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Grammar Instructional Strategies and Application

An Action Research Report

By

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Grammar Instructional Strategies and Application

Submitted on (August, 2016)

in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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Abstract

The purpose of this action research study was to determine the effects of sentence combining strategies and practice on the understanding of grammatical rules concerning conjunctions and the efficacy and clarity of student writing. The study took place in two middle school classes during a five-week timeline. A single sixth grade class of 29 students and a single seventh grade class of 29 students participated in the study. Teaching strategies included the use of pre-assessments, checkpoints, classroom practice, and post-assessments that covered conjunction identification, application, and the ability to distinguish between a correct and incorrect clause and idea combinations. Informal data was also collected through teacher observations and teacher-student conversations. Results were inconclusive whether teaching sentence combining strategies is more effective at increasing student understanding of conjunction rules; however, the practice of sentence combining did positively impact the quality and clarity of student writing. This research implies that clear and concise writing requires high quality examples and continuous student practice.

Keywords: conjunctions, sentence combining, student writing, grammar in context, grammar in isolation

Grammar: some love it; others loathe its very sound, like fingernails on a chalk board. Sadly, even more are uncertain as to what "grammar" is. This notion speaks to educators as much as the students. Students have endured decades of grammar books, countless exercises, and drawn out teacher-directed lectures that break down every component of a sentence. Teachers charged to enforce rules they often don't know and the professionals always seem to break. Traditional approaches seem to have stood the test of time. Each new generation of English teachers, by and large, adopting similar practices to the previous generation of teachers. These time-honored methods have stuck because they are neat and orderly, easily testable, and for far too many teachers, symbolizes power and control we hold over students (Swan, 2002). Some teachers challenged the norm and began exploring new strategies and reasons for teaching grammar. Many educators are pushing away from demonstratively ineffective methods and are finding new ways to make grammar relevant, interesting, and directly applicable to writing (Berger, 2006; Kousar, 2010; Louis, 2016; Paesani, 2005). They are moving away from teaching grammar because it is there, and moving toward grammar instruction that emphasizes the ability to understand and be understood with greater detail and clarity.

This study aims to identify instructional strategies that build knowledge and understanding of the American-English language, as well as improving written and verbal communication skills. We sought to explore the core of educators' intentions and desires for their students when considering how we teach grammar. Which portions of grammar are most critical for students to know begins with the simple question: Why is grammar taught? Ultimately, the objective is to develop an action research that explores instructional strategies that "enable students to use their voice more effectively" (Berger, 2006, p. 58) and improves overall grammar retention and use in middle grades. We specifically chose a method that focused on sentence combining while practicing the skills with student created writing and

content from our reading curriculum. Integrating grammar into the current content as a means for more efficient and complete communication of understanding was paramount to the study. We strove to eliminate any isolated grammar activities that didn't stand within student work or what they read for our classes in their respective grade levels.

Our research took place at a public school, in a suburb outside of Minneapolis. The research focused on the effects of utilizing sentence combining strategies to build grammatical knowledge and improve expression in sixth and seventh-grade level Language Arts students. Sentence combining utilizes the simple sentences to instruct beginning writers how to develop more varied and complex sentences (Saddler, 2005). According to NWEA scores from Spring 2015, the average sixth grader in the surveyed school reads beyond an eleventh grade level (Minnetonka School District, 2015). Seventh graders were not tested, as the NWEA Reading data was no longer useful. The student body performs very well on average, and their reading and writing abilities are stronger on average. The overall student mindset is one of strong achievement and the school's grading policies and culture reinforces a more traditional task-oriented grading system. Our challenge was presenting new methods to students who have adapted well to the norms of "give me something to do, and I will usually do it" mentality to being more open to practicing and utilizing skills for the sake of self betterment, rather than merely fulfilling an objective. "...Teaching grammar over the past 50 years is one of consternation, debate, and dissent" (Myhill and Watson, 2014, p.41) and that approach has echoed in our halls. Our middle school, Language Arts department, has vacillated on how best to approach grammar, culminating in a situation with teachers providing varying levels of grammar instruction and inconsistent content at their respective grade levels.

Our challenge thus emerged. We wanted to explore how effective integrated approaches to grammar were and be able to share this data with the rest of our Language Arts staff to drive conversation towards a more vertically aligned and cohesive system of instruction across all

three grades. If nothing more, we wanted to explore the less teacher-directed approaches to grammar we were accustomed to and determine if we could finally put an end to the never-ending cycle of ineffective grammar instruction.

In reading the literature, some researchers recognize a resurgence in the traditional rules-based systems that most people, including teachers, grew up learning (Kousar, 2010; Weaver, McNally, & Moerman, 2001). This review will analyze research completed by scholars, determining areas of agreement and also areas of difference. Weaver et al. (2001) further challenges what educators label grammar as, with a push to see beyond typical conventions and parts of speech. Developing communication skills in practical and meaningful ways are major factors contributing to students' ability to communicate effectively (Myhill & Watson, 2014; Berger, 2006; Dunn & Lindblom, 2003). Sentence combining uses the skills students currently possess and builds upon that foundation. Many developing student writers often write short, simple sentences such as:

My cat is nice.

My cat is cuddly.

Sentence combining helps students see the connection between the information contained within the sentences, and move towards removing the unnecessary repetitions and putting connected details together (Saddler, 2005). With this in mind, an improved version of the example sentence would be:

My cat is nice and cuddly.

These challenges and newly sprouted ideas lead us to wonder how our students would respond to grammatical practice that focuses on writing and rule application rather than rule accumulation. To what extent will integrated grammatical instruction and sentence combining lead to greater understanding and retention of grammatical knowledge and increased efficiency in communication?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Needs of Grammar Instruction

The methods and strategies for teaching grammar have swung far and wide throughout our educational history, but study after study has shown that regardless of the method, or ferocity with which the topic was taught, there has been little to no significant difference in achievement (Graham & Perin, 2007; Graham, Mckeown, Kiuvara, & Harris, 2012; Hillocks, 1984; Zuidema & Fink, 2012). The only real gains made were increasing the learners' distaste for grammar (Cleary, 2014). To the contrary, Ho and Binh (2014) researched rote, knowledge-based instruction versus grammar taught in the context of communication, finding moderate gains in two seventh grade classes instructed in context, but discovered the largest difference was present in students' increasingly positive attitude about grammar. Louis (2016) also saw moderate gains in her students' abilities and contributes the results to the innovative and non-traditional activities provided for learning and practice (p. 34) while Quible (2008) pitted traditional, rules-based instruction against an alternative strategy based method and also found the strategies-based students to perform marginally better than their peers. Though these results show promise, even studies conducted back in the 70's, such as the Elley, Barham, Lamb, and Wylie (1979) study of three different methods of grammar instruction over a more linear timeline and discovered no significant differences in the quality and content of students' writing ability in New Zealand. This study produced three very different approaches: a typical English course, a reading-writing combination course, and a transformational grammar course looking at grammar's influence on language use into a long-term analysis of each course's effects on writing.

