

A Practical Grammar Course: A (partially) annotated syllabus

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Introduction


Many linguists are currently actively exploring the importance of raising language awareness in the public schools, proposing ways to weave linguistics into the K-12 curriculum. The general thrust of such work is to highlight how linguistic knowledge enhances teachers' and students' understanding of language structure, acquisition, variation and change. Such knowledge, in turn, leads to a greater understanding of linguistic diversity, and to recognition of linguistic discrimination both inside and outside of the (often multilingual) K-12 classroom. Indeed, coalition building between linguists and educators toward this common goal is reflected in work by the American Dialect Society and the Center for Applied Linguistics, and subcommittees of both the National Council of Teachers of English and the Linguistic Society of America.

In this paper we outline a course for English Education majors intended to contribute to the growing curricular possibilities directed at integrating linguistics into the K-12 classroom. Our college level grammar course is designed to introduce preservice teachers to grammatical fundamentals in a way which speaks directly to the needs of the public school teacher by preparing them to make informed decisions about how and why to teach grammar in their own classrooms.

The Place of Linguistics Courses in English Departments

Some ways in which linguists can contribute to teacher education are clear, and we have found that the K-12 applications of the material in our introductory linguistics course have been very successful. To take one example from a popular book used in secondary education English language arts teaching programs, Christenbury (2000), in her chapter on Teaching Language, discusses a number of reasons why knowledge of language is necessary for the classroom teacher. For example, she argues that teachers need to understand the difference between prescriptive and descriptive grammar, especially with respect to valuing home dialects. She also offers suggestions for how to teach the seemingly irregular English spelling system, how to recognize parts of words, and how to recognize dialect variation in writing. In other words, knowledge of the basic components of descriptive grammar—namely syntax, semantics, phonology and morphology—as well as an understanding of linguistic change and variation can all be productively applied in the K-12 classroom. Our own introductory linguistics course, taken by all English majors, explores all of these concepts. In this way, the bridge between linguistic theory and K-12 classroom practice has been successfully crossed. Our students seem to be taking many of the concepts and knowledge acquired in our introductory course into their own

classrooms and textbooks have also incorporated much of the knowledge into practical lessons.

However, we feel there is a missed opportunity for similar classroom applications from a more narrowly focused class.  In many other institutions, we offer an English grammar course whose long history reflects in part the changing attitudes toward grammar instruction at all levels. The course began life as an English Education course on usage, focusing on correctness and Standard English. This version of the course failed to address linguistic diversity, and entrenched rather than challenged linguistic discrimination. The revision of the course swung far in the other direction, focusing almost exclusively on English descriptive grammar, and addressing only indirectly how concepts could be practically applied.


Though student feedback on this latter version of the course was typically very positive, we nevertheless felt that we could do more in the course to prepare preservice teachers for the issues they might face in their own classrooms. For example, many current English Education textbooks adopt the widely held position that direct instruction in (traditional) grammar does little to help one become a more effective writer. These texts nevertheless point out that *teachers* must be aware of certain (descriptive) grammatical fundamentals in order to help students recognize patterns of writing error involving, for example, modification, subordination and fragments (see, for example, Weaver, 1999). Teachers must therefore not only understand certain core grammatical concepts, but they must also know how to *apply* their knowledge of grammar in the classroom effectively.

We provide here an overview of a possible course for instructors facing the challenge of constructing a grammar course that is relevant and useful to preservice teachers (as well as to students in other majors). This course encourages students to understand different definitions of grammar and the arguments for and against teaching grammar in the public school classroom. Students also explore their own “grammar history,” and ultimately construct a pedagogical strategy of their own. We hope that the course outline will also give others—current and future teachers of K-12 English—some ideas for the teaching of grammar in their own classrooms.

Note that we present here only a partial syllabus, in particular omitting details of Part II of the course, the section in which actual grammatical concepts are taught and discussed. Instead, we provide examples of how one might construct only the first few lessons in this part of the course. One reason for this is space: a precise list of concepts taught, and their many applications, would be too large to include here, and our goal is only to suggest how one might approach this section. Another reason is that the uniqueness of our approach does not lie in a defending a particular approach to teaching grammar, but rather in constructing the *context* in which grammatical concepts are presented. We list ideas for resources and readings for teachers in the bibliography.

