Grammar Instruction in Toronto District School Board English Classrooms

By

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A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Teaching Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION IN TDSB SCHOOLS

Abstract

Many researchers have argued that there is little empirical evidence in clear support of the benefits of grammar instruction for student writing (see review by Andrews et al., 2006), while others contest that prior research has predominantly examined grammar instruction in isolation instead of contextualized forms (Jones, Myhill, & Bailey, 2012). Despite an increasing number of scholars writing on the different merits of grammar instruction, renewed consensus on the subject has yet to be achieved. The goal of this study was to collect the insights of Canadian secondary school English teachers on the issue of grammar instruction and its potential benefits for students. The data of the study was collected via a semi-structured interview with two English teachers currently employed by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), respectively. The study’s findings suggest that current curriculum designers should fundamentally rethink the potential value of grammar knowledge and instruction beyond writing ability. Furthermore, comprehensive training packages and inner-department discussions should be offered to teachers to both educate them on the potential value of grammar instruction in the classroom and reduce stigmatization of the subject. Lastly, at both the curricular and school levels, an examination of current teachers’ curricular demands and time constraints is recommended in order to assess the amount of time and energy that is available for them to effectively work on different micro-skills, such as grammar knowledge.

Key words: English grammar, grammar instruction, secondary schools, methods, practices
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Research Context

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, many Anglophone countries (e.g., England, Australia, New Zealand, USA, and Canada) abandoned grammar instruction based on the argument that it was irrelevant to language and writing development. However, due to national concerns regarding student writing ability, grammar instruction has recently been reintroduced in England, with a similar implementation to be undertaken in Australia (Jones, Myhill, & Bailey, 2012). The reintroduction of various forms of grammar instruction is also beginning to be seen in the Canadian context (e.g., within the Toronto District School Board), though due to its newness, a conclusive body of research has yet to be published on the subject within the country.

Research Problem

Many researchers have argued that there is little empirical evidence in clear support of the benefits of grammar instruction for student writing (see review by Andrews et al., 2006), while others contest that prior research has predominantly examined grammar instruction in isolation instead of contextualized forms (Jones, Myhill, & Bailey, 2012). Despite an increasing number of scholars writing on the different merits of grammar instruction, renewed consensus on the subject has yet to be achieved. Beyond the question of whether or not forms of in-class grammar instruction can help to improve student writing, teachers’ basic conceptions of grammar and the potential benefits of grammar training for teachers in terms of communicating errors perceived in student writing have received little attention in the literature. Concerning each of these aspects related to grammar instruction, there is particularly scant research on the Canadian context.
Research Purpose

In light of the above research problem, the purpose of this study is to collect the insights of Canadian secondary school English teachers on the issue of grammar instruction and its potential benefits for students. Such qualitative information will serve to fill in current gaps of knowledge on the subject stemming from the various limitations of prior methods of quantitative evaluation. Beyond the question of whether or not various forms of in-class grammar instruction can improve student writing, there is the question of whether or not increased training in grammar might be beneficial for teachers in terms of communicating writing errors to students. By including the latter question as well, this study aims to expand on much of the prior literature by examining the potential benefits of different forms of grammar instruction in relation to both students and teachers.

Research Questions

• Based on what they see in their students’ writing, to what extent do Canadian secondary school English teachers feel that grammar instruction would be useful in some regard to assist student language and writing comprehension?

• To what extent do Canadian secondary school English teachers feel that there is a way to usefully incorporate forms of grammar instruction into their lessons? To what extent do they believe such instruction could be effectively implemented?

• Aside from the potential impacts of in-class grammar instruction on student writing, to what extent do Canadian secondary school English teachers feel that a greater knowledge
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of grammar would be useful in helping to assist students with their writing?

Subsidiary Questions

- How do current secondary school English teachers in Canada rate themselves in terms of their knowledge of grammar? How concerned are they about their knowledge of grammar?
- How do teachers currently deal with grammar problems they find in student writing? To what extent do they explain the errors they find in student writing (i.e., do they simply note/correct various errors on written papers without further discussion)?
- To what extent are Canadian secondary school English teachers aware of various new applications for grammar instruction offered online? To what extent do they feel such applications might be useful for their students or themselves?

Reflexive Positioning Statement

As a professional editor and proofreader who has worked in the field for several years, I must acknowledge a possible bias in favour of grammar instruction that could potentially have a degree of influence on my questioning. Therefore, I must work to avoid leading questions and present my information as neutrally as possible. Gribbin (2005) notes the general disdain and cynicism many teachers feel toward grammar instruction. For many teachers, Gribbin argues, any discussion of grammar conjures the image of a strict disciplinarian, which often leads to quick, negative reactions. Therefore, I must ensure my reception not as an authority figure on the subject, but as an inquiring researcher with only a rough knowledge of grammar himself. The
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goal will be to avoid any sense of puritanism with regard to grammar knowledge in order to engage a genuine conversation on its potential merits for both students and teachers.

**Preview of the whole**

To respond to the above research questions, I will be conducting a qualitative research study on the potential benefits of contextualized grammar instruction in the classroom. This study will use purposeful sampling and include interviews with three teachers. In chapter 2, I review the literature on grammar instruction and related pedagogical theory. Next, in chapter 3, I elaborate on the research design. In chapter 4, I report my research findings and discuss their significance in light of the existing literature, and in chapter 5, I identify the implications of the findings for my own teacher identity and practice, as well as for the educational research community at large. I conclude by discussing a series of questions raised by the research findings and suggesting areas for future research.
Introduction

This chapter presents a review of the literature on grammar instruction at the high school level, including research on both isolated and contextual grammar instruction. The review touches upon, among others, the themes of ambivalence with regard to the effectiveness of grammar instruction in the field, teacher anxiety related to grammar knowledge, and new methodologies and technologies for teaching grammar. This review will first examine the research on historical methods of teaching grammar, with consideration given to the criteria of evaluation placed on such methods, as well as their particular contexts. In following, research on methods of contextualized grammar instruction, including their degrees of reported success and means of evaluation, will be examined. Finally, the concerns and opinions of contemporary teachers on the subject matter will be reviewed as expressed in the literature, followed by a brief discussion of the effectiveness of computer applications in assisting grammar instruction.

The Effectiveness of Grammar Instruction (A Historical Account)

In 2001, Wyse conducted an international review of the empirical evidence with regard to the effectiveness of grammar instruction in the latter half of the twentieth century. The author notes both a lack of depth and scope within many British studies that confirm the effectiveness of grammar instruction (see Tomlinson, 1994, Hudson, 2000), as well as several limitations among studies denying its effectiveness (see Hillocks, 1984). In the international context, Wyse finds similar issues within major research from Australia (Elley et al., 1976) and the United States (O’Hare, 1973). Despite certain limitations on both sides of the debate, however, the author
ultimately concludes based on the evidence at hand that “the teaching of grammar (using a range of models) has negligible positive effects on improving secondary pupils’ writing” (p. 422).

A more recent review of the empirical evidence on the subject by Andrews et al. (2006) concludes that “the teaching of syntax … appears to have no influence on either the accuracy or quality of written language development for 5-16-year-olds” (p. 51). The authors do note, however, that “this does not mean to say that there could be no such influence. It simply means that there have been no significant studies to date that have proved such an effect” (p. 51). In addition to this, they note the difficulty of comparing studies in the field due to their heterogeneity. Indeed, Wyse (2001) discusses not only the variety of definitions and types of grammar, but also the shifting means of grammar evaluation found in different studies as adding to the difficulty of arriving at a consensus on the issue of grammar instruction.

While both reviews conclude the overall literature on the subject to suggest the ineffectiveness of grammar instruction, neither unequivocally denies the potentiality of certain unexplored forms of grammar instruction to be effective. Andrews et al. (2006) note that, despite the evidence as to its ineffectiveness, the question of grammar instruction has been “haunting policy-makers, teachers, researchers and students themselves for over a hundred years” (p. 39). Perhaps this lingering doubt is due to a lack of certainty given the heterogeneity of evaluative approaches in the literature. In combination with this, such doubt may also be due to concern over the way grammar has traditionally been taught in the major English-speaking countries. In examining a study by Elley et al. (1976), Wyse (2001) admits that “[an] effective way of contextualising children’s grammatical learning [may be] at the point of teacher/learner interaction during the process of writing. When children carry out writing with meaningful
purposes this naturally reveals their syntactic choices which are then amenable to contextualised teaching” (p. 423).

