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Upper Elementary and Middle School U.S. Teachers' Views of Grammar and Its Instruction

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate upper elementary (Grades 4–6) and middle school (Grades 6–8) teachers' views of grammar and its instruction and to determine differences in their views about grammar, its instruction, and its importance to writing proficiency. Participants in this online study were 196 practicing teachers in eight school districts in one western U.S. state. Two thirds of the teachers in the study taught at the elementary level, and one third taught at the middle school level. When asked what they taught when teaching grammar, the large majority of these teachers reported teaching parts of speech, punctuation, and sentence structure. Overall, there were few significant differences between upper elementary and middle school teachers in the instructional strategies and curricular materials they reported using, in their views of how important it was to teach various aspects of grammar, and in their views of the extent to which those aspects of grammar improved writing proficiency. Findings are discussed in relation to prior research, and implications are drawn for the field.

Keywords: *grammar instruction, adolescents, curriculum and instruction, writing performance, teacher beliefs*

The importance of grammar and its instruction for native speakers of English has been discussed and debated by educators, policymakers, and the general public for the last two centuries (Crystal, 2006; Murphy, 2012). While there is a large and robust body of research on grammar instruction for English learners and students learning a second language (for a review, see Ur, 2011), the research on grammar instruction for native language speakers is less robust and controversial.

The controversy over grammar has revolved around how to define grammar, what to teach, how to teach it, and how helpful it is to language use and writing (for arguments, see Hartwell, 1985). Debates about the quality and quantity of the research and teaching of

grammar have existed for at least 50 years (Myhill & Watson, 2014). Research has suggested that many teachers find grammar instruction, regardless of how grammar is defined, tedious and not easily taught in ways that engage students' attention and interest (Elley et al., 1976; Watson, 2015; Wyse, 2001). In addition, many teachers lack confidence in understanding grammatical concepts (Gartland & Smolkin, 2016; Jones et al., 2013; Watson, 2015).

In light of these views about grammar and its instruction, this study investigated upper elementary (Grades 4–6) and middle school (Grades 6–8) teachers' views of grammar and its instruction and examined differences in their views about grammar, its instruction, and its importance to writing proficiency. To do this, we sent an online survey to teachers at the upper elementary and middle school levels in one U.S. state to determine their views of grammar and its instruction. We were especially interested in determining whether there were differences in the way upper elementary teachers, with backgrounds as generalists, and middle school teachers, who specifically teach English, in their views of grammar and its instruction. After all, middle and high school teachers share a common curriculum and specialization in English reading and writing, whereas elementary teachers have a much broader and more dispersed curriculum, as well as teacher preparation, that covers many subject areas.

History of Grammar and Its Instruction

An understanding of the history of grammar as well as educators' evolving understanding of it frame the current study. Gartland and Smolkin (2016) described some of the complex history of grammar and suggested that early views of grammar focused on oral and written language and how it was used in everyday talk. Grammar was defined as the study of how a language was structured at the sentence level. At the simplest level, sentences have a subject and a verb (Gartland & Smolkin, 2016; Watson, 2015). These early views of grammar were labeled *descriptive* because they described language and its use.

Descriptive Language and Its Instruction

These early views of grammar were translated into instruction focused on teaching students the rules for sentence construction. While a common grammar rule such as “complete sentences have a subject and a verb” is widely recognized by most high school students, many grammar rules are complex and require knowledge of a set of esoteric vocabulary words and phrases. Yatvin (2016, para. 1) gave an example of one such rule: “Sentence elements of equal grammatical rank should be expressed in parallel construction.” Understanding this rule and how it applies to constructing sentences requires, at the least, knowledge of “sentence elements,” “grammatical rank,” and “parallel construction.” Yatvin argued that the sentence “He dreams” is generated by at least seven grammatical rules. In his monograph on teaching grammar, Haussamen (2003) presented a set of grammatical rules in a how-to booklet for teachers. This booklet included a glossary of 109 terms such as *imperative*, *nominal clause*, *infinitive phrase*, *intransitive verb*, and *object case*.

