



The effect of grammar-diagraming on student writing skills  
by Charles E Whitehead

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**Abstract:**

The belief that grammar - diagraming would improve student writing skills led to this investigation. An examination of the literature concerning the teaching of student writing skills revealed a need for improved techniques to teach students to write clearly and concisely.

A six week intensive review of grammar -diagraming was designed for the experimental groups. The same course without the grammar-diagraming unit was used for the control groups. The investigation included four teachers and 132 students. In teaching their classes, the instructors of the experimental groups used the introductory unit of the grammar-diagraming review. The instructors of the control groups used the literature-writing approach to improve student writing skills and only reviewed grammar and sentence structure as the need arose. Pupils of the experimental and control groups were tested at the beginning of the course to measure initial ability and were again tested at the end of the course to measure final achievement in the improvement of the student's ability in achieving writing skills. The results indicate, there was no statistically significant difference in the final achievement in the areas of sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, or 500 word composition.

The following conclusions concerning the teaching of grammar-diagraming to improve student writing skills made on the basis of the review of literature and finding of this study is: that grammar-diagraming is as effective as literature-writing in the improving of student writing skills in the areas of sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, and 500 word composition, as measured by the Subject A Test of the University of California.

THE EFFECT OF GRAMMAR-DIAGRAMMING  
ON STUDENT WRITING SKILLS

194

by


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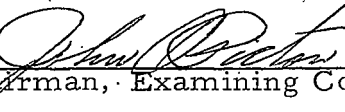
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C. E. W.

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## ABSTRACT

The belief that grammar-diagramming would improve student writing skills led to this investigation. An examination of the literature concerning the teaching of student writing skills revealed a need for improved techniques to teach students to write clearly and concisely.

A six week intensive review of grammar-diagramming was designed for the experimental groups. The same course without the grammar-diagramming unit was used for the control groups. The investigation included four teachers and 132 students. In teaching their classes, the instructors of the experimental groups used the introductory unit of the grammar-diagramming review. The instructors of the control groups used the literature-writing approach to improve student writing skills and only reviewed grammar and sentence structure as the need arose. Pupils of the experimental and control groups were tested at the beginning of the course to measure initial ability and were again tested at the end of the course to measure final achievement in the improvement of the student's ability in achieving writing skills. The results indicate there was no statistically significant difference in the final achievement in the areas of sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, or 500 word composition.

The following conclusions concerning the teaching of grammar-diagramming to improve student writing skills made on the basis of the review of literature and finding of this study is: that grammar-diagramming is as effective as literature-writing in the improving of student writing skills in the areas of sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, and 500 word composition, as measured by the Subject A Test of the University of California.

## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

Developing one's writing skills has frequently been stressed as one of the most important aims within an English curriculum. However, a divergence of opinion has always existed as to the methods of teaching these skills. The grammarian, a teacher who applies the formal rules of grammar to student compositions, on the one hand, insists that writing can be taught only by applying hard and fast rules to any writing situation. The literaturist, a teacher who applies the style and techniques of world authors as models for student compositions, on the other hand, believes that writing can be taught only after the student has been exposed to all forms of prose.

The need for correctness of expression is not limited to the student nor is it limited to the author of a best selling novel. Correctness of expression should be for everyone. The proverbial butcher, baker, and candle-stick maker need to and do express themselves every-day of the week, but relatively few express themselves correctly, and consequently they fail to communicate their ideas in a clear manner. Correct grammatical form may be learned from a textbook, but to impress upon the student the application of these rules to the all important self-expression and communication is another matter.

English teachers have been trying for years to get the student to express himself clearly and concisely. Far too frequently, the student immediately associates himself with that "bete noire" grammar

and his individual expression. Consequently, he believes that no matter what he says or writes, he will violate one of the rules he so tediously learned without a direct application at the time he learned them.

Many students are classified as non-achievers in the field of English because they hesitate and even refuse to express themselves when a teacher too laboriously stresses rules rather than their application.

The teacher's rigid attitude toward the formidable rules of grammar too often contributes to the degree of difficulty that a student has in learning and even applying those rules to his writing. If a student must learn grammar by rote the way he learns the multiplication tables he, no doubt, will use the grammatical structure about as frequently as he would the multiplication tables as such. One may conclude that if a student merely memorizes the grammatical rules without applying them to his particular need, the rules are of little value.

Diagraming has been a center of controversy relative to its effectiveness within an English program. As a teacher of English, the writer has believed for a long time that if diagraming were used as a tool to help the student visualize the relationships within a sentence, there would be notable improvement in the student's written expression. If a student could diagram his sentences in order to understand sentence parts and their relationships to each other in expressing an idea

instead of diagramming the numerous stereotyped sentences found in many grammar books, he could be assured of the technicalities of expression.

The need for revision of the English curriculum--especially in the area of composition--is pointed up by the fact that seventy per cent of the nation's colleges and universities are forced to offer remedial courses in English at an annual expense of \$10,000,000.<sup>1</sup> With this alarming figure at hand, it is evident that a different approach to grammar-diagramming could effect better student compositions than does that of literature-writing.

#### Statement of the Problem

The problem of this study was to determine if grammar-diagramming was more effective in improving student writing skills than was literature writing.