Regardless of the conflicting data, teaching grammar is essential. Berger (2006) explains the indispensability of teaching grammar in producing robust and confident writers and Louis (2016) echoes that fact, highlighting that college entrance exams focus heavily on grammar

knowledge. Before proposing a field notebook and mentor texts style of grammar instruction, Zuidema and Fink (2012) acknowledged many students' needs "as composers of everything from academic papers to YouTube videos, social text messages, workplace emails, and tweets calling for civic change, young writers benefit from having a more conscious command of their words" (p. 63). Such a command seems to be diminishing as found in a number of studies and surveys from the higher academic and business worlds including increasing complaints from college professors and future employers of the lack of capable writers they receive (Bullard & Anderson, 2014; Quible, 2008). These sentiments and findings pushed many teachers to bring grammar back to the forefront.

The Content of Grammar Instruction

At the heart of the great grammar debate is the concern for what a teacher should be teaching that will best enhance a student's knowledge of the English language as well as improve his/her writing. National and state requirements established by the National Governors Association for best practices through the Minnesota English/Language Arts Common Core Standards are helpful, but are loose guidelines and don't explain how to connect the particular aspects (2010). Knowing the language of the language is necessary for utilizing the various grammatical options (Myhill & Watson, 2014; Jones & Chen, 2012). This focus on metalinguistics is central to the understanding of grammar in our language and embedding it into our curriculum (2014). Berger (2006) argued for the teaching and infusing a teacher's instruction with the vocabulary of the language allowing students to communicate and understand the choices of expression they can make. With this broader focus on meaning and communication, Weaver, McNally, and Moerman (2001), posit that too much focus is placed on traditional writing conventions and providing more useful and interesting ways for young writers to express themselves is beneficial to widening application of their newfound skills.

When taking a broader stroke towards grammatical concepts, one common area of focus begins to emerge from the research. Berger (2006) stated that sentence combining provides meaningful experiences with different sentence structures and solidifies the knowledge and understanding by putting the skills to immediate use. When students learn about the pieces of what makes up sentences, they can follow a more thoughtful and purposeful path to knowing how to improve their writing. Sjolie (2006) has supported this differentiated opportunity and reflects, "Students of varying levels begin to understand how sentence 'pieces' can be manipulated and moved to provide sentence variation for fresher writing" (p. 37). Sentence combining is a definite strategy for building grammatical understanding and emphasizes how these skills help students develop an understanding of how a language functions and works to better communicate an individual's wants and needs (Myhill & Watson, 2014).

Teaching students to effectively communicate is the end goal and providing instruction on proper grammar and varied sentence structures enables them to express their wants and needs accurately and eloquently (Berger, 2006). Mart (2013) stated that students need the study of grammar to assist them in the organization of their words. Stronger grammar builds better sentences by improving grammatical structures and delivers a more compelling message to an audience.

The Process of Grammar Instruction

Ideas on the best method of grammar instruction have swung far and wide. One part of the movement is in structuring writing assignments in such a way that certain grammar concepts are incorporated directly into the rubric and expectations (Berger, 2006). Student writing necessarily dictates the content of grammar a teacher might focus on (Louis, 2016). Also referred to as "Rhetorical Grammar," the USA has adopted this approach more rapidly as a way to focus on grammar as a tool that can help shape and style a person's writing (Myhill & Watson,

2014). This notion starts with writing and requires a student become more thoughtful about their use and choices in language.

Utilizing learned concepts in meaningful ways immediately supports the ideas and enables learners to practice and improve skills they now see as valuable (Berger, 2006). Sentence combining, grammar paragraphs, and other activities provide experience and give greater meaning to grammar and the language as a whole by deepening a student's understanding (Berger, 2006; Myhill & Watson, 2014). Student achievement in grammar requires continuous and purposeful instruction (Louis, 2016). Teaching grammar concepts outside the regular curriculum gives the impression that grammar is separate from writing, and therefore not as important for the students. Saddler & Asaro-Saddler (2010), who have done extensive work over the past 10 years in advocating for a shift in writing instruction focusing on sentence combining, have suggested using student work when developing exercises because "using their work engages students at their level of understanding and may provide solutions to problems that they are experiencing with a current piece" (p. 161). Teaching skills students find value in and can embed in their daily lives is essential to developing a connection between what is learned and what can be done.

Students must be presented the ideas and given meaningful exercises to practice the soon-to-be acquired skill. The teaching process must be as thoughtful as the writing process, and educators must be careful not to merely assign and revise writing and call it grammar instruction (Zuidema & Fink, 2012). Giving students guidance in developing concepts and establishing a firm foundation are necessary, but for many teachers teaching grammar in context translates to not teaching grammar. Jones and Chen interviewed 53 primary and secondary teachers with most describing their grammar practice as in context or at the point of need, primarily responding to supporting student writing when the need arises. This strategy is undoubtedly helpful, but will certainly not ensure students acquire the range of skills and understanding required by state and

national standards. From this, educators must begin to consider that maybe their task is not one to popularize any one form or method of grammar, but to instill in children a sophisticated understanding of literacy across all contexts and purposes (Dunn & Lindblom, 2003).

Discussion/Conclusion of Literature Review

Review of current literature has highlighted alternative approaches to grammar instruction such as contextualizing grammar and an emphasis on considering grammar's role in altering a student's writing style and voice (Berger, 2006; Myhill & Watson, 2014). Although sentence combining emerged a number of times as a key area in which to focus content (Sjolie, 2006; Zuidema & Fink, 2012; Weaver et al., 2001), a larger scope of the literature focused on using grammar as a tool, rather than a bank of knowledge to learn (Dunn & Lindblom, 2006; Weaver, et al., 2001). Students have a desire to learn, but educators too often force knowledge and content upon their students without conveying the skill's actual application (Ares & Gorrell, 2002; Dunn & Lindblom, 2006).

A gap to explore further would be a sense of sequence in how to construct grammar curriculum and provide cohesive instruction. Our published resources committed little research to establishing a recommended method beyond state and national standards. One challenge in determining a scope and sequence is that the assumption that grammar is even necessary is still heavily debated and trying to give a specific order as one would in the math field might be too prescriptive to reach a student's unique writing needs. Studies on grammar abound, yet very little consensus is ever reached. The Common Core standards are an early attempt to do just that (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Another gap taken into account, but still requiring further study is teacher competency and understanding of grammar (Weaver et al., 2001). The knowledge of the instructor is a defining aspect of student achievement, and many educators do not have the in-depth grammatical background (Myhill & Watson, 2014). Jones and Chen (2012) provided a

grammar knowledge survey to five primary school teachers and 45 secondary school teachers.

The survey found most teachers were familiar with simple concepts of nouns, verbs, and adjectives, but were "less familiar with more abstract and complex terms such as nominalism and embedded clauses" (p. 8). More study is needed on the overall effect this lack of greater understanding has on student achievement.

How can we increase both the overall pedagogical as well as the content knowledge of teachers? What is lacking in teacher training courses that might fill this gap and provide English/Language Arts teachers with the confidence to impart a strong command of language on their students? The literature serves as a valuable reminder to today's educators that for students to fully and genuinely express themselves, education in grammar concepts needs to improve across the board, at all ages and experience levels.

