

# GRAMMAR AND DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS - WHAT DOES THE BRITISH EPPI REVIEW STUDY TELL US?<sup>1</sup>

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*International studies have concluded that the teaching of formal grammar does not improve pupils' writing skills. The most recent and extensive reports are possibly those from a review carried out by the British EPPI-Centre. These reports provide a systematic examination of studies carried out from the 1960s onwards. In this article, we take a critical look at key definitions of concepts used in the EPPI review, such as "grammar" and "sentence combining", and at the relationship between these concepts. Through this, we wish to discuss the main differences between teaching grammar and teaching "sentence combining" when it comes to the effect on pupils' writing skills. We also take a brief look at the history of the Norwegian debate on grammar teaching, giving a pointer to the relevance of the international debate to our own.*

## INTRODUCTION: WHAT DOES THE EPPI REVIEW SHOW?

EPPI (Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating) is a British centre, funded by British government bodies. EPPI's purpose is to gather results from "public policy research in a format that policy-makers, practitioners, academic and other users of research can use to make sensible decisions based on sound evidence". Figure 1 shows the institutions behind EPPI:



Figure 1: EPPI. See also <http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=63>

In this article, we wish to take a closer look at a review study carried out by the EPPI-Centre, a study of the effects of grammar teaching on pupils' accuracy and quality in written composition. The EPPI review systematically goes through research into the relationship between grammar teaching and the development of writing skills carried out from 1960 until the present day (see short overview in Andrews et al., 2006). EPPI's review study concludes that the teaching of what they term "grammar" and "syntax", has practically no effect on the writing skills of 5 to 16 year olds.

[...] there is no high-quality evidence to counter the prevailing belief that the teaching of the principles underlying and informing word order or 'syntax' has virtually no influence on the writing quality or accuracy of 5 to 16 year olds (Andrews et al., 2004a p. 47).

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an English translation (by Hilde Syversen) of the Norwegian paper: Tonne, Ingebjørg & Sakshaug, Laila (2007). [Grammatikk og skriveutvikling – hva sier den britiske EPPI-oversiktsstudien?](#), I: Synnøve Matre & Torlaug Løkensgard Hoel (red.), *Skrive for nåtid og framtid, bind 1. Skrivning i arbeidsliv og skole*. Tapir Akademisk Forlag. ISBN 9788251922159.

What they describe as “sentence combining”, however, EPPI does on the other hand conclude “[...] is an effective means of improving the syntactic maturity of students in English between the ages of 5 and 16.” (Andrews et al., 2004b p. 47).

Our starting point when studying the EPPI review, is to reflect on the research objects “grammar/syntax” and “sentence combining”, and how definitions of these objects are used in the review.<sup>2</sup> The EPPI review does to a large extent underline points of view about grammar which are well established amongst those working in or doing research into education, including those in Norway. Hence, it is of interest first to give an outline of the Norwegian debate, before we set out what EPPI has discovered and how they have done this.<sup>3</sup> We shall first look at Norway and arguments used here to support the position of grammar in education system in general, and in particular how the relationship between grammar teaching and writing skills has been examined.

### THE NORWEGIAN DEBATE ABOUT GRAMMAR IN SCHOOLS

In her article ”Grammatikk og morsmålsopplæring – historisk perspektiv” (‘Grammar and the teaching of the mother tongue - an historical perspective’), Frøydis Hertzberg gives an outline of the Norwegian debate on teaching first language grammar, represented by Baardseth (1873, p. 59, our translation):

Anyone who knows what grammar is, cannot deny that it is useful to learn it, both in order to speak properly, write properly, read properly, and understand properly what it is one hears or reads.

But, as Hertzberg points out, there has never been any consensus on this amongst teachers. For example, in his book on methods for teaching Norwegian from 1889 (and excerpts in Hertzberg and Jahr, 1980), the headmaster Johan Nicolaisen claimed to have rebutted some of the more well established arguments for teaching grammar in schools, such as the view that it develops reasoning skills as well as help reading and writing. Nicolaisen was of the view that the teaching of grammar was neither necessary nor desirable. At the most, he was willing to concede that grammar teaching might be helpful for spelling and punctuation. He sets out how grammar can be a useful tool when providing explanations in such cases:

Those rules of punctuation which are commonly applied in our language, are for the most part based on syntax. If children are consciously to follow these rules, we must teach them to know a sentence and also to separate between sentences. This again, is most easily achieved when they know some word groups (very few, though) and the two main components of a sentence, and it is also seen as necessary that they know the subordinate clause, i.e. that they can distinguish it from a main clause. (Nicolaisen, 1889, p. 151, our translation).

