

Examining Linguistics in the Language Strand of the Common Core State Standards

Kristin Denham*

English, Western Washington University

Abstract

The funding and support of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the widespread adoption of the standards have prompted the educational publishing industry in the United States to produce a host of offerings, all promising to help students meet these rigorous new standards. In the CCSS for English Language Arts and Literacy, there is an entire strand, with the title ‘Language’, offering the opportunity to incorporate knowledge of language into schools in ways that will further the goals of educators, administrators, and linguists alike. However, an examination of some of the materials aligned with the CCSS that are offered by corporate publishing giants reveals that these are not informed by advances in linguistics and undermine teachers’ autonomy. Additionally, many of the Language standards themselves are not informed by linguistics and instead reinforce myths, stereotypes, and discriminatory attitudes, if taken at face value. Linguists, teacher educators, and teachers must recognize today’s publishers’ marketing ploys for what they are. If teachers are encouraged to do what they know how to do, including select their own materials, and to use the topics in the Language standards to teach in more sophisticated ways about language, then the standards could become a launching pad for improved teaching and learning about language and linguistic discrimination.

Introduction

In 2009, with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states, two territories, and the District of Columbia developed a set of standards in English language arts and mathematics for kindergarten through 12th grade, called the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2014). By now, 43 states have adopted the Common Core State Standards. This is likely the biggest attempt at educational reform the U.S. has ever had, and, not surprisingly, it is controversial. Groups on opposite ends of the political spectrum oppose the standards; some progressives view them and the corporate publishing that proceeds along with them as threats to teacher autonomy, while some Tea Party conservatives view them as an example of too much government control and intervention.

As a linguist and teacher educator, I have mixed feelings about the Language strand of the CCSS for English Language Arts and Literacy. On the one hand, these standards, which include the three sections Conventions of Standard English, Knowledge of Language, and Vocabulary Acquisition and Use, are frustrating and inadequate. They seem to conflate speaking with writing, usage, and conventions with knowledge of language, and they give only a polite nod to language diversity (restricting mention of it to ‘stories, dramas, and poems’). On the other hand, the standards do address grammatical categories, phrases, clauses, language variation, and etymology, among other topics. Although the language standards in the CCSS are surely not the ones that linguists would have written, this extensive list, more than we have seen in other standards, *could* provide an opportunity to introduce more and better conversations about language in K–12 schools.

I am not entirely comfortable advocating for these standards, however, because I fear that the standards will be used to reinforce old-fashioned methods, myths, and stereotypes. Also, the very existence of standards can lead to control of the content of public education for the benefit of profit-making enterprises rather than for the benefit of students. Additionally, the assessment of the students' ability to meet the standards, which appears to be an inevitable result of the creation of standards, is an insidious enterprise. When assessment is used to evaluate not only students, but also teachers and schools, test creators control the curriculum. However, the CCSS are here, and they are important to school districts and therefore to teachers. If linguists, teachers, and teacher educators do not get involved, then the profit-making enterprises will step in (they already have), paying no attention to linguistic advances and research. Or, the Language standards could become a touchstone for linguists and teachers to connect and collaborate, together speaking up loudly and clearly about ways to make use of these standards to advance knowledge of language informed by linguistic research, while pushing back against inferior mandated curricula.

