

Proposal for Integrating Language Study in the Language Arts Curriculum, Grades 4-10

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Introduction

[This is an updated version of my (im)modest proposal, originally posted on the ATEG listserv.]

We have often expressed the desire to do something about the sad state of grammatical knowledge among students at all levels. Yet we don't seem to know what to do. What we need is a new plan.

Of course, I wouldn't say that nothing is being done. We do, after all, have such projects as Ed Vavra's promising development of the KISS approach, the book published by NCTE, and the establishment of ATEG as an assembly within NCTE. But I think we all feel that these projects are not adequate to meet the needs. This prompts me to make a proposal.

As preamble, I would first note that the English curriculum is often seen as a tripod of literature, composition, and language. These three legs are usually taught separately, but sometimes there are attempts at coordination. For instance, many composition assignments are for writing about literature, and many efforts to teach language are done in the hope of improving the correctness of compositions or students' understanding of literary language. However, as we have often noted, the success of such efforts is unproved and, very likely, would turn out to be failures if the proper research could be obtained.

I would also take note of the grave doubt that grammar as usually taught has any redeeming value. The feeling is that students don't learn much of what they are taught, students don't retain much of the little they learn, and students almost never learn enough to be able to apply it. I add that there is much evidence to support this feeling.

We don't even agree as to what it means to teach grammar—or at least we aren't careful to specify what we mean when we discuss issues related to grammar. Some refer to traditional school grammar, some to a more modern version, some to rules and exercises for correctness, and some to aspects of style.

Finally, we have noted the sad state of grammatical knowledge among teachers and prospective teachers. Most English teachers receive, at best, a single course in grammar, usually taught without making any connection to issues involving teaching grammar. And most elementary teachers are lucky to get even a single course in grammar.

In fact, grammar is now mostly relegated to the new linguistics departments, or it has become allied to anthropology rather than English. Thus it joins logic (now in philosophy

departments), composition, speech, drama-in-performance, and similar subjects as refugees from college English departments, yet these still are subjects that language arts teachers should know. And just as English departments don't want to teach literature or grammar in a form that prospective language arts teachers could easily apply in their teaching, neither do those other departments such as linguistics feel a responsibility for adjusting courses for the needs of elementary and secondary teachers.

Programs to prepare language arts teachers have tried to pick up the slack with education programs that cover how to teach literature, language, and composition. But in many colleges, all those subjects are covered in a single 3-credit course—hardly adequate for the job, especially if the “content” one is supposedly learning to teach has not been adequately taught by the “content” department. The best education programs have three courses, one in how to teach each leg of the tripod. But again, if the course must cover content as well as how to teach it, a single course is not adequate. For instance, I estimate that it would require at least two courses in language and how to teach it in order to cover the subject adequately. I don't know of any college that offers such a program.

One result of these problems is that the teaching of grammar has disappeared from many language arts classrooms. Teachers can't teach what they don't know. And they surely won't teach what has, arguably, been proved not to work.

A second result is that grammar as an individual subject (i.e., isolated from other language subjects such as semantics and pragmatics) will be extremely hard to re-introduce to the schools. And, given the sad history of grammar teaching, it's probably just as well that few people are seriously trying to do so. Too many teachers would take it as an attempt to re-introduce traditional grammar or those exercises on correctness.

So my proposal is that we NOT try to re-introduce grammar by itself, not even in a modern enlightened approach. I think that bringing back grammar as an individual subject will not happen successfully in my lifetime. Instead, I propose that we take over the entire “language” leg of the English tripod and make grammar just one strand of that. It would be a vital strand, for one cannot discuss anything much about language, whether it be vocabulary or dialect or style, without using grammatical concepts. But it would not be the whole thing.