Nicolaisen analyses this use of grammar in schools in an interesting way:

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<sup>2</sup>What we present in this article is only the starting point of a project which, in addition to the mentioned discussion of terms relating to grammar and the teaching of grammar, may also incorporate the testing of methods for grammar related teaching and writing in the class room, a project which we hope to develop in the future.

<sup>3</sup>With regards to established knowledge in this field outside of Norway, see for example discussions in Hillocks (1984).

This teaching of grammar departs, as one sees it, very significantly from the usual teaching of grammar which relies on systematising. The main difference lies in the completely different purpose. We do not set out with the purpose of teaching the children grammar (...) our sole concern is the practical need, the demand, dictated by accurate writing and correct punctuation (ibid.).

He finishes by saying:

There is, in the main, the same relationship between the theoretical-systematic grammar and the practical applied [grammar] as that between mathematics and practical addition and subtraction.

Over a hundred years ago, then, there were already those working in education in Norway who made a distinction between purely theoretical grammar teaching and the teaching of a more practically applied knowledge of grammar. Later, we will see that the EPPI study, in our view, blurs this important distinction, in that it does not make clear what kinds of teaching are in fact being compared.

Like an echo of this early Norwegian debate on grammar, grammar teaching in schools reappears on the agenda in the 1970s and 80s. Again, we make use of Hertzberg's account of the main fault lines of that debate, looking back from 2004: "At the heart of the debate [in the years around 1980] was the question of how grammar in its then form could defend its position as a pedagogical tool for teaching Norwegian" (Hertzberg, 2004, p. 97, our translation). She also gives an account of developments at the intersection between grammar and teaching from the late 1970s until 2004. She points out the most significant changes in linguistics since 1980; changes which one might think would have a bearing on how the role of first language Norwegian grammar teaching is viewed. These changes concern the emergence of a generative grammar and the new, non-normative view on language to which it gave rise. Furthermore, it concerns pragmatics, which shows that context is important, and also research into spoken language which has given us a more nuanced view on the relationship between speech and writing. The important insights provided by sociolinguistics and text linguistics, are also held up by Hertzberg as relevant.

About ten years prior to this article (Hertzberg, 2004), Hertzberg published an updated version of her doctoral thesis, in the form of the book *Norsk grammatikk i historisk lys* ('Norwegian grammar in an historical perspective') (Hertzberg, 1995). This is an important contribution to the analysis of the position of grammar in Norwegian schools, as it outlines the main arguments used for and against the teaching of grammar in schools. In the book, Hertzberg refers to three traditional arguments (historic key arguments) in favour of grammar as a discipline and three "modern" arguments. We will describe these arguments here, as a background to understanding the changing status of grammar in Norwegian schools, a debate which according to Hertzberg has been characterised by the same arguments for and against ever since the time of the Enlightenment.

The three historic key arguments are:

*The Formal Argument.* This is the argument that (education in) grammar develops the intellect, by exercising the ability to think logically through grammar, and that this ability can

be transferred to other intellectual abilities. Hertzberg traces this argument back to the 18th century. (Hertzberg, 1995, p. 17).

*The Foreign Language Argument.* This is the argument that grammar has a place in teaching the native language because this knowledge is needed in order to learn a foreign language. This argument is, according to Hertzberg, based on two main postulates: Firstly, the postulate that it is more efficient to take the detour via the grammar of the native language than to go directly to the grammar of the foreign language; and secondly that it is apposite to describe different languages using the same grammatical model. These postulates, says Hertzberg, are in turn based on the fundamental postulate that the teaching of grammar in itself makes it easier to acquire a foreign language.