The standards in the Language strand are an eclectic mix. This unevenness is undoubtedly a feature of many standards, written by groups of people who cannot be experts in everything. Take, for example, a Grade 9–10 standard: 'Use various types of phrases and clauses to convey specific meanings'. All students are, of course, already *using* phrases and clauses to convey meaning and have been since they were toddlers. They have also been doing so in their writing since a very young age. The intent of the standard is presumably to have students consider the effects of manipulating phrases and clauses in their writing. And the standard could also be used to tackle grammatical exploration for its own sake and for other applications. Other standards include quite simple concepts, such as the Grade 5 standard: 'Use a comma to set off the words *yes* and *no* ... , to set off a tag question from the rest of the sentence ... and to indicate direct address ... ', while others involve grammatical analysis, such as the Grade 3 standard to 'produce simple, compound, and complex sentences'. The directive 'to produce' is unnecessary; students are doing that already. But if they are to be able to recognize, analyze, and manipulate the phrases in their writing, that is a more interesting, but more complex task. And some standards are simply peculiar, such as this Grade 8 standard: 'Form and use verbs in the indicative, imperative, interrogative, conditional, and subjunctive mood'. There is no imaginable reason why students need to 'learn' how to use the interrogative or even stranger the all but extinct subjunctive. Also, and perhaps most importantly, some of the language standards are intended to reinforce varieties of language created by a powerful majority, without discussion of standard language ideology and its repercussions. The very first standard for every grade, K–12, is to 'Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking'. This component of the CCSS for Language cannot be ignored. The unevenness of the standards means, therefore, that it is important to thoughtfully approach each one to determine its worth, its relative importance, and relevant and meaningful extensions of it.

If we empower and encourage teachers to use the Common Core standards without having to depend on the mandated or packaged curricula being marketed to meet them, and if the standards are used as a scaffold to teach what teachers and other experts know to be important using methods and materials that *they* find effective, then perhaps we can make use of these standards. Government initiatives such as No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and now the CCSS have led publishing giants, the likes of Benchmark, Pearson, and The College Board, to produce resources that incorporate almost nothing from the successes of linguistic advances in K–12 education. Neither such initiatives nor the resources that follow in their wakes should dictate what is taught.

When school districts purchase and mandate a set of curriculum materials (and then, as has happened in my district, do surprise checks in classrooms to ensure that the materials are

being used), teacher autonomy is severely undermined. My district selected the *SpringBoard* curriculum package, published by The College Board, for all schools. Part of the motivation for doing so, in addition to helping students meet the new Common Core standards, was to address inequity by allowing all students equal access to the same Language Arts curriculum. The College Board offers testimonials such as ‘SpringBoard levels the playing field and provides all students the same academic experiences to build on’ (Springboard Success Story). This, of course, is an honorable goal, but assuming that the path toward equity is a mandated curriculum is a disturbing trend. Another motivation for mandated curriculum is to level the teacher playing field, offering a structure for new or struggling teachers. There is no evidence, however, that forcing a cookie cutter approach increases the performance of either teachers or students. Allington (2002) has consistently found that quality teacher instructional practices far outweigh most every other factor. He writes, ‘The exemplary teachers we studied too often had to teach against the organizational grain. They rejected district plans that “required” all children be placed in the same textbook or tradebook (and do the same worksheets on the same day). They recognized such schemes for what they are: truly anti-scientific, non-research-based fads designed more, it seems, as an attempt to exert administrative power than to produce high levels of student achievement’ (742).

Top-down control of classrooms is of concern even when the materials are good ones; however, many of the curricula emerging today under the guise of helping students meet the CCSS are anti-scientific, non-research-based approaches to language that do their best to remove not only the thinking for teachers but also for students, becoming an example of educational reform at its worst. Two examples follow.

Benchmark Education and The College Board’s SpringBoard

A fifth grade teacher I work with was asked by her school and district to use the Benchmark Education Company’s word study curriculum (<http://www.benchmarkeducation.com/>).¹ Benchmark Education is a large, national school resource publisher, with varied materials for literacy education. Benchmark Universe (<http://www.benchmarkuniverse.com/>), the online component with e-books and interactive resources, claims to have ‘research-based resources with proven results’ for all: ‘gifted, on-level, struggling readers, students with learning disabilities, and those still mastering English as a second language. Benchmark Education provides solutions’. The teacher wanted my take on the curriculum’s approach to word study connected to the Common Core. The basic content seems generally fine; Grade 3 is focused primarily on spelling patterns, Grade 4 too, though the curriculum expands into prefixes, suffixes, and homographs/homophones; and Grade 5 materials address learning suffixes, prefixes, and Greek and Latin roots, aligned with the Common Core (such as this standard for Grade 5: ‘Use common, grade-appropriate Greek and Latin affixes and roots as clues to the meaning of a word’). However, there is a fundamental problem that runs throughout this curriculum. It *tells* students what the morphemes mean. Aside from providing belittling scripts for teachers to use, those scripts are completely top-down, not allowing students to discover the unconscious knowledge that they already have about words and their parts, nor encouraging them to discover the patterns that would emerge if they were to analyze a set of word data. For example, the script dictates:

Write the suffix *-ion* on the chalkboard. Explain to students that today they will be working with the suffix *-ion*. Say: This suffix appears in many words and refers to an ‘action or process’ or ‘the result of an action or process.’ Adding *-ion* to a base word usually changes it from a verb to a noun.

With the top-down model, suffixes and their functions just become things to memorize. The discovery, the critical thinking, and the analysis are missing. Also missing is the sense of empowerment that comes when students understand that grammatical knowledge, such as the fact that *-ion* attaches to verbs to make nouns, is not handed down from on high but comes from within.

Another major curriculum package, *SpringBoard*, is, according to its website, in use in 42 states by 1.7 million students. Its lessons align with the Common Core standards, and its promotional video makes bold – but vague – claims: ‘Effective implementation of the Common Core requires powerful shifts in teaching, learning, and assessment. SpringBoard is proof that high expectations, supported by rigorous, accessible instruction and materials, measured by the highest quality authentic assessment, can and will deliver success’ (Springboard English Language Arts).

This series has very little direct study of language; instead, there are ‘Grammar and Usage’ sidebars, such as the one reproduced here.

A preposition links the noun or pronoun following it (its object) to another word in a sentence.

Prepositional phrases add specific or necessary detail in sentences. They function as adverbs or adjectives.

Adverb phrase modifying the verb *has swerved*:...skateboarding has swerved *from the fringe*...

Adjective phrase modifying the noun *cost*: cost *of doing business*

You can use prepositional phrases to add specific details when you write. Take care to use correct subject-verb agreement. When a prepositional phrase separates the subject and verb, the verb agrees with the subject, not with the object of the prepositional phrase. (*The College Board’s SpringBoard: English Textual Power, Level 2, Grade 7, p. 97*)

This boxed information occurs alongside a text passage about persuasive writing. The sidebar itself focuses on prepositions and prepositional phrases (‘Explain the function of nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in general and their functions in particular sentences’), and other phrase types are also mentioned (addressing this standard: ‘Explain the function of phrases and clauses in general and their function in specific sentences’). At the end of this sidebar, however, a connection to another one of the standards is made: ‘Ensure subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent agreement’.*² However, no examples of subject-verb agreement are given in the sidebar, and it would be very difficult for students (or teachers) to glean how prepositional phrases are related to subject-verb agreement, or even to understand what is meant by that phrase or others, such as ‘object of the prepositional phrase.’

In order to better illustrate what I believe are the intended goals for this sidebar, let’s first investigate subject-verb agreement. It is often listed as one of the most common errors of writing, showing up on lists from elementary to college-level writing. Most writers, however, do not have issues at all with subject-verb agreement; our unconscious intuitions serve us quite well.³ One place in which there is variation with respect to subject-verb agreement, though, involves subjects that contain prepositional phrases, as in the following example:

Each of the birds are/is going to leave the nest soon.

When there is a mismatch in the number of the head noun and the noun within the prepositional phrase, as in singular *each* compared to plural *birds* in the example above, then

speakers and writers choose either noun for the verb to agree with. Such variation in language typically spurs a usage rule; the suggested standard for edited academic writing is to make the verb agree with the head noun preceding the prepositional phrase.⁴ There are, then, logical reasons for including the various grammatical topics in this sidebar; however, more time and introspection than a sidebar discussion allows is needed in order to understand grammatical terminology (prepositional phrases), grammatical functions (subjects), and the reasons behind the variations. After delving into those topics, students could make informed choices about subject-verb agreement in writing. However, few students would understand these lessons and adjust their own verb choices in writing based on an oversimplified sidebar such as this one.