Teaching grammar rules including the vocabulary accompanying them was thought to enable students to learn a metalanguage about English. It was believed that having overt knowledge of this metalanguage would result in improved oral and written language (Glenn, 1995; Murphy 2012). During the early 20th century, educators focused their writing instruction on learning grammar rules and their accompanying set of terms.

Throughout a half-century of research on descriptive grammar instruction in which students learned a metalanguage for grammar and rules for constructing sentences, research-

ers have failed to find that such instruction improved writing performance in any meaningful way. One early study by Elley et al. (1976) is prototypical of this research. Across 4 years, a total of 12 outcome measures resulted in few, if any, differences among three approaches to teaching writing for students in Grades 9–11. Two of the approaches involved grammar rules, and the control involved students reading and writing about literature. Elley et al. concluded there were negligible effects of grammar instruction on writing performance; moreover, the control reading and writing group demonstrated competence equal to both grammar treatment groups. Further, students' attitudes toward both types of grammar instruction were generally negative, reporting these approaches as “useless,” “complicated,” and “unpleasant.”

Researchers studying the effects of grammar instruction on writing confirmed Elley et al.'s (1976) findings over and over again throughout the late 1900s and most recently in individual studies as well as reviews of studies (Andrews et al., 2006; Hillocks, 1986; Hillocks & Smith, 1991; Wyse, 2001). In most studies, comparisons were made between teaching the rules of grammar versus other methods of teaching writing.

These various methods were reviewed and analyzed in a seminal study by Graham and Perin (2007) as part of a larger meta-analysis of writing instruction for adolescent students. They examined 11 grammar studies of students in Grades 4–11. Graham and Perin's meta-analysis is important because researchers were able to determine the effect sizes of different types of instruction on writing quality. The average effect size of the studies in which traditional grammar was a treatment condition, after eliminating two outlier studies, was -0.34 . Graham and Perin concluded that “grammar instruction was not an effective treatment in any of the comparisons” (p. 462). Thus, the teaching of grammar rules has not been found to be an effective way to improve written language performance.

Perhaps because of the overall negligible effects of traditional grammar instruction that have pervaded research in the last half-century, grammar in general has taken a back seat in its importance to writing instruction over the last 20–30 years. This fact is evident in many of the most recently cited reviews of research on writing instruction (Dean, 2010; Finlayson & McCrudden, 2020; Graham, Harris, & Chambers, 2016) wherein grammar—however defined—is not mentioned at all. In a large study examining how U.S. middle and high school teachers teach writing, Applebee and Langer (2011) reported only a mention of grammar on a chart indicating that teachers spent 1.4% of their class time on “grammar and usage” (see also Applebee & Langer, 2009). There was no accompanying definition of “grammar and usage,” so it is impossible to determine how teachers understood those terms.

Grammar as Standard English Versus Grammar Rules

In two recent reports (Graham, 2019; Graham, Bruch, et al., 2016), grammar was mentioned peripherally in a rubric for evaluating writing. This rubric views grammar primarily as standard English, suggesting that students “carefully edit line by line to correct spelling and punctuation errors to make sure there are consistent verb tenses, no confusing shifts in the point of view, and all proper names have been capitalized” (Graham, Bruch, et al., p. 27), and “construct written sentences (e.g. punctuation, capitalization, more frequent use of subordinate clauses when writing specific types of texts)” (Graham, 2019, p. 285). These suggestions reflect the changed nature of grammar within writing instruction (Hudleston & Pullum, 2005).

However, not everything has changed. As recently as 2010, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) included standard English elements as well as traditional grammar and its metalanguage. For example, at the sixth-grade level, students are expected to

“demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.” In addition, though, beginning at the sixth-grade level, students should be able to “explain the function of conjunctions, prepositions, and interjections,” “form and use the perfect,” and “use correlative conjunctions.” At the eighth-grade level, students are expected to demonstrate knowledge of the conventions of standard English but also “explain the function of verbals (gerunds, participles, infinitives) in general and their function in particular sentences.” Thus, descriptive language involving grammar rules and terms remains in English teaching.

