

1-1-2012

## Grammar: Navigating Teaching without Crashing and Burning

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### Recommended Citation

Vocke, Karen; Jewell, Erin; Doherty-McDowell, Christy; Wolford, Drew; Ehst, Suzanne; Hovey, Amanda Margaret; Smith-Ball, Nicole; Erickson, Hillary; and Gonzalez, Katelin (2012) "Grammar: Navigating Teaching without Crashing and Burning," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 27: Iss. 2, Article 9.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1903>

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## Grammar: Navigating Teaching without Crashing and Burning

Questions about the teaching of grammar permeate the minds of every English teacher we know. We are constantly wondering how to teach it, learn it, and, ideally, conquer it. So when a group of us came together—an English Education professor, a creative writer, a high school English teacher, two English Education doctoral associates, three intern English teachers, and an aspiring professional writer—we quickly uncovered the depth and breadth of the field. Inevitably, as we pushed forth with our conversations, our personal and varied experiences with grammar emerged. We are a poet who consciously breaks the rules and a professional writer who follows them to a T; we are pre-service teachers seeking engaging methods and a secondary teacher navigating the reality of high-stakes testing; and we are a professor and aspiring professors enthralled by the complexity of the field. Our goal is to share the fruit of our research and conversations and to suggest what we collectively feel are best practices for grammar education in a secondary setting.

As we discussed the differences in our own usage and instruction, we wondered, what is it about grammar that makes it so difficult to teach? And what is grammar? While our answers to these questions are somewhat divergent, we are in agreement that grammar is a deeply ingrained system of rules that makes our language function. The pedagogical conflicts emerge around how to teach these structures—the comma rules, the pronoun referents, the rules we live by—to function in the communicative world.

As teachers, we are responsible for guiding our students along the path to effective communication. How we do that most successfully isn't inherently clear, but, in fact, raises additional questions for us to address. We offer the following questions for consideration because they represent the range of our own discussions and serve as a compass to guide the teacher's journey:

- What does research suggest about the teaching and learning of grammar?
- How do we teach in context?
- How can we facilitate students' usage of grammar as a tool, not a rule?
- Does standardized test preparation require traditional grammar instruction?

Asking these questions is easy enough, but answering them is complicated. With that complexity in mind, we have attempted to find the most relevant answers for today's teachers by considering the amalgamation of our own experiences with teaching, learning, and researching grammar.

### What does research suggest about the teaching and learning of grammar?

As teachers, we should begin by familiarizing ourselves with several "big picture" issues in order to make thoughtful deci-

sions about what to teach and how. Before jumping into the particulars of "what will I do in class," it's helpful to understand the research behind some pedagogical concerns, especially the critique of decontextualized grammar instruction.

Teachers of English have no doubt heard the criticism from the past 60-plus years of research: grammar taught in isolation doesn't improve student writing. However, this simple statement of "fact" leaves much for the teachers to unpack. What exactly makes grammar instruction "decontextualized"? Are worksheets based on the students' error patterns decontextualized? What about mini-lessons on sentence structures that the students might eventually apply? Ultimately, when we use the phrase "teaching grammar," do we assume that "teaching" includes the skill of application (in the same way that "teaching algebra" implies that students can apply memorized formulas to new problems)?

Helpful insight into this fundamental question comes from Hartwell (1985) who outlines five different definitions of grammar. Hartwell's list helps to distinguish between grammars we memorize, structures we study, and language skills developed for application. The most relevant of Hartwell's categories for our purposes are as follows:

**...grammar is a deeply ingrained system of rules that makes our language function.**

1. grammar defined as the branch of linguistic science that describes the internalized system of rules that speakers of a dialect share, and 2. grammar defined as stylistic, or concepts taught and used to strengthen written and spoken communication. This distinction is helpful for pinpointing and articulating what type of grammar instruction has been effective and what has not. We often assume that by teaching the former, the rules of the language, we can impact the latter, usage and style. On the contrary, we believe that students' prose is strengthened only when we explicitly make the connection between rules and style, what Hartwell (1985) terms "the awareness of language as language" (p. 122). Both holistic activities (such as mimicking mentor texts) and classical approaches (such as describing sentence structure in published prose) can be successful if intentionally linked to students' active use of language.

A seminal three-year study by Elley, Barham, Lamb, and Wyllie (1976) further bolsters our assurance that simply teaching the rules of grammar is of minimal value. In this study, students of "average ability" shared much of the same English curriculum with the exception of one variable among three groups. One group of students studied transformational grammar, which focused on explaining the rules of language without any stated utilitarian purpose. A second group rounded out their English curriculum with additional literature and creative writing. Finally, a third group studied traditional school grammar with many applications. At the end of each year, all students

were assessed in multiple ways, including writing samples, comprehension and vocabulary tests, sentence combining exercises, and surveys measuring attitudes toward reading and writing. After three years, the researchers concluded that none of the approaches to teaching grammar offered any significant advantages in the students' language growth. The only noteworthy difference among groups was that those who studied transformational grammar had a more negative attitude toward their English studies than the other two groups.