A (partially) annotated syllabus

 t I.

In this first section of the course we explore different definitions of grammar, the origins of these definitions, and the ideologies that underlie each. We discuss how these different approaches to grammar treat language variation and change, and the relationship between written and oral language. We then apply our knowledge to the “grammar controversy,” the debate about whether and how to teach grammar in the public schools, particularly in the writing classroom. Within this context we also discuss studies of writing “error,” exploring how grammatical knowledge can help us understand and identify different syntactic and morphological patterns. We examine different writing styles to gain a better understanding of the role of audience, and how grammatical patterns (even “errors”) can be used effectively. We consider our own writing and grammar histories, and examine our own expectations as future teachers. How is our own writing corrected and what seems most effective/ineffective? What are your teachers’ expectations, and what are r own?

What is Grammar? Definitions, ideologies, and their origins

- Definitions of grammar: traditional, prescriptive, descriptive, linguistic
- The ideologies that shape each definition
- Language standards: how are they defined and by whom?
- Language variation: how is it treated?
- Language change: how is it treated?
- Relationships among grammar, written language and oral language

Your personal grammar history

- What is your own definition of grammar?
- What is your school grammar background?
- What ideologies underlie your personal definition of grammar?
- What do think your teachers expect you to know?
- How are your grammatical “errors” graded/identified?
- How do you approach your own grammar (written/oral)?
- Different genres/different errors? Compare your own creative, personal, and academic writing

Thoughts for preservice teachers


- What are you expected to know as a teacher and do you feel like you know it?
- What/who are your teaching role models and why did you choose them?
- Stereotype of teacher as language cop/grammar expert: where do you fit in?
- Resources: where do you go for information?


Grammar, Writing, and Error

- Direct grammar instruction and the teaching of writing: An overview of the studies
- Writing error studies:
 - What is an “error,” who decides, and why?
 - Types of error: as stigmatized dialect, developmental, instruction induced, etc.

- What grammatical knowledge helps us identify patterns of error? Compile, as a class, a list of typical errors discussed in different studies, and discuss how they might be divided into different categories: as stigmatized dialect forms (such as *I seen it*, *I didn't do nothing*, or *she walk to school*), punctuation errors (*I bought egg's at the store*), or developmental errors (syntactic patterns common to basic writers such as run-ons or fragments).
- Compare some grammar handbook approaches to different errors.
- Apply information on error to your own personal grammar history and discuss any changes in perspective.

Part II. Which grammatical concepts should we study and why?

In the previous section of the course we compiled a list of writing errors most often addressed in the leading studies. These are important for us as teachers/ readers/writers to understand, so we will design our study of grammatical structure around them. The goal  is not to teach you how to avoid writing error, but rather to deepen your understanding of grammatical patterns that underlie certain syntactic and morphological constructions. We can then apply this knowledge to understanding how certain patterns are perceived and evaluated positively or negatively (as errors), and how these patterns/concepts can be used to create different stylistic and rhetorical effects for different audiences.

e: The instructor and students may formulate a basic course plan themselves, or it may be more useful to have the instructor design this section of the course based on what is discussed in Part I. One might also design this section around a particular grammar textbook of choice. Our own approach builds on students' intuitions about grammatical structure (see Noguchi 1991, for example), and attempts to raise students' metalinguistic awareness of their unconscious grammatical knowledge.

Grammar Lesson 1: The use

- Introduce concepts of subject (NP), predicate (VP), and (main/independent) clause (S).
- NP (noun phrase): semantic types of nouns, the determiner system, pronouns and antecedents
- VP (verb phrase): verb tenses, auxiliary, modal, and main verbs, and subject-verb agreement.
- Descriptive operations/movement rules that identify clauses: yes/no question formation, tag question formation.
- The syntax of passive sentences

- Pronominalization as a way of identifying a phrase (the subject NP, for example)

Applications:

Goals: In this section of the grammar lesson, students revisit the list of writing errors compiled in Part I to explore how knowledge of clause structure can be applied to understanding and explaining patterns of error. We use descriptive grammar as the basis for study of language prescription and standards.

