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Editors' Message

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Editors' Message

We all carry with us a bit of "grammar baggage," often packed with misconceptions folded by childhood or by naïve curricular decisions that were inflicted on us as children. Nancy's mother saw "good" English as a vehicle of success and as a class marker. "Ain't" was never allowed, and all "him and me's" were corrected and chastised. Nancy's 4th grade teacher, Mrs. Marshall, kept a "Grammar Jar" on the windowsill of her classroom. Any student who dared speak something like "I seen him yesterday," or "I had went to the office," had to write her or his name on a piece of paper and put it in the jar. Woe to any child who said "Can I go to the bathroom" rather than "May I go…"

Elizabeth's father insisted that she and her brother speak "standard English," often correcting them when misusing "I" and "me" or confusing "good" and "well." He wanted to ease his children's pathway to success and believed that speaking "better" English would help. Elizabeth's father saw "proper" English as a powerful tool that helped him achieve his dreams of becoming a physician. Coming from a poor farming community, he learned Standard English in school, but felt it important to teach it in the home to his own children, and thus, Elizabeth developed her ear for what is often referred to as standard English.

Mary doesn't recall having her speech corrected, but assumes it was. She does, though, believe she acquired most of her knowledge about "proper" English through reading and listening to others.

The idea that "bad grammar" dooms children to an unfortunate social class and bars them from acceptance into more genteel circles is not new. We teachers want the best for our students, but how we act on those hopes can sometimes have unfortunate consequences. And they are sometimes grounded in either misconceptions about language or flat out ignorance.

We know the power of home language, though, and thanks to researchers like Shirley Brice Heath and linguists like Geneva Smitherman, we understand the richness and complexity of those language traditions. And bell hooks challenges us to see that richness. But she also challenges us to make sure we acknowledge that there is a language of power and that we need to help students learn that language of power. This cannot happen when we naively believe there is only one right English. Nor can we think of grammar lessons as missions to stamp out "bad English." The authors featured in this issue show the complexity of the grammar issue and offer ways to think about grammar, its role in an English language arts curriculum, and, how we can help our students develop linguistic versatility.

We begin our issue with Constance Weaver's focus on the Common Core State Standards that address grammar. Weaver first questions whether we are, once again, headed toward "fake teaching and mimic learning." She urges teachers to move past classroom approaches that are "a mile wide and an inch deep," and identify what it is students demonstrate through their writing that they already know. Teachers can use the standards to help identify what it is students need to work on and then work on those during the revision process. Weaver provides teachers with ways to teach grammar that can help students do at least as well, often better, than students who have received a steady diet of grammar drills.

Like Weaver, Cheryl Almeda and Jonathan Bush argue that we must move past an over-simplified approach to grammar rules and toward an approach that sees grammar as complex and nuanced, based in living language that is adapted for specific purposes. Almeda and Bush acknowledge that even in academic settings, the grammar of biology differs from the grammar of advertising, or math. They lay out a "Grammar of Breakfast" that challenges us to move past grammar as rules and toward a grammar of context where style, audience, and intent shape the language authors use. They urge teachers to see grammar everywhere and to realize that writers have options. Grammar isn't a zone of errors but a rhetorical tool that connects writers to their audiences.

In "Re-Visioning 'Right' Writing in the Language Arts Classroom," Lucia Elden and Marilyn Wilson argue that an understanding of the complexity of language can help writers. They want teachers to "push back" against the assumption that grammar instruction requires an over-simplified attention to teaching rules and focusing on correctness. Careful to point out that grammar instruction is important, Elden and Wilson discuss how rich inquiry-based assignments challenge students to uncover the linguistic choices they and others have, and in the process, deepen their knowledge about grammar. They remind us that "we can harness the linguistic survival skills and intelligence our students already possess and make them aware of their own linguistic power in both writing and speech."

