

English is taught all over the world. In the United States, any child moving through the K through 12 public school system can expect to be taught English lessons from the beginning to the end of their school experience. Inevitably, it seems, students who speak English as their native tongue will come to a point in their educational pursuits where they begin to question the need to be instructed in a language that they communicate quite effectively in on a daily basis. Furthermore, students fail to see how linguistic changes affect how they speak today. However, through a curriculum inclusive of historical context, students will make connections in accordance to the foundational movers that shaped the language they speak today. For many students, English is a second, or even third language, which necessitates further instruction, in addition to the standard English Language Arts curriculum. ELL students struggle with English for a variety of reasons (from cultural to grammatical reasons.) The job of the educator is to be able to accommodate and adjust to help these students achieve a better understanding of English, in order to be successful not just in speaking, but in reading and writing as well.

English, as a discipline is often taught as a strict set of rules that must be mastered, often with ambiguous rationale guiding the “why” around the rules. If students face 12 years or more of instruction in English, how can educators facilitate the knowledge of the present “rules” in a way that is more engaging to both native and non-native English speakers? Our project will attempt to implement elements of the development of Modern English in a practical way, by applying these elements to various classroom settings. In order to help students make connections between prescriptive rules and a more descriptive-linguistic approach, we will focus on historical context, grammar, and English language learners.

When teaching your students linguistics from a historical perspective, it is important to include the following factors; territorial expansions, nationalistic outcomes, and socio-economic growth. Though these are only a few of the factors that dictated the outcome of the dominant English speaking territories of today, the influences and repercussions that resulted from these factors were essential to understand why these results initially occurred and what resulted from them.

When studying territorial expansions, you must allow your students to see that these great influxes of people into different areas impact history and language in a multitude of ways. One invasion of utmost importance would be that of the Vikings in 1066.<sup>1</sup> Now there could have been many reasons for this expansion, one of which being that the resources where the Vikings were previously could have been scarce. However, more convincingly, a move might have been made due to political conflicts within one of the head families. This can be deduced because inheritance was often left to the eldest son, leaving the other sons with no land, influence, or money to live on. Because of this, migrations were common so as to better their situation.<sup>2</sup> The movement of these Vikings is so critical because as we would come to find out later, Britain's royal lines would directly descend from them.<sup>3</sup>

Another territorial expansion that would be a determinative factor was made by France in 1204, when King John lost Normandy to the French. Due to this unfortunate occurrence, tensions were then heightened between Britain and France; this then resulted in a surge of British nationalism. In accordance with the nationalist structure, the focus of the British turned entirely

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Minnick. "Middle English." Lecture, Kalamazoo, MI, October 20, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Barber, *The English language: A Historical Introduction* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 127.

<sup>3</sup> Minnick. "Middle English."

internally.<sup>4</sup> Not only were the people motivated by means of a common interest, in their distaste of the French, but they had begun to assimilate their culture to reflect this interest. French no longer was looked upon as an acceptable language; English therefore took precedent, though few people had been speaking it for very long. This nationalistic approach is so important because in a very short time period, it ensured that the use of English in this territory grew exponentially. Not only did the native speakers change their spoken language, but written texts for educational purposes began to reflect this as well. As has been the standard pattern throughout history, this led to the formation of an elitist mentality within the higher classes of society.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, this mentality then strengthened growing tensions which had been festering between the upper and lower classes.

With a system that had always functioned in favor of the upper class rather than the lower class, the linguistic changes in Britain encouraged a revolutionary way of thinking. In coalition with the plague that had just ravaged the region, labor was scarce and the lower class peoples of society were now able to see the vast significance of their beings in regards to the functionality of society.<sup>6</sup> This then led to multiple movements which would cause future generations to question and challenge their position in society.<sup>7</sup>

When thinking of linguistics, one tends to focus primarily on the implications it has on the language of a group of individuals, however, through this method of teaching you can show your students what exactly drove the movement of this change. Without explorations, wars, or other conflicts, language would have no reason to change; in this manner, the stagnation of

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<sup>4</sup> James Cousins. "Nationalism." Lecture, Kalamazoo, MI, November 11, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> James Cousins. "Class Structure." Lecture, Kalamazoo, MI, October 28, 2014

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

language would be counterproductive to the human race. Furthermore, through this historical view, you can show your students how applicable these past events are to their lives today. Everything we do alters the course of our language from invasions to texting. In teaching these fundamental lessons, students are given the tools to grasp how these changes can occur in other regions and project other linguistic changes that could be on the horizon. Teaching with an emphasis on applicable, practical historical content can make even grammar lessons more engaging. This approach could motivate students to better understand the “why” behind the seemingly prescriptive rules of grammar.

