The War against Grammar

Teaching English grammar explicitly has long been a source of contention and controversy. Traditionalists lament the decline of students’ reading and writing skills and impute it to their inability to understand how language works, while modernists dismiss the traditionalists’ grammar angst and think that teachers need to focus more on stylistics, critical literacy, and self-expression in helping students write better.

At my college the English department recently inaugurated a one-credit “Grammar for Composition” course because many students could neither identify nor explain things like dependent clauses or gerunds, concepts some writing teachers feel students need to know to help them analyze and improve their writing. Several foreign language instructors have also noted that many students don’t know basic parts of speech, useful reference points for embarking upon the study of the grammar of another language.

In my own area of ESL, grammar has been, at least since the era of the structuralists in the 1950s, a staple of most programs and curricula. Publishers have followed the proliferation of people learning English worldwide with hundreds of books devoted to prescriptive grammar lessons, even while some leading lights in ESL/EFL education are now calling for a shift away from book-based grammar to a study of usage via the spoken language.

David Mulroy, a professor of classics at the University of Wisconsin, enters this grammar fray with his well-argued book, The War against Grammar, a title intended to send a message of alarm and raise the call to bring grammar teaching back to the fore of English teaching. To bolster his argument Mulroy cites the phenomenal growth of remedial English at the college level, the decline in foreign language study, the lower verbal scores on the SAT, and an Educational Testing Service report on adult literacy which showed that the United States ranked poorly against other high-income countries in reading ability.

Mulroy retraces the roots of our
present-day notion of liberal arts to the Greeks, who developed formal systems of inquiry in grammar, rhetoric, logic, mathematics, and philology: “The liberal arts are the ground rules of thought, not its end. In Aristotelian terms, they are not speculative disciplines, aimed at learning ultimate truths, but practical ones designed to serve ulterior purposes. Their value is instrumental.” This practical aspect of liberal arts training can still be seen today in many college curricula in which “core” requirements include composition, public speaking, introduction to literary analysis, and mathematics.

As an ESL practitioner, I recognize that most (second) language acquisition goes on idiosyncratically outside the classroom, yet within structured learning classes students need and want to understand grammar and be able to apply it to communicate effectively in speaking and writing. While Mulroy acknowledges that native speakers of English have an intuitive and largely unconscious sense of correct grammar, he feels one should not dismiss the value of explicitly teaching parts of speech, what constitutes complex sentences, the purpose of subordination. According to Mulroy, having grammatical and analytical tools at his or her disposal enables a student to take on complex texts such as Shakespeare or the Bible, as well as to learn another language.

As always, in debates of this nature, it is important to keep perspective, lest an absolutist position blind one to others’ legitimate concerns. Few would quibble with Mulroy about the importance of grammar, though he may be too lightly dismissing other factors influencing a person’s literacy, such as race, socioeconomic class, and access to good schools. The War against Grammar is the kind of text that could provoke some very thoughtful discussion among English, ESL, and foreign language educators, as well as those involved in training tomorrow’s teachers.

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Teaching and Learning Grammar: The Prototype-Construction Approach
by Arthur Whimbey and Myra J. Linden.

In Teaching and Learning Grammar: The Prototype-Construction Approach, Arthur Whimbey and Myra Linden attempt to provide insight to high school and early college English and composition teachers. Teaching and Learning Grammar describes the authors’ “revolutionary” approach to grammar instruction, titled the Prototype-Construction (P-C) Approach, meant as a tool for improving student writing; in their text, Whimbey and Linden argue for a need for improved grammar pedagogy based on research studies and the experiences of students and teachers alike; in short, they believe there is significant failure in the current pedagogical methods of grammar instruction.

The P-C Approach employs distinct steps for attempting to teach grammar. It begins by introducing students
to prototypes in the form of “prototype sentences.” Each prototype sentence consists of three main parts: a subject that performs an action, a verb that expresses an action, and an object that receives the action. In the P-C Approach, students learn the prototypical grammar concepts prior to moving forward in their instruction. The authors’ claim is that all grammatical concepts include “relatively simple, ‘prototype’ cases that can readily be defined and also more complicated, harder-to-find cases” (13). In theory, once students have entered the world of grammar through prototypes, they are ready to proceed to the construction aspect of the P-C Approach. Students are presented with exercises that represent the grammatical characteristics of the prototypes. They are then introduced to nonprototype cases through exercises that illustrate these more difficult cases along with their attributes that are similar to those of the prototypes. Because of this similarity, they belong in the same grammatical category. The exercises in the P-C Approach are almost strictly of the sentence-combining variety, asking students to “construct” sentences. The resulting sentences are nonprototypes that more clearly illustrate the studied grammar concept. This combining type of exercise, one that forces students to use prototype grammar concepts to form a complex, nonprototype sentence, is typical of what the P-C Approach requires of students during the construction phase.

