

A synthesis of research about alternative forms of grammar instruction

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ABSTRACT

There is much debate around whether traditional methods of grammar instruction are as effective as alternative forms of instruction. Most of the analysis research regarding traditional grammar instruction do not synthesize several different alternatives, and instead only discuss why traditional methods harm students more than help them learn grammar. The purpose of this paper is to synthesize several research papers on alternative methods of teaching grammar so that teachers are able to make an educated decision on which method is best for their classroom. This research paper was written through the evaluation of peer-reviewed research papers on alternative forms of traditional grammar instruction, as well as the analysis of results from a questionnaire asking about students' experience with traditional instruction and alternative forms, and their opinions on how these methods have affected their grammar learning. The results of the questionnaire showed that the difference between how students were taught grammar and which methods they felt were actually helpful to them were extremely disparate. The synthesis and evaluation of the research papers revealed that most articles do not discuss limitations of alternative forms of grammar, and instead only provide the benefits. Based on this synthesis and survey, I concluded that initial traditional instruction is necessary to establish foundational grammar knowledge, which can then be replaced or supplemented by alternative forms of instruction. Following this research and these findings, more research and synthesis can be conducted on methods of instruction to improve instruction in other subjects besides grammar. Exploring methods of grammar instruction is just the beginning of a wider circle of research investigating how and if traditional methods of teaching can be reformed.

INTRODUCTION

Most research on traditional grammar instruction claim that explicit instruction is ineffective in preparing students to use grammar correctly in the real world. Several arguments have been presented through experimentation or through meta-analysis, some of which include how traditional grammar instruction inhibits creativity, is not applicable in the real world, and is simply not interesting enough to be understood and retained by students. The bulk of these research papers focus on the problem, and none offer viable solutions. Most sources describe one alternative to traditional instruction, but none synthesize several different alternatives and offer an evaluation of the research conducted on these methods, which is the purpose of this paper. I will be exploring the viewpoints of students and experts regarding alternatives to traditional grammar instruction. The most discussed alternatives include teaching grammar through analyzing grammar rants, creative writing, and context. This synthesis will be extremely helpful for teachers to be able to make an educated decision on which method is best for their classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Linguists, teachers, academics, and policymakers have been in constant debate about the effectiveness of traditional grammar instruction for years. Traditional grammar instruction is often defined as consisting of memorizing countless grammar rules, and completing worksheets and activities which focus on the commitment of the rules to memory (Kolln). This “traditional approach to grammatical instruction has been portrayed as the three Ps- present, practice, produce” (qtd. from Mart). Critics have been addressing the limitations of such instruction, claiming that it can “encourage distorted views of how language works” (Lindblom & Dunn), and it “[doesn’t] help and may even hinder students’ efforts to become better writers” (Cleary). To

remedy the perceived shortcomings of traditional instruction, many academics have come up with alternative forms of grammar instruction which they have found, through extensive research, to be positively associated with students' grammar knowledge development. These forms include learning grammar through analyzing grammar rants, creative writing, and context.

Grammar Rants

Grammar rants are complaints and lamentations by journalists, cultural critics, politicians, and others regarding the teaching of grammar, spelling, writing, and speaking (Lindblom & Dunn). They are implemented in the classroom by asking students to have a discussion not only about the grammar rant, but also about the social implications of the grammar rant. Grammar rant activities are often given to students to supplement their grammar knowledge, and provides them with the opportunity to question and talk about the grammar rules they have been taught.

Analyzing grammar rants by prominent cultural figures has been shown to be effective for three reasons: grammar rants are interesting and fun, so students are more likely to remember the grammar rules; they show how “powerful people make value judgments about other people’s intelligence” based on how one speaks and uses grammar; and they show how language use is important in the communication of meaning and influence social connotations (Lindblom & Dunn). This method aligns with Edwin Battistella’s argument that the debate over traditional grammar instruction can be addressed by exploring the controversy within English language usage: “Coursework in linguistics needs to provide a commonsense reconciliation of descriptive linguistics with realistic linguistics by addressing issues of usage and standard” (Battistella). Grammar rants fulfill this need, especially because they help students become more aware of “right” and “wrong” language use and help them understand which aspects of the English language are conventional, and which are controversial (Lindblom & Dunn). Battistella

also asserts that we must “acknowledge the common truth that we all make grammatical choices and judgments and encourage students to reflect on their own usage” (Battistella). One of the main benefits of grammar rants is that their influence goes beyond that of simply teaching students how to use grammar; they also help students understand that they will be judged in society based on their own language usage.

