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**Language Lessons: A Study of Teaching Methods
in Georgia Middle-School Grammar Curricula**

End date for proposed activities: August 15, 2012

Description of proposed research project: Since the beginning of the “grammar wars” in the 1960s – when composition studies collided with both traditional (structural) grammar and emerging theories in linguistics – the teaching of grammar has been overshadowed, and even obliterated, by “whole language” advocates who claim that grammar instruction is not effective in teaching writing, and that it is even harmful. Casualties of this lengthy conflict have included teachers who earned Language Arts certification without formal preparation in grammar or other linguistics, and, most importantly, generations of students who have had little or no exposure to the structure and conventions of their own language. Many teachers have assessed student writing without considering sentence structure and attention to Standard English usage: the result has been that the United States education system has largely produced weak writers for over forty years. But in the nation’s growing dependence on standardized testing to satisfy assessment requirements of all kinds, educators have realized the need to bring grammar back to the American classroom, though not necessarily in the context of writing instruction.

Of particular interest to this study is a program popular in Georgia middle schools: DGP, or Daily Grammar Practice, a curriculum that is administered without benefit of any significant research. The program is simple, brief, and usually isolated: students analyze the same sentence each day of the week for approximately five minutes. For example, a sixth-grade class might study a sentence like this:

travis and heather read the last volume of the harry potter series before they saw the film version

The sentence lacks capitalization and punctuation: students add these graphological features on Monday. On Tuesday, they will name the parts of speech of each word in the sentence, and Wednesday they will name the function of each word (Travis and Heather, for instance, serves as a compound subject of the sentence). On Thursday they will name the structures in the sentence (the sample sentence here contains one independent clause and one dependent). Finally, the students diagram the sentence on Friday. On Monday they start the process again with a different sentence. While some teachers work to connect the lesson to reading and writing instruction, the program is a stand-alone lesson: it isolates the study of grammar.

Our project proposes to study the DGP as it is used in area middle schools in order to learn whether students are benefiting from the instruction – and whether student writing is improving. We plan to identify approximately 25 Georgia middle schools that use the DGP program and invite them to participate in our study, which will include analysis of completed teacher and student questionnaires and interviews, as well as analysis of student writing samples where available.

Significance of the proposed work: The results of our study should provide us with crucial data about the effectiveness of the DGP program, particularly in light of writing quality. It should also provide us with information about teacher preparation and commitment to the program. These results should be valuable to faculty and students in both The School of Education and in the English Department, where Language Arts pedagogy is taught. The study's results should benefit the participating middle schools as well.

Goals and expected products: The project includes these goals: (1) to produce a chronicle of the history and success of grammar instruction in area middle schools; (2) to obtain detailed information about how each participating school administers and assesses the lessons; (3) to gather and compile individual teachers' evaluations of the success of the DGP program; (4) to learn whether the DGP is effective in terms of improved student writing. The final expected products of the study are a presentation of our findings at the 2012 conference of The Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (ATEG), an assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English, and a subsequent publication in ATEG Journal.

Plan for involvement of undergraduates in the project: Two undergraduate English majors (one an English Education major) will prepare the initial Review of Literature (the bibliography) that will include studying the pedagogy of the DGP texts used in area middle schools. They will also design the questionnaires and interview instruments that will be reviewed by North Georgia's Institutional Review Board. They will conduct most of the on-site interviews, although I will accompany them. Finally, they will analyze the data

and prepare the conference presentation and article submission with my guidance. The undergraduate researchers are Hannah Bridgeman and Christopher Shull.

Budget: The project's financial needs are primarily limited to gasoline mileage for traveling to participating middle schools, copying and postage expenses, and purchase of DGP and other grammar texts. The following expenses are based on identifying 25 middle schools (within 75 miles of Dahlonega) that agree to participate in the project.

Gasoline mileage: \$1250

Copying and postage expenses: \$250

DGP and other texts: \$258.67 + shipping: \$300

Timeline:

October 1: Completion of Review of Literature November 1: Identification of participating middle schools November 22: Submission of empirical research instruments to IRB December 1: Distribution of questionnaires to participating middle schools January– March: On-site interviews at participating middle schools April– May: Analysis of data June 1: Conference abstract submission to ATEG August 15: Report to participating schools, CURCA, North Georgia faculty and students

Appendix A: Estimated Expense Report

Grammar Texts for DGP Study: Prices from Amazon.com

Grammar for Middle School: A Sentence-Composing Approach—A Student Worktext

Don & Jenny Killgallon

\$13.39

Richbaub's Introduction to Middle School Grammar

\$24.95

The Beginners' Drill-Book of English Grammar – Adapted for Middle-Class and Elementary School

James Burton

\$26.95

Grammar and Composition Handbook – Middle School

Glencoe Publishing Staff

\$40.30

Grammar in 15 Minutes a Day

LearningExpress Editors

\$10.40

Catching Up On Conventions: Grammar Lessons for Middle School Writers

Chantal Francois

\$12.25

Giggles in the Middle: Caught 'Ya! Grammar with a Giggle for Middle School

Jane Bell Kiester

\$16.72

Image Grammar – Middle School

Harry Noden

\$113.71

Total book expenses: \$258.67 + shipping = \$300

Copying Expenses:

- Purchase of North Georgia letterhead and 'second page' stationery
- Copying expenses for questionnaires and interviews
- Postage

An estimate of \$250 is our conservative projection of copying and mailing expenses.

Gasoline Expenses:

Our projection for gasoline expenses for traveling to interview sites is based on our target of 25 participating middle schools located within 75 miles of North Georgia College & State University. With a projected number of 2500 total miles driven for the project at 50 cents per mile, we project a need of \$1250 for gasoline expenses for the year's project.

Total Requested Support: \$1800.

Appendix B

Potential Georgia School Districts for DGP Study

Cartersville School System	Cartersville	Bartow
Clarke County Public Schools	Athens	Clarke
Commerce City Public Schools	Commerce	Jackson

Dawson County Public Schools	Dawsonville	Dawson
Decatur City Public Schools	Decatur	DeKalb
Decatur County Public Schools	Bainbridge	Decatur
DeKalb County Public Schools	Stone Mountain	DeKalb
Fannin County Public Schools	Blue Ridge	Fannin
Forsyth County Public Schools	Cumming	Forsyth
Fulton County Public Schools	Atlanta	Fulton
Gainesville City Public Schools	Gainesville	Hall

Lumpkin County Public Schools	Dahlonega	Lumpkin
Oconee County Public Schools	Watkinsville	Oconee

White County Public Schools	Cleveland	White