Voyages in English: Steeped in Tradition and Research

Introduction
In her book *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* (2003), Lynne Truss presents a humorous but somewhat disconcerting picture of average English-speaking adults when she states, “People can read very widely and well, and they are still not able to spell, or construct a sentence, or work out whether there’s an apostrophe in *its*. In a communication age, knowing how to write is a life skill.” When individuals present themselves with poor grammar and writing skills on resumes, entry-level essays, or applications, people will judge them as being careless and unintelligent (*Baltimore Sun*, 2004).

To fully appreciate the importance of grammar and correct usage as presented in both oral and written communication, it is important to look at what has been gleaned from research and experience over the years. To fully understand the benefits of a textbook series such as *Voyages in English* (VIE), it is equally important to understand how VIE responds to and is based in research, practice, and decades of tradition instructing elementary and middle school students in skills that have enabled them to speak and write articulately.

What the Research Indicates
In the 1970s formal grammar instruction was considered an antiquated practice in many educational environments. The preferred approach was “creativity at all costs with the results being ruinous on standard English acquisition” (Bantick, 2006). In the mid 1980s, the National Council of Teachers of English actually discouraged grammar instruction (Grammar Is Imperative, 2004). However, with the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative and state assessments with their emphasis on testing to measure achievement, English teachers are now “dusting off their grammar books” (*Baltimore Sun*, 2004) in a concerted effort to raise their students’ reading and writing scores. School officials are emphasizing the need for students to learn grammar as *the key* to developing writing skills. Spelling, grammar, and punctuation are in decline among American students. All aspects of grammar and writing need to be reinstated and taught consistently and well. “They cannot be absorbed through osmosis and through the act of reading alone” (Bantick).

While NCLB was promulgated for the purpose of achieving excellence in all schools, it is problematic in that it focuses attention on math and reading, while overlooking other disciplines that are “essential to a truly excellent education” (Sternberg) such as grammar, physical education, music, and art. On March 26, 2006, the *New York Times* ran an article with the headline “Schools Cutting Back to Teach Reading and Math.” Writing was not mentioned “despite national concern for overall student achievement” (Applebee, 2006). An unintended consequence of NCLB and other required high-stakes state tests is the shift of the instructional focus from the learner to the content and the results measured by these tests. Educators must recognize the danger of merely preparing students for tests rather than attending to the need to truly educate them (Sternberg).

Another danger that deserves mention is that of becoming satisfied with meeting minimum proficiency standards rather than providing students with high-level instruction and practice that challenges those who are most capable and supports those who struggle. Results from the 2003 National Curriculum Survey conducted by ACT, a widely used college entrance exam, show that “more than one in four college freshmen must take a remedial writing course” (Ezarik, 2003). The survey indicates that college
Instructors believe grammar and usage skills are the most important writing skills for entering college students. These instructors find students lacking in the ability to “consistently form complete sentence or to make pronouns agree with their referents” (Oldenburg). High school teachers, however, rank them last. While high school teachers acknowledge that grammar and usage are important, they devote themselves to teaching other writing skills. “Just 69 percent of high school teachers reported teaching [these skills]” (Ezarik). Cynthia Schmeiser, ACT's vice president for development, recommends that “grammar and usage skills be continually reinforced throughout K–12” (Ezarik).

The workplace has also become acutely aware of the deficits of potential employees regarding speaking and writing skills. In February 2006, 124 businesses were polled by the Association of Graduate Employers to determine the desirability of prospective employees. Those entrusted with the responsibility of hiring highlighted “poor communication skills, especially in grammar” (Bantick) during the application and interview process.

Not instructing numerous students in grammar for almost forty years has resulted in poor sentence construction and inappropriate or no punctuation. This drought has had its impact on the teaching profession as well. The test scores in literacy for teaching candidates in 1983 were in the seventy-fourth percentile, but by 2003 the scores dropped to the sixty-first percentile (Bantick).

The Unyielding Position of Voyage in English

Criticism leveled against those who continued to teach grammar, usage, punctuation, and writing were rooted in the misunderstanding that concepts and strategies were simply taught or drilled in isolation of any meaningful language activity. Diagramming was viewed as a useless exercise with no particular purpose. It is simply a matter of common sense to recognize that “to become skilled in almost [any] activity requires extensive and continual practice” (Allington). Those teachers who continued to use VIE knew that every aspect of language instruction has a purpose and enables students to grow in their ability and capacity to communicate in both the oral and the written word. These teachers recognized “the injustice of allowing students to continue making basic errors that may prevent them from admittance to the schools of their choice or to meaningful employment opportunities” (Oldenburg).