Research Methodology

We conducted the study of an integrated grammar approach at a public school, in a suburb outside of Minneapolis. We did the research within Language Arts classrooms that covered age and ability-level appropriate content that helps build sentence combining skills for sixth and seventh graders. The school district population is 95.5% white and more than 80% of households make more than \$50,000 (ProximityOne, 2013). Our challenge was to present new methods to students who have adapted well to the norms of give-me-something-to-do, and-I-will-usually-do-it mentality to being more open to utilizing skills in their practice. Myhill and Watson (2014) reflected on grammar's history stating, "...the history of grammar teaching over the past 50 years is one of consternation, debate, and dissent" and that approach has echoed in our halls (2014). Our middle school Language Arts department has vacillated on how best to approach grammar, culminating in a situation with teachers providing varying levels of grammar instruction and inconsistent content at their respective grade levels.

This action research project explored a less traditional aspect of grammar instruction in both sixth and seventh grade classrooms at our 6-8 middle school. All lessons and materials were designed for one class in each grade consisting of 29 students in sixth grade, and 30 students in seventh grade. The skills and objectives consisted of content typically covered in our classes, so our letter to parents and guardians gave them the option to have their child's data not included in the study; no families opted out. Our data, though collected separately, will at times show the distinctions between this age level difference, while others will share the data collected as a whole, regardless of the age group to show the overall effects of our strategies.

The fifteen minute cold-writing pre-assessment gauged student ability to use conjunctions accurately and convey meaning in a clear and concise manner. The ten question pretest assessed student ability to identify conjunctions, recognize their purpose in a sentence, and distinguish incorrect from correct usage. Two checkpoints were created and completed to gain some information on the progress of our students based on their understanding of general conjunctions in the first checkpoint and a student's wider ability to combine ideas through a variety of strategies in the second checkpoint. The posttest was an eight question multiple choice assessment that assessed comprehension and usage of the sentence combining skills we have been working on over the five week study. To conclude the collection of the data for the study, students were asked to write one formal essay in a fifteen minute cold-write setting looking to gauge the change in their writing since the prewrite. Informal data to gauge effectiveness of our strategies was gathered from student discussions and impromptu feedback.

Research and instruction targeted sentence combining skills and the use of conjunctions. These skills emerged from the literature as feasibly the most influential content to cover in the field of grammar, having the largest influence on students' actual writing. Sentence combining skills refer to student's abilities to write with a variety of sentence lengths and complexity by employing both simple and compound sentence structures and understanding the power of

conjunctions in both combining clauses as well as words and ideas themselves. In teaching that, we also were able to cover some internal punctuation work, especially the use of commas before a coordinating conjunction or in a list.

By focusing on sentence combining, we narrowed the scope of instruction on writing and grammar usage. Instead of teaching writing and teaching grammar. The subjects were one and the same. Our methods focused on student utilization and practice of the skills through their writing only. We did not give any homework that consisted of isolated practice exercises or activities in class that would have them solve unrelated sentences to the overall content of the class. Instead, we practiced the skills directly through each child's own writing or using examples from the literature we would already have been working on in class.

In seventh grade, this goal was met through establishing student blogs, left private from public view on the internet, that students reflected and wrote within twice a week over the course of four weeks. Some blogs were left for them to write freely and use the skills they knew best. Other blog posts asked students to complete a certain challenge or task. Examples of challenges and tasks for different posts included:

Write this blog in all simple sentences.

Utilize three compound sentences within this post.

How many prepositions can you incorporate into today's post?

Each day that we would have a blog entry, students were given ten to twenty minutes to write pending the complexity of the question or the level of challenge of the grammatical task they were meant to explore. The blog's purpose was to serve in place of grammar exercises and existed as the student's place to practice the skills we hoped they would learn. This was ungraded work which opened them up to explore not only the grammar concepts but also their own ideas in the vein of reflective journal writing. Students did read each other's work looking

for and identifying the skills that were meant to be practiced to further enhance their understanding and to help each other with some feedback.

Sixth grade embedded grammar instruction into the feedback and assessment of daily writings associated with current unit and curriculum goals. Writing examples ranged from short, single-sentence assignments, to multi-sentence paragraphs. Students were reminded of important skills prior to writing and constructive feedback was provided afterwards.

We both approached the actual grammar instruction through much shorter mini-lessons on the different skills of the study. More time was given for writing and usage, but brief fifteen minute lessons were necessary to directly instruct and guide the students in proper usage and to look at examples from our Language Arts curriculum.

This study was completed in class within five weeks. It began with a *Grammar Research: Pretest Writing Prompt* (see Appendix B) to gather samples of the students writing abilities at the onset of the study. Student were read the directions, questions were answered, and they were provided fifteen minutes to hand write their response to the question: “If we changed one thing about the world to make it better, what would that be?” At the end of the allotted time, students submitted their writing. The writing was assessed using the provided rubric, trends were analyzed, and curriculum was adjusted. The prewriting prompt was followed by *Grammar Research: Pretest* (see Appendix A) which utilized multiple choice questions to pinpoint skills of strength and weaknesses to better guide the instruction over the next four weeks. The first two weeks of the study were reserved for the mini-lessons and practice writing days for the students. We focused heavily on what coordinating conjunctions were and how to best utilize these seven words in our sentences. We also worked to get students to be able to identify and use prepositions within a sentence so they could distinguish them better from clauses. Once these two weeks passed, students completed *Building Stronger Sentences: Checkpoint #1* (see Appendix C) which assessed their ability to use conjunctions effectively through simple sentence

combining. Students had unlimited time to complete the individual assignment and submitted their assessments to the teacher when completed. Results were again analyzed and mini-lessons were revised to better support gaps and promote achievement. In week three, students were given *Building Stronger Sentences: Checkpoint #2* (see Appendix D) to further assess and understand their growth and progress. Students were again given unlimited time to complete the assignment and submitted their finished product to the teacher. The final *Grammar Research: Posttest* (see Appendix E) was administered during the final week of the study, along with the *Grammar Research: Posttest Writing Prompt* (see Appendix F). The directions were read and expectations outlined. Students were given fifteen minutes to complete the written portion of the assessment and were provided unlimited time to complete the multiple-choice post assessment. Completed assessments were submitted to the teacher prior to the end of class.

The sole purpose and goal of this instruction and assessments was to teach and measure if students could in fact improve their written expression more effectively through what we taught and by how we had them practice it through their own created work. The data we collected was compiled and arranged both by grade level and as a compiled work for further analysis to discover what our new methods can do for student learning concerning grammar.

Analysis of Data

The data accumulated from this study derived from a pretest and prewrite, two checkpoints, and a posttest with a written summative essay. The study began with sixth and seventh grade students writing a short response to the Grammar Research Pretest Writing Prompt (See Appendix B): If we changed one thing about the world to make it better, what would that be and why? The purpose of the writing prompt was to evaluate students' ability to use conjunctions accurately and the frequency of their accurate use. Three aspects of this skill were identified: Students' use of simple conjunctions, students' use of conjunctions to join clauses, and students' quality of written expression.