*The Language Ability Argument.* This is an argument that being taught grammar makes the pupil better at expressing herself in her native language. Hertzberg (p. 76-77) finds this argument in use as far back as in Peder Syv's *Den Danske Sprog-Kunst eller Grammatica* ('The Art of the Danish Language or Grammar') from 1685. This argument is also found in the Norwegian national curriculum from 1974, and is also the argument for teaching grammar that the EPPI-report uses as its starting point. (op. cit. p. 34-35).

The three modern arguments mainly hail from the 1980s, according to Hertzberg, but it is right to say that these arguments are still expressed in the current debate:

*The General Education Argument.* Here Hertzberg refers to several scholars, amongst others Jan Terje Faarlund, Lars Sigfred Evensen and Jon Erik Hagen. From slightly different points of view, all three argue that even if the teaching of grammar should turn out not to have a positive effect on pupils' writing skills, grammar is such a significant part of a person's skills and conduct that it is a vital part of a well-rounded general education. According to Hertzberg, this argument is related to the formal education argument, but differs in some significant ways: "But in contrast to the old formal education pedagogues, today's language scientists do not think that this knowledge makes a more moral and worthy person, who is more able to do the right thing" (Hertzberg, 1995, p 122-23).

*The Language Cross Over Argument.* Here, Hertzberg is referring to, amongst others, Helge Skar, who in an article in 1972 makes the case for grammar in schools as a "common frame of reference" which "has universal Western European validity" (quoted from Hertzberg, 1995: 125) Both Skar himself and Hertzberg sees this argument in light of the revival of the idea of a common grammar brought about by Chomsky's launch of the transformational generative grammar, which Chomsky himself connects to 17th and 18th century ideas of a universal grammar.

*The Metalanguage Argument.* This is the argument that you need a language about language, a grammatical metalanguage. In first language Norwegian teaching, this is demonstrated by how grammar can be of use in other topics, such as spoken language, Old Norse, and the second-choice form of the first language Norwegian ("sidemål") An example of this relevance is the rules governing the noun inflection in Norwegian which can be applied to all three of these disciplines within Norwegian as a subject. Furthermore, guidance in a language needs a set of grammatical terms (op. cit. p. 130).

In a separate chapter in her book, Hertzberg asks if text linguistics might represent the future school grammar. Her answer is, as we understand it, ambivalent. On the one hand, text linguistics became established as an important new language discipline by pinpointing the incompleteness of syntactical analysis. On the other hand, it has never put forward an alternative to syntax, says Hertzberg, but rather widened the analysis of language to larger units, *based on* syntax. This way, text linguistics can be seen as the strongest argument for traditional grammar, amongst other things as a metalanguage.

In view of these arguments and the reflections around them in Hertzberg's work, it seems reasonable that she ten years later on "grammar, the sore point in Norwegian teaching" concludes that:

Summing up, I would say that it is no longer school grammar in itself that is problematic, but the fact that it is persistently subjected to expectations which it cannot fulfil. In order to draw benefit from teaching grammar in schools, we need to do three things. We must liberate it from the narrow and normative view on languages that it is associated with, we must do away with the expectation that *it*, in itself is the path to language mastery, and we must liberate it from the ambition that it should say something important about language as a phenomenon. Traditional grammar can be a platform for further work with these tasks, but it cannot itself perform these tasks. If we leave the traditional grammar to be that which it was originally developed for, a system which makes it possible for us to talk about language in a simple way, it is good as gold. (Hertzberg, 2004, p. 107, our translation).

The peculiar thing is, according to Hertzberg (2004), that the content of school grammar, despite all the aforementioned changes and advances in language sciences, has not changed. It is as it was around 1980, even though it has had to accommodate other, new topics alongside it in the national curriculum for teaching of Norwegian as a first language. In 2004, not even the terminology used in school grammar was changed, despite the publishing in 1997 of the extensive new *Norsk referansegrammatikk* ('Norwegian Grammar Reference') (Faarlund, Lie and Vannebo, 1997). To some extent, this has changed since Hertzberg's 2004 article, with the new textbooks published in response to the curriculum set out in the government reform *Knowledge Promotion 2006* (Kunnskapsløftet 2006). Though not consistently used in the new textbooks, we see that several of them use (parts of) the new terminology. Subjunctions, *is*, for example, used instead of subordinating conjunctions, numerals have gone, and cardinal numbers are seen as adjectives (see for example Holm and Løkken, Zeppelin, språkbok 6, Aschehoug).