Some dreadful comments about grammar can be heard under the breaths of middle and high school students on any given school day. What might surprise many is that a healthy disdain for grammar can also be observed among scholars dating back hundreds of years. Taking a journey back in time to the *Political Register* of 1871 yields some evidence. Grammar is described as a “petty and sniveling science”, and, paradoxically, “the most essential of all the branches of book-learning, yet, a trifle, a poor, pitiful thing in itself”. Grammar has been rebuked and deemed essential in the same breath:

“Grammar is to literary composition what a linch-pin is to a wagon. It is a poor pitiful thing in itself, it bears no part of the weight, communicates nothing to the force, adds not in the least to the celerity, but still the wagon cannot very well and safely go on without it”.<sup>8</sup>

How can something seemingly so necessary yet so widely despised be made more interesting for a group of the population with ever declining attention spans and intolerance of boredom? How

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<sup>8</sup> L.C. Mugglestone, *Cobbett's Grammar: William, James Paul, and the Politics of Prescriptivism*. (*The Review of English Studies, New Series*, Vol. 48, No. 192, 1997), 471-78.

can teachers creatively incorporate such a dreaded discipline into lesson plans without evoking sighs and wails of disappointment?

First, educators must create space between the concepts of grammar and rules. Likening grammar to rules is commonplace among students. As Narcisa Schwarz states, teaching grammar as a defined set of rules creates the idea that the English language was something created, like a game, and structured from its inception with set guidelines of do's and don'ts. More accurately, as she states, "Languages started by people making sounds which evolved into words, phrases, and sentences..What we call grammar is simply a reflection of a language at a particular time".<sup>9</sup> This concept is particularly important in secondary education, where the understanding that rules are meant to be challenged, and at times broken becomes commonplace. Rather than being a detriment, natural adolescent rebellion can be incredibly helpful for teachers attempting to draw students into to what has historically been a painstaking subject to teach.

Recent additions to the Oxford dictionary illustrate the organismic features of the English language. Yes, students, dictionaries change. Specifically, they grow with the culture. An English classroom full of teens laughing and opining during a grammar lesson might seem like an impossibility, but making a class aware that words like "vape" and "bae" are now officially part of our lexicon might just lead to some interesting discussion. This real life (and real time) example of August Schleicher's idea that language evolves presents the opportunity for a fascinating lesson and discussion on the development of grammar. It could also be the beginning of a larger project that bridges the gap between the prescriptive and descriptive.

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<sup>9</sup> Narcisa Schwarz, "Aspects of Grammar Teaching Techniques." (IACSIT Press, 2014).

Motivating students to embrace grammar lessons can seem especially challenging for educators and curriculum developers. Research suggests that adopting an approach that leads students toward task goal orientation is supportive of their motivation to learn, irrespective of subject matter. Task goal orientation in students is defined as “the belief that the purpose of achieving is personal improvement and understanding”.<sup>10</sup> This goal theory is in contrast with ability goal orientation, where the purpose of learning achievement is solely to demonstrate competence, or appear to demonstrate competence. This orientation in students is associated with the perception that simply regurgitating content for a grade is sufficient. Curiosity and autonomy decline when students adopt this mindset.

Fortunately for students and educators alike, there are wonderful scholars making strides in applying these theories creatively in the field of English Language Arts, developing curriculum that is supportive of student engagement and motivation. Yes, even grammar lessons can be incredibly fun and engaging! Jeff House, an educator who was particularly inspired by June Casagrande’s *Grammar Snobs Are Great Big Meanies: A Guide to Language for Fun and Spite*, developed an engaging assignment for his high school students that has been met with positive feedback, most importantly, from his students. First, students are asked to identify a grammar “rule” that has given them particular trouble in the past, to the extent that its recollection makes them roll their eyes or become uncomfortable. For example, a student whose mother constantly corrects them for using double negatives, or saying ain’t in conversation (“AIN’T AIN’T A WORD!!!). Mr. House has students research the background of the selected rule violation, brainstorm details of the specific event or events where they are constantly

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<sup>10</sup> Lynley Anderman, *Motivation and Middle School Students*. (Champaign, IL. ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 1998)

corrected, and determine how the student will follow or modify the rule based on their research and experience. This writing assignment opens up a multi-lesson discussion on grammar focusing on the “why”. For example, class discussions in follow up to the assignment revolve around questions like “Why do some teachers mark me down for comma splice, while others don’t?” or “Why did my fourth grade teacher tell me not to begin a sentence with *and* when all kinds of sentences begin with *and*?”.<sup>11</sup> The classroom discussion that follows is engaging, as it is practical and relatable to the students. All the while they are learning the “hows” and “whys” of common grammar lessons in a way that fosters autonomy and creativity. In addition to helping native speakers of English, educators across disciplines will inevitably have English language learners (ELL) in their classrooms.