The Effectiveness of Contextualized Grammar Instruction

Despite the lack of conclusive evidence speaking to the beneficial effects of grammar instruction on student writing in the past, there is a growing body of literature that speaks to the limitations of such research and seeks to explore alternative approaches to teaching grammar. This literature constitutes a two-pronged effort of theory and practice. The former involves reconceptualizing the value of learning grammar as a means of reinvigorating its appreciation. Nunan (2005) briefly discusses the negative impact of prescriptivist grammarians (dating back to the eighteenth century) and their understanding of grammar as tied to morality. This understanding, Nunan argues, persists to this day within schools and serves to cast a negative light on both teachers and students’ appreciation of learning grammar. While the author admits that grammar is unquestionably tied in many ways to social status and propriety, she argues that many teachers overlook emphasizing two important reasons for learning grammar: rhetorical effect and the relationship between language and thought. The former involves “learning to use grammar for rhetorical effect, to make stylistic decisions. . .” (p. 72), thus increasing the number of sentence patterns students understand, which in turn facilitate the expression of more complex thoughts. Drawing on the theorization of Vygotsky, Nunan argues that “complex sentence structure and complex thought are mutually dependent” (p. 72). The author cites the hypothesis of Sapir and Benjamin, which states that “through syntax and vocabulary, language drives and determines thought patterns almost totally” (p. 73). That is to say, the greater the number of patterns and relationships students’ can learn and express in language directly relates to their
capacity for complex thought. This notion speaks strongly of the necessity for English teachers to include some form of grammar instruction in their teaching.

In an *English Journal* article entitled “What is Your Most Compelling Reason for Teaching Grammar?” (2006), a collection of interviewed teachers concur that simple propriety and upward mobility are counterproductive reasons for teaching grammar. Instead, they argue, developing a metalanguage, or a “language about language” (p. 18), is beneficial for a variety of other reasons, including clarity and complexity of communication, complexity of thought, gaining knowledge of the histories of various languages and the cultures they come from, and grasping the politics behind different kinds of languages and their levels of social acceptance. Schuster’s (2011) discussion of the overruling of grammar rules in contemporary writing suggests an understanding of grammar that while foundationally grounded is also malleable in relation to social context. Such an understanding encourages a distancing of teachers from any puritanical sense of grammar knowledge and instruction. Furthermore, Schuster’s discussion speaks to the potential value of teaching students’ grammar in reverse, such as by analyzing examples of traditionally incorrect grammar in pieces of writing and discussing their expressive merits.

While negative conceptions of grammar instruction remain a hurdle to overcome for those who believe in the practice’s potential merits, rethinking the value of learning grammar in relation to such things as, say, thought, does not ensure that conventional methods of instruction will necessarily change in tandem. Lefstein (2009) argues that, despite the adoption of a “rhetorical” approach to teaching grammar – one that emphasizes context, choice, process, and malleability, as opposed to prescriptive, rule-based grammar instruction – teachers often fall into traditional methods of grammar instruction due to a “procedural” philosophy of teaching English
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that has received little criticism in the literature. Such a philosophy works to break down
language processes into their component parts for isolated analysis, as well as suggests simple,
often reductive changes to language for the sake of “improvement” that fail to consider such
things as context, voice, and tone, among other literary aspects. Working in close connection
with this procedural philosophy is what Lefstein calls school boards’ “focus on evidence and
accountability” (p. 398), which encourages teachers to adopt overly mechanical and reductive
teaching practices for the sake of illustrating improvement. Lefstein concludes in stating that if
grammar is to be reconceptualized in the classroom, such a shift in thinking “has implications for
the way that curriculum is structured, the pedagogical models used, teacher knowledge about
grammar, and educational governance” (p. 398) that cannot be ignored.

Aside from reconceptualizing the value of teaching grammar, recent research criticizes
the subject’s historical analysis in the literature and points toward new methodologies of
instruction. Jones, Myhill, and Bailey (2012) note that the existing literature on grammar
instruction “is limited in that it only considers isolated grammar instruction and offers no
theorisation of an instructional relationship between grammar and writing” (p. 1241). The
authors also state that, to date, there are no large-scale studies that investigate the teaching of
grammar in the context of writing lessons, or what they call “contextualised grammar teaching”
(1243). They claim their study to be the first of its kind “to supply rigorous, theorised evidence
for the potential benefits of teaching grammar to support development in writing” (p. 1241). The
aim of the study, which included 855 students and 32 teachers from 32 different schools in
England, was to investigate whether or not the use of embedded grammar teaching within
teaching units for writing improved students’ writing performance. The study concludes that
contextualized grammar teaching was positively related to student writing performance, though
notes that greater improvement was shown by more skilled writers than by weaker writers. The authors speculate that “more able writers may have clearer communicative and rhetorical intentions for their writing than less able writers, enabling them to make more appropriate use of their grammatical understanding to shape text appropriately” (p. 1256). Contrary to prior research, a key factor of consideration in this study was teachers’ grammatical subject knowledge, which the authors found to be “an important factor in mediating [the study’s grammar] intervention[s]” (p. 1251).

**Concerns of Contemporary High School Teachers regarding Grammar Knowledge**

If, as Jones, Myhill, and Bailey (2012) suggest, the depth of teachers’ grammatical subject knowledge is a significant factor in the effectiveness of contextualized grammar instruction, then the uniformity of such knowledge among English teachers across school boards would appear integral to significantly increasing overall student writing abilities. The literature suggests, however, that this is far from the case in most English-speaking countries. In a recent study of teachers’ grammar knowledge in the UK (Aarts, Clayton, & Wallis, 2012), of the twenty teachers participating in the study, only two could recall ever being explicitly taught English grammar. Certain of the group members were self-taught, though all expressed great concern over the clarity and cohesiveness of their knowledge. Using big-data technologies, Dixon and Moxley (2013) examined teachers’ written commentaries in over 17,000 student essays within the United States and found little emphasis on grammar and punctuation, suggesting a general avoidance of such issues. The researchers recognize macro writing issues (e.g., organization and logic) as taking strong precedence over micro issues (e.g., punctuation and grammar) in the examined teachers’ commentaries.
In a study by Jeurisson (2012), two-thirds of the selected teachers from nine different schools scored below 60% on a basic grammar test. All of the teachers in this study felt that grammar should be taught in classrooms in some form, as well as expressed concern regarding their knowledge base of the subject. The authors of the study recommend that teacher education providers assess teachers’ grammar knowledge to better ensure that they feel comfortable teaching the subject matter, especially during the initial years of their careers. It is important to note, however, that not all teachers express the same concern regarding their grammar knowledge. Gribbin (2005) discusses a general disdain among secondary school English teachers with regard to grammar instruction, one that derives in particular from many teachers’ remembrance of how they were taught grammar in the past. Such disdain speaks to the need for a reconceptualization of the value of grammar instruction on these teachers’ parts, a topic that was discussed at some length above.

New Technologies for Teaching Grammar

While the development of new methodologies for teaching grammar and the reconceptualization of the value of grammar instruction are working to appease teachers’ concerns about their knowledge of and ability to teach grammar, new technological applications are increasingly appearing as support tools in this effort. Indeed, in a study by Smagorinsky, Wilson, and Moore (2011) that examined one English teacher’s path from teachers’ college to employment over a two-year period, a computer application was instrumental in the new teacher’s comfort level and ability to teach a required grammar element in her class. The researchers found that the application allowed students to “individualize their learning in ways that appeared to reduce their resistance to Brandy [the teacher] as an authority figure and give
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them a degree of control over their proficiency as writers, pace of learning, and use of language in the context of school” (p. 280). Thus, the application allowed the teacher to sidestep her students’ perception of an authoritarian grammarian and by-rote learning, two of the major factors working against such instruction in the classroom.

Indeed, Aarts, Clayton, and Wallis (2012) argue that teachers require an “accessible and enjoyable way to learn about grammar themselves and to teach it to their students” (p. 4). In their article, they discuss the Interactive Grammar of English (IGE) smartphone application developed by the Survey of English Usage (SEU) organization. This application ports over information and lessons from the highly popular Internet Grammar website, though presenting each within a variety of interactive quizzes and games. The authors state that the goal of the application is to popularize the teaching of grammar in English classes, though information is currently lacking on the application’s effectiveness and the degree to which it is being used by English teachers around the world. While the application is quite user-friendly and clear, it appears to be lacking in terms of sheer enjoyment. Further development should be employed so as to match the balance of content-knowledge and enjoyment successfully found in the second-language application field (e.g., Duolingo, Rosetta Stone).

