

1-1-2013

## **Grammar In Context and Isolated Units: the Impact of Dichotomized Teaching Methods In A Rural Southern High School**

Amy Kae Smith  
*University of South Carolina*

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GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT AND ISOLATED UNITS: THE IMPACT OF  
DICHOTOMIZED TEACHING METHODS IN A RURAL SOUTHERN  
HIGH SCHOOL

by

Amy K. Smith

Bachelor of Arts  
South Dakota State University, 1992

Master of Education  
Columbia College, 2001

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education in the

College of Education/Department of Instruction and Teacher Education

University of South Carolina

2013

Accepted by:

Rhonda Jeffries, Major Advisor

Karen Gavigan, Committee Member

Renee Jefferson, Committee Member

Susan Schramm Pate, Committee Member

Lacy Ford, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate School

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to all of my former and present grammar students who said, “Now I get it.”

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the support of many others, this work would not have been possible. I would like to express my deepest appreciation to Dr. Rhonda Jeffries, my committee chair and mentor throughout this process, and the other members of my committee: Dr. Susan Schramm Pate, Dr. Renee Jefferson, and Dr. Karen Gavigan. I appreciate your time, your expertise, and your guidance.

I also wish to thank my family and friends for your loving support. You have been my strength and source of energy and determination.

I also wish to extend a special thanks to language arts teachers at Cane Bay High School who kindly agreed to be a part of my study.

Finally, I have to thank Dr. Connie McClanahan and Dr. Denise McDougal without whom I would have never even attempted this degree.

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to use qualitative research methods to identify which methods a group of language arts teachers from a suburban high school use to teach grammar and why. Specific research questions included:

1. How do teachers who were educated with grammar as an isolated curricular unit perceive the current debate on language instruction? How do their perceptions impact their classroom instructional practice?
2. How do teachers who were educated with grammar as a whole language curricular unit perceive the current debate on language instruction? How do their perceptions impact their classroom instructional practice?

This study examined two different theories of grammar instruction and method within each of those theories. The more progressive methods included Daily Oral Grammar, Daily Grammar Practice and teaching grammar through literature and writing. The more essential method that some teachers prefer is direct instruction, or isolated units. The study was significant in light of research detailing college professors' and employers' frustrations with students and employees who do not use "Standard American English." It was also significant because of the researchers' experiences with colleagues comfort level teaching grammar and how state standards affected their teaching. This problem has wide implications for students going into the job world.

Some of the internal factors that influence which method teachers choose to teach grammar include comfort level with the topic and their own feelings about what students

need to know. Some of the external factors were national, district, and school mandates, and resources available to the teachers, including training.

I took a qualitative approach in this comparative case study with the intention of using language arts teachers and what their opinions and daily practices are when teaching grammar. I received information from fifteen teachers and did specific case studies on six of them.

Methods included semi-structured interviews with the six teachers after all fifteen took a survey.

I charted the survey data and chose to interview and observe teachers who fit within the realm of my research questions. Through

analysis, a number common themes emerged such as lack of sufficient teacher training in grammar instruction, lack of enforcement or accountability by school, district, or state, and the time needed to do an adequate job of grammar instruction. These themes may help to develop staff development sessions for teachers in our school, or perhaps even our district.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

The grammar debate has been around for decades. The official National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) position, which is against the formal teaching of grammar, is the position most honored in U.S. practice. However, proponents for the use of grammar voice their views in the NCTE's Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (ATEG). Some states, like California, require grammar instruction, while other states, like South Carolina, only require that students master mechanics and sentence types by any means necessary. Divisions exist among grammar-instruction supporters. Whether grammar should or should not be taught one way or another divides the profession (Hoffman, 2006, para. 1 & para. 2). It seems that some take a more essentialist approach, while others think a more holistic progressive approach is more effective (Joseph, 2000).

Popular grammar instruction methods seem to change with the times. For decades Language Arts teachers have debated over which methods are most effective. The two major methods of instruction used in this study, isolated units (direct instruction) and in context of literature and writing, have been a concern of language arts teachers for the past twenty years. In 1986, the National Council of Teacher Education ruled that grammar is to be taught in context of literature and writing. However, the NCTE amended that ruling in 1994 when they saw grammar scores declining. While they did

not mandate that grammar be taught in isolated units, they decided a combination of the two methods would be best. Much of the published research on this topic supports that method. Some of the published research supports isolated units (Thompson, 2002) or in a whole language context (Patterson & Duer, 2006).

### **A Historical Perspective: Understanding the Problem**

A cursory review of the historical background may be necessary to understand why there is such a divide between teachers and professors and the methods they prefer. Knowledge of the origin of the term “grammar” may be essential to illuminating why there are such negative connotations involved. In ancient times, the "goddess of grammar" was depicted as a severe old woman with a knife in order to "cut out the bad grammar from students" (Ezzaher, 2001 p. 90). The actual word "grammar" comes from "grammatike" which in Ancient Greek meant the "art of writing.”

While this may help to explain why the direct “drill and kill” method is looked down upon, society today is a very literate society, and written language is the "language of education and power" (Ezzaher, 2001 p. 90). Therefore, writing "correctly" is important. Unfortunately, more and more college professors are reporting that their students are incapable of writing complete sentences, and they are finding major agreement problems in what is written (Oldenburg, 2005; Jablon 2004).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Currently each state in United States of America has its own set of Language Arts Standards. In the very near future, states will be asked to adopt National Standards and comply. The South Carolina Language Arts standards include vague criteria and

expectation for grammar teaching and learning outcomes. The following are the only two for secondary English 2:

- E2-4.4 Use grammatical conventions of written Standard American English, including:
- subject-verb agreement,
  - pronoun-antecedent agreement,
  - agreement of nouns and their modifiers,
  - verb formation,
  - pronoun case,
  
  - formation of comparative and superlative adjectives and adverbs, and
  - idiomatic usage.
- E2-4.6 Edit written pieces for the correct use of Standard American English, including the reinforcement of conventions previously taught.

The national standards (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2011):

L.9-10.1. Demonstrate command of the conventions for standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

-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.

L.9-10.2. Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

-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.

The problem is clear. Unless the students know how to make their subjects and verbs agree, and understand what an “idiom” is, what a “clause” is, etc., they cannot comply with these standards. Therefore, they must be taught the vocabulary and rules that support these standards. In other words, while a progressive method might be effective,

without an essentialist background knowledge, the progressive method may be impossible.

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) declared in 1986, “the use of isolated grammar and the usage exercises not supported by theory and research is a deterrent to the improvement of students’ speaking and writing” (Hoffman, 2006, p. 226). Instead they recommend that teachers use literature and writing to teach grammar. In other words, look at proper examples and copy them. In 1994 the NCTE changed their minds after teachers complained about the increasing problems in students’ writing (Doniger, 2003). Another teacher complaint was that they felt inadequately prepared to teach grammar. Colleges were jumping on the NCTE bandwagon and not requiring grammar instruction courses of their secondary English teacher graduates.

This of course creates a second problem: teacher preparedness to teach grammar and usage. Many teachers are expected to learn grammar by taking a foreign language as an undergraduate student. Some future teachers take a methodology class in language arts and are required to teach one grammar lesson to the class. These methods are not effective, and many teachers feel quite unprepared when they are in their own classrooms (Amusashonubl-Perkovich, 2006).

To combat these issues, the NCTE published a statement that in addition to using literature and writing to teach grammar, secondary English teachers could use “mini-units” (direct instruction of one specific rule) to instruct students. This method was still not the tried and true drill and kill that had been used up through the 1980s, and writing and communication skills still suffer today.

## **The Purpose of the Study**

Whether high school students choose a college or a working path for their futures, clear writing and communication is necessary. Obviously these skills need to be taught as early in elementary school as possible. Since high school teachers have no control over the learning that comes before their classes, what can they do with the time they have to insure proper communication from their students? The specific purpose of this study focuses on the most successful methods of teaching grammar to students in their careers of high school English.

Through the use of teacher surveys and teacher interviews secondary English teachers will identify the most productive ways to teach students proper grammar and therefore the best ways to comply with state or national standards. The goal of this case study is to develop a further understanding of how teachers are instructing their students to meet the standards and make them better writers. Furthermore, the study is designed to determine what methods do teachers employ and how comfortable are they in using them.

## **Research Question**

The research will be guided by the following research questions:

1. How do teachers who were educated with grammar as an isolated curricular unit perceive the current debate on language instruction? How do their perceptions impact their classroom instructional practice?
2. How do teachers who were educated with grammar as a whole language curricular unit perceive the current debate on language instruction? How do their perceptions impact their classroom instructional practice?

The efficacy of the methods will be evaluated based on: 1) high school language arts teacher surveys, 2) high school language arts teacher interviews, and 3) high school language arts teacher observations.