At least 3.5 million children identified as limited in English proficiency (LEP) are enrolled in U.S. schools.<sup>12</sup> According to a study implemented by the California Community Foundation nearly 60% of English-language learners in California's high schools have failed to become proficient in English despite more than six years of a U.S. education. (California schools educate 1.6 million English learners, a quarter of all students; they make up the largest concentration of English learners in the nation.) (Reference: LA Times)<sup>13</sup>

One way to help students is to be able to answer some of the “Why?” questions with answers other than, “That’s just the way it is.”

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<sup>11</sup> Jeff House, *The Grammar Gallimaufry: Teaching Students to Challenge the Grammar Gods*. (English Journal, 2009), 98-102.

<sup>12</sup> Lily Wong Fillmore. "Loss Of Family Languages: Should Educators Be Concerned?" *Theory Into Practice*, (2000): 204.

<sup>13</sup> Teresa Watanabe. "Many English Learners Still Struggle with the Language, Study Shows." Los Angeles Times. May 28, 2010. Accessed November 15, 2014. <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/may/28/local/la-me-0528-english-20100528>.

In *Teaching Academic ESL Writing: Practical Techniques in Vocabulary and Grammar*, Hinkel points out the mismatch between what is taught and what can be accomplished by intermediate- and advanced-level ESL writers. Often, she argues, “intensive, individualized help with sentence-level syntax [...]” is needed.<sup>14</sup> Many ELL students stumble over syntax. Being able to explain to the ELL the difference between a synthetic and analytic language in the development of present day English and how it relates to ELL and their native languages can help students gain a better understanding of syntax.

In the past English was a synthetic language, which primarily relies on morphology or word level grammar. In present day English a sentence such as, “Dog bites Man,” is very different than “Man bites dog.” Word order is important to understanding the meaning of a sentence. Typically, in present day English, it’s important to have the subject then the verb then the object of the sentence. In a synthetic language word order is not important, the word itself is important. Synthetic languages change the ending of the word to give it meaning. For example observe this made up “synthetic” language below.

- –o = subject
- –i = object
  - Mano bites dogi
  - Mani bites dogo
  - Mani dogo bites
  - Bites dogo mani<sup>15</sup>

Adding an –o determines who the subject is (who is doing the biting) and adding and –i to the end of the word determines the object (who is receiving the biting). It doesn’t matter which order the words are put in because the meaning is determined by the suffix. Many languages today are

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<sup>14</sup> E. Hinkel. *Teaching academic ESL writing: Practical techniques in vocabulary and grammar*. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 20.

<sup>15</sup> Lisa Minnick. “Development of Modern English: Basic Linguistic Terminology.” (Lecture, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, September 3 and 8, 2014).



synthetic such as: Georgian, some Semitic languages such as Arabic, and also languages of the Americas, including Navajo, Nahuatl, Mohawk and Quechua).<sup>16</sup>

Overtime English has become an analytic language. This is the way sentences and phrases are constructed from their constituent parts (ex: words) in order to make sense).<sup>17</sup> As mentioned earlier, word order is very important, present day English is subject, verb, object (SOV). However, some other languages change to a different order: OSV, VSO, SOV, OVS, VOS. In present day English the adjective is first: cute dog; others such as Spanish the adjective is after: “dog cute.”<sup>18</sup>

Understanding when an ELL comes from a synthetic language background or an analytic background can help the general education teacher to understand why students are looking at the construction of the English language with difficulty. If the student is from a synthetic language the teacher could explain that in the past English was structured very similar to the way that “their” language is spoken, however overtime word order became very important because there is not the morphology of word endings to help determine meanings. Likewise with an ELL of an analytic language, the general education teacher can help them to understand, that just as word order is important in their language, so is it important in English. Being able to explain analytic and synthetic languages to students can help eliminate some of those “why” questions which can be a stumbling block to the learning process.

Without change, there can be no progress. Language is evidence that humanity will continue to progress and alter the ever-accessible tools of language to guide through whatever

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<sup>16</sup> "Synthetic Language." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. January 1, 2014. Accessed November 18, 2014. <http://www.britannica.com/>.

<sup>17</sup> Minnick. “Development of Modern English.”

<sup>18</sup> Minnick.

obstacles the future holds. Whether a native English speaker or ELL, developing an understanding of the seemingly prescriptive, sometimes illogical rules can be a less confusing endeavor with some historical context. Teachers have standards to implement and expectations to be met that may often be less than interesting to students. At the same time, these teachers want to encourage students to express themselves through the English language to the best of their abilities. Reconciling these, sometimes conflicting, objectives through an engaging approach can help students better understand that the “why” is achievable.