

Grammar Acquisition Made

Easy for Students:

**A proposal for future research in curriculum and
instructional design**

Keyword: English, grammar, research

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MICHAEL A. BRANAM – Curriculum Vitae

Education/Certification:

Batchelor of Science, Education, English Major, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN;
May 1995.

Master of Education, Curriculum and Instructional Design, English Emphasis,
Indiana Wesleyan University, Marion, IN; August 2001.

- ✓ Master's work researched the need and effectiveness of the instruction of English grammar through interactive activities: Grammar Acquisition Made Easy for Students (GAMES)
- ✓ Created National Board Certification Qualified Portfolio

Professional Experience:

Crystal Shores Educational Services, Inc.

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President

- ✓ Founded with wife in May 2001
- ✓ Offering free educational tutoring and free High School Christian Academy
- ✓ Researching and aligning curricular content of the GAMES program to the standards of the 49 states that have adopted state educational standards
- ✓ Posturing for submission of a grant proposal to the U.S. Department of Education for a three-year, nationwide classroom study of the effectiveness of the GAMES curriculum and pedagogical methods in secondary classrooms
- ✓ Presented paper at the Hawaiian International Conference on Education (January 2003)

Metropolitan School District of Pike Township

Pike High School

Indianapolis, IN

Jim Rollins, Principal

Ron Iwema, Department Head

August 1997 – Present

- ✓ Participant in the Indiana Department of Education ISTEP+ Item Specification Workshop (August 2002)
- ✓ New teacher mentor (2002-03)
- ✓ Assisted in creating ISTEP preparation unit for freshman English Classes
- ✓ Mentoring and evaluating student teacher candidates through the Butler University ED 433: Integrated General and Special Methods class (1999-00, 00-01, 01-02, 02-03)
- ✓ Taught in the Freshman Transition Pilot Program (2000-01, 01-02, 02-03)
- ✓ Developed and implemented inter-disciplinary script writing unit for Sophomore Honors English program (2000-01)
- ✓ Participated in the organization of career academy courses and sequence as a member of the Career Academy – Curriculum Integration Committee (2000-01)
- ✓ Taught PowerPoint to video technology in-service (2000-01)
- ✓ Taught Freshman English (1997 – present)
- ✓ Taught Sophomore Honors English (1999 – present)
- ✓ Researched the plausibility of career academies as a small school initiative structure through the Career Academies Advisory Committee (1999-2000)

- ✓ Taught Freshman English Skills remediation (1998-99, 99-00)
- ✓ Coordinated ISTEP/IGQE remediation (1999-00)
- ✓ Participated in and graduated from the Pike Township Curriculum Technology Integration (CTI) Program (1999-2000)
- ✓ Presented at the Pike Township CTI Program new participant welcome banquet (2000)
- ✓ Developed and implemented Freshman ISTEP/technology unit (1999-2000)
- ✓ Taught Sophomore English (1997-98, 98-99)
- ✓ Developed Freshman English Skills remediation curriculum (1998-99)
- ✓ Taught Freshman Honors English (1997-98)

Community Alternatives – ADEPT

Carmel, IN

(317) 573-8050

Jeanine Spivey, Program Director

July 1995 – May 1997

- ✓ Individual Services Coordinator/Qualified Mental Retardation Professional (ISC/QMRP)
 - ❖ Worked with team in the development of Individual Habilitation Plans (IHP)
 - ❖ Wrote goals for IHP
 - ❖ Oversaw and monitored IHP's for 19 individuals
 - ❖ Worked with Case Managers in organizing services for 19 individuals
 - ❖ Worked with Program Director and Other ISC's in program development
 - ❖ Supervised Team Coordinators and direct care staff
 - ❖ Organized and ran monthly in-service presentations for staff
 - ❖ Interviewed and trained new staff members
 - ❖ Oversaw the implementation of behavior intervention plans
 - ❖ Oversaw job placements for clients
 - ❖ Oversaw and audited monthly financials for 19 individuals
 - ❖ Personally provided 20 hours of direct care to individuals each week
 - ❖ Advocated for client's rights
- ✓ Day Services Coordinator
 - ❖ Developed, designed, and implemented Day Services curriculum guidelines for the instruction of daily living, basic education, and community mobility skills for all clients
 - ❖ Developed, designed, and implemented Vocational Services program
 - ❖ Developed, designed, and implemented educational programs for all individuals not active in the Day Services program
 - ❖ Monitored the educational progress of individuals in the Day Services and Vocational Services programs
 - ❖ Supervised and trained the Day Services and Vocational Services staff
 - ❖ Oversaw transportation of clients in the Day Services and Vocational Services Programs as well as those clients living in the group homes
 - ❖ Coached individuals in the Vocational Services program
 - ❖ Advocated for client's rights in educational and workplace environments
- ✓ Job Coach
 - ❖ Aided clients in seeking and securing employment
 - ❖ Developed, designed, and implemented personalized job-training program
 - ❖ Developed, designed, and implemented programs to teach socialization and community mobility skills through various individualized community activities
 - ❖ Advocated for client's rights in the workplace
 - ❖ Assisted care team in forming vocational goals for client's IHP