### **Operational Definitions**

1. Daily Grammar Practice (D.G.P.) - This is a series of books published by DGP Publishing. This series gives one sentence per week, and students must do a different task with the sentence each day. For example, on Friday they diagram the sentence. No teaching of grammar vocabulary is done with this method; the students are given a three-page dictionary of the terms.
2. Daily Oral Language (D.O.L.) - This is a series of books published by Scott Foresman. This series gives three sentences per day with several grammatical and punctuation errors. Teachers typically put these on the board or SMARTboard and give students a set time to find and fix the errors.
3. Isolated grammar units - This is also called prescriptive or traditional grammar, or direct instruction. This is when a teacher spends a class period or series of class periods doing only grammar instruction with no ties to literature or writing. Instruction usually includes an explanation of grammar or punctuation rules, and students doing drills and practice with the rules. A quiz or test is given for assessment.
4. Meta-language - A special language used to talk about grammar and the teaching of it.
5. Systemic functional grammar (SFG)--This is the idea that meaning is directly related to the structure of language; this is the theory behind using isolated units.
6. Whole Language - A constructivist theory that children learn language using the graphophonemic, syntactic, and semantic aspects of language.

### **Assumptions, Limitations and Delimitations of Study**

With this particular study the assumption is made that the teachers completing the surveys will provide truthful and accurate opinions. One limitation of this study is that participants will be teachers in one rural high school in South Carolina. However, these teachers are of various ages, experience and background. Therefore, the results of this study may be generalized to other suburban school districts throughout the United States.

### **Significance of Study and Conceptual Framework**

By identifying which method of grammar instruction is more efficient in producing students using academic grammar, English teachers will have more insight in how to help their students meet the state and national standards, as well as make them better communicators in writing and speaking. Also, perhaps a professional development model based on the needs of the teachers may be put into place.

Students have varying aspirations for their lives after high school. Whether they want to attend college, go into the military, or go directly into the workforce, they must have adequate communication skills in their writing and speaking, the language of power. Unfortunately, over the past fifteen years, public secondary schools have been failing to prepare students in these skills. At some point schools decided to do away with the essentialist method of isolated grammar units in favor of a more modern, progressive approach in which grammar was directly tied to literature in writing (Thompson, 2011).

This shift happened mainly because of new demands placed on teachers and students and therefore less time to do extensive grammar units. Unfortunately, since the “new method” has been in play for several years, teachers and employers have determined that it is not working. Students are unable to use “Standard American



English” effectively in college and the workforce. The NCTE and many U.S. school districts know this is a problem but have yet to reinforce the teaching of isolated grammar units to solve it. Many teachers are relieved by this because they are not getting adequate training in college to teach isolated grammar units.

## **Conclusion**

Addressing the communication issues of college students, blue collar workers and professionals is an issue of major importance in today’s literate society. This chapter provides an overview of a few issues involving how students learn academic English best and why it is so important that they do. Ensuring the academic success of high school students and making them into effective communicators is imperative to our society. Academic English is the language of power and gives them culture capital according to sociologists Lamont and Lareau (1988).

Chapter Two provides the reader with a review of the literature as it relates to studies and theories regarding preferences among secondary teachers of language. Chapter Three provides the methodology utilized for this case study. Chapter Four will present and analyze the findings of the research. Finally, Chapter Five will discuss the implications of the study and limitations of the study.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Review of Literature**

#### Teaching Grammar

In ancient times, the "goddess of grammar" was depicted as a severe old woman with a knife in order to "cut out the bad grammar from students." The actual word "grammar" comes from "grammatike" which in Ancient Greek meant the "art of writing" (Ezzaher, 2001 p. 90). Based on the origins of the word itself, linguists have come up with several conclusions about grammar's role in writing, speaking, and even society.

Society today is a very literate society, and written language is the "language of education and power" (Ezzaher, 2001 p. 90). Therefore, writing "correctly" is important. Unfortunately, more and more college professors are reporting that their students are incapable of writing complete sentences, and they are finding major agreement problems in what is written (Oldenburg, 2005). College professor Alvin Brown (1996) stated that "proper grammar and speech aren't the norm, but a form of elitism" (p. 99). He believed that for his students, speaking correctly means the difference between getting a job and not getting one, and even a person's social position. That places a lot of responsibility on grammar instruction in primary and secondary schools.

Unfortunately, many high school teachers seem to disagree with college professors about the importance of grammar and usage. Secondary teachers J. P. Patterson and David Duer (2006) discovered this fact when surveying 2,000 secondary

and post-secondary English teachers nationwide. The survey was part of ACT Inc., a non-profit, study. College professors ranked the skills of "grammar and usage" as most important, while high school teachers ranked them at the bottom. Furthermore, only 69% of the high school teachers surveyed reported teaching these skills. Part of the problem may be the English teachers' college preparation. They often get linguistics content when they sign up for a grammar course rather than knowledge of the skills and how to teach them (Vavre, 1996). Patterson and Duer noted this is why so many college freshmen take remedial writing courses. They just do not have the writing skills and grammar knowledge they need to write the research papers for their content classes. Baron (2003) disagreed with these findings and proposed that while the survey numbers may be accurate, the implications are not. His study found that grammar and usage stilt student writing, and content is a more important aspect of writing. Among English teachers and professors, it seems that Baron is in the minority.

While all English/language arts teachers agree that writing is important, they do not agree on teaching methods and the importance of grammar instruction. Language arts teachers have debated for years over which methods of instruction are the most effective. Decades ago, the skill and drill, or "drill and kill" as it has come to be known, was the method of choice (Hoffman, 2006). This essentialist practice allowed teachers to introduce a topic of grammar or usage, subject/verb agreement for example or prepositional phrases, and then have students practice the rules over and over until supposedly they understood it. Then the students would be quizzed and/or tested on the rules. Today this method is called "teaching in isolation" or "isolated units."

After many years of negative results using this method, researchers began looking at the big picture. Several linguists and professors concluded that systemic functional grammar is "fundamentally flawed" (Yates & Kenkel, 2001). They believed that the goal of sentence analysis must be descriptive adequacy, not arbitrary names of the parts. In 1986, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) declared that students will "learn grammar and usage by studying how their own language works in context" (National Council of Teachers of English, 1986). The council decided that students needed real-life situations (i.e. writing and speaking) to understand grammar. In other words, students needed to see grammar in action and understand why it was important to use the rules and have correct usage.

The NCTE backpedaled slightly in 1994 (Doniger, 2003). At that time, teachers were seeing huge problems with students' writing. Many teachers had decided not to teach grammar at all, partly because of the new trends and partly because they felt unqualified to teach it (Sipe, 2006). A majority of language arts teachers still feel that way, but they also feel that teaching grammar cannot be ignored (Haussamen, 2003). Many researchers bind correct grammar to morals of a society (Asselin, 2002). They think if grammar is no longer taught, society's morals will decline. Keeping that theory in mind, there are still many "old-fashioned" teachers of grammar that want to return to the essentialist methods and use large amounts of time to explain the rules and have students practice the rules.

Many teachers combine both methods, and more modern teachers only instruct in a more progressive, holistic way by connecting grammar to literature they are studying in class or student writing. Many school districts have mandated that grammar is not to be

taught in isolated units. Grammar has been pushed by the wayside, and topics such as drama, composition, literature and rhetoric have taken center stage (Haussamen, 2003). However, many teachers ignore these mandates because they feel that they know best. The debate on instructional methods continues to divide the profession (Hoffman, 2006). Also, the mandate is somewhat contradictory after the standards movement of the early 1990s. Many teachers feel they must teach grammar in isolated units because the standardized testing calls for students to have those skills (Thomas, 2001). More and more teachers are being evaluated by their principals and school districts based on the standardized test scores of their students.

A survey of English teachers at a suburban high school created by the researcher (see appendix A) indicated that of 30 teachers surveyed, 25% teach grammar in isolation, 20% teach grammar in context of writing, 5% teach grammar in context of literature, and 50% teach a combination of one or more methods (Smith, 2006). Obviously a combination is the preferred method of instruction. Much of the published research on this topic agrees (Thomas, 2001). Many teachers agree that meta-language must be taught and then at least mini-units on grammar should accompany lessons in the context of literature and writing (Hoffman, 2006), asserting that the progressive method does not work without the essential background. Petruzzella (1996) interviewed 25 teachers about teaching grammar. One finding that frustrated this researcher was the many definitions of "grammar." Some teachers described it as teaching isolated units, while others used that term to mean mechanics, including spelling. Petruzzella concluded that having a common definition of the term and a common vocabulary while teaching would be a valuable step in solving the grammar debate.

## Teaching Grammar in the Context of Literature

One of the main problems with teaching grammar in isolation is the amount of time it takes (Sipe, 2006). Many school districts mandate curricula that focus on literature exposure and analysis. Teachers have trouble finding the time to teach all the literature that is required. Therefore, many teachers have decided to use required literature as a source of grammar instruction. Doniger (2003) wrote, "as teachers of literature, we can help students investigate the connection between this grammatical resource and the work in question" (p. 102).

How can literature be used to teach grammar? One teacher brings in newspapers, magazines, and other types of literature. She and the class discussed why writers would choose different styles, words, punctuation and structures (Sipe, 2006). This lesson would prompt further exploration of formal grammar rules. Doniger (2003) uses scripts being read in class to talk about which words demand emphasis when read. This would prompt discussion of sentence parts and word functions. Australian middle school teacher Hayes (2003) used the research process to teach grammar. She used to teach isolated units but no longer practices the method. She transitioned to using sections of research materials (nonfiction books, etc.) and placing them on the overhead. Then she had the students analyze parts of the sentence and which ones are necessary for note-taking for their research (i.e., leaving out articles, conjunctions and unimportant descriptors).

