

“THE SKUNK AT THE GARDEN PARTY OF THE LANGUAGE ARTS”:
STUDENTS WEIGH IN ON WHAT GRAMMAR MEANS TO THEM

by

Sarah Caroline Olson

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DEFENSE COMMITTEE AND FINAL READING APPROVALS

of the thesis submitted by

Sarah Caroline Olson

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The following individuals read and discussed the thesis submitted by student Sarah Caroline Olson, and they evaluated her presentation and response to questions during the final oral examination. They found that the student passed the final oral examination.

Heidi Estrem, Ph.D. Chair, Supervisory Committee

Thomas Peele, Ph.D. Member, Supervisory Committee

Gail Shuck, Ph.D. Member, Supervisory Committee

The final reading approval of the thesis was granted by Heidi Estrem, Ph.D., Chair of the Supervisory Committee. The thesis was approved for the Graduate College by John R. Pelton, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College.

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I work to add new voices to an old conversation. While instructors and scholars alike have argued about the efficacy of various methods of grammar instruction, about whether grammar instruction should even be included in the English composition classroom, and about how to define grammar for more than a century, student voices have rarely entered this discussion. For this reason, I conducted a survey of student grammar conceptions within the First Year Writing Program at Boise State University, as well as follow-up focus groups. From these findings, I work to construct a denotative and connotative definition of grammar from the student perspective. Notably, students' denotative understanding of grammar continues to be largely prescriptive, though they are aware of the flawed nature of this way of viewing the topic. Students' connotative understanding includes terms like, "correct," "proper," "punctuation," "structure," "English," "words," "language," "sentence," "writing," "speaking," "judgment," "insecurity," "complexity," "convolution," "mystery," and "school."

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CHAPTER 1: CONNOTATIONS AND DENOTATIONS OF GRAMMAR WITHIN
RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

“Grammar is the skunk at the garden party of the language arts.”

-- Members of the NCTE Assembly for the
Teaching of English Grammar
(ATEG), *Grammar Alive! A Guide for Teachers*

After years of exploring the ins and outs of grammar from an almost exclusively descriptive perspective while in linguistics classes, it was at first quite jarring to re-enter the “real world” of other areas of the English department. I found myself back in the world where txt speak caused exasperation, and the re-occurrence of “defiantly” instead of “definitely” in student work was a torment, rather than an interesting research opportunity (in all fairness, these feelings are shared by most of society). I'm thankful for this slight outsider's perspective, however, as it has helped to bring interesting patterns to my attention over the course of the past two years.

One of these trends first appeared as I began teaching English 101. From the beginning of the semester, I was amazed by the number of students who stated variations of, “I'm horrible at grammar,” over and over. Yet when their work was turned in, their dire confessions rarely, if ever, were realized on paper. These students were usually at the same “level” of proficiency as the rest of their classmates. Their writing at worst

usually manifested an added handful of errors, which rarely interfered with communication.

In pointing out this disparity, I don't mean to deter efforts in grammar instruction, or claim that every student is already proficient enough in Standardized Written English. Rather I hope to draw new focus to the fact that to listen to many, you'd think that they were struggling to create barely legible texts. Further, when I would point this fact out in the classroom and compliment their grammar and usage while handing papers back, strangely mixed emotions of pleasure and mistrust would often cross students' faces. It was as if they were happy to hear this, but somehow certain it was a trick – just a teacher trying to boost self-esteem, rather than the truth. In addition, my praise rarely caused students to stop making similar declarations throughout the rest of the semester, both to me and their peers.

Prior to my research, I found this mentality incredibly worrisome. I couldn't help but wonder how my ability to learn would be affected if I truly felt that even 95% proficiency in something would only be worth a little more than none at all. On the other hand, I also wondered if this could perhaps be more a case of hyperbole for the sake of bonding with peers. In either case, I was certain that this behavioral trend was part of a fascinating bigger picture. I wasn't wrong.

As issues like those mentioned above heightened my awareness, it also became obvious that in order to begin to understand why students made comments like the ones above, I would first need to understand what students actually *meant* when they used the word “grammar”. This was most evident when reading cover letters: students would often ask me to pay special attention to grammar, but when providing specifics, their requests often had little to do with my own understanding of what this meant.

Sometimes this translated into help with organization, sometimes into help understanding the surface level conventions of a specific genre. Clearly, a disconnect was present on multiple levels where this term was concerned.

In order to actually answer my initial questions, I needed to explore the answer to the question, “What does 'grammar' mean to first-year college students at Boise State University?” When asking this question, I refer not only to the denotative, or dictionary definition of the word. Rather, an exploration of the connotative connections students make was necessary as well, in order to understand what, exactly was going on. In other words, I was interested in not only knowing their answers to such questions as, what is grammar? but also to ones like: What do you think of when you hear the word “grammar”? What memories do you attach to this word? What is its place or role within society?

...

As I delved into the literature connected to grammar within the field of Rhetoric and Composition, while I found a wealth of information that could be pieced together into a denotative and connotative understanding of this term for those who teach within the discipline, I did not find much information directly including the voices of students. Aside from the loosely related inquiries I will detail below, if student conceptions of grammar, or even opinions, were mentioned, it was almost always in terms of what researchers assumed or inferred, rather than statements based on direct, systematic study. For example, in “Response and the Social Construction on Error,” Chris M. Anson concludes by stating that “Attention to the principles of error as one *subject* of a writing classroom not only helps to revise and reformulate *our students' usually misguided models of correctness* but also closes the gap between our own reading or grading

processes and students' work" (18, second emphasis added). While the assumptions made were usually ones such as the above that I suspected to be true, this wasn't always the case. Leah A. Zuidema's article "Myth Education: Rationale and Strategies for Teaching against Linguistic Prejudice," elaborates on the assumptions of another author in a way that I found rather troubling, stating,

"Wilson asserted, 'Students who feel smug about their use of Standard English will benefit from understanding the linguistic strengths of speakers of other dialects' . . . to ignore the 'smug' students is a grave mistake, for these are the people who hold – or, as adults, will hold – much of the power that allows linguistic stigmatization and discrimination to continue.'" (667)

Though I lacked years of experience in the classroom, conversations from throughout my life lead me to enter this study suspecting that the only people who were ever truly, consistently smug about their knowledge of written language were a select few who make their livings writing grumpy language columns. Instead, I suspected that, while they occasionally expressed being proud of capability in a particular area of grammar, this was tempered by a perception that they were far from experts. It should be noted that I point out these examples not to highlight weaknesses in the work of others, but to explain where additional inspiration for my own research originated. As will be seen further into this document, both of these articles, as well as others making similar assumptions, helped me to further pinpoint precisely what it was I wanted to study and what questions needed to be asked of students.

I feel that these questions are important to answer from a student's perspective as well; if we desire to broaden students' understanding of language and grammar, it seems

that the only way to do this respectfully is to first work to understand what students already know and believe. While impressions gathered from years of teaching are incredibly useful, they can be skewed by personal beliefs and backgrounds. This can be especially true in relation to concepts such as grammar, which pack such a powerful emotional and political punch for some. Accordingly, while I used my own impressions as well as those of other instructors and scholars in the formation of questions, I work here to include as many student voices as possible in the formation of answers. Through my research, I provide a better understanding of what differences and similarities lie between instructor and student understandings, in order to better understand how my own and other instructors' views interact with those of students for better or worse. In addition, this knowledge is used to better gauge where to begin conversations about grammar with this community.

During my preliminary research, it also became clear that one of the reasons for the diversity of student interpretations of what grammar was, was the equally diverse understandings held by instructors. As I'll elaborate on shortly, grammar can mean anything from syntax to style; it can represent anything from traditional discipline and order to gatekeeping and discrimination. In order to gain a sufficiently deep understanding of what grammar was, and what it represented, my own questions couldn't be situated solidly within a single, closely related body of prior research, or even completely comfortably in the overlap found between two or even three areas. Rather, my questions lie at the junction of many fields, even spanning related disciplines. For this reason, rather than providing an outline of a single area of inquiry that has inspired my questions, I begin my survey of related research with a look at articles that have helped me to develop an understanding of the connotative and

denotative conceptions of grammar that published scholars and instructors alike within the field of Rhetoric and Composition bring to the table when they enter the classroom. At times, in order to fully explore the implications of these views, research originating in sociolinguistics is drawn upon. What follows is a closer examination of how each of these areas of study enriches my own understanding while supporting the call for additional insight. These areas also represent an overview of the major components making up my own connotative and denotative definitions of grammar, which, due to the lack of scholarship concerning student conceptions, is the main foundation from which I draw the questions that I ask students. Following this groundwork, I discuss studies that attempt to discern how proficient students feel they are at writing grammatically correct Standard English, and to pinpoint what exactly students understand grammar to be. As previously mentioned, this section is rather sparse, and often populated with material more concerned with language learner populations or those either teaching, or soon to be doing so. While my own interests lie with a more general population, these studies establish the sorts of questions that people have asked before, and how each worked out.

Rhetoric and Composition's Denotative Definition of “Grammar”

While terms are often quite straight forward when thought of in a strictly denotative sense, this trend doesn't hold true for the word “grammar”. Even among instructors, there is no consensus on what this term covers. Elements of this confusion are even discussed within the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which comments in its definition of the word “grammar” that,

The old-fashioned definition of grammar as ‘the art of speaking and writing a language correctly’ is from the modern point of view in one

respect too narrow, because it applies only to a portion of this branch of study; in another respect, it is too wide . . . because many questions of ‘correctness’ in language were recognized as outside the province of grammar: e.g. the use of a word in a wrong sense, or a bad pronunciation or spelling, would not have been called a grammatical mistake. At the same time, it was and is customary, on grounds of convenience, for books professedly treating of grammar to include more or less information on points not strictly belonging to the subject.” (“grammar” 1.a.)

In other words, our understanding of what grammar is, is still in a state of change and flux. Elements of Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, or ideological dominion by consent, help to explain this phenomenon. As Victor Villanueva aptly and poetically summarizes, “Common sense changes but still holds elements of older ways. That is, common sense maintains elements of previous hegemonies, reflecting current forces while containing previous forces, reflecting past ideologies and ideological struggles as well as present ones, reflecting past social relations and current relations” (Villanueva 124, 5). Given the connotations connected to the word grammar, it really isn’t surprising that older, traditional understandings of the term are still coloring newer views and shaping how information is organized and presented. Hence, as the *OED* comments, the discipline recognizes that style, usage, and grammar are all very different things, and yet still tends to group them all into the same areas of handbooks, or the same publications. In addition, though these areas are now recognized as different topics on some level, where precisely to draw boundaries is still very much up for discussion.

In fact, this problematic understanding of what exactly is meant by “grammar” dates back more than 25 years. In Patrick Hartwell’s “Grammar, Grammars, and the

Teaching of Grammar,” published in 1985, the author provides some enlightenment on what continues to fuel the debate over the place of grammar instruction within composition. He does this by providing five definitions of “grammar,” hoping in vain to put an end to debates caused by people arguing for the inclusion of completely different concepts in the composition classroom, as if they were all the same thing.¹

Summarized, they are as follows:

1. The “tacit and unconscious knowledge,” of language that a native speaker automatically acquires; a knowledge that is, however, influenced by literacy (111).
2. Linguistic grammars, such as older structuralist, or more recent (at the time) generative-transformational theoretical models, which attempt to explicitly represent Grammar 1 knowledge (114).
3. “Linguistic etiquette.” In more modern terms, “usage,” or as Hartwell puts it, “shibboleths” (110).
4. “The Incantations of the ‘Common School Grammars’” (119, in allusion to Suzette Haden Elgin). The flawed understandings of how the English language works often provided in traditional school handbooks: rules that are COIK: “clear only if known” (119).
5. “Stylistic grammar.” The conscious control and manipulation of language in order to achieve a desired effect (125).

Sadly, echoes of these conflated meanings are easy to find in the complaints of other scholars up to the present, as well as in confusing delineations in handbooks that students are supposed to draw guidance from. The following are a few select examples from each.

To begin with scholarly examples, in “Correctness and its Conceptions: The Meaning of Language Form for Basic Writers,” published in 1996, Michael Newman echoes a similar sentiment to that expressed by Hartwell. He comments, “. . . although we still evaluate students’ writing in terms of correctness every day, we do so without having reformulated a consensus about what this concept means” (23).² The author ties this continued upheaval to the historical circumstances surrounding the growth of the field. At the same time that open enrollment policies allowed for a much greater diversity in student bodies, older behaviorist approaches toward error were being replaced with newer ones influenced by the language acquisition theory of Noam Chomsky (24). This upheaval meant a move away from seeing error as a collection of bad habits, towards seeing it as part of the learning process. This shift, however, has never fully occurred. As Newman puts it, “Yet outside the classroom – and at times in it – this more theoretically sound and pedagogically appropriate approach has not had much impact on people’s views on the seriousness of error and the importance of avoiding it” (24).

Moving forward to 2001, Dominic Wyse, in “Grammar. For Writing? A Critical Review of Empirical Evidence” comments that “Defining grammar is problematic. Debates about grammar teaching have often confused style and correctness or differences between descriptive and prescriptive grammar” (411). Further, in 2004, Laura R. Micciche laments in “Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar” that, “Further complicating the problematic place of grammar in writing instruction is the matter of what kind of grammar we’re talking about. . . . However, grammar has a range of referents (i.e. prescriptive, descriptive, rhetorical) that describe very different kinds of intellectual activities, differences that matter tremendously” (717).

As mentioned previously, these blurring boundaries and clashing ideologies, unsurprisingly, appear in popular student handbooks as well. I choose as my first example *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, because although it is far from focused on the subject, it is often seen by students and instructors alike as *the* authority on formatting and stylistic choices. In addition, in regards to slippage of terminology, it provides several excellent examples. These include, “The organization and development of your ideas, the coherence of your presentation, and your command of sentence structure, grammar, and diction are all important considerations, as are the mechanics of writing—capitalization, spelling, punctuation, and so on” (49). Later in the text, further distinctions are made: “Although the scope of this book precludes a detailed discussion of grammar, usage, style, and related aspects of writing, this chapter addresses mechanical questions that you will likely encounter in writing research papers” (65). In summary, grammar here is something distinct from, among other things, sentence structure, diction, the mechanics of writing, usage, and style. I’m left wondering, what’s left? Within this text, grammar seems not even to represent a collection of sliding, layered concepts, but rather is simply a meaningless filler word.

Extreme cases such as the previously described are unsurprisingly impossible to find in handbooks that focus more extensively on grammar, but the more common slippages in meaning described by scholars above are easy to spot. For example, *The Everyday Writer* by Andrea A. Lunsford dedicates several sections to related content, choosing to separate stylistic features such as parallelism and shifts in moods and tense from “Sentence Grammar,” which covers basic parts of speech and sentence structures, which is, in turn, separated from “Punctuation and Mechanics.” which, besides punctuation, covers topics such as abbreviations, writing numbers, and when to use

italics. Again, we are left with a much clearer understanding of what grammar is not, than of what it is. Or, perhaps some of these topics are meant to be seen as branches of one overarching area? This isn't clear from looking at the text.

As will be seen in future chapters, unsurprisingly, much of this confusion reoccurs in student conceptions of what grammar is, and what its uses are. Definitions are far from lining up completely, however.