For over sixty years, those who wrote and published VIE, as well as those who used it for instruction in their classrooms, never abandoned the belief that communication is crucial in order to take one's place in the world. An excellent education in the acquisition and application of language has never been exclusively about memorizing parts of speech in isolation or diagramming a sentence as an end in itself. VIE has always been about helping students become polished, articulate, and intelligent communicators. It has always been focused on the needs of the students and in building their confidence so that when they speak, others listen, and when they write, others understand their message and want to read more. To that end, VIE has advanced the best values of the past to meet the demands of communication in the twenty-first century with all its new avenues of expression and technologies. Now as in past editions, the essential mission of VIE continues to be:

- To uphold the strength and rigor of the original VIE program that enabled hundreds of thousands of students to find their places as fully literate and valued contributors to society
- To provide all students (and teachers) with the proficiency in writing skills and grammar, and mastery in using genre to communicate successfully with any audience
- To reintegrate the writing process with its structural underpinnings at all levels to empower students as writers and critical thinkers who can achieve their full potential (Front matter—VIE, 2011)
The Standards and VIE

A comparison of the following graph to the scope and sequence chart and the explanation of the standards as they are applied in VIE will clarify exactly how the publishers, authors, and educational consultants have meticulously attended to the needs of learners and the requirements of the English language arts standards.

**NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts** *(NCTE/IRA, 1996)*

The focus of VIE is now and always has been on helping students with the mastery of grammar, writing, and the use of the English language. Students rarely recognize that what they learn in the classroom has both function and value in the real world. Teachers must constantly help students make the connection that what they learn in school has meaning and function outside the classroom walls. “Public discourse has [its] rules” *(Oldenburg, 2005)* and students will be judged on the way they communicate. To that end, the following standards have been used to inform the purpose, the curriculum content, and the development decisions in the production of VIE:
Audience

- **Standard 4:** Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. (NCTE/IRA, 1996)

Every language in the world has five registers, or levels, of formality (Payne, 2008)—frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate. With the explosion of digital media and the subsequent use of “text speak” (Bantick), communication is focused on being instantaneous, abbreviated, and set in the casual register. As a result, spelling is reduced to a minimum number of letters, traditional English is truncated, and expression is casual, quick, and often grammatically incorrect. This may be an acceptable level of expression when it occurs between friends; however, school and work environments operate in the formal and consultative registers.

In the formal register, word choice and sentence structure must be precise, accurate, and articulate. The consultative register is a combination of formal and casual (Payne) with distinctions drawn based on the setting and the participants. What is acceptable and appropriate in the schoolyard with classmates or in another informal setting may not be appropriate in the classroom during discussion or when addressing the teacher or classmates in an instructional environment.

VIE teaches students at every grade level how to recognize their purpose and audience and to adjust their oral and written communications to attend to what is required and acceptable. Over time, through consistent instruction and reinforcement, students understand the “social and disciplinary demands of the different forms of writing they encounter” (Applebee).

In grades one through eight, students are instructed in the application of seven traits of language necessary for quality writing: idea development, organization, word choice, voice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation. A review of the writing selections in VIE and the accompanying scoring rubrics evidences consistent attention to these requirements as they are applied to a variety of writing genres.

Strategies and Genres

- **Standard 5:** Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes. (NCTE/IRA, 1996)
- **Standard 6:** Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions, media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. (NCTE/IRA, 1996)

A review of the writing section in each level of VIE will reveal that the seven writing strategies are taught and applied to specific selections in a variety of genres. Prewriting, drafting, editing, revising, proofreading, and publishing are developed and practiced in an age-appropriate manner in grades one through eight in the following types of writing selections: description, exposition, letters, creative prose and poetry, persuasion, and research. Specific selections are introduced, taught for mastery, and reinforced over a period of at least two to three years to insure learning for understanding. These selections include personal narratives, how-to articles, descriptions, book reports, letters (friendly, business, formal), persuasive essays, poetry, and research reports. Each unit begins with an in-depth instruction of a specific genre...
along with specific grammar, usage, and mechanics concepts that students can immediately apply in the Writer’s Workshop to their individual writing assignment in the genre they just learned.

