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Jonathan Ostenson

Embedded Grammar Instruction: Authentic Connections between Grammar and Writing

I have taught English Language Arts courses for over fifteen years now: eleven years teaching in the secondary schools and five years teaching at the university level. In all those years, I have tried to make writing and writing instruction a vital part of my classes wherever and however I could. And in these efforts, I've often wrestled with teaching grammar: what to teach, when to teach it, and how to teach it.

Like many English teachers, I heard time and time again that we shouldn't teach grammar in isolation, that such efforts do little to actually improve students' writing (Weaver, 2007). My own experience early in my career bore this out. Handing out photocopied sheets of grammar exercises where students identified subjects and verbs in sentences did little to prevent the rash of run-ons and fragments that appeared in their writing. Students who had earlier earned perfect scores on their worksheets would blithely ramble on in sentences with multiple clauses devoid of punctuation. Rather than pull out all my hair in frustration, I largely gave up on the teaching of rules and definitions and

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instead relied on students who got it to help those who didn't during peer editing sessions.

I would have been ashamed to admit it then, but I was a bit relieved at abandoning the task of teaching things like the rules of the comma and definitions for the parts of speech. I wasn't completely secure in my own understanding of some of these principles, and the seemingly endless string of exceptions to every rule I taught exhausted me. Guilt nagged at me, though, and I felt like I was shirking my duty by not teaching more explicit grammar. I started to cast about for help: I knew what I was doing wasn't working, but I had little sense of what other options were available.

I've since read much of what's been published about teaching grammar, from Constance Weaver (2007) to Harry Noden (1999) to, more recently, Jeff Anderson (2005), and I have developed an eclectic approach to teaching grammar that I'm very happy with because I see it improving students' writing. My research has led me to identify two purposes for teaching grammar to my students: to enhance the style and effectiveness of their prose and to make their writing more correct. Given these purposes, I divide my teaching efforts into two broad categories: proactive and reactive grammar instruction. When I teach grammar proactively, I'm teaching students about the tools at their disposal as writers, about the possibilities that specific grammar structures provide them. When I teach reactively, I teach for correctness; based on common problems I've seen in students' writing, I help them learn about and apply conventions.

These wonderful authors also taught me that everything I teach needs to be taught within the context of our work on a meaningful piece of writing. The proactive instruction I give often comes during the drafting or revising stages of writing; reactive instruction is limited to the editing stage, right before we're ready to finalize our writing. Providing this instruction while my students are engaged in the writing process gives them a very real and immediate "sand box" in which to experiment with or apply the instruction. It also allows me to set expectations for the performance and provide appropriate feedback on their efforts—all of which is made more authentic because they are using what they learn in an immediate writing situation.

Proactive Teaching

When I teach grammar while students are drafting or revising, I like them to see that we're exploring possibilities. Effective writing, as Kolln (2007) points out, "requires attention to rhetoric" or the audience we're writing for, the purpose we have for writing, and our topic (p. 2). Kolln goes on to suggest that we have a writer's "toolkit" that is made up of the different possibilities in sentence structure we can use to communicate. This is the idea that I try to stress in proactive teaching: We are learning about tools and options so that we can make choices about which tools to use based on the rhetorical situation. This attitude towards the instruction, in my experience, avoids much of the stigma students attach to grammar instruction; rather than focusing solely on the don'ts of grammar, we focus on what grammar can do for our writing.

What I teach my students proactively is heavily influenced by Noden (1999) and his ideas about image grammar. Noden argues for a "grammar of style" developed by helping our students see the way authors use specific grammar constructs to create images in their writing. By examining models of powerful writing, Noden isolated a few grammatical structures (or "brush strokes," as

he refers to them, employing the metaphor of a writer as artist) that lend writing power: the participle, the absolute, the appositive, out-of-order adjectives, and action verbs. Taking his lead, I've taught my students some of these structures while they draft and revise their writing, encouraging them to experiment with these in their own work.