Grammatical sidebars and other similar mini-lessons like these throughout the *SpringBoard* curriculum seem designed to cut to the chase – to check off one of the standards and to deal with common writing errors in a fast and efficient manner. In so doing, however, such lessons do not allow students to engage with discovery of language and its patterns, nor do they take into account the vast body of research from linguistics, instead relying on shortcuts that don't work.⁵ Not only are students likely to miss the intended lesson but they also may doubt their intuitions and never realize their ability to analyze language. The assumed background knowledge, the misleading terminology, and the lack of discussion of reasons behind the errors render such lessons essentially useless, both in terms of dealing with the 'error' and with expanding grammatical knowledge. Many districts mandate curriculum programs like *Springboard* not for the 'exemplary teacher' but instead to provide more structure for the average, or even 'bad' teacher; however, this curriculum's approaches to language and grammar cannot possibly be effective for such teachers since so much information in these texts is incorrect or assumed, and opportunities for analysis and exploration are not offered.

Linguistically Informed Practice

As noted, some of the CCSS do contain terminology and concepts that one can build on to have informed conversations about and investigations into language. Consider a few examples from the Conventions of Standard English section from Grades 3, 7, and 9–10 to illustrate:

Grade 3: Explain the function of nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in general and their functions in particular sentences.

Grade 7: Explain the function of phrases and clauses in general and their function in specific sentences.

Grade 9–10: Use various types of phrases . . . and clauses . . . to convey specific meanings and add variety and interest to writing or presentations.

Students already know how to use these categories in their speech and writing, but a teacher can seize on the term 'explain', used in the Grade 3 and Grade 7 standards, to invite discovery of that knowledge, offering linguistically informed ways to approach such study. (Other standards, with directives to 'form' and 'produce' language, lend themselves less to discovery learning.)

To illustrate the kinds of problem solving that linguists and many K–12 teachers have used for decades, employing made-up, nonsense words to discover morphemes, I offer a sample lesson developed in conjunction with teachers and used in upper elementary, middle, and high school classes. Before such a lesson, the students need only a very brief introduction to the lexical category labels *noun*, *verb*, and *adjective*.

Introduction to Nouns – Nouns and Unconscious Knowledge

Consider a nonsense sentence, such as the following:

The dorbling groobies frandled a bonkled slank.

Ask students to identify the word category (part of speech) of various words. They'll quickly tell you that *groobies* and *slank* are nouns. They will likely add that *frandled* is a verb. They may stumble a bit on *dorbling* and *bonkled*, but will soon label these as adjectives. (If they do stumble, it's because these forms, in other positions, could be verbs; they're aware that those *-ing* and *-ed* endings are typical verbal endings.) So how do we know all this? How do we know that *groobies* and *slank* are nouns? It's certainly not because a noun is the name of a 'person, place, thing, or even idea' since these 'things' don't even exist. We know because of the morphology and syntax, because of the suffixes, in this case, on the words (their morphology) and because of the position of the words in relation to the other words (some of which are 'real' words) in the rest of the sentence (the syntax). It is that kind of knowledge that we make use of all of the time to identify categories and to learn real new words and how they function. We can also move some of those words around and see how the category changes:

While she was dorbling, she bonkled some slank groobies.
He groobies on the weekends.

We know that *dorbling* and *bonkled* are verbs here because of the affixes (the morphology) and their positions in relation to other words (the syntax). We know that *slank* is an adjective because of its position preceding *groobies*, which is still a noun. But in the next sentence, *groobies* is a verb. We know this because of the affixes and the positions of the words in relation to each other.

