

Running Head: GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION

Getting Off of the Island:

Methods of Effective Grammar Instruction

Tara Fox

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Michigan State University

Abstract

Few teachers would argue against the importance of grammar instruction in their classroom. What do differ, however, are the methods teachers choose to employ when teaching such language skills to their students. Some educators stick to the hard and fast rules of grammar drills, textbook exercises, and plentiful worksheets. While such activities may certainly have their time and place, the current research indicates that more needs to be done in the English classroom with regards to grammar lessons. As a result, teachers need to become more proactive in raising student engagement and motivation while also carefully crafting lessons that demonstrate the deep relationship between grammar and its language arts counterparts.

Introduction

The instruction of grammar to students is often a beguiling challenge for English teachers. Most, if not all, would certainly agree that a firm grasp of syntax, sentence structure, and language rules are essential in building successful communication skills through speech and the written text. If this is the case, then language arts teachers must make a concerted effort to not only find the most effective methods of teaching grammar skills but also raise student proficiency in utilizing these skills outside of the classroom. This proposal requires educators to stop treating grammar as an island separate from the subjects it complements. As a result, English teachers need to employ strategies that allow for grammar instruction to be taught in context, intertwined with the key elements of reading and writing. Finally, this paper is also part of fulfilling the requirements for the TE 848 Methods of Writing Instruction online course.

Background and Rationale

Traditionally, the English teachers have been given a most demanding role in the larger scheme of schooling. In the past, they have been solely responsible for teaching comprehension skills for a wide variety of reading styles, increasing spelling and vocabulary competence along the way. They should then expose students to narrative fiction, poetry, and a range of expository non-fiction writings, among other styles, teaching them to critically evaluate such writings. Subsequently, students should then be able to write in these styles, composing works in which they can effectively communicate their thoughts and intents, demonstrating a carefully crafted ability to think critically about what they have put to paper. While this is going on, teachers are also held accountable for increasing student motivation in regards to each of these topics. In the midst of all this, English teachers must also squeeze in time for the adverb and the preposition,

the complex sentence and the superlative adjective forms, and a whole slew of other, foundational principles in the study of English grammar. This small portrait is certainly enough to leave the English teacher breathless on more than one occasion. Fortunately, not only does much in academic research note that such reading and writing skills should be taught in all classrooms, but the research also suggests that many educational institutions are moving toward this practice.

Three years ago, I began working in a K-12 private school as a middle school English teacher in north Miami. The school is presented with a unique opportunity as it educates its students within a very multicultural and typically urban context. The vast majority of our students are first-generation Americans, with parents hailing from islands all over the Caribbean. In addition, these students are immersed in a world where hip-hop and like-minded film and television programs reign supreme. They are also children of a highly evolved digital generation in which shortened, abbreviated words and fragmented sentences have become the norm for communicating fully evolved thought. For example, students sing songs in the hallways in which the main chorus proudly proclaims the “way I are” and do not blink twice (Linden, 2009). They turn in papers with the number “2” as a replacement for the word “to,” forgetting in their haste that such informal abbreviations have a time and a place and that time and place is probably not in an expository essay comparing and contrasting the policies of two American presidents. These various factors, then, present a particular challenge as students are bombarded on every level with ways of writing and speaking that dictates standards contrary to the ones taught during fifty minutes I am allotted daily in the classroom.

Of course, there are certainly times in which holding tightly to conventional grammar standards can be restrictive and even suffocate a student’s work. During such times, perhaps for

a creative writing, further emphasis, or in a more unconventional work, teachers should encourage students to explore different avenues of writing and speaking. There is no disagreement offered here to such deviations. In the same respect, however, no doubt the vast majority of language arts teachers would affirm the necessity of teaching of grammar conventions to their students. The following questions, then, remain. Has the instruction of grammar become an island unto itself in which it becomes an almost entirely separate discipline? Are students being taught foundational grammar standards in a way that reverberates after the bell rings? What grammar instruction methods that engage students fully? It is to this end that I have pursued the following research questions.

Literature Review

My limited literature review is comprised mainly of academic journals and select texts, along with my personal experiences and observations in the classroom. These sources focused on the need for grammar instruction along with practical ways to apply this instruction in the classroom through lesson plan ideas, activities, and games. Other texts looked at the importance of raising student motivation and identifying ways to increase student engagement while studying grammar. Finally, several works looked at the ways in which grammar should be taught, repeatedly emphasizing that grammar must be taught within a particular context if students are to implement basic sentence and syntax rules in their everyday lives or even care about grammar at all.

