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Beyond What “Sounds Right”: Reframing Grammar Instruction

Scenario 1: *By the Book—Red Pen Equity*
The new writing teacher marks student papers, being sure to correct every error according to the class grammar guide. When resistant students struggle with irregular verbs and question why some verbs are “correct,” the teacher flushes and says, “That’s just what the book says.”

Scenario 2: “Sounds Right” Editing

The English teacher tells students to read their writing for what “sounds right,” an editing technique she remembers from her own school experiences. The final drafts show few improvements, and she expresses frustration while reading students’ final essays: “They just don’t spend enough time on their homework.”

Scenario 3: You Can’t Talk Like that Here

A teacher corrects students for speaking nonstandard English, saying, “You can talk like that at home or on the street, but this is school, so we don’t use language like that here—standard English grammar is the language of school; anything else is inappropriate.”

Scenario 4: Broken Language

A teacher slaps down a set of essays in the teachers’ lounge and complains that students don’t bring much language to school: “Their grammar is just so bad, broken. Texting has destroyed the English language.”

These scenarios may be recognizable to many English teachers. I admit that I played the role of the teacher in the first two

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scenarios during my early teaching years, and I have observed the latter two scenarios in various iterations. I also have come to understand the powerful, submerged

beliefs about “grammar” (or language) that provide the subtext for such scenarios, in which a limited understanding of “grammar” constrains teachers and students. Unproductive scenarios like these point to the need to expand a narrow definition of “grammar” to include the differences between descriptive and prescriptive grammar that create tension in the scenarios. In this article, I describe how a traditional “grammar” definition feeds our anxieties and confines our instructional approaches; then I explore the usefulness of

distinctions between prescriptive and descriptive definitions of grammar. Lastly, I offer ways that we can use the prescriptive and descriptive grammar distinction to open up critical possibilities for students as writers and language users.

Anxiety and Authority: English Teachers as “Grammar” Gatekeepers

Many of us can empathize with the teacher in the *By the Book* scenario. What English teacher has not felt the anxiety of correcting student papers for the first time? Red pen mania is now discouraged, yet green pens can just as easily turn papers into a weedy garden of correction. English teachers’ anxieties about holding high expectations, pushing student writing forward, and knowing the discipline can lead to questions like, “What do I mark? When? How often?”

These anxieties can stem from the ways English teachers often are expected to be language authorities. Our anxiety can be rooted in the concern that our own grammar knowledge is broken and that this secret lack of knowledge will undermine our teaching authority. Knowing the “rules” of “grammar” is perceived as a key part of our roles as teachers and authorities. “Oh no, you are an English teacher, so I’ll watch my grammar,” is a line I’ve heard over and over again from new acquaintances, as others have noted (e.g. Smith & Wilhelm, 2007; Curzan, 2009). Anxiety about fulfilling the expectations to be grammar gatekeepers can lead us, especially as new teachers, to blindly bootstrap our way through grammar books or rely on tacit language understandings.

As in the *By the Book* scenario, our fear of inadequate content knowledge can lead us to transfer authority to the current prescriptive grammar guide, perhaps without truly understanding linguistic principles that could help us teach our students. Instead of blindly following what the “book says” (especially if that book is twenty years old), I suggest that, as English teachers, we would benefit from reframing how we focus on “grammar” to include an understanding of the differences between prescriptive and descriptive grammar.

Reframing “Grammar”: The Usefulness of the Descriptive/Prescriptive Grammar Distinction

By questioning our use of “grammar” to mean only mean prescriptive “traditional” approaches, we can explore myths that get in the way of supporting our students’ language learning. Looking back to my first years of teaching reflected in the scenarios, I would highlight for my less experienced self the helpful resource of the prescriptive/descriptive framework. Although this useful distinction was covered briefly in my teacher education coursework, my actual ELA practice focused on a more limited, prescriptive definition of grammar. More recently, linguistic definitions of descriptive grammar

have enabled me to reframe my understanding and approaches to grammar instruction; teaching “grammar” encompasses more than teaching prescriptive grammar or “standard English.”

Prescriptive grammar is the list of rules that authorities decide must be followed, a way of thinking about language that developed in the 18th century when English grammarians attempted to regulate language use through guides for correct grammar, spelling, and usage (Watts, 1999). Prescriptive rules that exist for written language, like the edict to never split infinitives, often target usage that is perfectly acceptable in oral language and still comprehensible in many written texts.

Descriptive grammar documents actual language use and patterns that occur in language. Descriptive linguists seek to describe reality by recording the ways native English speakers actually use language. For instance, many current native speakers end sentences with prepositions and use “they” as a singular pronoun.