During the evaluation of 29 sixth grade written responses, the mean, median, and mode for all three areas of focus was a solid 2, or basic level according to our rubric (See Appendix B). One student scored a one, or emerging, in all areas, and one student garnered a three, or proficient, in the three domains. The sixth grade teacher learned from this assessment that continued instruction on the value of sentence variety and the opportunity to practice those skills was needed to continue moving the students forward in their writing. Figure 1 shows the results in our second category of coordinating conjunctions usage which we view as a primary benchmark in Sentence Combining and the area needing most growth from the students. Students needed to utilize the seven coordinating conjunctions that can hold clauses together in a sentence: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so (referred to as *FANBOYS*).

The seventh grade results on this written assessment were similar with a slightly higher overall score placement consistent with their extra year of practice and development. Within the 28 seventh graders studied, all but two of them could use conjunctions on a basic level within their sentences. The mode for these scores was a three out of four which, considering that they have not received any direct instruction, places them at a stronger ability level when four implies perfect usage. Written expression swung wildly as it often does as they are still developing their writer's voice and are learning to be clearer in their explanations and supporting their ideas. Seventh graders scored most poorly on their use of coordinating conjunctions (See Figure 1), and this was a major area of emphasis within the study as a whole.

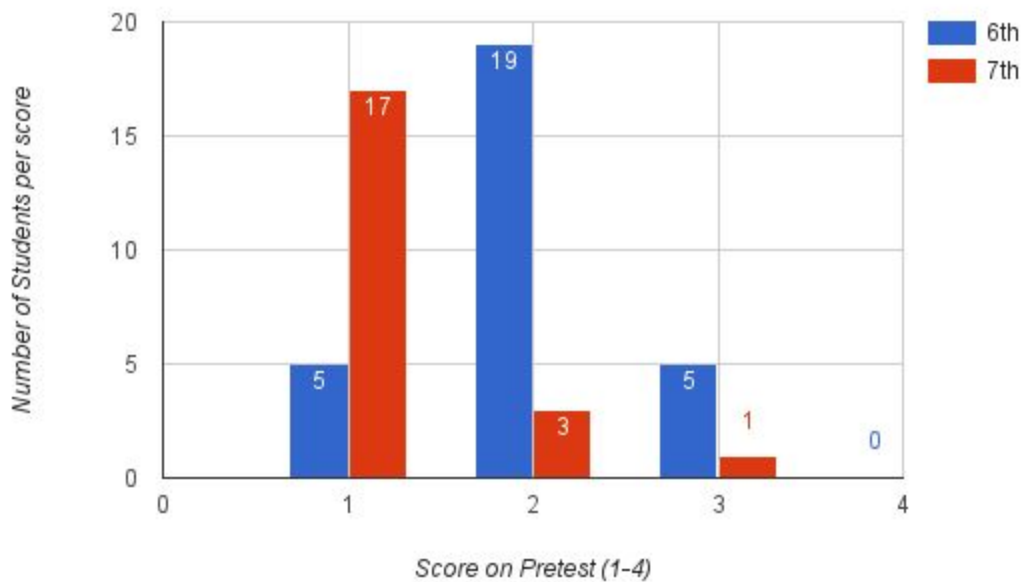


Figure 1. Student's Scoring based on ability to accurately use coordinating conjunctions in Prewrite.

Research continued with students completing the Grammar Research: Pretest (See Appendix A). The pretest was designed to identify specific skills within sentence combining, namely: the purpose of conjunctions, identifying conjunctions, applying value to conjunctions, and then a series of sentences needing combining that rose in complexity to see where students maxed out. This began with basic combinations of simple sentences, then grew to more complex clauses, and one challenge of combining three distinct clauses. The final section was an editing exercise in which students needed to determine improper sentence combining within a group of sentences, so that we might see each student's ability to distinguish between correct and improper combinations within a larger context. All of this also embeds punctuation rules surrounding appropriate comma usage.

The quantitative data that emerged from the sixth grade pretest confirmed the results of the prewrite. The average score obtained was a 50% success rate, with one student achieving

80% and 4 of 29 or 13% checking in at a score of 70%. 11 of 29 sixth grade students scored 40% or less on the pretest, with 7% of sixth grade participants scoring 10%. Students' general understanding of appropriate use of conjunctions and the skills required to eliminate extraneous information and combine like ideas into more concise statements was lacking. Students answered questions 4 and 5 correctly 96% and 93% respectively, illustrating their understanding of basic logical combinations of ideas and understanding the best conjunction to combine them. Only 27% answered questions six and ten correctly which can be attributed to both questions requiring the student to only combine verbs not clauses in a sentence without a comma. No student provided the correct response to question number two which is logical considering it merely asked students to identify conjunctions from a list when many may not have understood the meaning of the word.

The seventh grade participants' average success rate was 58%; nine of the students scored better than a 70%. Five seventh graders scored at or below 40% with nine more students scoring an exact 50% or 5/10 points. Like the sixth grade results, students excelled with over 80% answering correctly on numbers 4 and 5 which covers basic conjunction usage with simple clauses. The over 90% of seventh graders were better able to define the purpose of a conjunction over sixth graders even though the content was not covered explicitly in the seventh grade curriculum at that point. Question number two was particularly low scoring due to the number of conjunctions to pick from, and less than half of all seventh graders could answer questions seven through ten correctly, showing that they could not identify where errors were in writing when they were embedded within multiple sentences.

Our third and fourth pieces of data are the Grammar Research: Checkpoints #1 and #2(See Appendix C and Appendix D). The first checkpoint was an exercise that focused on the skills of combining like sentences and using the proper conjunctions to convey the correct meaning. The exercise consisted of ten simple sentences to be combined into five compound

sentences, each using a different conjunction. After the evaluation and analysis of Checkpoint #1, students were provided a second checkpoint to address the skill of combining subjects and/or predicates to eliminate repetition and combine details. Grammar Research: Checkpoint #2 required a greater level of skill and understanding than did Checkpoint #1. Students needed to identify like sentences and then see the purpose and need to eliminate and/or combine information.

Sixth grade students were fairly competent at combining like sentences, but struggled to choose the most accurate conjunction. Sixth graders scored an average of 53% on the first checkpoint and increased to 62% on the second checkpoint. The median score jumped from 50% to 70%, and the mode jumped 30 points from 50% to 80%. Seventh graders scored an average of 90% on the first checkpoint and 72% on the second checkpoint. Although Checkpoint #1 and Checkpoint #2 addressed slightly different aspects of conjunction use, seeing that large scale increase boded well for sixth graders future results as writers. With seventh grade, checkpoint one required following a formula that they could comprehend, but with checkpoint two, they were given more options and it was clear that many students complicated the combining options available to them.

The final pieces of data in the study were the Grammar Skills Posttest(Appendix E) and the Final Grammar Research Posttest Written Response (Appendix F). Both of these assessments were structured identically to the pretest versions of each. The Grammar Skills Posttest was streamlined to eliminate extra items that tested the same concepts. The content and format did not change. Questions one through three covered conjunctions in their meaning, use, and general identification. Questions four and five were basic clause combinations utilizing coordinating conjunctions with five being slightly more complex. Questions six through eight carried editing challenges with comma usage in the context of larger compound sentence constructions. The Written Response differed only in the prompt provided to students but still

maintained a 15 minute timed writing experience. Figure 2 shows the individual student growth (positive and negative) between their pre and post grammar skills assessments.