Monroe County Community School Corporation

Bloomington, IN

Donna Zink, Substitute Coordinator

April 1995-May 1995; October 1992-December 1993

Primary substitute for Highland Park Elementary School during 1992-93, 93-94 school years

Eastern School

Bloomfield, IN

April 1995-May 1995

Primary substitute for Jr. High and High School English and Social Studies Departments

Bloomfield High School

Bloomfield, IN

Kayla Hale, Supervising Teacher

November 1994; January 1995 – March 1995

- ✓ Student Teacher
 - ❖ Taught Sophomore English, Sophomore Tech Prep English, Senior Independent Themes, and Study Hall classes
 - ❖ Independently designed and taught lessons for all classes
 - ❖ Participated in IPASS conference, Terre Haute, IN
 - ❖ Compiled and assigned nine-week grades
- ✓ English Practicum
 - ❖ Researched, designed, and tested “Poetry Through Music” unit
 - ❖ Assisted teacher in creating and grading tests

West Middle School

Martinsville, IN

January 1994-May 1994

Reading tutor, Grade 8

Independent G.E.D. Tutor

Bloomington, IN

October 1993 – December 1994

Activities and Honors

Who’s Who Among America’s Teachers, 7th edition (2002)

Disney American Teacher Award Nominee (2001, 2002)

High school Sunday school teacher (2000 – present)

Head of Delegation, Indiana Special Olympics, November 1995 – April 1997

Special Olympics volunteer, September 1995 – November 1995

Southwestern Gold Award, 1990

Head Wrestling Coach, Bi-County Wrestling Club, Bloomington, IN, March 1986 – May 1990

- ✓ Coached 50+ member teams ranging in age from 3 to 18
- ✓ Indiana top-ten freestyle wrestling team, 1986, 88, 89, 90
- ✓ Coached individual state champions, 1986, 88, 89
- ✓ Coached national freestyle championship qualifiers, 1986, 89

