’re not supposed to use such terminology as “subject” and “predicate” and “participle” and “gerund.” Our students should learn to write by writing—only by writing, by letting it all hang out. Let’s not inhibit their creativity by calling unnecessary attention to the structures they use; and we’re certainly to have no “lessons” on sentence structure or parts of speech, on “formal grammar.”

How foolish. How harmful. The result is a generation (or more) of students who have no language for discussing their language. We teach them terminology in every other field—in science and math and history and geography and computer science and physical education, in literature, and in French. But not in their own language. We have produced a generation of teachers whose philosophy is based on the notion that grammar is for teachers to know, but not for students (and, in fact, the only title on the NCTE booklist concerning grammar in

the curriculum has that philosophy as its title: *Grammar for Teachers*).

We at the college level will not solve the problem of the language arts curriculum by turning our composition classes into grammar classes. I have never advocated such measures, despite Professor Hartwell's words to the contrary ("She concludes with a stirring call to place grammar instruction at the center of the composition curriculum . . ." [106]; "Martha Kolln's argument for teaching formal grammar . . ." [124].) But I do believe that rhetorical grammar has a place in our composition class, because of course grammar is there (Hartwell labels it "the grammar in our heads"). Beyond that, at the college level we certainly do have some influence on teacher training.

Professor Hartwell says that the grammar issue is a complicated one. Indeed it is. Unfortunately, articles such as his, despite its definitions and flow charts and analogies, provide little, if any, clarification.

In conclusion, I offer an analogy of my own. Imagine a research study carried out by the History Department to find out if learning the dates of historical events enhances a student's understanding of history. During one period a week the usual history lesson is replaced by an experimental class where students spend their time memorizing dates: they recite the dates, they diagram the dates, they drill. At the end of the experiment—a semester, perhaps, or a year—all the history students, those who studied the dates in their special class as well as those who did not, are given two tests: one is a test of dates; the other is a test of the students' general knowledge, or understanding, of history.

Here are the results: (1) The students in the experimental class score better on the test of dates, just as we would have predicted. (2) There is no correlation between the two tests; that is, students who score high on general knowledge are not significantly better at dates than those with a low general history score. Or, to put it another way, given a student's high score on dates, we cannot predict a comparable high score on general knowledge.

Now, what curriculum decisions should the history department make on the basis of these data? If they follow our lead, not only will they eliminate the class devoted to dates, they will remove all mention of dates from their other history classes as well. They will, in fact, declare far and wide that henceforth there shall be no time spent discussing dates in history classes—that time thus spent, because it displaces instruction in more important ideas, has a harmful effect on the understanding of history.

Martha Kolln
The Pennsylvania
State University

Patrick Hartwell Responds

There's little to be accomplished by talking across paradigms, so I'll try to be brief about this. Professor Kolln reads carefully the sections of my paper that deal with her work; she ignores the rest of what I had to say. Her "instrumental grammar" or "functional grammar" or "rhetorical grammar" (par. 9) is my grammar 5, defined, referenced, and given an acknowledged role in the teaching of composition (see the response of Joe

Williams in *CE* Oct. 1985), and I recognized (120) that teachers and students may perceive the need for something that might be called “grammar instruction,” though, granted, I see that perception in somewhat different terms and contexts than does Professor Kolln.

Otherwise, Professor Kolln is flat out wrong. She is wrong in claiming that I spend most of my space “rehashing definitions of the word *grammar*” (par. 2); I spend two pages on that necessary task (109-110). She is unfair in seeing what I call “romantic” theories of composition as “letting it all hang out” and historically inaccurate in seeing those theories as a response to the failure of formal grammar instruction (par. 13); they are positions grounded in recognized intellectual traditions of philosophical idealism (124). She is wrong in claiming that we have produced “a generation (or more) of students who have no language for discussing their language” (par. 14). Every culture develops a remarkably rich metalinguistic vocabulary for discussing language, literate cultures in particular, and we’d have to have a great deal of contempt for our students (and a grotesquely inflated view of our own importance) to hypothesize that literate adults below our ages (Kolln’s and mine, I guess) hobble around without such a vocabulary. Besides, if Kolln and I were to agree to examine carefully what passes for writing instruction in American classrooms—from kindergarten through college—we’d find it dripping with a kind of grammar instruction we both deplore. These are not trivial issues: we can take them in Kolln’s terms—students must be able to discuss their

own language by means of a vocabulary that is provided for them by teachers and textbooks—or we can take them in terms provided by more informed discussion—it’s really hard for kids to enter into the discourse communities characteristic of English essayist literacy, and to do so they need all the scaffolding that we can provide for them (see, for example, in this journal, Patricia Bizzell [“William Perry and Liberal Education,” *CE* 46 (1984): 447-454], Kenneth A. Bruffee [“Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind,’” *CE* 46 (1984): 635-652], and Mike Rose [“The Language of Exclusion,” *CE* 47 (1985): 341-359], or more generally, Nancy L. Stein [“Critical Issues in the Development of Literacy Education,” *American Journal of Education* 93 (1984): 171-199]). The curricular implications of this choice are obvious enough.

And who is this “we”? In paragraph one it’s “readers of *College English*,” in paragraph thirteen it’s “English teachers in general” at the beginning and “English teachers I disagree with” at the end, and in the next-to-last paragraph it’s “English teachers who agree with me.” We can see what’s going on here.

Professor Kolln ends by noticing my use of analogy and, such is the paradoxical nature of English essayist literacy, offering an analogy of her own, dealing with the teaching of history. The analogy violates an unwritten rule of English essayist literacy: you shouldn’t mess with domains of intellectual inquiry outside your own domain unless you recognize that they have traditions of their own. Those traditions—just go look them up (try

Jean Anyon [“Adequate Social Science, Curriculum Investigation, and Theory,” *Theory into Practice* 21 (1982): 34-37] and Frances Fitzgerald [*America Revised* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979)] for starters [but you

know I’m right, right?)]—have very little to do with the teaching of dates, formally or informally. Would that we would do the same.

Indiana University of Pennsylvania