To teach these structures, I've relied on a framework that Weaver (2007) lays out but that will look familiar to any teacher comfortable with strategy instruction or constructivist ap-

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proaches to teaching. This connection to constructivist methods is significant, since it suggests that we're trying to develop strategic behaviors in students as writers, in the sense that these grammar structures become tools and provide student writers with options. Weaver's framework (p. 23) suggests the following sequence for instruction:

- share a model of the concept in question
- create a model either solo or in conjunction with students
- compose in small groups; share and receive feedback
- compose individually; share again, either in front of the class or with the teacher
- ask students to apply the concept in their own writing
- evaluate and provide additional instruction or feedback as needed

I have found that the modeling of these concepts and the gradual release of responsibility built into this framework have allowed me to scaffold instruction for my students, meeting the needs of both skilled writers and those who struggle. To clarify my process, I will share in more detail an example of teaching students to use appositives through this framework.

Modeling the Grammar Concept

An appositive is a phrase or clause that renames a noun. Using an appositive can be a powerful way of creating imagery or efficiently adding additional information about a noun. Notice how Libba Bray (writing in *The Sweet Far Thing*) and Rick Riordan (in *The Sea of Monsters*) use appositives to enhance the imagery of their writing (emphasis added to identify the appositive):

I have come down in my most sensible traveling dress—a **brown tweed that will not show the train's smudges and soot.**

As we got closer to the monsters, the sound of Charybdis got louder and louder—a **horrible wet roar like the galaxy's biggest toilet being flushed.**

Appositives are not just for fiction writing; in fact, I often teach appositives when students engage in research-based writing. In these genres, writers use appositives to include information about sources, as in the line below from a Newsweek article by Daniel Gross:

"The activity is very positive," said Steven Kaplan, **a corporate-finance expert at the University of Chicago.**

To introduce the concept of appositives for my students, I start by showing them a number of model sentences from published writing featuring appositives and ask them to tell me what they notice about each sentence. At some point, someone usually comments about the appositives in each sentence (usually by noticing that they often start with an article such as a, an, or the). While I've rarely encountered a student who knew the term appositive, most of my students have been able to identify the pattern and recognize that this phrase adds information to or provides detail about a preceding noun. I also draw students' attention to the way appositives are punctuated, using commas or dashes to set them off from the main sentence. Throughout the rest of the lesson and future lessons, I consistently use the term "appositive," even though I will never require students to define the term on a test.

I then model for students how writers use appositives in their writing by adding an appositive to a sentence from a piece of writing I'm currently working on. Sometimes this means that I add an appositive where one didn't previously exist, sometimes it means I combine two sentences together using an appositive. For instance, a couple of years ago when I taught this lesson, I was working on an article about teaching *The Scarlet Letter*. I pulled up my current draft for my students and added an appositive to a sentence, as shown below:

This activity not only allowed for further exploration of the nature of risk but also gave valuable practice in expressing ideas symbolically, **a skill that would be important for the final assessment.**

I talked to students about why I added the appositive, how it fleshed out the importance of the skill students were developing in a way that didn't disrupt the original sentence or complicate the syntax of my writing.

It's important that students see me experimenting with these concepts in my own writing. This helps them see what we're doing not just as a school assignment but as something "real" writers do. They also see a good model of how we think through using the tools and making these choices as experienced writers, something they can imitate in their own practice.

Composing with the Grammar Concept

I have students practice using appositives through a technique I borrowed from Killgallon (1998) called sentence expansion. I use a visual image (as recommended by Noden) displayed with an overhead or LCD projector and give my students a kernel sentence, inspired by the image, that they then expand with an appositive. My favorite image for this lesson is a close-up photo of

a rusting, hulking crane sitting abandoned in a disused rail yard; I give students the sentence, "The crane, ^, sat idly in the rail yard." The carat in the kernel sentence

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indicates for students where their appositive should go. Using this kernel sentence, we practice writing appositives, starting the practice in pairs and moving to individual practice as I feel that students are getting the concept.