#### **METHOD, OBJECTS AND TERMS USED BY EPPI**

When we return to the more internationally oriented review carried out by EPPI, our starting point for this discussion is that we would like to highlight something of relevance to the Norwegian debate on grammar and writing. This is that since the relationship between grammar and writing is not at all straightforward, it is important to clarify what the research objects are, what is being compared, how terms used to describe the research objects are defined and used, and which method has been used in the studies.

#### **EPPI's method**

The method used by EPPI for selecting studies to include in the review has been fairly strict. Hence, the number of studies included is considerably reduced. This is how EPPI itself describes the selection of studies for the review (Andrews et al., 2006, p. 43):

The initial electronic searching for research in the field between 1900 and 2004 identified 4691 papers, which were screened for potential relevance on the basis of title and abstract. A further 50 potentially relevant papers were identified through hand searching. A total of 267 papers were then obtained and all were re-screened on the basis of the full paper. Of these, 64 turned out to be relevant to the particular criteria for the review and constituted a map of the field. Twenty-six papers reported reviews and 38 reported primary research.

In other words, starting with 4,741 articles, the selection was first narrowed down to 267 and then reduced further to 64 articles. Out of these, 26 were review studies whilst 38 were on

primary research. Some of these 38 articles were reporting on the same studies. The articles they were finally left with were divided into two groups, those suitable for the syntax review and those suitable for the “sentence combining” review:

11 papers were deemed by the review group to be highly relevant to the in-depth review on syntax and 20 papers, reporting on 18 studies, were relevant to the in-depth review on sentence combining (ibid.).

The EPPI review sets out in detail how the selection was made. Still, it is not possible to ignore that the number of primary studies included in the review is low, particularly considering that they claim to cover many decades of research in this field. We find this puzzling, whilst we don’t exclude the possibility that the selection itself may have something interesting to tell us about the relationship between grammar teaching and the development of writing skills in children and young people. However, further aspects of the review other than the selection method has been of greater interest to us; those of how the review define its research objects and the concepts they use.

In what follows, we propose to discuss the use of the term “grammar teaching”. What is understood by “grammar” in the EPPI study? What is understood by “teaching”. We also wish to look at the expression “sentence combining” and compare the latter to the two former terms. Following on from this, we wish to identify the most important differences between teaching grammar and teaching “sentence combining” with regard to the effect on the pupils’ writing skills.

### **How are the research objects defined and named?**

Firstly, we will discuss the relationship between the aforementioned terms “grammar” and “sentence combining”, using EPPI’s definitions of these terms as our starting point. EPPI defines the terms “sentence combining” and “syntax” as follows:

”Sentence combining”

A teaching technique for linking sentences horizontally, i.e. not via their meaning or sub-grammatical character, but with connectives (e.g. conjunctions) or syntagmatically [...]. It can also cover sentence-embedding and other techniques for expanding and complicating the structure of sentences (Andrews et al., 2004a p. 111).

“Syntax”

Constraints which control acceptable word order within a sentence, or dominance relations (such as head noun + relative clause) (ibid.)

We also include here their definition of “traditional grammar”, as they sometimes use this term almost synonymously with “syntax”:

”Traditional grammar”

Sentence grammars that tend to focus on the internal elements of the sentence, classifying ‘parts of speech’ and describing (and sometimes prescribing) the relationship between parts of speech (ibid.).

As well as these definitions, we do in the EPPI report sometimes find other ways of evaluating grammar teaching. Here, the evaluations are more implicit than in the definitions we have quoted above. Our view is that it is important to draw attention to these evaluations, to show how the terms above are treated differently, partly because they refer to different kinds of objects. We do this in the following way:

The EPPI review looks at, amongst other, a study by Fogel and Ehri (2000). Fogel and Ehri's (2000) objective was to find out how students who used "Black English Vernacular" forms were best taught how to use Standard English (SE) in their written work. Three teaching methods were used in order to teach the pupils six SE features. The methods were then compared. The three methods used were as follows:

- 1) E - "Exposure only", where the pupils listened to stories where these six SE features were used.
- 2) ES - "Exposure/Strategies", where the pupils listened to stories using the relevant forms, but in addition also had this use pointed out and presented.
- 3) ESP - "Exposure/Strategies/Practice", where as well as using the methods above, the pupils translated sentences from "Black English" to SE and were given feedback from their teacher on their work.