References available upon request

Proposal Summary

- National attention has recently been placed on the importance of graduating high school seniors' ability to understand and correctly use proper grammar. This has been an increasing concern for both the private and business sectors beginning around the time that the first graduating class of students who were taught through the whole language approach to grammar instruction entered the workforce or began higher educational pursuits.
- Nearly every state mandates that students master appropriate grammar usage before high school graduation, with many of them showing a need for such mastery by the beginning of the sophomore year. This growing concern for our students' lack of knowledge in grammar, and their growing apathy toward grammar instruction and subsequent knowledge pushes for an instructional technique that can put prescriptive grammar instruction in a new and exciting light. A methodology built on and promoting the concept, that English grammar is easy. Every year that passes without such a methodology creates greater hostility toward grammar instruction, the skills of graduating seniors, and the English/Language Arts community. We have created a behemoth that feeds on itself through the placement of English/Language Arts teachers who do not know nor like prescriptive grammar themselves into the secondary school setting.
- Education needs a strategy that incorporates the concept of keeping things simple with the active mindset of today's students, would engage, excite, and motivate students in the English/Language Arts classroom, including English as a Second Language, Limited English Proficiency, Special Education, and Gifted and Talented students, and thus improve the overall climate and strength of the school's educational environment. By finding such a methodology and the appropriate classroom application, the strength of our national educational system, and the mastery levels of our students leaving high school would increase.
- This form of education, known as a reductionist approach, was first implemented as far back as the days of Socrates (Moustafa, 1997), and has been utilized in American public schooling as far back as the Massachusetts elementary schools of 1647. This strategy has recently been under fire.
- Beginning in the late 1960's and early 1970's, the push for a whole language or constructionist approach to learning appeared, and has taken hold of the English/Language Arts classrooms (Simmons, 1998).
- The whole language approach is somewhat based on the theories of very reputable researchers such as Piaget, Dewey, Vygotsky, and Chomsky, as well as other equally notable researchers (Keefe, 1996), but fails to consider the findings of such researchers as Howard Gardner, Willard Dagget, and the researchers at the Regional Educational Laboratories. Charlotte Keefe, in her book *Label Free Learning* (1996), describes whole language as a process based on the philosophy that "learning is easy," and "students and teachers, as primary participants, are in control of the learning environment," while she states that the traditional reductionist approach "carries two messages: 1) Learning is hard; 2) Teachers need all the help they can get" (p. 13).
- In viewing the whole language approach, it can be seen that the current push in education is to teach grammar as a descriptive process, describing the language as it is used, rather than a prescriptive process, prescribing how it should be used as determined by social standards (Wolfram, 1998). This approach eliminates the instruction of Standard English practices and encourages the instruction of slang, dialects, and cultural variations of the English language because grammar practice is boring, phonics is hard, and nobody likes doing worksheets.

- The whole-language approach to language study in its basic form seems to be based largely on the idea that if we make the learning revolve around the learner, skip the difficult to learn and boring material, and keep the teacher from being the one to correct students' word usage and spelling, then we can make learning fun for students. In its basic form, the whole-language approach to language study seems to be based largely on the idea that if we make the learning revolve around the learner, skip the difficult to learn and boring material, and keep the teacher from being the one to correct students' word usage and spelling, then we can make learning fun for students.
- Howard Gardner's *Theory of Multiple Intelligences* provides educators with the groundwork necessary to make grammar instruction easy, enjoyable, and meaningful to all students.
- The Multiple Intelligence Theory also defeats a common idea that some students, especially the learning disabled, are not able to understand even the simple classifications of grammar.
- Within the context of the multiple intelligences, it can also be surmised that English as a New Language/Limited English Proficient and special education students could more easily obtain grammar proficiency through instructional approaches that address more than the commonly accessed verbal/linguistic intelligence.
- It is rarely debated in most English/Language Arts circles that students should be exposed to various types of literature, writing, and speaking scenarios, but the need for grammar instruction is highly contested among those teachers. The current national standards suggested by the NCTE makes only a vague reference to students' ability to use language structure (The List of Standards, 1999), while the Columbia University School of Education states that "students should develop an understanding of the parts of the English language" (English, 2000).
- Although it is fairly consistent among English/Language Arts teachers that grammar rules and practice are not of utmost importance (Dagget and Ott, 1999), which identifies the reasoning behind the NCTE's vague grammatical reference, research has found that the general population finds grammar of great importance.
- Surveys showed that most important English standard and the seventh most important academic standard overall, as ranked by those other than English/Language Arts teachers, was the ability to apply in writing the rules and conventions of grammar, usage, punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, with 83% of the respondents ranking it as the most important area of English (Dagget and Ott, 1999). English/Language Arts teachers, on the other hand, ranked this same standard as the twenty-eighth most important standard overall and one of the least important of the English standards.
- By identifying the stimuli that aid or deter the learning process, it is possible to manipulate the surroundings and the stimuli to create an environment that maximizes the opportunities for student learning.
- Researchers know that the brain is a parallel processor, which simply means that it can perform multiple tasks at once, much like a computer (Funderstanding: brain-based learning, 1998). The brain is constantly processing information and storing what it perceives as important. The information that the brain perceives as important, however, is not necessarily the material that the teacher intends to be learned (Wolfe, November 1998).