Conclusion

This chapter examined the literature on grammar instruction in the classroom, which has until quite recently deemed such instruction to have no clear effect on student writing ability. The heterogeneity of methodologies found throughout the majority of studies in the field, however, serves to call into question this literature’s conclusive validity. More recent research has noted various limitations of the prior literature on the subject, most predominantly that it has
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examined only contexts of isolated grammar instruction. The recent literature has also sought to reconceptualize the value of learning grammar in relation to various theories, thus distancing the practice from the negative connotations it has accrued over the past several decades. The importance of teachers’ grammar knowledge for teaching grammar in the classroom was also discussed, including the apparent lack of such knowledge within school boards as shown in the literature. In connection to this lack of knowledge, teachers’ concerns about their lack of grammar knowledge was discussed, including both positive and negative reactions toward teaching grammar in the classroom. Lastly, various new technologies that support grammar instruction in the classroom were discussed as potential means of alleviating teachers’ stress with regard to engaging the subject matter. The literature here reviewed points to the need for further research on teachers’ knowledge of, conceptions of, and attitudes toward teaching grammar in the classroom within Canada, a geographical area wherein new research on such matters is currently lacking. The current research seeks to examine each of these variables and their respective levels of influence on grammar instruction in order to both map a climate of consensus in this context and suggest possibilities for improvement.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction (Chapter Overview)

This chapter details this study’s research methodology, methodological decisions, and rationale for such decisions in relation to the study’s stated purpose and research questions. First, the research approach and procedure are discussed, followed by a description of the main instrument of data collection. Second, the participants of the study will be identified, along with the sampling criteria, including the sampling procedures and additional information on the participants. Third, a description of the data analysis will be given, followed by a discussion of the relevant ethical issues that were considered and addressed. Finally, the methodological limitations of the study are addressed in relation to its strengths.

Research Approach & Procedures

This study utilizes a qualitative research approach that includes a review of the existing literature relevant to the research questions and study purpose, as well as the conduction of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with two to three teachers. As opposed to quantitative studies, wherein researchers utilize deductive approaches to theorization via the collection and testing of data, qualitative studies commonly utilize inductive approaches to build progressively toward a new theory on a given subject (Barczak, 2015). Barczak (2015) notes two specific challenges posed to qualitative studies, both of which relate to such a study’s credibility. First, many qualitative papers can lack sufficient detail as to data collection and analysis, and therefore researchers must make sure to provide precise information in these regards. Second, qualitative research can often falter in terms of its clear and in-depth presentation of collected data.
While a qualitative study has these potential pitfalls to overcome, the latter do not make it a weaker methodological approach than a quantitative one. Indeed, according to Long et al. (2000), compared to qualitative studies, which can fall short in terms of reliability, “quantitative studies, [in] emphasizing causality and generalizability, frequently overlook validity issues in their pursuit of reliability” (p. 195). Furthermore, despite the long-standing belief among many researchers that quantitative studies provide more robust and objective findings, as Duffy and Chenail argue (2008), “no value-free research method exists” (p. 23). Indeed, quantitative research, rooted in an empiricist or positivist paradigm, all too often lacks transparency in terms of its value-laden philosophical, cultural, or personal underpinnings (Duffy & Chenail, 2008).

Davis (1998) argues that “the natural subjectivity of qualitative research, for which it is criticized the most, is actually its greatest strength” (np). It can be used, she argues, “to develop theory, describe complex social situations, gain entry into research areas that are not available to quantitative researchers, uncover rival hypotheses and unanticipated outcomes, and extend previous quantitative research” (np). Davis describes qualitative research in general as serving to explore a problem, setting, process, social group, or a pattern of interaction, allowing researchers to more easily “enter into naturalistic settings with the explicit purpose of finding solutions to the complex problems of today's world” (np).

As opinions on grammar instruction among secondary English teachers are conditioned by interrelated issues of self-efficacy, educational propriety, and personal history, a research methodology best suited to mining the complexities of highly nuanced participant responses would appear most fit for use in this study. Thus, a qualitative research approach was selected for use in this study in combination with semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, which will be the subject of the following section.
Instruments of Data Collection

Gil et al. (2008) cite observations, textual or visual analysis, and interviews (individual and group) as common means of data collection in qualitative research. In terms of interviews, there are three commonly used types: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. According to the researchers, the first typically involves predetermined questions with no thought given to on-the-spot follow-up questions. This type of interview is commonly used for its ease and speed of administration. The drawback to this type of interview is that it leaves little room for participants to give and expand on their answers to questions. The second type of interview, a semi-structured interview, consists of pre-established interview questions, though leaves room for a researcher to deviate from these questions and ask follow-up questions when deemed necessary. The benefit of this interview type is that it allows room for unanticipated questions to be asked of-the-moment by a researcher or research team. Lastly, unstructured interviews are performed with little or no organization, often following in a line of progressively developing inquiry from a single question. For this reason, they are often very time-consuming to perform.

The interviews of this study will be conducted in a face-to-face manner with secondary English teachers currently working within the Toronto District School Board. The duration and location of these interviews will be dependent on the participants’ schedules and working locations within the school board. As the participants may be quite busy in their lives, and due to the fact that they will be offering their time solely for the benefit of this study, the selected interview method should be considerate of such, which means that it should be structured so as to not be of a very long duration. At the same time, however, the interview cannot be too short or limited in terms of questioning for the collection of data rich in detail. Based on the above
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descriptions of interview types, it then becomes clear that a semi-structured interview method is best suited for this particular study, as it will allow for both the flexibility of inquiry and time necessary to achieve richly detailed data.

Participants

According to Arcury and Quandt (1999), “the rationale for selecting specific participants must reflect the purpose or goals of the study, allowing the investigator to find representative individuals who have the characteristics being considered by the investigation” (128). Despite the importance of this rationale, however, the authors argue, many researchers do not adequately explain their rationale or the selection processes used in connection to acquire participants. The following sections detail this study’s sampling criteria and procedures for recruitment, both of which relate clearly to its overall purpose of gaining information on secondary English teachers’ knowledge of and opinions on grammar instruction in the classroom.

Sampling criteria. The following criteria will be utilized for the selection of participants in this study:

1. The individuals must have once taught or are currently teaching secondary school English teachers within the Toronto District School Board.
2. The individuals should differ in age range, from roughly 25 to 65 years old.
3. The individuals should differ in terms of sex.

First, it is clearly important to this study that its participants have taught secondary school English at some point in their lives, as grammar instruction would typically not be found in
another subject of instruction. However, it is not entirely necessary that a given participant is currently teaching English, as their opinion on grammar instruction is not dependent on an of-the-moment analysis of his or her situation. Second, the participants of this study should ideally range in age to account for potential differences of perspective based on respective educational upbringings. Third, the participants should ideally range in terms of sex so as to determine whether or not there might be any potential bias in this regard, which may relate to sex-related differences in childhood educational achievement.

**Sampling procedures/recruitment.** Marshall (1996) discusses three broad approaches to selecting a sample for a qualitative study. First, there is a convenience sample, which is the least rigorous and involves the selection of the most accessible subjects. Marshall notes that it is also the least costly in terms of time, money, and effort for a researcher. Second, there is a judgment, or purposeful, sample, which is the most common sampling technique among qualitative studies. In this approach to sampling, a researcher selects the most productive sample to answer research questions, which can involve the development of a framework of variables for the selection of participants. Third, there is theoretical sampling, which involves the development of interpretive theories from emerging data, and then selecting participants based on these theories.

Considering the variety of limitations placed on this study, including time, cost, and accessibility, the study will employ a combination of convenience and purposeful sampling. Due to my recent teaching experiences within two TDSB schools and the connections made therein, convenience sampling is an obvious and effective choice for this study at the current time. Given the possibility of a suggested participant for this study, however, a degree of purposeful sampling
may be required. Through a combination of these two sampling methods, this study should easily arrive at the type of subjects described in the above sample criteria.

**Participant bios.** Teacher A has taught English for over twenty-five years at his particular secondary school, where he has been employed for the past six years. While he has taught every grade level and stream throughout his career, he currently teaches grades ten, eleven, and twelve academic English. Teacher A remembers being taught grammar predominantly in elementary school, though he can also recall a mild degree of instruction taking place at the secondary level.

Teacher B has taught for the past seven years of her career at the same secondary school. She has taught nearly every subject offered by the English Department at her school save for grade twelve academic English. Teacher B remembers being taught grammar at the secondary level only in grades nine and ten, for which she was given a workbook to answer various grammar-related questions and write grammatically correct sentences.

