Student Attitudes Towards English Grammar

Evalyn H. Bassett

University of Mississippi

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Student Attitudes Towards English Grammar

2022

By: Evalyn Hope Bassett

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for completion
of the Bachelor of Arts degree in Linguistics in the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College
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Approved:

____________________________________
Advisor: Dr. Tamara Warhol

____________________________________
Reader: Dr. Michael C. Raines

____________________________________
Reader: Dr. Felice Coles
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<table>
<thead>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CLT</td>
<td>Communicative Language Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GT</td>
<td>Grammar Translation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>First Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2</td>
<td>Second Language</td>
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<td>TL</td>
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Abstract

The literature on English grammar is mostly on its history, standardization, educational implementations, how ideologies shape its frequency of usage, and how it is perceived by students learning English as a second language. This study seeks to address a gap in the literature that reviews the attitudes of college students towards English grammar as their first language and how these attitudes correlate with any past experience with English grammar up to this point. To gain a better understanding of student’s attitudes towards English grammar, an online mixed-methods survey was distributed to graduate and undergraduate students in all departments of the University of Mississippi in which the participants were asked to respond to the survey in two parts. Respondents were first asked to rate their level of agreement to a set of statements on a Likert scale, and then given the option to answer two open-ended questions. The results showed that overall, students had more positive attitudes to grammar than might have been hypothesized based on the literature review. These results indicate that though a small number of students find grammar to be a possible means of discrimination, for the majority of students there is a positive orientation towards grammar as a means of communication in specific settings where it is most useful, as well as a deprivation of the teaching of grammatical principles in the United States that college students generally do not appreciate. From this study, it can be concluded that the explicit teaching of grammar is valued and appreciated for various reasons, despite contradictory views and other previous research studies.
Chapter 1. Introduction

Archbishop and poet, Richard C. Trench, said “Grammar is the logic of speech, even as logic is the grammar of reason.” He knew in the 19th century what we in the 21st century often fail to fully comprehend: the importance of grammar’s role in how we as humans communicate. While grammar is a term with many facets in the linguistics field, the Linguistic Society of America proposes, “For linguists, grammar is simply the collection of principles defining how to put together a sentence” (Grammar, 2022). Authors of the text Language Files from the Ohio State Department of Linguistics remark that “grammar is actually a much more complex phenomenon than anything that could ever be taught in school, but nevertheless every human being masters the grammar of some language” (Mihaliček, V., & Wilson, C., 2011, p. 3). In this linguistic context, grammar is defined as the structure of language, or a language, and as a skill that is acquired rather than a subject that is learned. The second edition of Fowler’s Modern English Usage (Fowler & Gowers, 1965), however, notes under its basic definition that “it has become fashionable to speak disrespectfully of grammar--a natural reaction from the excessive reverence formerly paid to it.” (p. 231). This definition refers to prescriptive grammar, a term that denotes the compilation of rules that were created with the intention of making language better. This study primarily focuses on student’s attitudes towards prescriptive grammar because that is what they are most aware of. According to Teschner and Evans (2007), grammar is fundamentally split into two types: prescriptive and descriptive. Language that is subject to arbitrary rules can be classified as prescriptive, while language that is routinely spoken by its native speakers can be classified as descriptive, because it reflects how language is actually used (Teschner & Eston, 2007). Many people perceive the word ‘grammar’ to encompass only
prescriptive rules and forms, and this rules-influenced outlook causes many to cringe on hearing the term.

Despite the importance of grammar in governing how we use language, studies done on how native speakers of English view the grammar of their own language, are few and far between. Typically, research on attitudes towards grammar centers around how second language learners respond to learning their target language’s (TL) grammar, particularly within the classroom. For example, a study on Pakistani students learning English in Balochistan was performed to measure their attitudes based on two teaching methods: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Grammar Translation (GT). These students responded with positive attitudes towards CLT but were not found favorable towards the GT method when learning English. (Muhammed, 2016). A second, broader study reviewing 752 American students studying any foreign language they chose, plus English, used a Likert scale and four open-ended questions to attempt to understand the opinions of these students towards learning their TL’s grammar (Loewen et. al., 2009). They found that answers varied depending on the TL and previous language background, but that overall some students thought grammar was necessary, some students showed negative attitudes, and still others valued time spent on communication skills over grammar skills in their second language (L2) of choice. Each of these studies demonstrates that a clear interest in attitudes about L2 grammar can be found throughout the literature. Although grammar is necessary for appropriate language usage, rarely do American students formally, or even informally, learn its basic structures and functions anymore. If they have learned explicit grammar rules and structures, they usually learn it alongside something else
(Micciche, 2004; Kolln, 1996) especially since the current best strategy in modern education for teaching grammar to high school students is to incorporate it into writing and reading instruction. Because of this integrative mentality, rarely does research extract opinions on grammar as a subject, as a tool, as a part of life. The question, then, to ask about this gap in the research is why no one has bothered to study first language grammar attitudes.
Chapter 2. Literature Review

This chapter begins with the literature that provides a closer look at the views of prescriptivists and the results of language standardization in the United States. It then expands by looking at the history of language ideologies and how prescriptive language has been born into and played a role in social language practices, as well as, how it particularly has affected English speakers of the United States through public education standards. This chapter also considers the role of descriptive linguists in attitudes towards language as a whole, whether inside or outside of academic circles. It explores the relationship between prescriptive and descriptive grammar, the likelihood of the average citizen’s conscious awareness of these respective grammars, and the effect that this might have on student’s attitudes towards grammar. This chapter then explores how grammar is viewed in foreign language education versus first language education, as well as the many ways in which grammar attitudes can be influenced by the choices made in the U.S. education system. This chapter discusses the differences between spoken and written language and how an individual’s understanding and attitude towards grammar might shift in response to which form of communication they use. Finally, this chapter briefly reviews how the possible effect of an individual’s economic prospects might influence their attitude towards grammar and their implications following prescriptive grammar rules.

2.1 Prescriptivism and Standardization Effects

The attitudes that individuals might have towards grammar are influenced by the rest of the general public, prescriptivists, or linguists. Moreover, the attitudes that they might have, not
only reflect their personal opinions, but also reflect the social order that individuals are a part of (Straaijer, 2016). The attitudes of many individuals are also biased towards prescriptive grammar only because the average individual’s conscious understanding of descriptive grammar is likely must less evident because a person’s grammar ability is intuitive rather than explicit. The difference is that descriptive grammar, or how language really is used, is not instructive like prescriptive grammar, which is what prescriptivists believe language should be like. Prescriptive grammar is indeed a prescription, or how perceived perfection in language can be reached if prescribed to the person who contains ‘infectious’ speech (Wright, 2000, p. 31). If prescriptive grammar is the only grammar that the average person is familiar with, how could one not have some kind of negative bias towards it? Prescriptivism is evidently associated with the need to be cured of a malady. In this manner, Henry David Thoreau wrote in his journal on February 3, 1860, that on reading “some of the rules for speaking and writing the English language correctly, I think any fool can make a rule, and every fool will mind it.” (Thoreau, as cited in Lippi-Green 2012, p. 66).

On the other hand, the philosopher Aristotle once said that the mark of an educated man was to look for precision in every class of things as the nature of the subject permits (Aristotle, 2004, p. 5). While one side of this argument ascertains that the rules of English grammar only agitate and exhaust us, another perspective is that even a natural process like language cannot be fully and respectfully understood without seeking its utmost precision. Morana Lukač, looking to observe the efforts of individuals who correct speech and writing on a regular basis both privately and publicly, observed several different trends showing people were bothered with
language as it is currently used and how they attempted to remedy it with prescription. She notes that while ‘grassroots prescriptivism’ might be an idea we associate with older and more conservative individuals, it is evident that plenty of younger people are just as likely, if not more likely, to prescribe language (Gifford, 2014, as cited in Lukač, 2018). She also points out in Boland and Queen’s (2016) study that personality traits have a great deal to do with how people respond to proper and improper usage: introverted and less agreeable people care the most about it (as cited in Lukač, 2018).