The major hypothesis to be tested was that students who learned and applied the rules of grammar to their compositions would show a significant improvement over the pupils who wrote compositions using the writings of major authors as models.

#### Procedures

The study was to determine if grammar-diagramming was more

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<sup>1</sup>These figures were compiled by Mrs. Nellie Thomas of the Rockford Illinois Public School System and appeared in the Oelwein Daily Register, Oelwein, Iowa, Saturday, June 22, 1962.

effective than literature-writing in developing student writing skills. An examination of the literature has revealed that: (1) the present trend indicates that grammar-diagraming is often seriously neglected while much time is devoted to the literature approach in the teaching of composition, (2) the student compositions reflect glaring inadequacies in the basic structure of composition, and (3) the concept of diagraming in relation to the teaching of grammar is de-emphasized.

In view of these three conditions an analysis of results comparing the grammar-diagraming approach in teaching composition was undertaken to determine which method would provide the student with the greater facility in expressing himself in a written manner.

A teaching plan incorporating grammar-diagraming was designed for the teaching of composition to the experimental group. The control group followed its proscribed units as outlined in the San Lorenzo High School Language Arts Curriculum Guide.

To test the major hypothesis that grammar-diagraming was more effective in the development of student writing skills, two teachers of San Lorenzo High School instructed the experimental group and two different teachers instructed the control group. The teachers of San Lorenzo High School who taught the control group did so in the manner proscribed by the Language Arts Curriculum Guide. The other two teachers taught the grammar-diagraming approach to develop student writing skills by diagraming the faulty sentences found in student

compositions as an aid to form a foundation for correct expression. After six weeks' review of grammar, the experimental group devoted the remaining 30 weeks to writing short compositions stressing the idea of communication through correctness of form.

The Subject A Test, Form 58<sup>2</sup> was used as a base to evaluate the pupils of the experimental and control groups at the beginning of the first semester. The Subject A Test, Form 58 and Form 59 is composed of four parts: Sentence Structure, Vocabulary, Punctuation, and a 500 word composition.

The Subject A Test, Form 59<sup>2</sup> was given to measure the achievement at the end of the school year to both the experimental and control groups. The resulting scores of the achievement test were statistically analyzed to determine if there were any significant differences between the two groups.

#### Limitations

✓ Certain limitations are inherent in this study. These include:

(1) This study was confined to high school seniors who were in the college preparatory program and enrolled in senior literature and composition at San Lorenzo High School, San Lorenzo, California.

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<sup>2</sup>The Subject A Test, Form 58 and Form 59 in English was developed by English teachers at the University of California and is given as a placement test to all incoming college freshmen.

(2) The four teachers participating in this study were the regularly assigned teachers to the senior level college preparatory program at San Lorenzo High School.

(3) The population of 132 students was restricted to the four classes of senior literature and composition taught at San Lorenzo High School.

(4) The experimental group of two classes was randomly assigned to two participating teachers; the control group of two classes was randomly assigned to the remaining two teachers.

The general area of teaching grammar-diagramming in the Language Arts Curriculum has been seriously de-emphasized. The literature pertaining to this problem indicated that students are performing at a very low level in their composition courses. Consequently, a need exists to compare the achievement when one group is taught a standard course in senior literature and composition, and the other group is taught the same material with emphasis on the grammar-diagramming approach. The results of this study could determine whether this de-emphasis in grammar-diagramming is justified.

## Chapter II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are two basic ways to teach composition. One is to emphasize the reading of standard works by various authors and then to write compositions imitating the styles of writing (informal approach); the other technique is to teach composition from the grammar-diagramming approach--a direct memorization and application of the rules of correct expression (formal approach).

Before reviewing research devoted to the informal and formal approach to the teaching of composition, a definition of the term grammar-diagramming is necessary. As the word will be used, it will refer to the study of syntax, sentence structure, and word forms interpretation pictured schematically. Perhaps a more exact definition for grammar is that established by the National Council of Teachers of English.

... (1) the description of the formation of English sentences, including the relationships of words, phrases and clauses to each other ; and (2) the explanation of choices in these inflectional forms which still survive in modern English.<sup>3</sup>

The informal approach to the teaching of composition has been widely accepted because research has indicated the ineffectiveness of diagramming, formal drill, and grammatical expression. Therefore, emphasis has been shifted to the study of techniques of various world

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<sup>3</sup> Greene, Harry A., Developing Language Skills in the Elementary Schools, p. 358.



authors and an application of these techniques to student written compositions.

### Studies of the Informal Approach to Composition

Many educators believe that a good knowledge of formal grammar is necessary in the development of correctness in reading and writing skills among students. Corresponding to this belief there has been a great deal of research in the direction of establishing the inter-relationships among grammar, composition, literature interpretations and other language areas. This approach has become known as the informal method of teaching composition.

Ineffectiveness of diagramming: Tovatt<sup>4</sup> conducted a test at the University of Colorado in 1952 to determine the extent diagramming skills were applied to written work. Among the 150 persons who took the test were 36 students of English, 27 undergraduates and 50 graduates from the school of Education at the University of Colorado. These individuals were chosen on the assumption that they would be more familiar with diagramming and would have more opportunity to apply it to written work than would auto mechanics, barbers or ranchers.