There is not much research on the downsides to grammar rants. Lindblom & Dunn’s research presented reasons why traditional grammar instruction was ineffective, then dived right into analyzing grammar rants and their benefits in the classroom. It is difficult to believe that there are no limitations to grammar rants, and Lindblom & Dunn’s research lack credibility because their research seems to be focused on naturalistic observations of students’ learning in the classroom rather than quantitative data. And these observations could be biased.

Battistella’s commentary, however, seems to be more credible because he presents strengths and limitations of traditional grammar, builds his argument, then unbiasedly presents how we can address the debate around traditional grammar instruction. But, both critics do not have evidence showing that traditional instruction is harmful, but rather present more evidence supporting a revised or alternative form of instruction such as analyzing grammar rants.

Creative Writing

Many researchers and academics have described creative writing as an effective alternative to grammar instruction. Michelle Cleary argues, “We need to teach students how to write grammatically by letting them write.” She describes a program at Arizona State in which students who test below college-level in writing are immediately put into a college writing course, which has helped more than 88 percent of those students pass freshman English (Cleary). David Gold also described a similar view in his account of when he developed an English curriculum for a new private high school: “...our teaching philosophy was based on the

premise that students learn to write best by writing; likewise, they learn to read best by reading” (Gold).

Additionally, Cleary makes the widely agreed upon point that traditional grammar teaching leads students to over-edit themselves, causing them to focus more on being correct rather than expressing their ideas (Cleary). Barbara Birch also supports this when she describes how people “make unconscious errors of hypercorrection” because they fail to learn how to use the grammar of Proper Written English (PWE) (Birch). Learning grammar through writing consists of teaching students strategies for editing, and providing lessons on specific problems that students can apply to their writing (Cleary). Gold also expresses a similar idea in his implementation of his English program. Part of his philosophy expressed that teachers must “teach writing as a reflexive and reflective process, emphasizing the importance of multiple revisions through conferences, class workshops, and peer reviews in a supportive class community” (qtd. from Gold). Research has shown that when students “stop trying to sound correct” many of their writing errors disappear (Cleary). Gold’s paper also expressed how, even when skilled writers make mistakes, it often demonstrates “movement toward acquisition of a rule rather than ignorance of it” (qtd. from Gold), showing how when students revise their writing to correct for grammar, that itself is a learning process.

Cleary’s research however, has its limitations as well. She uses a study where students from 9th to 11th grade were placed into three groups: one had traditional lessons, another used an unspecified alternative method, and a third received no grammar lessons and did creative writing instead. The results showed that there was no significant difference between the groups, except that “both grammar groups emerged with a strong antipathy to English.” It is extremely unclear how “antipathy” was measured, and the study does not provide any valuable quantitative evidence that traditional instruction was ineffective. Yet, Cleary uses this study as

one of the bases for her argument. Similarly, Gold's commentary was based on his observations of students at the school; he did not present any quantifiable evidence.

Learning grammar through context

The most researched alternative to traditional grammar instruction is teaching grammar through context. This means teaching through sentence-combining activities, dialogue, and literature analysis, among other techniques. Research has shown that teaching grammar through context "positively affects learners' competence to use grammatical structures accurately in language skills" (Mart). In Gold's article about his observations of students in the classroom, he explains, "For example, students had actually had plenty of formal training in prescriptive grammar. Nearly all could sing 'The Preposition Song' or give a list of subordinate and coordinate conjunctions. What they could not reliably do was use prepositions or conjunctions effectively in a sentence" (Gold). This shows why learning grammar in context is important. Through traditional methods, memorization of grammar rules is emphasized, but by memorizing, students often fail to understand how those grammar rules are used in the context of a sentence.