Another point that might support how people’s attitudes towards grammar is based primarily on what they know through prescriptive thought, is that linguistics, as a field of study, tends to disregard prescriptivism and favor descriptive studies, for various reasons. Linguists are not concerned with grammatical errors or ‘matters of form’, that is, writing talk, as many would say. Linguist Robert A. Hall makes the argument that “speakers know their own languages natively and therefore do not really make grammatical ‘mistakes’, and that consequently, prescriptivism is unnecessary.” (Hall, 1960, as cited in Straaijer, 2015). The problem is that written language derives from spoken language, which creates the need for a common language standard where there wasn’t one before. The question then becomes whether people consider grammar to be more important to writing than to speaking, although it is essential for the function of both. Unraveling the relationship that grammar shares with the public, prescriptivists, and linguists can be quite difficult, as the former is often heavily influenced by the two very different opinions of the latter (Straaijer, 2015).
2.2 Language Ideology and the History of Prescriptive Grammar

If prescriptivism is wholly unnecessary, then why has it been around this long? Why is it that Strunk and White’s grammar manual *The Elements of Style* has sold some 10 million copies, and where does this prescriptive ideology come from (Roberts, 2009)? Prescriptivism in the English language originated as early as, if not much earlier than, the eighteenth century. Part of the argument for why grammar might still matter to many is that through the years it has continued to hold language to a standard, as Steven Pinker puts it, “When people are accused of speaking “ungrammatically”… or of consistently violating a ‘rule’, there must be some different sense of “grammatical” and “rule” in the air” (Pinker, 1995, p. 383); this phenomenon is more universal than most people care to admit. Language standardization is a convoluted process that crystalizes with time and brings with it a growing number of rules, and the complexity of this process might be a subtle nod to a person’s attitudes toward prescriptivism. Richard J. Watts mentions the research of Lynda Muggleston (1995):

Unless we consider whether prescriptive attitudes towards the language were already present before the middle of the eighteenth century and what set of social processes took place to link those attitudes to hegemonic social practices, we only have part of an extremely complex historical process involving language standardization. (as cited in Wright, p. 29).

Today, talk of language prescription origins, let alone language standardization, is obviously not a common phenomenon in middle schools, dinner table conversations or even educational conferences. If the question of how we came to a language standard is not answered,
or even asked, for most people, there can hardly be an informed opinion about grammar. Part of our standardization process also, or perhaps part of its problem, is that the United States has no consensus on a standard way of teaching English or its grammar, which leads to divided ideologies:

“We Americans do not have a national curriculum and do not have a consensus for the establishment of one. Rather than a narrative about the rise and fall and revival of grammar, we can only offer an account of the fall and include current symptoms of, and current work towards, an impending revival (Kolln and Hancock, 2005, p. 21).

This quote lends a great deal of insight as to why studying attitudes about grammar is so difficult: there is hardly a standard to agree upon.

2.3 The Influence of Linguists and Descriptivism

It is also the case that linguists who concern themselves only with descriptivism in their jobs often begin to lose sight of the purpose for prescriptive grammar. While descriptive linguistics and grammar deals with the evolutionary status quo of language, prescriptive grammar concerns itself with maintaining a consensual understanding within that evolutionary language. But often this need for maintenance can get overlooked, and “it might be argued that ... linguists put too much stock in this type of rationalist approach, forgetting that ‘[i]f the frames that define common sense contradict the facts, the facts will be ignored’ “(Straaijer, p. 235).

Arguably, there is always a place for grammar, as it is an important part of learning a language, including our own (Bernat & Lloyd, as cited in Chali et al., 2020).
However, the place held for prescriptive grammar may not be a place that anyone shows any desire to preserve realistically, educationally, or professionally. Prescriptive grammar seems to remain publicly important and meaningful only to a select few - most of them being the types of people whom linguist Steven Pinker describes as ‘language mavens’, the dark cynics who block out all propositions for grammaticality besides their own, as well as the prescriptivists and all others who obsess over English grammar because of their field of study, or their own personal interests (Pinker, 1995, p. 383). Since Pinker’s argument in The Language Instinct is that grammar is innate, he argues that prescription takes away our humanity. Without it we function very well, and moreover, we make prescriptions superfluous to speech simply by communicating the way we do naturally:

“Prescriptive rules are useless without the more fundamental rules that create the sentences.... These rules are never mentioned in the style manuals or school grammar because the authors correctly assume that anyone capable of reading the manuals must already have the rules....when a scientist considers all the high-tech mental machinery needed to arrange words into ordinary sentences, prescriptive rules are, at best, inconsequential little decorations. The very fact that they have to be drilled shows that they are alien to the natural workings of the language system” (p. 384).

Prescriptivism can also be seen, especially by linguists, as ‘demand created’, where the people who demand it of others answer to no authority over it because they embody that authority and make a living from it (Lippi-Green, 2012). This is implicit in turning a language standard into a selling point for prescriptivists for them to gain popularity with the masses. The
way that editors decide on how content should be edited in the major publishing houses, for example, is something of a mystery that no one really questions, according to Deborah Cameron (1995), noting that on announcing the sale of a style guide based on the standards of *The Times*, people rushed to enquire when they could own copies for themselves, with an interesting observation on this phenomenon:

This response casts doubt on the idea which is very prominent in the *Times* guide itself: the idea that a newspaper’s house style simply mirrors the usage of its readers. ‘*The Times*’ we are told, ‘should use the language of its readers, but that language at its best, clearest and most concise’” (1992, as cited in Cameron 1995).

Cameron points out exactly how the language standard decided by these in-house editors, while helpful in some ways, might simply just be a selling point in other ways. For linguists, the boundary where descriptive language meets prescriptivism is not always welcomed and is often confusing to find, as Dallin Oaks discusses:

“If, as it is often claimed, legitimate linguistic work doesn’t enter into prescriptivism, then just where does that threshold between the two occur? And even if linguists are able to determine where they think such a threshold exists, is the breaching of the boundary between the two approaches or stances really a disavowal of one’s professionalism or identity as a linguist?” (Oaks, 2021, p. 2).

Linguists’ studies are concerned with the descriptive nature of language, and many, if not most, retain the view of opposition towards prescriptivism somewhat because it is the expected norm
(Oaks, 2021). But this opposition can make education difficult, as Mugglestone notes, because the two are often seen as antonyms (Mugglestone, 2015; as cited in Oaks, 2021). Oaks relates that especially for students of linguistics, it’s extremely hard to discern the importance of prescriptivism when the content of their studies emphasizes descriptive language, but their essays must be scrutinized by prescriptive standards (Oaks, 2021). It’s impossible to separate the two, yet students are often heavily pushed to place importance on descriptive language if they study linguistics, and they often get a skewed perception of “prescription” as being the grotesque murder of the beautiful natural process they’re being taught to study. Jane Hodson observes on this point of tension, “If this sort of contradiction sits uncomfortably with linguistics professors, imagine how confusing this could be to their students” (Hodson, 2006 as cited in Oaks, 2021). The meeting of the two perspectives is evidently not emphasized enough, and it influences the young students of language and linguistics themselves. Deborah Cameron observes that

“Prescriptivism is also a negative term for linguists in a more technical sense. It is the disfavored half of a binary opposition, ‘descriptive/prescriptive’;” (Cameron, 1995, p .5). She goes on to say that this negatively affected binary sets the tone for the discipline of linguistics as a whole, which automatically divides a linguistics student’s understanding of grammar, but leaves one part of it negatively tainted.

2.4 Foreign Language versus First Language, and Other Educational Influences

In modern education, the instruction of English grammar is frequently debated, especially in high school or lower levels. Studies of how native English speakers learn their own language are scarce, even though some researchers, such as Hudson and Walmsley (2005), argue that the
understanding of one’s first language (L1), particularly its grammar, actually supports the understanding of a second language. As evidenced by the amount of literature that surrounds foreign language study and grammar attitudes surrounding the L2. In a database search, over 2,000 articles written on EFL grammar attitudes appear from 2020 until now. Interestingly, few studies address the instruction of English grammar to native English speakers, very likely due to the fact that in the United States, we have experienced a need to dissociate grammar from language arts studies (Kolln and Hancock, 2005), with grammar education’s diminished place in the public curriculum, as well as the debates that have surrounded it, since the late 1980s. After ample research was provided as evidence that isolating grammar through exercises and drills did not help but hindered oral and written skills, the NCTE gave the following resolution in November of 1985:

Resolved, that the National Council of Teachers of English affirm the position that the use of isolated grammar and usage exercises not supported by theory and research is a deterrent to the improvement of students’ speaking and writing and that, in order to improve both of these, class time at all levels must be devoted to opportunities for meaningful listening, speaking, reading, and writing; and that NCTE urge the discontinuance of testing practices that encourage the teaching of grammar rather than English language arts instruction. (National Council, 1985).

After this resolution, the view towards teaching grammar in any kind of isolated format as frowned upon by the NCTE has severely altered the course of grammatical instruction in American schools, causing many to simply remove all of it from their curriculum. However, it has not been wiped out, as “many classroom teachers continued to teach grammar, often behind
closed doors” (Kolln and Hancock, 2005, p. 19). Thus, the mixed point of view has continued to form what modern education and grammar teaching has become today. In fact, standard evaluations are likely very instrumental to how students view their own performance and decide to use English grammar.