As students practice, I engage them in ways that are critical to helping them develop a mastery of this tool. First, I encourage a lot of sharing of what students write and I praise them for their efforts. I want students to feel comfortable taking risks and sharing their results because this leads to significant discussion about appositives and their effects. As we consider the effect of the appositive, I am encouraging students to think about the rhetorical dimensions of their writing, and how audience and purpose influence the choices we make. I also ask students to consider the placement of the appositive. In the kernel sentence about the crane, the appositive comes right after the noun it renames; however, it would be just as correct

to place it before the noun or even at the end of this sentence. Each placement creates a different effect, and by discussing the impact of these alternatives, I help to show students the kinds of choices that writers can make given the affordances of these tools.

Application of the Grammar Concept

I will use two or three additional images and kernel sentences as we move through partner work and independent practice. And once I feel students are adept at using appositives in expanding kernel sentences, I shift to ask them to apply this concept in their own writing. If we're currently drafting, I might require students to write for ten or fifteen minutes and use an appositive when they see a chance; if we're revising, I ask students to go back through their writing and identify important nouns and add appositives to some.

I often find it helpful to model this process for students, since we're moving into a more authentic and complex context for their use of the appositive. I pull up a draft of something I am currently writing (on the overhead or LCD projector to allow students to see me making changes) and I either write or revise,

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looking for ways to use appositives in either case. It's at this point that I often show students how we can use appositives to combine the ideas of two sentences into one, helping the flow of the writing. Or I may identify an idea (a noun) that I think

could be expanded (similar to what we did with the images in our guided practice) and add an appositive to flesh out that noun. After I've added an appositive, I step back and think aloud for my students about the effect, sometimes even soliciting their reactions. As we discuss the effect of the appositive, sometimes we decide my change doesn't really work.

By showing students my own writing and modeling how I decide the effectiveness of my efforts, I help create a safe environment in the classroom where we can all share and comment on each other's writing without fear of personal attacks. After students have a chance to write or revise with appositives in their own written drafts, I ask them to share their efforts and we talk about the effectiveness of their choices. Sometimes the appositives don't work so well, but often they add to or enhance students' writing in clearly discernible ways. Whatever the outcome of our experiments, these discussions provide meaningful opportunities to explore the potential effect of the appositive.

Additional Instruction

I've found that one lesson is rarely enough for students to completely internalize the concept, so I usually offer additional sessions of modeling and practice. This doesn't take long,

as I can limit these follow-up sessions to 15 minutes or so, but they're valuable for students as they see additional examples of the concept in practice and experience for themselves how to integrate it into their own writing. I rely on some of Killgallon's (1998) other techniques (sentence combining, unscrambling, and imitating) to provide some variety in practice with using appositives. And I am constantly encouraging students to share and discuss the effect of appositives as they experiment with them. Once I can see from students' work that they are getting the hang of how to use the grammar feature, I can feel good about moving on.

After the drafting and revising, when it's time to submit a final draft, I require students to use two or three appositives in their writing and ask them to highlight their usage in the final draft; in addition, I like to have students (usually on post-it notes or in comment boxes if they're turning in a digital version) tell me why they chose to use these appositives and what effect they have on the writing. I encourage this reflective writing about their practice because it helps my students recognize the competence they are developing as writers and encourages them to see how these techniques might transfer to other kinds of writing.

Extension

The framework and instruction described here can be used for many different grammar concepts that can enhance our student's writing, including out-of-order adjectives, participles, or absolutes. I have also, using this framework, taught students to use adverbial conjunctions (although, as, while, until, etc.) to create introductory clauses that can help expand sentences or combine related sentences. Or we have imitated compound sentences that we find in published writing, using coordinating conjunctions to join related independent clauses. Regardless of the grammar concept, this framework can help students understand the structures, experiment with using them in a "safe" environment, and then implement them in their own writing. And the discussions we have as part of this instruction help them see the power of these tools for their writing, a motivating force for even my English majors at the university.