This lesson illustrates the discovery learning approach to word and sentence analysis, which can be used to investigate any number of kinds of grammatical relationships. Such an approach may take more time than having students learn meaning-based definitions of parts of speech and meanings of suffixes and prefixes, as in *Benchmark*, but it's an approach that is based on scientific facts about language.

Linguistically Informed Resources

Although Benchmark Education Company, The College Board, and other educational publishers that market to school districts do not appear to take into account work by linguists, when we look beyond them, we find there are, in fact, quite a few linguistically informed, research-based textbooks and resources for use in upper elementary, middle, and high school classrooms that teachers can use when given the opportunity to choose their own materials. These offer students straightforward tools of analysis leading to discovery of category distinctions and other grammatical patterns, allowing lessons on language, including those that align with Common Core standards, to potentially become useful ones.

Schuster (2003) focuses on using morphological and syntactic clues, such as those in the 'Nouns and Unconscious Knowledge' exercise given above, to identify syntactic categories and discusses the inadequacy of meaning-based definitions. Anderson (2005) discusses the importance of teachers having a clear understanding of students' mistakes or 'pseudo-concepts', pointing out that there are good reasons that we all make 'errors', such as subject-verb agreement; they are rarely just random. A teacher needs to consider the reasons behind the errors, which are variations, not errors, and use those to empower and teach. Like

Anderson, Crovitz (2011) encourages teachers to understand that the ‘mistakes’ in students’ writing are not just careless and stupid; rather, they show students ‘grappling with meaning’ (32). He suggests playful ways to learn from students’ ambiguity in writing, and offers alternatives to typical daily oral language exercises. Crovitz also discusses how criticisms of one’s language can lead to one feeling ‘uncultured or ignorant’ (38); such discussion allows students to grapple directly with linguistic discrimination. Another useful resource is Ehrenworth and Vinton (2005), which offers practical, linguistically informed ways of introducing grammatical concepts, while acknowledging language change, language elitism, and the role of power, which simply cannot be separated from discussions of grammar. The authors also note the empowerment that can come with this approach to teaching about language:

...[G]iven that our language and culture are in flux and changing rapidly, we serve students best when we empower them to make purposeful choices and decisions based on a complex, nuanced understanding of the effects those grammatical choices will have on both our minds and our hearts and the way they can affect and reinforce meaning. (4)

Also noteworthy is Benjamin with Oliva (2007); the authors offer clear explanations, informed by linguistics, of which aspects of grammar to teach and why, with explicit application of those concepts to writing and analysis of literature. Another valuable resource is the website Exploring Language (<http://www.explorelanguage.org/>), which offers language-related lessons for Grades 3–8, all connected to the CCSS. Even though some of these resources position grammar study primarily as a means to an end (of learning rules of writing and error-correction), they do so in a way that takes advantage of students’ unconscious knowledge and that builds on the advances of linguistics. Also, they align with the Common Core standards and meet teachers and students on familiar ground, discussing writing, usage, and conventions, while also delving into broader concerns of language use in society, demonstrating ways in which language study is of central importance to everyone, and should not be simply treated as sidebar material.

One of the broader concerns of language use in society that every teacher should address is the role of a standard form of language. Many of the standards in the CCSS appear to be designed to promote a standard variety – in writing, certainly, but also in speaking. Such teaching without accompanying discussion can be extremely counter-productive and even destructive, in ways addressed below.

Standard Language and Discrimination

One of the sections of the Language Strand is called Conventions of Standard English, where the term alone promotes the mythical idea of a single, standard, ‘correct’ language variety. Also, the Anchor Standards, the more general standards for K–12 English Language Arts and Literacy, state quite unequivocally:

Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

There is much evidence, however, that there simply is no single linguistic variety with a set of rules that speakers and writers agree on; rather, there is a collection of shibboleths of both speaking and writing, but not enough to build an entire notion of a standard around. Promoting such a hypothetical standard in the CCSS further institutionalizes linguistic subordination and overlooks the discrimination suffered by speakers of non-mainstream dialects and non-native speakers of English.