The distinction between prescriptive and descriptive grammar offers two particularly useful areas of awareness for English teachers:

- 1) An awareness of descriptive approaches can enable recognition of student language abilities and beginning assessment of oral/written language use.
- 2) An awareness of prescriptivism (the water we swim in) can further help unpack the power dynamics of language and authority.

The distinction between prescriptive and descriptive grammar also underscores tensions we may experience as English teachers charged with grammar instruction. These tensions arise from strong beliefs about language that can prevent us from taking on a more descriptive approach to grammar instruction. However, the prescriptive/descriptive distinction can enable us to consider instructional responses to a language myth like the following misconception:

Language Myth: There is one and only one correct spoken form of language, modeled on single correct written form; all others are substandard.

Reality: Linguists would disagree, and they have described this myth as the “standard language ideology.” Standard language ideology functions in collaboration with prescriptive ideologies about grammar that assume that “hundreds of millions of fluent native speakers cannot be trusted to use their own native language” (Milroy, 1999, p. 21). This inherent lack of trust feeds into the dilemma teachers have to both appreciate language varieties and “keep them in their place” (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 109). Instructional approaches (like those in the scenarios) can perpetuate the myth that oral and written languages are the same, which counters the linguistic understanding that oral and written language function quite differently.

Without an ability to recognize these distinctions, teachers can slip easily into deficit thinking by referring to student language as broken, sloppy, or bad. Deficit thinking classifies speaking “nonstandard,” or stigmatized varieties, of English as language problems and groups them with developmental and literacy problems (Milroy & Milroy, 1999; Smitherman, 1986). The *Broken Language* scenario serves as a case in

point of how this kind of deficit thinking can be applied to students’ language. In reality, students’ writing is likely affected by language change linked to technology, but these manifestations don’t mean that their language is broken in some way. Such deficit beliefs also can set up a conflict between home and school language use, positioning nonstandard speakers as outsiders within the school context. These misconceptions obscure opportunities for new written language learning in our ELA classrooms.

Unpacking Oral and Written Language Differences: Moving Beyond “Sounds Right” Editing

As we consider the prescriptive/descriptive distinction, the *Sounds Right Editing* scenario provides an opportunity to unpack the differences between oral and written language. Understanding these differences could affect our approaches to grammar instruction. Based on a mantra that many of us heard used during our own education, the teacher in the scenario relies on a kind of false equity of doing what “sounds” right (like an immersion approach of “you’ll pick it up”). Of course, the students in the scenario may not have spent enough time on their homework. But, let’s analyze the “sounds right” approach.

A “sounds right” editing approach can promote a confused belief about what transfers between written and oral language. Sounds right editing confuses the differences between a descriptive and prescriptive approach to understanding language. Since the ways people actually use language orally often conflicts with prescriptive rules for written English, it is unsurprising that students who edit their papers for what “sounds right” might not achieve the prescriptive correctness desired by their teacher.

One of the main problems with the *Sounds Right Editing* scenario (and the *You Can’t Talk Like that Here* scenario) is that they rely on assumptions that written school language naturally mirrors students’ language practices or that even “standard” oral language use maps onto “standard” written language. When students speak multiple languages, “sounding right” becomes especially confusing. And, what “sounds right” may not even work for “mainstream” English speakers whose dialects are validated in school.

Having the linguistic concept of “descriptive grammar” helped me understand that what “sounds right” for a student is not necessarily valued by school models of “correctness.” Instead of the approach I experienced as a student, the prescriptive/descriptive grammar distinction suggests other approaches, such as:

- identifying patterns students may be using that are oral patterns.

- understanding the written genre or register and associated structures students will need to master in order to complete writing assignments.
- discussing explicitly the prescriptive model of standard written English while engaging students in thinking descriptively about how they actually write and speak.
- acknowledging to students that oral language, even forms of standard spoken English, do not correspond with standard written English.
- looking for patterns in student writing that provide examples for contrastive analysis between what students do in their writing and what standard English prescribes.

Using the Grammar Anxiety: Opening the Gates to Investigate Language Authority

Our anxiety provides a launching point. Like many of the new teachers I work with as a teacher educator, when I started teaching, I had inherited a history of prescriptivism and language authority. Grammar guides, school-wide writing initiatives, and activities from veteran teachers increased my awareness of prescriptive usage to the extent that I could hardly read a novel without analyzing comma placement. Even as a teacher rooted in process views of writing, the history of English teaching as a site for language mavens and standard bearers added to my hyper-awareness of language use. In some ways this awareness was useful, but without ways of analyzing how language authority influenced my teaching and my students' learning, this prescriptive awareness could be damaging and distracting.