**Data Analysis**

Before the study’s data analysis stage, transcripts of the interviews were created using the InqScribe application. Once the interviews were transcribed, they were coded using descriptive and in vivo coding so as to determine themes both at the general and specific level. When the coding was completed, these themes were grouped into categories based on their similarity to one another. Once the themes were categorized, those most pertinent for discussion were selected for closer examination based on their relation to the study’s research questions. From here, the remaining themes were synthesized into the study’s three major themes of discussion.
Ethical Review Procedures

According to Shaw (2003), no research method is ethically privileged, be it qualitative or quantitative. Qualitative research, however, does come with its own unique ethical challenges. For one, Shaw describes the common dilemma among researchers practicing qualitative research of posing as both friend and “snooping” reporter, a dilemma likely of great possibility between a student teacher and a previous associate teacher. House (1993) elaborates four key possibilities of ethical infringement in qualitative research: withholding the nature of the evaluation research from participants; exposing participants to acts that would harm them; invading the privacy of participants, and withholding benefits from participants. Of these, withholding the nature of the evaluation research and the invasion of privacy are the most relevant issues to the study at hand. To account for these potentialities, all participants will be informed in full before interviewing of the overall goals and purpose of the research, as well as their right to exit the interview process at any time and deny the use of any information given.

DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) note that the ensured anonymity of the interviewee is yet another ethical issue of concern in a qualitative study, as participants may share sensitive information that could put their personal relationships or occupational positions in jeopardy. As the conversations of the current study may include criticism of specific school boards, this is indeed a relevant concern for this study. Therefore, the full anonymity of the participant will be emphasized prior to beginning any form of data collection, as well as during the collection of data. The authors suggest a reiteration of a study’s goal and ethical considerations at multiple points throughout any interrelations with participants, which will be adhered to within the
present study. In the data collection process of this study, participants will be informed of such prior to, during, and before publication of any information given.

**Methodological Limitations and Strengths**

Atieno (2009) states three general limitations of qualitative research: First, by its very nature, qualitative research does not necessarily seek to reduce text-based data into any kind of numerical representation in terms of frequency. That is to say, despite the potential richness of data acquired through qualitative methods, given the potentiality of opposed responses between participants, and even self-contradictory statements given by individual participants, there is the possibility via such methods to have failed to prove anything (or even to produce something of relevance) to the reader. Of course, this is a possibility with quantitative research as well, yet the potential for wholly ambiguous data would certainly appear higher in a qualitative study of the present study’s size. On the note of ambiguity, Atieno notes as a second potential limitation of qualitative research that language-based qualitative studies can suffer from issues of semantic interpretation. Lastly, the author notes that qualitative studies can lack in their ability to be generalizable, which is certainly a limitation of the study at hand.

Despite these limitations, however, a qualitative approach has many strengths that make it an effective choice for the present study. Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault (2016) argue that qualitative research is both more flexible and casual in nature. In seeking to explore the nuanced opinions of individuals within their specific contexts of lived experience, the qualitative researcher looks to engage participants in a comfortable, naturalistic manner. Such a methodological approach would appear essential for meeting teachers to discuss a subject of some potential bearing on beliefs of self-efficacy. The authors also note richness of detail as a
strength of more personally engaging qualitative research. Indeed, despite this study’s small sample size, the depth of information acquired will hopefully compensate to a degree for its lack of generalizability.

**Conclusion: Brief Overview and Looking Ahead**

This chapter detailed this study’s research methodology, beginning with a discussion of the research approach and procedure, including the meaning and significance of qualitative research, as well as its strengths and weaknesses in relation to quantitative research. The instrument of data collection (interviews) was then discussed as the primary source of data in the study. Different kinds of interviews conducted in qualitative research were then discussed, including semi-structured interviews, which will be utilized for the present study. The participants of the study were then detailed, including the criteria for the selection of interviewees, as well as brief introductions of those selected in following. The recruitment procedures of convenience and purposive sampling were discussed as means to achieve a richness and depth of data in the most feasible manner for this study, followed by a description of the study’s data analysis. Ethical issues such as withholding the nature of the evaluation research and the invasion of privacy were discussed as most relevant to the study at hand, and means were discussed to ensure the negation of either of these possibilities. Finally, several methodological limitations and strengths of the study’s approach were discussed in order to justify the study’s selection of a qualitative methodology. The next chapter will detail the findings of the research.
Chapter 4: Findings

The following chapter presents the research findings of this qualitative study, the purpose of which was to collect the insights of Canadian secondary school English teachers on the issue of grammar instruction and its potential benefits for students. These findings were acquired through the undertaking of two semi-structured interviews with current English teachers within the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). The two participants of the study (given the pseudonyms John and Susan, respectively, for the sake of privacy) were recruited via convenience sampling, as they each worked at the same school in which the researcher was undertaking a month-long teaching period. With seven and twenty-five years of experience, respectively, these participants represent two different generations of teacher: one at roughly the beginning of her career, and the other in the later stages of his occupation. Furthermore, while each teaching a broad range of English classes, the former expressed greater interest in teaching applied courses, while the latter preferred academic. Each of the participant’s interviews was transcribed and coded several times before categorizing the relevant data into the following three general themes:

1. The value of English grammar knowledge for the student
2. Barriers to grammar instruction in the English classroom
3. When and how to practice grammar instruction in the English classroom

The first of these themes concerns the participants’ beliefs as to the value of grammar knowledge in the English classroom. Although to differing degrees and for different reasons, both participants believe the development of English grammar knowledge to have merit for students. Their reasons for this belief were divided into the three sub-themes of confidence with language, developing thinking skills and grasping abstract concepts, and the necessity of
Grammar knowledge for post-secondary education. These sub-themes agree with many of the pro-grammar instruction arguments presented in the literature.

The second theme concerns barriers to grammar instruction in the English classroom and is divided into the three sub-themes of poor training in elementary school, time and curricular demands, and stigmas and conflicting ideologies. The participants speak to each of these sub-themes as significant challenges to integrating any kind of grammar instruction into the English classroom, though neither believe them to rule out the possibility of such instruction altogether. The data within this theme correlates with certain challenges mentioned in this study’s literature review, as well as looks beyond the literature to specific challenges Ontario secondary school teachers face in this regard.

The third and final theme concerns the participants’ beliefs as to when and how forms of grammar instruction might be implemented in the English classroom. This theme is divided into the two sub-themes of one-on-one discussions and peer review sessions, and grammar instruction via reading instead of writing. While the data on this theme corresponds to several of the strategies mentioned in the literature review, it also presents a significant deviation in terms of the discussion on grammar instruction via reading, which shifts the conversation on grammar instruction in an interesting new direction.

The data within these three themes and their related sub-themes will help to build consensus on the need for grammar instruction in secondary English classrooms. Furthermore, it will assist educators who support the notion of grammar instruction with overcoming potential barriers to the practice, as well as offer them strategies for its effective implementation. The data in this section speaks to the enduring concern for some form of grammar instruction in the
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English classroom, and encourages the thought of more prevalent and intriguing forms of implementation in the future. Each of the themes will be discussed in detail in following.

The Value of English Grammar Knowledge for the Student

As the literature attests, opinions have long been divided as to the value of grammar knowledge for students, particularly with regard to writing ability (Andrews et al., 2006; Wyse, 2001). Therefore, this study sought first to determine the opinions of current secondary school English teachers in this regard. The data presented in this section relates to the following research question: “To what degree do you feel there is a need to teach grammar in today’s English classrooms?” Both of the participants expressed grammar knowledge to have value for students, though at times for different reasons and in relation to different contexts. Their comments were categorized into the sub-themes of confidence with language, developing thinking skills and grasping abstract concepts, and the necessity of grammar knowledge for post-secondary education.

Confidence with Language

Each of the participants expressed English grammar knowledge to have value in the sense of bringing confidence to both students and teachers alike. Reminiscing on his own experiences with grammar instruction as a child, John notes that he “liked doing grammar in the languages because it gave [him] confidence” in speaking and constructing sentences. Understanding the structural underpinnings of his native language helped to relieve him of a degree of uncertainty that is commonly felt by individuals when speaking and writing. John also states that his earlier grammar instruction led him to be “amazed at how logical the language [is],” that its various parts fit together in a very clear and sensible manner. His words speak to the grasp of grammar
on a broader conceptual level as being of value to a student’s appreciation of language, and in relation to his or her degree of confidence in using it.

Susan also mentions the value of grammar knowledge in raising confidence, though more so in relation to an English-as-a-second language (ESL) context. While agreeing that there should be a place for some form of grammar instruction in the English classroom, she expresses skepticism as to its overall value, and particularly when implemented in a “direct” fashion “without a context.” One of her major concerns behind this belief is that she “just [does not] think [students] are going to retain it [grammar knowledge].” Susan states her prioritization of “writing as a form of understanding yourself and a form of self-expression, [as well as] reflective writing” over more skill-based practices, such as grammar instruction, in her classroom, though does not deny the latter’s value in terms of raising confidence with language. Such is particularly the case, she argues, with ESL students, who “are really eager to learn the grammar,” and for whom grammar knowledge is “tied to confidence … and their progression [with the language].”

