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Sheila Benson

Grammar Instruction Needs Fixed: Teaching Standardized Grammatical Conventions and Honoring Linguistic Identity

Setting the Scene

When I began teaching English education courses at a university in the Appalachian region, one of the courses I inherited was called Approaches to Teaching Language. The first night of class, I wanted to hear people speak, so I asked everyone to take a minute or two to say where they were from. I anticipated lots of dialectic variety because of the range of places my students came from: Pittsburgh, New Jersey, New York, Delaware, and various parts of West Virginia. One student, sitting in the back of the room, spoke as softly and as briefly as possible. I could not coax him to speak further. It took several weeks for him to finally feel comfortable speaking up in class discussion. When he did, he explained that he was from the county furthest south in the state, and for his entire life he'd been judged as a hillbilly the minute he opened his mouth. He was tired of that judgment, so he'd learned to stay quiet.

As I continued to teach the course across several semesters, I started paying attention to comments like the one above, comments that expressed that sense that something was "wrong" with how students spoke and used language. One student, also from far south in the state, told me that as a vocal major she had "eliminated" her dialect. She proudly told me she didn't speak that way anymore. Another student said she thought how her parents spoke was "cute," but she wouldn't speak that way herself because it wasn't "educated." We talked about how language is learned and how we echo the conventions that surround us. We talked about how it's not an issue of right or wrong but rather of audience. I brought up an example: "That house needs painted" rather than "That house needs to be painted."

Up shot a hand: "What? Who says 'That house needs to be painted'? Why all the extra words?"

"Well, following conventions of standard American edited English, you have to have a verb, not just a past participle."

"How do you *know* stuff like that?"

I thought a bit, then answered: "Well . . . it's how grammar conventions work and . . . it sounds right."

"But 'needs painted' sounds right to us! How do you teach students a convention you can't hear and don't use yourself?"

Therein lies the dilemma. We want to honor students' home dialects, but we also want them to understand that in certain situations, especially in writing, there's a set of language conventions they are expected to follow. We can talk about code switching and point out places where students do it, and we can talk about the arbitrariness of language conventions, but at some point students need to know how to use them.

When I began teaching this course, I had an intellectual understanding of the issues surrounding grammar instruction. What I didn't yet understand was the emotional attachments

to language use. I had encountered the emotional issues to a certain extent from living in Quebec for a year and a half, recognizing that people responded to me differently when I spoke Quebecois rather than Parisian French, but I didn't understand why. Quebecois wasn't part of my identity. Similarly, I knew the intellectual territory of dialect variation and grammar instruction, but I hadn't experienced the emotional connections. As a California native who'd lived in various parts of the West and Midwest, I didn't have an easily identifiable (or rather, easily stigmatized) dialect. I didn't know what that felt like. Teaching this course taught me differently.

This article traces my journey towards a better understanding, and addressing, of the sociocultural impact of language construction. Teaching grammar within that broader context opens doors for students to better communicate in multiple contexts. Because I was working with preservice English language arts teachers who used a range of stigmatized dialects, teachers who had been shut out linguistically themselves, the stakes were especially high. Through various assignments, my preservice teachers and I learned the importance of valuing all language use rather than memorizing rules.

Linguistic Autobiography

I knew that we needed to start the course with an exploration of our linguistic territories, and I knew there was material to be mined from preservice teachers' experience. Our first paper, a linguistic autobiography, was designed to help them explore why they spoke as they did. Preservice teachers answered a series of questions to get them generating potential writing material: Are there certain words or phrases that your family uses that you don't hear

other places? Have you ever felt like a linguistic outsider? Any substitute swear words? What phrases from movies or other media are part of how you speak? Have you ever been teased for

how you speak? How would you describe the way you speak to someone who's not "from here"? They were to use the material generated from these questions and write a 4-6 page reflection about some aspect of the way they spoke/used language.

I was not prepared for the sense of shame that emerged from these papers. One preservice teacher wrote about how much she loves the way her family speaks in her small West Virginia town and how that dialect says "home" to her. She then wrote about her sense of alienation when she came to the university and how she was teased (mildly) for her country twang. She

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learned to hide it, then went home for the summer and felt alienated from her family because she no longer sounded like them. Her paper expressed her sense of alienation from two communities and how she does not want to feel linguistically split but does not know how to reconcile the two dialects. Another preservice teacher wrote about being literally silenced in a study abroad course in Spain: because she spoke the “wrong” Spanish dialect, she was not allowed to speak in class. She had never experienced such silencing because she had always been the highest-achieving student in whatever class she took, and the silencing troubled her. Yet another preservice teacher wrote of a moment when she said “rolly-coaster” rather than “roller coaster” and was assigned to the lowest level reading group as a result. She spent the rest of her childhood rejecting her parents’ working-class Pittsburgh dialect and wrote about how she was just now, years later, realizing that she had shut herself away from part of her identity because of her language choices.

I had originally envisioned this linguistic autobiography as an opportunity to take inventory. My preservice teachers, given the opportunity to think about how their language choices influenced who they were, took the assignment to a much deeper level. They literally felt split by the dialect juggling they performed. They wanted to be proud of their home dialects—and in certain situations they were—but they were also receiving messages that their home dialects were “wrong” or “broken.” How they spoke said “home,” but that home was seen as backwoods and ignorant, so they learned to reject it. They learned to be hyper-vigilant about speaking “correctly.” They worried aloud in class that they didn’t “know grammar” because they couldn’t diagram sentences and use grammar terminology with ease. High stakes standardized grammar tests required for graduation, along with a grammar-only middle school language arts curriculum and grammar-specific state standards, exacerbated their worries, as well as their sense of being linguistically split. They wanted to be proud of their home dialect, but they also wanted linguistic credibility. Could they do both?