Each person tested was asked to diagram the sentence, "Practically all boys play baseball at a very early age." Ninety four per cent

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<sup>4</sup>Tovatt, Anthony L., "Diagramming: A Sterile Skill," The English Journal, LXI (February, 1952), pp. 91-93.

of the group were unable to diagram the sentence. Of the six per cent who could, only two stated that they actually applied diagramming skills to their own work. Of the 145 who could not diagram the sentence, 57 stated that they did need diagramming skills for their work. From these responses Tovatt arrived at three conclusions: (1) The carry-over value of diagramming beyond the classroom should be seriously questioned since any indication of its use in good communication was clearly lacking. (2) Persons although they are unable to diagram, still claim they apply diagramming skills. This indicated that English teachers in using diagramming as a teaching method are perpetuating fact with fiction. (3) English teachers should reevaluate their teaching procedures. Tovatt summarized his third conclusion by stating:

Despite the limitations in the sample used in the study, this finding above should give conscientious English teacher pause and cause him to re-examine the effectiveness of his teaching procedure in light of recent research.<sup>5</sup>

Ineffectiveness of diagramming applied to language skills, comprehension, and usage: In a paper published in the September Bulletin of the School of Education, Indiana University, Strom<sup>6</sup> related findings of research expressed in three separate theses by Berghahn, Barnet

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid. pp. 91-93.

<sup>6</sup>Strom, Ingrid M., "Experimental Studies Concerned with the Teaching of Grammatical Usage, Sentence Structure and Other Problem Areas in Writing", Bulletin of the School of Education of Indiana University, XL, (September, 1960), p. 1.

and Stewart. Each thesis dealt with the results of tests created to determine the value of diagramming as applied to various language skills. In one thesis, Barghahn<sup>7</sup> investigated the effects of sentence diagramming on reading comprehension and on English usage in speaking and writing. One group was given intensive drill in diagramming for six weeks; the other group continued its regular class work in English without any emphasis on diagramming or sentence analysis. Barghahn concluded that instruction in diagramming contributes little or nothing to comprehension in reading or to more rapid acquisition of knowledge of correct usage.

In a master's thesis completed in 1942, Barnet<sup>8</sup> confirmed Barghahn's findings. After working with and testing pupils from various grade levels, Barnet concluded that although students could be taught to diagram rapidly and correctly, they did not acquire any significant degree of communication skills. He stated:

...that the skills thus acquired did not contribute in any significant degree to an improvement in pupil's language usage or in his abilities to read and comprehend sentences.

In the third thesis, Stewart<sup>9</sup> has related his findings in an experimental study involving one thousand ninth grade pupils in twenty

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid. p. 10.

different school systems in Iowa, Illinois, and Minnesota. For eight weeks one group of classes devoted almost all of its time to learning by diagramming sentences. A second group spent the same amount of time in learning identical language concepts, but it used a different method--that of practicing with workbook exercises requiring the underlining of correct responses, listing of answers in columns, writing of some original sentences and re-writing of poor sentences. To test the pupils on their ability to construct good sentences, an instrument was devised that would evaluate the quality of the sentences constructed. Ideas were supplied in short simple statements, and pupils were asked to organize them in the most interesting and effective sentences possible. Stewart<sup>10</sup> concluded that among the results he found that the rules of grammar, punctuation, and capitalization were of little value. He stated.

... incidental learning of capitalization, punctuation, and grammatical usage is no more pronounced under an instructional program composed largely of diagramming sentences than it is under one employing composition exercises.

Strom<sup>11</sup> concluded that among their findings Barnet, Barghahn, and Stewart agree that practice in diagramming produces greater skill in diagramming.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

Greene, in Developing Language Skills in Elementary Schools disclaims any value in diagramming sentences in the following quotation:

The only defensible reason for teaching children to diagram sentences should be the improvement it brings in their ability to create effective sentences. Unfortunately, the evidence shows that this is insignificant.<sup>12</sup>

Greene<sup>13</sup> bases his statement on past research done on the subject of diagramming and on his teaching experience at different grade levels.

Ineffectiveness of formal drill in grammar: A study by Klopp<sup>14</sup> involving 336 tenth grade pupils in 13 different classes attempted to evaluate an experimental method of teaching proficiency in applied language skills as compared to standard methods emphasizing formal grammar study. Of the 13 classes, ten were conducted as usual with methods of instruction varying in degree and manner particular to each teacher. Three of the classes were instructed by experimental methods which de-emphasized formal grammar. In these experimental classes, self-administered drills aided grammatical knowledge as the need indicated by errors made on original compositions.

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<sup>12</sup>Greene, Harry, op. cit., pp. 368-369.

<sup>13</sup>Among his research he mentions the work of Barnet and Stewart as discussed by Strom.

<sup>14</sup>Klopp, J. W., "Grammar by Rule of Practice," The English Journal, XX, (February, 1931), p. 155.

Tests were given at the beginning and end of the school year. On the final test there were 116 elements, 60 in formal grammar and 56 in applied grammar. In applied grammar the range of scores was from a -2.7 to 7.0 on a purely relative scoring system where the higher numerical value indicated a greater amount of achievement. For the ten standard classes the average score for the applied grammar was 2.6, and for the experimental classes it was 4.97. In formal grammar the range of scores for all classes was from 6.8 to 16.4. Again the experimental classes scored higher with an average of 11.8 while the standard classes had an average score of 9.24.

