To The Editor:

In these days of shortages, it continues to amaze me how much energy we waste in education over the grammar teaching issue. Your recent “Education Section” (Back-to-School Supplement, Aug. 16), for instance, contained these assurances by Prin. Edward Jones: “The English courses at the school this year will place much more stress on grammar, spelling, and punctuation, which will be applied through greater emphasis on composition.” Now, certainly we want the schools to graduate students who have attained a high degree of literacy, yet currently it appears that there are massive deficiencies among students in the “basic” skill areas (of course, any kind of historical perspective on these matters will show that for more than 100 years certain educators have bemoaned the lack of proficiency in reading and writing among the nation’s youth — and one can always find real figures to support such a claim).

The point I wish to make, however, is that there is no direct relationship between the conscious mastery of grammar and the ability to write and speak fluently and “correctly.” All the research in this area in the last 50 years points conclusively to the lack of correlation between formal grammar instruction and proficiency in composition (and where a relationship has been found, it was always in a negative direction, since the teaching of grammar meant that the time the student otherwise could have been spending writing was being wasted in rote drill). Yet grammar teaching continues to hold its own with a rather broad-based support among our population. No one ever liked it themselves, but somehow it represented a necessary rite of passage, some mistaken badge of honor among the educated. And so this support frequently evolves into an emotional rather than a rational issue. Research evidence, even the latest theoretical findings from psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology, is totally ignored. People who in other areas remain up-to-date or skeptical cling to their ancient superstitions about grammar.

I suppose we must resign ourselves to being overpowered by such deep-rooted, though misdirected, beliefs. Still, what we should be doing in education bears repeating. If we really want to improve our children’s verbal ability, then we will require lots of active language use. We will have them write constantly about issues and events that are central to their lives. We will not insist on perfection the first time, but will realize that the act of composing involves numerous drafts. We will provide a wider audience for the child’s writing than just the teacher herself. And we will unequivocally ban all random and meaningless grammar exercises and instruction.

In fact, one of the most useful things we could do during the present energy crisis would be to use all the grammar texts as fuel to keep the furnaces in our schools burning so that our children can be participating in truly useful activities.

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