Research

- **Standard 7:** Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience. (NCTE/IRA, 1996)

- **Standard 8:** Students use a variety of technological and informational resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. (NCTE/IRA, 1996)

At every level in the VIE text, students are instructed in age-appropriate skills that are needed in research writing, from how to alphabetize in grade one to how to research, develop, and compose a complete research report in grade eight. Careful attention is given to presenting these skills in an evolutionary process so that students have time to master one skill for understanding before moving on to another. Those educators responsible for the production of VIE strongly believe that it is too late to wait until middle school to teach skills such as gathering data from a variety of sources, composing note cards, properly documenting parenthetical references, and preparing a Works Cited page.

By presenting each step of the research process in a systematic manner, VIE provides students with the much-needed support and practice to become not only accomplished researchers but also ethical writers. Students learn that good research requires searching numerous sources, selectively choosing the information that supports their topics, and applying the strategies of the writing process in order to produce well-constructed papers representative of their abilities. A review of the scope and sequence chart contained in the teacher’s edition of VIE will give a clear listing of what skills are presented and attended to in each grade.

The English Language Learner

- **Standard 10:** Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum. (NCTE/IRA, 1996)

All students deserve a strong, interesting, challenging curriculum with high-level outcomes. “All tasks should respect each learner” (Tomlinson, 2003). It is a myth that the English-language learner (ELL) is linguistically deficient. Linguists have known for decades that all languages, “even those considered to be deficient varieties of English dialects and English vernaculars, are highly structured with complex grammatical rules” (Gorski, 2008). The very first editions of VIE were intended to meet the needs of an immigrant population and assist them in taking their rightful place in society. That initial value of meeting the needs of the English-language learner has never been abandoned. With the resurgence of immigration, VIE continues to develop a curriculum that teaches to the strengths of English-language learners while supporting them in areas where they may struggle. It is a core value of VIE that curriculum and instructional materials never stereotype those new to the English language.
Application to Real Life

- **Standard 11:** Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities. (NCTE/IRA, 1996)

- **Standard 12:** Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information). (NCTE/IRA, 1996)

The development of every part of speech, each element of correct usage, and each writing strategy throughout the entire VIE series is directed toward producing reflective, creative, critical, and articulate communicators. The core values and competencies that fortify this series have always been focused on high-level instruction and practice that challenge the most able of students and support those who struggle. It is impossible to have a short-term view of curriculum and instruction and expect to have a long-term success rate for students. Directors of admittance or future employers may not ask a candidate to list the parts of speech or to diagram a sentence, but they will look at the quality of writing in a resume, an application, or a required essay. It is the articulate candidate that knows how to draw upon and utilize grammar and writing skills in a clear and concise manner who will win the day.

“The best teachers never lose sight of their students’ potential. They believe in the brilliance and ability of all of their students” (Landsman, 2006). The best instructional materials support the visions and beliefs of the best teachers. They keep their focus on helping students build upon their strengths and improve upon their weaknesses. The best teachers and the best instructional materials set the bar high and never settle for mediocrity for any student. Practices that work “establish common, high expectations for all learners with a focus on achievement” and provide for “increasing instructional time in literacy” (Hawkins, 2007).

**VIE Teaches All Students**

All students have needs. Students with special needs require a highly structured and organized program that provides appropriate support over time. Other students need a challenge where the basic curriculum is extended and calls for the application of critical thinking. All students have the right to be “full participants in an excellence-based education. Beginning with high-quality curriculum and instruction is a precursor to excellence for any student” (Tomlinson). Good instruction, with a support system in place, moves children beyond what they believe they are capable of doing. “When in doubt, teach up!” (Tomlinson). To do less would surely disenfranchise those students with poor communication skills and would be unjust to those students able to meet a challenge. High-level curriculum development “as a process, seeks to improve the learning experience of [all] students” (Wiles, 1999).

The content and skills required of articulate communicators have never been sacrificed by those who write or teach VIE. But people in education do change when they believe the change is right. Adaptation to the needs of the learner is part of every revision of VIE, but the integrity of what is taught and how instruction takes place never yields to what is considered popular or out of style in other educational environments.
Conclusion

Since the first publication of the Voyages in English series in 1942, the emphasis has always been on providing students with the necessary tools of oral and written language that honor their abilities and enable them to take their places in a dignified and articulate manner in sought-after educational institutions and, eventually, in the workforce and society. When the focus remains on the student and the level of expectation is high, standards and high-risk tests become ways of assessing student progress rather than goals to be met. A truly excellent instructional language series always sets its sight on lifetime communication competence rather than short-term minimum proficiency test results. Voyages in English has stood the test of time in proving its prowess in preparing students for life in a society that still values dignified communication skills and expects high-level performance.

Works Cited