Sentence-combining as a method of teaching grammar in context has seen to be effective because it is practical and applied to specific situations, unlike traditional techniques which generalize from practice and usage and created into rules that are then applied (Andrews et al.). In addition, teaching grammar through dialogue has been shown to be effective: "The use of dialogues in grammar teaching is useful because the use of dialogues generally matches learners' expectations of how language is used in the real world: "people use language primarily to talk to each other" (qtd. from Mart). Lastly, using literature analysis as a means of teaching grammar through context has also been widely used. In Gold's description of his curriculum, he explains why he picked specific texts for analysis. He says, "These texts...were appropriate for

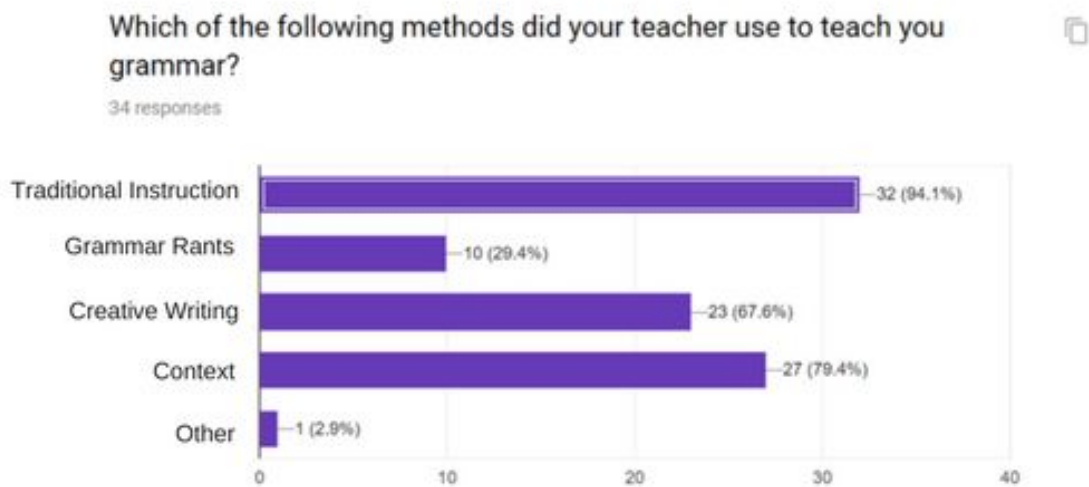
developing students' critical-thinking skills and awareness of themselves as readers and writers" (Gold). This shows how analyzing literature can help develop students' sense of context, thus helping them understand how to use grammar in context.

Since most of the research conducted on alternative methods shun traditional instruction and focus on the benefits of one specific alternative method, I decided it was necessary to conduct another study myself to gather the opinions of students who have learned English grammar to investigate how they have been taught English grammar, whether they felt those methods were effective, and which methods they felt would have been more helpful to them when learning grammar.

METHODOLOGY

To conduct my study, I sent out an anonymous questionnaire (created through Google Forms) to 40 undergraduate students at Carnegie Mellon University. I sent out the questionnaire by personally messaging people to complete my survey and sending them the link directly, because I knew it would be more effective in receiving more responses in a short amount of time. I recognize that, because of this, my sample is biased, since not only were the people who filled out my survey CMU students, they were all my friends. From the 40 people I sent the survey to, I received 34 responses. The questionnaire included five questions. The first two (Did you go to school in America?; Did you learn English grammar in school?) were yes or no questions; the third (Which of the following did your teaching use to teach you grammar?) was followed by choices and definitions of those choices including: traditional instruction, grammar rants, creative writing, context, and other; the fourth and fifth (Which method(s) did you find to be the most helpful? Why?; Is there another method that you think would have been more helpful for you to learn grammar? If so, why? If not, why?) were free-response questions.

RESULTS



This graph shows how many students learned grammar through each of the methods discussed in this paper.