Despite this evidence, many of us feel obligated to teach students parts of speech, punctuation rules, sentence structures and the like. Those of us who feel drawn to pull out the gram-

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mar worksheets or work straight through a textbook must carefully analyze the results of such instruction. Do we see students writing more fluent, dynamic prose as a result of our lessons?

Or do we repeatedly groan about the fact that we just taught the rules for semicolon usage, but few students are actually using these in their writing? Regardless of the particulars of our lesson plans, we will be more effective teachers if we reflect on how our motives align with our methods.

We can define what we mean by grammar, we know what we want from instruction, and research confirms our experience that grammar in context is ideal; but the question remains, how do we carry that forth in our classroom? If improved student writing is indeed the goal, how do we best achieve that end?

#### **How do we teach in context?**

As a group, we're united in the belief that when grammar is taught out of context, even successful students tend to recall only select rules. Think about the oft-taught concept of sentence combining, where students are asked to transform simple sentences into compound and complex structures. Often, this concept is taught through decontextualized activities such as worksheets and mini-lessons but is not actively transferred to the larger goal of improved writing. The research of Lindblom and Dunn (2006) asserts that activities such as these do not help students write better. "In fact, some studies suggest traditional grammar instruction causes students to make more errors in their writing" (p. 71-72), the exact opposite of what teachers are hoping for.

Meaningful teaching places grammar instruction solidly within the writing process. In the preceding example, instead of the lesson ending with the worksheet, it should continue with students returning to their in-process writing to combine and manipulate their own sentences. Weaver, Bush, Anderson, and Bills (2006) state, "The writing process offers an opportunity to continually reinforce previously 'learned' skills. Many teachers make the mistake of 'covering' various grammatical skills and then assuming that students know and can apply them" (p. 80). Teachers must intentionally make the link between grammatical rules and the writing process so that students are able to transform grammar from static knowledge into a valuable skill.

Another way to situate grammar in the context of meaningful communication is through the use of mentor texts. These can be works of literature that students are studying, or they can be student-created texts that serve as models. One way to use mentor texts in the classroom is to point out (or let the students find) evidence of craft in literature. If students need a refresher on prepositional phrases, for example, then a great warm-up activity is for students to find prepositional phrases in their current novel of study. As Dorfman and Cappelli (2007) explain, "Mechanics and grammar can be embedded... through the use of mentor texts so that students don't see it as a series of isolated exercises in a workbook, but rather in the context of what real authors do" (p. 238). The more students are guided to notice the craft of great text, the more likely they are to internalize various authors' techniques and imitate them in their own writing.

Another successful exercise with mentor texts is the revision of the published work. For example, when students read a novel in class, teachers might take a passage of text that the students have not yet read and rewrite it, making changes to one particular grammatical feature. To study prepositional phrases, for example, the teacher removes all such phrases, then asks students to examine the text for places where a prepositional phrase would add some spark to the writing. Students then revise the passage either in small groups or individually, and in the final step, they compare their revised text with the author's original version. This promotes a higher level of thinking as the class applies the skills they are learning to text; equally important, it paves the way for students to evaluate and appreciate the author's technique, eventually enabling them to use such skills in their own work as a means of constructing, rather than correcting, writing (Weaver, 2001).

Through text-based study, students can also see the ways in which rules are deliberately broken for rhetorical effect. For example, Ray (1999) takes a descriptive approach to grammar instruction, and changes its name to "language study."

Through the use of mentor texts, she and her students delve into authors' works, identifying language patterns and paying close attention to instances of deliberate misuse of rules.

Wilhelm (2001) applies this same concept to student writing: "To teach language use effectively, the context I suggest is that of the students' own writing.... Students can see, in the context of their own writing, that meaning is changed through the use and misuse of... conventions" (p. 62).

Rather than being "right" or "wrong," grammar in context serves as an opportunity to strengthen and define writing. This tool, if used effectively, constructs something greater: by teaching grammar in context of our students' writing, students are empowered rather than intimidated and can use grammar as a tool to their advantage.