Rhetoric and Composition's Connotative Definition of "Grammar"

Several elements of this field's connotative definition have already been indirectly discussed in relation to the denotative: grammar is still deeply enmeshed in our minds with concepts of usage and style. So much so that it's basically impossible to find a handbook that doesn't cover these elements in overlapping, intertwined ways, and many scholars feel the need to clarify precisely which of these elements they are referring to when they write about related issues. In other words, no matter what the professed teaching philosophy, the word "grammar" still has heavy prescriptive connotations. This section moves beyond these associations to look at others that seem enduringly connected with Rhetoric and Composition's understanding of grammar.

Firstly, wherever grammar is discussed, the word "error" is rarely far behind. In a sense, what grammar is, is defined for the discipline through our understanding of the many perceived ways one can fail to be grammatical. Of course, since long before the field of Rhetoric and Composition was born researchers have been fascinated by grammatical error, and haunted by the possibility that the Chicken Littles were right; that the turmoil of varying current events *was* negatively affecting the ability of students

to write grammatically proficient prose. However, the centrality of this concern becomes apparent in light of a related phenomenon: in this context, though student writers make countless other mistakes while learning, when error is discussed, *almost exclusively one kind is meant*.

However, it should be noted that Mark Blaauw-Hara's 2007 study "Mapping the Frontier: A Survey of Twenty Years of Grammar Articles in *TETYC*" highlights the positive advances that can, and have been made, even with the discipline's difficulties at pinning down a common, denotative definition, and the seeming inability to talk about grammar without focusing on, or often simply meaning steps necessary to remove error. Through cataloging themes in articles published by *Teaching English in the Two Year College* concerning grammar over a span of 20 years, the author discerned that, while some authors still appeared to conceive of error as something stable, universal, and coming from a handbook in the earliest years he analyzed, it is now common-place to frame issues in terms of rhetorical situation (30). In short, the "nature" or meaning of grammatical error and correctness has drastically shifted. Though scholars still spend a good deal of time discussing error, as well as techniques for facilitating its removal from writing, the very meaning of what is being discussed has shifted. Blaauw-Harra sees this change as a positive "shift from a prescriptive view of grammar instruction to a more descriptive one" (34). In other words, a fundamental shift away from Hartwell's Grammar 4, or traditional "School Grammar" to a mixture of Grammar 2 and 5: Linguistic and Stylistic Grammar. So, in relation to connotations, not only did Blaauw-Harra find evidence that the prescriptive tinges connected to grammar were waning, but that our understanding of one of the terms most closely bound to grammar was shifting as well.

This shift in what “error” means, and hence what “grammar” means, is clear in the work of major scholars in other publications as well. For example, Andrea A. Lunsford and Karen J. Lunsford chose to complicate the meaning of their findings in a recent, nation-wide study of common errors within the writing of first year composition students by attaching the following caveat: “The rate of error in our study, then, should also be seen as rate of attention to error. When readers look for errors, they will find them” (801). The article itself focuses on trends in error, and their relation to the shifting nature of the rhetorical situations that students of different generations find themselves in. On a similar note, in “Frequency of Errors in Essays by College Freshmen and by Professional Writers,” author Gary Sloan comments that “... because of the complicated cognitive processes that come into play when one reads a text and because certain types of errors are not uniformly demarcated, what seems an error to one reader may not to another” (300).

When reading articles such as this, I was lead to wonder: Are students aware of this cycle? Is grammar understood as a dynamic, constantly changing and developing body of knowledge, or a static one? In short, how far has this shift in meaning traveled? Is it leaving the walls of academia? Or, do students still obsess over definitions gained from handbooks?

These discussions, in turn, hint at the other connotations that grammar carries within this discipline, all of which fit under the umbrella theme of grammar’s connections to power relations. As will be seen, this can refer to the subject’s traditional ties to a more authoritarian, teacher centered manner of instruction; to a problematic understanding of grammar as truths arriving from on high in the form of handbooks; to Standard American English ideologies; or to various combinations of these beliefs. In

turn, “grammar” for those in Rhetoric and Composition can be said to carry connotations such as, “authoritarian,” “traditional,” “morality,” “outmoded,” “absolute,” “positivist,” and “repressive”. While the connotations of meaning described in the previous section are indeed frustrating, I feel that it is this collection of connotations that has truly earned this topic the distinction of being “the skunk at the garden party of the language arts,” as members of the NCTE Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (ATEG) put it in the introduction to *Grammar Alive! A Guide for Teachers*. In addition, I think that these are the issues that have kept the denotative definition of grammar so confusing for so long: these are the true sites of conflict in meaning.

In support of this theory, although Blaauw-Hara’s study of trends in grammar publications over 20 year’s time did find a great deal of shift in Rhetoric and Composition’s understanding of what grammar was, and wasn’t, a consistency arose as well. Blaauw-Hara found that what tied all of the articles examined together was the fact that they all had to do with “the relationship between grammar and power” (31). This effect is shown on a macroscopic scale, such as in Amy Lynch-Binieck’s exploration of Lynn Truss’s *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves* in the contexts of language and power, in which Lynch-Binieck states, “were they more honest with themselves and us, writers of rules would instead use the terms ‘privileged’ and ‘unprivileged,’ terms that reflect the social nature of standards”(qtd. in Blaauw-Hara 34). In addition, on the microscopic level, how power relations in the classroom are affected by various methods of grammar instruction is frequently discussed. As the author puts it, the view within the discipline has now shifted towards one that feels that if “we should view students as agents with the authority to make their own choices about their writing, we have to accept that they will sometimes make choices – whether consciously, through ignorance, or as a result of

overreaching their abilities – that we may view as wrong” (35). This belief is in sharp contrast to the specter of traditional grammar education, which, as Bonnie Devet aptly puts it, “always [was] identified with teacher-centered classrooms: professors as the source of knowledge, grading papers almost exclusively for spelling, comma splices, and usage questions” (qtd. in Blaauw-Hara 35).

While these connotative associations are slowly becoming more positive, the process is far from over. In conjunction with this growing awareness of the detrimental power relations connected with traditional understandings and methods of teaching grammar, in 1974, well over 30 years ago, and years before the first article that Blaauw-Hara analyzed had been published, the Conference on College Composition and Communication moved to make a historical break from older, authoritarian, fixed understandings of what correct grammar was by publishing the resolution on the “Student’s Right to Their Own Language,” reaffirmed in 2003. This resolution arose from problems related to what Robert Phillipson refers to as linguicism, or “ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language” (qtd. in Zuidema). Besides affirming the student’s right to their own language, this policy statement affirms the “responsibility of all teachers of English to assist all students in the development of their ability to speak and write better whatever their dialects,” to “... provide the opportunity for students to learn the conventions of what has been called written edited American English,” and “that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to understand and respect diversity of dialects.” In addition, this resolution details a basic plan to achieve these ends that included two parts: publishing both the statement itself,

and “suggestions for ways of dealing with linguistic variety, as expressed in the CCCC background statement on students' right to their own language,” and “promot[ing] classroom practices to expose students to the variety of dialects that comprise our multiregional, multiethnic, and multicultural society, so that they too will understand the nature of American English and come to respect all its dialects.”

Every time I read these historic words I'm inspired, but prior to my own research I was also left to wonder how effective education has been at conveying these sentiments. When presented with this text, how would students react? Would they agree with the statements above? Be utterly flabbergasted? Or a mixture of both? My concerns have recently been echoed by the organizations that originally produced this resolution as well. In 2009, the NCTE published the new book *Affirming Students' Right to Their Own Language: Bridging Language Policies and Pedagogical Practices*. The publication opens with a statement of regret that the resolution was in need of reaffirmation in 2003 because “unfortunately, many of the same conditions that SRTOL was intended to address in the early 1970s have re-emerged with an intensity that cannot be ignored” (xvii).

While recorded examples of linguisticism are often centered on spoken speech, this perception is deceiving. Though writing and speech are two separate forms of communication, psychologically, our written and spoken voices are closely intertwined. Further, these prejudices have an even tighter hold on written language than the spoken. In addition, I suspect that some students do not always make distinctions between these situations on a grammatical level. For example, during a conference, a student once apologized to me for using the word “like” so much, referring to their use as “bad grammar”.

Further, the effects of overlooking the connections between written and spoken language in education are clear in the writing of authors like Gloria Anzaldúa and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o who succeeded in spite of the systems of education they were a part of while growing up. For example, in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa describes her struggles to exist between multiple cultures, and states in relation to language both that, "I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself," and that "words, my passion for the daily struggle to render them concrete in the world and on paper, to render them flesh, keeps me alive" (59, Preface). In a similar narrative of life caught between English colonial discourses and those of the Agĩkũyũ people of Kenya, Thiong'o states in *Decolonising the Mind* that the product of the split between the language spoken at home at that school was "like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a larger social scale, it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies" (28). It should be noted that the author refers to written, as well as spoken English here.

In relation to grammar, these connections between written and spoken English grammars can be seen in articles describing teaching methods in line with SRTOL such as "'Taylor Cat is Black': Code-Switch to Add Standard English to Students' Linguistic Repertoires," by Rebecca S. Wheeler; "Language Diversity in Teacher Education and in the Classroom," by Arnetha F. Ball and Rashidah Jaami Muhammad; and "Practical Pedagogy for Composition," by Kim Brian Lovejoy. These connections within a connotational understanding of grammar inspired even more questions about student understandings: Do students have separate conceptions for grammatical spoken and written language? Do they feel the same rules apply no matter what, or do they feel that

the mode of communication, situation, and genre dictate the necessary grammar?

Leah A. Zuidema's article "Myth Education: Rationale and Strategies for Teaching against Linguistic Prejudice," continues the call for linguistic acceptance found in the previously discussed NCTE materials, but also briefly echoes a call for research similar to what I propose. She comments on the lack of articles focused on mainstream "students' attitudes toward or knowledge about linguistic diversity" in several prominent publications, and points out that "to ignore the 'smug' students is a grave mistake, for these are the people who hold – or, as adults, will hold – much power that allows linguistic stigmatization and discrimination to continue" (667).

Within the same article, Zuidema also groups common areas of concern in the classroom into four overarching grammar myths, which, broadly speaking, are as follows:

- "English must obey the rules of grammar." (This is meant in a prescriptive manner, rather than a descriptive one)
- "Some dialects and languages don't have grammatical rules."
- "Standard English is better than other varieties."
- "English is not as good as it used to be, and it is getting worse."

My own research looks at how prevalent each of these myths is, analyzing the extent that each is a part of students' connotative and denotative conceptions of grammar. In addition, I work to examine how students use these myths to position themselves in relation to their peers, and other populations outside of the classroom. Again, if we seek to broaden students' understanding of language and grammar, it seems that the only way to do so respectfully is to first work to understand what students already know and

believe.

The sociolinguistic work of Deborah Cameron also supports the need for research like that described here. In support she states, “Only when we understand what grammar symbolizes at the deepest level can we hope to understand how its meaning is deployed at particular times, for particular purposes” (93). While Cameron’s larger focus is, again, on how powerful groups use language myths and prejudice to shape public policy and education, her words can be applied to pedagogical situations as well. In order to shape public policy, these latent, symbolic understandings must first be an integral part of the general public’s understanding. Hence, I hope to work towards understanding “what grammar symbolizes on the deepest level” for first year students at Boise State, not so much to grasp how they use this information strategically (though that would be interesting as well), but rather to begin to understand what elements of these myths are currently strongest in this population in order to inform my instruction. I believe that, only with this information, can we ever hope to really shift these deeply entrenched cultural ideologies.

In addition, Cameron provides evidence of another aspect of what she refers to as the “subterranean symbolism” of the word grammar which points to possible reasons for the lack of progress in this area of English education: issues concerning morality. For example, she draws connections between the furor surrounding grammar education in England in the late 1980s and the concept of moral panic, which she describes as, “when some social phenomenon or problem is suddenly foregrounded in public discourse and discussed in an obsessive, moralistic and alarmist manner, as if it betokened some imminent catastrophe”. She also states that “. . . the measures proposed to alleviate it are usually extreme and punitive” (82). She points to a wealth of specific examples in mass

media publications in which there is “slippage between linguistic and moral terms,” and states that “[t]he otherwise baffling observations of pro-grammar conservatives become intelligible if we hypothesize a systematic analogy between the structure of language and the structure of society” (95). Traditional grammar education is seen to represent “order, tradition, authority, and hierarchy,” while any deviation represents “disorder, change, fragmentation, anarchy, and lawlessness” (95). She also points out that this association is not something new, drawing on the fact that the Greek personification of Grammar was “a stern figure holding a book in one hand and a birch rod or whip in the other” (97)³. Cameron argues that this connection (among others), which usually goes unrecognized, needs to be addressed in order for any sort of paradigm shift to occur. While Cameron uses examples from England in the 1980s to demonstrate her theory, as someone who was educated in this exclusively in the state of Idaho, I can attest to the fact that the only representations of grammar I had prior to taking courses in linguistics were very much the same, traditional ones expressed in Cameron's examples.

In closing, in trying to summarize the debate concerning the nature of grammatical error, author Patricia Lawrence comments, “‘Error’ – and this may be difficult for a generation now intent on ignoring it to understand – was the public space where the latent theoretical and educational commitments of faculty members, departments, and divisions met and interacted” (qtd. in Santa 20). I feel that given grammar’s inescapable social underpinnings, far from ending in the 90s, this assertion remains true decades later, and may continue to be true long into the future. In addition, the concerns of educators, not to mention political figures, parents, and other concerned citizens cannot have failed to impact the understandings of Boise State’s first year students. In line with this thinking, to look at student conceptions of grammar without

taking into account related social concerns such as these would be a grave error. Further, because all undergraduate students are in an unequal power relationship with faculty, if we truly hope to strive for a more student centered classroom, their voices should be heard as well, no matter what their native language or dialect. As stated previously, I strive through my own research to give this population a voice in this conversation.

Complementary Past Studies

Because part of my goal in developing a student definition of grammar is to gather some details of students' perceived proficiency, or lack thereof, in order to add depth to my findings, I provide hints here of the “real story” suggested by the research of Andrea A. Lunsford and Karen J. Lunsford, among others. Each of the following studies attempts to test the viability of notions that are a part of the common mythology of grammar in the United States and many other Western nations.

In one of the most recent, and largest studies of student grammar and usage error, Lunsford and Lunsford coded the top 25 errors found in a stratified sample of 877 anonymous student papers, and then compared their data to that of similar studies from the beginning of the 20th century onwards. In short, the typical American college student is indeed proficient in standard grammar practices, and has been relatively consistently so for at minimum almost 100 years. The main data from Lunsford and Lunsford's study is presented below, as well as comparative numbers from other similar studies which the authors summarized:

Table 1.1 Student Error Rates over Time

Study	Year	Errors per 100 Words
Johnson	1917	2.11
Witty and Green	1930	2.24
Connors and Lunsford	1986	2.26*
Lunsford and Lunsford	2006	2.45

* This number does not include the most frequent error found, spelling. Connors and Lunsford's fascination with the frequency of this error evolved into a separate study. When the newer Lunsford and Lunsford results are adjusted to exclude spelling as well, the average goes down to 2.299 errors per 100 words (800). It is also interesting to note that Lunsford and Lunsford included EFL students into their data, while Connors and Lunsford did not (788).