Reactive Teaching

I see the proactive efforts at teaching grammar as being focused on the *do's* of grammar—teaching students what they can do in their writing to make it more powerful—rather than focusing on the *don'ts* of grammar that often dominate our efforts to help students write more correctly. We touch on conventions when I teach proactively, as when discussions of punctuation marks arise when I teach about participial phrases or appositives. As my students imitate expert writers, they are often learning more than they think about the conventions of punctuation. But these efforts, while helpful, are often not enough to ensure that their writing is free from significant errors.

I consider this additional instruction as reactive in the sense that what I teach is in response to my students' needs. Fair or not, their writing will be judged by its correctness, and they need to understand this and be skilled at spotting and correcting the errors in their writing. As a new teacher, this goal used

to frustrate me: Students seemed almost belligerent in their refusal to apply the rules we had so diligently studied with our worksheets, and the sheer number of errors in their writing discouraged me to no end. I have since learned some important lessons about the nature of error and my role in helping students write with fewer errors, lessons that have changed the way I approach this kind of instruction.

Assuming A New Attitude

Research on error in writing suggests that, in part, error is a result of the developmental nature of learning to write. Shaughnessy (1977) suggests that learning to write is like learning a new dialect—some things from our spoken language are going to transfer to written forms of communication, but there are entirely new things to learn in writing (like punctuation, a feature we don't see in spoken communication). We wouldn't expect a kindergartner who's just learning to write to use end punctuation consistently and appropriately. It's not too much of a stretch to think that older students might struggle with complex uses of the comma or semicolon, not because they're lazy or inattentive but because they're not developmentally ready to master those marks. This suggests, at the least, that we need to adopt a more patient attitude towards the errors we find in students' writing.

I have found, for instance, that some errors are a natural part of students trying to integrate new grammar concepts into their writing. After I taught my eighth graders how to combine independent clauses using a comma and coordinating con-

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junction, I noticed they would start to use commas before almost every coordinating conjunction in their writing (as in "Joey, and I"). After teaching students to use

participial phrases to open a sentence, many of them would forget the comma that's often used to set off that phrase. Rather than marking their papers in red pen or labeling their responses in class as "wrong," I try instead to celebrate these mistakes as part of the natural process of learning to do something new. None of us, I explain to my students, hops right on a bike and rides it well the first time we try—similarly, learning to use these new grammar tools will necessitate some failures and mistakes. When I see these mistakes, we talk about why this usage isn't conventional (a term I try to use more than "correct" or even "standard"), tying back to what we learned from the activities described in the previous section.

As I have come to accept errors as part of my students' growth in writing, I feel much less concerned about their presence, especially in early drafts. In fact, focusing on correctness too early in the writing process stifles my students and can cause some of them to be too safe or minimalistic in their writing for fear of making mistakes. I do not ask students to even think about errors or punctuation until we've got a complete draft ready for polishing, an attitude that encourages risk-tak-

ing and experimentation of the kind I encourage in my proactive efforts. Some of my students want to make edits as they draft (a strategy that I find myself using a lot as a writer), and I don't discourage that, but we do not spend instructional time on errors or editing until later in the writing process.

Focusing on What Matters

When we do turn our attention to errors, I work hard to restrain my natural English teacher instincts to address every possible error I can see. From my own experience, I know that such instincts pave the pathway to teacher burnout and don't help my students very much at all. Instead, I have discovered that focusing on a few errors that really matter is key to maximizing my instructional efforts and that empowering my students to find their own errors minimizes their dependence on me as a copy editor.

One way I determine which errors really matter is by looking at my students' writing to see which errors they make; of these, I try to focus on the errors that are most common and most likely to interfere with meaning or that reflect poorly on the writer. A missing comma in an introductory element (as in "Opening the door slowly she prepared to enter the room.") can cause confusion for a reader. Likewise, independent clauses joined together inappropriately (i.e., run-on sentences) can obscure otherwise strong ideas in students' writing. On the other hand, using the word "your" instead of "you're" probably doesn't confuse a skilled reader, but it can elicit strong negative reactions. By closely evaluating early pieces of writing students do in my classroom, I start to build a list of the most common and most troublesome errors.

