

**BACK TO THE BASICS: GRAMMAR AND USAGE****The Issues**

The widespread public concern for a return to the "basics" in English has included a call for increased study of grammar and usage. Critics point to the frequent use of bad grammar by contemporary students, and even by community leaders and public officials. The presumed decline in language standards is often attributed to poor language models provided by television, radio, popular music, and other sources that reinforce examples of poor speaking habits. Advocates of "back to the basics" believe that English teachers have abandoned instruction in fundamentals of grammar like parts of speech, sentence diagramming, and subject-verb agreement. Critics also complain that teachers permit students to use poor grammar in the classroom. Students are allowed to "do their own thing," and the result is the sloppy and ineffective speech rampant in today's society.

**Professional Viewpoints: NCTE/Research**

It is true that many English teachers no longer see grammar instruction as a series of rules distinguishing "right" forms of speech from "wrong" forms. A distinction should be made between *grammar* and *usage*. The former refers to a study of the principles underlying language, the latter to the kind of language called for in particular social situations. Since all normal children adequately learn the basic *grammar* of their native dialects (for example, the native speaker never makes a mistake like saying "am going I not" for "I am not going"), the public clamor actually focuses on dialect-related *usage* differences (as in the use of "I ain't goin" for "I am not going"), which are not grammar problems at all.

Usage differences were once popularly believed to reflect differences in intellectual ability. However, linguistic research has demonstrated that all dialects of English are complete, valid language systems. Moreover, people can do abstract thinking and can talk intelligently in any dialect. There are no "smart dialects" or "ignorant dialects."

The NCTE Commission on Composition has recognized the importance of "the study of the structure...of language, including English grammar," as a "valuable asset to a liberal education." But, warns the commission, grammar should be taught "for its own sake, not as a substitute for composition," and it should not be an instrument for presenting the grammar of a particular dialect "as 'right' or 'pure' or 'logical' or better than others."

Society's demand for use of standard English in certain formal situations (especially in certain jobs) can be viewed in several ways. From a strictly objective viewpoint, such demands are arbitrary, because dialect differences in America

are seldom so great as to hinder communication among speakers of different dialects. The insistence on standard English speech as a job qualification is therefore seen by many as a way of reinforcing class differences, of making sure that the dominant culture is not invaded by talented people of minority cultures. NCTE's Conference on College Composition and Communication forthrightly affirmed "the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialect of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style."

From a practical standpoint, the English teacher knows that nonstandard dialects are one kind of barrier to social mobility, so the teaching of English as a second, dialect—without denigrating the students' native dialect—is a way of providing students with skills for coping with and surviving in our society. At the same time, it is reasonable to ask the business community and society at large to tolerate a wider range of dialects and language styles, as long as the basic end of communication is being served.

Many English teachers, then, feel a responsibility to reject approaches to grammar and usage study that support the linguistic imperialism of prescriptive "school grammars." They also feel responsible for selecting approaches to language study that (a) actually increase the effectiveness of the students' language performance and (b) describe language structure in an accurate way. The traditional grammar study recommended by "back to basics" advocates meets neither of these qualifications. Research indicates that students' language performance is affected not by formal grammar study but by direct, nonanalytical techniques like the audiolingual method and sentence-combining. And the most accurate descriptions of grammatical structure—if, indeed, abstract knowledge of grammar is to be emphasized—are found in generative grammar and generative semantics.

Increasingly, English teachers are moving away from teaching labels and definitions and towards the things that make a difference in their students' lives: promoting fluency and richness of expression; reducing instances of clichés and jargon; creating an awareness of manipulative language in advertising and politics; and promoting logical exchange of ideas in open discussion.

The impact of the new approaches to language instruction has not yet been felt. At this point, teachers are looking *forward* to the basics, and many years are likely to pass before the ill effects of entrenched, unproductive approaches are modified by the "new fundamentals" of language instruction. In the meantime, the general public must be given a clear picture of the real nature of language problems in our society and the classroom practices best suited to solving those problems.

•Reproduce this Starter Sheet freely, in whole or in part.... Distribute it to faculty members, principals, textbook committees, parents' groups, curriculum directors, Boards of Education, business people, and other interested parties.

•Keep an eye out for commentaries on language or language teaching in local newspapers. (Syndicated columnists and letters to the editor often include such commentaries.)

•Respond with your own letter, explaining the problem from the English teachers' perspective.

•Try to influence English program development in your school along the lines suggested by current research and theory, utilizing information in this Starter Sheet and some of the materials cited below.

### Resources

Aarons, Alfred, ed. "Issues in the Teaching of Standard English." Special issue of *The Florida FL Reporter*, Spring-Fall 1974.

Butler, Melvin, et al. "Students' right to Their Own Language." Special issue of *College Composition and Communication*, Fall 1974.

Hess, Karen, and Maxwell, John C. *What to Do about Nonstandard Dialects. A Review of the Literature.* Minneapolis, Minn.: Upper Midwest Regional Laboratory, Inc., 1969. (ED 041 027)

Horn, Thomas D., ed. *Research Bases for Oral Language Instruction.* Urbana, Ill: NCTE, 1971.

Strong, William. "Sentence-Combining: Back to Basics and Beyond." *English Journal* 65 (February 1976): 56, 60-64.

Williams, Frederick, ed. *Language and Poverty.* Chicago, Ill: Markham Publishing Co., 1970.

Stewart, William, advisor. "The Dialect of the Black American." Recording. Chicago, Ill.: Western Electric Company, 1971.

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