Research Questions

Much research has been conducted with respect to effective grammar instruction. As such, my research questions center on the following:

- In what context or contexts should grammar be taught? Should grammar be taught in isolation?
- To what degree should teachers emphasize grammar instruction with regards to the other demands of the English classroom?
- What methods best engage students in grammar lessons?

Though the exploration of these questions and resources, it is my hope that a clearer understanding of grammar instruction in the English classroom will emerge, allowing ample opportunity for teaching improvement in this underpinning area of language arts.

Charting a Course to the Mainland: Grammar in Context

Twenty years ago, the average eighth grader stepped into a language arts classroom and pulled out a faithful copy of Warriner's English Grammar and Composition or some comparable text and began a study of standard English grammar rules. While certainly a worthy occupation, this method of study was more often than not in disconnect from other school disciplines, with grammar instruction sitting faithfully on its own island while subjects like reading and writing were waiting separately on the mainland. In strong response to such traditionally popular teaching strategies, perhaps one of the concepts most reverberating in today's scholarly publications concerning the improvement of students' education in language is that grammar should not be taught in isolation, a methodology that will inevitably lead to counterproductive consequences.

Some researchers note that an isolated grammar instruction can be quite harmful to a student's progression in other areas of language. Paraskevas observes that an "apprenticeship into grammar should always be presented in the context of reading and writing; years of research have made it clear that grammar taught in isolation does not contribute to the writing skills of students." (Paraskevas, 2006, para. 3). Other teachers have found that teaching isolated grammar skills rob time from valuable reading and writing lessons (Sipe 2006). In short, teachers must be wary of detaching standard grammar rules from the language they serve. In fact, some of today's leading educators suggest that "traditional grammar instruction can encourage distorted views of how language works, ignoring some of the most interesting aspects of language shift and change" (Lindblom & Dunn, 2006, para. 2). Part of this distortion, of course, is the creation of a wall between language and its practical functions. It takes one skill to identify the adjectives in an series of unrelated, independent sentences in a textbook exercise; it takes another and arguably more useful skill entirely to write a sentence in which adjectives flow fluidly and contribute to a greater understanding of the topic at hand.

Knowing that grammar should be taught in context is not enough for the language arts teacher. This teacher must then employ strategies that are conducive to a grammar program in collaboration with other facets of language. Fearn and Farnan (2007) make this distinction when they discuss grammar *in* writing versus grammar *for* writing. Their research followed two teachers in urban schools, one who focused on traditional grammar approaches and a second who focused on the function of grammar within writing. The first teacher worked primarily with identification examples and worksheets, then moving to the separate writing portion of the class period. On the other hand, the second teacher primarily concentrated on getting students to *think* about what they were doing in class. As an exercise, for example, this teacher listed verbs on the

board and asked students to create sentences in their minds and subsequently share their sentences with the class. Then, students were asked to experiment with verb positions, considering different placements of the verb with the sentence – as the fourth word, fifth word, and so on. Again, students disclosed their sentences to the class. Once students had spent intentional time thinking about verbs in context, they set about writing paragraphs with deliberate emphasis on verb choice and placement (Fearn & Farnan, 2007).

In the end, this study indicated that grammar instruction within writing did not significantly raise student fluency or reduce student error than an isolated grammar instruction. However, these researchers did make a significant find, noting that “grammar-driven writing instruction enhanced writing performance as measured by holistic criteria, while traditional grammar instruction, separate from writing instruction, did not influence writing performance” (Fearn & Farnan, 2007, p. 75). The idea here is if students are simply working with find-and-identify drills during a grammar lesson, they should not be expected to competently transfer those skills to a writing exercise and in fact, most of the students in the traditional grammar approach in this study could not transfer such skills. Instead, students need to learn parts of speech and other grammar standards needed within the context of *thinking* in order to create sentence structures and syntax forms with authenticity and vitality.

Getting the Crew on Board: Student Engagement

Once teachers have ascertained and implemented strategies to make grammar a contextual activity, the next step in effect grammar instructions requires an ability to get the students on board with the method and engage them in the process at hand. Patterson, Schaller, & Clemens (2008) reflect this idea when they observe that “attitude, motivation, and engagement

are vital factors that contribute to reading and writing success.” Since we have established that grammar instruction should be taught within the context of reading and writing, educators must work to create an environment favorable to increasing these factors.