Teachers' Views of Grammar

As expected, in studies in the United States and across the English-speaking world, many teachers view grammar as correct standard English. In her interviews and focus groups with teachers, Weaver (1996) asked teachers in the United States to brainstorm what the term *grammar* meant to them. Teachers reported that grammar included the mechanics and conventions of written English. High school teachers in Petruzzella's (1996) study expressed similar definitions of grammar instruction, which included “correct” grammar with a focus on reducing errors in standard English (Watson, 2012). In Watson's (2015a) study of UK middle school teachers, many defined grammar as writing “correctly” or “accurately” in standard English (p. 6).

While many teachers seem to define grammar as correct standard English, studies also suggest that teachers do not have a consistent definition of grammar (Locke, 2010; Watson, 2012, 2015a; 2015b) and have negative attitudes about teaching it. Evidence suggests that some teachers focus on the metalinguistic knowledge that traditional grammar promotes: “You can create effects through it [grammar]; your writing will improve by having this *knowledge of how it [grammar] works* (Watson, 2015a, p. 8). Other teachers, such as Clare in Watson's (2015b) case study, viewed grammar instruction negatively, calling it “boring, unimportant, and opposed to creativity” (p. 342).

A study by Macken-Horarik et al. (2018) found that Australian teachers overwhelmingly believed the teaching of grammar in context was important (83%), and they said they felt confident teaching it. However, they were less enthusiastic when asked about the importance of specific grammatical terms, and they lacked confidence in “identifying, describing, and interpreting grammatical patterns in texts” (p. 311). Thus, their confidence in teaching grammar can be questioned.

The Current Study

We were interested in upper elementary and middle school teachers' current views of grammar and its instruction in the United States and differences between these teachers' views about grammar, its instruction, and its importance to writing proficiency. Similar to Macken-Horarik et al.'s (2018) study, we expected teachers of different grades to differ in their views of grammar and its instruction. We expected that middle school teachers with their English curricula would be more likely to value grammar and its instruction than upper elementary teachers. Therefore, the question for the study was this: What are practicing upper elementary and middle school teachers' views of grammar and its instruction, and are there differences between these teachers' views about grammar, its instruction, and its importance to writing proficiency?

Method

Participants

Participants in the study were 196 practicing upper elementary and middle school teachers in eight school districts in one western U.S. state. Two thirds of the teachers in the study taught at the elementary level (Grades 4–6), and one third taught at the middle school level (Grades 6–8). Elementary teachers are licensed to teach Grades K–6 in this state, whereas secondary teachers are licensed to teach Grades 6–12. Thus, sixth grade is an overlap, allowing licensed teachers at both the elementary and secondary levels to teach that grade. For sixth-grade teachers in this study, we categorized them based on whether they reported working at an elementary or middle school.

Most teachers teaching at the elementary level had degrees in elementary education, whereas almost half of the middle school teachers had majors outside of English, even though they taught English. About half of the elementary teachers taught in Title I low-income schools, and middle school teachers taught in schools representing a variety of socioeconomic statuses. Elementary teachers were about evenly distributed in terms of their years of teaching experience, whereas middle school teachers were unevenly divided in terms of their experience (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Data

Category	Elementary (<i>n</i> = 131)	Middle (<i>n</i> = 65)
College major		
Elementary education	88	5
English education	1	43
Other major	35	17
Level of education		
Bachelor's degree	72	34
Master's degree	57	31
Doctorate	2	0
Socioeconomic status of school		
Low-income Title 1	64	20
Low/middle	42	32
High/middle	24	13
High	1	0

Gender

Female	131	54
Male	11	11

Years teaching

1–5	37	28
6–10	25	11
11–15	28	8
16+	41	18

The Survey

We developed a survey based on teachers' reported definition of grammar identified in a U.S. study by Weaver (1996). In Weaver's study teachers' definition included four broad categories: parts of speech, punctuation, usage, and sentence patterns and structures. We used these categories to develop a survey consisting of 24 closed- and open-ended questions. We began the survey with the following open-ended question: "When you teach grammar in your class(es), what do you teach? Please provide a few examples (e.g., parts of speech, forms of punctuation, usage, sentence structure)."