Figure 2 displays the percent of change for all students from pre to post assessments both positive and negative. Overall, 28% of the students showed some form of negative growth, showing that no progress was made with this process. That leaves a majority of the students who all made gains, but only a few students, 17.5 % or 10 students made gains of better than a 50% change from their pretest score. This leads to inconclusive results that sentence combining methods and non-isolated style were not necessarily hurtful, but were only able to provide an increase in some student's scores and a decrease in others.

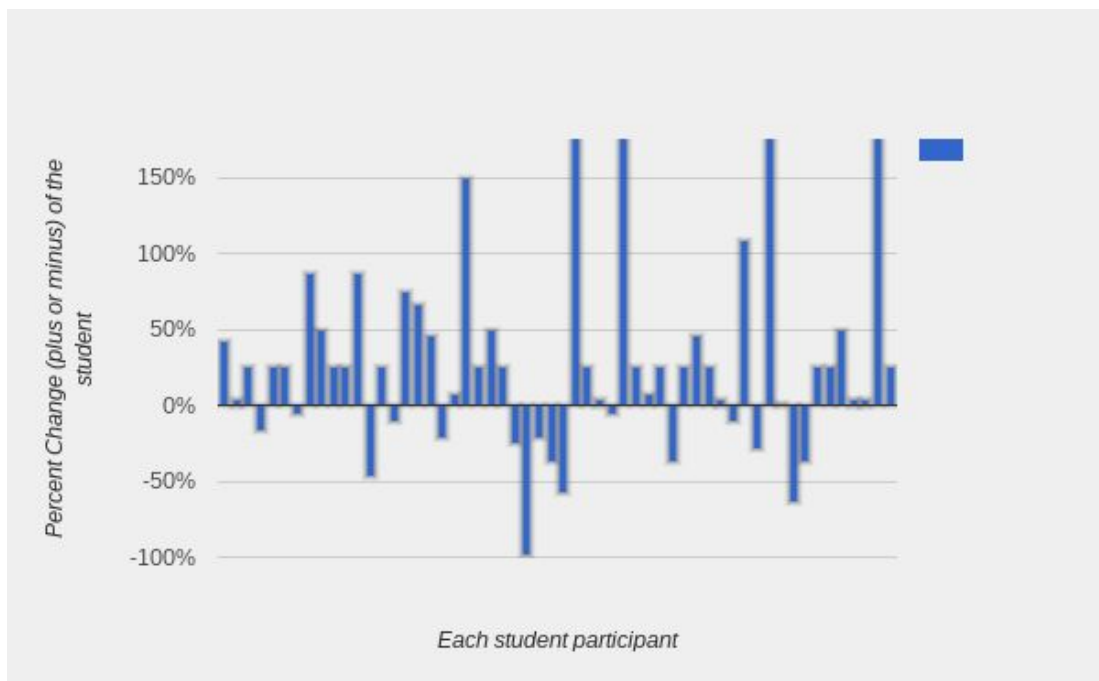


Figure 2. Sixth & Seventh Grade Grammar Assessment Pre to Posttest percent change results.

Sixth grade alone, posted moderate gains from pretest to posttest, scoring 51% higher on average. The minimum score was raised from 10% to 25% and the max score went from 70% to 87%. Figure 3 provides a breakdown of each of the questions on the post test and discussion of the skills with which they excelled and/or struggled. Question two required multiple answers in

selecting from a list of conjunctions with distractor options and 12 of the 29 students only selected one, with only 4 students not selecting a correct answer. Questions six, seven, and eight required students to identify sentence errors, if any, and were still challenges for sixth grade students rating below 75% on all three. Questions one and three covering basic conjunction meaning and defining a specific conjunctions usage were answered correctly at a rate of 75% and four and five were answered correctly over 90% of the time. These results show gains made in defining, identifying, and using correct conjunctions at the basic level.

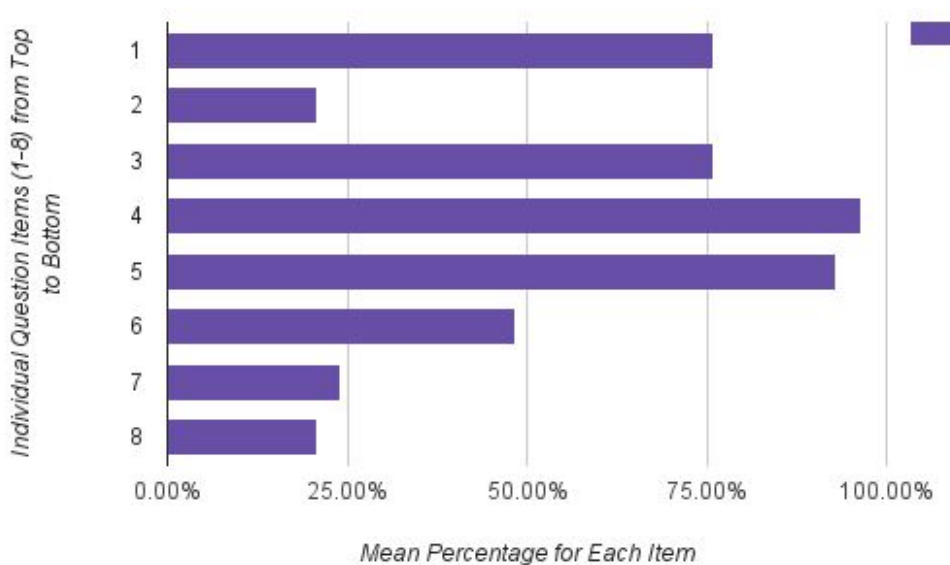


Figure 3. Sixth Grade Question Results on the Post Test

The Grammar Skills posttest revealed a small increase overall in the average score for the seventh grade group from 58% to 69%. This growth was hindered by lower than expected results on numbers one and two (Figure 4) where less than 60% of students could define and identify conjunctions. This was a drop from the pretest. Students maintained or increased their ability to combine basic clauses correctly in questions four and five at a rate of 96% for each question. Question seven required students to identify proper comma usage when presented with only additive information, not new clauses which is tricky and 18% answered this correctly.

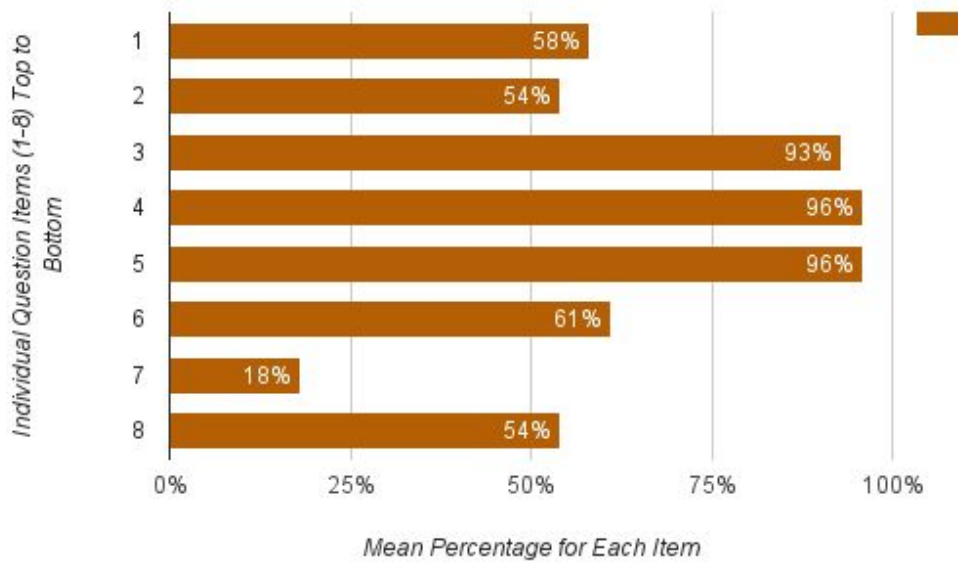


Figure 4. 7th Grade question results on the Post Test.