All of these ideas make effective use of time within the curriculum, and many teachers use these in conjunction with isolated units. One downfall to using literature as a resource for grammar reported by Doniger (2003) is that students don't know the meta-

language (i.e. what a preposition, etc is) making discussion about sentence parts difficult. This often ends up taking more time because the teacher has to spend extra time teaching the meta-language, which, ironically, is basically teaching grammar in isolation. Rather than teach students grammar, we must "teach students *about* grammar" (Haussamen, 2003 p. 16).

### Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing

Since correct writing and speaking are the goals of grammar instruction, it makes sense to many instructors to use grammar instruction in the context of writing. Hayes (2003), as mentioned previously, taught grammar while teaching research writing. She showed her students different types of writing (narrative, persuasive, etc.) and had them compare the grammar. The students determined which sentence structures would be most appropriate for the different parts.

Johansen and Shaw (2003), two high school teachers in Maine, were told by their superiors to teach grammar in the context of writing, but they were frustrated because they were never taught how to do that. They were also reluctant to go back to isolated units. Necessity was the mother of invention; they compromised and came up with a process known as "glossing." This is a five-step process in which the teacher identifies errors in student writing, and then the teacher has the student correct the identified errors. Then follows an added step where students must use various resources to find the grammatical rules that explain their corrections. They complete "glossing sheets" that are basically grammar "mini-units." Johansen and Shaw found this process extremely helpful. Perhaps these mini-units are isolated units, but the compromise (students finding their own errors and rules to correct them) is a reasonable concession. Research shows

that compromises and combinations of methods tend to have the best results (Thomas, 2001).

Weaver (1996) wrote an entire book on this topic called *Teaching Grammar in Context*. She conducted several experiments with students in the fifth grade, seventh grade and tenth grade. The language arts teachers of these students taught grammar in the context of writing. Weaver's conclusion was that the students' writing was far better than it had been before because students were focused on content, not grammar rules. In the conclusion of her article Weaver (1996) stated:

No matter how students are taught grammatical concepts, syntactic constructions and stylistic devices, or language conventions and editing concepts, they will not automatically make use of these in their writing. However, the relevant research confirms what everyday experience reveals: that teaching "grammar" in the context of writing works better than teaching grammar as a formal system. (p. 22)

Former public school teacher Deborah Dean (2001) agreed. When her district dropped formal grammar standards from their curriculum, she tried a new approach. She found sentences from all different sorts of published texts, and then she had her students copy the structures of the sentences. The students inserted their own words into the structure, which was basically used as a formula or model. She claimed that they may not know what part of speech each word is, but their writing has improved and the students are much more interested in her "grammar lessons" now.

Lacina (2005) noted that "skill and drill" rule instruction does not lead to using the rules in writing. Her research found that "unlike other content areas, practice does not make perfect" (p. 249). She taught a college-level writing methods course and used an



online chat room for a large part of the class. The students posted their writing, and then other students edited the writing. She admitted to teaching "mini-lesson" in grammar; however, she only used student writing as a springboard for discussion. Teaching grammar solely using literature and reading without teaching the meta-language first is a very progressive idea because it does not allow students the tools they need for standardized testing, and therefore gaining culture capital (Joseph, 2000).

### Teaching Grammar in Isolated Units

Teaching grammar in isolation may be an old idea, but many teachers still submit that it is the most effective way. Perhaps these teachers are older and this was how they learned grammar; or maybe these teachers have tried just about everything, and teaching using isolated units is their last attempt. Michael Thompson (2002), editor of *Our Gifted Children* magazine, is a major proponent of teaching grammar in isolation. His research discussed how math and Latin are not taught with a focus on real-life use, and like those subjects, grammar has "a complicated system of interlocking subsystems," (p. 63) and large amounts of time should be given to its instruction. He continued with, "prescriptive grammar instruction is correct" (p. 65). It is his contention that students will be expected to observe language standards within the professional world, and teachers are doing students a disservice not preparing them to meet these standards.

Thompson's (2002) focus was on gifted children because he felt that isolated units are particularly necessary for them. The high-level intellectual components have to be in place before they can link them to language. Other researchers who do not focus on gifted students also discovered that "form-focused instruction is needed to improve learners' accuracy" (Larsen-Freeman, 1997 p. 66). Nunan (2005) stated that teachers

must explain to kids *why* the rules are important (mainly to focus on their use as tools), but teachers still need to teach the rules. She continued that native speakers of English learn a lot through generalizations of the rules; unfortunately, English has many exceptions to the rules, so students can not be expected to learn the exceptions on their own. She noted, "grammar rules are fixed and must be learned because patterns of speech reflect education, class, even morality" (p. 72).

Gibben (1996) agreed that generalizations about a language come first in the reader's mind, but then the rules must be taught. "The success of any study with students, it seems, depends as much on persistence and luck as it does on pedagogical content knowledge" (p. 56). "Persistence" seems to imply repetitive practice of the rules (i.e. "drill and kill"). Hagemann (2003) said that when education shifted its center of writing to content, we forgot grammar's contribution to meaning. In other words, when a writer doesn't pay attention to proper form and structure, the meaning of the content may be lost.

Kratzke (2003) said that grammar should be approached through principles rather than rules; however, he noted that students need to start with a basic knowledge of the eight parts of speech and then move on to more functional uses of grammar. Another proponent Hunter (1996) considered grammar as a mandated part of district curricula once again. He reported on several studies that show the link between formal grammar instruction and higher-level writing skills. Isolated units need not always be teacher-led either. Breznak and Scott (2003) put their students into groups to teach each other the grammar rules. They became actively engaged, but their focus was still on the rules and practicing them.

Sams (2003) realized that teaching grammar in the context of writing was not helping her students at all. She noted:

as I explored the reasons behind students' difficulties with organization, coherence, and revision, and as I developed strategies for addressing the root causes, I found I was teaching grammar—not usage—but grammar, the relationship between structure and meaning. Furthermore, as my students and I explored together the relation between structure and meaning, I realized why twentieth century researchers concluded that direct instruction in grammar had no impact upon writing. Quite simply, the grammar instruction in these studies was not related to writing. It merely taught prescription (usage and rules) and description (noun, verb, prepositional phrase), the naming of parts. I realized also why the “in-context” approach to grammar instruction advocated today has negligible impact upon writing. It consists of little more than guided application of rules that teachers seem mysteriously to pull out of a hat in order to correct errors they detect in a piece of writing. (p. 58)

This essentialist method of grammar instruction is necessary to give students cultural capital (Joseph, 2000). There is a an expertise in this particular subject that students must have in order for them to be successful in today's world no matter which path they choose to take.

## Summary

The debate continues over which method is more effective. Hoffman (2006) determined that no general agreement on this topic will ever exist. He discovered that each teacher draws from personal conclusions from his/her own successes and failures, and uses those conclusions to devise a method of grammar instruction that is very personal.

Some teachers are totally in the holistic, context camp, others in the isolated unit camp, and many straddle the fence. Some secondary teachers of language arts teach no grammar at all because they do not have time or the appropriate knowledge base. One absolute conclusion within the literature is that grammar must be taught. The most effective methods are debatable. Smagorinsky et. al. (2007) traced a beginning English teacher's career from her college experience to her student teaching experience to teaching high school English classes at two demographically different schools. In each case, she used a completely different method of teaching grammar because of the children's needs. Finally, perhaps it really does depend on the individual teachers: "Examine your own knowledge and attitudes to the multiple aspects of grammar. Specifically, reflect and come to terms with your stance towards 'proper English,' a standard grammar and a grammar standard" (Asselin, 2002 p. 53).

While the debate over which method of teaching grammar is best continues, students are suffering. They are unable to use "Standard American English" in college and/or the workforce. Many teachers like mini-units and teaching grammar in context of literature because it is faster, and many teachers are not adequately prepared to teach grammar. This study will show which methods teachers prefer to use and how teachers

can be more successful teaching grammar. The end result will benefit not only the students, but society as a whole.

As seen in Chapter Two this debate between the most effective ways to teach grammar and between whether grammar is vitally important to writing or not has been around for decades and is ongoing today. Some standard and uniform practices must be set up across the nation for teachers to be trained efficiently in grammar instruction and in showing kids how to use it in their writing. Chapter Three discusses the methodology of a study of high school language arts teachers. It describes how they were taught grammar and how it impacts their grammar instruction.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

Twenty years ago middle and high school students took a special class either called “Grammar” or “English” in which literature was not the focus, but instead was learning Standard English Usage. Students learned parts of speech, functions of nouns and pronouns, subject/verb agreements, diagrammed sentences and learned how to write and speak formally and “correctly.” This no longer happens in most middle and high schools in the U.S.A. today. Grammar classes are either taken as electives, or grammar is taught in an English class that focuses on literature and how to pass state graduation tests.

As the review of literature outlines, college professors and businesses are outraged and finding this a real problem in the academic and business worlds. Many high school and middle school English teachers understand their plight, and they want to incorporate more grammar into their classes. An ongoing debate has ensued because other secondary teachers are “scared” of grammar, and they would rather follow the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) mandate of using literature and writing and mini-lessons rather than full-blown, isolated units to teach grammar.

As stated in Chapter One, this study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. How do teachers who were educated with grammar as an isolated curricular unit perceive the current debate on language instruction? How do their perceptions impact their classroom instructional practice?
2. How do teachers who were educated with grammar as a whole language curricular unit perceive the current debate on language instruction? How do their perceptions impact their classroom instructional practice?