*Teaching and Learning Grammar* is broken into four sections in an attempt to cover the scope of grammatical concepts. Section 1, consisting of Chapters 1 to 3, identifies the need for a new grammar approach. The P-C Approach is then identified in detail in response to that need. Section 2 contains Chapters 4 to 11, in which seven of the eight traditional parts of speech are covered, not including interjections. Section 3 includes chapters 12 to 18. In this seven-chapter segment, more advanced concepts are addressed: relative and noun clauses, modals, helping verbs, voice, the verb “do,” and verbs. The final section of the book, chapter 19, contains an overview of the P-C Approach; this section also includes a bibliography and subject index for easy reference. This final section calls for a paradigm shift in grammar instruction, while advertising the authors’ two more recent workbook publications.

In all, *Teaching and Learning Grammar: The Prototype-Construction Approach* has four distinct objectives: It attempts to introduce the P-C Approach, illustrate its use in coordination with grammar concepts, convince teachers that the P-C Approach has a positive impact on student writing, and sell classroom sets of Whimbey and Linden’s P-C Approach workbooks.

As an introduction to and description of the Prototype-Construction Approach, *Teaching and Learning Grammar* contains a variety of helpful features. One of its most prominent is its coverage of relevant grammar concepts. In covering the parts of speech, conjunctions, and numerous more difficult concepts, the text provides a thorough examination of the traditional, semantic definitions of grammar. In doing so, it also illustrates the inherent deficiencies of these definitions and of the typical approaches to teaching them. As is the standard in *Teaching and Learning Grammar*,
Grammar, the authors describe the deficiencies of the commonly used definition of a grammatical structure and then present an alternative to it that encompasses all they deem necessary. This alternative theoretically makes teaching and learning the concept simpler. Another of its strengths is the types of sentences Teaching and Learning Grammar uses in its exercises and examples. Each sentence is what the authors consider to be a “prototype” sentence, one that consists of the three main parts previously outlined. The strength of these sentences is the authors’ consistency in using them as a teaching device, as well as the simplicity of their structure. Whimbey and Linden’s prototype sentences are further strengthened by the clear identification of each part of speech or grammar concept within each sentence, often demarcated with arrows and bold lettering. This characteristic of the P-C Approach is extremely user-friendly for students attempting to learn the basics of grammar with the hope of improving their writing. A final strong suit is the text’s exercises, which are integral to its reception by the teaching community. Whimbey and Linden provide the reader with sample exercises that employ the P-C Approach. Additionally, selected exercises provide answers and explanations to more clearly illustrate the approach’s function in teaching grammar. This allows teachers to see the P-C Approach in practice, while giving them an opportunity to “try it out” for themselves. In fact, in their opening chapter, the authors address teachers, suggesting that they “read the explanations and do all the exercises to obtain a firsthand view of how the various grammatical concepts are introduced to students and how the exercises reinforce students’ functional understanding of the concepts” (2). The student exercises can be found in their P-C Approach workbooks, which their text later advertises. What is even more impressive in regard to the exercises is that they focus on sentence construction, disregarding the traditional “fill-in-the-blank” and “drill-and-kill” activities that most readers are familiar with. The product of such exercises will be a clear illustration of the function of the relevant grammar concept.

Although one of its assets is its coverage of a wide variety of grammar concepts, Teaching and Learning Grammar is a bit off the mark in its treatment of parts of speech. To begin with, the order in which Whimbey and Linden present the standard parts of speech is desultory. With minor variations, most current grammar texts are at least consistent in their treatment of pronouns. Lester Faigley’s Penguin Handbook, Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford’s St. Martin’s Handbook, and John Warriner’s Warriner’s English Grammar and Composition all introduce pronouns immediately after nouns, which are typically either the first or second part of speech addressed. Whimbey and Linden, on the other hand, neglect to introduce pronouns until the end of Section 2, even after conjunctions. While it is clear that the P-C Approach is an attempt to redefine grammar instruction, this mistreatment of pronouns is confusing. The text’s introduction of verbs is equally disconcerting. The authors claim that their text moves from simple to complex concepts, but in the opening chapter of the parts of speech section they contradict themselves. They do so not...
only in what they choose to introduce, the “be” verb family, but also in proposing that “the P-C Approach deals with this family of verbs separately because it is the most complicated [. . .] and therefore the most troublesome for many students” (15). What is even more disturbing is the lack of any extended discussion of main verbs. The authors briefly refer to the concept, but neglect to elucidate any further. This lack of attention to one of the most important parts of speech, verbs, diminishes the credibility of the text as a whole. Finally, in addition to the lack of verb treatment is the disregard for articles. The discussion of this concept is limited to one paragraph, consisting of little more than two sentences. When addressing articles, Whimbey and Linden report that articles are “so different that modern linguists give the, along with a and an, a separate category called articles. Furthermore, articles are part of another category that modern grammarians call determiners” (35). This is practically the only interchange about articles between the authors and reader, with no further elucidation. With this exclusion, the authors have ignored the most commonly used word in the English language. This is yet another clear shortcoming of their text.