Methods: Rather than relying on model sentences and drills, we encourage students to find examples of the syntactic constructions under discussion in actual texts (their own or others' writing), and to also create their own examples. Using text examples also provides the opportunity to compare academic writing with other genres.

- Use of passive voice in writing: what is its rhetorical effect?
- Pronouns (case, finding antecedents, and dialect variation: *hissself*) Examine effect of dialect variation in creative and academic writing, and in oral language.
- Subject-verb agreement (*She walk(s) to the store./I seen/saw it.*) Examine effect of dialect variation in creative and academic writing, and in oral language.
- Tense shift: create some examples and discuss effect on reader. Examine own writing.
- Possessive nouns (*that is John's book/that John book*) Examine effect of dialect variation (reflected also in punctuation) in creative and academic writing and in oral language.
- Stylistic use of semantic classes of nouns (in poetry, for example)
- Run-on sentences: find examples, create your own, discuss punctuation, use yes/no and tag question formation to find clause boundaries.

Grammar Lesson 2: Subordination and Coordination

- Introduce concepts of subordinate clauses (restricting discussion here to clausal complements as in *I think **that grammar is fun***).
- Distinguish subordinate clauses from coordinate clauses

- Expand generally on coordination of other categories (NP, VP, PP, etc.). Illustrate syntactic parallelism.
- Introduce conjunctive adverbs (*therefore, moreover, however, etc.*) and show how this is conjunction not subordination.

Applications:

- Parallelism: find examples of both parallel and non-parallel coordination. What is the stylistic effect?
- Sentence combining: increasing sentence complexity (practice combining, simplify (decombine) complex sentences, discuss combining as a teaching tool in the writing classroom)
- Discuss punctuation: semi-colons, colons versus periods
- Run-on or fused sentences: identify more complex run-ons, with subordinate clauses

Notice that the approach here relies on exploring text as a resource of grammatical patterns, rather than relying on model sentences, drills and memorization. We use descriptive grammar as the basis for study of language prescription and standards.

Part III. Follow up: projects/presentations/mini-lessons

In this section we explore practical applications in more detail, providing students with the opportunity to develop their pedagogical approaches to grammar in the K-12 classroom. (Our suggestions here target preservice teachers, but students with different interests could also explore other topics for their projects, such as the grammar of other spoken or signed languages, (including creoles or pidgins), the grammar of different English dialects, the origins of language prescription (in English and other languages), grammatical patterns in Old, Middle and Early Modern English, etc.)

- **Grammar and assessment.** Investigate grammar ideologies reflected in state education requirements and standardized testing. (In our state, students would investigate the Washington State Essential Academic Learning Requirements for reading, writing and communication, and the Washington Assessment of Standards of Learning (WASL), a statewide mandatory standardized test focused on writing).
- **Acquisition of reading/writing.** Explore in more detail the origins of different types of error that we have only touched on in class. Discuss the development of writing, when certain errors appear, and some possible pedagogical approaches to them.

- **Grammar in the ESL or bilingual classroom.** What are some different approaches to teaching English grammar in the ESL/bilingual classroom? How do these differ from teaching English grammar to native speakers?
- **Grammar attitudes in the schools.** Interview K-12 teachers about their definition of grammar and approaches to teaching it. What ideologies seem to be at work and why? What are some challenges teachers face in approaching grammar in their classrooms? What do they feel is successful and what is not?
- **Pedagogical approaches/mini-lessons.** Make up a mini-lesson that you can teach to your classmates, illustrating practical applications of material we've learned in class. You might choose from the following:

Tense shift
Pronouns and antecedents
Fragments (what is a clause, and what is not?)
Run-ons
Punctuation
Etc.

In your presentation be sure to explore how you as a teacher might approach stigmatized dialects in your classroom and how you might approach genres of writing, based on what we now know about the relationship between error and audience.

Conclusions

Though we believe that the study of grammar is in fact valuable in its own right whether practical applications to the K-12 classroom can be found or not, we offer here—and encourage students to discover—some ways in which knowledge of grammar is applicable in the context of teaching both academic and non-academic writing. We hope that our college level grammar course introduces grammatical fundamentals in a way which speaks directly to the needs of the public school teacher by preparing them to make informed decisions about how and why to teach grammar in their own classrooms.

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