Our pre and post tests for written work showed how writing was enhanced. All but four students showed improvement in their use of conjunctions and clarity of expression. Three of those students showed no gains and one student dropped 25%. Overall, students made long strides in their writing. Eleven students, or 38%, showed an improvement of greater than 50% and the class average increased by 40%.

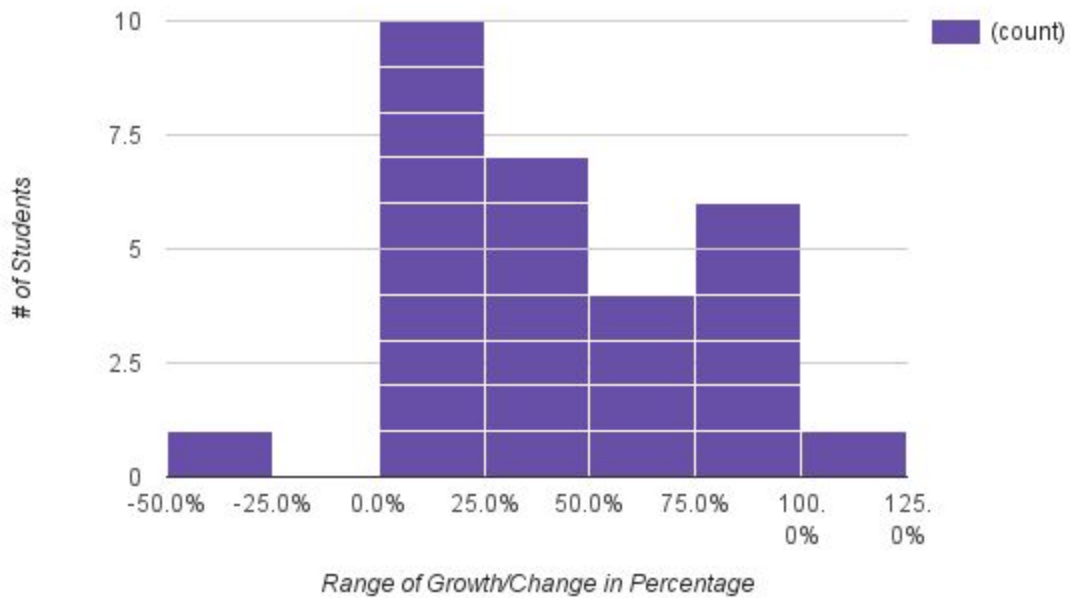


Figure 4. Sixth Grade Pre to Post Written assessment percent change results.

Figure 5 demonstrates the growth as writers seventh graders made during this study based on improvement from the prewrite to the postwrite. In comparing the data between sixth and seventh grades, one major difference stands out. The mode percent change would fall between the 0 to 30% mark for both sixth and seventh grade, but interestingly the median score is far closer to zero or no change for seventh than sixth grade. This means that there is an even number of students on either side of no change at all which implies there is no statistical evidence proving that they have grown as writers based on the skills we set out to study.

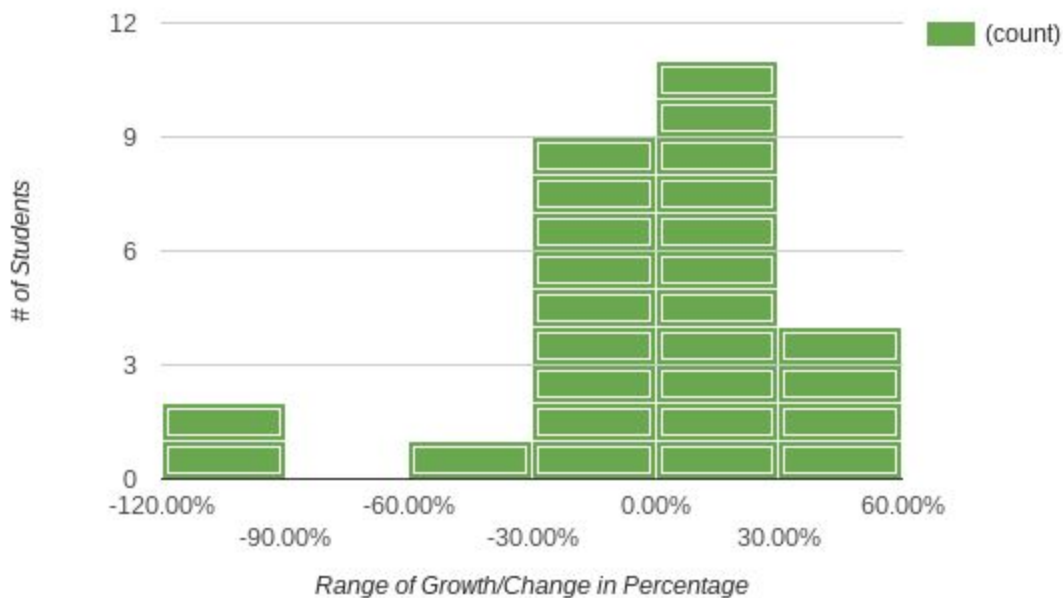


Figure 5. Seventh Pre to Post Written Assessment percent change results.

The goal of the study is to determine if this method of instruction yields positive results in both retention and application of the grammatical understandings. While the majority of students improved on both fronts. There continue to be gaps in the instruction and eventual understanding of students. With this in mind, our analysis of this information directly influences our course of action within our classrooms in the upcoming year, as well as our departments as a whole.

Action Plan

After analyzing the data produced by this study, it is clear that grammar is challenging to target and assess. If we continue with a more authentic model of writing and instruction, we risk losing clear methods of practice and easily understood results. Student based instruction will require the need to develop better methods of measuring student progress. This study showed that we need to be more prescriptive in actual grammar shortcomings within our students' writing. Through studying sentence combining skills, we can focus in on a common language to

further the discussion amongst colleagues and between teacher and student. Improving student writing and developing effective communicators requires routine grammatical instruction and experimentation (Weaver et al., 2001). Providing students with continual opportunities to develop their communication skills through practice and giving appropriate feedback for their grade level is essential to their success, regardless of the method or strategy (Berger, 2006).

The data we mined from these pre-instruction exercises was useful to our teaching and the overall research, but upon reflection, including a brief questionnaire on students' strengths and weaknesses in grammar and writing may have contributed greater depth and understanding of student competency at the onset of the study. Overall, the data provided us the foundation to take the next step in utilizing these pretests with leveled questions built in. This will help to drive the sixth and seventh grade teams to better target our independent grade levels with the skills they need most.