In Verbal Hygiene, Deborah Cameron also discusses the ‘great grammar crusade’ in the United States and the UK in the ten years prior to 2012. In both the UK and the United States, English teaching methods, as well as the language in general, began to undergo major reform. The British 1988 Education Reform Policy significantly altered the beliefs about how the English language would be taught in the UK, because there was a huge call for traditional standards of teaching English to be brought back (Cameron, 1995). Simultaneously in the United States, there was a similar push to alleviate “an alleged decline in standards and an alleged drift away from the values education had traditionally sought to transmit” (Cameron, 1995, p. 79). Cameron points out that in the end, each nation’s reform heavily influenced the course of grammar and the opinions these nations’ citizens had about it, but that in the United States, a national curriculum was not birthed from this reform.

The ways in which we do see grammar taught in schools allows the issue to be seen from the opposite direction. A study of English grammatical pedagogy in even a southern private school in 2006 also speaks to this matter exactly in its reformation of the school’s curriculum. Parents who are concerned about their students’ abilities to pass the SAT second-guessed the teacher’s ideology that “Prescriptive grammar is best taught rhetorically, rather than as a separate formal exercise” (Gold, 2006, p. 44). As parents thought the teaching methods of the private
school instructors were not formal enough, the teacher then had to start sending home small assessments that isolated precisely what skills the students were learning in order for parents to take comfort in their children’s education. Even after the reform of a private school’s English curriculum, the following description can be found; “teach grammar, usage and mechanics rhetorically and in the context of students writing, not as separate “formal” subjects”, and still the integrative method concerned the parents as not thorough enough (as cited in Gold, 2006, p. 43).

Another way that views on prescriptivism can be discerned in modern education is through Latin, the subject which was likely Europe’s first introductions to prescriptive grammar as early as the mid-1500’s (Wright, 2000, p. 30). But Latin is scarcely taught anymore and nowhere to be seen in public education curricula, and this could be a reason for students showing unfamiliarity with grammar structures. Modern, or progressive education, has a clear stance on the eradication of teaching grammar in explicit forms, but there is also scarce evidence that an alternative to grammar instruction is offered (Kolln & Hancock, 2005, p. 26). While Latin is the grammar subject in most classical curricula, as well a gateway to effectively learning Romance languages, the public and private modern education curricula do not teach grammar as formal and explicit exercises, and thus Latin loses its grammatical potency and has disappeared from public schools’ curricula. How this might have affected modern English education standards is discussed in a 1985 study by the Latin and Greek scholar, T. W. Melluish, who provides an interesting premonition for how the English language arts system has come to be what it is today. He argues that as progressive teaching methods try to implement this rhetorical teaching style of
grammar into public education English classes, the logical and analytical part of the subject becomes null, and students are only learning half of the subject, which handicaps them as well as leaves their teachers with unfortunate academic results:

[F]or although [the Norwood Report] complains bitterly of the inability of modern youth to understand a passage of English, or to express its ideas orally, or in writing with precision and clarity, on the question of teaching English grammar it maintains a deafening silence. (Melluish, 1944, p. 62).

The jettisoning of “formal exercises” and “grammatical instruction” outside of rhetorical integration of grammar leaves students at a disadvantage when they are confronted with grammatical issues in college. The ideology pervades that even now, “[g]rammar is generally thought of in highly reductive error-focused terms” (Koln & Hancock, 2005, p. 24). There is no formal reintroduction for students after elementary school, so a negative bias towards their understanding of grammar should not be a shock when they lose points for grammatical errors in a college literature survey class. An analysis of young students’ writing skills considers this idea by stating that language is too complex a system to expect each part of language to hone the other part simply by focusing on overall processes, such as reading more to fix writing skills, and writing more to understand grammar (John, 2019). One side of the research presents that to write well, it’s important that in writing education students are “isolating a specific skill and its sub-skills” (John, 2019). It is even mentioned that the experimental methods tested on individuals in classrooms should have focused more on “the grammar aspects [more] deeply instead of just
listing errors” and “analys[is of] the errors based on each rule concerned with each grammar concept” (John and Kothari, 2019).

While research points to this being a good approach that might inexplicably lead to more positive grappling with grammar, modern education is currently unmoved from its all-inclusive approach. There is still research from the other end of the spectrum when it comes to writing education, which has emphasized process over product since as early as the 1960s, revealing some of modern education’s own attitudes towards grammar then and now (Kolln & Hancock, 2005). This research has been in motion since the resolution against grammar instruction for writing was delivered by the NCTE in 1963, which started the belief that grammar harmed writing:

“In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: 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).” (Braddock, as cited in Kolln & Hancock, 2005, p. 15).

This widely known quote has been instrumental to American education since 1985. Furthermore, many teachers hesitate to teach grammar at all, whether explicitly or integrated with reading and/or writing. A study in Ethiopia on EFL teachers revealed that the lack of grammar instruction in second-language instruction was problematic because grammar was not integrated with reading and/or writing. In response to the focus group, Chali et al. (2020)
reported that “participants believed grammar and reading are the foundations of knowledge
development”. They also argue in their literature review that no other subject is as targeted and
researched in foreign language education as grammar. Students have the most trouble learning
grammar explicitly in a foreign language setting, so naturally a struggle to comprehend first
language grammar would not be surprising. Yet, teacher’s ideologies often remain centered
around the exclusion of grammar structures altogether, rather than combining structures with
reading to create a mixed approach. Even if their ideologies were more agreeable towards “old-
fashioned " explicit grammar, it is also the case that many modern English teachers do not
necessarily fully understand the grammatical technicalities of the English language themselves
before they are licensed to teach it. Researchers Kolln and Hancock discuss the notability of this
fact in education:

For us, it is not just historically true, but currently true that many US English teachers are “happy
to go on record as knowing nothing whatsoever about the grammar of their native language
(Hudson & Walmsley, 2005, pp. 605-606, as cited in Kolln and Hancock, 2005, p. 21).

This absence of language knowledge can be traced back to the products of English
universities in the early 1900s, when undergraduate students in England, who eventually became
graduate teachers of English, were already finding English philology too dry to continue
studying it (Hudson and Walmsley, 2005). If the beliefs and the knowledge a teacher might have
will personalize the beliefs of a student and certainly affect their perception and their attitude
towards the subject they are learning (Campbell, 2020), then this is certainly significant to note
when focusing on attitudes towards English grammar.
2.5 Spoken vs. Written Significance

In this debate however, there is also a call for the contrast between spoken and written grammaticality. Michael Halliday makes the observation that “writing and speaking are not just alternative ways of doing the same things; rather, they are ways of doing different things” (Halliday, 1989, as cited in Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 18). Psycholinguist Steven Pinker focuses on this difference when he discusses the notion of over-decorating human speech in *The Language Instinct*, saying that “[F]orcing modern English speakers to not--whoops, not to split an infinitive because it isn’t done in Latin makes about as much sense as forcing modern residents of England to wear laurels and togas” (Pinker, 1995, p. 386).

However, attitudes towards spoken language are certainly found to be different from attitudes towards written language. Researcher Cristinel Munteanu points out the philosophy of American thinker John Dewey, who posited that “[a]uthentic communication is revealed in spoken language, in dialogue, and not in written language” (Munteanu, 2019). While this idea does circulate, the opposing school of thought asserts the importance of language in rhetorical texts both in the scholarly realm and modern society. Swedish scholar Per Linell identifies that in the field of linguistics, there exists a bias for written language and its analyzation, explaining that many of the models we use to describe spoken language are borrowed from the ways we analyze written language, and that now according to linguists and their analyses, “Language is based on static structures, rather than on active situated processes” (Linell, 2019, p. 2).
Laura Micciche argues her belief that rhetoric and rhetorical grammar deserve a significant place in modern education (Micciche, 2004). She makes a case for the anxiety that surrounds grammar in the classroom and proposes that a healthy relationship between rhetorical writing and its grammar will demonstrate to students the importance of meaningful communication through writing:

We need a discourse about grammar that does not retreat from the realities we face in the classroom—a discourse that takes seriously the connection between writing and thinking, the interwoven relationship between what we say and how we say it (p. 718).

Evidently writing and elocution are therefore of great importance to schools, but according to Pinker, it is foolish to apply the rules of Latin, or of Strunk and White, to our speech. What has happened in education then is that grammar is seen only as a wrench in the cogs of a young writer’s creative process, and this is the reason that some researchers argue for a more contextualized or ‘rhetorical’ approach to teaching grammar in writing (Micciche, 2004; Jones et al., 2013).

Similarly, a statement made by the NCTE task force in 1985 on the singularly important matter of teaching grammar in writing in order for students to pass the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) caused Kolln and Hancock (2005) to make this observation:

“It is interesting that the task force, largely by choice, ignored the issue of grammar testing now part of the SAT, perhaps because it is not an area of expertise. Grammar is thought of as
unimportant, and it would seem that questions about grammar are not thought of as real
questions about writing” (p. 24).