We then asked questions in each of the four categories. For consistency we used the same format for each category. We asked: "What instructional strategies do you use when you teach _____?" Eight possible responses were then listed (direct/explicit instruction, extended practice, mini-lessons, conferences, discussions during reading, discussions during writing, Daily Oral Language, other), and teachers were instructed to check all that applied. Few teachers reported using "other" instructional strategies, so we were accurate in identifying those instructional strategies most likely used by teachers.

For curricular materials, we asked: "What curricular materials do you use when you teach _____?" Eight possible responses were listed (basal anthologies, published worksheets, self-created materials, Pinterest, Daily Oral Language, district-created materials, computer programs, other), and teachers were instructed to check all that applied. Once again, few teachers chose "other" curricular materials, confirming that the list of possible curricular materials was accurate.

Finally, a set of 22 grammar elements were identified for parts of speech, punctuation, usage, and sentence structure. Elements for parts of speech were nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and pronouns. Elements for punctuation were periods, commas, capitalization, quotation marks, parentheses, dashes, colons, and semicolons. Elements for usage were subject-verb agreement, tense, pronoun-antecedent, active-passive voice, and prepositional phrases. Elements for sentence structure were simple, compound, complex, and compound/complex. For each element, teachers were asked to rate its importance along a Likert scale from 1 (*not important to teach*) to 6 (*very much important to teach*) and 1 (*does not improve writing performance*) to 6 (*greatly improves writing performance*).

Procedure

A state literacy director sent an email to all literacy directors in the 41 school districts in the state informing them about the study and inviting their districts to participate. Literacy directors in eight districts agreed to participate in the study. Five of these districts were primarily urban and suburban, and three were rural. Those eight directors sent our invitation to participate to teachers of Grades 4–8 in their districts. In the email request to teachers, we included a brief overview of the project and a link to the online survey. All participating teachers received a \$10 gift card.

Data Analysis

To analyze the open-ended question about what teachers did when they taught grammar, one of us read through all responses, which were then tallied into one of eight categories: parts of speech, punctuation, sentence structure, usage, spelling, vocabulary, other English grammar, and other. From these categories, a coding sheet was developed for each of the eight categories. For example, the coding sheet specified that parts of speech were tallied as 1 when teachers wrote either “parts of speech” or an accepted part of speech such as nouns, verbs, or adjectives. “Other English grammar” was tallied as 1 when teachers mentioned traditional or traditional grammar terms such as progressive verbs, gerunds, and comparative/superlative adjectives.

After the categories and coding sheet were developed, two of us independently coded all the open-ended responses using the coding sheet. The two of us reached agreement on the coding of five of the eight categories, agreement defined as within three tallies (e.g., for parts of speech, coder 1 tallied 140 responses and coder 2 tallied 138 responses). For the remaining three categories where we were more than three tallies apart, agreement was reached through discussion. We then conducted chi-square analyses to determine whether there were significant differences between the two groups of teachers in what they reported teaching.

To analyze data on the teachers’ instructional strategies and curricular materials, we aggregated responses for upper elementary and middle school teachers across the four grammar categories—parts of speech, punctuation, usage, and sentence structure—and then tallied the total number of upper elementary and middle school teachers who reported each instructional strategy and curricular material. We then conducted chi-square analyses to determine whether there were significant differences between the two groups of teachers in their reporting of strategies and materials.

For “very important to teach” and “greatly improves writing performance,” the total number and percentages of teachers who reported each of 22 grammar elements were calculated for upper elementary and middle school teachers. Thereafter, MANOVAs were calculated to determine differences in teachers’ views on the importance of teaching the 22 grammar elements.

Results

When asked what they teach when they teach grammar, the large majority of upper elementary and middle school teachers reported teaching parts of speech (83.9% and 90.7%, respectively), punctuation (83.9% and 90.7%), and sentence structure (70.9% and 90.7%). Almost one third of teachers (31.2% and 30.7%) reported teaching usage as a part of grammar. Few teachers included spelling as part of grammar (13.7% and 1.0%), or vocabulary (15.2% and 10.7%). Less than one quarter of teachers (20.3% and 15.3%) reported teaching “other” as part of grammar. Much of this category included aspects of the writing

process—editing, proofing, paragraph structure, and so forth. Only 14.5% of elementary and 7.6% of middle school teachers taught “other English grammar.” Here teachers reported teaching sentence fragments and run-on sentences as well as metalanguage terms such as “past, present, future tense,” “prepositional phrases,” “appositives,” and “conjunctions and subordinations” as part of grammar.