So what are the other aspects of language? A book that I have used called *Linguistics for Non-Linguists* (Frank Parker and Kathryn Riley) shows what they might be. It has chapters on the following subjects:

- Pragmatics
- Semantics
- Syntax
- Morphology
- Phonology
- Language variation
- First-language acquisition
- Second-language acquisition

Written language

The neurology of language

Perhaps we wouldn't need to include all of these aspects of language, but surely we would want to include in our language curriculum some items from the list. In addition, we might want to include more about the language of literature and the other forms of writing. Most of these are probably related to pragmatics, but given that the Parker and Riley book includes only speech acts under pragmatics, this shows that even the above list is inadequate.

Moreover, I found that understanding language in the terms used by linguistics was awfully difficult for my college students. Indeed, it was hard for ME, and I have a lot more background than my students. So I am proposing that we use an approach called "Language Awareness" instead. This includes many of the same concepts as linguistics casts them in terms more appropriate for the non-linguist. As best I can tell, language awareness is a British approach; the only American I can tie it to is Larry Andrews of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He calls the approach "language exploration and awareness" and has written a book by that name: *Language Exploration and Awareness: A Resource Book for Teachers*, 2nd edition. (The first edition is much shorter; used copies of it can be bought cheaply on Amazon.)

The general principle of language awareness is to start with genuine texts and oral language and have students make observations and generalizations about the language, aiming to develop a metalinguistic understanding of what is going on. This is very similar to what several members of ATEG have been advocating.

The next part of my proposal is that we develop a textbook series, perhaps for grades 4-10, in which the basic concepts of language awareness are introduced and then used in ever-more sophisticated form. We would, of course first need to develop a tentative curriculum for language and then a full language arts curriculum in which to use our language curriculum. (Or we could borrow an existing one. See below.) After we have sketched out a language curriculum, we could get linguists and language arts educators to help us refine it.

Finally, after developing all these ideas, we would need to create and publish materials for teachers to use. There are several ways of doing this, but that problem is several years down the road. Perhaps we will want to develop pamphlets for teaching units.

So there you have it. I don't know if we could pull it off, but I think it's worth a try. As a former professor of mine once said, the only way to get an idea into schools is to write a textbook that they can use. Few have the time to write their own materials.

As a first step in this process, I have developed a first draft of a language curriculum and a couple of lessons to show how it could be used. The following is an explanation of what has been done.

The Language Curriculum

This language curriculum covers grades 4-10. It could have covered other grades as well, but I have no confidence in my knowledge of what goes on from kindergarten to third grade. And I think I have introduced all of the language elements I'm interested in by the tenth grade. Grades 11-12 would just be more of the same.

As you will see, I have arranged the curriculum in a table. The table makes it easy to scan the curriculum and get an overall view of what I have in mind. However, it doesn't allow space for explanations and elaborations. Most teachers would do more than I have listed, especially by repeating what was covered in earlier grades. So the table is a limiting mechanism, but I decided to use it anyway for its other virtues.

I assume that in its actual use, the curriculum would be cumulative. That is, even though I don't have space to specifically mention it, I intend that subjects taught in one grade would be used in higher grades, re-taught when necessary, and expanded upon.

As you can see by looking at the tables, my view of the language concepts to be taught includes more than grammar, however one defines that term. My reasoning and conceptions are as follows:

I. First, I think that the common notion of grammar as syntax is too limiting. I prefer the system commonly used in linguistics, wherein phonemics and morphemics are also part of grammar. At the lower grades, these other levels of grammar might be more useful and teachable. In addition, I think we should add semantics and pragmatics to the extent possible. So that gives us three main levels of language, each of them divided into three more levels. These are the following (borrowed from *At Theory of Discourse*, by James I. Kinneavy):

Basic Language Elements

A. Grammar

1. Phonology (phonemics, phonetics, phonics)
2. Morphology (roots, affixes, inflections, compounding, etc.)
3. Syntax (word functions, sentence elements, sentence types, etc.)

B. Semantics

1. Semantic implications of grammar
2. Reference (how words refer to the world)
3. Psycholinguistics (concepts, scripts, etc.)

C. Pragmatics (those aspects related to grammatical and semantic choices)

1. Media and language arts
2. Modes of discourse (narration, description, etc.)
3. Aims of discourse (persuasion, literature, information, etc.)