Figure 1

When students were asked about which method they learned grammar through, traditional instruction was reported as being used most often (94.1%). On the contrary, grammar rants were reported as being used least frequently (29.4%) (Figure 1). Overall, learning grammar through context and through traditional instruction (doing worksheets to memorize) seemed to be used most often.

The most interesting results, however, came from the free-response questions. Even though 32 of the 34 respondents indicated that they were taught through traditional instruction, only 5 students total thought that traditional instruction was actually helpful to them in learning grammar. On the other hand, 17 students thought learning grammar through context helped them learn grammar, 8 believed creative writing helped, and 6 believed grammar rants helped.

Most respondents indicated that more than one technique helped them learn grammar (Figure 2). Some of the respondents' answers are shown below (Figure 3).

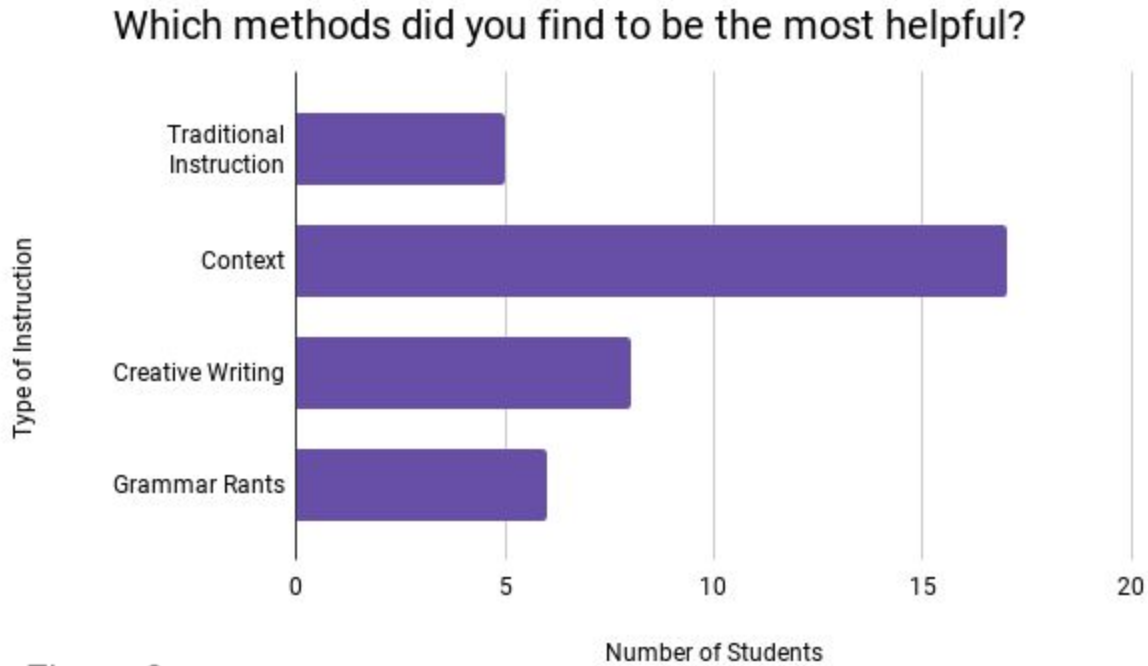


Figure 2

This shows the number of students who thought each method was helpful to them in learning grammar.

Which methods did you find to be most helpful? Why?
I thought creative writing , specifically learning grammar through writing was the most helpful because you had to form your own original sentences and it required an understanding of how to apply grammar rules. In comparison to completing worksheets or correcting sentences, creative writing does not constrain you to one method.
Context and sentence-combining helped the most. It was structured enough I could understand the rules, but it had enough freedom for me to practice using it in real-life.
Grammar Rants : Looking at other people's writing and seeing common mistakes helped me identify errors in my own grammar. It also helped me understand how well I was doing compared to my peers, which served, to a limited degree, as motivation to do better.
I found traditional instruction to be the most helpful because I like having explicit rules to follow.

Figure 3

This shows students' explanations of which method they believed was the most helpful when they were learning grammar.