**... by teaching grammar in context of our students' writing, students are empowered rather than intimidated and can use grammar as a tool to their advantage.**

### How can we facilitate students' usage of grammar as a tool, not a rule?

Too many students have been taught to use grammar in a diagnostic, mechanistic, decontextualized way, which has hindered their ability to enact their knowledge. Marks (2002) highlights the absurdity of this method of training by comparing it to teaching children to ride a bike by first making them identify the pedals, handlebars, wheels, and other parts of the bike by underlining or circling them, depending on function. The next step is teaching them to spell these words; then they must diagram the bike, drawing lines between the names and the respective parts and explaining what each does. Supposedly, after this series of lessons, children would be able to hop on, sans training wheels, and ride. The actual result would be falling, possibly suffering injury, and probably creating a fear of the bicycle. If taught in a hands-on way, however, children can master the skill and forever have the bicycle in their "tool-box" as something they can use to accomplish daily tasks like exercising or shopping. While the proposed method is clearly ludicrous for learning to ride a bike, it is commonly accepted for teaching grammar even though the potential outcome is the same: The student crashes and burns.

We have seen over and over that attitudes toward grammar influence both teaching and learning. Students cringe when they hear the word: "Grammar is boring," "grammar is hard," "grammar is pointless." We've heard it all. This attitude towards grammar as the enemy stems not only from the way it

**If grammar is presented as a tool that students can use to control meaning rather than a set of rules they must abide by, they are the masters of their writing, not apprentices learning its restrictions.**

is taught, but the way students learn to use it. Peer Editing with Perfection is an example of how students in a secondary classroom might develop this perception that the pain of grammar is far greater than its value (Peterson, 2003).

In this approach to peer editing, one main requirement is for students to use grammar as a corrective tool to fill peers' papers with editing marks and corrections. While students can pride themselves on being excellent editors, this does little to create excellent writers.

Ricks (1994) reiterates that this further compounds the original issue: "Grammar, as taught in school, teaches people how to analyze prewritten sentences and name the parts, not how to synthesize new sentences out of their own thoughts" (p. 49). Macrorie (1970) made this same argument about the failure to present grammar as a tool for dynamic composition: "Marginal comments pointing out slips or mistakes in grammar, spelling, or mechanics are not ordinarily useful to a writer until he is polishing his work in final draft" (p. 67). So what is a more responsible way to teach students to master grammar and assure that they keep it in their writing toolbox?

The first step is to empower students about their inherent knowledge of how language works to convey meaning. Benjamin (2003) states, "Writing sentences on a board and asking students to compare them and choose from them is a surefire way to generate discussion. Students can't resist disagreeing,

complaining, and revising" (p. 38). Benjamin's sample exercise leads students to discuss ideas related to style and convention. She writes three sentence variations for students to examine, then asks the class to discuss which sentence is most effective for different contexts:

1. The shark bit his leg to the bone.
2. To the bone, the shark bit his leg.
3. The shark bit his leg. To the bone.

This approach not only highlights what students already know or think they know about grammar, but also shows them how syntax influences meaning and even gives them the option to deviate from convention for stylistic effect.

In a related study on teaching in context, Sipe (2006) examined how authors utilized and molded grammatical conventions to their fit their purposes. Students were then invited to think critically about the intent and purpose behind the authors' choices and were invited to transfer this intent into their own works. Sipe (2006) maintains, "The students' ability to understand and control their own written language provided them with a degree of power when they entered into certain written conversations beyond our classrooms" (p. 16).

Though these are but a few specific ideas, the underlying idea is to shift students' attention to the opportunities provided by language structures. If grammar is presented as a tool that students can use to control meaning rather than a set of rules they must abide by, they are the masters of their writing, not apprentices learning its restrictions. Instead of feeling intimidated by a seemingly unending list of rules, they will be empowered to use language to build depth and creativity in their work. This power is important in student writing; however, depth and creativity, as exciting as they are, often clash with one of the inherent tasks of teachers—to prepare for high-stakes tests that compose much of today's evaluation of schools, teachers, and students. This forces us to ask the following question:

### Does standardized test preparation require traditional grammar instruction?

Since Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, standardized testing in secondary schooling has become the chosen tool to gauge a student's "readiness" for a diploma and/or higher education (Baker, Barton, Darling-Hammond, Haertel, Ladd, Linn, & Shepard, 2010). Some researchers, however, believe that standardized tests can shift students' and teachers' focus from practical use of grammar to memorization of "arbitrary rules that most people do not follow" (Gebhard & Martin, 2011, ¶ 3). Again, the decontextualized approach to grammar instruction emerges, resulting in instruction that ignores the potential power of grammar, discriminates against regional dialects, (Gebhard & Martin, 2011) and promotes an unnatural conformity to what is misperceived as "correct" English (Curzan, 2002).