Providing pre assessments is a practice that supports student learning from the beginning and initiating with the Grammar Research Pretest (See Appendix A) and Pre Write (See Appendix B) was crucial because it provided a starting point for our instruction. These data points informed us that many sixth graders could form basic compound sentences, but lacked the ability to differentiate between the various conjunctions. Sixth grade writing rarely emerges beyond the complexity of simple sentences and simple conjunction usage such as *and* and *but*, so these results were expected. The sixth grade teacher will focus on identifying these basic conjunctions and their proper situational use, while providing advanced practice for students who have shown mastery at this level. Deeper compound sentence grammatical structures reach sixth grade students on a reading level, but are beyond their level of writing and seem more appropriate for seventh grade students. This then provides an opportunity for our school and others to begin to draw clearer lines between grades when aligning curriculum vertically across a middle school. A focus for sixth grade then becomes understanding the conjunctions and

exploring their uses in different contexts all while extending sentences beyond their simple structures with more detail. Sixth graders can also begin to explore how to use a coordinating conjunction to combine two simple clauses.

Seventh grade could do all that the sixth grade students were capable of and seemed more confident in identifying when a variety of conjunctions could be used and showed an increased deftness in their clause combinations. They ran into issues concerning proper punctuation within these more complicated compound sentence structures particularly with proper comma usage. This should then become the realm in which seventh grade teachers can further enhance a seventh grader's abilities. Seventh grade writers should become adept at distinguishing between conjunctions only combining words and phrases, and when they begin to combine larger clauses requiring specific comma rule usage. Based on the strong capabilities of a large part of the students in the study in 7th grade, we intend to open up discussions around using and understanding dependent clauses which is a whole new set of rules. Eliminating unnecessary repetition will also be a mantra of the seventh grade writing program.

While each of the checkpoints did provide a means to gauge the progress of the young writers in the study, the checkpoints fell short of providing valuable and meaningful information for a couple of reasons. One, they were not progressively built or hinged upon each other. They dealt with quite different skills and we feel that if they had merely focused on increasing complexity of sentence combining skills, we could have better used the data. Two, the Checkpoint #2 (See Appendix D) hit upon a few skills that fell outside of the scope of our study, or at least what we measured on the posttest. Our net was cast too wide at this point and that skewed the data slightly, hence we did not fixate upon that information as much in our data analysis knowing we had ample amounts of information to work from in the pre and post tests. Future checkpoints and supportive mini lessons should have a clearer focus and more thoughtful development from beginning to end. That said, these checkpoints allowed us to see the

limitations of our students within the process of learning how to write stronger sentences, and we were better able to identify where the developmental stopping point for sixth and seventh grade writers might be and the writing assessments further supported this.

The post write required the same skills from students as the pre write, an accurate use of conjunctions and punctuation, and clear and effective communication. The post write question asking about the value of cooperation may have been an easier question for students to answer than the pre write question asking students to describe a way to make the world better. Both questions are deep and meaningful, but changing the world is a tough concept to develop in fifteen minutes. The quality of sixth grade students' writing improved considerably in relation to their use of conjunctions, seeing a mean increase of 40%. Discussing and practicing conjunction usage provided the guidelines for students to avoid repetition and improve the effectiveness of their overall written communication. Students provided verbal feedback that even the slightest discussion on grammar and sentence forming techniques provided ideas for greater expression. Introducing students to effective writing strategies, even in passing, and providing more in-class writing opportunities will be key to continued development of strong middle school writers.

At the onset, our goal was to not give students countless sentences to correct in order to practice a rule, but instead hoped to have the students practice as writers themselves. This sounds appropriate in theory, but is a very vague method to ensure appropriate practice and would be hard to ensure that all teachers are maintaining similar accountability measures. This was too great a challenge to align with respect to the many standards required and the looming end of the school year, so we each taught with our content and curriculum in mind. For this, we maintained similar goals but still found different paths to get there. This leads to part of the uncertainty of embedding grammar within writing methods. As we tried to teach and work through the necessary skills, we struggled with how to best ensure that our students were actually learning and mastering the material. Without exercises and practice work, this method could

easily lead a teacher to not actually teach with clarity and fall back on the comfortable notion that at least the students are writing. This could be dangerous without a more prescriptive model.

Though our data is inconclusive concerning the effect teaching authentic and embedded sentence combining skills has on writers, it is clear that teaching these skills does improve writing and gives students the confidence to express themselves with more variation. This was one of the two goals within our research. This method has shown to be one out of many ways a teacher can teach grammar that would appear to help move student writers forward and deserves its place in the larger spectrum of grammar instruction. Though we wouldn't advise relying solely on this method, we feel confident that with this different approach, each individual teacher of English can have a greater sense of independence and creativity in crafting writing activities that better allow for his/her students to practice necessary skills. Even more importantly, practicing sentence combining through student writing gives another opportunity for exploring what each child thinks, feels, and understands about the world around them rather than follow some preset groups of sentences. After all, the aim is for our students to practice communicating through writing, not just fix the errors of others. Surviving our modern world as future productive adults requires communicating with those around them in the academic world, the professional world, but most importantly in their personal lives and it is through their writing that they must convey themselves best.

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Appendix A:

Grammar Skill Pre-Test

Part One: Parts of Speech Definitions

Choose the explanation that best describes the meaning of the bold word.

1. Which of the following best describes a **conjunction**?
 - a. essential to a complete sentence
 - b. joins clauses or sentences to other clauses or sentences
 - c. occurs when you combine two words together
 - d. usually starts with a capital letter
2. Which of the following words are **conjunctions**? You may choose more than one.
 - a. or
 - b. and
 - c. them
 - d. yet
 - e. as much as
3. Which conjunction is used to connect two equal parts into one sentence?
 - a. until
 - b. but
 - c. since
 - d. after

Part Two: Sentence Combining

Choose the correct combination of sentences to accurately express the given information.

4. Combine the following two sentences using the correct conjunction.

I am hungry. I don't want to eat.

- a. I am hungry, nor I don't want to eat.
- b. I am hungry, so I don't want to eat.
- c. I am hungry, but I don't want to eat.
- d. I am hungry, for I don't want to eat.

5. Combine the following two sentences using the correct conjunction.

Her style may be different. The effect she has on an audience is amazing.

- a. Her style may be different, and the effect she has on an audience is amazing.
- b. Her style may be different, nor the effect she has on an audience is amazing.
- c. Her style may be different, for the effect she has on an audience is amazing.
- d. Her style may be different, but the effect she has on an audience is amazing.

6. Combine the following two sentences using the correct conjunction.

The spaghetti with squirrel gravy is hot. The spaghetti with squirrel gravy is delicious.

- a. The spaghetti with squirrel gravy is hot but delicious.
- b. The spaghetti with squirrel gravy is hot and delicious.
- c. The spaghetti with squirrel gravy is hot nor delicious.
- d. The spaghetti with squirrel gravy is hot so delicious.

7. Combine the following three sentences using the correct conjunctions and punctuation.

Tiffany wants to play volleyball.

Tiffany wants to act in the school musical.