Klopp<sup>15</sup> concluded that more emphasis on grammar only as applied to individual weaknesses in theme writing was of greater value in developing applied skills as well as knowledge of formal grammar than was extensive drill in formal grammar.

A study was made of three methods of teaching sentence structure at Eugene High School, Eugene, Oregon. This study, conducted by the University of Oregon, attempted to determine to what degree the study of formal grammar aided student writing. The three methods used were: (1) instruction in the study of sentence structure presented in a logical manner to try to develop a knowledge of how the material learned was to be applied to writing, (2) the same methods as the first were used with the exception of assigning weekly themes which were

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid, p. 156.

not discussed after being returned. As in the first method all activities except theme writing were concerned with study of sentence structure, (3) the only sentence structure items taught were a result of mistakes made in theme writing and in connection with literature and its interpretation. In other words, sentence structure was only taught where the need became apparent through errors in applied skills. The study was a long term project which included five semester units of study. The items of student sentence structure which were studied and tested were Completeness, Coordination, Subordination, Clarity, and Effectiveness.

Results of this study indicated that those instructed with the third method, where sentence structure was taught as the need arose, showed the most significant gain in ability to choose the punctuation and usage items which correctly completed the sentence. The third method also proved the most effective method in developing the ability to detect weaknesses in sentence structure and attacking points of difficulty in student writing. All methods proved of equal value in developing the use of mature sentences. The conclusion of this study was that teaching sentence structure as indicated by student needs in individual writing was as effective as drill in grammar. <sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Kraus, Silvy, "A Comparison of Three Methods of Teaching Sentence Structure," The English Journal, LXVI, (May, 1947), pp. 276-281.

In a survey made in 1919, Diebel and Sears<sup>17</sup> found that more mistakes in pronouns were made in the eighth grade by pupils who had received instruction in formal grammar than were made in the third grade by children who had not, up to that point, received any instruction in grammar. As a result, the investigators seriously questioned the efficiency of the methods used in teaching the use of the pronouns.

In 1923, Asker<sup>18</sup> conducted a study involving 295 freshmen from the University of Washington. The purpose of this study was to establish a relationship between grammatical usage and correctness in writing. Two specific relationships were tested: (1) the difference between grammatical knowledge, and (2) ability in composition. Asker analyzed the results of his studies by assigning correlation coefficients ranging from 0 to 1.0. The correlation between knowledge of grammar and ability to judge correctness of sentences was .23 and between grammar and ability in composition was .37. He concluded that knowledge of formal grammar has little influence on the ability to judge the grammatical correctness of sentences or to write good compositions.

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<sup>17</sup>Diebel, Amelia and Sears, Isabel, "Study of the Common Mistakes in Pupil's Oral English," Elementary School Journal XVII, (September, 1916), pp. 44-45.

<sup>18</sup>Asker, William, "Does Knowledge of Grammar Function?," School and Society, XVII, (January, 1923), pp. 107-111.



In 1941 Smith<sup>19</sup> conducted a survey of English instruction in New York schools. She found that in small town high schools much more emphasis was placed on formal grammar than in the larger urban areas. Paralleling this discovery, she found considerably less ability among pupils of small town schools to speak or write correct English.

In a standardized examination designed to test these abilities, pupils from small towns scored considerably below pupils from large cities where more emphasis was placed on motivated practice in writing and speaking.

Ineffectiveness of formal grammar on grammatical expression:

In an investigation of the English proficiency of 1,300 freshmen at the University of Illinois, Jefferson, Glenn, and Getmann<sup>20</sup> compared scores made by students on a composition test given them in September and repeated four months later. In spite of heavy drill on mechanics of grammar in the intervening four months, more progress was made by students in improvement of purposiveness, organization, analysis and fluency than in the mechanics of writing.

Strom<sup>21</sup> undertook a study involving 327 high school sophomores in fifteen classes to investigate the relationships existing between the

<sup>19</sup>Smith, Dora V., Evaluation Instruction in Secondary School English, p. 273.

<sup>20</sup>Jefferson, B. L.; Glenn, S. E.; and Getmann, Royal, "Freshman Writings: September to February," The English Journal, (January, 1935), pp. 34-36.

<sup>21</sup>Strom, op. cit., p. 6.

ability to read materials of an informative or literary nature and the ability to analyze the syntax and grammar of the sentences read. In general, little if any, relationship was found between the pupils' comprehension of ten selected passages of poetry and literary prose and their ability to classify crucial elements of grammar and syntax in the sentences in these passages. Further testing showed the correlations between literary interpretation and grammatical analysis were still virtually non-existent. The effects of socio-economic background were taken into consideration, and the pupils from each class from both public and private schools were divided into four groups according to paternal occupation. The results indicated that the socio-economic background as evidenced by paternal occupation was a factor influencing performance on all the tests except the one of knowledge of grammar and syntax.