The participants’ statements on the value of grammar knowledge in this regard look more so to internal processes that may be positively impacted by grammar instruction than to the determination of a one-to-one relationship between grammar knowledge and student writing ability, the latter of which has been the focus of much of the literature in the field (see Andrews et al., 2006; Wyse, 2001). This way of thinking about grammar knowledge shifts the predominant focus away from validating grammar instruction based on student writing toward the development of more abstract cognitive skills, such as logic and critical thinking. While the impact of grammar instruction on these skills may be more difficult to empirically verify, this does not mean it does not exist. Further research on this potential relationship would be beneficial to the field.
Developing Thinking Skills and Grasping Abstract Concepts

Of the two participants in the study, John emphasized the value of grammar knowledge in developing thinking skills and grasping abstract concepts. For him, an understanding of grammar goes far beyond assisting basic writing skills. For one, it is integral to “learning to read effectively.” For John, grammar knowledge can help facilitate “deeper reading” skills that rely on making “the distinction between content and style and structure,” which he argues play “a huge factor in grade 12.” Grammar assists us to recognize the underlying structure of our sentences, and in turn, to recognize the expressive capacities of different structures themselves:

If you can parse a sentence, then you can think about words as having content, but also function. Then you can look at ideas as having function, style as having function, and structure as having function. And so, you can transfer that to different types of writing, so that it’s not just a matter of dotting your eyes and crossing your ts and everybody feels better.

That is to say, grammar knowledge helps us to appreciate that style and structure carry expressive capacities and have meaning in themselves. Getting individuals to think at the structural level of language opens the door to thinking structurally about other areas of focus, even “ideas” themselves. The ability to parse a sentence relates to the ability to effectively parse and structure a thought. Together with John’s above-mentioned comment as to recognizing the “logic” of languages, his words speak strongly to the value of grammar instruction in the development of thinking skills and grasping abstract concepts.
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John’s thinking here aligns significantly with that of Nunan (2005), who argues for the value of grammar instruction in terms of understanding rhetorical effect in writing and the development of complex thinking skills. Many aspects of John’s statements are encapsulated in Nunan’s argument that “complex sentence structure and complex thought are mutually dependent” (p. 72). John also appears to share the belief of other teachers in the value of developing a metalanguage, or a “language about language” (“What is Your Most Compelling Reason for Teaching Grammar?”, 2006, p. 18) to enhance students’ complexity of communication and thought. Much like Nunan, John’s recognition of the value of grammar knowledge stems from his broader conceptualization of the effects of such knowledge, which speaks to the need for teachers and school boards at large to present grammar instruction to students in this more complex, intriguing light.

The Necessity of Grammar Knowledge for Post-Secondary Education

Both teachers agreed that a certain amount of grammar instruction was particularly of value for students looking to enter university settings following graduation. While Susan states that grammar does not need to be given much attention in the lower educational streams (e.g., applied, etc.), recognizing the emphasis placed on strong writing at the university level, she believes that university-bound students should receive some form of instruction on the subject: “I think if they are going to university, yes, they're going to drown if they don't know how to write an essay [with proper grammar], right?” Her words here gesture to a commonly stated though little researched knowledge gap between secondary and post-secondary institutional language skills. Indeed, the literature is scant as to the degree of readiness for university that students achieve in high school in terms of speaking and writing ability.
Perhaps this knowledge gap has something to do with the Ontario Ministry of Education’s shift away from teaching the more formal aspects of language toward an emphasis on self-expression and reflection, a shift both teachers mentioned in their interviews. While Susan expresses satisfaction with this general shift, John feels as though it is actually serving to undermine basic communication skills: “I don't particularly believe that creative writing [e.g., self-reflective and expressive writing] is necessarily the most important thing. I think practical-- I mean, if it's a university stream– I think that they ought to be able to organize their thoughts clearly, correctly, and to do it in grammatically correct form.” John goes even further to suggest that parents feel this way, too: “I've had a lot of parents that are appalled at [their kids’] grammar. I’ve said, well, there's really good ideas here. They don't seem to buy that. They want the kids to be able to write clearly and correctly in a lot of cases. I can't speak for all of them.”

John’s and Susan’s comments here call for a reexamination of the value of grammar instruction for high school students at the ministry level. Furthermore, they encourage research as to the degree of student preparedness for university in terms of speaking and writing ability in Ontario, which is an area that has received little attention in the literature.

**Barriers to grammar instruction in the English classroom**

While both John and Susan believed grammar knowledge to have value for students, they expressed several barriers to the effective implementation of forms of grammar instruction in high schools. Their responses in this regard were elicited by the research question, “If any, what are the limitations to teaching grammar in the classroom? In other words, do any classroom factors make the teaching of grammar impractical?” In this particular theme, the answers of both participants were strikingly similar, which speaks to the prevalence of these barriers beyond a
merely subjective perception of them. The participants’ answers to this theme were divided into the three sub-themes of poor training in elementary school, time and curricular demands, and stigmas and conflicting ideologies.

**Poor Training in Elementary School**

Both John and Susan expressed poor training in elementary school as being a significant barrier to teaching grammar at the high school level. According to John, students “haven’t been given the language [grammar terms] prior in elementary school.” Therefore, when he attempts to teach it, “it's not [a] review so much.” John and Susan agree that high school English teachers can no longer expect students entering grade nine to know the basic parts of speech and different sentence types. John argues that “everyone coming into high school [should] know what a subject and predicate is, what the different parts of speech are, and essentially how a sentence functions” for the sake of their effective communicability. He fears that students’ lack of this basic knowledge is slowly reducing the language’s expressivity: “We're losing some of those more complex tenses, which is a concern.”

Susan agrees that students should be receiving some grammar instruction in elementary school (“We hope that maybe in elementary they've done some grammar”), though states not wanting to “push responsibility” for this solely on elementary teachers. She expresses some confusion as to the best time to offer grammar instruction to young minds, wondering “if high school is the [best] place” for it, or whether “it should be targeted earlier.” Her comments here gesture to a certain degree of knowledge about increased language acquisition capacities in young children, which appears to be inflecting her belief in students’ abilities to retain grammar knowledge at the high school level. She expresses wanting to know “if there’s research on when
is the best time” to provide grammar instruction, which speaks to the need for greater teacher training in this regard in order to support the implementation of the practice.

Discussing the literature on grammar instruction worldwide, Uysal and Bardakci (2014) relate how “studies that research teachers and their grammar teaching are rare, and almost non-existent at the elementary-level English teaching contexts” (p. 1). Indeed, this appears to be the case, save for a few small surveys of elementary teachers’ language knowledge (Malatesha et al., 2009) and attitudes toward grammar instruction (Gartland & Smolkin, 2016). The former found 78 elementary teachers to lack sufficient language knowledge for English teaching, while the latter speaks to elementary teachers’ fears and negative attitudes toward grammar instruction in light of new curriculum changes in the US. These findings, together with the overall scant amount of research on this context in the literature, calls for further investigation as to the level of grammar instruction students are receiving in elementary schools.

**Time and Curricular Demands**

The second major barrier to grammar instruction in the English classroom, as stated by both teachers, is a combination of time and curricular demands. From John’s perspective, there is a lack of time to workshop the minutia of grammar rules due to the increasingly expanding English curriculum in Ontario: “And then there is the pressure of time. There's so much to get to in the curriculum. We've had, since I've been in high school at least, media and oral being added as strands, and these can certainly take time away from grammar.” For Susan, lack of time to focus on grammar has more to do with increasingly large class sizes: “I think there's a lack of time, too, though. That's a big factor, where you prioritize things, and just the numbers of students in the class—to do the one-on-one conferencing. Like, it's really hard to spend more than two or three minutes with each student.” Susan describes the thirty-three students in her current grade
nine class as making it near impossible to address individual student issues with grammar. Each of these perspectives points to factors within the education system itself that are causing fundamental language skills to be pushed out of the classroom.

The explosive amount of research on teacher burnout over the past twenty-five years speaks to the amount of pressure placed on teachers to perform increasingly diverse tasks and meet a wide range of curricular expectations. A large study within the US context (Mazur & Lynch, 1989) found that organizational stress factors, such as work overload, lack of support, and isolation, were significant predictors of teacher burnout. Since the time of this study, little appears to have changed. Grayson and Alvarez (2008) discuss the “increasing role demands placed on teachers outside of direct academic instruction, such as [the] management of Individual Education Plans and mental health programming for students,” has on teacher burnout, as well as “the strain exerted by current legislative demands for district-wide academic reports” (p. 1359). Several studies across various secondary teaching disciplines (see Birnbaum et al., 2003; Brouwers et al., 2011; Demorouti et al., 2001) speak to the limitations of practice teachers suffer due to large class sizes, an increasing number of administrative demands, and overwhelming curricular expectations. Concerning grammar instruction in secondary English classrooms, both the data of this study and those mentioned above raise the important question as to what must be done at the systemic level of education in Ontario in order for the teaching of such micro-skills to become possible.