Tiffany knows tryouts for both are at the same time.

- a. Tiffany wants to play volleyball, and Tiffany wants to act in the school musical, and Tiffany knows tryouts for both are at the same time.
- b. Tiffany wants to play volleyball, and wants to act in the school musical and she knows tryouts for both are at the same time.
- c. Tiffany wants to play volleyball and wants to act in the school musical, but she knows tryouts for both are at the same time.
- d. Tiffany wants to play volleyball and wants to act in the school musical but she knows tryouts for both are at the same time.

Part III: Recognizing Incorrect Sentence Combinations

Choose the option that corrects an error in the underlined portions. If no error exists, choose "no change is necessary."

Example: Diane couldn't concentrate on General Hospital, (A) because Santana, (B) her beagle who had been cooped up in the house all day, (C) wanted to take a long walk around the lake.

- a. **General Hospital because - Correct answer**
- b. Santana her
- c. day wanted
- d. No change is necessary

8. Minnetonka middle school has kind and cheerful students, (A) yet we still must have conversations (B) about doing the right thing. No school is free from bullying (C) nor from people exploring how to establish lasting friendships.

- a. students yet
- b. conversations, about
- c. bullying, nor
- d. no change is necessary

9. The cell phone began to chime in her book bag, (A) Jasmine froze in her seat (B) as all eyes in the room darted from her to Mr. Williams (C) and back to her again.

- a. bag, and Jasmine
- b. seat, as
- c. Williams, and
- d. no change is necessary

10. Jerry sprinted across the grass, (A) and jumped over a tall fence in his neighbor's yard. (B) He was only trying to get his football back, (C) but Gerald, their fierce guard dog, had other ideas.

- a. grass and jumped
- b. yard, so he
- c. back but
- d. no change is necessary

Appendix C

BUILDING STRONGER SENTENCES- CHECKPOINT #1

<p>Directions: <i>Make four logical combinations of compound sentences by combining a sentence from group A with a sentence from group B using what you know about conjunctions and combining simple sentences to make 4 compound sentences. For the 5th sentence, please write one of your own.</i></p>	<p>Conjunctions List:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For - And - Nor - But - Or - Yet - So
<p>Simple Sentences Group A</p>	<p>Simple Sentences Group B</p>
<p>my hockey team won three straight games</p> <p>a job helps to provide spending money</p> <p>will you be at the concert</p> <p>we played games</p>	<p>it makes life a lot busier</p> <p>are you busy that night</p> <p>the adults sat and talked</p> <p>we are still in fifth place</p>

Write your answers below using the charts above!

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

5) Your Own Sentence:

Appendix D
BUILDING STRONGER SENTENCES- CHECKPOINT #2

<p>Directions: <i>Make four logical combinations of sentences that are NOT compound sentences, but instead combine ideas in the following ways:</i></p> <p><i>Join together verbs</i> <i>Join together multiple subjects</i> <i>Eliminate repetition & combine detail.</i></p>	<p>Conjunctions List:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For - And - Nor - But - Or - Yet - So
<p>Simple Sentences Group A</p>	<p>Simple Sentences Group B</p>
<p>Jerry likes board games better than video games.</p> <p>The students started to like reading poetry.</p> <p>We never appreciate winters as much as we should.</p> <p>Our lacrosse team which has only 2 players taller than 5 feet wins most games.</p>	<p>The students also started to like writing poetry.</p> <p>Starla likes board games better than video games.</p> <p>Our fierce and competitive lacrosse team wins many tournaments.</p> <p>We also dislike cloudy days full of rain.</p>

Write your answers below using the charts above!

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

5) **Your Own Sentence:**

Appendix E

Grammar Skill Post Test

Part One: Parts of Speech Definitions

Choose the explanation that best describes the meaning of the bold word.

1. Which of the following best describes a **conjunction**?
 - a. describes a verb
 - b. occurs when you combine two words together
 - c. essential to a complete sentence
 - d. joins clauses or sentences to other clauses or sentences
2. Which of the following words are **conjunctions**? You may choose more than one.
 - a. yet
 - b. that
 - c. so
 - d. above
3. Which conjunction is used to connect two equal parts into one sentence?
 - a. until
 - b. and
 - c. since
 - d. after

Part Two: Sentence Combining

Choose the correct combination of sentences to accurately express the given information.

4. Combine the following two sentences using the correct conjunction.
I am exhausted from a long school day. I want to go to bed early tonight.
 - a. I am exhausted from a long school day, nor I want to go to bed early tonight.
 - b. I am exhausted from a long school day, so I want to go to bed early tonight.
 - c. I am exhausted from a long school day, yet I want to go to bed early tonight.
 - d. I am exhausted from a long school day, but I want to go to bed early tonight.
5. Combine the following two sentences using the correct conjunction.
Terry may be a chatty person in conversation. He is terrified of speaking in front of a group.
 - a. Terry may be a chatty person in conversation, and he is terrified of speaking in front of a group.
 - b. Terry may be a chatty person in conversation, so he is terrified of speaking in front of a group.
 - c. Terry may be a chatty person in conversation, but he is terrified of speaking in front of a group.
 - d. Terry may be a chatty person in conversation, nor he is terrified of speaking in front of a group.

Part III: Recognizing Incorrect Sentence Combinations

Choose the option that corrects an error in the underlined portions. If no error exists, choose "no change is necessary."

6. Minnetonka middle school has kind and cheerful students(A) yet we still must have conversations (B) about doing the right thing. No school is free from bullying.(C) nor from people exploring how to establish lasting friendships.
 - a. students, yet
 - b. conversations, about
 - c. bullying nor
 - d. no change is necessary

7. The cell phone began to chime in her book bag. (A)and Jasmine froze in her seat (B) as all eyes in the room darted from her to Mr. Williams. (C) and back to her again.
 - a. bag, Jasmine
 - b. seat, as
 - c. Williams and
 - d. no change is necessary

8. Jerry sprinted across the grass (A) and jumped over a tall fence in his neighbor's yard. (B) He was only trying to get his football back (C) but Gerald, their fierce guard dog, had other ideas.
 - a. grass, and jumped
 - b. yard, so he
 - c. back, but
 - d. no change is necessary

Appendix F

Grammar Research: Post Test Writing Prompt

You have 15 minutes to answer the following question in a complete and literate manner. This writing should include: sentence variety, conjunction use, and proper punctuation. Please do your best .

Describe why cooperation is an important skill for success?

More lines provided on attached pages...

Post Test Writing Prompt Rubric

Areas	4(Advanced)	3(Proficient)	2(Basic)	1(Emerging)
Use of Conjunctions (simple) - to join words together.	Student used 2 or more conjunctions accurately.	Student used 1 conjunction accurately.	Student used 1 or more conjunctions inaccurately.	Student did not use any conjunctions.
Use of Conjunctions (Fanboys) - to join clauses	Student used 2 or more conjunctions accurately with comma.	Student used 1 conjunction accurately and included the comma.	Student used 1 or more conjunctions inaccurately or lacked the comma.	Student did not use any conjunctions to join two clauses.
Overall Written Expression	Written expression is clear, concise, and well thought out	Written expression is clear and concise	Written expression is vague , yet coherent	Written expression is incoherent and vague