Writing and Grammar*

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I. Introduction

What makes good writing? This question is answered usually in terms of such scoring criteria as content, organization, grammar, mechanics, cohesion, vocabulary, style, coherence, etc. These criteria vary across researchers and testing institutions. For example, Harris (1969) suggests content, form, grammar, style, and mechanics as scoring criteria. The TWE (Test of Written English) battery, administered by ETS (Educational Testing Service), scores writing based on length, organization, style, grammar, and sentences.

What concerns us here is how grammar is related to writing, and whether or not grammar instruction helps writing. This paper briefly reviews the two different positions, the anti- and pro-grammar camp, toward the teaching of grammar for writing instruction. In this paper, I overview the typical grammar errors made by native college students, and I also examine the corresponding errors—along with some other typical ones—made by non-native college students. I delve into the aspects of those errors from the perspective of syntax, semantics, and discourse. Accordingly, I argue that grammar instruction, inevitably explicit, is indispensable to language learning in general or specifically writing.

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II. An Overview on the Position of Grammar in Writing

Grammar taught in primary and secondary schools is often dubbed as traditional or school grammar, which is designed for a pedagogical purpose. Grammar instruction has been often stated in relation to writing. Gleason (1965: 13) states that “grammar might be justified if it could help in preventing errors in writing, or if it could contribute in any other way to composing ability.” A question that arises immediately here is whether grammar helps to enhance writing. Depending on the answer to this question, the place of grammar in writing instruction has undergone a variety of fluctuations over the past forty years. In what follows, I will briefly review two extreme positions towards grammar instruction in the teaching of writing.

1. Anti-Grammar Position

The anti-grammar position puts its basic tenet on the assumption that grammar, traditional grammar in particular, does not bring writing improvement. The convention of this traditional grammar was to teach and enforce correct language usage, as pointed out by Kolln and Hancock (2005). This view with the role of traditional grammar dates back to Lowth (1799), who identifies grammar with usage.

A frontliner in the anti-grammar position is Harris (1962). He conducts an experiment among children aged twelve to fourteen, and he reports “a harmful effect” of grammar instruction on children’s writing. This strong phrase is quoted right away in Braddock et al. (1963), who carried out a massive research project and state that “the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing (p. 37).”

Building mainly on the research conducted by Braddock et al. (1963), Hillocks (1986: 138) also reports that “none of the studies reviewed provides any support for teaching grammar as a means of improving composition skills.” D’Elia (1977: 01) describes the relationship between