2014 Summer Teaching Grant
Grammar Instruction in 6th-12th grades: Research and Practice
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I am requesting a Summer Teaching Grant to develop new resources for teaching grammar in secondary schools. I propose to develop a White Paper with examples of middle and high school lessons and activities that will be used for two courses I regularly teach: English 436 (The Structure of English) and Eng 370 (Introduction to Language), as well as for the two-quarter sequence English 443 and 443 (Teaching English Language Arts in the Secondary Schools) and ELL 342 (Introduction to English Linguistics for P-12 Teachers).

There are four reasons why this work is important and timely. One is the incorporation of new research; recent, important research has demonstrated the criticality of direct instruction of grammar for the improvement of student writing. The topic of teaching grammar in secondary schools has a long and fraught history but, despite ample current research, most teacher training programs still promote instructional modes based on 30, 40, and even 50-year-old research. Direct instruction about language (grammar, in particular) was not common for some years in middle and high school, except as error correction. However, we have learned a great deal since then about which aspects of grammar should be taught, building on the advances of both linguistics and of writing instruction. For example, work over the last few years (Jones, Myhill, and Bailey (2012), Lines and Myhill (2012), Mulder and Thomas (2009)) demonstrates that contextualized grammar study has a positive effect on writing performance in intervention groups compared to control groups. This work also offers solid evidence for the benefits of teaching grammar to develop writing, not only for new writers but also for strong writers. Such research has led to a shift in the teaching of grammar in middle and high school that is not yet reflected in our teacher preparation materials. Other work in this century, such as that by Kolln (2003), Kolln and Hancock (2005), Brown (2009), Patterson (2001), Martinsen (2000), and others, discusses the controversy, but also the evidence for the many benefits beyond applications to writing instruction.

A second reason for this project is needed now is the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, a state-led effort, coordinated by the National Governors’ Association Center for Best Practice and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), which has developed standards in collaboration with teachers, administrators, and outside experts. These new national standards give much more attention to language than many existing state standards do and emphasize direct grammar instruction, beginning in the early grades, because the benefits of such instruction have been recognized. However, the teachers I collaborate with are concerned that students are woefully unprepared to meet these standards given the current curricula and materials.

Thirdly, this project also forms part of the larger K-16 project, Core to College: Preparing Students for College Readiness and Success, which aims to foster long-term collaboration between state higher education and K-12 schools, guided by the Common Core State Standards and assessments. Washington is one of 10 states in the project, and I am a representative for WWU to this larger Core to College project. It is important that we better align what we are doing in higher education with the expectations for students in K-12 and that we better communicate the research on language to the wider community. And crucially, recognition of how important linguistic study is in K-12 should be directly reflected in our English Education courses here at Western.

This collaborative work with educators should go beyond our publications and presentations at national meetings; it should be part of the instruction about the teaching of grammar and other linguistic topics here at WWU. For the past decade I have been collaborating with teachers in order to develop linguistically-informed curriculum materials for K-12 classrooms. For the past decade I have been collaborating with teachers in order to develop linguistically-informed curriculum materials for K-12 classrooms. This long-term project has included a National Science Foundation grant, professional leave in 2006-07 to work in schools with elementary teachers, ongoing development of curriculum and teacher resources for K-12, as well as substantial changes in the way I teach my courses. My professional leave project this year is focused on refining and disseminating (by blog, book, website, local and
national professional meetings, meetings with teachers and administrators) the rationale, the lesson plans, and teacher resources for more relevant, accessible, and standards-based instruction on language in K-12 education. Much other recent work (for example, Denham (2007, 2010), Denham and Lobeck (2002, 2005, 2010); Jones et al (2012); Honda, O’Neill, and Pippin (2004); Kolln (2003), Lobeck and Lightfoot (2013), Lobeck and Smith (2013), and Noguchi (2002)) has also demonstrated that exploration of grammar will pay off for students in critical thinking and language empowerment with explicit extensions to writing and analysis of literature. A White Paper that situates this research and highlights the important recent findings and their implications for our WWU Education students and their future students will be an important contribution, fostering the interdisciplinary work we say we value. Related lesson plans, available in my book Language Lessons: Daily Language Investigations, as well as those included in Denham (2013a, 2013b) and Lobeck and Smith (2013) will demonstrate examples already piloted in numerous 6th-12th grade classrooms. Although we (Anne Lobeck and I) have many informal conversations with those in Secondary Education, both in our department and in Woodring, improving circulation of this research and work has been an acknowledged shortcoming at the national and local levels. My white paper will advance collaboration and be an important component of the interdisciplinary communication that must happen in order to enhance student learning at all levels.

I will spend substantial time compiling the research that has demonstrated the effectiveness of direct instruction of linguistically-informed grammar. These findings emphasize that using students’ intuitions in conjunction with facilitated scientific investigations to identify and analyze linguistic patterns accomplishes highly desired educational objectives:

- differentiates between oral and written language
- expands students’ understanding of alternative usage (e.g. fragments in fiction and poetry),
- provides an alternative to analyzing errors as simply mistakes to be corrected,
- introduces students to useful linguistic concepts and terminology (such as clause, subject, prepositional phrase),
- offers students tools that they can apply to analyzing language more generally, and
- offers a better way to tackle errors of writing.

Providing an overview of the current research on linguistically-informed grammar instruction alongside examples of the kinds of materials to be integrated throughout the school year would greatly benefit pre- and in-service teachers.

This project would fulfill a need that we have felt for many years. We here at WWU, both in Education, English, and Linguistics, embrace the importance of linguistics courses for our secondary English teachers. Our English majors who are going to be teachers take both Introduction to Linguistics and The Structure of English. Washington’s Professional Educator Standards Board also includes a number of standards on “Knowledge and Understanding of the English Language, Language Development, and its Diversity.” However, when our students graduate and get their own classrooms, they find a dearth of linguistically-informed materials and often fall back on traditional models, with little instruction about language and only abbreviated lessons connected to correcting errors of writing.

With support from this summer teaching grant I will demonstrate how we have been bringing research-based instruction on grammar into middle and high school classrooms while also allowing teachers to focus on all of the other important aspects of a secondary English course. My work will also show how grammatical knowledge can enhance secondary English courses. This approach will bring our teacher preparation courses in line with our own expectations for our students as future teachers of Washington State’s children. They will also elevate the expectations for knowledge of language advanced by the Common Core State Standards for K-12, while incorporating the advances over the last 30 years in research on the effects of grammar instruction on writing. The project will expand my own expertise as a teacher, broaden my knowledge of the expectations of our students in the Eng 443-444 classes, and better inform how I teach Eng 370 and Eng 436. It will complete a critical piece of my long-term collaborative effort towards the integration of linguistics into all levels of education by making a more direct connection between my research and Secondary Education here at WWU.

Denham, Kristin (2013a) Middle School Linguistics http://middleschoolling.blogspot.com/

Denham, Kristin (2013b) TeachLing: Lesson plans on language and linguistics in K-12 education http://www.teaching.wwu.edu/


Lobeck, Anne and Dana Smith (2013) Teaching Grammar Through Inquiry, manuscript.


Patterson, Nancy (2001) “Just the facts: Research and theory about grammar instruction,” Voices from the Middle 8, 2, 50-55.