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A NEW CHALLENGE FOR AN OLD STRUGGLE: THE TEACHING OF GRAMMAR AND WRITING

Patricia Davidson and Ann Policelli

Teachers from Grade 2 to Grade 12 have long felt the responsibility to teach the "naming of parts" until they "covered" all the material in a grammar text. Yet, even as early as 1893, when grammar was being advocated as the center of the curriculum for the purpose of teaching logic, it was acknowledged that the "study of grammar would not aid correctness" (*Report of the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies*, 1893). Research studies continue to confirm that position.

It is not surprising that English teachers often feel caught in the middle of a frustrating game of tug-of-war. On the one side, researchers urge teachers to forego the teaching of grammar in isolation and concentrate instead on the teaching of writing; while on the other side, society expects English teachers to give students mastery of standard English. A careful look at both sides, however, suggests that these seeming opposites are not even dealing with the same issue. Researchers criticize the pedagogy of teaching grammar, not the intrinsic worth of learning it. On the other hand, society only wants results and neither considers nor suggests pedagogy. The task of the English teacher, then, is not to choose between the two but to address a new question: Is there a way to develop students' ability to analyze language while at the same time improving their writing and speaking?

We have worked for several years as high school English teachers and researchers to answer that question. The result is an exciting and effective semester course for high school seniors. It is a course which 1) involves students in a developmental sequence of writing assignments designed to teach them to write as they will be expected to after high school; 2) makes them conscious of themselves as writers; 3) requires them to conduct research about language; and 4) improves their knowledge of the conventions of the language.

One of our first research questions was: What is grammar? In his seminal essay, "Grammar, Grammars and the Teaching of Grammar," Patrick Hartwell gives four definitions of grammar (109-110). In essence, Grammar 1 is the knowledge of language that all speakers of the language who are above age five or six acquire from their environment. Grammar 2 is the formal linguistic analysis of language patterns. Grammar 3 is usage or linguistic etiquette. Grammar 4 is the prescriptive grammar taught in schools; it suffers a time lag because neither the grammar texts nor the teachers are as contemporary as on-going linguistic studies. As Hartwell suggests, the whole of grammar teaching has been based on the unproven assumption that when we teach grammar in school "the students' language awareness, proficiency and linguistic manners will improve" (Hartwell 110). We, too, doubted that assumption and could see clearly why the traditional teaching of grammar had not been effective.

As we planned our course, we wanted to discover ways to uncover students' understandings of language patterns and conventions. We learned from research that in reading their writing aloud, most students will correct many of their own errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation without noting differences in what they wrote (Bartholomae 59). Also, in one study, when the teacher located errors in student papers by a simple check in the margin, rather than identify and comment upon specific errors, students were able to correct 61.1% of their errors (Haswell 604). The conclusion to be drawn from both studies is clear: Students know more than they sometimes demonstrate. This is evident in our classrooms when a teacher's cocked eyebrow or quizzical look can cause a student to immediately change a verbal construction from an incorrect to a correct one. In designing a course, then, we took as our first responsibility the need to provide the means for students to become conscious of the knowledge that they already possessed.

We also concluded that usage is teachable and especially effective when taught as a way to give students choices in using language. Even though the sentence "He ain't here" is structurally correct, students can be taught the broader contexts of language use and be shown that it is neither appropriate nor effective in many situations to write or speak in that manner. We concluded that usage instruction provides the students with a means of gaining personal power with their language, and it is accomplished by emphasizing appropriateness rather than correctness.

When we considered how the study and analysis of formal language patterns could be integrated into the course, we researched the cognitive development of adolescents. Despite the repetition throughout the grades of formal grammar study, the naming of parts of speech, and the analysis of sentence patterns, students generally fail to master the content because it is taught before the students have reached the developmental stages where they can learn it. According to Sanborn, the study of grammar demands a level of abstraction that most school children have not achieved and some will never achieve (75). In fact, it has been estimated that 30% of the adult population will never be able to function at that level of abstraction (Kohlberg and Gilligan 75). However, students in the 12th grade will often have reached a level of formal operational thought and a level of ego development necessary for the analysis of language (Sanborn 78). We discovered that in their senior year students were not only cognitively ready but also motivated to learn about their language in this fashion because they were faced with leaving school and going on to other endeavors (usually higher education), and they wanted to be prepared in every way, including having the ability to analyze language as well as use it.

The conclusions that we formed about the teaching of grammar did not influence us in any way to teach grammar in isolation or to separate it from broader language experiences. We recognized that the most powerful determiner in developing students' mastery of language is their direct, meaningful use of the language. We decided that by making such language experiences, especially writing, the main focus of the course, we would be helping students to improve as well as to develop syntactical sophistication. In 1960, Ingrid Strom, reviewing more than fifty experimental studies, came to a similarly strong and unqualified conclusion:

direct methods of instruction, focusing on writing activities and the structuring of ideas are more efficient in teaching sentence structure, usage, punctuation, and other related factors than are such methods as nomenclature drills, diagramming, and rote memorization of grammatical rules. (14)

We therefore designed a course that would integrate what we had discovered about the learners of language with a developmental program in teaching writing.