The efficacy of the methods will be evaluated based on: 1) high school language arts teacher surveys, 2) high school language arts teacher interviews, and 3) high school language arts teacher observations. Also, the study is conducted with the assumption that teachers must obtain the knowledge they need to improve their grammar skills, so they can teach grammar effectively (Lee, 2004).

This methodology chapter is divided into subsections. First, an overview and explanation of the research design and approach is provided. Secondly, the setting and sample is described. Next, the materials and methods used to gain data are described. A fifth section discusses the researcher as a data-gathering instrument. The sixth section discusses the study limitations and validity of data. The final sections include the measures taken to protect the participants and a brief summary of the chapter.

### Research Design & Approach

Despite the fact that Standard English Usage is still expected in college classes and many careers, secondary schools are not instructing students adequately and preparing them for the next step in their lives (Lee, 2004). The NCTE released its official recommendation that grammar be taught in conjunction with literature and writing rather than in isolated units (Hoffman, 2006). Unfortunately, this is not working effectively

toward preparing students for college or jobs. This study seeks to determine the most effective way to teach grammar and usage to secondary students.

This study will utilize a qualitative approach. According to Maxwell (2005), a qualitative approach is best for a study in which the researcher would like to find potential problems and solutions on a particular case. Cresswell (2009) believes that a qualitative study is better than a quantitative one for a topic in which not much research has been completed. “Qualitative research is explorative...” (Cresswell, 2009, p. 18) This will be a case study using fifteen language arts teachers at a suburban high school. Since not a large number of participants will be involved, a qualitative understanding of the situation is necessary. This study will use the structured approach rather than the unstructured approach.

#### Research Approach

The design used for this study will be the structured approach because it is better for “questions that deal with *differences* between things,” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 80). According to Merriam (1998) the case study approach will be best for this study because case studies are more concrete, more contextual, and more developed by reader interpretation. The first phase will study teacher perceptions through surveys. Based on survey answers, the researcher will choose which teachers to interview and observe.

#### The Setting and Sample

The sample of language arts teachers will be categorized by the rural high school in which they teach. The participant teachers will be selected based on their use of different grammar-teaching methods. The distribution of participants includes: 1) teachers who follow school district guidelines (which are influenced by the NCTE and



state standardized tests), 2) teachers who use isolated units of study, 3) teachers who use methods that blend the previous two categories, and 4) teachers who do not teach grammar at all. This rural high school site was selected because of convenience for the researcher who has daily access to the teachers involved, as well as the great diversity of the teachers involved which will allow this group of teachers to serve as a microcosm of the larger high school system of the United States.

The participants will include teachers in a southeastern U.S. high school with less than one to more than over thirty years of teaching experience. All of the teachers in the study received secondary education in the United States, and they all have bachelor's degrees in English. Eighty percent of these teachers are White, and 20% are African American. Twenty-seven percent are male and 73% are female.

#### Data Gathering Materials and Methods

The qualitative materials must be flexible, so the researcher will use a variety of methods. The materials used in the first phase of research will be surveys of 15 teachers. All teachers instruct in different ways, so independent subject profiles are necessary to take into account before deciding which teachers will be interviewed and observed.

The teacher surveys will be given to all Language Arts teachers (15 in total) at the chosen site. The questions will all deal with the different methods used in teaching grammar as well as some demographic information regarding the level of students (CP, honors, special education, freshmen, etc.) taught, etc. (see Appendix A).

After the researcher has reviewed the survey answers, individual interviews will be conducted based on the information ascertained. The interviews will be informal and unstructured with a list of some prepared questions but expectations of many unplanned

follow up questions. This interview method will allow for more flexibility and insight for the researcher (Merriam, 1998). The researcher will attempt to interview at least one teacher from the distribution of participants expected to include a: 1) teacher who follows school district guidelines (which are influenced by the NCTE and state standardized tests), 2) teacher who uses isolated units of study, 3) teacher who uses methods that blend the previous two categories, and 4) teacher who do not teach grammar at all. The second phase will be made up of interviews and observations. Interview questions will be specific to the instructional methods used by the teachers and their results. Other factors determining interview questions will be how comfortable the teacher is teaching grammar and how much time they spend on grammar instruction. Observations will allow the researcher to gather data on specific parts of the instructional methods used (i.e. lecture, worksheets, writing, etc.). The survey and interview data will guide the final phase of data collection which involves classroom observations which will serve to triangulate the collective data set.

### Researcher as Instrument

The researcher plays many different roles within the case study setting. She is a teacher of language arts herself with specific views on which grammar instruction methods are most effective. This may serve as a bias when gathering data from her colleagues.

The researcher is also the head of her department and has been for three years. She leads monthly meetings, facilitates professional development and serves as a supplies coordinator for each of the fifteen teachers involved in the study. One veteran teacher involved in the study has worked with the researcher for more than five years at two

different schools. Another veteran teacher has worked with the researcher for five years and served as the former department head. The rest of the teachers have worked with the researcher for 1-3 years.

Overall, the participants of this study have a friendly rapport with the researcher and respect for her as a leader. In individual situations, the researcher has aided each of the participants in some aspect of his or her instruction or planning. The researcher anticipates the participant willingness to participate in this study and give honest answers to the surveys and interview questions. As an extra assurance, the survey will be accompanied by a letter of consent assuring participants that the study is completely optional and will have no impact on the participants' teaching assignments; salary; etc. (see Appendix B).

A third role the researcher plays in this study is an aspiring college professor in an undergraduate education program. As a future teacher of teachers, the researcher has some preconceived ideas about the best methods of development for future grammar educators. She tends to lead her current colleagues along the path of her preferred methods when they seek her advice.

#### Study Limitations and Validity of Data

Many attempts were made to control the extraneous variables in the design of this study. However, many limitations will exist with the sampling techniques. First of all, the participants are based on convenience of the researcher, so they are not randomly selected, but rather purposively. Although a randomized sample may strengthen results, convenience and purposive sampling will ensure more accuracy in meeting the criteria

and accuracy in interpreting the data. For convenience and reliability, the participants are teachers who have received degrees from various universities and education programs.

A second limitation is that some of the participants in the study have worked with the researcher in the past. Some of the teachers have been trained and mentored by her, and all of the teachers involved know her on a personal level. These relationships could cause some of the qualitative information gathered to be more influenced by existing biases. The participants may feel obligated to answer survey and interview questions in a certain way. Attempts will be made to assure the participants that honesty in their answers is most useful to the researcher.

Validity must be established within the qualitative study. For qualitative research, the research will be accurate because the results of the researcher-written surveys and interviews and observations will be first-hand knowledge. Several measures will be taken in order to protect the rights of the participants in this study: 1) All surveys analyzed will be confidential, 2) All personal demographic information on the surveys will remain confidential, and 3) All interviews will be one-on-one in a private setting. Participants will be able to ask any questions of the researcher about the study and only provide information of their choosing. They will also sign a letter of consent stating that they may opt out of the study at any time with no consequence.

### **Summary**

This study is a qualitative study using the structured design and unstructured interview questions and observations. It will compare several different approaches to teaching Standard English Usage, and it will attempt to determine how ELA teachers determine pedagogical methods for grammar instruction and explore which methods are

more effective. It may also help to determine what changes need to take place in teacher development. The sample will be comprised of 15 language arts teachers. Each teacher is of various demographic groups. This qualitative study will use surveys, interviews, and observations to obtain information on grammar-teaching methods and student learning styles.

## Chapter Four

### Introduction

According to Merriam (1998), “The contents of a case study report depend on the audience’s interest as well as the investigator’s purpose on doing the study in the first place” (p. 227). The purpose of this study was to not only find out which grammar methods a particular group of language arts teachers prefer to use in their classrooms, but which methods they were taught in high school and in college as they were preparing to teach language arts. Did the way in which they were taught impact the methods they use to teach? The results of the researcher’s surveys and interviews showed a large variety of methods being used within one suburban high school.

The research questions focused on were

1. How do teachers who were educated with grammar as an isolated curricular unit perceive the current debate on language instruction? How do their perceptions impact their classroom instructional practice?
2. How do teachers who were educated with grammar as a whole language curricular unit perceive the current debate on language instruction? How do their perceptions impact their classroom instructional practice?

The researcher surveyed fifteen language arts teachers in a southern rural high school during the first semester of the 2012-2013 school year. The surveys were created using Survey Monkey, and they were accessed by the participants via a link emailed to

them by the researcher. Only those teachers signing a release of information given by the researcher were counted in the survey. The survey focused on demographic information such as where the participant attended high school and college, and how many years the participant has been teaching language arts. The remainder of the questions focused on methods in which the teachers learned grammar in both high school and college, and which methods they use to teach grammar in their classrooms. Since the NCTE’s rulings and the state standards have an impact on what is mandated, the researcher added some questions about the teachers’ opinions on the adequacy of these rulings.

The results from the surveys varied extremely (see Tables 1 and 2). There were no noticeably discernible patterns of information at first, so the researcher chose interview and observation participants based on answers that covered the opposite ends of the spectrum (meaning those who were taught using isolated methods but use in-context methods to teach their classes, and vice-versa). The researcher also chose to interview and observe survey responders whose comments seemed to form some new reoccurring themes related to the research questions.