Ultimately, though, the largest detriment to the text is the way that it unknowingly detracts from its own credibility in an attempt to achieve its objectives. One specific lacking element is a discussion of the relevant theory that precipitated the authors’ “new” approach to grammar instruction. Any empirical data that these studies yielded was not discussed in their current text. So, if readers and teachers want to understand what precipitated the “revolutionary” P-C Approach, they will have to research beyond the text. This exclusion robs Teaching and Learning Grammar of its reliability.

Teaching and Learning Grammar is further compromised in its treatment of the impact that the P-C Approach has on the improvement of student writing. The authors claim that their approach has a positive effect on student writing, but then conclude that “a number of studies [. . .] have found that students who constructed sentences in exercises like those shown in this book improved significantly on standardized tests of reading skills” (79), and, later, that “other research studies [. . .] have found that having students construct complex sentences from simple ones improves their scores on standardized reading tests” (92). These two similar but independent references to the impact their approach has illustrates the reality of their findings: the P-C Approach has more of a proven effect on reading than on writing, which contradicts their earlier assertions. This discrepancy is a serious limitation of Whimbey and Linden’s publication.

The culminating weakness of Teaching and Learning Grammar is the authors’ repeated endorsement of their other products; they seriously detract from the book’s more academic intentions. In nearly every chapter, Whimbey and Linden shamelessly promote their two grammar workbooks, Grammar for Improving Writing and Reading Skills and More Grammar for Improving Writing and Grammar Skills.

In all, although it has an ostensibly similar number of strengths and weaknesses, Teaching and Learning Grammar:
The Prototype-Construction Approach does not achieve its intended objectives. As an introduction to a “new” approach to teaching grammar, the book is adequate. It clearly defines, explains, and puts the P-C Approach into practice. But it fails to provide the requisite information as to how the P-C Approach fills a gap in existing grammar pedagogy. In order for teachers to embrace a new pedagogical strategy, the theory behind the practice must be included. Furthermore, it is difficult to take what Whimbey and Linden purport seriously, considering the vested interest they willingly display for the sale of their workbooks. In the final analysis, Teaching and Learning Grammar might be used as a starting point for teachers who desire to depart from the traditional methods of grammar instruction, but only with the knowledge of its substantial imperfections.

reviewed by
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Rhetorical Democracy: Discursive Practices of Civic Engagement
edited by Gerard A. Hauser and Amy Grim.

In the preface to Rhetorical Democracy: Discursive Practices of Civic Engagement, a compilation of selected papers presented at the 2002 conference of the Rhetoric Society of America, Gerard A. Hauser challenges instructors to “reclaim their birthright by reasserting the centrality of rhetoric to democratic life in the twentieth century,” by “enabling our students to live as free human beings who have it within their power to influence the communities in which they will work, make their homes, form friendships, raise families, educate their children, enjoy public arts, and pursue their private pleasures” (13). While this is a worthy challenge to any instructor, and Rhetorical Democracy is a useful work to encourage writing teachers to rethink their philosophies, the text generally offers more theory than pragmatic application for writing instructors.

The work is divided into three distinct categories: Part I, Plenary Papers, whose four authors discuss various pedagogical underpinnings from which instructors direct their teaching methods; Part II, President’s Panel: The Rhetoric of 9/11 and Its Aftermath, which provides concise and interesting analyses of how Americans remember, discuss, and use the events of September 11; and Part III, twenty-seven selected papers that cover topics ranging from the rhetorical nature of poetry slams (Jerry Blifield) to a case-study-like discussion of the renaming of the Illinois State University student union (Jeff Ludwig), from George W. Bush’s “Republican judgment” about stem-cell research (Stephen A. Klien) to the antiglobalization movement’s rhetorical efforts to define their identity (Shawn Hellman), from a reevaluation of Adam Smith’s economic rhetoric in light of his underanalyzed text The Theory of Moral Sentiments (David Charles Gore) to a discussion of “hybrid pedagogy” that incorporates service-learning and cultural studies (J. Blake Scott). This wildly diverse third
section has quite a bit to offer intellectually, but some readers may not be interested in such diversity. The section is a bit short on how one applies these principles or ideas in a classroom or a collegewide setting because the articles are more focused on analysis than on pedagogy.