Melinda Orzulak, too, focuses her article on reframing grammar instruction by moving past rules and the idea that there is one single "correct" form of language. She urges teachers, however, to move away from a "sounds right" approach, especially during editing processes, and toward the use of descriptive grammar that challenges students to consider audience and purpose. She discusses "codes of power" and prescriptive grammar lessons that lead to over-correction and, ultimately, frustration. She suggests moving toward inquiry approaches that challenge students to examine the rules of language, both prescriptive and descriptive, and, in so doing, gain a better understanding of effective uses of language.

As do so many of the articles in this issue, "Embedded Grammar Instruction: Authentic Connections Between Grammar and Writing" by Jonathan Ostenson, finds that contextualized grammar instruction during writing has a far greater impact on students' knowledge of grammar and their abilities to make informed linguistic decisions. Ostenson admits that at one point he gave up on grammar instruction altogether, but realized that ignoring grammar study in his classroom was no better than giving students doses of rule-driven prescriptive grammar lessons. So, he began developing what he calls a "proactive" approach to grammar that he believes leads to slow but strong growth and greater linguistic control.

Karen Vocke and her colleagues admit that grammar is one of those areas where teachers sometimes crash and burn. But, they argue, it doesn't have to be that way. They begin their article with a survey of the research on the teaching of grammar and then explore ways to teach grammar based on that research. They explore teaching in context, using grammar as a tool , and preparing students for standardized tests that include grammar questions. They, too, argue that grammar lessons should be embedded in writing instruction and through mentor texts, and suggest that some preparation might be helpful for students before they take a standardized test.

Like many of our authors, Ford and Davis discuss the shallow knowledge that many of their pre-service teachers bring to their English methods classes, and explore ways to deepen that knowledge. And they also explore developmentally appropriate "craft lessons" that can help students engage in lessons and help teachers learn to value diverse linguistic traditions.

Molly McCord addresses grammar from the perspective of second language learners. Using her experience as a community college writing instructor, she investigates the role of feedback on one English language learner and draws conclusions about the kinds of feedback that are most helpful to students whose first language is not English.

In the article "Language as Choice: Exploring the Tools Writers Can Use," Cornelia, Paraskevas, discusses grammar as an issue of stylistic choices. She notes that many language arts textbooks focus on adjectives as detail, but she points out that English provides writers and speakers with far more options than adjectives. If we are to encourage students to make their writing more vivid, we must move past the simple notion that the only choice writers have to do so is through adjectives. Her article suggests ways for student writers to think critically about embedding details and bringing writing to life. She uses mentor texts to illustrate how authors such as Milton and Hershey use modifiers to create effect and how rethinking our approach to grammar opens up new possibilities for crafting language and deepening grammatical and writing knowledge.

Linguistic diversity is at the heart of a number of articles in this issue. Sheila Benson argues that teachers can teach standardized grammatical conventions and still respect linguistic identities. In her early years as a teacher, she saw the divide many of her students experienced between their language and what was portrayed as the "right" language. Through a linguistic autobiography assignment she began to lead her students out of a clouded self-image of their home language, and toward a pedagogy that she and her pre-service teachers found powerful and effective. Through a project that challenged students to explore primary and secondary discourse communities, she helped her students consider the role that social contexts play in language use. And, in another class room assignment, she asks her pre-service teachers to design a grammar unit from a sociocultural perspective.

Patrick Hartwell's ground-breaking piece in a 1985 issue of College English. Hartwell's "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" has been heavily anthologized. Becky Caouette analyzes the treatment Hartwell's article has gotten and places Hartwell within an historical perspective. She notes that Hartwell's article seems to have become more of a stopping point than a call for more thinking. And she wonders whether Harwell's argument is dated, or whether it continues to challenge us to think about grammar instruction and its role in the composition classroom.

"Found Poem" and "Laundry" by Gretchen Rumohr-Voskuil challenge us to think about language, instruction, and the power of words.

We end our issue with Rob Rozema's MiTech column about the language of texting and students' use of it in formal written language. And, we include a wonderful essay by Greg Shafer about his experiences with linguistically diverse students in a community college setting. This is the third article by Shafer that we have published and we value his voice.

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