II. Second, combining my own ideas with several from the discipline of language awareness, I came up with a list of possible curriculum elements. These are areas of

language study that could be turned into free-standing units or, preferably, be made parts of integrated units. You will see these as labels for the columns in the tables.

Curriculum Elements (subjects within which language can be studied)

- A. Dictionary study
 - 1. Lexicography
 - 2. Basic parts of a dictionary definition
 - 3. Extras (e.g., word history, synonyms and antonyms, usage notes)
- B. Language variation
 - 1. Historical
 - 2. Levels of formality
 - 3. Socio-economic
 - 4. Regional
 - 5. Age
 - 6. In-groups (occupation, avocations, family, etc.)
- C. Oral discourse routines and conventions
 - 1. Using a telephone
 - 2. Conversations
 - 3. Classroom discourse
 - 4. Formal speech: debate, public speaking, etc.
- D. Print media (publications and how they are put together)
 - 1. Books (fiction, trade, textbooks, reference, etc.)
 - 2. Periodicals (newspapers, magazines, newsletters, etc.)
 - 3. Pamphlets and other handouts
 - 4. Web sites and e-zines
- E. Conventions of Writing
 - 1. Spelling
 - 2. Punctuation
 - 3. Usage
 - 4. Capitalization and other conventions of typography
- F. Linguistic features of the modes of discourse
 - 1. Narration
 - 2. Description
 - 3. Classification, definition, and division
 - 4. Evaluation
- G. Linguistic Features of the Rhetorical Aims
 - 1. Persuasion
 - 2. Self-expression
 - 3. Literature
 - 4. Exposition (information, science, exploration)
- H. The Language of Evaluation, Intolerance, and Discrimination
 - 1. Stereotyping
 - 2. Negative aspects of a stereotype
 - 3. Being on the receiving end
 - 4. Causes and effects

Your Role

As you study the table listing all of these curriculum elements and when to introduce them to students, keep in mind that I do not see this table as a finished product. I have had to do a lot of guessing about what can, as a practical matter, be taught at each grade. In other words, I think I have developed a good *scope* of what could be done, but I am unsure of the *sequence*.

I hope that you will send me suggestions for improvement of the sequence, based on your knowledge and personal experience. I'm also amenable to revising the scope if you think it's necessary.

Send suggestions by e-mail whenever they occur to you.

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Developing a Curriculum for Language Arts Instruction

Any language curriculum that we propose will need to be embedded in a larger *language arts* curriculum in order to be useful to teachers. I was originally going to develop an example of a full curriculum for at least one grade in order to show how my views of language could be included. Then I decided to look around to see if maybe someone had already developed one that would be acceptable to me; I could then just point out where language elements were being included, or I could point out how they could be included.

I was looking for a curriculum based on certain criteria, as follows:

1. It should follow the principles of **language awareness**, as outlined by Larry Andrews of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in various publications. The most recent seems to be *Language Exploration and Awareness: A Resource Book for Teachers*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998). See especially pp. 12-18. This approach requires emphasizing meaning, using authentic texts, taking a developmental view, covering more levels of language than just grammar, and being student-centered and inquiry-based. Each of these requirements could be explained at some length, but this is not the place to do so.
2. Even though I am conceiving of this curriculum as embodying the language strand of the traditional English tripod, I think our curriculum should take a **language arts** view of English instead of the tripod. The language arts are reading, writing, speaking, listening and (the newly added) creating and interpreting visuals. The tripod tends to overemphasize literature, encourage teaching language in isolation from its use, and ignore the oral and visual.
3. The curriculum should be organized in **integrated units**. That is, every unit should include all or most of the language arts. For example, there would be no such thing as a

unit on grammar or usage. I prefer thematic units, but I have no objection to units based on a genre, a specific piece of literature, or a topic, as long as they integrate the language arts.

4. The units should also permit a **writing-across-the-curriculum** approach to the rest of the school curriculum. Or, preferably, units could use language arts across the curriculum.