While error frequency has changed very little, essay length and genre has shifted considerably. While students were required on average to write 162 words per paper in 1917, 231 in 1930, and 422 in 1986, Lunsford and Lunsford found a new exponential jump to an average of 1038 words per paper in 2006 (792). In addition, while students in 1986 were most frequently required to write personal narratives, in 2006, the most common genre was the researched argument or report (793). In short, *students not only were shown to be steadily proficient in standardized grammar, but were doing so while writing arguably more complex and challenging material.* This information made me

wonder: When students enter my English 101 or 102 classrooms, in general, do they think their grammar knowledge and abilities are acceptable? Do they believe their skills are “worse” than past generations? To get to the heart of the matter, do they define grammar as a subject with achievable, understandable goals? Or is it seen as beyond their grasp?

Gary Sloan’s 1990 pilot study, “Frequency of Errors in Essays by College Freshmen and by Professional Writers,” makes a related point. Sloan compared 20 essays written in class at the end of the semester in a freshman composition course, each of approximately 500 words, to the first 500 words of the work of an equal number of professional writers in the anthology *Short Takes: Model Essays for Composition* (300). When he marked errors according to the handbook that students were required to purchase, he found that even with the certain help of editors, the number of errors found in published professional work was quite comparable to those within the student essays. For student writers, 2.04 errors were found per hundred words, as compared with 1.82 errors per hundred words for professionals (300, 302). The author states that “[b]ecause of the smallness of my samples, I regard the study as merely suggestive – and, I hope, provocative,” a statement that I wholeheartedly agree with. This research enforces the need for answers to the questions I’ve asked above in relation to Lunsford and Lunsford while opening the door to others as well. Do my students see grammar as handed down from prestigious, infallible published works? Or, does it originate somewhere else? Perhaps it simply is, much like traditional representations of God? Again, I felt that while the information provided in studies such as these was helpful, I wasn’t sure how best to make use of it in the classroom without answers to the questions I’ve posed here

as well.

In “Error Feedback in L2 Writing Classes: How Explicit Does It Need to Be?” by Dana Ferris and Barrie Roberts, I found the only instance of shades of the type of research I wanted to conduct, though the population involved was different. While this study mostly focuses on the level of explicitness necessary for effective feedback, the authors felt that answering the questions “What are student views about their own grammar needs and feedback preferences, and how do these correspond to their textual data?” were important to reaching an overall conclusion (381). As part of their research, Ferris and Roberts distributed a “Grammar Knowledge Questionnaire” and a “Grammar Knowledge Pretest” to 72 English as a Foreign Language students enrolled at California State University, Sacramento (385). The first, five-item questionnaire included a question asking students to assess their own proficiency level (399). The results of these questions were then compared to the results of the second 18-item questionnaire, which asked students to locate errors, categorize them, and suggest corrections, as well as an in-class writing prompt (387). Of the 63 students who completed the first questionnaire the majority (56%) felt that the statement “My English grammar problems are very serious and really hurt my writing,” best described their proficiency, 20% chose the statement “I’m not really sure whether English grammar is a problem for my writing,” 14% chose, “English grammar is not really a serious issue for me. Other writing issues are more important,” and 10% chose “Although I don’t know much about English grammar, it’s not a serious problem for me” (392, 399).

In the interests of providing a thought provoking, though uneven comparison to the results of Lunsford and Lunsford, I will focus here on the results of the in-class essay. In the 67 essays coded, an average of 33.6 errors per 350 words was found, which

then can be translated into 9.6 errors per 100 words. (389) While this number is higher than the previous studies discussed, it is worth taking a moment to wonder: is it “bad” enough to constitute the competency responses above? Sadly, the authors never address the results of their question concerning perceived proficiency in relation to this general error per word ratio, nor do they provide information connecting individual student’s perceptions to this actuality.

Lastly, the “Language Knowledge and Awareness Survey,” conducted by the CCCC Language Policy Committee and published in 2000, also informed my research.

Relevant questions that the survey strove to answer were:

- “What are the attitudes of NCTE and CCCC members toward language variation and bi/multilingualism?”
- “What are the attitudes of CCCC and NCTE members toward their own language? What are the sources of these attitudes?”

The committee drew a random, stratified sample of 2,970 NCTE Secondary Section and CCCC members, representing the organizations proportionately by ethnicity, gender, region, and number of years teaching. Although this survey focused on teacher perceptions, and although the subject matter may at first seem disconnected from my own questions, samples of several questions asked, as well as the percentage of respondents who agreed with each, help to show the relevance:

- Students need to master Standard English for upward mobility. (96.1%)
- In the home, students should be exposed to Standard English only. (13.2%)
- There are valid reasons for using nonstandard dialects. (80.1%)
- Students should learn grammar rules to improve their ability to understand and communicate concepts and information. (78.4%)

In addition, the survey found that 65% of respondents were unfamiliar with the “Student’s Right to Their Own Language” resolution. These results provide interesting counterpoints in conversation with student views as well, helping to situate their responses within the context of their education.

...

As can be seen, what was originally inspired by a handful of classroom interactions that left a bad taste in my mouth grew first into an attempt to tack down not only what I meant when *I* spoke of “grammar,” but also what other Rhetoric and Composition scholars were talking about. This research led me to ask further questions about what my students’ thoughts on these issues were, and also highlighted the lack of direct student input in related literature. What follows in the next chapter is the plan I formulated to begin working on getting to the bottom of all of my concerns.

End Notes

¹ “The first three of which originate from W. Nelson Francis’s 1954 publication “The Three Meanings of Grammar”.

² While Newman focuses on the conception of error and correctness within the field, and not the conception of the term “grammar,” as will be discussed in relation to the discipline’s connotative understanding of this word, the two concepts are so closely intertwined as to be often completely interchangeable.

³ This trend, in fact, continues well into the middle ages in Europe. For example, see Laura Cleaver’s “Grammar and Her Children: Learning to Read in the Art of the Twelfth Century”.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The following chapter details the research that led me to choose the ways of gathering information that I did and my reasons for using them. In addition, the details of how I carried out my plans are below.

Methodology

Several theories and concepts strongly influenced my chosen approach. Of utmost importance was the desire to make sure that, though the results would ultimately be presented in my own hand, the process leading up to them gave as many opportunities for the population involved to have their voices heard as possible. While this bent ties to larger philosophical leanings as well, the article “Seduction and Betrayal in Qualitative Research” by Thomas Newkirk moved me to bring this concern even further to the forefront. Newkirk's text details two studies in which those being “studied” were not given the opportunity to voice their own interpretations of the data gathered, as well as the dismaying consequences of these decisions. In one situation, originally described in the article “Remediation as Social Construct,” by Hull, Rose, Fraser, and Castellano, there were far reaching, negative costs for those who graciously volunteered to participate as subjects in the study: an instructor who was observed was unaware of the researcher’s negative appraisal of her interactions with a student until after the semester was over, and a student left the class sapped of confidence (6-9). The second article to be critically examined by Newkirk was Linda Brodkey’s “On the Subjects of

Class and Gender in “The Literacy Letters””. In this case, the methods used render the study almost completely moot. In this case, the author invited her graduate students to write letters to basic writing students at the same school. She then judged their success at responding (9-12) In light of these cautionary tales, not to mention the many other positive examples demonstrating that the results of a more open study are not only more ethical, but also often more nuanced, insightful, and “true to life,” I plan to follow Newkirk's suggestion to work from a “default” position. To directly quote Newkirk, “Like the default setting on a computer program, this procedure can be changed – but the researcher is responsible for explaining why he or she chose to vary the default position” (12).

The relevant “default settings” that Newkirk specifies can be summarized as follows:

- “As part of the initial agreement, the researcher should state a willingness to bring up issues, problems, or questions. . . .” and, most importantly,
- “The researcher should grant the teacher (and, when relevant, her students) the opportunity to respond to interpretations of problematical situations” (13-14).

Working in harmony with these concerns, my chosen methods were also influenced by a social constructivist understanding of knowledge building, as well as the historical tendencies of teacher-research within the field of Rhetoric and Composition. I felt that rather than single-handedly gathering data, sitting down to organize it, and then writing about my unambiguous conclusions, I needed the help of as many understandings as possible in order to begin to accurately answer my questions. This was especially true because I am not a part of the community I was learning about. In line with this theoretical positioning, without students as “co-researchers,” as Ruth Ray puts it in “Composition from the Teacher-Research Point of View,” I would be unable to

fully understand the information I gathered. As Ray states, “Students are not merely subjects whom the teacher-researcher instructs and assesses; they are co-researchers, sources of knowledge whose insights help focus and provide new directions for the study” (175, 6).

My methods were also selected through careful consideration of the context of my study, in line with the concepts discussed in Cindy Johaneck's *Composing Research: A Contextualist Paradigm for Rhetoric and Composition*. Johaneck argues that the traditional distinction between quantitative and qualitative research is artificial and harmful, leading towards a tendency to choose methods based on political, and emotional concerns, rather than through careful consideration of which methods most suite the questions at hand. As Johaneck puts it, “...depending on context, the kind of information we seek *must* vary: when stories are readily available and are informative (or, perhaps, are all we have), we should, of course, share them; when numbers are easily obtained and are informative, we should share them, too (and share them completely and, certainly, without apology)” (88). In line with this thinking, I've endeavored to adopt methods that, given my situation and the questions I have, will most effectively help me to find answers – in this case, in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

Lastly, based both on personal experience and the writing of people such as Ann Blakeslee and Cathy Fleischer in *Becoming a Writing Researcher*, I decided that conducting a study in which both reflection and reflexivity were integral parts would lead to the most constructive and useful end results. By continually actively reflecting on all of the information I gather, on my aims, my responsibilities, my role within the study, my personal beliefs, biases, and background, how I'm reaching interpretations,

and more, I worked to keep my research “honest,” on track, and sensitive to all hints at, and nuances of meaning.

Methods

A Survey of Students within the First Year Writing Program

I began my exploration of student’s denotative and connotative understandings by developing a survey for mass distribution. As mentioned in the first chapter, because I was unable to find an instrument that I was satisfied would answer my research questions, I chose to build my own, though I drew some direct inspiration from Ferris and Roberts’ study “Error Feedback in L2 Writing Classes: How Explicit Does It Need to Be?” as well as the “Language Knowledge and Awareness Survey” conducted by the CCCC Language Policy Committee. After long sessions of brainstorming and collecting all of my question ideas from the margins of relevant literature, as well as gathering helpful input from faculty, family members, fellow graduate students, members of the ATEG Listserv, and statistician Laura Bond, I sent an invitation to pilot the survey to 50 students in the target demographic. Based on the responses to questions and direct, anonymous feedback of 15 students, as well as further insight from Laura Bond, I reduced the overall number of questions and reworded several slightly. For example, originally my survey contained an even more extensive set of Likert-type statements, each of which had an “opposite” statement to test for consistency. This meant that my survey took much longer to complete than the 15 minute average I had set as an original goal, however. In addition, after discussing my goals with Ms. Bond, we came to the conclusion that a measurement of consistency at this level would not likely be necessary. This change reduced the number of Likert-type questions from over 30 to 16 without significantly reducing the amount or detail of information I would be able to gather.

Although these reverse statements were overkill for my final purposes, they did help to target several areas of confusion in the pilot survey, however. For example, the original pilot included both of the following statements:

- Experts know everything there is to know about English grammar already.
- The study of grammar is an expanding field with many areas still in need of further study.

While all but one student responded to the first statement, the second had the highest rate of nonresponse, with 6 out of 15 students choosing either “Don’t know,” or skipping it completely. As the first statement was much more readily grasped and responded to by my target population, and as it conveyed a similar enough idea, I was able to move forward using only the first and not only increase the efficiency of my measure, but also communicational effectiveness.

Once final revisions were completed, the survey was distributed via email to any member of the student population enrolled in English 101 during the Fall 2010 semester: a total of 1585 students.¹ This wide pool was selected for several reasons. Firstly, I was interested in painting as accurate a picture as possible of students’ denotative and connotative understandings of grammar, and felt that the more voices who contributed, the better I would be able to succeed. Secondly, I wanted to make sure enough data was collected, even with a very small response rate. The invitation provided a brief summary of my research questions and plans, as well as a link leading to the survey, which was distributed online through Qualtrics (see Appendix A). Of these, 220 opened the survey link, and 123 completed it. (See Appendix B for complete survey)

Student Focus Groups

Upon completion of initial survey data gathering, I use my initial analysis of the

results to inform and develop the questions asked during several hour long focus groups comprised of students from the same demographic. In order to find participants, I included an optional field at the end of my survey asking those who might be interested in further participation to provide contact information. In addition, I sent an email to a large number of graduate assistants currently teaching English 101 or 102 informing them of the opportunity for their students, and including a flyer with further information (see Appendix C).

The main purpose of these groups was to get a more in-depth understanding of especially gray and/or divisive results from my survey, as well as to work to uncover any flaws that could be affecting the results. In addition, I asked students for feedback about the results in general to get a more nuanced understanding of what they meant, and to avoid any inaccurate interpretations on my part. For example, I asked if select results were what they would expect to see, whether they agreed with them, and what they thought the reasoning behind select results might be.

In order to facilitate discussion, students were emailed a summary of results after their initial contact with me, and had on average a week to peruse this information if they desired. Copies of this summary were also available for each participant at the focus groups. This summary included a brief overview of demographics, the results of each multiple choice question, the percentage of students who agreed with each Likert-type statement, and word clouds² generated from the answers to each short response question (see Appendix D).

Each of the three focus groups met in a breakout room on the second floor of the Interactive Center for Teaching and Learning. This location was chosen for its neutrality and friendly atmosphere, as well as its convenience and familiarity for participants. Each

group of two to four students met for approximately one hour.

End Notes

¹ My initial plan was to survey all students enrolled in both English 101, and 102. Due to a clerical error (the wrong mailing list was provided), almost exclusively English 101 students received the survey. This was not discovered until much later after focus groups had already met.

² Word clouds were created from short answer results using a program called Tagxedo, which takes a text, removes common words (such as "is," "are," and "do"), and sizes the rest to highlight the frequencies of occurrence.

CHAPTER 3: THE RESULTS

What follows are the results of my survey, with input and clarifications provided by those who graciously participated in my focus groups.

Survey Demographics

In summary, the survey was taken mostly by young, female students enrolled in English 101, who grew up speaking Standard American English, and who were not the first generation in their family to attend college. To elaborate, 75% were between 18 and 20 years of age, 63% were female, 96% were enrolled in English 101, 97% grew up speaking English, 95% grew up speaking Standard American English, and 61% were not first generation college students. In comparison to the university as a whole, as of 2008, Boise State had a student population that was 54% female, and 80% of students were classified as white non-Hispanic, the second largest group being Hispanic, at 6%, followed by 3% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 1% African American and 1% Native American/Alaska Native (8% undeclared) (Demographic)¹. As of 2006, 26% of the student body was under 21, 34% were between 21 and 25, 16% were between 26 and 30, and 24% were over 30 (Institutional).