In contrast, though, the text could prove helpful to anyone wanting to research more deeply into the roots of rhetorical democracy relating to the ancient rhetorical tradition that Hauser’s preface, Bruce E. Gronbeck’s “Citizen Voices in Cyberpolitical Culture,” Rosa A. Eberly’s “Plato’s Shibboleth Delin- cations; or, the Complete Idiot’s Guide to Rhetoric,” and other articles explore in some detail. The second section, focusing on the rhetoric of 9/11, could be useful for background reading on the controversial issues, stemming from American responses to terrorism, which instructors might have students explore in various composition courses. Those voices in the 9/11 section might be fruitful in providing a counterpoint to the typical depictions of post-9/11 America that students are exposed to (the “America United,” “After September 11, everything changed” rhetoric). In particular, Dana L. Cloud’s ideas in “The Triumph of Consolatory Ritual over Deliberation since 9/11” would introduce important rhetorical concepts to students while talking about how people talk about September 11. In addition, Mark Andrejevic’s “The Rehabilitation of Propaganda: Post 9/11 Media Coverage in the United States” underscores how our corporate media exclude or at least marginalize certain voices in the discussion of how we should proceed as a citizenry under the constant threat, real or imagined, of terrorism. As Andrejevic relates, “The current attempt to separate the war of words from the impact of U.S. foreign policy in terms of bombs and bodies, both past and present, relegates the public to the passive role of infotainment consumer” (89).

This role of the “infotainment consumer,” how we seem to count more as poll numbers than as true citizens and how many of our students are not engaged in our democracy much at all, is what many of the articles discuss at length in the first two sections. “The Temple Issues Forum: Innovations in Pedagogy for Civic Engagement,” by Herbert W. Simons, is one of the collection’s strongest essays because Simons uses the Temple Issues Forum as a model for other universities that want to foster civic engagement in political issues within the outlying university’s community or the larger democracy, an engagement that works, in Simons’s words, as “a way of reasserting traditional academic commitments to preparation for citizenship and for the life of the mind” (54). His examples and recommendations on how to create an issues forum aligned with a public debate and discussion group is a way to apply John Dewey’s dictum of learning by doing and solving problems through group participation, through one’s community (61). For those community college writing professionals looking for a way to get students more engaged in their civic lives, Simons’s article is a must-read—it’s a method for creating a true community in a commuter–populated community college setting.

Writing instructors who value the
integration of theory and praxis will enjoy many of the articles in *Rhetorical Democracy*; however, as in any compilation of conference papers, some articles fail to address the pragmatic aspects of our day-to-day work. This is to be expected from the diverse and learned perspectives represented at an annual Rhetoric Society of America conference. Most important, however, this text exemplifies a groundswell in composition pedagogy—a return to the ideal of good rhetoricians speaking well in their communities, a move toward civic engagement.

reviewed by
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TYCA “FAME AND SHAME” AWARD WINNERS

The Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) has announced the winners of the 2005 Public Image of the Two-Year College “Fame and Shame” Awards.

Fame Winner

The 2005 TYCA Fame Award went to Clint Eastwood for his movie *Million Dollar Baby* because in it, he presents community colleges as places of opportunity and hope. His character, in fact, gives a community college catalog to another character in the film who needs it. Additionally, the Fame Award committee felt that *Million Dollar Baby* co-star Morgan Freeman earned equal acclaim for his attendance at TYCA–SE, for donating his honoraria to a community college fund, and for his high praise of community colleges and the role they played in his education.

Shame Winner

The 2005 TYCA Shame Award went to Jay Leno for continually making disparaging remarks about community colleges and community college students on NBC’s *Tonight Show*. Specifically, the award went to Leno for his introductory monologue on March 17, 2004; therein, he noted, “Thousands of students gathered in Sacramento to protest the proposed hike in tuition fees—all these community college kids.” He explained that “you could kind of tell they were community college students,” and then ran a video clip of young protesters—presumably community college students—holding signs bearing slogans such as “Skool is expensive,” “Let us lern,” and “Don’t raise tooishun.”

The Fame and Shame Awards annually recognize the best and worst mentions of the two-year college appearing in any media during the previous year. Visit the Fame and Shame Awards Web site at www.ncte.org/groups/tyca/awards/fameshame to submit nominations for the 2006 award.