5. Study would be based on **both fiction and non-fiction**. In other words, I'm not interested in a curriculum that does not give equal weight to other kinds of texts besides literature.

A Sample Curriculum

After much searching, I came upon a curriculum being used as an example for the State of Michigan. While I don't agree with every part of it, it is, I think, an excellent creation. It also meets the criteria above. That is, it follows the principles of language awareness, it is divided into units, the units integrate all of the language arts, it balances literature and non-literary discourse, and it connects to other school subjects.

Thus, we have the fortunate circumstance of not needing to invent our own curriculum in order to have a context for language study. The Michigan curriculum can be adapted to our purposes. Of course, there is already some language study included or implied by the Michigan curriculum, but we can add more where appropriate. The curriculum is also copyrighted, so at some point we would need to deal with that issue.

To see how the curriculum is constructed and how we might add language study as specified in my tables, let us consider Michigan's fourth grade language arts curriculum. It consists of seven units, as follows:

1. Personal Narrative
2. Courage
3. Mysteries
4. Supporting Others in a Time of Need
5. Research on Environmental Preservation
6. Myths and Legends
7. Adventure

As you can see, three of these seem to be organized around genres (personal narrative, mysteries, myths and legends), three are thematic (courage, supporting others, adventure), and one combines a theme (environmental preservation) with specified academic skills (research).

To see how language study is already embedded in units (and to which we might add more about language), let us consider the first one, personal narrative. The personal narrative is a common genre for many grades, including freshman composition in college. It has also attracted much interest for study by college English departments under the title

of “the memoir,” probably because it is the type of non-literature most similar to literature.

In terms of my curriculum table, the personal narrative is an example of expressive discourse (its rhetorical aim) and is organized on the principles of narration (its rhetorical mode). It allows for considerable deviation from Standard English by permitting writers to use their own dialects and similar variations in language, to the extent that dialect and other variations can be represented in writing. Furthermore, it often deals with intolerance and discrimination suffered by the writer. In sum, personal narrative is an ideal venue for the study of language.

Here is the url for the 4th grade unit on the personal narrative:

http://www.michigan.gov/scope/0,1607,7-155-13481_13487_13488-39206--,00.html

The unit for personal narrative consists of ten lessons. To summarize these lessons, the students do the following:

1. They read and listen to many examples of personal narratives.
2. They define personal narratives and make lists of their salient characteristics.
3. They develop a rubric from the definition and list of characteristics.
4. They develop a list of possible topics, using the three rhetorical strategies of self-expression (self, others, world) to categorize the topics.
5. They then write, revise, and edit their own personal narratives, using their rubrics and teacher-led lessons on such subjects as writing dialogue and maintaining chronological order.
6. They “publish” their papers and read them aloud.

The potential for teaching language skills can be seen in the lessons themselves and in the rubric that students are likely to develop under the teacher’s guidance. One such rubric for the personal narrative, which is included in one lesson plan, goes as follows (It is adapted from a Houghton Mifflin publication):

1. I start with a question, a surprising statement, or dialogue.
2. I use details and dialogue to tell what I saw, heard, tasted, smelled, and felt.
3. I include only events that are important to the story, and put the events in order.
4. My writing sounds like me.
5. My ending tells how the story worked out or what I thought or felt.
6. There are almost no mistakes in capitalization, punctuation, or spelling.

This rubric has several elements that could be studied to help students become sensitive to language (language awareness) and improve their correctness and style. Some of these are as follows:

- The concepts of question, statement, and dialogue are from speech acts, features of pragmatics.