The survey results for method taught as a student vs. method used to teach their students is outlined in Table 4.1:

**Table 4.1**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Method learned in high school</b>                    | <b>Method learned in college</b>                      | <b>Method used to teach their students</b>                                 |
|--------------------|---|---|--|
| HS                 | In context of reading and writing                       | Isolated units  | Isolated units and some DGP  |
| DC                 | Isolated units (elementary school); none in high school | Through foreign language and transformational grammar | DGP with honors level students; DGP with more isolated units with CP level |
| DS                 | None-business English                                   | One grammar course                                    | Through student writing  |
| MP                 | Combination of  | Through reading,                                      | Combination of   |

|    |                                   |  |   |
|----|-----------------------------------|--|---|
|    | methods                           | writing and foreign language                         | methods   |
| CC | Isolated Units                    | Isolated Units and specific grammar classes          | Physical grammar (syntax), SAT method (choose the correct sentence) |
| FG | Isolated Units                    | In context of reading and writing                    | In context of writing and DGP                                       |
| AR | In context of reading and writing | In context of reading and writing                    | Combination of all methods  |
| GL | A combination of methods          | Through foreign language                             | Combination of methods  |
| DD | A combination of methods          | Isolated units, through writing and foreign language | Combination of methods  |
| LJ | A combination of methods          | In context of reading and writing                    | Combination of methods  |
| SN | In context of reading and writing | In context of reading and writing and isolated units | DGP, isolated units and in context of reading                       |
| BW | Isolated Units                    | Isolated Units                                       | In context of writing and DOL                                       |
| LP | None                              | In context of reading and writing                    | In context of writing   |
| BB | A combination of methods          | Isolated units and through foreign language          | Isolated units and through reading and writing                      |
| JO | A combination of methods          | Isolated units and in context of reading and writing | Combination of methods  |

Survey information about the participants' number of years teaching, confidence in teaching grammar and satisfaction with grammar state standards are shown in Table 4.2:

**Table 4.2**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Type of College Attended</b> | <b>Years Teaching</b> | <b>Current comfort level teaching grammar</b> | <b>Satisfied with grammar state standards?</b> |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|---|--|
| HS                 | Small state                     | 4 years               | Somewhat 3 out of 4                           | No   |
| DC                 | Large state                     | 9 years               | Very 4 out of 4                               | No   |
| DS                 | Small private                   | 9 years               | Not Very 2 out of 4                           | No   |



|    |                                |          |                     |     |
|----|--------------------------------|----------|---------------------|-----|
| MP | Small military                 | 6 years  | Very 4 out of 4     | Yes |
| CC | Large state and small military | 14 years | Very 4 out of 4     | No  |
| FG | Large state                    | 10 years | Somewhat 3 out of 4 | Yes |
| AR | Large state                    | 21 years | Somewhat 3 out of 4 | No  |
| GL | Small private                  | 4 years  | Somewhat 3 out of 4 | No  |
| DD | Small private                  | 12 years | Very 4 out of 4     | No  |
| LJ | Medium state                   | 5 years  | Somewhat 3 out of 4 | No  |
| SN | Large state                    | 5 years  | Not very 2 out of 4 | No  |
| BW | Small military                 | 1 year   | Not Very 2 out of 4 | No  |
| LP | Small private                  | 5 years  | Somewhat 3 out of 4 | No  |
| BB | Large state                    | 30+      | Very 4 out of 4     | Yes |
| JO | Medium state                   | 4 years  | Somewhat 3 out of 4 | Yes |

During the interviews, the researcher asked participants to expand on their answers and asked follow up questions. One of the goals was to find out what worked as far as teaching grammar in the classroom and what did not work. The researcher gained much unexpected information from the interviews and observations that helped to form the structure of this chapter. In the Presentation of Data section the researcher gives individual case studies based on information given by the teachers. Next, the Discussion section explains the factors that guide teachers to choose which methods work best. Finally the Summary is a discussion about the patterns that did come out of the information, and how they can be used to improve the teaching of grammar for all language arts teachers.

## Presentation of Data

### *Case Study: Debra*

Debra is considered a non-traditional teacher because she opted to raise her children before beginning her teaching career. She is a White female in her 50s. Sometimes not going straight from high school into college and then into teaching may have a bearing on teacher choices as far as instructional methods. Since there was a gap between college and career, and since retaining grammar knowledge often requires repetition, this break between college and career made Debra unconfident in her skills. Debra attended an urban high school of about 700 students and a small private religious college, both in the tri-county area of the high school where she now is a teacher. She does not remember receiving any grammar instruction in high school (in the early 1980s) because she took “Business English.” Students were tracked based on their future career choices, and Debra’s English classes consisted mostly of technical writing. When Debra knew she wanted to become a language arts teacher, she took the required courses in her college program for the desired degree. There were few options for additional elective courses, and none involved the teaching of grammar. She was required to take a course called “The History of the English Language.” In this class she had no direct instruction of grammar in isolated units, but instead was asked to correct sentences written incorrectly.

She has now taught high school English grades 9-12 for nine years. Teaching grammar is a huge dilemma for her, which is the main reason she was chosen for a case study. Although the state standards require that teachers make sure students leave their classes with various grammatical skills, Debra, like many other teachers in this study,

teaches grammar rarely. She feels completely inadequate in this area of her teaching and says she “doesn’t want to look stupid.” Debra has reached out to the researcher as her department head and to other colleagues for any and all ideas on how to best teach grammar. When the researcher brought up methods such as Daily Oral Language and Daily Grammar Practice, Debra was clueless. She believes that isolated units would be the most effective, but she has no idea how to go about teaching them. When asked by the researcher if she would attend some optional staff development on the teaching of isolated grammar units, her answer was an emphatic “Yes!”

During her nine years of teaching, the only time that Debra teaches grammar is after the students have written essays. She will take the parts that she knows are wrong (e.g. subject/verb agreement, pronoun usage, etc.) and show students the correct way to write the incorrect sentences. She can recognize run-on sentences and fragments, but teaching students about subordinate and independent clauses is not an option for her because of her lack of knowledge.

She is currently working with the researcher on their own time to come up with the best method for Debra to use. She is experimenting with both essentialist isolated units and the more progressive D.O.L. and D.G.P. Debra asked not to be observed for this study because she was too uncomfortable with her lack of confidence with grammar knowledge.

When the researcher asked her why she answered the efficacy of the state standards question as “no,” when she obviously does not even try to meet the state standards with her students, she said, “They are probably great standards, but since I

don't really teach grammar, and we are not held accountable, I really don't pay much attention to them."

*Case Study: Hannah*

Hannah, a White female in her late 20s, also attended a small suburban high school and an urban liberal college in the tri-county area which is the same as the high school in which she now teaches, and she has been teaching 9<sup>th</sup> grade English and journalism for four years. Hannah is almost the exact opposite of Debra. While most of her high school teachers taught grammar in context of students' writing, her college prepared her by teaching grammar using isolated units. When asked how confident Hanna is in her knowledge of grammar, she ranked herself as a 3 (somewhat) on a scale of 1-4, 4 being very comfortable. Her answer was probably modest based on the interview's findings. The researcher was very surprised to find that learning grammar via isolated units were required of all students majoring in Secondary Education Language Arts at her undergraduate school. This is not the norm based on the researcher's findings and personal experience.

Hannah has tried several different methods in her own classroom to meet the SC Standards for grammar. She has tried using Daily Grammar Practice, but admits that it ended up turning into isolated units because the students had trouble grasping the concepts without direct instruction. She has decided that isolated units are the most effective way, and she teaches them in her class on a daily basis.

Hannah has recently earned her master's degree in administration and performs many administrative-internship type duties at her school. She is the leader of the school's leadership team meetings and may have some input as far as staff development. When

asked if she thought optional staff development on the teaching of grammar would be beneficial and well-attended, despite her beyond adequate knowledge, she replied with an emphatic “yes!”

The researcher observed Hannah teaching grammar on November 12, 2012. The students were just beginning a unit on direct objects and had recently completed units on verbs, subjects and prepositional phrases. Hannah had them first get out their verb lists with all of the linking and helping verbs listed. Then she had them take out a list of prepositions. On the SMARTboard, Hannah had the definition of a direct object (a noun or pronoun that receives the action of the action verb), and the students wrote the definition down in their grammar notebooks.

Then Hannah modeled some sample sentences on the SMARTboard. The teacher guided the students through steps that it was clear they knew very well. They were asked to tell her the prepositional phrases. Ninety-five percent of the students raised their hands and after a student was chosen, the student easily rattled off the two prepositional phrases. The next step was to find the verb and determine if it was action or linking, and again students raised their hands and the same routine occurred. The same situation happened with the subject. Then Hannah showed them the direct object and explained why it was the direct object.

For some of the example sentences Hannah did not have them raise their hands but instead just call out the answers. It soon became like a memorized chant, and while the method may seem almost Lancastrian, these students will be able to take apart a sentence to determine subordinate clauses and independent clauses. They will not have

problems with run-ons or fragments which earn major grade penalties in both high school and college.