Differences between upper elementary and middle school teachers were minimal. More middle school than upper elementary teachers reported teaching sentence structure ($\chi^2(1) = 14.890, p = .001$), and more elementary than middle school teachers reported teaching spelling and vocabulary ($\chi^2(1) = 4.605, p = .032$ and $\chi^2(1) = 8.559, p = .003$ respectively). No other differences were found.

Instructional Strategies and Curricular Materials

Of the seven possible instructional strategies identified for teachers, the four they reported using most often were direct/explicit instruction (82.4% of upper elementary teachers and 80% of middle school teachers), mini-lessons (72.5% and 81.5%), discussions during reading (60.3% and 47.6%), and discussions during writing (68.7% and 58.4%). Only 9.9% of upper elementary and 10.7% of middle school teachers reported using “other” strategies not mentioned.

Table 2

Percentage of Teachers Using Instructional Strategies for Teaching Grammar

	Elementary (<i>n</i> = 131)	Middle (<i>n</i> = 65)
Direct instruction	82.4%	80.0%
Extended practice	41.2%	44.6%
Mini-lessons	72.5%	81.5%
Conferencing	53.4%	38.4%
Discussions during reading	60.3%	47.6%
Discussions during writing	68.7%	58.4%
Daily oral language	39.6%	32.3%
Other	9.9%	10.7%

Note. The total exceeds 100% because teachers could report using more than one instructional strategy.

We used a chi-square analysis to determine whether there were significant differences between upper elementary and middle school teachers' use of instructional strategies. The only reported difference was that upper elementary teachers reported using conferencing more than middle school teachers, $\chi^2(1, N = 196) = 3.90, p = .048$. In the seven additional categories of instructional strategies used to teach grammar, no other differences were found between the two groups.

Curricular materials. Of the eight possible curricular materials identified for use by teachers, participants reported using self-created materials the most (53.0% of upper elementary and 75.3% of middle school teachers). Published worksheets were reportedly used by almost half of teachers, (46.1% and 46.1%), followed by Pinterest (37.6% and 44.6%) and computer programs (33.8% and 40.0%). Only 9%–13% of all teachers reported using materials other than the eight types identified in the survey.

Table 3

Percentage of Teachers Using Curricular Materials for Teaching Grammar

	Elementary (<i>n</i> = 131)	Middle (<i>n</i> = 65)
Basal anthology	35.3%	13.8%
Published worksheets	46.1%	46.1%
Self-created materials	53.0%	75.3%
Internet/Pinterest	37.6%	44.6%
Daily oral language	33.0%	18.4%
District-created materials	20.0%	13.8%
Computer programs	33.8%	40.0%
Other	13.8%	09.2%

Note. The total exceeds 100% because teachers could report using more than one instructional strategy.

A chi-square analysis was used to determine whether there were significant differences between upper elementary and middle school teachers' use of curricular materials. As expected, fewer middle school teachers used basal reader anthologies than upper elementary teachers, $\chi^2(1, N = 196) = 9.927, p = .002$. More middle school teachers reported using self-created materials than upper elementary teachers, $\chi^2(1, N = 196) = 9.025, p = .003$. Conversely, more upper elementary teachers reported using Daily Oral Language, $\chi^2(1, N = 196) = 4.571, p = .033$. In the five additional categories of curricular materials, no differences were found.

The Importance of Grammar and Its Instruction

When asked how important it was to teach parts of speech, most teachers reported it was very important to teach (69.3% of upper elementary teachers and 71.9% of middle school teachers), and about half (46.5% and 50%) reported that teaching parts of speech greatly improved students' writing performance.