Not surprisingly, the third method gave the best results. The ESP method incorporates not only pupils listening to the forms that were being taught, having them pointed out and talked about, but ALSO trying them out in their own writing, with feedback. The pupils became better at deploying the six SE features, also in their own free writing. The EPPI reviewers explain:

The results of this study showed that the ESP treatment was more effective in teaching students to write using [Standard English] forms than either of the other two treatments. What the study reveals is, perhaps, more pedagogical than grammar-based: differences between [Black English Vernacular] and [Standard English] are grammatical issues, but it is not until such differences are understood and then practised in writing that they take effect" (Andrews et al., 2006, p. 45).

This quote shows, in our view, that Andrews et al. are trying to redefine the ESP method from being grammar teaching to being something more pedagogical, since the teacher is using a system which includes understanding and practical work in the teaching. We get the impression that if the work is practical, this is no longer grammar teaching, but something else. We think this pinpoints an important difference between the objects which are being compared in the EPPI study.

Grammar is, as the definition above also points out, principles which say something about the relationship between words in a sentence. Grammar is in other words not a method. The EPPI review has not defined "grammar teaching" but "grammar". Hence, that which is pedagogic and that which is carried out by the pupil on a practical level as part of teaching grammar, is explained as something other than grammar. "Sentence combining", on the other hand, as we read the definitions above, is a method, a "teaching technique", used to hammer home certain types of sentences. Ulf Teleman (1980, p. 73, footnote 2) does, in a different context, make some interesting observations:

I do think it is important to separate the following three aspects:

- a) The characteristics of the good product
- b) The characteristics of the good writing process (causes a)
- c) The characteristics of the good writing learning process (causes b))

What is normally meant by grammar is a way of specifying some of the characteristics of the product, no more. [...]

Grammar is then type a) according to Teleman, while “sentence combining” is more similar to type c). Grammar is a specification of what constitutes grammatical utterances in a language, not a method for finding out how to learn to use these grammatical statements.

Below, we exemplify this discussion by taking a closer look at word classes. We look at how topics related to word classes can be fitted in to the class room teaching, on the one hand as part of teaching “grammar” and on the other hand as part of the kind of teaching EPPI refers to as “sentence combining”. What does it mean to teach word classes as “grammar”, and what are the implications of teaching it as “sentence combining”?

### **Are apples and pears being compared?**

Our understanding of what the difference is between “grammar teaching” and “sentence combining” is connected to this central question, which we have already touched upon: What is meant by “grammar teaching”, when it is claimed that grammar teaching has not been found to have a positive effect on developing writing skills? What is the key variable that makes “sentence combining” but not “grammar teaching”, have a positive effect on pupils’ writing skills?

Let us perform a thought experiment:

When it comes to teaching grammar, teaching word classes and related topics has been seen as important in Norwegian schools, judging from how word classes are treated in the Norwegian national curricula. L97 (curriculum from 1997) in particular, has many concrete references to word classes (2nd, 3rd, 4th, 6th and 7th school year). The curriculum in Knowledge Promotion (“Kunnskapsløftet”) places a particular emphasis on word classes: One of the six skills objectives post year 4 under the main area of “Language and Culture”, is that the pupil should be able to “describe language, the use of language, word classes and their function”.

Conjunction and subordinating subjunction, formerly called co-ordinating conjunction and subordinating conjunction, are examples of word classes. In order to follow the curriculum on this point, the teacher might try through explanation and examples to teach the pupils about these and other word classes, and about their function. What does she tell the pupils? In the textbooks, it is typically stated that conjunctions are words that connect similar words, similar clauses or sentences. About subjunctions, it is typically explained that they introduce subordinate clauses and that they are subordinating words. The teacher might say similar things when she describes these word classes. Following on, she might show some examples of how *and*, *or*, *but*, *for*, *so*, *so that*, *because*, *which*, and so on, examples in actual texts (see for instance Sandvik and Rudidalen 2006).