We based the program on James Moffett's four modes of discourse: personal, narrative, analysis, and persuasion. We begin the course with the personal mode, which only demands that students use recall or memory. Next, we move to the narrative by asking the students to write about one of their personal writings from an objective point of view. Students then generalize or theorize about a topic derived from their first two pieces in order to write an analysis. Lastly, students write a persuasive piece in order to convince a specific audience about an idea mentioned in some form in one of their previous writings. Writing in these four modes in this sequence enables students to gain confidence by beginning with what is usually easiest for them and moving to modes which have greater cognitive demands and are thereby more difficult. Also, familiarizing them with these modes provides them with pre-writing strategies for subsequent essay assignments since writing in the personal and/or narrative mode often serves as a heuristic for writing powerful analysis or persuasion.

Since our program is intended for students who will be going to college (but are not in the highest or honors level), the essay writing assignments resemble the kind of writing the students would need for college: a personal essays suitable for college application, an analytical essay which evaluates or explains, and a proposal which presents an argument. For all essays, the focus is on strategies for invention and revision as well as form. In other words, students are taught how to become writers who can generate and rework ideas.

As the students progress through these writing assignments, the teaching of grammar is carried out in various ways. First of all, at the beginning of the course students take a diagnostic test having three parts: correcting common usage errors, writing a college essay, and writing a proposal. The two writing sections include response sheets which address tone, persona, audience, and organization. Each student lists his or her own errors and becomes aware of areas that need attention. The teacher develops mini-lessons for the entire class based on those lists. The mini-lessons present an analysis of language yet never dominate the course.

Secondly, in order to provide students with an awareness of language, every week each student is responsible for an entry of a "language observation" in his or her language log and for an explanation to the class about that observation. Each day begins with students giving examples that they have observed of language used incorrectly or powerfully or unusually. This

sharing of observations usually results in enthusiastic conversation in the class about the students' misconceptions, likes, and dislikes regarding the use of language. Students love to relate errors and non-standard usages heard in lunch room conversations or to point out television ads or song lyrics that misuse standard English. The teacher, therefore, is able to provide knowledge about the conventions of language and emphasize issues of usage.

The language observations also serve as a means for developing a collaborative environment in which students become active thinkers with increasing responsibility for their own learning. Furthermore, these observations begin the process of independent language study which results in a final research project. As a culminating activity for the course, we ask students to conduct research on a language-related subject of interest to them and to present their findings to the class. The research, which must include at least two print sources and one personal interview, is presented in a formal paper that describes the process of discovery which led to specific conclusions about the topic. Students investigate topics that range from the language of sports writing to a study of language development in elementary school students. For example, students have interviewed a newspaper columnist, visited our elementary schools, and have taught lessons to high school freshmen. As a final project, this active research allows students to apply their knowledge in an independent and personal study of language.

Throughout the course, we give class time in order to coach students through all steps of the writing process in a workshop setting. All writing assignments are accompanied by response sheets so that students work as pairs to read and suggest revisions and editing options to one another. Each teacher-designed worksheet addresses the organization and impact of the writing and also has questions about the points covered in the mini-lessons prior to the writing assignment. Helping one another with these points allows students to activate knowledge that they have but do not always demonstrate without assistance; it also allows them to put into practice the knowledge they have gained through the mini-lessons. With the last writing assignment, the language projects, students design their own response sheets, demonstrating that they not only can respond appropriately to questions about their writing but also know the questions that need to be asked—which, of course, will be their task when the course is over and they are on their own.

At the end of the trial year of the course, we administered a post-test. Students average a 38% increase on their usage score, which we regarded as quite significant for a semester course. Also, on the post-test we asked students to choose one piece of writing from their folders and fill out response sheets identical to those of the pre-test. On the pre-test, there was a preponderance of blanks or question marks because the students did not understand issues of tone, audience, and organization. Often, students could not even conceive of a possible answer. On the post-test, however, they responded fully, often asking for additional sheets in order to complete their analysis of their own writing.

On their final exam, students are asked to write one letter using all four modes of discourse. Students write to a junior who will be taking the course the following year. In the first part of the letter, students write in the personal mode about their original expectations of the course; in the second section they write a description of what they experienced in the course of the narrative mode; next, they analyze their own abilities with language; and finally, they try to convince the reader about the worth of the course. In the nine sections of the course taught by six different teachers over the past four semesters, students have been extremely enthusiastic in their praise of the course. We planned this course to be an elective, but in witnessing the need it filled and the readiness of the students to learn about their language as part of their development as writers, we now have the course mandatory for all students at that ability level.

Indeed, we have been convinced by our success that there is no reason to fight a non-existent battle between teaching grammar and teaching writing. There is a way to combine writing instruction and the teaching of the conventions of standard English. As one student wrote on her final exam:

My biggest improvement is that I pay more attention to what I hear
and what I read, and I think more about what I write. I feel ready
for college!

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