- Putting events in order requires some use and knowledge of sequential transitions—especially how to make substitutes for “and then.” Work could also be done on the basic rule of narration, which is to reveal causal relationships between events. This might require subordinate clauses beginning with a word like “because.”
- Making one’s writing sound like the writer requires allowing for language variation to at least a small extent. Variation might be based on age, region, or ethnic group. In other words, fourth graders must be allowed to write like fourth graders and not be held to adult standards. Southerners must be allowed to use the vocabulary of southerners.
- Even though the rubric doesn’t specifically include them, students are likely to make observations about the language of self-expression. For instance, they would likely see the frequent use of personal pronouns.
- The rubric calls for “almost no mistakes” in mechanics. This is a place where the teacher could have one or two whole-class lessons in common errors and then work with small groups and individuals to help students to learn how to spot and correct other problems. The teacher might need to teach and use concepts from grammar in the process of helping students. Because students are working with full drafts, there is plenty of opportunity for students to learn in the context of their own writing.

An Application to Writing

To see how this might work on a real fourth grade essay, consider the following one. It was not written to fit the rubric, but it *is* a personal narrative. It’s a first draft. The cat’s actual name was Sabrina. The Dad was me.

One night my Dad said, “Where is the cat?” We heard a mew outside. When Dad opened the door, in stepped Sybrenia, our cat. Dad said “She’s got something in her mouth.” Sure enough, when Dad pryed open Sybrenia’s mouth, out scrambled a little mouse. “Why is the mouse still alive,” I asked, “If Sybrenia caught it?” “This is only one of her first mice,” Said Dad. The mouse ran around the room while my six-foot tall Dad kept crawling after the mouse trying to catch it, pouncing on it, yelling “I got it Oh, rats.” As you can imagine I was enjoying this very much. When mom came home she said, “I go next door and get a trap.” She got the trap, but we didn’t catch it. Every morning I asked “Did you catch it?” Unfortunately for the mouse, one day we **did** catch it.

The End

The paper on which this draft was written also included the teacher's comments, all of which are in the form of questions to help the child improve the contents by adding more details to the story and more about what the writer was thinking and feeling. There is, after all, no point in trying to work on corrections on an early draft; some of the mistakes are probably more like typos than real errors. (The spelling of "around," for instance.) After the next draft—which was about a third longer and was divided into paragraphs—the teacher began working on correctness. Only the first and second drafts were saved, so I can't tell you the ultimate form of the essay.

There are several aspects of language skills that the teacher might have tried getting students to make inferences about, or the teacher might have taught them directly either as whole-class lessons or to the individual student:

Spelling and word formation: The rule that when a word ends in y, preceded by a consonant, you change the y to i. Also, when you add -ly to a word you keep the whole word you are adding it to, as *unfortunately*. (Unfortunately, there are exceptions to the rule.)

Punctuation and pragmatics: Be consistent about separating a quote from its speaker tag with a comma. (This seems to be a time when teachers work especially hard on teaching students how to write dialogue.) A teacher probably would not try teaching students to put a comma after introductory adverbial clauses at this age, but perhaps this particular student is ready for it.

Capitalization: When you split a quote, don't capitalize first word of the second half. A teacher could also make a stab at teaching when to capitalize mom and dad, though I wouldn't expect much. Students still don't know how to do that when they come to college.

Pragmatics/text formation: Keep track of your personal pronouns to see if you need to re-introduce the names they stand for. Also keep track of the names to see if you are getting repetitious and need to substitute a personal pronoun.

Syntax / parts of speech: It probably would have come up when students were identifying characteristics of personal narratives that this genre includes many personal pronouns, especially first person. A teacher could pursue this observation, to introduce or reintroduce the concepts of noun and pronoun, common nouns and proper nouns. Such vocabulary could then be put to immediate use in discussing the generalizations and issues mentioned above.

The issue of varying the verbs used in speaker tags might also come up during the teaching of how to write dialogue. It would be a good context in which to use the concept of verb and to mention its name.

Semantics (lexicography, concepts, grammatical aspects of meaning): These aspects would come up more naturally in reading examples of personal narratives than in doing the writing. See below.

An Application to Reading

Now we can see how language skills might be taught within the context of a reading assignment. Most of the readings described in the Michigan curriculum are by adults or by older students. But a teacher could save some student papers and use them as models in future classes. Or teachers could write their own papers, narrating one of their own experiences during elementary school and trying to imitate the writing of a fourth grader. That's what I did in writing the following paper.