Two professional organizations have given serious consideration to the subject of the value of formal grammar instruction. These organizations are The National Council of Teachers of English and The National Conference on Research in English. In 1937, The National Conference on Research in English, as reported by Greene<sup>22</sup>, supported the statement that formal grammar does not result in a gain in the writing of correct English; consequently, the ability of the individual to recognize correct

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<sup>22</sup>Greene, op. cit., p. 6.

English is not the result of formal grammar. Based on evidence presented in the same year, the Conference asserted grammar failed to function as a method of teaching language expression.

Hatfield, as chairman of the Curriculum Commission of the National Council of Teachers of English, expressed the conviction that rules of grammar were ineffectual. He suggested that:

All teaching of grammar separate from the manipulation of sentences be discontinued since every scientific attempt to prove that knowledge of grammar is useful has failed.<sup>23</sup>

This same Commission pointed to the futility of teaching syntax by stating:

Labeling the parts of speech has proven in one research study after another . . . to be futile so far as its effect on speech and writing is concerned. Intermediate grade pupils should have practice in the use of language, not in classification of forms.<sup>24</sup>

In an issue featuring various subjects dealing with the teaching of English grammar, The Journal of the National Education Association discussed briefly the ineffectiveness of grammatical instruction:

<sup>23</sup>Hatfield, W. Wilbur, "What Grammar? And How?" Virginia Journal of Education, XXLX, (May, 1936), p. 318.

<sup>24</sup>Greene, Harry, loc. cit., p. 6.

Research reveals that a knowledge of classificatory grammar has little measurable effect on the ability to express ideas accurately or precisely in writing or speaking.<sup>25</sup>

English educators have conducted tests and experiments in their desire to improve student writing skills. Researchers in the field of grammar have agreed that the teaching of grammar per se to improve the student's writing skills is not the solution to the problem, and that practice in diagraming only produces a greater skill in diagraming. On the other hand, traditionalists in grammar believe that a formal approach to grammar is necessary to improve student writing skills.

#### Studies of the Formal Approach to Composition

English educators who use the formal approach to the teaching of composition firmly believe that this direct method permits the student not only to understand the rules of grammar but also to apply these rules so that he will write in a clear and concise manner. Research has supported the formal grammar approach to writing by indicating the effectiveness of schematic sentence structure, structural grammar, grammatical structure of literature, and of correct usage and grammar.

With the ineffectiveness of student expression in his composition and with the current trend toward the informal approach to the teaching

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<sup>25</sup> "Do Grammar Drills Help Writing Skills?", Journal of the National Education Association, XLIX, (December, 1959), p. 25.

of composition, a re-evaluation of teaching methods is indicated. One study revealed that only a small percentage of American high school and college graduates are able to write an intelligible letter or report.<sup>26</sup> Even young scientists find it difficult to report with clarity what they are doing. In his article, "Life, Literature, and the Classroom" Priestly emphasizes the individual's poor communicative skills:

We live in a smog of bad writing. I am not thinking about split infinitives, sentences ending with prepositions, gerunds without the possessive nouns or pronoun, and so on and so forth. I mean the dumping and shoveling of words as if they were garbage.<sup>27</sup>

A student's poor writing is not new to teachers of English composition, but because poor writing is increasing with alarming intensity, a great deal of stress is now being placed on methods of teaching, and effectiveness of traditional grammar on writing skills is being disputed.<sup>28</sup>

The language curriculum up to 1850 was dominated completely by the study of traditional grammar. During the next sixty years, although most teachers believed that instruction in formal grammar was

<sup>26</sup>LaBrandt, Lou, "Writing and Structure," Education, Vol. 76. No. 8, (September, 1955), p. 468.

<sup>27</sup>Priestly, J. B., "Life, Literature, and the Classroom," Harbrace Teacher's Notebook to English, (Winter, 1960), p. 11.

<sup>28</sup>Zahner, Louis, "Composition at the Barricades," Teacher's Notebook in English, (Winter, 1961), p. 1.

important to the study of written communications, few maintained that the direct approach was the better method. Diagraming, which is a mechanical means of analyzing the structure of a sentence, was widely used as a method of teaching composition from early records until the 1920's. Then, for some unknown reason, diagraming disappeared from high school textbooks. In the past ten years, however, diagraming has become increasingly popular as a method of teaching sentence structure.<sup>29</sup>

The effectiveness of a schematic sentence structure: In an attempt to find a remedy for the prevalence of grammatical errors responsible for preventing students from writing as well as they should, experiments stressing the use of grammar have been conducted. However, the experiments stressing the use of grammar have produced no definite conclusions because of the subjective nature of the compositions from the standpoint of the instructors, and the variety of variables such as chronological and mental age; intelligence, and personal interests of the students involved. Nevertheless, one such experiment on the effectiveness of diagraming involved 1,000 pupils in the ninth grade English classes from 22 Iowa, Illinois, and Minnesota schools. The findings indicated that diagraming is not more effective in teaching correct sentence structure than is a direct emphasis on the formulation of sentences. But

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<sup>29</sup>Hunnicut, C. W., and Iverson, William J., Research in the Three R's, p. 333.

some authors and editors are convinced that a schematic picture of a sentence (in diagram form) is of value, especially to students who cannot understand the structure of a sentence unless they express it in some graphic way.<sup>30</sup>

Consequently, two conflicting points of view still remain: The educators who advocate the informal approach argue that too many inconsistencies exist in traditional grammar, and that they can see little relationship between a knowledge of grammar and the ability to write clearly and correctly; whereas, the supporters of the formal approach firmly believe that a knowledge of grammar is a powerful aid in writing because it gives the student a better understanding of a sentence, which is so necessary for improving writing skills.