Stigmas and Conflicting Ideologies

Intriguingly, stigmas and conflicting ideologies about grammar are mentioned most prevalently as barriers to grammar instruction by both of the study’s participants. Their responses on this topic speak to Gribbin’s (2005) discussion of the general disdain found within current
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secondary schools toward grammar instruction due to negative past experiences and the image of
the strict prescriptivist grammarian. Susan, like many current teachers, remembers
“experience[ing] the teacher standing up at the front and just teaching grammar without a
context,” a practice that she tries to stay away from in her own classroom. While she agrees with
the notion of contextualized grammar instruction over by-rote learning, representing somewhat
of a middle-ground position in the classroom grammar debate, she recognizes a far more
polarized situation in her faculty at large:

I think there's one of two teachers: I don't know if you're finding this in your interviews,
but there are the teachers who love grammar and who criticize, like, the radio and news,
other teachers, the administration, everybody, and then there are the teachers, like me,
who just don't know [all] the rules— fly by the seat of their pants in some ways, right?

While trying to remain neutral, Susan’s words here carry the suggestion that teachers with an
interest in grammar are overly finicky and critical not only toward their students but to everyone.
In Susan’s experience, this may very well be the case, but it also may speak to a general stigma
against teachers with an interest in grammar and the firm belief that it should be taught to all in
some fashion.

John states unequivocally that there is indeed a stigma against such English teachers in
contemporary schools: “Oh, absolutely. There definitely is. There definitely is.” He goes so far
as to express a fear of teaching grammar in any direct fashion:

I'm willing to [teach grammar], but not if I am the lone wolf who gets attacked for doing
it for being old-fashioned and so on, which is often – you know, the English department
is pretty divided here – I think we have a healthy balance. But I don't want to be seen as
John mentions “a teacher at another school who does a whole unit in grade 11 on rhetoric,” and how he “has been given a lot of flack for that,” ending on a note of frustration: “So, I don’t know what the answer is. That's up to the ministry. They're going to tell us what to do.” While he is quite earnest in granting that “overemphasizing grammar or being a real stickler for grammar is obviously going to be a real impediment to creativity,” his prior comments suggest that there are an equal amount of individuals who are real “sticklers” against any form of grammar instruction. He puts forth a theory as to why this is the case:

I know that there are a number of teachers – not to criticize your generation – who did not have that greater grammatical training, and I think they're a little embarrassed, perhaps, and maybe their resistance to teaching it is the fact that they haven't really learned the proper terminology.

Here, John expresses a kind of power dynamic related to intellectual capital in the English department, one where certain teachers feel lesser due to lack of knowledge, and because of this, resist certain practices that make them feel this way.

Both Susan’s and John’s responses speak to an underlying sense of conflicting ideologies and stigmatization with regard to grammar instruction in present-day English faculties in Ontario, one that appears to be keeping both sides quiet about their opinions on the subject for different reasons. This particular issue represents a significant impediment to furthering the conversation about grammar instruction within high school English departments. Therefore, future research should look into various strategies to foster such a conversation. Susan put forth
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her own suggestion in this regard that training and discussion on grammar instruction should not
be delivered to teachers from someone outside a school so as to avoid greater division between
the “haves” and the “have-nots” of grammar knowledge. Rather, such a conversation should be
undertaken within departments so as to bridge this divide and foster positive relationships:

I think it would be better to have them, as your colleague, help us. Some of us. We could
do some inner department stuff. Because then, like, they feel secure, but also, we get a
little bit out of it.

When and How to Practice Grammar Instruction in the English Classroom

Despite the barriers to grammar instruction that the teachers mentioned in their interviews,
both felt that it was nonetheless still possible to integrate some forms of grammar instruction in
the classroom. Both teachers emphasized contextualized grammar teaching, an approach
discussed by Jones, Myhill, and Bailey (2012) in the literature, as the most effective means of
doing so. Contextualized grammar instruction refers to a style of grammar instruction that is not
taught in isolation, but is embedded in various ways within different lessons. In responding to
the question, “Do you believe that there may be an effective way of integrating some form of
grammar instruction in the English classroom?”, the teachers expressed three main options: one-
on-one discussions, peer review sessions, and grammar instruction via reading instead of writing.

One-on-One Discussions and Peer Review Sessions

Due to the above-mentioned barriers of time and curricular demands, both teachers expressed
trying to work in forms of grammar instruction predominantly on a case-by-case basis or via peer
reviews of writing. Susan argues that “If a student [understands] one piece of grammar, I don't
feel the need to lecture to the rest of them about it.” She prefers to talk “one-on-one with [a
given] student [to] figure it [their grammar issue] out” and assist them. When there are a variety
of students with language issues in a large class, however, achieving this one-on-one time can be
quite a challenge: “It’s really hard to spend more than two or three minutes with each student.”
Given shortages of time, Susan encourages students to utilize mobile technologies to answer
specific grammar questions. However, this raises the question as to whether or not a student will
fully understand a given grammar rule on their own without assistance.

John takes a similarly student-driven approach to grammar, particularly with his senior grade
classes: “I’ve told them that if you seem to be getting the same kinds of codes continuously in
your writing, come to me, I’ve got books that have exercises in them that explain the concept
along with an answer key. And there's also stuff available online. So, I'm leaving it up to them.”
He argues that, at least in his current school, grammar is not so big of an overall issue in the
higher grades that it absolutely needs to be addressed to the class as a whole. Nonetheless, he
does occasionally “try to give whole class lessons on grammar,” though expresses concern as to
their effectiveness. He also mentions peer editing as a means of encouraging close examination
of grammar. Reminiscing about his own experiences with peer editing as a student, John states,
“I remember being encouraged to do peer editing, and we really seemed to like that a lot. A lot of
students seemed to like that, because we got to read each other’s writing and really look at
grammatical structure.”

While both one-on-one discussions and peer review sessions represent effective means of
integrating forms of grammar instruction into teachers’ time-crunch schedules, each of these
methods comes with its own problems. First, while one-on-one teacher-student discussions about
grammar issues are no doubt the best and most direct form of instruction, as Susan notes,
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providing such discussions to a large number of students (each with specific language issues) can be extremely difficult. Second, peer review sessions risk leaving it up to students to grasp a particular grammar rule, which can easily lead to the spread of misinformation. Perhaps the greater issue here, however, is whether or not these methods merely represent a transference of traditional methods of grammar instruction onto the student, still falling into what Lefstein (2009) criticizes as a procedural philosophy of teaching English. Lefstein argues that our teaching of grammar must undergo a fundamental transformation in order for it to be effective, from “the way that curriculum is structured, the pedagogical models used, teacher knowledge about grammar, [to] educational governance” (p. 398). The following technique may represent a positive step in this direction.

**Grammar Instruction via Reading Instead of Writing**

Some of the most interesting findings of this study come in the teachers’ statements regarding the value of grammar knowledge for reading and methods of instruction during reading processes. Thinking back to his own educational experience, John describes grammar knowledge as invaluable “in understanding complex sentences and reading.” His perspective extends beyond grammar instruction solely for good writing skills to include the development of strong analytical skills: “It wasn't just that it transferred into writing at all . . . it was a key component . . . for reading an analyzing.” He describes a practice “called ‘prose appreciation’” that he experienced as a student, “where you looked not just at the grammar, but need[ed] to understand the grammar in order to understand how the writing worked” when reading. John states that he tries to carry on this practice in his class to this day.
Susan describes attending a professional development session that discussed the acquisition of language and language rules via reading, which she says had a strong effect on her. She emphasizes how students “recognize structures in writing” more so when they read than when they write. With this in mind, she has begun to develop her own form of contextualized grammar instruction during group reading sessions: “I’m more keen now on stopping in between on a reading and saying ‘What kind of a clause is this?’, or, like, if it [a particular grammar rule] is important.” She describes this practice as “a big shift” in her pedagogy “because [her faculty] usually get[s] students to independently read. We don’t read out loud in a lot of our academic courses.” While she expresses that she is just beginning to test this teaching method and does not use it all that frequently just yet, her efforts gesture toward a potentially consistent and effective method of contextualized grammar instruction that is capable of addressing entire classes at once.

