Since the 1963 publication of *Research in Written Composition* by Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones and Lowell Schoer (NCTE), teachers of writers have wondered how much grammar to teach or whether to teach grammar at all. Remember this famous paragraph? “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.”

Now comes Constance Weaver, following up her *Grammar for Teachers* (NCTE, 1979) with *Teaching Grammar in Context*. Weaver suggests teaching those aspects of grammar that are most relevant to writing, but teaching less grammar than we once did, focusing our use of grammar as a tool to support writing growth and setting aside as much time for actual writing as possible.

Indeed, writing — the generation of language, revision and editing — is the central focus of the book. Developing writers, she insists, should not be overloaded with grammar terminology. Teachers are sometimes eager to ladle out more arcane language expertise than students need or can get a hold on. This is not a recipe for inspiring a love of language. I recall a parallel case involving one of my sons as a young, fledgling stamp collector. He was investigating a beginner’s stamp collection notebook and received a gift that overwhelmed him: a three-inch-thick stamp notebook, the kind experts use. He soon lost interest in stamp collecting, just as many students confronted with grammar books that must appear to them three inches thick give up on ever learning much about correctness.

Here is Weaver’s basic position: “Students can learn and apply many grammatical concepts without learning to analyze and label the parts of speech and various other grammatical constructions. While this recognition does not solve all problems in teaching grammar, it can certainly be a starting point for experimenting with other approaches to teaching those aspects of grammar that are most relevant to writing.”

Teachers should not, however, conclude from Weaver’s common sense approach that they need not know grammar. Teachers, she believes, should know as much about language as possible in order to help individual students understand, as needed, grammatical concepts. She points to Lucy Caulkins’ and Nancie Atwell’s mini-lessons as good ways to share knowledge without requiring that young writers go through the behaviorist practice-and-be-tested hoops. Such lessons may work with the many students who find grammar palatable only in small doses.

*Teaching Grammar in Context*, however, is not primarily a
“how-to” book. Rather, it presents an overview of issues related to teaching grammar. Because of this focus, the book might be particularly useful in settings such as English education methods classes or staff inservice sessions. Group discussions of this book could very well motivate teachers to share strategies for teaching grammar in context.

Chapter 1 offers definitions of the term “grammar,” including the fundamental sense of grammar as “the unconscious command of syntax that enables us to understand and speak the language.” Grammar in this sense need not be taught, since it is what we learn as we acquire language. Chapter 1 also gives a historical perspective on traditional school grammar, originally taught to (1) discipline the mind and (2) teach socially prestigious forms that sometimes offered the middle and upper classes “an excuse for considering themselves superior to others.” In the eighteenth century, Weaver notes, prescriptions for English were based on descriptions of Latin, whether they were relevant to English or not. The rule about not ending a sentence with a preposition comes from Latin. “This literally can’t be done in Latin so it shouldn’t be done in English,” the eighteenth century grammarians reasoned. The grammarians might have done well to listen to another Latin speaker, the ancient Roman Quintilian, who believed that “standards for usage should be based on the current usage of the educated.”

Early chapters of the book consider research data related to the teaching of grammar. For example, Weaver explores such questions as “How is language acquired?” and “Are errors evidence of growth?” With the support of research, Weaver, in a play on the popular “scope and sequence” charts produced by textbook publishers, advocates scope but not sequence. For example, a kindergartner using dialogue is in a position to learn quotation marks, while an adult may need review of many such conventions. Thus, a particular skill may be taught at a variety of levels.

Weaver writes:

...We teachers cannot realistically hope to sequence what aspects of grammar should be taught. It simply won’t work... Thus — it bears repeating — there cannot be any sensible scope and sequence to tell us what to teach when, with regard to revising and editing. As teachers, we simply have to be knowledgeable enough about developmental trends to have some ideas when and how to intervene with particular students — and this means being sensitive to their feelings about their writing and themselves as writers too.

Key to much of Weaver’s discussion is Noam Chomsky’s distinction between “surface structure” and “deep structure” — the grammar that allows us to comprehend and produce language. This leads her to review some of the unconscious learning we do as we acquire the grammatical structure of English. For example, we come to understand without acquiring the terminology that a “have” auxiliary is always followed by a past participle (“She has left her job”) while a “be” auxiliary is always followed by a present participle (“Jerry will be taking over her job”).