The effectiveness of structural grammar: Structural grammar which was developed by Fries, Roberts and Whitehall,<sup>31</sup> is now being used by 4 per cent of the four thousand teachers in California. This method of teaching composition does not attempt to cover grammar as a separate discipline, but analyzes the sentence from the point of view of patterns, word orders, and formal clues.

By learning general categories of sentences, the student can determine the function of a particular word in a given sentence.

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 333.

<sup>31</sup>Binney, James, "Short Report Concerning Grammar," Education, Vol. 76:8, (April, 1956), p. 472.

Instructors of this method assert that students practicing direct associations are able to express more complex relationships of thought with greater facility.

Structural grammarians<sup>32</sup> support the assumption that a particular locution is correct if enough people use it. Their contention is that what was considered slang fifty years ago now reads like a list of literary phrases. But these advocates of current usage are diverting attention from the important question by treating usage as a matter of manners instead of a matter of meaning. They are not considering the distinction between inventive and preventive usage which is the key issue. By bringing into language useful and vitalizing expressions, new usage can be inventive, but it can be preventive if it hinders the user from expressing what he wishes to say.

Students can memorize rules without understanding the principles involved. Yarborough<sup>33</sup> reports that in practice of this kind the understanding of grammatical structure is not required, and the pupil need only to observe, to learn imitation, and to transfer these learned speech patterns to his writing. Possibly for the slow learner who does not possess the insight and ability to apply grammatical results to writing, the study of correct patterns may be the answer.

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<sup>32</sup>Zahner, Louis, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>33</sup>Yarborough, Betty B., "Teaching English to Slow Learners," Teacher's Notebook in English, (Spring, 1962), p. 6.



In their article, "How Not to Teach English," Carrol and Cole<sup>34</sup> suggest that instead of teaching grammar as a separate discipline, the instructor should bridge grammar and its application to the problems of composition.

When Cox<sup>35</sup> was asked by a prominent English professor if she believed it necessary to teach grammar in order to produce good writers, she answered,

"Yes, I believe we need to build a solid foundation of grammar, but it is vitally necessary to show students every step of the way exactly how this grammar applies to their spelling and writing."

Her statement was immediately challenged by many teachers who disagreed violently. Upon investigation, she found that the reason for disagreement lay in the fact that the term grammar meant something different to everyone: To one teacher it meant the parts of speech and their nomenclature; to another it implied the science of putting words together forcefully and correctly; and still to another it meant declensions, conjugations and word usage. . . . Because each teacher gave his particular definition for the word grammar, Cox concluded that maybe it is not important for all to agree on a definition of grammar, but it

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<sup>34</sup>Carrol, John, and Cole, Tom J., "How Not to Teach English," The Clearing House, 38:1, (September, 1963), p. 25.

<sup>35</sup>Cox, Miram S., "Grammar--Why? How? When?", The Clearing House, Vol. 30, (October, 1955), p. 98.

is important that all should know the mechanics of English so that they may teach the students how to improve communication skills.<sup>36</sup>

The effectiveness of grammatical structure to literature: Although it is important for a student to read in order to build a background for good writing, some authorities are still seeking the goal of relating the study of reading extensively with the principles of writing. At Boise Junior College,<sup>37</sup> the freshman composition course is organized around readings in modern literature. In three classes, the students who showed interest in reading and comprehension were able to draw related subject matter from their own experience for theme subjects. The other students who lacked the interest in reading and comprehension encountered difficulty in finding subject matter for their themes from these readings. Despite the difficulties experienced by some students in developing theme topics, some teachers believe that the reading method is useful both as a vehicle of instruction and as entertainment value. Forrester and Stedman,<sup>38</sup> authors of Writing and Thinking, agree that there is no better or more enjoyable way of learning to write than by a vast amount of reading of the masters of English prose, for this would familiarize a student with the correct and

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>37</sup>Hatch, Ada T., "Reading Centered Composition Course," Junior College Journal, 26:7 (March, 1956), pp. 395-396.

<sup>38</sup>Forrester, Norman, and Stedman, J. M., Writing and Thinking, p. 5.

successful modes of expression. This method, however, is time-consuming, and, therefore, impractical for a busy school student. Another deterrent to this method of learning to write composition is the speed of reading that is currently being emphasized in schools and colleges. In reading rapidly, the student misses the grammatical structure of the sentence as he concentrates on the key words necessary to convey the author's meaning.

For written communication to be effective, the reader must be able to understand the message the writer wishes to convey. Yet, it is not uncommon to find ambiguously worded signs in restaurants and hotels throughout the United States. For instance they may read:

"Any discourtesy on the part of waiters will be appreciated if reported to the management; or, The management will appreciate any discourtesy on the part of waiters if reported by guests; or, Guests reporting any discourtesy on the part of waiters will be appreciated."<sup>39</sup>

The effectiveness of correct usage and grammar: Our educational system<sup>40</sup> should assume a large part of the responsibility for present-day English. Since 1900 many soft-hearted teachers have been attempting to make a game out of learning the English Arts. Many educators are afraid to make the students face the fact that they must work for an education, and some authorities would try to convince everyone that technical rules and terminology should be completely abolished.