Similarly, our students who have internalized beliefs about "good" and "bad" grammar inherit anxieties about "grammar." By high school, I've noticed how some students express negative attitudes about their own language abilities, paralyzing themselves in classroom contexts, while they performed articulately and creatively in others. They have internalized a mishmash of beliefs that often contradict their lived experiences. These beliefs manifest as deference, deficit thinking about their own language use, and uncritical acceptance of language authorities.

These anxieties of both students and teachers underscore the importance of addressing issues of power and language. Both students and teachers benefit from awareness of continuing questions of power surrounding language use. Linguistic stereotyping and discrimination, some argue, remain a looming backdoor of racial and class-based discrimination (Lippi-Green, 1997). Consequently, I argue that power and language are crucial to investigate in both linguistically diverse classrooms and linguistically homogenous classrooms.

Beyond Over-Correction: Teaching Investigation of Language Change and Authority

Even though we know that meticulous correction of every error does not improve student writing, the over-correction of student error, like in the *By the Book* scenario, still happens because English teachers feel responsible for teaching prescriptive codes of English. Unfortunately, instead of producing writing improvement, over-correction can lead to frustration and negative attitudes—on the part of both teachers and

students—because correction does not necessarily lead to language understanding.

Yet, we have internalized the social value of standard English, and many of us seek approaches for communicating this value to our students while still valuing linguistic diversity. Lisa Delpit points to her own shifting, seemingly contradictory language positions and speaks of seeking a balance: "Even while teachers provide access to the 'codes of power' represented by acquiring facility in 'standard edited English,' they must also value and make use in the classroom of the language and culture children bring from home" (Delpit, 2006, p. xxvi).

These tensions can create opportunities for teachers to develop complex, critical understanding of language by using both descriptive and prescriptive grammar foci for instruction. By exploring language authority with our students, we can prevent underlying beliefs about prescriptivism from blocking useful understandings of language variety and change. Our knowledge of language change and authority could help us explain to our students how

...students can engage in looking at dictionaries and other linguistic authorities to learn how to think critically about language and authority.

to use prescriptive grammar guides effectively in conjunction with their lived language practices. For instance, we already engage with the dilemmas surrounding teaching the canon and critiquing it. Just as many of us encourage our students to think critically about literature, Anne Curzan (2000; 2005) describes how students can engage in looking at dictionaries and other linguistic authorities to learn how to think critically about language and authority.

The prescriptive/descriptive distinction can help us reimagine the *By the Book* scenario as well as the *Broken Language* scenario. Instead of shutting down conversations about "grammar," due to defensiveness, ELA teachers can take an investigative approach by

- supporting students as critical writers by allowing them to engage with questions about language change and authority.
- focusing on the ways language connects to authority both institutionally and in the classroom.
- providing opportunities to analyze the prescriptive norms in dictionaries, grammar texts, and the "complaint tradition" of language mavens who monitor good and bad language behavior.
- exploring ongoing language change in writing (such as the influences of texting).

Conclusion: Towards Critical Inquiry about Grammar

All four scenarios that started this article point to the untapped (and negative) ways that limited, static "grammar" definitions and approaches can keep us from engaging with more expansive ways of approaching grammar and grammar instruction. Linguist Diane Larsen-Freeman (2003) suggests that language teachers think of "grammar as a skill or dynamic process" or grammaring (p. 24), and this more active understanding helps us as English teachers to expand beyond a tra-

ditional, prescriptive model of “grammar” in English language arts that defines grammar as a distinct set of rules to be learned.

In the scenarios, a narrow view of grammar pits teachers and students against each other with “grammar” as an unproductive tension point. By expanding our knowledge of grammar, I see the opportunities for conceiving of “grammar” in ways that build linguistic confidence for both teachers and students. We have the opportunity to recognize that we often are referring to “prescriptive” grammar in secondary schools (and what this ideological definition constrains). Another opportunity is the reminder that “descriptive” grammar helps us notice oral and written patterns and differences. The prescriptive/descriptive distinction provides a crucial starting point towards critical approaches to grammar: “One place to start is to encourage critical inquiry about the rules of language, descriptive and prescriptive, so that students understand what is at stake in the choices that they make. We should encourage our students and ourselves to ask at every language turn, Says who?” (Curzan, 2009, p. 879).

Students live in complex linguistic and discursive worlds; calling the question about language and “grammar” authority does not mean that all manner of chaos will be loosed on the world. In fact, students and teachers may find that understanding the relationships between language and authority enable them to use language more effectively—that is they will have a better sense of why language works in such complicated ways.

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