Good New or Bad News?

Did your teacher ever send a note home with you? That has to be bad news. Right? That happened to me in the third grade. My teacher said it wasn't bad news, but I still was nervous.

My mom opened the note. "This is nothing bad," she said. "Your teacher just thinks you need glasses." At first I was relieved that I wasn't in trouble. Then I thought, oh no, not glasses! I'll look like a geek. I told mom that I didn't want to look like a geek. She made an appointment with an eye doctor anyway. She also said I shouldn't use that word again. She hates words like that.

We went to this office of the eye doctor about a week later. An eye doctor is really known as an optometrist. My optometrist was a lady. I had to sit in a big chair like a dentist's chair and look through a machine with lenses in it. There was a row of letters on the wall and I had to read them off. The optometrist kept changing the lenses until I could read the letters. Then she started changing the lenses this way and that way. She would ask which way was best.

After awhile the optometrist told my mom that I needed glasses and gave her a piece of paper with some numbers on it. She called it a prescription like it was for medicine.

On the way home, we stopped at a store that sold glasses. A man had me try on some frames to find ones I liked. I liked ones with X-men on them, but mom said they

were too expensive. I picked out some that looked about the same but no X-men. I also asked the man if he was an optometrist. He said no, he was an optician.

When we got home, my cousin Marissa was there. She is supposed to wear glasses but won't do it. I asked her why, and she said she hated how she looked with glasses on. She said she would rather not see good than look bad. That got me all worried.

About a week later, we went back to the store and the optician had me try on my new glasses. He kept adjusting them until they felt snug and straight. Then I looked in the mirror to see how bad it was. Did I look like a you know what? I couldn't tell for sure. On the way home I kept asking my mom what she thought. I told her about Marissa. All she said was "You look fine. Anyway, it's better to see than to worry how you look."

So I began looking outside the car to see if I could tell any difference. Wow, the world sure did look different. I could see clear down to the end of the street. I could even read the name on the car ahead of us. It was a Ford. The next day in school I could see the board as clear as day. The teacher even let me move out of the front row. She also said I looked fine. "Glasses look good on you," she said.

Now that I've had my glasses for a year, I'm used to them. I think I don't look too bad. And if I do, I don't care. I like being able to see things that other people can see. Mom was right. It's better to see good than worry how you look.

Using the Rubric: A paper like this could be used either to help students develop a rubric or to practice using a rubric like the one given above. In addition to the items already on the rubric, students could add that the paper needs to use the word "I" a lot and also the word "said."

Observing the wording and mechanics of the writing: These are times when students can be encouraged to make inferences about the nature of words like "I" and "said" and how they are used. Students could also observe the various ways that dialogue is used, not just as direct quotations but also as paraphrases. And they could observe and make inferences about how dialogue is capitalized and punctuated.

Semantics: Students could also engage in many activities involving words like "optometrist," "optician," and "prescription." They could get out their dictionaries to find out what the words mean, how they are constructed, and how technical terms were developed.

Language of Discrimination: In class discussion, students could consider why the writer's mother is against using the word "geek." This would get into stereotyping and name-calling and how these processes work.

Language Variation: Even in fourth grade, some students will know that a phrase like "to see good" isn't quite right. If someone brings it up, the teacher can lead the class into a brief discussion of when one would say "to see well" and why. Students could also see if they could figure out why "see good" seems wrong but "look good" doesn't

Narration / Text formation: Students could be asked to look for the words and phrases that help to keep the sequence straight and moving along. There's quite a variety of items that might be identified, so students might make a stab at classifying them.

Expressive Discourse: Expressive discourse is all about students learning about themselves and, possibly, becoming different people as a result of experience and writing about experience. Students could be asked what evidence they see that the writer is a different person now than he was before the he got glasses.

Conclusion

Well, that's the proposal and how it might work. It's an ambitious proposal, but I think it's the only way that language concepts, including grammar, will find their way into the language arts curriculum in a systematic form. You will find the overall language curriculum in the accompanying pdf file.