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<sup>39</sup>Ophdyche, John, Say What You Mean, p. XIII.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. XVI.

Before a person can become an experienced chess player, he must go through the tedious preliminaries of mastering the names and moves of the pieces. Before a student can become an effective writer, he must thoroughly understand the eight parts of speech if he wants to develop the skill of conveying his thoughts in writing.<sup>41</sup>

A good working knowledge of grammatical terms will help a student to comprehend and develop style, to understand parallelism, to vary sentences, to punctuate his writing correctly, to avoid sentence fragments, comma faults, and run-on sentences.<sup>42</sup>

From somewhere, an idea has taken hold that writing must be ungrammatical in order to be interesting and that any correctly written theme is inevitably dull. It is true that some people who have never studied grammar can write an interesting article,<sup>43</sup> and that some who have studied grammar intensively may write a dull and unexciting one. However, a conscious understanding of the grammatical system is advantageous in the process of learning to write, for in general, form and content go together, and correctness does not necessarily mean a dull theme. As Ophdyche<sup>44</sup> in his book, Say What You Mean, asserts,

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<sup>41</sup> Cook, Luella B., Using English, Book Two, p. 381.

<sup>42</sup> Jewett, Arno, and Tovatt, Anthony, How Much Grammar Should We Teach?, " English Journal, LII:3, (March, 1963), p. 215.

<sup>43</sup> Binnet, James, op. cit., p. 477.

<sup>44</sup> Ophdyche, John, op. cit., p. XVII.

"Correct usage is, if you please, a matter of grammar. There can be no blinking the fact and no apologies made to the so-called and self-called advanced or progressive educators."

Little research is available that supports one method as being better than the other method in the development of student writing skills. Consequently, an experiment comparing the effectiveness of grammar-diagraming on student writing skills to the literature-writing approach on student writing skills was designed.

#### Summary

The results of the survey of literature indicated that the teaching of either the informal or formal approach to composition has not been considered satisfactory since neither has produced students who are effective writers.

Perhaps one reason for the controversy concerning the teaching of grammar relative to composition is that no two English teachers have the same definition of the term grammar. To some teachers it has meant word usage; to others it has implied communication techniques, and still to others it implied conjugations and declensions.

Another reason contributing to the controversy of formal versus informal grammar relative to teaching composition was the inconsistencies and exceptions to rules of formal grammar as contrasted to the liberal interpretation to grammatical constructions found in literature.

An inspection of the literature reveals two viewpoints concerning the relative effectiveness of the informal and formal approach to the

teaching of grammar to improve student writing skills.

Those individuals who supported the view that the informal approach to grammar is effective in teaching student writing skills stated: (1) that grammar-diagramming produced only greater skill in diagramming, (2) that diagramming did not apply to language skills, comprehension, and usage, (3) that formal drill in grammar was ineffective in improving grammatical expression.

Those individuals who supported the view that formal instruction in grammar relative to composition is effective in improving student writing skills stated: (1) that the value of diagramming is effective because it expresses sentence structures in a graphic manner, (2) that diagramming strengthens associations between sentence structure and word usage, (3) that the teaching of formal grammar can be applied to individual problems of student compositions, and (4) that a good working knowledge of grammatical terms helps a student to comprehend and develop a writing style.

Little research is available that supports one method as being better than the other method in the development of student writing skills. Consequently, an experiment comparing the effectiveness of grammar-diagramming on student writing skills to the literature-writing approach on student writing skills was designed.

## CHAPTER III

### EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN AND INVESTIGATIONAL PROCEDURES

Because it was believed that an intensive unit in grammar would improve final achievement in writing compositions, an experiment involving the cooperation of teachers and students in San Lorenzo High School, San Lorenzo, California, was designed and an investigation was conducted to determine if there was any significant difference in the final achievement in writing skills by students who write compositions in the manner of using world authors as examples of writing or those students who write compositions in the formal manner of applying grammatical rules to their written expression. The following items were considered in designing the experiment and conducting the investigation: (1) introductory grammar-diagraming unit, (2) selection and assignment of teachers, (3) information used in comparing the experimental and control groups, and (4) teaching procedures.

#### Introductory Grammar-Diagraming Unit

A grammar-diagraming unit was selected for use at the beginning of the senior literature and composition course rather than at the end because of the need for student understanding of the grammatical structure involved in writing compositions. The unit of grammar-diagraming at the beginning of the senior literature and composition course not only acquaints the student with the grammatical structure of correctly written

sentences but also serves as a background for the understanding of sentence structure for future writing assignments. Three criteria were considered in devising the grammar-diagramming unit: (1) the selection of grammar-diagramming to be included in the unit, (2) the time required for completion of the unit, and (3) the grammar-diagramming to be included in the unit.

Criteria for the selection of exercises to be included in the unit:

It was believed that certain criteria should be met in selecting units of grammar-diagramming for the introductory unit. The units selected would progress from the simple grammatical rules to the complex. The grammar exercises would be directly related to the course content of senior literature and composition: parts of speech, verb tenses, subject-predicate (sentence base) clauses, agreement problems, pronoun case, word modifiers, parallelism, and shifts in and split constructions.