While the upcoming Common Core standards do require students to use prepositional phrases in a descriptive way, the state standards do not address anything the researcher observed in Hannah's classroom. They do however require that students use correct conventions according to "Standard American English." The students will not know how to make their pronouns and antecedents agree if they do not know what a direct object is. The rule states that objective case pronouns are to be used for direct objects and nominative case pronouns are to be used for predicate nominatives. Sentences without linking verbs do not have predicate nominatives. Therefore, if a student does not know what a linking verb is, or a direct object is, or an objective case pronoun, how are they supposed to meet the state standards? Hannah answered the question about the efficacy of state standards as "yes," because through teaching isolated units, she meets them. She does feel that the standards should be more specific to help out other teachers, and she feels that teachers should be held accountable for having their students meet them.

*Case Study: Deborah*

Unlike the previous study participants, Deborah, a White female in her 50s attended high school in a large northern United States high school and a large state college in Nevada. Her original degree (and job) was in guidance counseling. However, she has taught English for nine years. Her first experience with grammar was at an early age, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Her elementary English classes were taught (in the 1960s) by Cuban nuns, and they used drill and kill isolated units. Deborah does not remember

being taught grammar in high school, and her college preparation was very limited as well. She took one course in “transformational” grammar and was also expected to learn grammar via learning a foreign language, as is often the case.

She ranked herself a 4 (very comfortable) in her knowledge of grammar. The method she uses in her classroom is not the method in which she was taught. She prefers the Daily Grammar Practice method, and this prompted the researcher to do one of her observations in order to see Deborah practicing this method.

The observation was on November 9, 2012 in an English 2 Honors class. The class is made up of both 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders. The students worked in groups and each had a three-sheet packet of definitions of various parts of speech, grammar functions, etc. Different from the program’s suggested instructions of completing one step per day, Deborah’s class did all five steps in one day. This is because they alternate day to day between grammar and vocabulary lessons. Today, they were given a specific sentence and asked to do the following with it:

1. identify the part of speech of each word
2. identify sentence parts (subject, direct object, infinitives, etc.)
3. identify clauses and sentence type (compound etc.)
4. add punctuation and capitalization
5. diagram the sentence

During the observation, the researcher sat among the students and could hear two different groups working on the steps. All students were very involved and trying to work the steps. Deborah walked among the groups answering student questions. At one point, Deborah asked all of the students to look up at the board so she could explain something and show them an example. After about ten to fifteen minutes of working in groups, the students seemed to come to a standstill. Conversation around the researcher

turned to video games and hairstyles. At this point Deborah brought the whole class together and did direct instruction on the parts they did not understand.

When asked why she preferred using Daily Grammar Practice when she ended up doing direct instruction anyway, Deborah answered that she likes the approach this program takes, and that she would only do it with her honors-level courses. With lower-level courses (college preparation level), a lot more direct instruction would be needed.

Deborah finds the state standards “not at all adequate” at mandating student grammar outcomes. She believes our schools need a much more detailed, specific list of skills to learn before entering college or the work world. She mentions that we teachers are held accountable for all of the literature standards via the benchmark exams we are required to give students. We are also required to take the data from those benchmarks and analyze which standards are met, and which are not. We are not required, however, to do all of the standards, just those we choose. The researcher has noticed that none of the teachers choose the grammar standards. Administration seems to be okay with this, so no accountability on the teachers’ or the students’ part is shown.

Personally, she feels that she need not attend an optional staff development on how to teach grammar, but she thinks it is a good idea for other teachers who may be uncomfortable in their lack of knowledge.

*Case Study: Calvin*

Another surprising finding came when interviewing Calvin, a White male in his late 30s. He learned Latin in his high school in the mid-state (late 1980s) which gave him a strong grammar background. This is a very rare situation today, and even was in the 1980s. He did attend a small, private religious high school, and also attended college at



both a large state college and a small military academy. In addition to Latin instruction in high school, he also learned grammar via isolated units. Surprisingly, he also was required to take a class in college learning grammar and teaching grammar in isolated units. He rates himself as “very comfortable” in his grammar knowledge.

The researcher noted that veteran teacher Calvin (14 years) does not teach his English 3 students using isolated units. Instead, he uses a method modeled after the questions given on the SAT (on which he teaches an elective course). He gives students incorrect sentences and then four choices of how to correct it. He uses that as a springboard and then does a small amount of direct instruction on why the correct answer is correct.

He chooses to use any shortcut he can “around direct instruction” because of the large amount of time direct instruction takes. This was not the first time the researcher heard this comment. Another method Calvin uses is syntactical in which he uses students as words (e.g. hangs a sign with a word on it around a student’s neck) and has the class arrange them in the correct order of a sentence. This was a new method for the researcher.

He did not use that method during the observation by the researcher on November 19, 2012. Instead, he did the former mentioned SAT approach. The students seemed to do well with this method, but although they could find the right answer, they could not explain why it was right. The researcher is inferring that they have come up with a system in which they recognize patterns of syntax and punctuation. This method will easily get them through the SAT, but it will undoubtedly present problems in their own writing.

Calvin says the state standards are not effective because although his students can meet the standards using his method, like the other teachers, he thinks they are not specific enough.

*Case Study: Lance*

Another participant who attended a small private religious college in the tri-county area is Lance, a White male in his late 20s. Different from Deborah though, he does not remember any grammar instruction in high school, a suburban school near the SC/Georgia border. He did however state that, “I do know that I began college with a serious deficit in prerequisite knowledge of grammar and mechanics.” His collegiate teaching preparation was not much more helpful. He learned grammar via the NCTE recommended method of using sentences in published literature or student writing to understand sentence structure and grammar rules.

As a 5<sup>th</sup> year English teacher he, like many others, has tried various methods of grammar and instruction in his classroom. Like most of the participants in this study, he started out using the method in which he learned. He quickly found fault with that because the students were not performing to the state standards, or his standards. Lance has worked part time in a college writing lab, so he has a good idea of what the students need to know before going to college.

In his frustration he turned to the researcher, whom he views as a mentor since he did part of his student teaching with her. He asked to be taught grammar in isolated units as if he were one of her students. So a few lessons took place, and the researcher gave him an outline of order and activities. He is using them currently and so far finds isolated units to be far more effective than his previous endeavors. He also said that he would

attend any staff development involving teaching of grammar offered by the school or district.

He refers to the state grammar standards as “ridiculous” and “worthless.” He believes that we should not have them at all, or they need to be completely revised. Knowing that a committee of Language Arts teachers wrote these standards, he comments that those teachers “must never teach grammar or know anything about it.” He became frustrated during the interview and refused to comment further on the standards.

Unfortunately the observation of Lance was cut short because of a fire drill, but what was observed was exactly what the researcher expected. As a teacher transitioning from the method of teaching grammar through the context of writing to isolated units, he actually practiced both during the November 15, 2012 observation. A week ago he had assigned his English 3 College Preparatory class a two-page persuasive essay on a topic from the play *The Crucible* which they had just finished reading as a class. After discussing the content of a few of the individual student essays, he put up on the SMARTboard some grammatically incorrect sentences from the essays. Rather than using the Daily Oral Language method of a random sampling of errors for students to fix, he chose sentences that all had the same major error: fragments.

He first had the students read them and then asked the class what was wrong with them. The very few students, who know what a fragment is, immediately raised their hands. Lance did not call on them because he wanted to hear from the students not familiar with fragments. The first boy called on responded, “Those sentences are too short.” A second boy called on answered, “They aren’t finished yet.” Lance asked him to

expound on his answer, and the boy proceeded to add an independent clause to one of the fragments to fix it. This was the exact opening that Lance needed to launch into his isolated lesson about clauses. When he said to the second boy that he had just added an independent clause and made the sentence complete, the boy bragged, “Oh yeah! That’s right!” The rest of the class heckled him and said he got lucky or said that he did not know what a clause was. It was revealed after a show of hands that in fact 15 or the 17 students had no idea what a clause was. This showed the researcher that it is true what the published research states: students may know what looks or sounds right, but they do not have the meta-language needed to know why it is correct or incorrect.

Lance proceeded to pass out a list of subordinate conjunctions and had students take notes on the different types of clauses and how they were different from phrases. They began to practice identifying some prewritten groups of words on the SMARTboard as a phrase, independent clause or subordinate clause. Then the fire alarm went off and with only five minutes of class remaining upon the students’ return to class, Lance had to review and continue the clause lesson the next day.

*Case Study: Brittany*

Brittany is a first year teacher. She is an African American female in her early 20s. The researcher chose to interview her because although she learned grammar via isolated units in high school and college, she feels that the more progressive methods of Daily Oral Language and through students’ writing are more effective for teaching grammar in her classroom. So the first and main question was why? Were the isolated units not effective for her? She ranked her confidence in her ability to teach grammar as only “somewhat.”

The answers to the researcher's questions were ones that have come up before. She feels that during the classes which used isolated units, she knew the grammar very well, and she earned high grades. However, since it has been five years since she had the class, she feels she has forgotten a lot of the information. The researcher tested her by asking her a few grammar questions, which she answered correctly. Through further discussion, Brittany and the researcher came to the conclusion that several of the rules were deeply embedded in her subconscious mind, but she lacks the confidence as a first-year teacher to teach it.

The Daily Oral Language is a pre-packaged program that allows her to not spend time or energy preparing lessons. She shows the students the incorrect sentence, and if they do not fix it appropriately, she has the confidence to tell them what the right answers are and why. She does not, however, know how to design isolated unit lessons and then conduct them. If given pre-written lessons or a workshop on how to write and conduct them, she would "definitely" change methods.