Both John’s and Susan’s thinking here is quite intriguing in that, similar to the issue of confidence discussed above, it looks beyond the literature’s obsession with grammar instruction and effective writing to encompass effective reading and analytical skills. Indeed, as reviews of studies on the effectiveness of grammar instruction in the literature (Andrews et al., 2006; Wyse, 2001) show, the question of such instruction in the English classroom has revolved around empirical confirmations of improvement in student writing. Aside from the fact that, as Jones, Myhill, and Bailey (2012) note, these studies have by and large examined only isolated grammar instruction rather than contextualized forms, John’s and Susan’s comments show them to interpret the value of grammar instruction in an incredibly narrow fashion, and to reduce the validation of its effects down to a single terrain. The participants’ responses encourage
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researchers of grammar instruction to think beyond these specific confines and consider the network of positive effects such instruction may have on a variety of student skillsets.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the data from two semi-structured interviews with Ontario secondary English teachers concerning grammar instruction and its potential benefits for students. The findings were categorized into the following three main themes, each of which included three sub-themes:

1. The value of English grammar knowledge for the student
2. Barriers to grammar instruction in the English classroom
3. When and how to practice grammar instruction in the English classroom

The first theme discussed the value of English grammar knowledge for the student and was divided into the three sub-themes of confidence with language, developing thinking skills and grasping abstract concepts, and the necessity of grammar knowledge for post-secondary education. The findings speak to the need for a reconceptualization of the value of grammar knowledge in the Ontario school system, as well as greater research into levels of student preparedness for college and university settings in terms of speaking and writing skills.

The second theme focused on barriers to grammar instruction in the English classroom, which were divided into the three sub-themes of poor training in elementary school, time and curricular demands, and stigmas and conflicting ideologies. The findings speak to the concern of secondary English teachers regarding students’ understanding of English grammar upon entry to high school, the difficulty of integrating forms of grammar instruction into the classroom due to
time and curricular demands, and the persistence of stigmas both for and against “grammarians-types” within secondary English faculties.

The third theme detailed the respondents’ answers in terms of when and how to practice grammar instruction in the classroom, and was divided into the two sub-themes of one-on-one discussions and peer review sessions, and grammar instruction via reading instead of writing. The findings reveal the discussion of grammar knowledge to be predominantly student-driven on an as-needed basis, and when facilitated by a teacher, to not happen as an integrated part of an English student’s learning. The teachers do, however, take a broader perspective than much of the literature on the value of grammar knowledge for, beyond writing, the development of reading and analytical skills. They also gesture toward new forms of grammar instruction that can take place during group reading sessions in addition to writing periods.

The data of this study will be of significance to current secondary English teachers and English curriculum developers in rethinking the value of grammar instruction in the classroom and developing innovative methods by which such instruction might be delivered. The data shows two teachers of widely different teaching philosophies to agree about the ultimate value of grammar knowledge. With increased data of this kind, further consideration should be given as to the emphasis of grammar instruction within secondary curricula, as well as to the ways in which the subject can be presented to students in the classroom. The following chapter will discuss the implications of this study for different levels of the Ontario education system and suggest areas for future research.
Introduction

The following chapter will give an overview of the key findings of this study and their significance, as well as discuss their various implications for educational communities and the researcher’s personal practice. The chapter will conclude with various recommendations and suggestions as to areas for future research, as well as a brief recapitulation of the study’s major sections.

Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

The key findings of the study were divided into three major themes: the value of English grammar knowledge for the student, barriers to grammar instruction in the English classroom, and when and how to practice grammar instruction in the English classroom. Concerning the value of English grammar knowledge for the student, the participants both felt, though to differing degrees, that English grammar knowledge is of value to high school students. The participants discussed confidence with language, the development of thinking skills and grasping abstract concepts, and the necessity of grammar knowledge for post-secondary education as key reasons for this belief. Of greatest significance among these is perhaps the development of thinking skills and abstract concepts, as the theme gestures to the need to fundamentally re-conceptualize the value of grammar knowledge at all levels of education.

The study’s second theme, barriers to grammar instruction in the English classroom, included the three sub-themes of poor training in elementary school, time and curricular demands, and stigmas and conflicting ideologies. While both participants emphasized a perceived lack of grammar training among their students coming from elementary schools, they
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expressed difficulty in dealing with this issue due to time constraints and curricular demands. Most significant among the sub-themes, however, is stigmas and conflicting ideologies, as these particular issues pertain to foundational conceptions of the value of grammar instruction in general, as well as to how teachers self-identify and their levels of comfort in teaching different subject matter.

The study’s third and final theme concerned when and how to practice grammar instruction in the English classroom. The participants discussed one-on-one writing discussions and peer review sessions as being the predominant means of grammar instruction in their respective classrooms. By their responses, the breadth and depth of such instruction, however, appeared to be quite scant. Aside from these topics, one participant in particular spoke to the value of grammar instruction for students via reading instead of writing. This notion is quite significant in that much of the literature on the subject focuses exclusively on learning grammar via writing. The participant’s response speaks to and encourages a shift of focus in examining the value of grammar instruction for secondary students.

Implications

The following section will discuss the implications of this study’s findings for educational communities in Ontario and at large, and for the professional identity and practice of the researcher.

**The educational community.** The findings of this study have several implications for educational communities within Ontario. First, a fundamental rethinking of the value of grammar knowledge should be undertaken both at the curriculum design and teacher-training levels if any
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kind of contextualized grammar instruction is to be successfully implemented in classrooms. The findings of this study suggest that both teachers and students alike find only narrow, if any, value in acquiring grammar knowledge, which unquestionably adds to the difficulty in motivating students to do so. Understanding grammar knowledge as improving analytical and metacognitive thinking skills opens up new avenues for the presentation of grammar instruction in classrooms beyond a boring, by-rote task. Both teachers and curriculum designers not only need to teach but to talk about grammar differently if the value of grammar knowledge is to be comprehensively reexamined in the future.

Talking openly about grammar in new ways is also necessary to improve inner-department relationships at the school-board level. Indeed, the findings of this study gesture to an unspoken ideological battleground concerning the value of grammar instruction in secondary classrooms, one that is currently debilitating constructive conversation. In addition, the findings of the study suggest that English teachers must not be overburdened by classroom (e.g., overly large class sizes) or curricular (e.g., an ever-increasing amount of teaching strands) demands to the extent that micro-skills such as grammar are excluded. Lastly, the findings have implications for elementary schools in Ontario, as the participants’ both expressed concern about a potential lack of grammar instruction therein.

At the classroom level, the findings of this study have implications for the practical teaching of grammar instruction in Ontario high schools. The participants’ comments suggest that grammar instruction in the classroom is currently both scant and uninteresting, and that new methods of instruction should therefore be attempted, particularly contextualized forms of instruction. In addition, the findings raise the question as to whether grammar instruction should
be taught more so via reading or writing, the former of which appears to be little practiced within secondary schools, particularly in the senior grades.

My professional identity and practice. I chose the topic of grammar instruction for this research study because I received little to no such instruction in elementary school and have always questioned its potential value in preparing students for post-secondary education. This study’s findings have not only led me to rethink the value of grammar instruction and its breadth of implications, but also to believe that some form of grammar instruction in the secondary English classroom would indeed be of value to students. First, the findings have led me to recognize grammar knowledge as having great value for students in terms of developing thinking and abstract reasoning skills. This recognition will no doubt affect the delivery of different forms of grammar instruction to students in my future teaching practice. That is, I now feel that it is important to discuss with students the broader implications of grammar knowledge beyond writing ability. If students can find no foundational value or interest in acquiring grammar knowledge, conceiving it as either boring or useless, they are unlikely to ever appreciate being asked to do so.

The findings of this study have also offered me new ways of implementing grammar instruction in the classroom. The most significant revelation in this regard is to teach grammar via reading instead of writing, which in turn has led me to rethink the value of reading aloud in class beyond the junior grades in secondary school. In addition to this, the findings have encouraged me to locate areas within my lessons wherein forms of contextualized grammar instruction can take place, as well as to be more generally cognizant of moments in which grammar knowledge can be quickly and efficiently imparted to students on the spot. Lastly, the
findings of the study have encouraged me to attempt to be more explicit in terms of articulating grammatical errors in student writing, which appears to be lacking in Ontario high schools today. Perhaps the increasing use of digital paper submissions online will help to facilitate the speed of such a process, which is presumably one of the major barriers to its implementation.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered. First, at the level of educational research, curriculum designers should look to reexamine and broaden teachers’ conceptions of the value of grammar instruction if it is to remain a component of mention in present curricular documents. Such an effort necessitates the reintroduction of and elaboration on the topic in curriculum documents so as to reinvigorate interest and practice. As the literature shows (see chapter two), assessments of the value of grammar instruction for student writing have been limited by teachers’ narrow application of such instruction worldwide. Therefore, curriculum designers and educational policy-makers should encourage more conceptually rich and flexibly implemented forms of grammar instruction so as to accurately assess its value for students beyond writing ability in the future. If curriculum designers fail to grasp and articulate the broad value of acquiring grammar knowledge to teachers, its effective practice in classrooms will be that much more challenging to achieve.