Focus Group Demographics

The 10 total focus group members were mostly young, equally male and female students enrolled in English 102, who grew up speaking Standard American English, and who were not the first generation in their families to go to college. To elaborate, 78%

were between 18 and 25 years of age, 50% were male and 50% were female, 67% were enrolled in English 102, 100% spoke English as their first language, and 89% grew up speaking mostly Standard American English. The first focus group, conducted on November 30th, 2010, consisted of two young women, one older woman, and one young man, and was split equally between 101 and 102 enrollment. The second, conducted on December 2nd, 2010, consisted of one young woman enrolled in 101, and one young man enrolled in 102. The third, conducted on December 3rd, consisted of one young woman and three young men, all enrolled in 102.

As is clear above, due to the necessity of selecting participants based on availability and willingness to help, this population did end up with some significant differences when compared to those who took the survey (most notably in gender and current class enrollment). I went into each focus group with this fact in mind, and also considered the results of the members who did more closely match the survey demographics in isolation. The only notable effect I found was a tendency for women in the second and third focus groups – ones where they were either represented in equal numbers or in the minority – to be much more willing to support the conjectures and observations of their male counterparts than to initiate conversations. However, because of the scarcity of previous, similar studies, my goal here is to look for overall trends, rather than to examine differences among various demographic populations. (Though this would also make for very interesting work!) It should also be noted that the opinions and observations, regardless of differences in population, usually supported the results suggested by the survey. In short, the differences did much more to convince me that if more students enrolled in English 102 had participated in the survey, the results would have been very similar than otherwise.

Table 3.1 Comparison of Demographics

	Survey Demographics	Focus Group Demographics	BSU Demographics
Class	96% in English 101 4% in English 102	33% in English 101 67% in English 102	NA
Age	75% 18-20 14% 21-25 3% 26-36 5% 37-46 3% 58-65	44% 18-20 33% 21-25 11% 26-36 --- 11% 58-65	26% Under 21 34% 21-25 16% 26-30 24% Over 30
Gender	63% Female 37% Male	50% Female 50% Male	54% Female 46% Male
First Generation College Students	61% First Generation 39% Not	44% First Generation 56% Not	<i>Information not found</i>
First Language	97% English 3% Other	100% English	<i>Information not found</i>
Dominant Dialect	95% Standard American English 3% A nonstandard American English dialect, or with an accent 3% Other	89% Standard American English 11% Other	Race/Ethnicity 80% White Non-Hispanic 6% Hispanic 3% Asian American/ Pacific Islander 1% African American 1% Native American/ Alaska Native 8% undeclared

So. How Do Students (Literally) Define the Term “Grammar”?

In addition to the multiple choice questions and Likert-type statements that will be discussed shortly, the survey began with five short answer questions, one of which was, “How do you define the term ‘grammar’?” I performed a thematic analysis on the responses to each of these questions, searching first for commonalities, and then color coding them to test my hypotheses as well. In addition, as can be seen in the survey summary that was distributed to focus group participants (Appendix D), as well as below, I used a word cloud generator to search for commonly used words and phrases that I might have been overlooking.

One of the most striking trends among student definitions of this term was a heavy reliance on terms like “proper,” “correct,” and to a lesser extent words like “good,” and “great”. Of the 121 definitions, 44 (36.4%) are phrased in these terms, making this the strongest trend I found. In short, correct grammar is so extremely unmarked a concept that students frequently automatically defined the word “grammar” – as if what were written on the page for them to define was “correct grammar” – a striking mirror image of the word “error” in the field’s literature, which is automatically assumed to be grammatical in nature.

The second strongest trend I found was a reliance on the word “structure,” and metaphors related to building and crafting. 24 out of 121 (19.8%) responses incorporated this sort of language, typically making statements such as, “The specific pieces of language put together to form formal writing/speaking,” or more simply, “Rules and structure of language”². It is also interesting to note that in more elaborate responses such as the first, students were much more likely to use this metaphor to define grammar as putting together, rather than taking apart.

Though grammar was often defined in terms of building, interestingly enough, building blocks were rarely elaborated on. The most often mentioned element of grammar by far was punctuation – 23 out of 121 (19%) mention it in their responses, including two people who simply wrote that single word as their response.

Lastly, rhetorical and stylistic themes do appear in at least 15 out of 121 (12.4%) of responses. Because it is impossible to know exactly what was meant by responses such as, “knowing the correct terms of a language,” however, this number may actually have been higher in actuality.

themselves were average was much more strongly felt than that the rest of the generation was below average, however. When asked about others within their generation, only 55.1% felt that their understanding was below average, while 43% felt that it was average (this, in comparison to the full 94.1% who felt that their own understanding was either average or above). When asked whether English was degrading over time, 52.1% agreed that it was – almost the same percentage as felt others’ understanding was below average.

Table 3.2 Responses to “I Consider My Understanding of Grammar to Be _____”


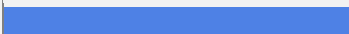

Answer		Response	%
Above average.		25	21.2%
Average.		86	72.9%
Below average.		7	6%
Total		118	100%

Table 3.3 Responses to “Today's generation has _____”


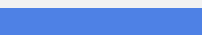

Answer		Response	%
a below average understanding of standardized English grammar.		65	55.1%
an average understanding of standardized English grammar.		51	43.2%
an above average understanding of standardized English grammar.		2	2%
Total		118	100%

Table 3.4 Other Results Related to Confidence in Self and Others

	Disagree	Agree	Don't Know
I feel comfortable editing the grammar of my own writing.	27.4% (32)	71.8% (84)	0.9% (1)
I feel comfortable editing the grammar of others' writing.	33.3% (39)	65% (76)	1.7% (2)
I feel comfortable revising non grammar related features of my own writing, such as the organization and ideas.	14.5% (17)	83.8% (98)	1.7% (2)
I feel comfortable revising non grammar related features of others' writing, such as the organization and ideas.	23.9% (28)	73.5% (86)	2.6% (3)
English grammar is degrading over time.	36.8% (43)	52.1% (61)	11.1% (13)

* For full details on Likert-type results, see Appendix E

When focus groups were initially asked to bring up anything that stood out in particular as they read through the summary of results, all three began by pointing out the disparity between the numbers of students who felt that their own abilities were average or above, and the number who felt that their generation were at the same level. While it should be noted that these questions were towards the very top of the first page of the summary, students did spend at least a few minutes reading the document in its entirety before commenting on this interesting disparity. Initial responses usually were amusement, though some underlying frustrations came to light as these results were further discussed. For example, Cody, a participant in the first group, commented, "It's kinda, it seems like the same idea in that everyone thinks their child's special; everyone thinks they're really good at grammar." Similarly, in the second focus group Mike commented, ". . . in Eastern Civ . . . at the start of the semester they talked about how a lot of American Students are doing poor in math and sciences and things like that

because they overestimate their abilities.” As the discussion in this first group unfolded, all participants agreed that what is considered average has dropped substantially in the nation, however, providing a possible explanation for the numbers: because students feel that the average is so low, they feel that they must be either at, or above that marker. While a similar discussion of decaying standards didn’t occur to the same extent in the other two groups, various members noted this possibility directly as well. In addition, it is interesting to note that in person, most participants were much more willing to talk about their struggles with grammar and their own at most average abilities, than their successes or own above average capabilities.

Responses to the Question, “What does it mean to be proficient in English Grammar?”

Although this question asks about proficiency rather than “averageness,” responses still provide insight into what students mean when they talk about degrading standards, in other words working to answer the question: “Just what *are* these standards?” Simply put, all of the same trends that occurred in response to the question asking students to define grammar occurred here as well. A trend that occurs to a lesser extent in response to that question takes on new strength here, however: a focus on effective communication. As can be seen in the word cloud below, the word “understand,” takes on a newly prominent role: 22 out of 125 responses (17.6%) incorporate this concept into their answers. On the other hand, while this trend gains prominence here, the “proper” and “correct” crowd still win out: 28% focus their definitions on these concepts. The word “understand” is so large below in part because it is used in two ways: the formerly mentioned, and also in answers such as, “to

cut, however. While 66.1% of students disagreed that, “Teachers all have such different ideas about grammar that it’s impossible to learn much of anything about the subject,” 71.8% also disagreed with the statement, “Teachers all agree on what is grammatical and what is not.” While these responses at first may seem to contradict each other, they can also be seen as simply showing as placing teachers’ expression of grammar accurately as part science, and part art. In other words, by analyzing the responses to these two questions simultaneously, students can be seen to communicate that while teachers don’t all work from the same handbook, they also rarely provide information that differs enough to cause confusion. Students’ responses to the statement, “Experts know everything there is to know about English grammar already. There is nothing new left to discover,” support this flexible conception of grammar as well: a full 97 out of 117 (82.9%) disagreed with it. In addition, though representing a weaker trend, 72 out of 117 (61.5%) also disagreed with the statement “Grammar rules are absolute. There is no wiggle room with them.”

Table 3.5 Responses to “How much should English 101 and 102 at BSU focus on grammar instruction?”

Answer		Response	%
It should be a top priority.		22	18.6%
It should be a moderate priority.		83	70.3%
It should be a low priority.		13	11%
Total		118	100%

Table 3.6 Other Results Related to Grammar in the Classroom

	Disagree	Agree	Don't Know
Instructors don't usually focus much on grammar when they read student papers.	67% (77)	25.2% (29)	7.8% (9)
Teachers all have such different ideas about grammar that it's impossible to learn much of anything about the subject.	66.1% (76)	30.4% (35)	5.2% (6)
Teachers all agree on what is grammatical and what is not.	71.8% (84)	21.4% (25)	6.8% (8)
Experts know everything there is to know about English grammar already. There is nothing new left to discover.	82.9% (97)	11.1% (13)	6% (7)
Grammar rules are absolute. There is no wiggle room with them.	61.5% (72)	33.3% (39)	5.1% (6)

In focus groups, the call for grammar to be a moderate priority was upheld for the most part, with some interesting additional insights provided as well. For example, in the second focus group Mike clarified that he felt there should be a different level of focus between English 101 and 102: English 101 should moderately focus on grammar, while English 102 should emphasize it less, as it was more concerned with research methods. Once this comment had been made, Weslynn agreed, and a similar consensus was reached by Miles and Aidan in the third focus group. Mike also commented that he found it hard to “set values for things like that because everyone comes in with a different level of understanding I suppose, or a different style which they employ. . . .” This question also fostered a reminder of how different the backgrounds of the students entering the First Year Writing Program here at BSU tend to be. While Cody commented that, “They assume almost that, you covered the basics the last time we worked on

grammar, or I worked on grammar was like the 3rd grade,” Caroline said, “Yeah, I think it should be [a moderate priority], but it shouldn’t be like pushed, because like, you have four years of it in high school, and it’s really graded hard in high school, I felt.”

Reactions and Perceptions of Error

When students were asked about their reaction to a grammatical error found within a published work, their response was quite complex. Students who took the survey were asked to select all the answers that applied to their typical response from a list that included “I feel it demonstrates carelessness,” “It makes me trust the text less,” “It makes me respect the author less,” “I barely give it a second thought – it’s not really a big deal,” “It reassures me that writers and editors are human too,” and a blank in which they could enter their own responses. The most popular response by a small margin, selected by 50% was, “It reassures me that writers and editors are human too,” however, this was closely followed by 42% who chose, “I feel it demonstrates carelessness.” The least popular response, other than adding in their own words, was “It makes me respect the author less,” which was chosen by 25% of respondents.

The responses added in by students who selected “other,” as well as responses from focus groups, also add additional insight. Within the additional short responses, several slight trends emerged, including three of the total 22 students who mention a compulsion to fix the error, three students who mention a feeling of superiority gained from finding the error, and two students who mentioned that errors are not always a black and white matter, stating, “Sometimes writers like to give the sounds out and it is part of how they write,” and, “First I have to wonder if it was an act of carelessness or if actually it has something to do with a cultural or conceptual lacking on my part. It would

not be fair to assume that the writer was stupid” (See Appendix E to read all responses). In focus groups, some of these trends reemerged. While some students agreed strongly with answers like, “I barely give it a second thought,” and, “It reassures me that writers and editors are human too,” others felt that there was more cause for concern. Two students also expressed feeling amused but proud when they spotted an error. Almost all discussion related to this question centered on how truly messy error can be, with an interesting focus on how drastically genre affects how severe an error is, or even what was considered to *be* an error. During the first and third meetings, students commented on the occasional dissonance between what was expected in the classroom, and what was expected of professional writers. For example, Ms. Brown stated,

Authors have a style of writing out sentences and they’re known for that, but you can’t write a run on sentence in class. . . like *Beloved* that I was reading, and my teacher admired that none of her sentences, like, made sense, you know, like they had a comma here and a period after two words, but he admired that that’s the way that she wrote. She became a millionaire from it, but you can’t write that way, and be grammatically correct.

During the same discussion, Cody brought up another pairing of genres in which error held a different weight for him. He felt that errors within something like a tank manual were much more worrisome to see and could have much farther reaching consequences than errors within something like a novel, while Destiny worried that errors in literature could hold more weight, as students tended to read literature in order to develop and inform their own writing abilities. This acknowledgment of the varying importance of error occurred in the third focus group as well.

The most interesting trend in written responses to this question was not only evidenced in content, but also in form. A significant number – 6 out of 22 (27.3%) -- were written in a form more closely related to “txt speak” than to formal English. In other words, the characteristic lack of capitalization of the pronoun “I” is seen, and a lack of elements of punctuation that tend to be harder to produce on a phone, such as apostrophes and commas. Two respondents elaborated on this use in interesting ways directly, stating (verbatim), “as long as i can under stand the work. i dont care,” and, “Its not a big deal due to typing on a computer anymore and txting. It has literally changed the way we write. have you ever looked at your grandparents writing. Its almost gracefull.” While people obviously are most likely not overly concerned with grammatical constructions when filling out surveys, instead most likely focusing on conveying the requested information in as concise a manner as possible, I still feel that these responses are evidence of a shift in the culture of language, and possibly the beginning of new paradigm. Responses such as the last above elaborate on tensions between old and new, while other responses such as “Someones not doing their job,” and “i read it over and over, it bothers me,” show an at least latent genre awareness that may become a stronger component of the coming generation’s understanding of what grammar is, or rather, what different grammars are developing. This trend was much stronger within these short answer responses than in other sections where students provided written answer. Elsewhere, only a handful responded similarly, suggesting that this currently represents a *very* small trend. I still think that technology’s affect on longstanding beliefs about grammar would be a fascinating area for further study, however.

To move away from how error is responded to and focus instead on who is seen

to make errors, students demonstrated a positively developing grasp of what they should realistically strive for when grammar is concerned. A full 75.2% disagreed with the statement, “People who dedicate their lives to writing or teaching writing rarely, if ever, make grammatical errors.” However, the percentage of agreement dropped to 56% when they were presented with the statement, “People who dedicate their lives to writing or teaching writing often make the same grammatical errors that college students do.” In addition, a full 8.6% chose “Don’t Know” in relation to the last statement. While anyone who has spent time with writers and English teachers knows that the above is in fact often the case, students bring up an interesting point. Although we do make the same mistakes, is it really with a similar frequency? Students also show a strong rhetorical awareness, in that an exceptional 91.5% agreed with the statement, “Some grammatical errors are much worse than others.” In fact, this statement had the highest level of concurrence in the entire survey by far. Given the fact that respondents demonstrate a very strong attention to the fact that all errors are not created equal, perhaps respondents are onto something else here as well. In other words, when analyzed together the latter two responses suggest, much as many theorists do, that although grammatical perfection can never really be achieved by anyone, what one can do is strive to reduce the number of especially negatively perceived errors within a community one desires to be a part of – as those who have dedicated their lives to writing in some capacity most likely have done.