Another view on speaking versus writing is that after considering the research, many
linguists deem speaking to be the more natural process of the two, as Ali Alsaawi (2019)
discusses: “[speaking] is a natural process that makes its acquisition faster, while writing is
acquired through learning, which emphasizes its status among literate people” (Alsaawi, 2019, p.
195). She points out that while there are disadvantages to speech that written language does not
contain, spoken language is not as mechanical as written, and is faster to attain because skills
such as spelling are not involved with speech (p. 195). Spoken language is also a special
phenomenon that most people find much more fascinating because of its responsiveness to “[t]he
smallest and most subtle changes in its contextual environment” (Coffin et. al., 2014, p. 25). But
this fascination with spoken language does not always translate into written language, which
prevents many students from truly embracing writing as a skill. Thus, writing skills are lamented
in the workforce, as Kurt Wise explains:

“When I practiced public relations before moving to academe, there's one sentence I wish I
could’ve said more often: “That kid’s writing skills are outstanding.” Unfortunately, I didn’t
utter that sentence often” (Wise, 2005).

The ability of students to write well in the past 20 years might have to do with their
perception of grammar, which presents itself most clearly in writing. Deborah Cameron’s
observation on the style guide of *The Time’s* even admits that the way in which language in its
written form is alluded to by modern editorial authorities is “parasitic” to speech, only liable to change if speech changes first (Cameron, 1995, p. 56). If grammar is seen as only a cure for the ill, or as DeCapua (2008) phrases it, “[o]ften linked to both explicit and implicit criticisms of people’s use or “misuse” of language, which may have created a sense of resentment or frustration with the notion of grammar” (DeCapua, as cited in Chali et al., 2020), then that is noteworthy of how people will view grammar usage. If it is thought to be difficult in writing, how can it not be difficult in the speech of students? On the subject of writing, British linguist Ronald Carter argues that “oral skills are normally less highly valued [than writing skills],” which is true of societies that prefer the permanent to the ephemeral (as cited in Coffin et al., 2014, p. 25). Overall, grammar gets a fairly bad reputation when it comes to perceiving how it is integrated into either spoken or written language.
Chapter 3. Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study is a mixed-method approach, with data that was collected in a survey. The primary question I sought to address is the overall opinions of students towards English grammar, as well as taking into account their own past experiences with English grammar in academic settings or otherwise.

3.1. Setting and Participants

The survey was administered online to the students at the University of Mississippi, and an unlimited amount of time was allotted for participants to take the survey. The possible sample size of students was 23,000 out of the population of college and graduate students currently enrolled. Seventy-eight (78) students responded.

3.2. Data Collection

The survey consisted of 22 questions measured on a 5-point Likert scale, and two open-ended questions. The open-ended questions were added to address student’s experiences specifically learning English grammar, as well as leave space for the student to openly discuss any opinion about good grammar usage that they were not able to express through the Likert-scale questions. The full list of questions and results for both quantitative and qualitative analysis can be found in Appendices A and B.

I collected the opinions of the students while also drawing conclusions from correlations between the quantitative and qualitative data. To display the data, I transferred and processed it through Microsoft Excel to provide a clear analysis of all survey answers. I scaled the quantitative data by calculating the mean of each response on the 5-point scale and using a bar graph to display each answer’s mean score. These statements and answers can be found in Appendix A. For the qualitative statements, I manually summarized the data by grouping the
answers into general categories based on trends in order to make simple correlations between the quantitative and qualitative data. For a comprehensive list of answers to open-ended questions 23 and 24, please refer to Appendix B. Statements with highest mean Likert score could be compared to the general trends of the qualitative data section.

The use of computers, email, and an internet-based survey that I created using Qualtrics were used to extract this information because I wanted to explore student’s opinions on grammar without the pressure of a direct conversation. I wanted people to answer the questions exactly as they felt comfortable in the moment, and I used a mixed-methods approach so that I could find answers to themes I had previously researched, as well as invite students to talk about their own experiences with grammar in school or elsewhere. Using these means of data collection, I aimed to see the correlation between what a student’s initial thoughts on grammar were and the personal experiences and beliefs of that student. I sought to answer this because it’s an under-researched topic in education as well as English linguistics.

3.3. Analysis Approach

For this research methodology, the approach is the most suitable for this research primarily because I was seeking preconceived notions about grammar. I wanted to accurately judge student’s underlying attitudes towards grammar, especially regarding their personal experiences. The open-ended questions especially justify this method because they directly seek the opinions of the participants, allowing them to address anything that they felt had not been addressed by my research questions that I myself had designed, offering a space to show their point of view. I employed the convenience of autonomy through an online survey as a way to ensure that people felt that they could share openly about their individual experiences. I considered holding interviews with participants, but I did not want participants to feel as if they
could not be open with me because of the lack of autonomy. I also considered visiting high
schools and/or elementary schools to observe teachers teaching language arts or English courses.
I was more interested, however, in the opinions of my peers who are now in college, and I also
wanted this research to be fully centered around educational influences and settings. I also
rejected focus groups because I wanted each participant to relate their own specific thoughts and
experiences and the opinions that correlated with them. To achieve this, I saw no need for a
focus group, and I thought that all of these issues could be easily avoided by using an anonymous
survey. I used the 5-point Likert scale based on agreement to get an accurate scale of student’s
true opinions regarding grammar, and its instruction in their lives.

I also chose a Likert scale for the purpose of properly emphasizing the sociolinguistic
aspect of this research study. I used this scale also to target the opinions of the participants and
completely exclude grammatical abilities. The open-ended questions were chosen for the same
reason and the data that I collected from those answers was not based on grammaticality, but on
content.
Chapter 4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Analysis

The participants who responded to this mixed-methods survey were all students in the graduate and undergraduate departments of the University of Mississippi, meeting the requirements for having passed the elementary, middle, and high school years of education. I commenced the distribution of the survey in the third week of November 2021, and the survey was closed by late January of 2022. Seventy-eight (78) students responded to this survey, but a differing number of students chose to respond to the open-ended questions, which is mentioned later on in this section.

The results of this study are in answer to the research question of what student’s attitudes towards English grammar currently are. Figure 1.1 depicts each question’s mean number of responses on the 5-point Likert scale. Most participants significantly agreed with the questions below, whose mean answer is between 4 and 5, with the mean point amount listed next to the question in parentheses:

5. When I try to write with good grammar, I get better grades. (4.68)
6. When I try to write with good grammar, my point is made more effectively. (4.6)
9. In school, I had a teacher explicitly explain grammatical rules of my own language (NOT in foreign language class.) (4.37)
12. I believe that knowing your own language’s grammar improves your ability to learn a second language. (4.23)
15. Grammar is useful for everyone, regardless of profession. (4.51)
18. I find a use for grammar in everyday life. (4.22)
19. Learning my own language’s grammar has made me a better reader. (4.54)
20. Learning my own language’s grammar has made me a better writer. (4.79)

21. When I think of grammar, I think of rules, systems and structures. (4.41)

Most participants significantly disagreed with the questions below, whose mean answer fell between 0 and 2:

2. I don’t think good grammar is very useful. (1.41)

7. No one cares if I make grammatical errors, in school or otherwise. (1.71)

8. Grammar isn’t required for everyday speech, so it’s not very important for most people to know. (1.77)

14. Grammar is for scholars, nerds, and English majors, not me. (1.41)

16. Grammar is a thing that has caused me endless confusion my whole life. (1.92)
4.2 Qualitative Results on Learning Grammar

The qualitative data was immensely informative on deciphering how students experienced learning grammar in school before they had begun studying in college, as well as allowing space for them to talk openly about their opinions on the use of “good” grammar. The chart in Figure 1.2 below is representative of the general attitudes of student’s responses to their experience learning grammar, or the integration of grammar into education at all. For question number 23, represented by Figure 2.1, 41 participants responded. While many answers were clear about which attitude the participant possesses, anomalies to the trends are highlighted in the Discussion section.
Seventeen percent (17%) of respondents emphasized that either grammar had not been focused on enough in their school or experience, or that they saw a need for teachers to focus on teaching grammar more explicitly, especially in elementary or middle school. Twenty percent (20%) of the respondents reported that they had either had one very helpful teacher explain things for them in school at some point, and this was a lucky find, or that they were thoroughly educated in grammar throughout their school experience, and that this was something they were “lucky” to have experienced and rarely found in education. Another 20% reported that they had found grammar to be beneficial to them in some way. Whether reading or writing in English or creating ease in learning a foreign language, this group reported to have seen English grammatical knowledge as more of an added benefit to writing and reading than anything else.
Another 12% reported that they experienced grammar as an implicit phenomenon, and did not benefit from or even remember any explicit teaching that they had been exposed to. This group typically reported that they knew a sentence was wrong but could not begin to explain why. Five percent (5%) of the respondents reported that they associated their understanding of English grammar with what they had learned in foreign language classes, such as French. Ten percent (10%) reported that for them, grammar made things easier for them to understand, or that while other things were difficult to grasp, grammar was not one of them. A couple of people even used the word “fun” to describe their experience of learning grammar. Two percent (2%) reported grammar to be an unnecessary skill. Another 2% reported that learning grammar was not important because it was harmful to language as a whole and discriminated against non-standard dialects. Twelve percent (12%) of the respondents filled their space with a negative statement that offered no opinion, such as “no”. The responses received about this question highlight how many students are not actually encumbered by grammar when they are writing, as the NCTE became fearful of (Braddock, as cited in Kolln & Hancock, 2005, p. 15), but rather felt as though grammar was of extreme benefit to them as a writer. In spite of grammar being discouraged in education, some teachers are evidently still implementing it because the results show that 20% of the participants had an experience learning it but were aware of how fortunate they were. One participant said:

*I had a grammar class at my private school from elementary through middle school, but I know that is not the norm. I have appreciated those lessons and it has made me a better writer and student.*
The results also clearly show the effects of an integrated approach on teaching grammar in education that is communicatively based on the participants of this study, as 17% responded that there was simply not enough instruction, particularly in their younger years. A couple of participants responded simply:

*I think they should put more of an emphasis on teaching grammar.*

*I think that grammar needs to be more heavily taught in American schools. Many students do not have a solid understanding of the mechanics of the English language. If they do not learn at school or at home, they will not develop their skills for the workforce.*

Another interesting statistic in these results is the smaller number of students at just 12% who argued that grammar was a matter of feeling, and not knowing. Their opinions speak to Steven Pinker’s point in *The Language Instinct*, that next to the way we structure a sentence on our own from infancy, grammar structures are “inconsequential decorations” to our language (Pinker, p. 384). One participant wrote:

*I’ve found that “learning” grammar is, in all actuality, much harder than performing it. We don’t often know the rules we are applying when we speak or write, but instead we just unconsciously perform them.*

While many participants felt limited in their scope of grammatical knowledge through education, 20% of participants responded that what they did learn had in fact been very beneficial to them. One participant noted that their relationship with grammar was a little complex:
My experience with grammar is complicated. I would say that it has made me a better writer over time. It has given me a lot of headaches particularly when I do not have time to proofread.

It is a useful skill particularly for a college student though.

There are also a few correlations between the quantitative and qualitative analyses given. In the quantitative set of questions participants gave the statement, “I don’t think good grammar is very useful” a 1.51 mean score on the Likert scale, which correlates with the following two statements:

*Learning my own language’s grammar has made me a better reader.* (4.54)
*Learning my own language’s grammar has made me a better writer.* (4.79)

In addition to these acknowledgements of improved reading and writing skills, many students remarked in the qualitative section of the analysis about other skills grammar had aided them with, or beliefs in what skills grammar knowledge aids in:

*I think learning correct grammar has increased my knowledge of English and made me a better writer. Knowing the rules of your language is essential to competently using your language.*
*I think its very important to learn the systems and structures that govern the use of English as a means to facilitate and encourage communication, particularly written communication.*
Of course I make mistakes at times, but when I began learning Spanish in the eighth grade I found that if I imagined forming a sentence in English, I could restructure it in order to learn Spanish.

The beliefs surrounding how good grammar does or doesn’t affect communication is a very interesting point to observe in both open-ended questions of the data. As the above respondent writes, several participants in the first open-ended question #23, had the opinion that knowledge of the “laws” of English language are not so restrictive as they are helpful and/or important to the facilitation of communication, forming 20% of answers, which correlates with the qualitative data from question #24 as well. Based on the overall thoughts that people have about good grammar usage in this question by combining the two categories “Useful Communication Skill” and “Important for Professional and Academic Settings”, 63% of participants’ answers to this question showed a positive orientation to grammar acting as a helpful means for communicating with other people.

The lower percentages of participants who explicitly disagreed with this were 4% in the first question (categories Harmful to Language, 2% and Unnecessary Skill, 2%) and 18% in the second question (categories Not Important, 5%, and Can Be Discriminatory, 13%). In the first question, one participant brought up the writings of Lippi-Green, similar to those mentioned in the literature review, and discouraged the categorization of words and rules into standard and nonstandard categories:
“Language is always changing. All of it is made up. All the words and rules are made up. We shouldn’t get so attached to treating the outside world as an English class. I think it’s pedantic, and I personally don't like it when people correct my grammar outside of academia. I'm very passionate about this topic because one of my parents is an immigrant whose first language is not English. See Rosina Lippi-Green's publication about standard language ideology ...”

A couple of other opinions express that in the long run, participants did not deem grammar very necessary for functions other than academic reading, writing or speaking.

The response below expresses the opinion of some respondents that grammar isn’t exactly a prerequisite to success in any arena while still acknowledging its usefulness in the academic arena:

“I don't think that knowing grammar is necessary for success—understanding grammar makes you a better writer, but I feel that reading a lot gave me a better understanding of grammar, not the other way around.”

This response also ties back to Pinker’s (1995, p. 384) point that language is more of a skill than a learned science, which assumes that grammar is part and parcel of that. Another respondent notes that they could not deem, at least not explicitly, much or any of their academic success a product of grammatical knowledge:

I did not realize until my junior year of high school how unusual my experiences in receiving explicit grammatical instruction were, and though I do believe those experiences make me a stronger academic writer, I resent the idea that they were necessary to my intelligence or
success as a student, and I find it incredibly hard to trust anyone who believes their knowledge of so-called "good" grammar makes them more intelligent than anyone else.

Here, the respondent notes that not only do they feel that their own intelligence cannot be attributed to grammatical knowledge or correctness, but they also don’t trust anyone else who counts grammar as a form of intelligence.

4.3 Qualitative Results on ‘Good Grammar’ Usage

Figure 2.2 displays the general trends in responses to question #24, the second open-ended question. For this question again, only 41 participants chose to respond.

![Figure 2.2 Qualitative Statement Trends for Question 24](image)
Regarding the usage of good grammar, 19% of respondents believed that the use of good grammar helped one seem more intelligent and more educated. Much of this group also stated that in order to be taken seriously, especially in professional settings, one needed to use good grammar in writing or in speech. Twenty-nine percent (29%) of the respondents believed that good grammar is a vital and useful skill to academic writing and any other professional endeavors. Thirteen percent (13%) of the respondents were convinced that the use of good grammar was more discriminatory than it was useful, and that it was not at all necessary for communication. Many argued that good grammar usage seemed futile to them if their point could be made without it. Thirty-four percent (34%) of the respondents had a positive opinion on good grammar usage, highlighting that it was excellent for clear communication. Many reported that they found it to be a helpful skill in reading, writing and speaking, and that overall, knowing grammar was useful to them. Five percent (5%) reported that for them, good grammar was not important or used by them.

In one category of responses to this question, respondents believed that in order to be taken seriously in settings where effective communication is valued, such as professional and academic settings, grammatical knowledge had to be important to them, which directly correlates with the 4.51-point average for the statement “Grammar is useful for everyone, regardless of profession” in the quantitative question set. For question #24, 19% of the respondents said that in some capacity, using or hearing good grammar in their speech or writing, or that of others, was not only desirable but necessary to sound educated and prepared for the task at hand. Several of
the participants' responses were varied but followed the same trend: in certain settings, people who use good grammar are automatically trusted in certain ways:

“Good grammar shows someone's education level and helps me respect them more as a person.”

“If someone in a professional work setting has bad grammar when they speak, I wouldn’t take them as seriously and may question how well they do their job.”

“Having good grammar definitely makes you sound more intelligent, and that opens up lots of opportunities for you. In particular, good grammar gives off the impression that you know what you are talking about and are a credible source.”

Other responses noted the idea that one’s intelligence wasn’t necessarily higher if they knew grammar or spoke with better grammar than their cohorts. The respondents instead used verbs like “seem”, “appear” and “sound” to denote how someone’s intelligence levels came across to others, such as the last quote listed above, and the following quotes:

“You will appear much more educated by following simple grammar rules rather than vernacular English.”

“Using good grammar makes you sound smarter and communicate better”

Whether or not this is an accurate way to judge someone’s intelligence is something this respondent was caught up with exactly:
“I think good grammar makes people more likely to take your speaking and writing seriously. However, I’m split on whether or not this SHOULD be the case. Maybe it’s important to have rules so we can understand one another, or maybe we should let our language vary and change naturally.”