Today's secondary educator encounters the inevitable dilemma of balancing the teaching of district/state/federally-mandated curriculum while preparing students for school/district/state-mandated standardized testing. The pressures placed on both teacher and student can be overwhelming. Often a teacher's job security is directly linked to student performance on standardized tests, and students must perform on these tests to

reach their future goals. Students' anxiety about standardized tests is magnified as they realize that perceptions of their worth may rest solely on a bubble-sheet (Baker et al., 2010; Thomson, 2011). The unfortunate result is that the stakes are exceedingly high for everyone associated with standardized testing.

This reality often leads English teachers back to the very de-contextualized methods we've critiqued thus far. But perhaps the best way to teach our students grammar while preparing them for the inevitable tests is to find an appropriate balance. Is there a way to teach grammar in the context of their own writing, while still exposing them to the forms and structures they will encounter on a multiple choice test?

First, it is important for teachers to be familiar with the tests themselves. We need to know not only the skills being asked of our students, but also the actual structure and format of the test. In the state of Michigan, high school students take the Michigan Merit Examination (MME) in the spring of their eleventh-grade year. The MME consists of an ACT Plus Writing component, Work Keys component, and other Michigan-developed assessments in math, science, and social studies (MDE, 2011). Within the ACT portion (2012), students are given an English test, which according to "Your Guide to the ACT":

is a 75-item, 45-minute test that measures the student's understanding of the conventions of standard written English (punctuation, grammar and usage, and sentence structure) and of rhetorical skills (strategy, organization, and style). Spelling, vocabulary, and rote recall of rules of grammar are not tested. (p. 4)

Beyond the overarching test structure, the question format is something that teachers must be familiar with. Grammar questions ask students to revise underlined sections of writing, and this is not a format that students naturally encounter outside of the test. Yes, revising and editing text is a key skill, but in the true context of writing, they are not given a list of four possible corrections. When sitting down to a standardized test, many students, even those competent in grammar skills, may be intimidated by this unfamiliar format (which again reinforces the idea of grammar being merely right or wrong).

This brings us back to the issue of balance: How do we offer students grammar instruction in the context of writing while preparing them to be successful on such tests? We certainly do not want to focus our instruction solely on test preparation, yet we do not want our students to walk into the test session only to be blindsided by format. We offer few methods teachers can use to find some sense of equilibrium.

One approach introduces the test structure early in the students' high school career, but in a way that uses student writing. For example, a teacher can take a rough draft of a student essay, underline a portion that needs revising, and use this student's piece as an exercise for the entire class. The teacher leads the students in a discussion of why this portion is underlined and offers several solutions. The students then discuss which of these solutions is the best fix. Using this method, the teacher models the thought process one would use during the test while also addressing a contextualized grammatical issue.

A second approach, notably longer in scope, is to focus heavily on grammar skills in the context of writing throughout the ninth- and tenth-grade years, providing students with an understanding of important grammar concepts in their own and oth-

ers' writing by using methods not unlike those described earlier in this article. In the eleventh and twelfth grades, students then focus on the format of the MME by analyzing pieces of writing with underlined passages and choosing from several revision options. With this approach, students first learn real-world grammar skills and then apply those skills to test-like settings.

A balanced approach will give students the ability to use conventions meaningfully in writing while also enabling them to be successful on tests that set out to measure such capabilities. By using real writing, practicing revision, conducting mini-lessons, and exposing students to the test formats, teachers foster successful writers, and ideally this success is reflected in test scores. This not only opens doors to students' futures but also gives them the confidence they need to continue to learn and own grammar.

### Concluding Remarks

As our group pondered these complicated issues, we found some concrete advice we can offer to those in the field. Grammar should be taught in a contextualized manner. Teachers can accomplish this by using grammar lessons that are integrated with the writing process and utilize mentor texts so that students know the rules of grammar and know when it is possible to deviate from these rules. By teaching grammar in this way, educators can be confident their students are prepared to exhibit their knowledge of grammar on standardized tests, provided students have been introduced to the testing format.

**...we must position ourselves to use grammar as a compass that guides us through the English language—not as a set of roadblocks that hinders our journey.**

We propose that teachers think of "grammar" as two distinct terms: grammar and Grammar. The intimidating "Grammar" (with a capital "G") authorizes a specific, rule-driven pedagogy. On the other hand, "grammar" (with a lowercase "g") implies a contextualized, student-driven technique. After researching and conversing extensively, we believe teaching "grammar" to be the most valuable and effective method.

Our quest to understand grammar is far from over, as is likely the case for most teachers. We understand the complex and confusing journey of teaching and learning grammar, but we can't fear this. Rather, we must position ourselves to use grammar as a compass that guides us through the English language—not as a set of roadblocks that hinders our journey.

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