The observation of Brittany on November 19, 2013 was very short because the Daily Oral Language method is usually used a warm-up or "bell ringer" activity. She uses this particular activity three days a week and journaling the other two. The three grammatically and mechanically incorrect sentences were put up on the white board. The students copy those sentences into their notebooks, and then they have approximately seven minutes to correct the errors. Brittany then asked volunteers to come up to correct the sentences. These sentences had broken at least ten different grammar or mechanics rules, so unlike Lance's student-written sentences, there was no common theme to discuss afterward.

The students did really well with the “easier” problems like putting a period at the end of the sentence and capitalizing the name of the high school in one of the sentences. They struggled with using an apostrophe to show plural possession, a run-on sentence, and adjective usage (using “fewer” rather than “less”). After the students sat down she asked the entire class for input, and a few of them knew how to fix the more problematic errors, but most students stayed quiet. Then Brittany, using her teacher’s answer key, fixed the rest of the problems with no explanation as to why the corrections were needed. The students copied the corrections and then the class moved on to reading their novel.

In a private conversation between Brittany and the researcher later, she explained that some of the answers she did not know, and some of them she did know, but did not know how to explain the correction to the students. She had also mentioned previously that she does not feel she has the time to spend on teaching grammar because of the heavy literature requirements put on her by the principal.

As far as her opinion on the state standards being sufficient (“yes”), she commented that they were beyond her, but she figured “the state must know what it is doing.”

## Discussion

Through the interviews and observations done by the researcher, a couple of factors emerged that address the research questions mentioned previously.

First of all, when the researcher broached the subject of the ongoing, nationwide debate between different methods, only three of the fifteen participants were really aware of the two different sides. None of them were surprised to learn of it; in fact, it comforted most of them to learn that they were not alone in this struggle. The common denominator

among all of the participants is the search for the “best” method. The term “best” encompasses much: effectiveness in students’ writing, effectiveness in students’ general communication, time consumption, resources available, teacher accountability, and previous grammar knowledge on the teachers’ parts. All of these problems arose during the interviews.

One of the main factors this study considered was the amount and method of preparation the teachers had in order to teach grammar. Both the methods and the amounts spanned the spectrum from none to confidence inspiring courses in both high school and college. Sadly, the majority were closer to the “none” end of the spectrum. Of the fifteen teachers surveyed, only three rated themselves as totally comfortable teaching grammar. Even some teachers who have been teaching for more than five years, do not have the confidence to teach grammar effectively. These teachers partly blame the state standards because they are very vague and rarely enforced by administration. If the motivator of accountability were in place, teachers would be more likely to spend the time to learn grammar on their own, and some schools would offer more staff development on the topic of grammar.

A second major factor is how their preparation methods impacted their teaching methods. The majority of the teachers used what they knew first. In other words, if they were taught in context of writing and reading, that is what they tried in their classrooms first. So preparation definitely did have an impact. However, despite what method they began with, almost all of them switched to, or at least tried, other methods. Only about half of the participants are comfortable in their current method, and of that half, some of them are open to trying other methods that may work better for them.

## Summary

The preceding sections enlightened the researcher as to the individual thoughts on grammar education of each teacher in her department. The methods of preparation and the methods used to teach are in no way uniform. Despite district attempts at implementing a uniform grammar teaching method for all language arts teachers, most teachers revolted and refuse to follow the recommended guidelines. Instead, they prefer to use what they know or experiment with other methods, or the worst case scenario, just avoid teaching grammar at all.

A couple of patterns did emerge as the results of the study were put together. Of those teachers who regularly teach grammar, despite what method is used, direct instruction plays some role in their teaching. Even those teachers who use NCTE and locally recommended Daily Grammar Practice, Daily Oral Language, or teach in context of reading and writing, still stray from those pure methods to do isolated units. They have discovered that students do not just automatically know the concepts brought up using these methods. The teacher has to pause to directly explain the concept and show examples. Technically, this is using isolated units. Therefore, the majority of the teachers use a combination of methods, all of which include some type of isolated units.

Another pattern that emerged among all of the subjects is the need for better teacher preparation. One hundred percent of the subjects agreed that staff development sessions on teaching grammar for language arts teachers (and possibly teachers of other subjects as well) is needed or at least a good idea. All of the individuals except Deborah involved in the case studies would participate in these sessions if offered.



In conclusion, English teachers must be better prepared to teach grammar. Whether this happens at the college level or in the form of staff development, it has to happen. Of those who do feel competent and teach grammar regularly, the NCTE and district recommended methods are not sufficient. All teachers must incorporate direct instruction (isolated units) even if they use one of the recommended methods as a springboard to get the students thinking about grammar. And finally, although isolated units may seem to be the most effective method to use, the knowledge and time required for this method is limited for most teachers.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Summary and Discussion**

Chapter Five presents a summary of the study and important conclusions drawn from the data presented in Chapter 4 as it relates to the questions that guided this study:

1. How do teachers who were educated with grammar as an isolated curricular unit perceive the current debate on language instruction? How do their perceptions impact their classroom instructional practice?
2. How do teachers who were educated with grammar as a whole language curricular unit perceive the current debate on language instruction? How do their perceptions impact their classroom instructional practice?

It then offers a summary of the results and relates them to prior research literature, discusses implications for practice, and offers recommendations for further research.

#### **Summary of the Study**

This study examined grammar teaching method choices made by teachers of language arts in a suburban public high school. The study was significant in light of the large body of research by language arts teachers and college professors curious about why their students are not coming to them prepared for formal writing. (Oldenburg, 2005; Brown 1996; Patterson & Duer, 2006; Vavre, 1996). This problem has wide implications. For example, Brown (1996) stated that knowing the language of power will be the difference between people getting jobs or not, and it will set their social status.

Two of the causes of students beginning college unprepared are method of teacher training in grammar instruction and teachers' opinions of how important grammar is compared to all the other topics they are required to teach. The latter was shown in a survey done by ACT Inc. from which Patterson and Duer (2006) discovered that only 69% of high school English teachers nationwide teach grammar in any form. Also in this survey, the college professors who took part rated grammar and usage and the most important skill for a student to have, while high school teachers ranked that skill at the bottom. This may be a result of not only individual state standards' lack of accountability of teachers to teach these skills, but the NCTE recommendation of using progressive methods such as teaching grammar only in the context of students' writing and in context with the literature they are reading (Hoffman, 2006).

The NCTE recommended methods are preferred by some of the teachers in this study despite the way they learned grammar. Other progressive methods include Daily Oral Language and Daily Grammar Practice that are package programs produced by companies and sold to public schools. These methods use the indirect approach of giving students sentences to correct without giving students the background rules of the language of power. Other teachers prefer the essentialist method of teaching grammar in isolation and the "drill and kill" repetition of the rules method that was used to teach many of the veteran teachers in the study.

The researcher took a qualitative approach to this study with the intention of focusing on a specific group of high school language arts teachers in a suburban school who are of various ages, genders, races, and knowledge bases. Case studies of particular language arts teachers were used in this study for several reasons including the fact that

they can show specific instances that show a general problem, they may be influenced by author bias, they can show the complexity of factors in the problem, and they can discuss different alternatives and variations (e.g. ways to teach grammar) (Merriam, 1998).

Methods included first giving a general online survey to the teachers in the study. Based on the data garnered from the survey, the researcher chose participants that fit with the research questions, and then interviewed those teachers. After accumulating the knowledge gained from the interviews, the researcher then chose to observe some of the interviewed teachers using their grammar teaching methods in the classroom. After putting all of the factors together, a few strong themes came to light. External themes include national, state, district, and school standards expected of the teacher, materials available to the teacher, and time allotted for teaching grammar along with all the literature requirements. The main internal theme is grammar knowledge of the individual teachers, but teaching styles and preferences play a role in everything they teach including grammar. Also, some teachers give more writing assignments than other teachers, and that too is a factor.

## Discussion

This section is organized by some of the themes that came up in the study and how they fit in with the research in chapter two. While all educated people understand that in this very literary society in which we live that “Standard English Usage” is the language of power (Ezzaher, 2001) and gives one culture capital, teachers’ opinions differ on the best way to teach students this imperative skill.

One method researched was teaching grammar using whatever literature the students happen to be reading. The one advantage of this method is that state standards

require so many analysis of literature (both fiction and nonfiction) indicators for student outcome that this method may save time by killing two birds with one stone. Another advantage the researcher learned while doing this study is that on standardized tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test needed for entrance into most colleges, students must take poorly written sentences and fix them. Unfortunately, the disadvantages far outweigh the advantage. The teachers in this study who tried this method could not choose representative passages from the literature to help teach grammar and usage concepts, so they ended up using pre-packaged, progressive programs such as Daily Oral Language and Daily Grammar Practice. The problem that all teachers of the suburban high school studied ran into, was that students did not have the meta-language (i.e. definitions of a subordinate clause or prepositional phrase, etc.) to do the corrections. Therefore, teachers had to stop the lesson and teach a mini-unit on the concept, which is essentially an isolated unit anyway. This finding fits with Haussamen's research in which he states that students need to know not just grammatical rules, but why they are rules (2003).