Teachers ... should know as much about language as possible in order to help individual students

Weaver acknowledges that we don’t know “how children acquire grammatical competence in their native language. We can only extract the patterns from recorded utterances and formulate rules that would account for those utterances.” After analyzing children’s early speech, she concludes, “Considering just the surface structure, such learning might appear to proceed from part to whole. But viewed from the deeper, underlying structure, it is just the opposite: First comes the whole, the underlying propositions, and then gradually comes an ability to represent the parts that reflect and convey that whole.” Anyone who has acquired language, she says, does know what a sentence is, and reading miscues (Ken Goodman’s term) demonstrate that intuitive sense of grammar.

Second languages are best acquired in much the same way as the first, Weaver observes: through immersion in using the language. She refers to the work of Stephen Krashen who contrasts
language learning (formally studying a language) with language acquisition, learning to communicate naturally without formal instruction. To oversimplify, Krashen says we acquire language through comprehensible input — taking in language we don’t understand within a context that makes it understandable. Weaver also discusses the research of Warwick Elley, who concluded that direct teaching of grammar is not necessary for acquiring the basic structure of a second language any more than for acquiring one’s native language. Since small children are not worried about being perfect, they are inclined to play with language. This helps account for their ready acquisition of language. “Unless an adult intervenes punitively, young children will just naturally take risks in using language; they are uninhibited by fear of failure, punishment, or embarrassment.” This lack of inhibition underlies children’s willingness to try invented or constructed spelling.

Weaver’s thinking relies on the case she makes for the contractivist or transitional model of learning, the view that learners make their own meaning based upon their background knowledge, experiences, and purposes. This model he contrasts with the reductionist or transmission model, one in which the teacher — the possessor of ready-made knowledge — delivers information to the students. As Weaver discusses these two positions, she treats us to a review of the work of many years of thinking about these issues, citing theorists from Edward Thorndike to Madeline Hunter, from Brian Cambourne to Jerome Bruner.

In support of constructivism, she discusses research that shows “by the end of first grade, children encouraged to spell as best they can score as well or better on standardized tests of spelling than children who are asked to write using only the words they can spell correctly. In addition, they seem to develop a better grasp of phonics, to use a much wider range of vocabulary, and of course to write as well.”

Weaver recalls an important sentence from Grammar for Teachers: “There seems to be little value in marking students’ papers with ‘corrections,’ little value in teaching the conventions of mechanics apart from actual writing, and even less value in teaching grammar in order to instill these conventions.” This conclusion leads Weaver to observe that the teacher needs sometimes to serve as an editor rather than a critic or judge. In this view, she echoes James Britton’s “teacher as learning colleague” idea and Peter Elbow’s vision of the teacher helping the writer meet the standards of the “gatekeepers.”

She also makes clear that the gatekeepers are not all that watchful. She notes that published writers occasionally use comma splices, such as in John Steinbeck’s summary sentence: “They clambered up the grass, they clutched at each other, little ones rode on big ones.” And she looks at what Kline and Memering called “minor sentences,” sentences such as “How convenient!”

From Weaver’s book we can draw some guidelines which teachers at all levels can apply. Some of her suggestions are:

- engage students in writing across the curriculum
- read good literature
- teach grammar in context using a minimum of terminology
- offer grammar electives
- follow up on mini-lessons with students who exhibit both the need and readiness for a particular skill.

Is there some concluding advice that teachers will be able to take away from Teaching Grammar in Context? If there is, I would put it this way: Teachers need to know grammar, process writing, developmental trends and individual learners. They need to be able to use grammar, when appropriate, to help writers improve their writing, especially their revising and editing.

What a reasonable idea, especially for someone like me who began teaching using Warriner’s Grammar and Composition and who, about the time he was becoming expert at diagramming sentences, virtually stopped using grammar terms altogether. Weaver sets the stage for a second look at grammar as a tool for writers, and I find myself parting the curtains.

Reference