Focus group participants were again able to bring useful additional insight and depth to these answers. When asked about the high rate of “don't know” responses to the question about whether teachers and those who dedicate their lives to writing make the same mistakes as they do, in general, as discussed above, their explanations centered on

a more nuanced perception of the question than what I originally conceived of. For example, questions were brought up such as: At what stage of the writing process? In formal, or informal situations? In speech, or in writing? They make errors, but are they *really* the same? Am I able to give an un-biased response, when I'm so used to having these people correct my own grammar? In addition, both of the focus groups who were asked this question included students who mentioned that they'd simply never thought about this before, and wondered if some simply didn't want to stop to think enough to make a decision when originally taking the survey. Overall, however, no one challenged the notion that this population *did* make errors.

Table 3.7 Responses to “(Please select all the answers that apply.) In general, when I find a typo or grammatical error while reading a published work,”

Answer	Response	%
I feel it demonstrates carelessness.	49	42%
it makes me trust the text less.	41	35%
it makes me respect the author less.	29	25%
I barely give it a second thought – it's not really a big deal.	31	26%
it reassures me that writers and editors are human too.	59	50%
Other:	22	19%

Table 3.8 Other Results Related to Grammatical Error

	Disagree	Agree	Don't Know
People who dedicate their lives to writing or teaching writing rarely, if ever, make grammatical errors.	75.2% (88)	19.7% (23)	5.1% (6)
People who dedicate their lives to writing or teaching writing often make the same grammatical errors that college students do.	35% (41)	56% (65)	8.6% (10)

Some grammatical errors are much worse than others.	7.7% (9)	91.5% (107)	0.9% (1)
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Awareness of Regional and Cultural Grammars

Unsurprisingly, the most troubling results of the entire survey were related to student's understanding of grammar in terms of its rich potential for variability, although the extent of the problem is only hinted at when these results are not considered in tandem with responses and insight gained from focus group participants. A full 81.2% agreed with the statement, "All regional and cultural variations of English have grammar," while 71.8% agreed with the statement, "All regional and cultural variations of English grammar can convey complex thinking and ideas," and 65% agreed with the statement, "Some regional or cultural variations of English grammar are better at conveying complex thinking and ideas." These results tell only part of the story, however. Each of these questions had a consistently high response rate of "don't know" as well: 8.5% for the first, 12% for the second, and a full 20.5% for the third question. No other set of questions previously discussed demonstrates a similar trend, or even remotely approaches the last percentage. This high level of uncertainty suggests that while students can intuit what an appropriate response most likely is, and while many most likely also comprehend and truly agree with each of these statements, a significant portion are caught off guard when presented with statements such as these.

Table 3.9 Results Related to Regional and Cultural Variations of English

	Disagree	Agree	Don't Know
All regional and cultural variations of English have grammar.	10.3% (12)	81.2% (95)	8.5% (10)

Some regional or cultural variations of English grammar are better at conveying complex thinking and ideas.	13.7% (16)	65.8% (77)	20.5% (24)
All regional and cultural variations of English grammar can convey complex thinking and ideas.	16.2% (19)	71.8% (84)	12% (14)

The insights of focus group participants largely concurred with the above interpretations. Of the ten students who participated, two openly expressed their own confusion with the wording of these questions, and many others were relatively uncertain with their use of the terms. Each group in turn brought up the relatively homogenous and insular background of many attending the university, agreeing that these questions dealt with issues that just weren't brought up frequently in day to day life. For instance, Cody commented that,

When you think of culture everyone always thinks of someone in the middle of Africa, someone in Europe, someone in, someone completely far off, not realizing that a culture, there are probably hundreds of cultures here, I mean there's huge, um, from people moving here just to the fact that, if you have a different religion you have a different way of life, that's a different culture. So most of the time people don't really understand . . . what a culture is, so they just kinda skipped the question.

Providing a living example of the difference background can make, Aidan, who grew up in Australia, commented towards the start of the third focus group, "I can't stop thinking of this one, where it says 90% agreed that all regional and cultural variations of English have grammar. I don't, I can't picture a variation of English that I wouldn't say has grammar. I'm just kinda surprised that people have . . . what are those people doing?" While several students also appeared to have a clear grasp of what had been asked from the beginning of the conversation, and also could speak eloquently on the subject, the

vast majority of participants agreed that language variation simply wasn't something that was discussed with any sort of regularity.

On a more positive note, as previously stated, even if students were uncertain of exactly what the question was asking, they could intuit the most likely socially acceptable answer. In support of this application of intuition, Destiny commented, “So maybe they, they thought of it as race, or, you know, bigotry or something like that. Or maybe they actually, literally thought it meant foreigners or immigrants from certain areas.” Once terms were clarified, students provided nuanced and sensitive examples of other grammars, ranging from African American Vernacular English, to texting, to the English of England and Australia, to specialized vocabularies specific to certain jobs, and various southern dialects, which Cody commented, “most of which I don’t agree with, but many of which, they can convey a point faster.” In summary, students are highly receptive to discussions about regional and cultural language differences, and were very engaged by the topic once it was brought up in each focus group. Students are ready; the conversations simply need to be had in order to bring tacit, subconscious information stored in the recesses of minds to the forefront so that it can be applied to life situations more readily.

Associations with the Term “Grammar”

Two of the short answer questions I asked directly related to this idea:

- When you hear the word "grammar," what is the first thing that comes to mind?
- Please describe one of your strongest memories connected to the word “grammar”.

(For an overview of the sorts of terms that were frequently mentioned, view the word

clouds at the end of this section.)

One strong trend among these responses, especially in relation to the question concerning memories, was reference to some variation of drill and kill style coursework. For example, “One of my strongest memories connected with the word grammar would be the one of my green grammar lesson book from junior year of high school,” “having to do sentence diagrams in 9th grade,” and, “my high school freshmen English teacher decided to go back to the basics with grammar by using work sheets that seemed so elementary. He spent a lot of time working with us and grammar. I don’t remember much from it though.” All told, of the 120 people who responded, 18 mentioned this sort of memory. This trend occurred elsewhere also, although to a lesser extent. For example, in the question concerning what first came to mind, five students out of 131 mentioned similar associations.

When coding the responses to the question concerning memory, another strong and perhaps unsurprising trend emerged. Of the 120 people that responded, 30 were easily categorizable as negative memories, while only 13 could be categorized as positive. The majority of the rest, rather than being truly neutral, are simply uncategorizable without more information. This includes statements such as, “senior thesis for high school,” or “Daily Oral Language-Practice grammar sentences in elementary and middle school”. This negative trend is represented even clearer in the results to the question concerning what comes to mind first in relation to the word grammar. Here, at best responses were neutral. In addition, of the 131 responses to this question, 18 were distinctly negative, ranging from single word responses such as “Boring,” “pain,” and “hate,” to more complex replies such as, “SCARY! I don’t know Grammar rules at all and I wish classes covered it more,” or “ugh, periods, commas, and

everything else where do they go?”

Another trend manifesting in responses to these two questions was strongly present in all other short answer queries as well, except for the question about what students would like to ask an expert in the field. As opposed to our discourse community’s focus on error, when the term grammar is used by students, either the word “proper,” or the word “correct,” never seem to be far behind. The terms were most prevalent in the response to the question, “How do you define the term ‘grammar?’” in which variations of each word occurred 22 times respectively. Typical responses of this sort include, “The way we use language in the *proper* way,” and “*correct* punctuation and spelling” (emphasis added). At times, these words dog responses, appearing multiple times within only a few short words: “Usually the first thing that comes to mind is *proper* English. Tenses being used *properly*, *correct* conjugation, syntax and sentence structure.”

Another word, along with its related terms, that never seems to be far from student’s minds is “punctuation”. This theme is most striking in relation to the question asking what first comes to mind – a full 25 out of 131 respondents mention punctuation (19.1%). It plays a similarly prominent role in students’ response to the question, “How do you define grammar?” Here, 23 out of 121 (19%) mention punctuation– a significant portion of which actually define grammar as simply “punctuation,” or “Proper use of punctuation”. In comparison, other elements of traditional grammar, such as nouns and verbs, or subjects and predicates, rarely are used. For example, these terms are only mentioned by 3 out of 131 people (2.3%) in response to the question about the first thing that came to mind. The highest instance of the use of words like these comes in response to the question asking students to define the term “grammar” – but even here only 5 out

of 121 people use them (4.1%).

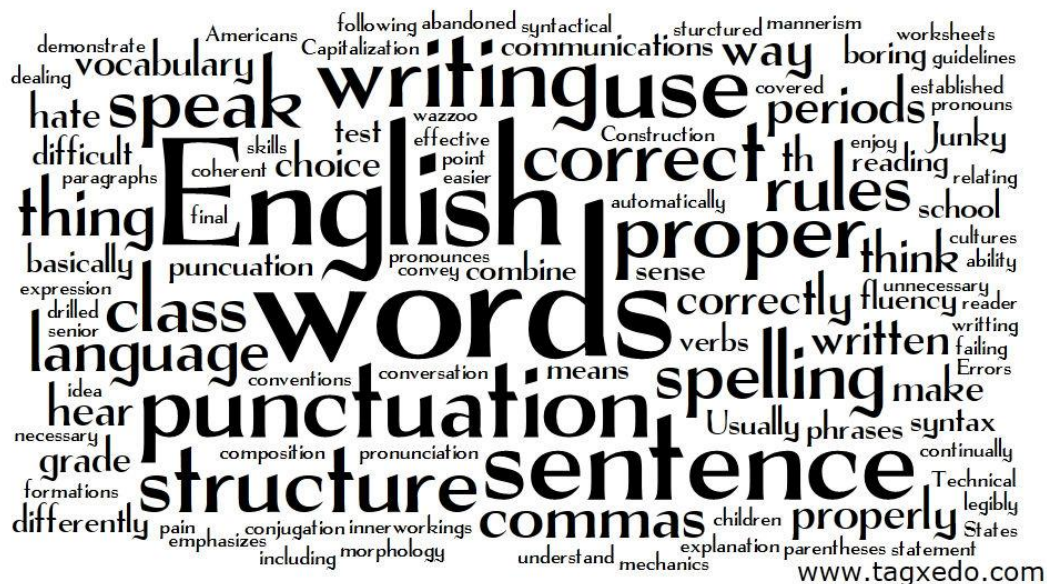


Figure 3.3 Responses to “When you hear the word ‘grammar,’ what is the first thing that comes to mind?”

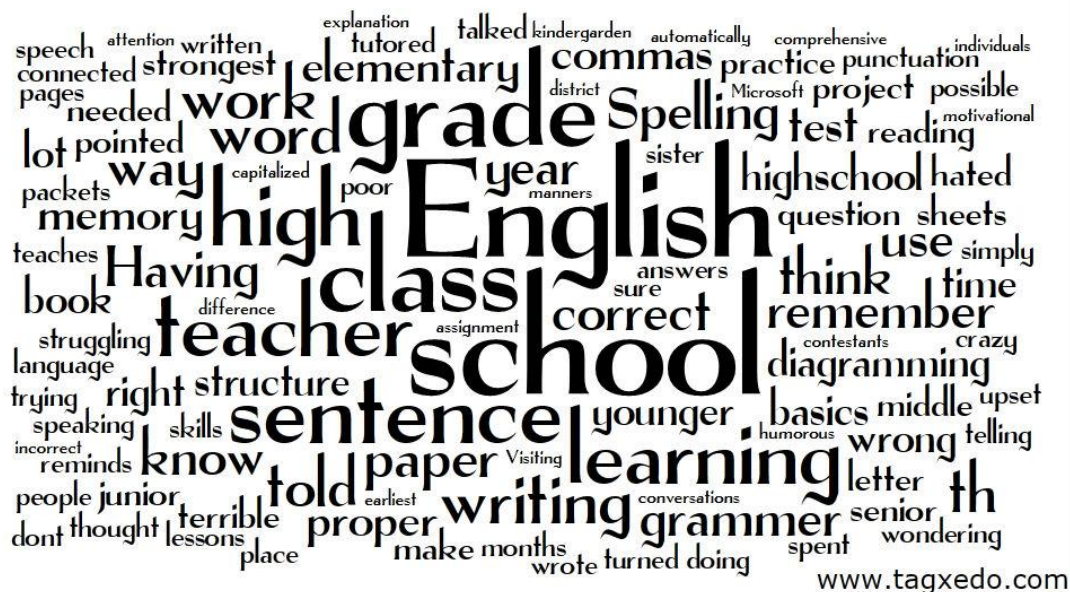


Figure 3.4 Responses to “Please describe one of your strongest memories connected to the word ‘grammar’.”

A Closer Look at the Question, “If you had the chance to ask an expert anything you wanted about English Grammar, what would it be?”

Several interesting trends emerge in the types of questions students would like to ask (to see a full list of the questions asked, see Appendix G). Unsurprisingly, a significant number, 17 out of 103 total responses (16.5%) , wanted some sort of specific grammatical bugbear to be set to rest once and for all, such as, “What EXACTLY is the proper use for semi-colon,” or “Do you have an easy way to remember when to use affect and when to use effect?” Following a similar train of thought, 11.7% asked other questions more generally geared towards improving their own abilities in some manner. Not all students were interested strictly in more utilitarian questions, however. For example, 6.8% asked questions related to the history of language and grammar. All told, well over half – 65.6% asked questions that were more philosophically rooted, or to do with linguistic concerns, such as, “Who makes the rules up?” “What’s with the silent letter in pronunciation?” and, “Does it matter if someone doesn’t have perfect writing or speaking grammar?”

This question is also one of the few places where students’ exasperation or frustration with grammar was apparent. 18.5% were unmistakably written in a challenging or defensive tone, asking questions such as, “Why are you an expert in English Grammar? We all have the ability to speak well, do you enjoy making us all look like idiots?” “What’s the point?” and “Why the hell is it complicated?” An

this removes meaning from the texts and their discussion (most notably when students are discussing texting while using grammar and spelling typical for that sort of communication). In the end, I made this decision by asking my current English 101 class what they would prefer – this was the almost unanimous choice.

CHAPTER 4: WORKING TOWARDS DEFINITIONS AND OTHER CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I work to arrange some of the puzzle pieces from the previous one into the beginnings of a complete picture and provide classroom applications informed by my research.

A Denotative Definition

Before synthesizing and analyzing the common elements of the students' definition of grammar, a reminder of the denotative definitions that are generally in play for instructors is in order. To do this, I'll return to Patrick Hartwell's five definitions, summarized from "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar":

1. The "tacit and unconscious knowledge," of language that a native speaker automatically acquires; a knowledge that is, however, influenced by literacy (111).
2. Linguistic grammars, such as older structuralist, or more recent (at the time) generative-transformational theoretical models, which attempt to explicitly represent Grammar 1 knowledge (114).
3. "Linguistic etiquette." In more modern terms, "usage," or as Hartwell puts it, "shibboleths" (110).
4. "The Incantations of the 'Common School Grammars'" (119, in allusion to Suzette Haden Elgin). The flawed understandings of how the English language works often provided in traditional school handbooks: rules that are COIK:

"clear only if known" (119).