Whether or not this is an accurate way to judge someone’s intelligence is something this respondent was caught up with exactly:

Here lies the evidence of the meeting of boundaries of grammar’s prescriptive standards and descriptive habits that a student faces, as is iterated in (Oaks 2021, p. 2). The answer to this question is still, evidently, a puzzling concept.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph on data for question #23, grammar and communication seem to be directly related in many participant’s opinions. The largest opinion trend in the second open-ended question was that participants reported grammar to be a significant factor in meaningful communication. One participant’s response was careful to include the need to not emphasize grammar too much:

*I think that it helps to create better understanding during communication. When not utilized it can cause confusion as to the meaning of sentences. It shouldn’t be overemphasized but it is important to consider.*

Another participant emphasized that grammar as a skill was more important than math, and justifies why:
I had a bit of trouble deciding whether basic math skills or grammar was more important (they both are valuable skills to have). Ultimately, I decided to go with grammar because, regardless of your job, you will have to be able to effectively communicate with other people. Since clearly expressing yourself is the most necessary in everyday life, grammar is the most important skill.

The 34% of respondents who believed grammar to be a “useful communication skill” correlate directly with the following quantitative data questions:

*Grammar isn’t required for everyday speech, so it isn’t very important for most people to know.*

(1.77 mean score on the Likert scale).

As seen in the above quote, the respondents in this category believed that grammar naturally facilitates clear communication. There were, however, anomalies to this opinion, with participants who believed that good grammar was not necessary to communication and instead encouraged preoccupation with discrimination. These participants’ opinions made up the 13% who believed that grammar could be discriminatory to language users and falls in correlation with the quantitative analysis statement, “Good grammar isn’t necessary to communicate.” (2.88 mean on the Likert scale). One participant acknowledged the useful communication aspect of grammar, but still expressed the discriminatory aspect in full:

“I think the idea of “good grammar” just leads to discrimination on dialect. When I say “good grammar,” I mean standardized grammar, which is what I assume this survey is asking about. When you create a standardized grammar and try to enforce it as the “proper” form of the language, you tilt the societal playing field away from those whose native dialect deviates from
the standardized form of the language ... Overall I think standardizing grammar can be useful for providing a universal mode of communication for speakers of a certain language, but it should not be upheld as something that is more “proper” than the grammar of local dialects.”

Another participant acknowledged the existence of ulterior motives, or the ‘created demand’ for prescriptive grammar that exists for multiple reasons in the world, as Lippi-Green talks about in *English with an Accent*. And as is mentioned in the literature review (Lippi-Green, p. 59). They speak candidly on this matter:

*From a linguistic perspective, what counts as “good” grammar (from a prescriptive perspective) is purely ideological, rather than fact ... Such ideologies are designed to serve the interests of the powerful and privileged, and so we as language-users must be intentional in critically examining how and why we advance them, if and when we choose to do so.*

The last high percentage category is the group of respondents that believed that grammar was most important to academic and professional settings. This is constituted by 29% of respondents’ answers. There is also a direct correlation between this trend and the statements,

“*Grammar is for scholars, nerds and English majors, not me.*” (1.41 mean on Likert scale), and “*No one cares if I make grammatical errors, in school or otherwise.*” (1.71 mean on the Likert scale). Several respondents were vocal about why grammar was important in these settings.

Many believed in conjunction with this, however, that it was not necessary for communication:

“*Grammar is contextual.*”
“While good grammar is often necessary for good writing, it is NOT necessary for every day speech.”

“*I believe that language’s main function is for communication. Therefore, if one can convey their thoughts sufficiently without the use of proper grammar, than correct grammar is not necessary. However, in professional settings, good grammar provides a beneficial structure for conveying complex ideas.*”

Many of the statements in this category fall in direct correlation with the mean answer on the Likert scale for quantitative analysis statement “*When I hear the term grammar in everyday speech, I get annoyed*”, which had a 2.51 mean on the Likert scale.

The trend to either believe that grammar facilitated communication of all kinds or that it only clarified communication in academic or professional contexts was fairly consistent. There were no overlapping opinions, and it correlates directly also with the quantitative statement “Good grammar isn’t necessary to communicate”, which has a Likert scale mean of 2.88, showing mixed opinions on the statement.
Chapter 5. Discussion

This study addressed a gap in the literature regarding how native English-speaking students feel towards their own language’s grammar by investigating their opinions regarding grammar as well as their experiences learning it. The limitations of this study include the lack of demographic knowledge of the participants other than their occupation as a student, as well as the sample size of 78 participants total. The survey was meant to analyze students' opinions on English grammar and see how they correlate with the literature that is already written on the subject. The open-ended questions were instructive for knowing people’s thoughts about grammar that could not be articulated in the quantitative analysis. The discussion of these results focuses on three major findings with a few limitations.

5.1 Grammar for Communication

Firstly, the results are indicative that students felt that grammar was a helpful means for several communication forms. Particularly, students felt more confident in their writing abilities in school or professional settings when they consciously used good grammar; contradicting several ideas in the literature review that propose that grammar is an error-based means of learning the English language, especially when learning writing. Sixty-three percent (63%), (25 participants) answering the second question thought that grammar aided them in their attempts at communication and made their attempts more effective, which contradicts the opinions of some authorities on education in the United States, who see grammar as unimportant in comparison with the writing skills needed to pass the SAT (Kolln & Hancock, 2005, p. 24). This particular
point in Kolln and Hancock’s (2005) study correlates with the data relating to student’s limited experience and the belief that it is important to learn, even if they were not given the chance to learn it fully. This brings us to the second major finding.

5.2 Grammar in Education

A great portion of students had interesting thoughts about their experience with grammar in education, which also contradicts some of the literature on the subject. These results also indicate that the teaching of grammar in schools was not too-error driven for progress in student’s learning, especially in reading and writing. While the NCTE (National Council, 1985) ruled grammar to be “harmful to writing” and discouraged its public instruction, students reported that grammar helped them excel at writing as well as feel like they could communicate more effectively overall in school. This belief of grammar being harmful to writing is also directly contradicted by the quantitative data in the study, which shows a large portion of students who answered positively when asked if using grammar helped them get better grades.

Another finding worth noting is that despite the discouragement of teaching of grammar in public schools, the results indicate that it is fairly prevalent. In the first open-ended question regarding student's experiences learning grammar, 67% of the overall respondents acknowledged that they had an explicit learning experience with grammar, which confirms the theory in Kolln and Hancock (2005) work; while teachers are discouraged to teach grammar, they are suspected to be doing so anyway “behind closed doors” (Kolln & Hancock, 2005, p. 19). Participants said that they had an explicit instruction in the three categories “Not Enough Focus”, “Limited
Experience” and “Beneficial” in the first open-ended question. Seventeen percent (17%) of the participants who answered this question also did not feel as if there was enough instruction in younger years, indicating a dislike for the integrative approach, which was criticized very early on by the Latin scholar T.W. Melluish (1944, p. 62). Participants indicated that they specifically thought that it was “important” to teach grammar explicitly in younger years.

5.3 Grammar in the Workforce

Students also believed that regardless of profession, grammar is a significant skill, which corresponds to the belief of some researchers that writing abilities are important to all students looking for a job in all professions. (Geiser & Studley, 2001; Powell, 2009, as cited in Crossley et al., 2014).

A small number of participants in each question argued that grammar, namely prescriptive grammar, was an agent of discrimination and an unnecessary hindrance in our ability to speak without a grammar manual. Sixteen percent (16%) of the responses to the first question and 13% of the responses from the second question sided most with the idea that Robert Hall first put forth: that speakers don’t make grammatical mistakes when they know grammar implicitly (Hall, 1960, as cited in Straaijer, 2015). The vast majority of responses, however, argued that grammar was useful for a few different reasons. Participants’ opinions indicate that grammar can be discriminatory, and this discrimination is a way of yielding desired results, such as being taken seriously by people, or catching the eye of a future employer and making a better impression on them than if one had been less grammar conscious.
5.4 Limitations

This study has two major limitations. The first limitation is size (78 participants). This smaller sample size, however, does provide some insight into student’s opinions as it includes qualitative data. The second limitation is the lack of demographic information given for the participants, especially the level of education (i.e., undergraduate versus graduate students). However, most of the previous literature on this subject does not specify the demographics of their participants, either.
Chapter 6. Conclusion

This research aimed to identify the attitudes that college students possess towards English grammar based on their day-to-day and academic experiences. Using quantitative and qualitative analyses of student attitudes towards grammar, it can be concluded that students have mixed attitudes towards grammar in their lives, but that the majority of students view grammar as a positive thing. The results suggest that students typically find grammar to be useful for communication, whether in formal or informal settings. The results also indicate that students believe that grammar should be more heavily emphasized in early school years, and if it had been emphasized in their education, it was sporadic and/or unexpected rather than consistent.