When students were asked if there was another method they think would have been more helpful, 15 students responded that they did not believe there was another method that could have been more helpful. Other students mentioned how it would have been more helpful to them if they read more in school, participated in dialogue, did more sentence-combining activities, studied another language and connected that language's grammar to English grammar, studied other English dialects, and analyzed grammar rants (Figure 4).

Is there another method that you think would have been more helpful for you to learn grammar? If so, why? If not, why?
The methods above cover everything that I was exposed to. I thought the traditional instructor method and learning grammar through context was effective, but not useful long term. Many students pay more attention to answering questions correctly, rather than learning how to apply grammar rules to various scenarios.
A method that I found really helpful was to learn about English grammar through studying another language(s). I was able to learn a lot about English sentence structure and grammar through studying Latin (and Arabic). I guess I found this helpful because I was able to notice more of the key elements of English grammar (differences and similarities between English and a foreign language).
No. I think the methods listed above are comprehensive. However, I would say that the executing the lessons well, through engaging presentations of the material and the use of interactive activities, are just as important as the content.
I think it's important for the methods to be used in the right order. For example, I think creative writing and learning grammar through context are the most effective for long-term learning, but are ineffective if you don't have the necessary basic grammar rules down, which generally require you to learn them traditionally from a teacher first.

This shows students' explanations of which methods they believed would have helped them learn grammar more effectively.

Figure 4

DISCUSSION

The difference between how students were taught grammar and which methods they felt were actually helpful to them were extremely disparate. While most learned grammar through

traditional methods, most preferred alternative methods instead. This shows how, in reflection, students feel they are not gaining as much grammar knowledge through traditional methods, especially regarding applying those rules in context. In addition, most students felt that learning grammar in context would have been most helpful, meaning they would have preferred to analyze more literature, do sentence combining activities, and learn grammar through dialogue.

The synthesis and evaluation of all the research methods revealed that most of the research on alternative methods do not include the drawbacks of that method but rather focus solely on the benefits, while also disputing traditional instruction. Additionally, from the available research on these alternative methods, it seems like traditional instruction is necessary in the beginning stages of learning grammar before alternative methods are used. To learn grammar through creative writing, students must have some knowledge of grammar beforehand. Similarly, to analyze grammar rants and understand grammar in context, students should be relatively knowledgeable about grammar in order to participate in such activities. Thus, this synthesis of existing grammar research and this study analyzing students' experiences and thoughts about grammar instruction seem to point to the overall conclusion that grammar is best taught through a combination of traditional methods and alternative methods, in order to establish prior knowledge of grammar so students can engage in alternative activities. In this way, alternative methods of teaching grammar serve to improve students existing knowledge of grammar rather than serve as their first exposure to grammar.

Some limitations of this study included having a redundant question in the questionnaire, which was "Did you go to school in America?" because regardless of whether they went to school in America or not, they were asked in the next question whether they learned English grammar, and all the questions following were dependent on that answer. Also, the sample was very small, biased, and not representative of all Carnegie Mellon students.

The implications of this study and synthesis include presenting teachers with an evaluation of the research regarding alternative forms of grammar instruction, and presenting the audience with quantifiable evidence regarding students' perspectives on how they were taught grammar.

It will also help provide solutions for education reform in the U.S. by describing why certain methods of teaching work better than others and how students can benefit from them. Eventually more research and synthesis can be conducted on methods of instruction to improve instruction in other subjects besides grammar. Exploring methods of grammar instruction is just the beginning of a wider research circle investigating how and if traditional methods of teaching can be reformed.

Future research could focus on synthesizing and evaluating research on methods for teaching other subjects, and a similar study can be done. Education needs to be reformed in several ways, and changing modes of teaching to fit individual students' needs should be researched about more thoroughly.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Kendra Williamson, my professor, as well as Fei Peng and Ming Lu, my peer reviewers, for their helpful comments and criticisms on an earlier draft of this paper.

-Shruti Murali, "A synthesis of research about alternative forms of grammar instruction"

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