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This short, focused list guides my instructional efforts during the year, and I typically choose one or two of these errors to focus on during the editing process. In explicit instruction about the error, which I try to keep as brief and focused as I can, I use steps of modeling and guided practice to help students become comfortable with spotting and correcting the error. Then, it's time for them to look at their own writing. One activity that I have used at this stage is based on Jeff Anderson's (2005) "express-lane edit" approach, inspired by a wait in the express lane at a grocery store. When we reach the editing stage of the writing process, I provide explicit instruction on one or two specific errors I want students to focus on, such as capitalization of proper nouns or using commas to set off interrupters like appositives or absolutes. Then, they go carefully through their writing and "check out" their writing for those two errors; while they do so, they create a "receipt" for me that shows either how they made corrections or how they avoided the error in their writing. This receipt must be included with their final draft so I can see not only evidence of their process but also how well they understand the conventions we are focused on. I appreciate the express-lane edit activity because it places the

onus for finding and correcting errors where it belongs: on the students. Another way I help students notice their own problems with an issue like commonly confused words is to teach them how to use the find and replace function of the word processor. For my students who know they confuse “their” and “they’re,” for instance, I teach a mini-lesson on the difference between these two words with lots of models of correct usage from published texts. Then I model for them how I go through a document in the word processor, searching for each occurrence of the word “their” or “they’re” and double-checking my usage. In an adaptation of Anderson’s express lane receipt idea, I can ask students to highlight and comment on each usage and explain why it’s correct (or why they changed it if they originally had used the wrong word).

With sentence structure issues that lead to things like run-on sentences or inappropriate fragments, I’ve helped students attend to these errors by having them read their writing aloud. I model for students how reading aloud helps us notice the natural cadence and pauses in our writing and how those might signal a need for punctuation. While pauses don’t always indicate

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the need for a comma or period, they can help us become more aware of punctuation problems. Since I’ve often taught classes with thirty or more students, I’ve used “whisper phones” made of PVC pipe and elbows that allow students to read their papers aloud without disturbing those around them (see the page at <http://goo.gl/ZTRV1> for detailed instruction on how to

make these phones). While students feel funny at first about reading into a PVC phone, they quickly adjust, and I’ve been impressed with how they can often spot problems in their writing on their own. Once they’ve noticed the problems, it’s easier to help them explore ways of fixing them.

And, finally, a word about grading and errors in light of this discussion. As Heyden (2003) suggests in a column in *English Journal*, in grading we ought to “see everything, overlook a great deal, and correct a little” (p. 15). While this attitude sometimes goes against my deepest instincts, I’ve found it to be a far more helpful and less stressful way to grade mechanics in students’ papers. It’s best to explicitly outline the errors I’ll be looking for as I grade and to focus only on a small number of significant errors. Since we’ve studied those and looked closely for them in our editing workshops, I find that I have to deal with far fewer issues when grading. This means that I don’t hand back papers that are bleeding with red ink, something that discourages writers and makes them feel less confident about their abilities. And I find that I focus my attention while grading more on global issues, allowing me to give feedback on things that are likely to yield better results for my students.

Reflecting on Change

I would be the first to admit that the efforts described here have not always yielded immediate results or been easy to implement. There have been times when the siren song of gram-

mar worksheets and tidy little answer keys has almost lured me away. And I still catch myself worrying that I’m not “covering” enough in my efforts to teach grammar within the context of the writing process.

But I have seen growth and progress in my students as writers that I rarely saw when I relied on the worksheets and answer keys to “teach” grammar. I remind myself that writing is a complicated process and a messy one, as is mastery of the language and its conventions. I do know that I’m much more excited about grammar and language instruction now than I ever was before, and my students are more curious and willing to take risks with language in their writing than they were in the days of worksheets. They may not walk out of my classroom having mastered all of the terms and definitions in our grammar handbooks, but they leave with a greater confidence and a growing set of tools to use in their writing. And that, after all, is why I teach.

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