6.1 Reflection

This study was instructive to my research question as it actively sought to find out the attitudes of students towards English grammar. The mixed-methods survey was very useful for this research question, as it looked at the problem both qualitatively and quantitatively. The quantitative analysis was insightful to student’s attitudes because it measured their reactions to statements made about English grammar. The qualitative analysis demonstrated that student’s different backgrounds and experiences heavily influenced their opinions and attitudes towards English grammar. While the quantitative part of the analysis allowed this study to get a general statistical understanding of attitudes towards grammar, the open-ended questions helped expound on the previous generalizations and helped explain where those statistics came from.
6.2 Significance of Limitations

The limitations of this study were significant and insightful to my research question because each limitation had a positive side. The sample size was not very large, but there were enough respondents for some representation of attitudes in the quantitative analysis. The sample size was also significant to the qualitative study because plenty of responses correlated with trends, but not too many to analyze accurately. Over 100 respondents would have been more difficult not to overgeneralize each person’s answer and mis-analyze information.

6.3 Future study

Based on the results of this study, education in the United States should perhaps include more explicit grammar teaching that is consistent in how it is taught, and in what year of school. While these results also suggest that grammar can be ideologically harmful if used to discriminate, they also conclude that if taught and used properly, grammatical skills and accuracy are important to clear communication, at least in writing, and that we should use and teach these skills.

Future research should view this study as a jumping-off point for research on L1 grammar from a sociolinguistic perspective. To better understand the implications of these results, future research should focus on analyzing a few different ideas, to start with. The research problem can continue to be studied two ways: (1) where do attitudes begin and how can they be influenced positively? and (2) where do they play a role in people’s lives that greatly affects them? Future researchers could start with discovering the most helpful and healthy ways
to introduce grammar in the classroom, the ideologies behind teaching standard versus nonstandard language grammar in school, or perhaps a study that moves out of the student realm and into the workforce, such as surveying how important grammatical skills are to employers and employees alike.

Though there is much to be explored in this topic of research, this thesis is a first step into analyzing how people consciously comprehend the grammar of their first language and why it is important to learn how they do this. While the literature extensively covers prescriptive and descriptive language and grammar, as well as how education has decided to include grammar in the curricula, it lacks in the sociolinguistic aspect that analyzes how people’s attitudes can affect linguistic processes. This study is just the beginning of many future studies that would seek to explore the boundary of what history, ideology, and education have taught us about language in the past, and what we’ve come to think about it today. There is a promising outlook for future research in this area for the sake of a mindful workforce, a more comprehensive education system, and, of course, a better chance at communicating clearly with each other.
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### Appendix A

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<th></th>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>If asked to define grammar, I wouldn’t know what to say.</td>
<td>32.06%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41.03%</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8.97%</td>
<td>12.62%</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>I don’t think good grammar is very useful.</td>
<td>71.79%</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>21.79%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1.28%</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Good grammar isn’t necessary to communicate.</td>
<td>25.97%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22.08%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7.79%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Good grammar is necessary for writing, but it is not necessary for everyday speech.</td>
<td>12.82%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>28.21%</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12.82%</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>When I try to write with good grammar, I get better grades.</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7.79%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>When I try to write with good grammar, my point is made more effectively.</td>
<td>1.28%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5.13%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>No one cares if I make grammatical errors. In school or otherwise.</td>
<td>44.87%</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>44.87%</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>5.13%</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Grammar isn’t required for everyday speech, so it’s not very important for most people to know.</td>
<td>48.72%</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>34.62%</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>8.97%</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>In school, I had a teacher explicitly explain grammatical rules of my own language (NOT in foreign language class).</td>
<td>1.28%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.13%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.13%</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>When I hear the term ‘grammar’ in an academic context, I get nervous.</td>
<td>41.03%</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32.05%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8.97%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>When I hear the term ‘grammar’ in everyday speech, I get annoyed.</td>
<td>24.39%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30.77%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17.95%</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I believe that knowing your own language’s grammar improves your ability to learn a second language.</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.13%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11.54%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I believe that to learn a second language, you must know the grammar of your own language first.</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19.23%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20.51%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Grammar is for scholars, nerds, and English majors, not me.</td>
<td>71.79%</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>21.79%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Grammar is useful for everyone, regardless of profession.</td>
<td>1.28%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.13%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Grammar is a thing that has caused me endless confusion my whole life.</td>
<td>47.44%</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>28.21%</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12.82%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Math is more important to know than grammar.</td>
<td>24.39%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30.77%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28.21%</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>I find a use for grammar in everyday life.</td>
<td>1.28%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.41%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.26%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Learning my own language’s grammar has made me a better reader.</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6.41%</td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Learning my own language’s grammar has made me a better writer.</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
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<td>2.56%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>When I think of grammar, I think of rules, systems, and structures.</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5.13%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.13%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>I would rather solve an algebra equation than diagram a sentence.</td>
<td>24.36%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11.54%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15.38%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Showing rows 1 - 22 of 22
Appendix B

Q23 - Do you have any thoughts about your experience learning grammar?

Grammar isn't focused on enough in school, and if I had more of a focus on grammar in school it would've helped me learn a second language.

I was lucky to learn the specific rules of grammar—other people I know weren't taught this in school. I enjoy learning and using good grammar because I like making everything systematic and organized.

As both a French and Latin student in high school, I found that knowing English grammar made my experience 100x easier. When in the classroom, I noticed that the students who struggled with the languages often did not understand English grammar which led to them being very confused.

I've always liked grammar, but I've also grown up loving to read. However, it is also very iffy when it comes to learning grammar through reading because not all books utilize good prescriptive grammar. I remember reading a book and assuming it utilized good grammar (both my parents are Korean, so I didn't really know what "good" grammar was), but it actually didn't. The sentence structures were what most English teachers would call "bad" grammar. If grammar is taught, it must be taught explicitly, because that's the only way I got it.

I had one great English teacher my junior year of high school that explained grammar rules to us. Before then, I can't remember the last time a teacher reviewed grammar rules.

I had an amazing English teacher who, to this day, is the sole reason that I made a good score on the English section of the ACT. It wasn't too hard, but I can definitely see how it can be confusing (especially if it is your second language).

As I am dyslexic, I have had a unique experience with grammar and learning its application. Grammar allowed me to break a sentence down when its meaning seemed all but foreign to me. I found its systematic practices essential in any type of analytical process throughout my entire education.

I had a grammar class at my private school from elementary through middle school, but I know that is not the norm. I have appreciated those lessons and it has made me a better writer and student

Middle school

I think grammar could've been taught more in younger grades
No

In elementary school, I had a good grammar teacher who gave me a good foundation for my grammar skills. In my experience learning Japanese, I feel like this knowledge has aided my grasp of the language.

I had read A LOT as a kid, so my experience with learning grammar was less classroom-oriented and more learn-from-exposure. I didn’t hate learning grammar in class though.

I did not realize until my junior year of high school how unusual my experiences in receiving explicit grammatical instruction were, and though I do believe those experiences make me a stronger academic writer, I resent the idea that they were necessary to my intelligence or success as a student, and I find it incredibly hard to trust anyone who believes their knowledge of so-called "good" grammar makes them more intelligent than anyone else.

None.

My experience with grammar is complicated. I would say that it has made me a better writer overtime. It has given me a lot of headaches particularly when I do not have time to proofread. It is a useful skill particularly for a college student though.

Grammar is something that I know intrinsically. It is hard to explain the rules of grammar, and I don’t know the vocabulary to describe it, but I know good grammar when I hear it.

I think that giving importance to grammar at younger ages is important. I personally started paying attention at an early age, and that has made me a better writer and reader.

I think they should put more of an emphasis on teaching grammar.

No.

It was very beneficial to me.

I think learning correct grammar has increased my knowledge of English and made me a better writer. Knowing the rules of your language is essential to competently using your language.

Grammar makes sense to me and I know how to use grammar rules but I do not understand the “why” behind those rules. For example, I can not diagram a sentence but I can tell if it is correct or not.
Language is always changing. All of it is made up. All the words and rules are made up. We shouldn't get so attached to treating the outside world as an English class. I think it's pedantic, and I personally don't like it when people correct my grammar outside of academia. I'm very passionate about this topic because one of my parents is an immigrant whose first language is not English. See Rosina Lippi-Green's publication about standard language ideology: "a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class."

I am and have always been better at learning grammar and writing skills than I am at learning math. Grammar has always been something that comes naturally to me and has always made sense. It is a major part of how I speak and write today and I pay great attention to it.

Mostly associate it with grammar I've learned for French

I was drilled grammar rules from elementary school until sixth grade before switching to more of a focus on literature. The constant practice (and songs) helped me remember all the structures. However, I feel like since we didn't really review grammar past sixth grade (even including my college classes) that many people have forgotten how to construct/deconstruct a sentence.

Learning a foreign language helped me understand English grammar a lot more than many of my English classes did. Knowing the English grammar helped me learn the foreign language better, but I learned the most about English grammar in my foreign language classes. I would also say that reading lots of books helped me learn grammar, just by seeing how something was supposed to be arranged. Knowing that grammar has helped me understand older and more complicated texts.