It has not been uncommon for English teachers to hear a mixture of grumblings and groans upon asking their students to pull out their grammar text, a type of reaction that is clearly not conducive to the learning process. Recent research has indicated that a student’s interest in the task at hand is achieved through the intertwining senses of competence and meaningfulness (Graham, MacArthur, & Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 203). This can, perhaps, be best achieved as educators teach students to take ownership of their writing and the words chosen to express their thoughts. As such, they cannot become carbon copies of the teacher, robotically regurgitating what they have heard from the front of the classroom into their writings. Consequently, the English teacher must take responsibility in cultivating the critical thinking abilities of their students. When students are given a chance to express *their* voice, without fear of punishment, they are more likely to take more care with the language they use. English teacher Nicholle Berg recognizes this trend when she notes the following:

Consequently, any perceived defamatory uses in papers upset me but not my students. Students had not taken ownership for language uses in their writing. I was to blame. My overzealous protection had inadvertently created student focus on my value of language instead of student value of effectively expressing self—that is, students' personal writing identities and valid recognition of purpose and audience. This produced an unintended and undesirable result: an affirmation of my knowledge as English expert rather than the encouragement of student

thinking, learning, and inquiry about applicable language uses in their world.

(Perry, 2006, para. 13)

In short, language arts teachers have been giving the responsibility of enhancing the learning process by guiding students into becoming independent thinkers. The classroom is not a place for teachers to “strut their stuff,” so to speak. Rather, teachers must be about the business of promoting student inquiry, and thus engagement, into the possible applications of their grammar skills. In a coauthored article studying student engagement with respect to grammar, Lauren Wright looks to the research of other educators who argue that

engagement cannot be disconnected from students’ broader and more extended experiences with school, asserting that learners’ relationships with texts must be viewed in terms of the vast web of experiences over time, in and outside school, that they bring to particular classroom episodes. (Smagorinsky & O’Donnell-Allen, 1998)

Essentially, students must believe that what they do *inside* the classroom has application and purpose *outside* the classroom.

Crew Activities: Suggestions for Engagement

In finding practical ways to increase student engagement, this section offers three suggestions. First asking students to make a connection to the sentences they write opens the door for grammar instruction to become more unified with other language arts disciplines. Katie Wood Ray suggests that students learning grammar need a selection of “touchstone texts” (Ray, as cited in Paraskevas, 2006). She defines these texts as “anything we read, anything that moves us” (Paraskevas, 2006). This has huge implications for teachers and students in the language arts

classroom, for it allows the teacher to demonstrate the breadth of that which impacts our lives, a creative step that can be played out in several ways. For example, the teacher might introduce a unit on parts of speech, and give the students a few days to return with a text, any text, that touches them. In any given classroom of eighth graders, the responses will be no doubt be diverse and even surprising, perhaps covering everything from a skillfully articulated poem or song lyric to a line from a *Sports Illustrated* capturing the beauty of a touchdown pass sailing in a perfect arc through the air in the final seconds of a championship game. Such impromptu examples can provide ample fodder for the teacher to demonstrate the flexibility and beauty of language in practical, everyday situations. Appendix A provides a sample lesson plan for such an activity.

Secondly, some educators have found success in teaching students that while grammar instruction is comprised of rules and standards, it is also paradoxically a means of “liberation” (Ruggieri, 2006, para. 9). To simplify, Paraskevas (2006) suggests demonstrating to students that grammar is not just a set of rules, but a selection of choices. For example, when teaching voice in writing, teachers generally encourage the use of active voice. A good teacher, though, will spend some time identifying ways in which passive voice can be used effectively. When constructing a minilesson differentiating between active and passive voice in a fictional narrative, a teacher can give the following two examples:

- *The babysitter mistakenly left the front door open.*
- *The front door had been mistakenly left open.*

In the first sentence, both the action “left” and the individual performing the action (“babysitter”) are identified. Because of the writer’s choice to use active voice, the reader knows exactly what has happened. In the second sentence, however, the use of passive voice leaves more unknown.

Who left the front door open? Perhaps it was the babysitter. On the other hand, if the author is writing a detective story, perhaps it was the notorious Red Brick Thief. Which option of voice is better? Class opinions may differ, and they should. The point is that with the second sentence, the reader must keep reading to unravel the mystery of the front door. If this level of mild suspense is what is intended by the writer, then the choice of passive voice is an effective one. As a result, teachers can use this small exercise to show that authors have an overwhelming amount of options before them, and that their choice of sentence construction and verb choice is ultimately up to them, utilized in whatever way may best convey the intended mood of the work.

