What Are the Priorities?

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Although society assumes that (1) schools should teach grammar and (2) learning grammar will help students to write better, those who teach both writing and grammar have long questioned the second assumption. As early as 1906, researcher Franklin S. Hoyt demonstrated that a knowledge of grammar is not a concomitant of effective writing.1 Schools, however, have continued to teach grammar. Scholars have invented new grammars to teach. Indeed, the word grammar is meaningless today unless qualified by a descriptor such as traditional, structural, or transformational generative.

While some studies connect grammar instruction and writing,2 many more suggest that the ability to write well has little to do with how much formal grammar a person knows.3 One might argue that if the reverse were true, grammarians would be the best writers in our society. Those who have read widely in their works certainly cannot endorse such a contention.

A moderating voice in this argument is Rei R. Noguchi, who, although essentially siding with those who deny the value of formal grammar instruction in teaching writing, establishes a middle ground by defining the basics in a writer’s grammar and by suggesting how best to teach these basics.4 Identifying the essential elements of writing as content, organization, and style, Noguchi dismisses a knowledge of grammar as having much to do with any of these elements except style.

Working from this base, Noguchi establishes grammatical priorities, arguing, for example, “It makes considerably more sense to teach the concept of ‘subject’ than the concept of ‘objective complement.’” Noguchi does not suggest that no one needs to know about objective complements. He acknowledges that grammar is both an academic subject that specialists study and a tool that can help students to write better or at least to understand better the operations performed in writing. Specialists must study grammar in ways quite inappropriate for students.

Citing a study of 3,000 graded essays drawn from students across the United States,5 Noguchi notes that the 20 most common types of error are in punctuation, especially the use of commas and apostrophes; in verb use, particularly irregular verbs; and in pronoun use and reference of pronouns. The types of errors identified can be addressed quite succinctly in English classes, and for most students, this limited presentation is adequate, although for some it will need to be repeated and reinforced.

Noguchi bases much of his proposed instructions on Maxine Hairston’s hierarchy of errors—a nonacademic hierarchy that ranges from “status marking” errors to “very serious” errors to “minor or unimportant” errors.6 These errors are those recognized by people from the “real” world, the world that will in time draw its work force from the products of our schools.

The virtue of Noguchi’s approach is that it suggests an honest, compact, and effective method for teaching practical grammar to students at all educational levels. His approach will fit into any English curriculum without seriously disrupting the more important concerns. It is also an approach that can be pursued informally for a day or two whenever student writing assignments suggest a need for specific instruction.