

The Scaffolding of Monuments: Teaching English Grammar

by Tammy Peters

Recently my third graders at Mars Hill Academy shared with an Open House audience how to analyze a sentence. First we chanted the “Eight Parts of Speech,” followed by a rousing chorus defining adjectives and adverbs. We recited 49 prepositions. The viewers smiled approvingly. Then the real fun began. In unison, we identified the principal elements

fell short of our expectations. We began to search for a better way.

Our search led us to Thomas W. Harvey. This 19th century grammarian incorporated the correct standard and usage within his lessons by building on concepts. He started with the principal elements and slowly added subordinate elements (adverbs and adjectives). Introducing his

declarative; (why?). **Scholars** is the *subject*; (why?): **learn** is the *predicate*; (why?). “Learn” is modified by **lessons**, an *objective element*.²

Using what we gained from Harvey’s *Grammar*, we began to design our own program with our own grammar definitions and analysis. We use three main components to frame our lessons: grammar terminology, choral analysis, and diagramming.

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and all the subordinate elements in a sentence. I drew the modifier lines on a whiteboard while the class explained the relationships between the words. At the end, we diagrammed the sentence to show a visual representation of the internal structure. The audience stared in disbelief. Hands slowly lifted in the air. “How did you ever discover this method?” “Why teach English grammar in this manner?”

Nine years ago, we as a young classical Christian school began to wrestle with how to teach English grammar using the Socratic method of questioning. At that time, our program had the students identify parts of a sentence through parsing. But as the children progressed up the academic ladder, we found that they never really understood the relationships of words within the sentence. There seemed to be a disconnect between identifying all its parts and understanding why a sentence behaved as it did. It

readers to a concept, he instructed them to identify an element within a sentence, and then directed them to explain why it behaved as it did. For example:

“Iron is heavy.”

“This is a *sentence*; it is a group of words making complete sense: *declarative*; it states a fact. **Iron** is the *subject*; it is that of which something is affirmed: **heavy** is the *predicate*; it is that which is affirmed of the subject; **is** is the copula; it joins the predicate to the subject.”¹

Harvey built on existing knowledge. In the second example, he provides only the new analysis for the reader to learn or memorize while the explanations of previous lessons need to be recited by memory.

“Scholars learn lessons.”

“This is a *sentence*; (why?):

Grammar terminology

To learn the language of grammar, we sing or chant the definitions. Singing definitions provides the memory pegs of learning. This reinforces our classical method of teaching younger children. First, we focus on the building blocks of our language, the eight parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, interjections). Second, we focus on the mortar to create complete thoughts, the principal elements (subject and predicates) and the subordinate elements (modifiers, phrases, and clauses). We use “Grammar School Grammar,” a music CD.³

Choral analysis

To learn the structure of a sentence, we analyze as a whole class. As with Harvey, we analyze a sentence element by element, though we added a marking system to identify each part while we analyze. For example:

S lv PA

Iron is heavy.

This sentence is about *iron*. So, *iron* is the **subject** (S) because it

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is what the sentence is about. This sentence tells us that iron is *heavy*. So, *heavy* is the **predicate** because it is what the sentence tells us about iron. It is a **predicate adjective** (PA) because it tells a quality of the subject. *Is* is the **linking verb** because it joins the subject to the predicate.

Once the students understand simple sentences identifying the subject and the predicates (predicate verb, predicate nominative, predicate adjectives) plus the prepositional phrases, they are ready to handle complex sentences with clauses (relative clauses, adverbial clauses, noun clauses).

Diagramming

To learn the relationship of principal elements with the subordinate elements, we use the Reed and Kellogg method of diagramming.⁴ Its main goal is to visualize the relationship of subordinate elements to principal elements.

So why teach English grammar in this way? It reinforces Dorothy Sayers' view of the grammar stage (ages 9-11) as being focused on language. Children at this age possess a God-given ability to memorize large amounts of materials, which then become the scaffolding for building the dialectic (ages 12-14) and rhetoric (ages 14-16) stages that follow. The singing of grammar definitions and choral analysis provide the framework where further learning takes place.

At the close of our Open House, I related a story of a few years ago when my husband and I took our kids to Washington, D.C., to see the sites. I personally wanted to visit the Washington Monument. This marble sentinel lays claim to being the largest

masonry building in the world, and I couldn't wait to see it. Yet alas, the monument wore a shroud of scaffolding, which surrounded the grand masterpiece and obscured it. Though impressive, it wasn't what I desired to see.

I warned the audience of the danger of focusing on the scaffolding and missing its reason for being there. While visitors are often impressed by our students' ability to analyze sentences, I explained that its purpose is twofold: (1) to provide the structure to better understand their own language, and (2) to provide the wherewithal to construct monuments of thought through their writing and speaking. Each stage of learning reinforces and shapes the next. When these grammar years are successful, its lasting reward is our children's ability to communicate about God's world and His truth using His precious gift of language.

Note: For more information about the "Grammar School Grammar" music CD used at MHA contact Tammy Peters at htpeters@fuse.net or (513) 777-1167.

ENDNOTES

1. Thomas W. Harvey, *Harvey's Elementary Grammar and Composition* (New York: American Book Company, 1880), 21.
2. *Harvey*, 26.
3. Tammy Peters, *Grammar School Grammar*, 2004. (Music CD)
4. Alonzo Reed and Brainerd Kellogg, *Graded Lessons in English: An Elementary English Grammar* (New York: Effingham Maynard & Co., 1890).

Memorization...

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Conclusion

The data results show a very high percentage of retention (70%) from songs learned during the class as compared to only 40% from recitations. Students also retained 56% from chants. So where should parents and educators spend much of their time? Teach factual information in songs, chants, and jingles throughout the elementary years!

The survey revealed clearly that elementary aged students, especially during second through fifth grades, benefit from a memory class and retain much of the information presented. At ECCS we will continue our memory class and use these times, and research-proven methodologies to teach with the grain of our students.

(This article contains excerpts from Mrs. McKee's research. You may request a copy of the paper in its entirety, including graphs and other references, by e-mail at pammckee@aol.com.)

ENDNOTES

1. Hermann Ebbinghaus, *Memory: A Contribution to Experimental Psychology* (New York: Dover, 1964).
2. Douglas Wilson, *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning: An Approach to Distinctively Christian Education* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 14.
3. Dorothy Sayers, "The Lost Tools of Learning" (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1990).
4. Wilson, 1991, 155.