5. "Stylistic grammar." The conscious control and manipulation of language in order to achieve a desired effect (125).

As was previously discussed in the first chapter, it's often hard to tell precisely which of these shades of meaning is being employed when reading materials within the discipline or when looking at handbooks geared for first year students. However, as is hinted at in a not-so-subtle manner by the above definitions, one trend that is apparent within the field is that definition number four is *not* in style.

When analyzing survey and focus group results, the converse was true. As was seen in the previous chapter, while student understandings of grammar were just as diverse as their instructor counterparts, defining grammar in terms of Hartwell's "School Grammar" was definitely the main trend. It was, however, also a leading source of exasperation and frustration. Evidence within survey results that this is the main working denotative definition is not immediately clear, because although many of the short answer responses to the question asking for definitions could be interpreted as fitting into the "School Grammar" category, they were so short that it was often impossible to be certain which of Hartwell's definitions, if any, students were working from. In order to gain a stronger grasp of how each student who participated in the survey conceived of grammar, and because, as stated, short answer responses don't allow for follow-up questions, I chose to look at the collected answers to all five short answer responses for each person. This allowed for triangulation (or pentagulation?) of results, and a much better chance of correctly interpreting what students meant. In addition, upon completion of my initial coding, I waited for a period of several weeks and repeated the process a second time. Lastly, when coding, I kept in mind evidence of

common conceptions expressed within focus groups. If I was in doubt of how to code a series of responses, I used this information to make my final decision. I hope that through doing this, again, the highest accuracy possible was achieved. The following are the results from this coding:

Table 4.1 Combined Short Answer Results

Hartwell's Five Definitions	Students whose answers had clearly distinguishable characteristics from each
1. The Grammar of a Native Speaker	11
2. Linguistic Grammar	10
3. Linguistic Etiquette, or "Usage"	37
4. School Grammar	119
5. Stylistic Grammar	35

Table 4.2 The Most Popular Combinations of Hartwell's Definitions

Combination	Students whose answers had clearly distinguishable characteristics from each
School/Usage	21
School/Stylistic	16
School/Usage/Stylistic	12
School/Linguistic	7
School/Native	7
Other Combinations	11
Total Conflicting/Combined Responses:	72
Total consistent, "School Grammar" Responses:	49

While the other four definitions did each appear, as can be seen, they rarely came without shades of "School Grammar" still present. This often lead to strange contradictions and frustrated dialogues that usually aren't voiced in the classroom, such as the student who talked of struggling to pass a 7th grade English class in which "Nouns, pronouns, and verbs [were] the only things drilled into our heads," and directly

defines grammar as “verbs, nouns, pronouns, adverbs. Those kind of words.” This same person then states that being proficient in English grammar means “to be able to write or talk so that others can understand what you are trying to say,” and would like to ask an expert, “Why are you an expert in English Grammar? We all have the ability to speak well, do you enjoy making us all look like idiots?” These conflicts at times seem to closely mirror the struggles with definition that instructors face detailed in the first chapter. Based on responses similar to that of the conflicted student above, however, I also believe that a large population doesn’t *realize* that their instructors often struggle similarly. Hence, I see these responses as not only representations of conflicting discourses, but also interesting and fruitful places to begin classroom discussions.

To move back to the dominant definition, however, I find it especially troubling because it’s not simply out of sync with the definitions favored by college educators. Rather, these conceptions don’t even line up with newer popular dictionary’s representations. As a point of reference, the following are the relevant definitions from Webster’s 1913 edition:

1. The science which treats of the principles of language; the study of forms of speech, and their relations to one another; the art concerned with the right use and application of the rules of a language, in speaking or writing.
2. The art of speaking or writing with correctness or according to established usage; speech considered with regard to the rules of a grammar.

This, in comparison to the modern edition:

l a : the study of the classes of words, their inflections, and their functions and relations in the sentence

b : a study of what is to be preferred and what avoided in inflection and syntax

2 *a* : the characteristic system of inflections and syntax of a language

b : a system of rules that defines the grammatical structure of a language

This disparity is especially noteworthy because in most cases, change in definitions is seen to begin in casual conversations, protests, and letters to friends. Here, the opposite appears to have taken place: scholarship has dictated changes in dictionaries, but significant portions of society at large, including many of the students who participated in my research, still hold more to definitions used in 1913. I see this as an interesting opportunity for further research. What other terms have experienced similar inversions? Are there patterns or similarities in historical context that lead to similar mismatches between layperson understandings and “official” definitions? What are the fates of such terms?

An Addition to the Definition

Student definitions don’t end there, however. Rather, they explicitly include one other element that I’ve also shown to permeate literature within the field in the first chapter, and that is only hinted at in dictionaries such as the above:

1. A tool to judge others with.

This inclusion most likely ties to the fact that, with students’ best interests in mind, instructors still frequently rely on statements like, “If you don’t learn to tell the difference between their, there, and they’re, you won’t be able to write an impressive resume”. However, when talking to students and analyzing survey responses, there seemed to be a much deeper understanding at play. In addition, as will be discussed in the next section, while the same tendencies to judge that past teachers warned of in

others are already a part of many students' worldviews, these tendencies and their connected discourses are also in direct tension with other beliefs.

Evidence of this addition to the denotative definition appears in survey responses most obviously in connection with the question concerning whether some grammatical errors were worse than others. As might be recalled, this question garnered the strongest consensus: 91.5% of those surveyed agreed. It can also be demonstrated in responses to how a typo found in a published work would be viewed: although the choice, "It reassures me that writers and editors are human too," was the most popular, the choices "I feel it demonstrates carelessness," and, "It makes me trust the text less" were not very far behind. I was also led to similar conclusions by students' discussions in focus groups concerning the tendency of survey participants to rank themselves as in possession of an "average" or "above average" understanding of grammar, but to judge others within their generation as below average. As discussed in chapter three, besides frequent references to the generally poor state of the grammatical understanding of fellow classmates, students also frequently connect their concerns to the American education system in general, and its ability to keep up with the rest of the world. In other words, students were well aware, and concerned with the fact that their knowledge of the dominant discourse could affect much more than their employability, but also be used to judge the power and future trajectory of the nation.

In addition, although the majority of students felt comfortable editing the work of other students, awareness also manifested in focus groups in several student's discussions of why they were not comfortable editing the work of other students, or asking for help themselves. For example, Caroline commented, "I just don't like telling the person like, what they did wrong. Like, I feel mean doing it (laughter). So I don't like

doing it. At all.” Further, Cody commented that it could be embarrassing to ask for help on grammar related issues, because,

It’s, I mean, it, for some weird reason when you write your own paper, um, you’re writing a personal experience on a paper, you feel like you should be able to grammatically get it correct, even though, logically. . . this is my last English class ever, I don’t care, as soon as I’m done I’m out, but for maybe going to the writing center and being like, hey, I need help with grammar, it feels almost embarrassing cuz, it feels like, well, you learned this in the third grade you should know (Destiny: Yeah), but, it’s a little more complicated than that.

I suspect that this element of the student definition points to the main reason that students downplay their own understandings of grammar when in the presence of peers (the question that sparked my initial inquiry!). In general, as stated, their responses concerning their own level of competency and that of other students’ coupled with focus group conversations point towards a general feeling that, while they may not be spectacular at it, they’re better than most. However, they are also well aware that proficiency in the dominant discourse is used as a way to judge those around them. I suspect that this clashes with their feelings of camaraderie for fellow students; subconsciously with their conceptions of class, or rather the myth of a classless society in America; as well as, in some cases more serious insecurities.

I’m lead to think that the last concern is the least likely, however, based not only on focus group conversations, but also on a comparison to results from Dana Ferris and Barrie Roberts’ study “Error Feedback in L2 Writing Classes: How Explicit Does It Need to Be?” As was discussed in the first chapter, of the 63 ELL students enrolled at

California State University, Sacramento, the majority (56%) felt that the statement “My English grammar problems are very serious and really hurt my writing,” best described their proficiency, 20% chose the statement “I’m not really sure whether English grammar is a problem for my writing,” 14% chose, “English grammar is not really a serious issue for me. Other writing issues are more important,” and 10% chose “Although I don’t know much about English grammar, it’s not a serious problem for me” (392, 399). While this exact question was not asked of students, I feel the fact that only 6% of students surveyed felt that their understanding of grammar was below average, coupled with the fact that only 19% felt that grammar should be a top priority in English 101 and 102 point towards a very different relationship with grammar.

An Important “But...”

While some of the above seems disheartening at first, especially the continued reliance on “The Incantations of the ‘Common School Grammars’,” as Hartwell puts it, the results of my research leave me quite optimistic. The source of this optimism comes mainly from the previously described conflicts inherent in current understandings and students’ budding awareness that these exist. These have already been demonstrated to a certain extent in the conflicting statements from the short answer section of the survey and the uncomfortableness with judging other’s proficiency when face to face. However, the clearest evidence that these conflicts are not only subconscious comes from reading the questions students posed in response to the query, “If you had a chance to ask an expert anything you wanted about English grammar, what would it be?” As a reminder, well over half (65.6%) wanted to know something more related to philosophical or linguistic concerns, which often had to do with topics that would certainly shake up their

denotative understandings, such as “Who makes the rules up?” In addition, 30.1% were either openly exasperated or challenging. Moving to a different section of the survey, while in the minority, a full 30.4% of respondents agreed with the statement, “Teachers all have such different ideas about grammar that it’s impossible to learn much of anything about the subject.”

While students were less likely to voice concerns as bluntly within focus group meetings, they were far from absent. For example, when discussing the question “People who dedicate their lives to writing or teaching writing often make the same grammatical errors that college students do,” Aidan joked that maybe the majority (who agreed) had answered out of spite, to which Derek laughed and added, “Take that!” They also appeared in Ms. Brown and Destiny’s frustrations with the differences they saw between what professional writers did, and what teachers wanted from them, as well as the challenges in trying to differentiate between grammatical necessities and stylistic choices; Cody’s frustrations with not learning what to do with a semi-colon until late in high school, and Mike’s comment that English grammar seems especially hard because, “There’s so many... so many small rules, and, just the way we spell things out...”

In short, students are highly aware that the term grammar represents a complex area of study, and are also often aware that their own understandings are conflicting. If more educators affirm this knowledge, substantial progress could occur.

Hints at Connotations

Unsurprisingly, the connotational elements of students’ definition are much harder to chart -- this depth is left out of dictionaries for a reason. The following is a

brief reminder of the themes and words that occurred with the greatest frequency throughout my study. Words that occur over and over when students discuss grammar included (grouped loosely by theme):

- Correct, proper, punctuation, structure, English, words, language, sentence, writing, speaking.

Other implied connotations include:

- Judgment, insecurity complexity, convoluted, mystery, and school.

In addition, the word “grammar” also was most frequently connected with negative or neutral memories, often involving boredom, workbooks, and usually centered in the classroom. In short, while students no longer frequently connect the word grammar with the classificatory terms of traditional approaches to writing education, such as “noun,” “verb,” “subject,” or “predicate,” many, if not all of the other connotations of a typical traditional education persist.

As mentioned, the evidence for most of the above has already been previously covered. For a rapid refresher of where these terms occur in short answer responses, I recommend referring back to the word clouds of chapter three, in which all of the words from the first bullet feature prominently. Of course, a more detailed review, as well as an expansion of terms not previously discussed follows as well. To begin with the review, my inclusion of “correct” and “proper” comes mostly from the heavy occurrence of these terms in all short answer questions, except for the one asking students what they would like to ask an expert. Most strikingly, of the 121 student definitions for the word “grammar,” 44 (36.4%) were phrased in these terms, making this the strongest trend I found in responses. My inclusion of the word punctuation ties with responses to the question, “How do you define the term grammar?” in which 19% of responses mention

it, as from responses to the question asking what first comes to mind, in which 19.1% also mentioned punctuation, and comparable feedback from focus group participants. My inclusion of “structure” comes most noticeably from responses to the question asking for a definition as well: specifically the fact that the word “structure,” and metaphors related to building and crafting occurred in 19.8% of responses. This term was also prominent in responses to the question about what came to mind as well, where it features in 10.7% of responses.

Several of the words that are included in the first bulleted list above, but not previously discussed, are left this way because they are relatively unremarkable – not in the sense that they do not say anything interesting about student conceptions, but rather in the sense that they are completely unsurprising. These include “English,” “words,” “language,” “sentence,” “writing,” and “speaking.” While they may be unremarkable, it shouldn’t be taken completely for granted that they are there, something that would be easy to do. For this reason, I will briefly discuss them here.

Firstly, students did refer to English much more frequently than any other language. When asked about this tendency in focus groups, they pointed out the obvious: while most have taken classes about other languages, education in English usually dates back farther in their lives than any other. For example, during the second focus group Mike said, “Yeah I think the first thing, yeah, just being a native speaker from what you grew up with. But it certainly applies to all other languages. The rules,” and Weslynn agreed, stating “It’s what we’ve been around.” Earlier in our conversation, Mike demonstrated just how strong this connotation is by saying, “I’m not sure whether the technical definition of grammar, whether it’s for like, other languages other than

English but I would just think of grammar as the rules of language, or of written language.”

The most interesting thing about students’ use of general terms like “Language,” “words,” and “sentence,” is that they are used to explain grammar in place of more traditional terms such as “subject” and “predicate,” or “noun” and “verb,” etc. For example, short answer responses to the question asking for a definition of “grammar” often use these three words to respond with answers like, “The way we use *language* in the proper way,” “Grammar can be defined as the study of *words* and different parts of *words* to form *sentences*,” and “the way *sentences* are constructed” (emphasis added). As you may recall, the highest instance of the use of traditional grammar vocabulary comes in response to the question asking students to define the term “grammar” – but even here, only 4.1% used them.

When coding students’ short answer responses in order to better understand denotative definitions, I coded for whether students referred to grammar in connection with written or spoken language as well. The following were the results.

Table 4.3 Associations with Written or Spoken Language

Short answer responses that related to written language.	57
Short answer responses that related to both.	38
Short answer responses that related to spoken language.	10

While these results are unsurprising, they do provide a reminder of several important concepts that should be emphasized more in the classroom. It’s sad that not all students realize that even if they’re not proficient in “School Grammar,” they *have* mastered at least one verbal grammar, most likely more than one. Not to mention the “grammar” of

texting, etc. In correlation, most of the students who mentioned both writing and speaking in their responses did so as if they functioned under one uniform system. While conversations in focus groups leave me certain that, in practice, students know this isn't so, if there is any hope of breaking down this older, faulty understanding of which modes of communication function under what systems, conversations about these differences need to be brought more to the forefront in the classroom.