The Common Core standards do incorporate notions about language variation in the Knowledge of Language section of the Language strand:

Grade 5: Compare and contrast the varieties of English (e.g., *dialects*, *registers*) used in stories, dramas, or poems.

Grades 9–10: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

However, in order to address these well, and in ways that aren't discriminatory (such as suggesting that variation only has a place in 'stories, dramas, or poems'), teachers must really understand the grammatical structures underlying the varieties, as well as understand the basis of biases about spoken and written variations. The Language standards of the CCSS should not be adopted if they continue to promote a standard language variety without accompanying discussion of what that means, where the notion of a standard comes from, and how it reinforces existing power structures.

Consider a Common Core standard previously discussed, 'Ensure subject-verb agreement', and the differing ways to approach the variation one might encounter. Though his treatment of parts of speech is enlightened, Schuster's (2003) treatment of subject-verb agreement defers to standard English, offering little discussion of variation; he simply teaches students to modify non-standard forms. In contrast, Wilde (2012) directly addresses variation in the context of linguistic discrimination and language privilege: 'Language variation is a social justice issue just as much as racial identity is' (96). Wilde introduces subject-verb agreement in this way:

One third-grader is likely to say 'My sister walks home from school' and another 'My sister walk home from school.' Only the first child will be judged to have met the standards, and this feature is likely to appear as a test item. Yet both children are speaking grammatically in the language of their home communities. However, the standard refers to 'the conventions of *standard* English grammar and usage,' so one child's home language is less valued and she has a strike against her from the start. (86–87)

Wilde calls variations in subject-verb agreement, like the ones discussed above with respect to the *SpringBoard* sidebar, 'copy-editor-level niceties' (as in, *Each of the birds are/is going to leave the nest soon*); these are likely not even what the CCSS writers are getting at, at least for Grade 3, the grade at which this standard is first presented. 'Clearly the goal here is to "correct" the language of some children, particularly since the standard applies to speech as well as writing' (Wilde, 87). Wilde's direct discussion of the goals of this standard and the aspects of language that it is attempting to address, without simply submitting to the standard's role as an arbiter of usage, is a much preferred approach to that of *SpringBoard*, for example. Discussion of 'standard English' cannot be swept under the rug. Wilde writes,

Presumably curriculum and tests linked to the Common Core State Standards will focus on items that don't appear in all students' home version of English, since those are the ones that some students get 'wrong'; indeed, the only native speakers of English who wouldn't meet this and similar standards are those whose versions of English have these slight variations in subject/verb agreement and the use of auxiliaries. (One could say, in fact, that the only reason such test items would exist is to single out these students.) (88)

Other resources for teaching about language variation and for teaching linguistically diverse students exist and have proven to be quite successful in classrooms at all levels.

Adger, Wolfram and Christian (2007) provide examples of ways for teachers and students to use their own language data to discover patterns, offering language variations not simply as problems that must be accommodated, but as an important area of study in their own right. The goals of Reaser and Wolfram (2007), a curriculum unit designed to meet social studies standards and which focuses on the languages and dialects of North Carolina (though it is adaptable to other regions), include developing ‘a respect for the systematic patterning of all language varieties’, gaining ‘authentic knowledge about how dialects pattern’, as well as an ‘appreciation for the connection between language and culture’. Wheeler and Swords (2010) and Brown (2009) are also excellent resources both for teacher preparation and for classroom use, as is Charity Hudley and Mallinson (2010, 2013), which explores how linguistic differences play out in classrooms and demonstrates quite specific ways to build in linguistically informed instruction.

Sweetland (2006, 2010) also discusses the role of language variation and language attitudes on student learning and offers evidence for the importance of teacher understanding of the workings of language. Teaching materials and textbooks such as these, which value linguistic diversity rather than try to eradicate it, *must* be included in any kind of curriculum.