- Learning is a process in which the brain takes in information, processes that information, stores the information it deems relevant, and is then able to recall that information at a later time.
- Scientists believe that memory is divided into two distinct categories, declarative and procedural. Declarative memory is the type of memory in which a person can recall the information, but does not necessarily know how to apply that information. This type of memory is believed to be located on the cortex and is what is considered the conscious memory. Procedural memory is located deeper in the brain and “allows us to perform procedures without using the limited conscious-processing space” (Wolfe, page 63). It is also believed that procedural memory is created through the repeated firing of the neurons until a permanent connection is made. (Inside the teen brain, 1999, Wolfe, 1998).
- Additional research has recently found that emotional intelligence is “a better predictor of future success than traditional methods such as GPA, IQ, or standardized test scores,” and that “emotional health is fundamental to effective learning” (page 1). This means an instructional method, which allows students to learn by using their strongest intelligences from Gardner’s theory to develop the basic concepts of emotional intelligences further, is needed.
- Researchers have shown that “many students who have difficulty in school do not use strategic methods, but randomly guess when confronted with problems” (Lombardi & Butera, page 2), which seems to imply that either the instructors are not teaching students to recognize how they learn and then teaching the students according to the strengths of their students, or that there are other factors which impact a student’s learning. Although the first scenario is unfortunately overwhelmingly true, one factor that affects student learning is in fact the emotional state of the student. The classroom environment has been found to be a large factor in student learning, because learning is a process with a profound physiological impact.
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- Neurological research has found that emotions play a critical role in the patterning process because the brain’s reaction to certain emotions (Funderstanding: brain-based learning, 1998). It is a long established fact that the brain reacts differently to fear than it does to pleasure. This, then, is the crucial link in presenting grammar to students in an interesting manner.
- The grammar instruction must utilize the concepts of relaxed alertness, active learning, orchestrated immersion, concrete and abstract learners, and active and reflective learners. It should incorporate the multiple intelligences, the emotional intelligences, and right- and left-brain activities.
- The approach should incorporate patterning, visualizations, and movement into traditional concepts such as rote-memorization, sequencing, and analyzing. It should also create a classroom environment that allows for observational learning, along with active participation, peer tutoring, and the positive reinforcements thought so necessary by the behaviorists. It should create a positive and relaxed classroom culture that views learning as something enjoyable.

- A large stumbling block for students and teachers as well, is remembering the complicated rules and procedures traditionally taught with prescriptive grammar.
- An approach that can effectively teach to all of the intelligences strengthens those intelligences in which students are weak and need work, teaches to those in which they are strong, and strengthens the emotional intelligences introduced by Goleman is needed.
- The proposed approach to teaching grammar, when used in totality uses direct instruction through mini-lessons and “teachable moments”, in conjunction with the basics of child learning set out by Piaget, and a fundamental shift in the student’s view of grammar instruction. The approach places prescriptive grammar instruction in a position to create great intrinsic motivation for the student to perform.
- Along with the diversity of special education students, we saw in the Midwest Educational Laboratories study that the minority students also need many of the same classroom conditions as the special needs child, specifically peer tutoring, cooperative learning, high classroom expectations, adaptability of the lesson, and incentives or rewards – all of which are obtained through the proposed program.
- Our approach makes grammar instruction a fun, enjoyable, and meaningful experience for everyone involved.
- In order to remain educationally competitive on a worldwide scale, we must realize that now is the time to create classrooms full of activity that promote creativity, positive attitudes, a feeling of support, and a feeling of self-worth.
- Primary research into currently used methodologies will be conducted during the first year of the study. Information being collected will include currently implemented instructional practices and prospective participant school information, including student demographics, availability of teachers, and district standards.
- The goal of the research team is to secure six to nine teachers within each district in order to present a more valid sampling of the effectiveness of each instructional approach and to secure the widest possible selection of learning styles and ability levels, including special education students and English as a New Language/Limited English Proficiency students. We also are targeting a wide selection of both rural and urban schools, socio-economic factors, ethnicities, and both public and private schools.
- Student grammar proficiency will be tested through the administration of a content specific test at the beginning and end of each grading period.
- At the close of the third year, we will begin the analysis of all statistical and anecdotal information received and will disseminate our findings.
- The findings of this study will further enhance the international body of knowledge that is currently available, and will provide information applicable to increasing student learning in the area of English grammar specifically, and in all areas of academia generally. The informational findings of this study will not be limited strictly to the presentation of prescriptive grammar rules, but will support current and on-going brain and educational research in the areas of cognition.

SOURCES

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