To move on to the second bulleted list at the beginning of this section, or the “implied connotations,” as with some of the terms from the first list, these simply need a brief connection to previous conversations within this text. The terms “judgment” and “insecurity” are most likely freshest in mind, as I discussed these several pages back in the section “An Addition to the Definition,” where I posited that students’ denotative definition of “grammar” includes the knowledge that it’s a tool to judge others with. While I also explain that students appear to feel relatively secure about their own understandings of grammar, I include the word “insecurity” for two reasons. Firstly, this term’s inclusion refers to the tendency students have to downplay this certainty when in conversations in peers. Secondly, it refers to the insecurity felt in relation to the nation’s collective understanding, which came up in discussion in all three focus groups to varying degrees. For example, in relation to the results about personal understanding and average understanding of the public, Mike commented that “. . . in Eastern Civ . . . at the start of the semester they talked about how a lot of American Students are doing poor in math and sciences and things like that because they overestimate their abilities.” Perhaps the best way to label students feelings, in actuality, would be “ambivalent security,” if such a thing can be said to exist. The words “complexity,” “convolution,” and “mystery,” are all closely related, and their inclusion comes from the same bits of

evidence, most notably the short answer responses to my request for questions they would like to ask an expert. As will be discussed in greater depth below, many of these directly ask things like, “Why is it so complex?” or, “Why all the weird rules?” or, “Where did rules of grammar originate or evolve?” Focus groups also made it clear that these terms were central; a large amount of our conversations revolved around various intricacies or contradictions, such as the varying acceptability of different ways of writing and all of the strange exceptions and odd spellings that make up the English language. Lastly, I include the word “school” because, unsurprisingly, when asked to provide a memory connected with grammar, responses came almost entirely from experiences in the classroom. While this is relatively unremarkable, it is interesting in relation to what it excludes. In other words, grammar never leaves the classroom.

Implications for the Classroom

The most important thing to keep in mind is the obvious fact that students’ conceptions are in no way black and white, and in no way simple. The trends that I’ve worked to distill above only show a fraction of the picture. They should be used to inform classroom practices with care, and always with the many exceptions and nuances discussed in the previous chapter in mind. In connection with this complexity, one of the other most important reminders my research provides is that the depth and sophistication of knowledge that students already possess should never be underestimated. In addition, it’s impossible to know exactly what interesting topics will come up in relation to grammar. Really, the denotations and connotations above are only the tip of the iceberg. To illustrate this point, here is an attempt to capture the richness and breadth of the

conversations I had with the ten students who agreed to participate in my focus groups.

In only three hours, we eleven discussed:

- Whether grammatical issues mattered more in spoken, or written English
- The fact that the very existence of regional and cultural variations made it impossible for there to not be wiggle room with grammar rules
- The uniqueness of English spelling
- New grammars such as computer languages and text lingo
- Western vs Eastern perceptions of self
- The difference that a good teacher can make, and what a “good” teacher was
- English grammar compared to Japanese and Spanish
- Different orthographies and how they can affect interpretability
- The nuanced differences between written and spoken English
- The effects a person’s environment and place of birth can have on their perception
- Experiences with an employer required writing course
- Experiences in a Basic Writing course
- Experiences with draconian teachers, and whether English instructors should push their students to similar standards in preparation for similar situations
- The effect of current “cookie-cutter” education methods on students’ ability to learn
- The frustration of not being able to write as well as others
- The competitive nature of education, even within elementary school
- Education techniques of the ancients, such as Confucius and Pythagoras
- The importance of parental involvement in education
- The unique challenges of various areas of study

- The lack of transparency of thought provided by language in any form
- The ability of various dialects to convey some ideas more effectively than the dominant one
- The effect of location on speech patterns
- The new challenges currently facing the publishing industry due to technological advances, and their affect on grammar
- The discourse of the military
- Tensions between what's praised in literature and what's expected in student essays
- A desire to write in a mature style
- The difference between attending college straight out of high school and waiting a few years, or returning for another degree
- The importance of building on knowledge that's already there when learning about grammar and writing
- The impossibility of having language without grammar
- The constant negativity of feedback related to grammar
- Differences between Australian, British, and American accents and dialects
- The difference between speech and writing
- The frustrations of MLA guideline changes
- The strengths and weaknesses of rules v.s. recommendations
- Contexts that make grammatical errors more, or less important
- The frustrations of teachers obsessed with their own pet peeves
- The importance of working to connect information from different courses
- The mystery of who gets to decide what's grammatical and what's not

- The benefits and challenges of peer review
- And more.

While we pick up on some general trends simply by being in the classroom and reading student writing, being reminded of the extreme complexity of what may come to mind for students in relation to the simplest statement was invigorating. We never truly know what connections are being made, or what precisely will spark them.

Diversity of Knowledge

On a related note, it's also important to remember that even in a relatively homogenous student body such as that at BSU, almost nothing can be assumed about the knowledge related to grammar that students gained while in secondary school and before. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this was especially obvious in focus groups, where some students complained that they'd spend hour after hour being drilled on terminology in high school, and others insisted they hadn't had any instruction related to grammar since the third grade. This unevenness could prove to be a powerful discussion opener, which could easily transition into conversations about various grammar and language beliefs and ideologies (while providing helpful background information for the instructor). For example, discussions could be started about why or why not their education didn't focus on labeling nouns and verbs, as well as the level of satisfaction with methods of instruction they had experienced in the past.

Taking Advantage of the Slippage in Meaning

As has been shown, there were many students, both among survey responders and focus group participants, who were well aware of the inconsistencies in the way grammar had been taught to them in the past, and even more so between what they had experienced in life outside of the English classroom versus what they felt were

dominant, “correct” assumptions. The next step is encouraging these experiences to actually be brought out into the open in the classroom for further analysis, for further development, and in some cases simply to validate what these people suspect.

Given my past experiences in the classroom, one of the biggest hurdles in working to reduce the power of older, flawed discourses may be getting students to participate in an initial conversation that begins to actively acknowledge and analyze the tensions between mythic and practical experience. In other words, one of the main challenges may be encouraging conversations similar to the ones that I had in focus groups to take place in a more high stakes classroom setting. One way to encourage more open discussion and to work to undercut the especially authoritarian undertones of the topic that I have had success with is to let students take the lead. In the past, I have found that students are more willing to voice more “risky” opinions when other students are leading the conversation. For example, when students were working on writing a research-based essay in English 102, we discussed typical academic genre conventions, which include particular attention to traits typically assigned to Standard English. One way this was done was through a student lead discussion of one of Geneva Smitherman’s “Soul ‘n Style” columns for *The English Journal* (which are written in a complex mixture of African American Vernacular English and terminology specialized to her field of research).

Another possible classroom application would be to assign students to write a letter to the authors of the handbook in use for the class, a past teacher, or other related authority figure. In the past, by introducing a third party to address their concerns to, this has generated much more openly confrontational, and often more productive discussions similar to those that took place in focus groups.

Changing Definitions

Within the classroom, I feel that one of the most important and simplest ways to improve our approach to grammar is to work to change student's denotative definitions of the term. To draw an admittedly horrible (but effective) analogy, this can function much as euphemisms do. In short, by changing the denotative definition of grammar and explaining the meaning of more specific terms such as "usage" and "stylistic features," changes in the connotations will follow eventually. In addition, students and teachers will be better able to communicate. One of the strangest realizations that I've had while working on this project was the fact that while Hartwell and others discuss in depth the problems caused among educators by our lack of clear terminology in this realm, I have found no mention of the effect this muddle has on students. While it's not necessary for a composition student to know what a gerund is in order for us to have productive discussions about writing, clarification of what an instructor means by "grammatical errors are minimal" on a rubric should definitely occur.

A New Reason to Include Language Education

Besides the fact that a significant number of students appear to be unfamiliar with topics related to language variation to the point where the very words needed to talk about the subject may be missing¹, lining up with past research such as the "Language Knowledge and Awareness Survey" conducted by the CCCC Language Policy Committee, I do think the results of my survey point to a reason that is possibly even more important for its further inclusion in the classroom. Students want to know. Over and over, questions like, "Why is it so important if it is comprehensible?" and,

“Who makes the rules up?” were asked, not to mention, “Why are some people so bad with grammar?” (See Appendix G for a full list of questions asked.)

I can remember asking similar questions while growing up and never getting satisfactory answers. In fact, this frustration almost led me to write English off as a discipline (I originally was majoring in nutrition). Seeing these questions echoed again by student after student not only brought my own past frustrations to mind, but also the disciplinary arguments that have led to a rise in interest in Genre Theory, and genre-based instruction within the first year composition classroom. Just as leaving students to their own devices to puzzle out the unmentioned conventions that mark academic writing leads to regrettable imbalances in power and needless frustration, so too does leaving out discussions about the developments that have led to a national climate where it's acceptable to fire a news anchor for having too strong of an accent, and where high quality student writing is seen as that which most closely matches the dominant discourse. Language is the birthright of every healthy citizen of the nation. Not giving students access to accurate or complete information, not encouraging conversations about the tensions inherent in language education, allows others to control them later on through the continued propagation of myths.

Based on results, one smart discussion opener to use to begin these conversations would be something related to the statement, “Some grammatical errors are much worse than others.” As was discussed previously, this statement garnered the largest consensus, by far, of the entire survey. In addition, only one person chose to respond with “Don't Know”. This certainty suggests that students would have ready and sure responses. Furthermore, once an engaged conversation had begun, this discussion could then be directed in numerous constructive directions, depending on the goals of the instructor.

The most obvious follow-up question would of course be: What makes some errors worse than others?

A Final Thought

Whatever the methods used to begin the various conversations discussed about, the most important thing I've learned from my research is that these *meta*-conversations really do need to happen. Regardless of an instructor's views on the value of various methods of grammar instruction within the classroom, grammar is something that has not left the public discourse. Simply not discussing it in the classroom has not changed this fact, and most likely never will. So, in short, our choices are to let the media alone shape the next generation's understanding of what grammar is, and can be, or join in on these conversations ourselves, bringing the body of careful research our field has to offer into these dialogs as well.

End Notes

¹. Issues in the initial stages of survey design pointed towards related issues, and instructors' intuitions that this might be the case. The questions concerning regional and cultural language variation went through the most revisions, and were critiqued by almost all who viewed drafts. While this was partially due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, reviewers commented over and over that they weren't sure students would understand what I was asking. This problem was obviously never resolved.

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APPENDIX A

Email Invitation Sent to all Students Enrolled in English 101 or 102

Hello and welcome to BSU!

In order to better tailor first year English courses to the needs of you and other students, as well as inform the larger community of scholars interested in research on the teaching of writing, you are invited to participate in a survey about grammar conceptions.

If you choose to take the survey:

- Plan to spend approximately 10-15 minutes answering questions about what grammar means to you. **This is not a test of your grammatical knowledge, but rather an inventory of your views on the subject.** If you choose to take this survey, please keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers.
- If you wish, you will be able to save your answers and return to complete this survey later. It will be available for 2 weeks.
- You may also choose to leave questions blank if you believe your answers may reveal your identity.
- **You must be currently enrolled in a first year writing course, and 18 years of age or older to take this survey.**

Your participation is voluntary, anonymous, and for research purposes only. You may discontinue the survey at any time and for any reason or not participate with no penalty whatsoever.

The survey can be found here:

https://boisestate.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_6XPzuDbnfwx53PS

Questions: More details about the survey are provided at the link above. If you have any additional questions, this research is being conducted by Sarah Olson, a graduate student in the M.A. in Composition and Rhetoric program, and Heidi Estrem, Director of the First-Year Writing Program. If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you can contact the principal investigator at saraholson1@boisestate.edu. If for some reason you do not wish to do this, you may contact the Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the board office between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday, by calling (208) 426-5401 or by writing: Institutional Review Board, Office of Research Compliance, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725-1138.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

APPENDIX B:

Complete Survey Text, as Distributed Through Qualtrics

Project Description: This survey is designed to gather information about student conceptions of grammar. As you answer the following questions, keep in mind that *no part of this survey is meant to test your grammar knowledge*. In addition, keep in mind that participation in this survey is voluntary, and you may discontinue the survey at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty whatsoever. All results are anonymous and for research purposes only. This survey should take 10 – 15 minutes to complete.

Risks and Benefits: If you choose to take this survey, please keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers. **This survey is to measure student conceptions, so you are the expert!** Responses from all participants will be treated with the utmost respect and will be combined to search for overall patterns. Although you will be given the opportunity to provide contact information after completing this survey, it will not be connected to any of your previous answers.

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, other than the satisfaction of knowing you're contributing to meaningful research. However, the information that you provide may help composition instructors to better grasp student understandings of grammar, and as a result better tailor classes to your needs.

Confidentiality: The data in this study will be confidential. Any work quoted in research studies will be quoted anonymously. You may also choose to leave questions blank if you believe your answers may reveal your identity. The online survey results are password-protected, and will be destroyed within one year. All copies will be destroyed in 5 years or after the data in them becomes irrelevant, whichever comes first.

Questions: This research is being conducted by Sarah Olson, a graduate student in the M.A. in Composition and Rhetoric program, and Heidi Estrem, Director of the First-Year Writing Program.

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you can contact the principal investigator at saraholson1@boisestate.edu. If for some reason you do not wish to do this, you may contact the Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the board office between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday, by calling (208) 426-5401 or by writing: Institutional Review Board, Office of Research Compliance, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725-1138. This information will be provided again at the end of the survey.

_____ I have read this information, and am continuing with this survey voluntarily.

For the next five questions, please type your answers in the box provided. Feel free to be as brief or detailed as you wish. Remember that if, for any reason, you do not wish to answer a question, you can simply leave it blank. (Each question followed by a response box when originally distributed.)

When you hear the word "grammar," what is the first thing that comes to mind?

Please describe one of your strongest memories connected to the word "grammar".

What does it mean to be proficient in English grammar?

How do you define the term "grammar"?

If you had the chance to ask an expert anything you wanted about English Grammar, what would it be?

The Next 4 questions are multiple choice. If a question allows you to select multiple answers, it will expressly state this fact.

I consider my understanding of grammar to be:

- Above average.
- Average.
- Below average.

Today's generation has _____.

- a below average understanding of standardized English grammar.
- an average understanding of standardized English grammar.
- an above average understanding of standardized English grammar.

How much should English 101 and 102 at BSU focus on grammar instruction?

- It should be a top priority.
- It should be a moderate priority.
- It should be a low priority.

(Please select all the answers that apply.) In general, when I find a typo or grammatical error while reading a published work,

- I feel it demonstrates carelessness.
- it makes me trust the text less.
- it makes me respect the author less.
- I barely give it a second thought – it's not really a big deal.
- it reassures me that writers and editors are human too.

Other: _____

This last section is made up of statements, rather than questions. Please rate your agreement for each, or select "Don't Know".

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
People who dedicate their lives to writing or teaching writing rarely, if ever, make grammatical errors.					
People who dedicate their lives to writing or teaching writing often make the same grammatical errors that college students do.					
Experts know everything there is to know about English grammar already. There is nothing new left to discover.					
Instructors don't usually focus much on grammar when they read student papers.					
All regional and cultural variations of English have grammar.					
Some regional or cultural variations of English grammar are better at conveying complex thinking and ideas.					
All regional and cultural variations of English grammar can convey complex thinking and ideas.					
Teachers all have such different ideas about grammar that it's impossible to learn much of anything about the subject.					
Teachers all agree on what is grammatical and what is not.					
Grammar rules are absolute. There is no wiggle room with them.					
I feel comfortable editing the grammar of my own writing.					
I feel comfortable editing the grammar of others' writing.					
I feel comfortable revising non grammar related features of my own writing, such as the organization and ideas.					
I feel comfortable revising non grammar related features of others' writing, such as the organization and ideas.					
Some grammatical errors are much worse than others.					
English grammar is degrading over time.					