When asked how important it was to teach punctuation, most teachers (70.1% of upper elementary teachers and 67.3% of middle school teachers) reported that it was very important to teach capitals, periods, commas, and quotation marks, whereas few teachers (12.5% and 16.4%) thought it was important to teach parentheses, dashes, colons, and semi-

colons. When asked whether teaching punctuation greatly improved writing performance, 40.4% of upper elementary teachers and 36.9% of middle school teachers reported that it did.

When asked about the importance of teaching different usage forms, just over half of teachers (58.5% of upper elementary teachers and 54.5% of middle school teachers) reported that subject-verb agreement and tenses were very important to teach. However, fewer teachers (30.1% and 24.5%) viewed pronoun/antecedent agreement, active and passive voice, and prepositional phrases as very important to teach. Overall, about one third of teachers (36.6% and 29.6%) reported that teaching usage greatly improved writing performance.

Finally, when asked how important it was to teach sentence structures, less than half of teachers (48.5% of upper elementary teachers and 37.6% of middle school teachers) reported that teaching sentence structures was very important. Fewer teachers reported that teaching sentences structures greatly improved writing performance (28.4% and 29.2%).

Differences in teachers' views. When determining whether there were differences between upper elementary and middle school teachers' views on the importance of teaching parts of speech, punctuation, usage, and sentence structure to their students (see Table 4), a multilevel analysis was performed. Of the 22 grammatical elements examined for parts of speech, punctuation, usage, and sentence structure, only four reached statistical significance. Upper elementary and middle school teachers differed in their views of the importance of teaching two forms of punctuation: colons $F(1, 189) = 4.81, p = .03, \eta^2 = .024$ and semicolons $F(1, 189) = 9.81, p = .002, \eta^2 = .049$. The two groups also differed in their views on the importance of teaching simple sentence structures, $F(1, 193) = 4.89, p = .028, \eta^2 = .025$. Lastly, the two groups differed in their views of the importance of teaching prepositional phrases, $F(1, 191) = 3.88, p = .050, \eta^2 = .020$. Upper elementary and middle school teachers did not differ in their views on the importance of teaching the remaining 18 grammar elements.

Discussion

The upper elementary and middle school teachers in this study looked at and valued grammar and its instruction similarly. They taught grammar as parts of speech, punctuation, and sentence structures. They reportedly used primarily four different instructional strategies, and they differed in the use of only one of the eight strategies identified. They relied primarily on self-created materials and published worksheets to teach grammar, and they differed in only three of the eight curricular materials they reported using. Few differences arose when upper elementary and middle school teachers were asked how important various aspects of grammar were to teach and the extent to which teaching those aspects of grammar improved writing performance. Of the 22 grammatical concepts presented to teachers, only four were viewed differently by upper elementary and middle school teachers.

The first surprising finding of this study was that upper elementary and middle school teachers viewed grammar largely in similar ways. We might surmise that middle school teachers would have different views of grammar than elementary teachers, perhaps because of different teacher preparation or because of different curricula and different standards for middle and elementary school (e.g., an English curriculum vs. a language arts curriculum; see CCSS Language Standards for Grades 4 and 8). However, this research indicated upper elementary and middle school teachers shared similar views of grammar. This finding is consistent with other research suggesting that grammar is not a part of either elementary or secondary curricula in teacher preparation programs (Graham et al., 2014;

Table 4

Summary of MANOVA for Importance of Teaching Grammar Between Upper Elementary and Middle School Teachers

Parts of speech	Between-Subject Effects			
	MS	df	F	Partial η^2
Nouns	0.369	1, 193	.216	.001
Verbs	1.030	1, 193	.705	.004
Adjectives	0.369	1, 193	.259	.001
Adverbs	0.656	1, 193	.437	.002
Pronouns	0.023	1, 193	.014	.000
Punctuation				
Periods	1.530	1, 189	.171	.009
Capitals	0.391	1, 189	.472	.002
Commas	0.000	1, 189	.000	.002
Quotation marks	0.473	1, 189	.512	.003
Parentheses	1.090	1, 189	.701	.004
Dashes	0.006	1, 189	.003	.000
Colons	7.970	1, 189	4.810*	.024
Semicolons	17.500	1, 189	9.810**	.049
Usage				
Subject-verb agreement	0.015	1, 191	.010	.000
Tense	0.536	1, 191	.919	.002
Pronoun-antecedent	0.392	1, 191	.521	.001
Active-passive voice	0.597	1, 191	.585	.002
Prepositional phrases	6.660	1, 191	.050*	.020
Sentence Structure				
Simple	10.5	1, 193	4.890*	.025
Compound	2.79	1, 193	1.940	.010
Complex	.256	1, 193	0.206	.001
Compound/Complex	.023	1, 193	0.014	.000