Because the experiment would be only of one year's duration, it was advisable that the grammar-diagramming unit occupy as short a time as possible in order to provide the majority of time for actual writing assignments concerned with the Language Arts Curriculum Guide. However, the time allotted to the introductory unit should be sufficient to allow the students to gain an understanding of sentence structure which could have an effect on their final achievement in senior literature and composition and should be sufficient to permit adequate measure of the effect on final achievement of the students' writing skills.



The exercises selected for the grammar-diagraming unit consisted of an intensive review of the following: parts of speech, all moods, tenses, active and passive voice of verbs, diagraming of sentence bases, diagraming of phrases, main and subordinate clauses, review of agreement problems, case and reference of pronouns, dangling and misplaced modifiers, faulty parallelisms, and shifts in and split constructions. These areas of grammar-diagraming provide opportunities for the student to experience first hand the correct grammatical structure which is required to write compositions clearly and concisely.

Determination of the time required for completing the unit: When planning the introductory unit in grammar-diagraming, it was necessary to determine the time required to complete the unit. From previous teaching experience, the writer determined that a six weeks intensive review of grammar-diagraming was sufficient for completion of the units. The six weeks review represented one sixth of the entire course which permitted an adequate measure of the effect of grammar-diagraming on the improvement of student writing skills.

Content of the unit: The introductory unit selected for the experimental portion of this study contained 11 areas which were covered during the first six weeks of the first semester. The first four sections, i. e., the eight parts of speech, verb conjugations, subject-predicate (sentence bases) were reviewed the first two weeks. One week was devoted to phrases and clauses. Two weeks were planned for agreement

problems of subject and verbs, pronouns and antecedents, pronoun case and reference. The sixth and last week of the experiment covered dangling and misplaced modifiers; faulty parallelism, shifts and split constructions. After each section had been discussed, the student was asked to write an original paragraph incorporating sentence usage dealing with that unit.

In order to determine the effect on final achievement of the use of the introductory units of grammar-diagraming, it was necessary to secure the aid of several teachers who would teach senior literature and composition according to the methods proscribed for the experimental and control groups.

#### Selection and Assignment of Teachers

To obtain data for determining if there was any significant difference in final achievement between students who study senior literature and composition in the traditional manner and students who completed the intensive six weeks review of grammar, it was necessary to enlist the aid of teachers of the senior literature and composition classes who were then assigned to the experimental and control groups. The two teachers assigned to the experimental groups and the two teachers assigned to the control groups had expressed an interest in the study. These teachers were experienced teachers with a mean of 3.7 years teaching senior literature and composition classes. The

range of their total teaching experience was 5-14 years. Each teacher held a Master's degree--two from the University of California, one from Stanford University, and one from the University of Washington at Seattle. In addition, each teacher has taken graduate work beyond his Master's degree. The four participating teachers taught a total of 132 students in four classes of senior literature and composition.

The assignment of two classes to the experimental group and the assignment of two classes to the control group was done on the basis of the teacher's orientation to the informal or formal approach to teaching composition. The assignment was determined by the background and personal interest of the teachers. Teachers A and B were known by educators to be effective in teaching grammar. The remaining two teachers C and D were known by educators to be effective teachers in the field of literature. The classes taught by teachers A and B were designated as the experimental groups; the classes taught by teachers C and D were designated as the control groups. The class period for each group was 50 minutes long, and the classes met five days a week for 36 weeks.

#### Information Used in Comparing the Experimental and Control Groups

To determine the effect on final achievement of improved student writing skills as a result of a six weeks intensive review of grammar, it was necessary to compare the experimental and control groups to

ascertain the extent to which they were similar prior to the statistical analysis of the data. The information used in comparing the experimental group with the control group was obtained from three areas: (1) I. Q. of the students participating in the study, (2) cumulative grade point average, and (3) the Subject A Test, Form 58, used as a pre-test. The Subject A Test, Form 58, is composed of four parts: sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, and a 500 word composition.

The student t technique<sup>45</sup> at a significance level of 0.05 was used to determine the relative effectiveness of the informal and formal approaches to the teaching of composition when the experimental and control groups were compared. (See Table 1, page 36)

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$$t = \frac{M_1 - M_2}{\sqrt{\frac{\sum x_1^2 + \sum x_2^2}{N_1 + N_2 - 2} \cdot \frac{N_1 + N_2}{N_1 \cdot N_2}}}$$

$M_1$  = The mean of the difference between the scores on the Subject A Test, Form 58, and the Subject A Test, Form 59, of the control group.

$M_2$  = The mean of the difference between the scores of the Subject A Test, Form 58, and the Subject A Test, Form 59, of the experimental group.

$E_{x1}^2$  and  $E_{x2}^2$  = The sum of the square of all the differences of the Subject A Test, Form 58, and the Subject A Test, Form 59, for the control and experimental groups.

To determine if the control and the experimental groups were equal in terms of I. Q. and overall scholastic ability, the student t technique was used to analyze the difference of the means of the control and the experimental groups of I. Q. and grade point average.































































































































































