Demographic Information: For this research project, we will be recording demographic information (age, gender, chosen degree, etc.). Due to the make-up of Idaho's population, the combined answers to these questions may make an individual person identifiable. We will make every effort to protect participants' confidentiality. However, if you are uncomfortable answering any of these questions, you may leave them blank.

My first language was:

English

Other: _____

I grew up speaking mostly:

Standard American English

a nonstandard American English dialect (such as Southern English, African American English, or New York English), or with an accent.

Other: _____

I am currently enrolled in:

English 90

English 101

English 102

Other: _____

I am part of the first generation in my family to go to college.

Yes

No

My gender is:

Male

Female

Transgender

How old are you?

18-20

21-25

26-36

37-46

47-57

58-65

66 or older

If you have any additional comments you would like to make about any of the questions in this survey or the subject of grammar, please type them below. If not, leave the field blank. (Followed by a response box in original)

Thank you very much for your time and valuable input. The researcher will be conducting follow-up discussion groups once the results of this survey are in. If you think you may be interested in viewing and discussing the results with fellow students

later in the semester, please type your name and email address below. If you do not wish to provide this information, simply leave the box blank. This information will **not** be connected to any of your other responses. (Followed by response box in original)

As previously stated, this research is being conducted by Sarah Olson, a graduate student in the M.A. in Composition and Rhetoric program, and Heidi Estrem, Director of the First-Year Writing Program. If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you can contact the principal investigator at saraholson1@boisestate.edu. If for some reason you do not wish to do this, you may contact the Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the board office between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday, by calling (208) 426-5401 or by writing: Institutional Review Board, Office of Research Compliance, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725-1138.

APPENDIX C

Recruitment Flyer Mailed to Graduate Assistants

APPENDIX D

Summary of Survey Results Given to Focus Group Participants*

Summary of Results

Who took the survey?

Mostly young, female students enrolled in English 101, who grew up speaking Standard American English, and who are not the first generation in their family to attend college. (77% were between 18-20, 62% were female, 92% were enrolled in English 101, 95% grew up speaking Standard American English, 71% are not the first generation college students)

Selected Results:

73% consider their understanding of grammar to be above average

24% consider it average

5% consider it below average

54% feel that today's generation has a below average understanding of grammar

44% feel it's average

2% feel it's above average

19% feel grammar instruction should be a top priority in English 101 and 102 at BSU.

70% feel it should be a moderate priority.

12% feel it should be a low priority.

When they find a typo or grammatical error while reading a published work,

50% say it reassures them that writers and editors are human too

42% feel it demonstrates carelessness

36% say they trust the text less

26% say they trust the author less

26% barely give it a second thought, and don't think it's a big deal

21% agree that people who dedicate their lives to writing or teaching writing rarely, if ever, make grammatical errors.

61% agree that people who dedicate their lives to writing or teaching writing often make the same grammatical errors that college students do.

90% agreed that all regional and cultural variations of English have grammar.

82% agree that some regional or cultural variations of English grammar are better at conveying complex thinking and ideas.

81% agree that all regional and cultural variations of English grammar can convey complex thinking and ideas.

28% agree that Instructors don't usually focus much on grammar when they read student papers.

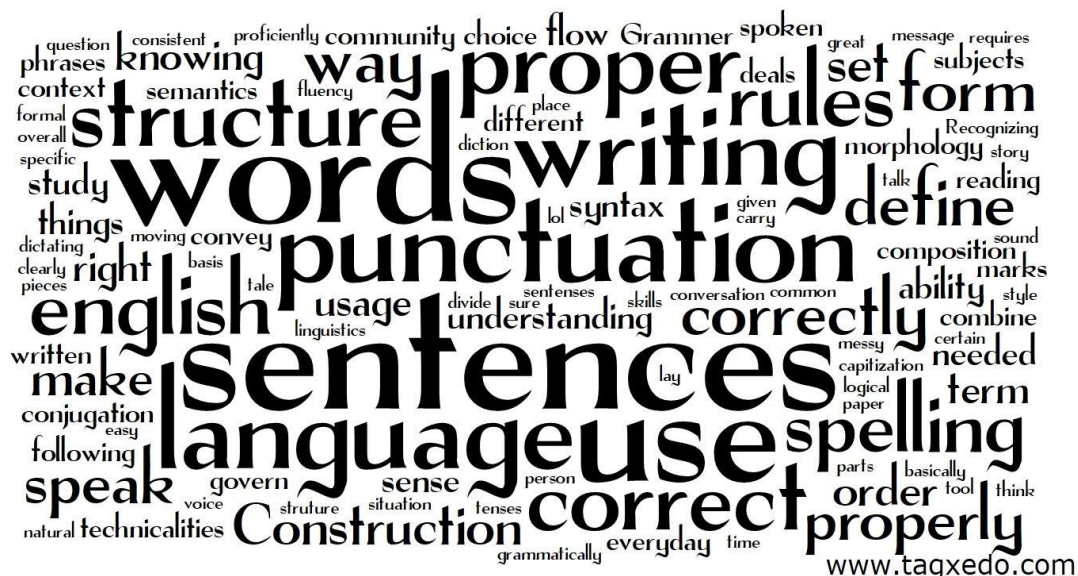
30% agree that teachers all have such different ideas about grammar that it's impossible to learn much of anything about the subject.

32% agree that teachers all agree on what is grammatical and what is not.
 31% agree that grammar rules are absolute. There is no wiggle room with them.
 73% feel comfortable editing the grammar of their own writing.
 66% feel comfortable editing the grammar of others' writing.
 84% feel comfortable revising non grammar related features of their own writing, such as the organization and ideas.
 75% feel comfortable revising non grammar related features of others' writing, such as the organization and ideas.

Short Answer Responses:

Because there are hundreds of responses to these questions, they're very hard to sum up succinctly. What follows are "word clouds" made from all of the responses to each - in short, the larger the word is, the more often the word was used.

How do you define the term "grammar"?



APPENDIX E

Other Responses to the Question, “In General, When I Find a Typo or Grammatical Error While Reading a Published Work, _____” (Verbatim)

- Someones not doing their job
- I want to correct it
- I mentally correct it but don't put much more thought into it other than that.
- Even though they are human - one or two texts are enough - but when they are profuse is when I have a problem with the responsibility of the editor and the writer(s)
- I don't mind if I read another person's work with grammar errors, just as long as I didn't make those errors.
- I feel smart.
- I reflect poorly on the education system and on the professionals who should be proofreading/editing this work.
- i read it over and over, it bothers me
- if it is published, it shouldn't really have simple errors like that
- I wonder why its a typo and how to fix it and how to prevent it in my own writing. I think its better to learn from others mistakes than to penalize them.
- as long as i can under stand the work. i dont care
- it reassures me that I spotted a grammar error
- sometimes writers like to give the sounds out and it is part of how they write
- First I have to wonder if it was an act of carelessness or if actualy it has something to do with a culteral or conceptual lacking on my part. It would not be fair to assume that the writter was stupid.
- arrogant, lazy
- i think its funny
- Makes me laugh
- It makes me want to correct the error
- It makes me feel a little smarter.
- makes me wonder if the author either didn't see the mistake by accident
- We do use electronics and they cannot fix everything.
- Its not a big deal due to typing on a computer anymore and txtng. It has literally changed the way we write. have you ever looked at your grandparents writing. Its almost gracefull

APPENDIX F

Detailed Results of Likert-Type Questions

Table F.1 Detailed Results of Likert-Type Questions

	Viewed, not Answered	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know	Mean	Standard Deviation
People who dedicate their lives to writing or teaching writing rarely, if ever, make grammatical errors.	0 0.0%	15 12.8%	73 62.4%	19 16.2%	4 3.4%	6 5.1%	2.36	1.01
People who dedicate their lives to writing or teaching writing often make the same grammatical errors that college students do.	1 0.9%	5 4.3%	36 30.8%	53 45.3%	12 10.3%	10 8.5%	3.27	1.14
Experts know everything there is to know about English grammar already. There is nothing new left to discover.	0 0.0%	41 35.0%	56 47.9%	9 7.7%	4 3.4%	7 6.0%	1.97	1.02
Instructors don't usually focus much on grammar when they read student papers.	2 1.7%	23 19.7%	54 46.2%	24 20.5%	5 4.3%	9 7.7%	2.43	1.16
All regional and cultural variations of English have grammar.	0 0.0%	1 0.9%	11 9.4%	63 53.8%	32 27.4%	10 8.5%	3.97	0.9
Some regional or cultural variations of English grammar are better at conveying complex thinking and ideas.	0 0.0%	2 1.7%	14 12.0%	57 48.7%	20 17.1%	24 20.5%	3.68	0.95
All regional and cultural variations of English grammar can convey complex thinking and ideas.	0 0.0%	2 1.7%	17 14.5%	69 59.0%	15 12.8%	14 12.0%	3.67	0.94
Teachers all have such different ideas about grammar that it's impossible to learn much of anything about the subject.	0 0.0%	11 9.4%	65 55.6%	26 22.2%	9 7.7%	6 5.1%	2.63	1.16
Teachers all agree on what is grammatical and what is not.	0 0.0%	19 16.2%	65 55.6%	21 17.9%	4 3.4%	8 6.8%	2.37	1.06
Grammar rules are absolute. There is no wiggle room with them.	0 0.0%	20 17.1%	52 44.4%	31 26.5%	8 6.8%	6 5.1%	2.62	1.24
I feel comfortable editing the grammar of my own writing.	0 0.0%	7 6.0%	25 21.4%	56 47.9%	28 23.9%	1 0.9%	3.62	1.23
I feel comfortable editing the grammar of others' writing.	0 0.0%	10 8.5%	29 24.8%	53 45.3%	23 19.7%	2 1.7%	3.43	1.29
I feel comfortable revising non grammar related features of my own writing, such as the organization and ideas.	0 0.0%	3 2.6%	14 12.0%	62 53.0%	36 30.8%	2 1.7%	3.97	1.02
I feel comfortable revising non grammar related features of others' writing, such as the organization and ideas.	0 0.0%	5 4.3%	23 19.7%	56 47.9%	30 25.6%	3 2.6%	3.71	1.17
Some grammatical errors are much worse than others.	0 0.0%	1 0.9%	8 6.8%	68 58.1%	39 33.3%	1 0.9%	4.16	0.82

English grammar is degrading over time.	0 0.0%	6 5.1%	37 31.6%	42 35.9%	19 16.2%	13 11.1%	3.26	1.21
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APPENDIX G

Loosely Categorized Responses to the Question, “If You Had the Chance to Ask an Expert Anything You Wanted About English Grammar, What Would it Be?”

Philosophically Oriented Questions

Variations on “Why does it matter?”

- Why can't I just do it the way it makes sense to me?!
- Why does it matter so much? Why does my paper get docked points because of a misplaced comma?
- I probably would not agree with anything they are saying unless they can truly explain to me the importance of knowing all the different types of words.
- I don't know. Why do you care so much about it? I guess.
- What's the point?
- Why do we have to take it?
- What is so important about it?
- Why do teachers stress it over and over?
- Why are you an expert in English Grammar? We all have the ability to speak well, do you enjoy making us all look like idiots?
- Why do they teach me a language which I can efficiently speak and write? Isn't it a little redundant?
- Why is it so important if it is comprehensible?
- Why is it so important for college and life after college? What exactly does it prove?
- Why are there so many rules; if it sounds good than why does it matter?

Variations on “Why is it so complex?”

- Why is it so complicated and varied?
- Why is the English language so complex and specified with grammar?
- Why are there so many exceptions?
- Why is English grammar so complicated? Why not make it simpler?
- Why the hell is it so complicated?
- Why are English rules so complex?
- Why are there so many rules in putting together a proper sentence?
- Why are there new guidelines to writing?
- Why all the weird rules?
- Why aren't the English language and the grammatical rules more uniform?

Other General Questions of Legitimacy

- WHY?
- Why is this so tedious?
- Why does it seem like we (students) get graded on the punctuation and fluency of our papers instead of how well we grasped the concept and expressed our ideas and thoughts on the paper?
- Why are the rules of grammar so strict?

Historical

- How are words and meanings created?
- I think it would be more of a history grammar question. Why does English remove the feminine/masculine wording that many other Latin based languages have?
- Where did rules of grammar originate or evolve?
- Where did good grammar come from? Who set the bar as to what good grammar should sound like?
- How long the proper Grammar skills that we use today have been used in history.
- I would ask what and where the origins of it was; and maybe ask why they were made.
- Where did it originate?

Other

- Is it just the United States that puts such an emphasis on the importance of English Grammar, or do other countries really stress grammar?
- How is the English Grammar system different of other languages?
- What's with the silent letter in pronunciation?
- Why are some words spelled differently but sound the same?
- I would ask if there is a wrong or write way to write.
- What is the true meaning behind it?
- What are the most commonly used words?
- Who makes the rules up?
- Why so many different punctuations?
- Is there always a right answer or does it always change?
- What is up with the word "AIN'T"
- Why we can't say ain't.
- What is the exact definition?
- What is grammar?
- Does it matter if someone doesn't have perfect writing or speaking grammar?
- Why do professional writers get to cheat on grammar rules?
- Why did they discontinue phonics?
- Why are some people so bad with grammar?
- What is proper English?
- Why isn't it taught at a greater level through high school?
- Why do we tend to not care about grammar so much?
- What about it makes them so interested in it?
- What makes you an expert in English?
- How long did it take you to become what you are now, was it hard?
- Why are you an expert in English Grammar?

Pragmatic Questions

Concerning The “Nuts and Bolts” of Grammar

- Where does everything go?
- How do you know if you are using proper grammar or not?
- Can you ever use “and” at the beginning of a sentence ever?
- Why should you not use contractions in a paper?
- How do you correctly indicate the titles of articles, journals, movies/TV series, and songs?
- I never know when to use the words have and has, any suggestions?
- Do you have an easy way to remember when to use affect and when to use effect?
- review punctuation
- Where do I put my commas?! I just cannot seem to get them right.
- When do you use semicolons, colons, and dashes?
- What EXACTLY is the proper use for semicolons?
- What is a "comma splice"?
- Why do comma splices occur?
- What’s the easiest way to determine proper use of grammar in writing. ie., commas, semi-colons, colons, quotes etc....
- Using brackets and semicolons properly.
- When do you use a colon vs. a semi-colon? Why?
- hmmm... SO MANY!!! I suppose... to go over punctuation in regards to quotations... I never know where the punctuation goes... Or how to work with the quote within the sentence... It’s difficult.
- I can't think of anything in specific to ask-- but I may ask him to look over a paper for grammar errors.
- If I had the chance to ask an expert anything I wanted about English Grammar, I would ask for help with flow in my essays and transitions.
- What is a genre?

General Improvement

- What are some little hints and tricks to make grammar easier to use and remember?
- What are easy ways to understand it well?
- What is perfect grammar, and how do you achieve that?
- How do I get to be like you?
- How can I get better at it? Are There any tricks I can learn that will help?
- What should I learn in order to impress people I want to seem very educated too?
- Does the use of big/sophisticated words in writing make you seem more credible?
- What is a big word you can teach me?
- What’s the best way to know if you have constructed a strong sentence?
- What do you find the most important about the English Grammar?

- What's the secret to being a good speaker?

Ambiguous Questions

- I would want to know more about it because I am a grammar junky.
- What word is most grammatically misused in the English language?