Such explanations are examples of teaching grammar, and according to the EPPI review have no positive effect on quality and accuracy in written composition. However, when the teacher's explanation is put to practical use in the method "sentence combining", it is quite a different matter. The pupils practice making new sentences out of old ones, they use the conjunctions and subordinating conjunctions in their own writing, and become better at using conjunctions and subordinating conjunctions, i.e. connecting sentences. Another skills objective post year 4, is that the pupil should be able to vary their sentence construction.

Looking more closely at what constitutes a "sentence combining" exercise, we see that these cannot be carried out without any form of linguistic or grammatical explanations. One "sentence combining" exercise we have looked at more closely, is introduced as follows:

Sentence Combining, practice 1

Combining ideas. Combine short sentences by using compound subjects or verbs, phrase modifiers, compound sentences, or compound-complex sentences.

(PH@school Student pages, 2006)

It is not a given that the (English speaking) pupils understand all these expressions unless the teacher goes through it with them. But the advantage of these kinds of exercises is that they include a lot of examples, which would help if the pupil doesn't understand what, for example, "compound-complex sentences" are, even after an explanation from the teacher. Some of the examples shown with the above "sentence combining" exercise are:

The tide came up. It washed away our sand castle.

Which becomes:

The tide came up and washed away our sand castle.

And:

We had hoped to visit the rock. The Pilgrims had landed there. The area was blocked off.

Which can become:

We had hoped to visit the rock where the Pilgrims had landed, but the area was blocked off.

Another similar exercise in this field is called "sentence scrambling" (see for example Killgallon, 1984); There, the pupils are asked to divide up long sentences into parts that give meaning, like sub clauses. These parts are then to be moved around, in order to vary the sentence construction. This is reminiscent of the moving test we do when analysing sentences in order to find the different clauses. Again, this type of exercise, in this case the "sentence scrambling" exercise, is seen as having a positive effect on the pupils' writing skills. In this connection it is worth noting that another skills objective for post year 4 pupils in the Knowledge Promotion ('Kunnskapsløftet') is that the pupils are able to vary their sentence construction.

The question we ask is whether the difference pointed out in the EPPI review is a (somewhat unclear and convoluted) argument for learning through trying out and making your own experiences, and we think it is important to show that the two objects the study seeks to compare are difficult to compare because they have such different characteristics.

### **PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION AND THE WAY FORWARD**

Our interpretation of the EPPI results so far is that grammar teaching, if not backed up by pupil activities, does not have a positive effect on pupils' accuracy and quality in written composition. But if the teacher's know-how in grammar is translated into extensive, repetitive, imitative and practical exercises for the pupils, in other words a "sentence combining" drill, the pupils become better at using the new, complex sentence structures they have imitated in their practical work.

We are not of the view that it is wrong to make this distinction, between, on the one hand, purely theoretical teaching, and on the other hand practical application and (relatively) meaningful direct links to the pupil's own writing. The problem we have highlighted here is that it is wrong to call one, which does not improve writing skills, "grammar teaching", when what is defined and in fact compared is pure grammar (and not "teaching"). This becomes particularly striking when the other object, "sentence combining", which the study shows to be more effective, is a limited, practical method, with limited scope and a specified implementation. Setting these out in opposition to one another is confusing and misleading, as there are two completely different types of objects being compared.

We think it more constructive to discover and discuss what kinds of classroom activities best improve pupils' writing skills. Is it the degree of autonomous activity which is key? Is drilling in few limited types of sentences positive also for pupils' general written composition, or is the effect limited to just the types of sentences that has been part of the drill? Perhaps a combination of the teacher explaining grammar and the pupils trying it out in their own writing might have a positive effect? If so, what combination would prove fruitful? Fogel and Ehri (2000), described above, show that such a combination of explanation and practical work can give good results. The EPPI study obscures these results, because the researchers responsible for the study in our view overlooks the fact that the research objects are of different types and cannot easily be compared in a meaningful way.