Third, this idea of liberation is also played out in the very real truth that good writers sometimes break the rules (Ruggieri, 2006). In *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck writes, “Cyrus explained softly to Adam the nature of a soldier. And though his knowledge came from research rather than experience, he knew and he was accurate” (Steinbeck, 1979, p. 31). Here, Steinbeck makes the near-cardinal sin of beginning a sentence with the conjunction “and.” However, teachers can demonstrate that one reason this sentence works because the story is told by a first-person narrator, and when individuals are speaking, they naturally have breaks in thought before picking up again. Then, George Orwell employs this strategy in his classic *1984*, writing the following in the voice of his protagonist Winston.

*there was a middleaged woman might have been a jewess sitting up in the bow
with a little boy about three years old in her arms. little boy screaming with fright
and hiding his head between her breasts as if he was trying to burrow right into
her and the woman putting her arms around him and comforting him although
she was blue with fright herself [sic]. (Orwell, 1977, p. 10)*

While this may seem to be the ramblings of a madman, this diary is actually Winston's first act of rebellion against Big Brother, an unmonitored, uninhibited stream of thought that has dared to be immortalized on paper. It is, in fact, an incident of tremendous importance in the novel. The key here, however, is teaching students to distinguish between the times when breaking the rules is effective and when it is simply the result of lazy writing.

Reaching the Shoreline: Implications & Conclusion

In the end, all teachers must realize that sound grammar instruction is crucial to their students' ability to read and write effectively. This grammar instruction can certainly *not* be a singular activity in which grammar exercises are kept out on an island while the other language arts disciplines are separated by a veritable ocean of drills and worksheets. In the same respect, teachers must be proactive in lesson planning, securing genuine methods of assessment, and receiving feedback. It is an unfortunate day when a teacher's pride stands in the way of improving his or her educational classroom standards. Of course, it may be disheartening to hear a student say that a teacher's particular method is uninviting; it is even more disheartening, though, to learn that a student clocked out during a teaching period and left class without an increase in knowledge. As valuable as these grammar strategies may sound on paper, they are of no good if they are not effectively developed and implemented within the classroom.

Moreover, this latest academic research is revealing that a student's 100% on a clauses worksheet does not necessarily mean that they have developed the thinking skills needed to translate the different types of clauses to his or her writing. As such, we as teachers must constantly monitor our progress as educators in the classroom. In addition, we must also learn the flexibility we try to teach our students, not allowing ourselves to be chained to a grammar

text, and instead balancing the tension between when and where traditional grammar skills should be utilized and when and where these same, very malleable skills can be molded and stretched, or even tossed out completely, to fit a particular writing need. Finally, we must be diligent in teaching our students the ability to distinguish between such writing situations, creating authentic opportunities for student engagement each and every step of the way.

Appendix A. Beauty in Language with Verbs and Adjectives, Lesson Plan**Student Objectives**

Students will:

- Identify verbs and adjectives in previously-selected, meaningful texts.
- Evaluate author's selection in word choice.
- Write paragraphs with carefully crafted verbs and adjectives on a topic of meaning to them.

Instructional Plan

Preparation

- Introduce the concepts of verbs and adjectives.
- Give students two to three days to find a brief, but meaningful text.
- Bring newspaper copies to class for students who may show up unprepared.
- Separate students into groups of three for discussion.

Instruction and Activities

- Review definitions of verbs and adjectives with the class. (approx. 5 min.)
- Model activity in front of the class. Project modeled text in the front of the room or pass out paper copies for students. Identify the verbs and adjectives in a section of the text and think aloud as to possible reasons the author chose those words. (approx. 10 min.)
- Scaffold the activity in class discussion with a second text either projected on screen. Identify places where language appears to be beautiful or callous, flexible or rigid, etc. (approx. 10 min.)
- Group students and allow them to discuss the verbs and adjectives within their text and how these word choices contribute to the overall meaning of the text. (approx. 15 min.)
- Assemble students once more for a large-group discussion to identify what stood out to them most in these passages. Ask them to think about what worked in the texts and what did not work and how they can apply their learnings in their own writing. (approx. 9 min.)
- Assign students a one to two paragraph writing assignment about a meaningful topic for homework. Remind them to pay close attention to the verbs and adjectives they choose. At the bottom of paper, instruct the students to take a few sentences to discuss why they chose the verbs and adjectives that they did. (approx. 1 min.)

Assessment

- Conducted informally while walking around the room and monitoring discussion.
- Formal assessment gauged through homework writing assignment.

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