The Common Core can offer an opportunity to introduce discussions about the role of language in society when materials, such as those listed here, are chosen thoughtfully by teachers who know that language can and must be studied scientifically, and that language study should not be used to reinforce linguistic inequality.

Conclusions

Linguists, teachers, and teacher educators can use the language found in the Language strand of the CCSS to advance students’ knowledge of language and introduce them to their capacity for inquiry into language more generally. The CCSS can be interpreted in order to develop knowledge of language in ways that take advantage of students’ unconscious knowledge, approach language study scientifically, and address the biases inherent in promoting a standard. However, if the standards are approached as just another list of items to check off, without teacher or student fully exploring and appreciating the value and diversity of their knowledge of language, then nothing will be gained. And when school districts buy in to a Benchmark- or *SpringBoard*-style top-down approach to help students meet the CCSS, teachers and students miss opportunities to address and investigate language complexities and patterns explicitly; instead, the information simply reinforces old adages (such as a noun is the name of a person, place, or thing; a clause is a group of words that express a complete thought) and promotes a mythical, idealized standard. But if linguists, teacher educators, and teachers demonstrate ways in which the packaged curricula are inadequate, while continuing to work together to ensure that teachers have the freedom they need in order to teach using materials, including their own, that allow for inquiry and discovery, and that directly acknowledge language biases, then we can effect change.

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Short Biography

Kristin Denham's research focuses on the integration of linguistics into K-12 education. She has co-edited (with Anne Lobeck) two books in this area, *Language in the Schools: Integrating Linguistics into K-12 Education* (Lawrence Erlbaum 2005) and *Linguistics at School: Language Awareness in Primary and Secondary Education* (Cambridge 2010), as well as articles and websites, including Exploring Language (<http://www.explorelanguage.org/>), TeachLing (<http://www.teachling.wvu.edu/>), and the blog Middle School Linguistics (<http://middleschoolling.blogspot.com/>). She has also co-authored (with Anne Lobeck) two textbooks, *Navigating English Grammar: A guide to analyzing real language* (Wiley-Blackwell 2013) and *Linguistics for Everyone: An Introduction* (Cengage 2013). Denham teaches linguistics in the English Department and the interdepartmental Linguistics Program at Western Washington University, where she has been since 1996. She holds a BA in Linguistics and French from Swarthmore College, an MA in Linguistics from the University of Arizona, and a PhD in Linguistics from the University of Washington.

Notes

* Correspondence address: Kristin Denham, English, Western Washington University, 516 High Street English Dept WWU, 516 High Street Bellingham Washington 98225, USA. 2824 Grant Street, Bellingham, Washington 98225, USA. E-mail: kristin.denham@wwu.edu

¹ You can't even peek at these materials without a school's login and you can't see much without paying.

² The asterisk appears in the standard and indicates one of the 'skills and understandings that are particularly likely to require continued attention in higher grades as they are applied to increasingly sophisticated writing and speaking'.

³ English language learners or speakers of various English dialects may have different patterns of subject-verb agreement. Such variations should not be called 'errors' since they are patterned and logical for that dialect, but they may differ from the so-called standard writing expected in most classroom writing. I return to this below.

⁴ The facts are, in fact, more interesting and complicated; the type of noun (whether it is a measure noun or not) preceding the prepositional phrase can affect the form of the verb (*Three gallons of milk is enough. / Three cats with long fur are enough.*), as is whether it is mass or count (*All of the chicken is gone. / All of the chickens are gone.*). Also, when there is a plural head and a singular in the prepositional phrase, there is no agreement variation: *Dogs on a leash are not scary. / *Dogs on a leash is not scary.* Middle and high school students could discover what facts determine their preferred verb choices and hypothesize about why.

⁵ The *SpringBoard* text also contains a Grammar Handbook as an appendix, which is simply material from Purdue's Online Writing Lab (OWL) website: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/5/>. It is not a grammar handbook, but a collection of usage rules and common errors of writing.

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