Second, the participants’ comments in this study speak to the need for comprehensive training packages and discussions concerning grammar within current secondary school English departments. While one of the two participants mentioned acquiring the notion of teaching grammar through reading instead of writing via a specific professional development discussion in her school, this training was the only one of its kind she had ever received. Furthermore, to
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avoid the stigmatization of grammar instruction as old-fashioned and authoritarian, English department heads should foster continuing conversations on the value of English grammar knowledge and various new methods of classroom implementation. As stated by one participant, internal dialogues within departments may be preferable to training received from outsiders in this regard. Lastly, teachers should not be overburdened by extraneous responsibilities beyond classroom subjects in order to possess the time and energy to work on different micro-skills, such as grammar knowledge.

Areas for Further Research

The findings of this study suggest several areas for further research. For one, extensive research on English grammar instruction at the elementary school level is required, as there is little to no information in the literature on this topic, and the participants of this study expressed concern that little is being done in this context. Such research should examine not only the way grammar instruction is being taught in classrooms but also the ideologies driving it. Second, further research into teachers’ understandings with regard to the value of grammar knowledge beyond writing ability should be undertaken so as to develop a current consensus on the issue. Third, the literature must look beyond writing outcomes as the sole criterion for determining the value of grammar instruction and consider various tests that might be developed to assess the value of grammar knowledge for abstract and metacognitive thinking skills. Fourth, additional studies on various forms of contextualized grammar instruction in the classroom should be undertaken to determine their prevalence and develop a system of best practices. Lastly, more information on teachers’ thoughts regarding the negative stigmatization of grammar instruction
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would be useful to determine the prevalence and effects of such stigmatization within school boards.

Concluding Comments

This study examined grammar instruction in Toronto District School Board (TDSB) schools via interviews with two current TDSB teachers. From the study’s findings, three major themes emerged: the value of English grammar knowledge for the student, barriers to grammar instruction in the English classroom, and when and how to teach grammar instruction in the English classroom. First, although to different degrees, both teachers were found to believe in the value of English grammar knowledge for students. Both teachers stated confidence with language and the necessity for post-secondary education as reasons for this belief, while one emphasized the value of grammar knowledge for developing thinking skills and grasping abstract concepts. Second, both teachers expressed several barriers to effective grammar instruction in the classroom. Both teachers noted that time and curricular demands reduce the ability to practice micro-skills such as grammar instruction in the classroom. Both teachers also expressed concern over a lack of adequate grammar training in elementary schools. Lastly, both acknowledged current conflicting ideologies and stigmas against grammar instruction in secondary English departments as inhibiting its effective practice. Third, the teachers discussed grammar instruction via one-on-one discussions and peer editing as the primary means of such instruction in their classrooms. One teacher discussed the idea of teaching grammar via reading with students instead of writing, which represents a significantly different approach than is discussed in much of the literature.
With these findings, the study has several implications for educational communities within Ontario at the curriculum, department, and classroom levels. First, the findings have bearing on the current status and articulation of the value of English grammar knowledge in Ontario curricula. The findings speak to the need for a reevaluation of English grammar instruction and its potential benefits for secondary students. Second, the findings carry implications for current secondary English departments in terms of conflicting ideologies and stigmas that exist within them concerning grammar instruction. The participants’ responses suggest that greater dialogue on the topic is required within English departments in order to effectively practice grammar instruction. Third, the findings of this study have several implications at the classroom level in terms of different techniques and methodologies for teaching English grammar. The most significant of these findings is the notion of teaching grammar instruction via reading instead of writing in the classroom, which relates to the need to rethink grammar instruction and its potential value for secondary students.

Several recommendations were put forth based on the findings of this study. First, at the curriculum level, it was recommended that curriculum designers fundamentally rethink the potential value of grammar knowledge and instruction beyond writing ability, and work to conceptually redefine such knowledge to better reflect its broad implications related to cognition. Curriculum designers can also offer teachers new techniques for implementing forms of grammar instruction in the classroom beyond rote learning. Second, the study recommended that comprehensive training packages and inner-department discussions be offered at the school level in order to both educate current teachers on the potential value of grammar instruction in the classroom and reduce stigmatization of the subject. Lastly, at both the curricular and school levels, an examination of current teachers’ curricular demands and time constraints is
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recommended in order to assess the amount of time and energy that is available for teachers to effectively work on micro-skills such as grammar knowledge.

In conclusion, despite the claims of many studies that grammar instruction has little to no effect on student writing, the question as to the value of grammar instruction has continued to persist for decades. Rather than interpret this persistence as due to a sense of vague confusion about the subject, perhaps it should be respected as a trustworthy intuition among both teachers and scholars alike. While the value of grammar instruction has not been empirically verified in terms of student writing, this does not mean that it should not be taught. In doing so, students may risk missing out on a core component of language understanding that has much broader implications than are currently acknowledged. The debate is likely to continue from both sides of the argument, perhaps long into the future, but the need for such debate is truly what matters, and this not solely among scholars. When teachers engage in conversations about challenging subject matter, they can find practical implementations and reduce intellectual stigmatization. The danger lies in abandoning such conversations altogether.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: July 14, 2015
Dear ___________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. As a student in a pre-service teaching program with English as my primary teachable, I am interested in exploring the degree to which secondary English teachers believe some form of grammar instruction would be useful in schools. The findings of this study will be informative not only for current and pre-service English teachers, but also English curriculum designers. I believe that your opinions and experiences will be quite valuable to increasing knowledge on this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor, Dr. Arlo Kempf, will be providing support for this report throughout the duration of its creation. The purpose of this report is to allow students to become familiar with a variety of ways to practice research. My data collection consists of a 45-60 minute interview that will be audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you.

The contents of this interview will be used for an assignment that includes a final paper and informal presentations to my classmates (including the possibility of presenting at a conference or printing within a publication). Your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications will not be used and remain confidential. The only individuals who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, to withdraw even after you have consented to participate in the research, and to decline to answer any specific questions asked. The audio recording of our interview will be destroyed after my paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to five years after the data has been collected.

Please sign the attached form if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Sincerely,

Matthew Vanstone
E-mail: matthew.vanstone@mail.utoronto.ca

Instructor’s name: Dr. Arlo Kempf
E-mail: arlo.kempf@utoronto.ca
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by _______________________ (name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ____________________________________________ Name (printed):
________________________________________ Date: ________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for participating in this research study. The research seeks to gather secondary English teachers’ opinions on the potential value of grammar instruction within today’s high school classrooms. This interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes, and is comprised of approximately 15 questions. The interview protocol has been divided into 4 sections: background information, knowledge and self-efficacy as a teacher, personal experiences with grammar as a teacher, and potential supports and next steps for teachers. You may choose not to answer any question and can remove yourself from participation at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

To begin, can you state your name for the recording?

Section A – Background Information

1. How long have you been an English teacher?
2. What grades and subjects do you currently teach? Which have you previously taught?
3. Did you receive some form of grammar instruction when you were in high school? If so, in what years did this roughly take place, and what were your thoughts on it in terms of enjoyment and effectiveness?

Section B – Secondary English Teacher Self-Beliefs

4. Do you consider yourself a strongly academic type of teacher?
5. What do you believe is the most important aspect of writing that a student should achieve upon the completion of high school?
6. Do you believe this aspect could be enhanced in any way via some form of grammar instruction?
7. Out of 10, how would you rate your ability to accurately explain English grammar to a student given a situation where you intuitively recognize an error in their writing?
8. To what extent do you believe that such an ability is of value to an English teacher?

Section C – Experiences and Challenges

9. To what degree do you teach proper grammar in the classroom? If at all, in what areas is such teaching most likely to happen (e.g., in class discussions, in one-on-one discussions, in writing commentary)?
10. If any, what are the limitations to teaching grammar in the classroom? In other words, do any classroom factors make the teaching of grammar impractical?
11. Given your answer to 10, do you believe that there may be an effective way of integrating some form of grammar instruction in the English classroom?

12. To what degree do you feel there is a need to teach grammar in today’s English classrooms?

**Section D – Supports and Next Steps**

13. Do you think English teachers would benefit from training in English grammar and grammar instruction methods?

14. To what extent do you think current English teachers would willingly undertake additional training to improve on this area of the subject?

15. To what extent are you aware of online applications that assist with grammar instruction? Would you consider utilizing these in the classroom?