I don't think that knowing grammar is necessary for success—understanding grammar makes you a better writer, but I feel that reading a lot gave me a better understanding of grammar, not the other way around. There has never been an instance where I've needed to know how to diagram a sentence outside of sixth grade English class, so while I believe understanding grammar is important, I don't think memorizing parts of speech has much of a practical application.

I think that grammar needs to be more heavily taught in American schools. Many students do not have a solid understanding of the mechanics of the English language. If they do not learn at school or at home, they will not develop their skills for the workforce.

I have always had wonderful english teachers during my time in public school. Of course I make mistakes at times, but when i began learning spanish in the eight grade I found that if I imagined forming a sentence in english, I could restructure it in order to learn spanish.

No.
I enjoyed learning grammar rules because it was taught to me in an enjoyable way with plenty of room for questions, not shame or blame.

I think that simple grammar rules that we were taught in grade school have seemed to slip my mind at times. For example, it isn't correct to end your sentence with a preposition and I forget that most of the time. There are more simple, little rules I often forget just because they are not re-introduced to me. I should already have them engraved in my brain.

I think the way it is taught in schools can be discouraging to students because, in my experience, it easy for it to become dry and boring. However, I think its very important to learn the systems and structures that govern the use of English as a means to facilitate and encourage communication, particularly written communication.

I'm naturally skilled at it, as in I am a great speaker, reader, and writer. It's second nature to me. That being said, I cannot recall specifics about it, such as what word parts mean and other grammatical terms for teaching. I think knowing those terms is useful when first learning, but once one becomes skilled at it, it is only necessary to practice in a way that is more natural instead of academic at that point - if that makes sense.

Good grammar is important

I've found that “learning” grammar is, in all actuality, much harder than performing it. We don’t often know the rules we are applying when we speak or write, but instead we just unconsciously perform them.

It’s inconsistent from year to year in a classroom setting, both in requirements and instruction.

Grammar are fun!
Q24 - What are your thoughts regarding the use of good grammar?

“Good” grammar is usually just a “standard” grammar. Good grammar is not always (or ever) necessary to communicate.

I don't use good grammar

While good grammar is often necessary for good writing, especially academic writing, it is NOT essential in everyday speech. People decide what the language is, not academics, and so what is considered “bad grammar” in everyday speech is just as valid as what is traditionally taught as good grammar.

Using good grammar makes you sound smarter and communicate better

Using good grammar is important to me. For some reason my brain immediately notices incorrect grammar, even though I know a lot of people do not value it the same way I do. It is just something that I notice pretty consistently.

The use of good grammar is useful in school and in a professional setting because it helps you sound like you know what you're talking about. However, it is not necessarily an indicator of someone's expertise, and good grammar is not necessary for communication.

So long as the meaning of thought is understood, I don’t mind some minor incorrect grammar

It's annoying to learn but worth it.

It's extremely useful.

It's best to use, but people who don't should not be looked down upon

It makes communication much more easily portrayed among speakers, readers, and writers; however, I do not believe having the best grammar is necessary in getting the message apart. Additionally, you cannot expect people who do not speak the native language to know the grammar of said language, but that does not make that person's speech less intelligent or sophisticated. Determining somebody's grammar and language skills as an indicator of intelligence is closed-minded and often exclusive in my opinion.
It is vital to succeed in life

It is important to use good grammar.

It is important in writing, but it is not important in everyday speech.

If you don't use it you can sound stupid, ignorant, and/or uneducated.

I'm tired of people overly criticizing country talk, broken English, and African-American vernacular. The whole point of language is to communicate. If someone can communicate and make their thoughts clear, it does not really matter if they are speaking (not writing!) standard/best English, especially if English is not their first language. I'm tired of grammar being used as a tool to discriminate. People see AAVE as "ghetto" and country-speak as "redneck." People see speakers of broken English as stupid, despite the fact that those people probably know thousands more words in another language plus some English words. In this world, someone's dialect and accent will always affect how they are perceived, and I think that's silly. I do not believe that "bad" English or bad grammar invalidates an argument or provides a basis for denying someone a job that they can perform. Maybe speakers with bad grammar did not have the same educational opportunities, and that's simply what they learned in the home. As we know, the reason for people speaking AAVE is slavery and then Jim Crow. I don't think we can fault them for that, especially if they can get their points across.

I think the idea of "good grammar" just leads to discrimination based on dialect. When I say "good grammar," I mean standardized grammar, which is what I assume this survey is asking about. When you create a standardized grammar and try to enforce it as the "proper" form of the language, you tilt the societal playing field away from those whose native dialect deviates from the standardized form of the language. For example, Americans who speak English with a southern accent may be perceived as uneducated or lower-class due to what is viewed as the use of "incorrect" grammar (i.e. use of double negatives, words like "ain't"). However, in reality, speakers of non-standard dialects (like those used in southern states) speak with perfectly correct grammar - it's just the grammar that obeys the rules of their dialect and not the arbitrarily-decided standardized grammar. Overall I think standardizing grammar can be useful for providing a universal mode of communication for speakers of a certain language, but it should not be upheld as something that is more "proper" than the grammar of local dialects.

I think the different dialects and variations of English have some different grammatical rules at times and that's okay, but in written English, I think following the grammar of standard English is important because you need some sort of standardization so everybody, regardless of dialect, can understand.
I think that using correct grammar strengthens professional and academic writing as well as in your everyday speech. You will appear much more educated by following simple grammar rules rather than vernacular English.

I think that it is important only in an academic or professional context

I think that it helps to create better understanding during communication. When not utilized it can cause confusion as to the meaning of sentences. It shouldn’t be overemphasized but it is important to consider.

I think it’s important

I think it’s very important in school and in life. If someone in a professional work setting has bad grammar when they speak, I wouldn’t take them as seriously and may question how well they do their job.

I think it is important to use good grammar for the workforce and so that you can be easily understood in everyday speech.

I think good grammar makes people more likely to take your speaking and writing seriously. However, I'm split on whether or not this SHOULD be the case. Maybe it's important to have rules so we can understand one another, or maybe we should let our language vary and change naturally.

I think good grammar is essential to being successful today. It makes you appear to be smarter than those with bad grammar

I think good grammar is a very important tool that can help a person get their point across, and I do see the value in speaking/writing with correct grammar. However, I believe that some scholars are too reluctant to let grammar evolve as it historically does.

I think being able to use good grammar is necessary. Not so much for everyday conversations, but for more formal settings: interviews, business meetings, discussions, etc. Having the knowledge of good grammar is necessary, but it doesn't always need to be used.

I love english, and I volunteered at the writing at the community college I attended a few years ago. Most of the people I saw came in for grammar and mechanics. I found most individuals had issues trying to form a simple paragraph. So yes, good grammar and basic writing are necessary in the everyday world.

I had a bit of trouble deciding whether basic math skills or grammar was more important (they both are valuable skills to have). Ultimately, I decided to go with grammar because, regardless of your job, you will have to be able to effectively communicate with other people. Since clearly expressing yourself is the most necessary in everyday life, grammar is the most important skill.
I believe the use of good grammar is very important in an academic setting and I always try to use good grammar. It is annoying when my grammar is corrected in a casual setting or on a text message.

I believe that language’s main function is for communication. Therefore, if one can convey their thoughts sufficiently without the use of proper grammar, than correct grammar is not necessary. However, in professional settings, good grammar provides a beneficial structure for conveying complex ideas.

I believe that good grammar only matters in an academic context. If one is speaking with their friends / family, it doesn't matter if they use good grammar.

Having good grammar definitely makes you sound more intelligent, and that opens up lots of opportunities for you. In particular, good grammar gives off the impression that you know what you are talking about and are a credible source. It also facilitates communication because a misplaced phrase or comma can change the meaning of a sentence.

Grammar takes on the responsibility of creating not only structure, but also carrying tone. Any type of writing, from a blog to a formal essay, could be misinterpreted for the core meaning it is trying to communicate. Good grammar shows thoughtfulness and a clearer intention from the writer.

Grammar should still be a focus in school, along with reading and writing skills, but students and children should not be shamed for using bad grammar. It can become classist and counterproductive to shame people for theirs.

Grammar is contextual.

Good grammar shows someone’s education level and helps me respect them more as a person.

Good grammar and simple easy to understand writing is extremely useful. Complexity and misunderstanding can be detrimental when a person is trying to explain or illustrate a concept.

From a linguistic perspective, what counts as “good” grammar (from a prescriptive perspective) is purely ideological, rather than fact. The idea that someone who doesn't end their sentences with a preposition is somehow a better English speaker than someone who does is a societal construction, as are every other language ideology an individual may hold. Such ideologies are designed to serve the interests of the powerful and privileged, and so we as language-users must be intentional in critically examining how and why we advance them, if and when we choose to do so.

By using correct grammar, academic papers and/or stories flow more easily.