Note. MS = mean square; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Kiuhara et al., 2009; Myers et al., 2016). In addition, research suggests that most writing in U.S. elementary and secondary classrooms consists of fill-in-the-blanks and short responses, and teachers' use of more extensive and intensive writing experiences was infrequent (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Graham et al., 2014). Kiuhara et al. (2009) reported that high school teachers reported teaching grammar no more than "several times a year" (p. 143). The lack of teacher preparation and the lack of extensive writing experiences in general may account for the lack of differences between the two groups (but see Macken-Horarik et al., 2018 for teachers in Australia).

An additional surprising finding was that while many teachers tended to view various elements of grammar as very important to teach, fewer teachers reported that teaching those elements greatly improved writing performance. It might be that teachers saw various aspects of grammar as important to teach because these grammar elements were in a particular curriculum, because they were part of state standards, or because they have always been taught. Maybe teachers teach them because they think they are supposed to rather than because they think they improve writing performance.

Implications

It is clear from research, and evidenced by the CCSS (2010), that educators and policymakers as well as those who created the standards are ambivalent about exactly what grammar is and what should be taught. The CCSS expect students to know and use appropriate conventions for written communication (e.g., standard English); this view is consistent with teachers' understandings of grammar. However, the CCSS also expect students to explain some traditional grammar terms and rules, which is especially problematic because research does not support learning a metalanguage for English (Graham & Perin, 2007), and teachers in our study as well as others do not know and/or are not confident in that metalanguage (Jones et al., 2013; Watson, 2015).

A more recent turn for researchers has been to a focus on knowledge about language (KAL) (Carter, 1990) wherein preservice and in-service teachers learn about how language is used in different contexts (who is the audience, what is the channel of communication, and what is the setting in which this is happening) (Derewianka, 2012). This turn may have important ramifications for how teachers and students understand language and how it is used to communicate both orally and in writing. For example, helping students understand different registers used in English (one register or way of communicating on a text message vs. a different register or way of communicating to a principal) is a powerful and useful tool for teachers to help students understand language. Research into KAL is new but offers a welcome shift in how teachers and students use language for different purposes. This new line of research does not replace viewing grammar as writing conventions, but it adds an interesting dimension to our understanding of language and its use, one that may prove to be more relevant to students' understanding of language than traditional grammar rules.

Limitations

Several limitations are important when interpreting the findings of this study. First, and importantly, teachers in this study do not reflect a representative sample of all upper elementary and middle school English language arts teachers in the United States because the sample was a convenience sample in one state. However, findings from this study are consistent with other available studies that examined teachers' views of grammar instruction (Graham et al., 2014; Kiuhara et al., 2009; Watson, 2012; 2015; Weaver, 1996). Second, findings reflect teachers' reported understandings of grammar instruction but not what they actually do in their classrooms. It could be that teachers teach grammar in ways that do not

accurately reflect their beliefs, a finding that has been replicated in multiple disciplines (Fang, 1996; Kaymakamoglu & Kucuk, 2018). Finally, this study did not compare elementary and middle school teachers with high school English teachers, although available research does not appear to demonstrate major differences (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Graham et al., 2014; Kihara et al., 2009).

Conclusion

The National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that “writing performance is no better now than it was in decades past” and that “achievement in 2004 is similar to what it was in the 1970s” (Stedman, 2009, p. 13). For all the research and literature on grammar and its instruction, we do not seem to be any closer to understanding how grammar and language knowledge in general fits into a writing curriculum and writing proficiency than we did decades ago. How to teach language to native English speakers in an already bloated English curriculum remains a considerable challenge for teacher preparation programs as well as district professional development.

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