A second progressive method that comes up frequently in research of this topic is to use the students' own writing to show problematic sentences and have either the individual students figure out how to fix it, or show it anonymously to the class and seek answers. All of the teachers in this study have used this method at some time or another. It is effective because kids are looking at actual sentences written by them, and as a result will know how to fix the problem grammar, usage or mechanics. The problem with this is, once again, that teachers then need to explain *why* the correct way is correct. Students need to see the process that gets them to the correct sentence structure and word usage.

Another method that falls under this category in the research is when teachers show the students different types of writing (persuasive, narrative, etc.) and the grammar that is used in each (Hayes, 2003). None of the teachers in this study use that method. When asked about it in interviews, the teachers did not understand how that would be a helpful method because they do not think that students would transfer the knowledge to their own writing. Most of the teachers had trouble getting students to write at all.

The research definitely finds advocates of this method. Two teachers in Maine had the students correct the incorrect sentences and then research to find the rule as to why the right answer was correct (Johnson and Shaw, 2003). The teachers in this study thought that was a fabulous idea, if not for their time and resource constraints. This progressive method has the most proponents, but in this study the teachers who used it always ended up back at essential mini-units in isolation.

In the research of methods of teaching grammar, the most commonly advocated method was isolated units and teachers who were “bucking the system” after the NCTE regulations were announced. Editor Michael Thompson (2002) brought up the fact that math and foreign languages are taught using a “prescriptive” method (i.e. rules first, application later). He found isolated units were needed for gifted students because of their natural inclination to know *why* something is what it is. In this study the researcher concluded that low level students needed isolated units because the more gifted students could learn the meta-language on their own.

#### Discussion Summary

The debate between which method is most effective will probably continue forever, but two final outcomes came out in this study. The first is that no matter which

method a teacher prefers or a school mandates, the teacher has to be trained properly. The second is that it seems the dichotomy between holistic progressive methods and essentialist isolated methods should not exist. A combination of the two would be the ideal. Students must know the rules of the difficult English language, but they must know them so that they can apply them in real life writing and speaking.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study opened up many more specific studies that could be done. A quantitative study comparing grammar teaching methods and student scores would be very interesting. Using data methods such as mechanics/grammar grades on essays in a class taught by essentialist isolated units vs. progressive Daily Grammar Practice, or one of the other methods mentioned in this study may influence the choice of methods used by teachers. Other data that could be used would be scores on standardized tests such as the HSAP, MAPS test, SAT, ACT, etc. If students taught via isolated units scored higher than students taught using more progressive methods on whichever data method was used in a study, it may change the NCTE's directive and give a rebirth to both high schools and colleges teaching using that method.

Hunter (1996) cites a few quantitative studies similar to this, however, there have not been any conducted and/or published within the last ten to fifteen years. A more modern study would be beneficial for the NCTE to make recommendations. Also Achieve Inc., the writers of the common core standards, would benefit from a new study because of the 48 states that are changing from state standards to national standards. They could see that more specificity of language skills is needed in the requirements for student high school graduation.

Also a study of college training programs for future English teachers and how different colleges compare would be helpful. Another study could focus on staff development options for English teachers who are not confident and “don’t want to look stupid” as one of the interviewees mentioned.

### **Implications for Practice and Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to use qualitative methods to identify which methods of teaching grammar are chosen by teachers of different backgrounds and which they perceive as most effective. The researcher wanted to explore individual situations and break down the dichotomy between recommended progressive teaching methods and more effective essential methods.

This study offers important implications for educators and policy makers. First, it is clear that the external factors of expected student outcomes (i.e. state standards and national common core standards) and accountability must be regulated and enforced. Teachers know that all students should leave them knowing the language of power to help them in college and/or the job world, but they are not held accountable for this result in South Carolina. If the state standards were more specific, or the graduation test more difficult, teachers would have to spend a required amount of time teaching grammar.

If teachers are held accountable, then they must be trained properly to teach grammar well enough to meet student outcomes. Whether this comes in the form of required college courses for future language arts teachers, summer workshops or in-services provided by school districts, it must be done.

In summary, this study has addressed the research questions with the following developing theories:



1. Some teachers abandon their isolated roots because of mandated progressive methods. They find this debate interesting and many feel bound by legislative practices.
2. Most of the teachers taught using a whole language method feel very uncomfortable with their knowledge of grammar and know little about the debate because they do not really know what isolated units are. They tend to not teach grammar at all or they do it very sparsely. They intrinsically know grammar is important, but they have no idea how to approach it in their classrooms.

Educators can use this knowledge to request (or demand) training in grammar teaching methods through staff development and request more specific legislation on student outcomes and how teachers will be accountable for it.

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## Appendix A

**Case Study Survey**  
**Teaching Grammar in Isolation vs. in Context of Reading and Writing**  
**Amy K. Smith's Dissertation for the Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction at**  
**the University of South Carolina.**

### Demographic Information

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Position: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of years teaching K-12 Language Arts: \_\_\_\_\_

College/University where you received your teaching degree: \_\_\_\_\_

Other teaching positions (please explain and list how long you taught):

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### Grammar Instruction

1. How were you instructed in grammar and usage during your K-12 years?  
(circle all that apply)

isolated units  
(drill and kill)

whole language  
(through the use of  
literature)

daily oral language

other\*

\*please explain:

---

2. On the following scale, how confident/successful were you in using proper grammar and usage in college? (circle one)

Very confident

Somewhat confident

Not very  
confident

Not at all  
confident

3. How were you instructed in *teaching* grammar and usage during your undergraduate college years? (circle all that apply)

|                                    |  |                              |        |
|------------------------------------|--|------------------------------|--------|
| isolated units<br>(drill and kill) | whole language<br>(through the use of<br>literature) | taking a foreign<br>language | other* |
|------------------------------------|--|------------------------------|--------|

\*Please explain:

---

4. On the following scale, how confident/successful were you in teaching proper grammar and usage during your first 1-3 years of teaching? (circle one)

|                |                    |                       |                         |
|----------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Very confident | Somewhat confident | Not very<br>confident | Not at all<br>confident |
|----------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|

5. On the following scale, how confident/successful were you in teaching proper grammar and usage during your current year of teaching? (circle one)

|                |                    |                       |                         |
|----------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Very confident | Somewhat confident | Not very<br>confident | Not at all<br>confident |
|----------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|

6. Which methods have you used to teach grammar to your students? (circle all that apply)

|                                    |  |                     |        |
|------------------------------------|--|---------------------|--------|
| isolated units<br>(drill and kill) | whole language<br>(through the use of<br>literature) | daily oral language | other* |
|------------------------------------|--|---------------------|--------|

\*please explain:

---

7. On the following scale how successful do you think your teaching of grammar and usage method is for your students? (circle one)

|                 |                        |                        |                          |
|-----------------|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Very successful | Somewhat<br>successful | Not very<br>successful | Not at all<br>successful |
|-----------------|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|

8. How many minutes do you spend teaching grammar each week (based on a 90 minute block-450 minutes per week)? (circle one)

|               |         |        |              |
|---------------|---------|--------|--------------|
| More than 150 | 100-150 | 50-100 | less than 50 |
|---------------|---------|--------|--------------|

9. On the following scale how satisfied are you with the amount of time you have to teach grammar within your curriculum? (circle one)

|                |                       |                       |                         |
|----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Very satisfied | Somewhat<br>satisfied | Not very<br>satisfied | Not at all<br>satisfied |
|----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|

10. If you were offered professional development courses in grammar instruction, would you take them?

yes

no

11. Do you believe the SC state standards and/or the CCSS are adequate for 9-12 grammar instruction? (see below)

yes

no

12. Do you have any other comments or any questions you would like to add?

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SC State Standard

E2-4.4 Use grammatical conventions of written Standard American English, including

- subject-verb agreement,
- pronoun-antecedent agreement,
- agreement of nouns and their modifiers,
- verb formation,
- pronoun case,
- formation of comparative and superlative adjectives and adverbs, and
- idiomatic usage.

*(See Instructional Appendix: Composite Writing Matrix.)*

Common Core State Standards

1. Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

a. Use parallel structure.\*

b. 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.



2. Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.
  - a. Use a semicolon (and perhaps a conjunctive adverb) to link two or more closely related independent clauses.
  - b. Use a colon to introduce a list or quotation.
  - c. Spell correctly.

## Appendix B

Oct. 20, 2012

Dear Colleagues,

I am requesting your help with a study I am doing on the various methods of grammar instruction. This study is one of the requirements for receiving my Ed. D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of South Carolina.

I am asking that you fill out the attached survey as honestly and completely as possible. Based on your answers, I may request to interview and/or observe you. You may choose not to participate at all, or to opt out of any part of my study.

If you choose to participate, your answers will in no way affect your position, teaching assignments, salary, or any aspect of your job. I assure you this study is for my individual purposes only, and I have ascertained the permission of Dr. Westberry to do this project.

I would very much appreciate your cooperation and am hoping that the results of this study will aid in Language Arts teacher development in the future. I am hoping this study may have an impact on not only our school, but the district, state and even the national level.

If you are interested in the results after my study is concluded, they will be available for you.

By signing below, you are giving me permission to use your responses in my study. Remember, you have the option to decline or discontinue participation in the study at any time.

---

Participant Name

---

Date

Thank you very much,

Amy K. Smith