These concerns shifted how I taught the course. I had to address the split beyond “Look, you’re code switching. Isn’t that great?” We had to dig deeper, really pushing into why that split existed and how to cope with it. My assigning of readings that emphasized the arbitrary nature of grammar conventions—pieces like Hartwell’s (1985) “Grammar, grammars, and the teaching of grammar” and Williams’s (1980) “The phenomenology of error”—wasn’t going to be enough. My preservice teachers needed tools. So that’s what I gave them—or rather, enabled them to build for themselves.

Confronting Grammar Demons

The first semester of Approaches to Teaching Language, I assigned five minute teaching demonstrations as a way to help preservice teachers practice teaching some sort of language-related concept in a non-threatening setting. After seeing the dialect dilemma related to grammar instruction, I refocused the assignment to deal with grammar instruction directly. I brought in Constance Weaver’s (2007) *The Grammar Plan Book: A Guide to Smart Teaching*, particularly her idea of teaching grammar so that we “teach fewer things but teach

them deeply and well” (p. 16). We looked at some of her examples of teaching grammar in the context of how writers actually use whatever grammatical principle she was demonstrating. Then came the action step: Weaver’s book contains a large list of major grammatical concepts, taken from the concepts that most often appear on standardized tests. Preservice teachers were to select one of their personal “grammar demons,” something they felt they needed to understand better, and design a five minute teaching activity that could help their classmates better understand that concept in the context of some sort of writing or reading. The goal was to use the concept in an actual communication setting, not just learn about a concept. I didn’t want them to design a nice little jingle to remember prepositions or distribute some practice sentences where we circled helping verbs. I wanted my preservice teachers to see that they could address standardized usage in light of dialect variation so that their future students didn’t get the message that how they spoke was “wrong” and “needed fixed.”

Preservice teachers took up the challenge in creative ways, building writing into what they had originally thought they would teach via worksheets. They explored the merits of various sentence constructions by analyzing fortune cookie messages and then wrote their own fortunes. They examined how they under-

stood the function of grammar even when they didn’t know the terminology. One preservice teacher wrote an allegorical children’s book about adjectival phrases, using the protagonist’s dilemma of who she “belonged with” to help her classmates better understand how such phrases function in real communication situations. A few of the preservice teachers still lapsed into worksheet mode because it was so deeply ingrained into how they understood grammar instruction, but even they were able to see that there were other ways to help their future students understand grammatical conventions.

In addition, I started modeling contextualized grammar instruction more consciously. I had always taught mini-lessons about common grammar issues I noticed in students’ papers: things like semi-colon usage, run-on sentences, or correct quotation punctuation. Unfortunately, because I gave those mini-lessons near the end of class, just after handing back graded papers, my preservice teachers didn’t usually pay attention because they were flipping through my comments instead. Taking my cue from Weaver, I pulled in examples from specific pieces of literature. For example, I wanted to demonstrate how identifying adverbial phrases and differentiating them from the main subject and verb of a sentence could help with understanding complex passages. I pulled out this sentence from William Faulkner’s “Barn Burning”:

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The boy, crouched on his nail keg at the back of the crowded room, knew he smelled cheese, and more: from where he sat he could see the ranked shelves close-packed with the solid, squat, dynamic shapes of tin cans whose labels his stomach read, not from the lettering which meant nothing to his mind but from the scarlet devils and the silver curve of fish—this, the cheese which he knew he smelled and the hermetic meat which his intestines believed he smelled coming in intermittent gusts momentary and brief between the other constant one, the smell and sense just a little of fear because mostly of despair and grief, the old fierce pull of blood. (p. 145)

I asked preservice teachers to explain what the sentence was saying, especially who the subject of the sentence was. We then identified the core of the sentence and explored why all the rest of the words were there. I handed out enlarged copies of the sentence and asked everyone to work in groups to cut out key phrases and move them around, grouping them

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by meaning in relation to the subject and verb. My preservice teachers had not thought about grammar in terms of meaning before, and this activity gave them a concrete way to make sense of terminology and see how it worked in

real life. I didn't see a raft of Faulknerian sentences start appearing in students' writing after that (which might be a good thing), but they were seeing that they could make sense of what had previously been an arcane set of terms. My preservice teachers also got braver about trying new sentence structures and their punctuation accuracy improved.

I also addressed the larger sociocultural component of the grammar debate more directly. Because their home dialects were so stigmatized, my preservice teachers—and their future host teachers—were hyper-vigilant about their grammar usage. They were afraid of losing credibility because of how they spoke, and they wanted to be sure their students spoke "correctly" as well. At the same time, as demonstrated in the linguistic autobiography assignment, there was a sense that they were betraying or at least denying a key part of who they were when they gave up their dialect or hid it. In some ways, our class readings about language and its relation to identity were increasing the sense of guilt; my preservice teachers were becoming more aware of what was at stake when they code-switched. This is where Michelle Crotteau's (2007) *English Journal* article about helping students honor their home dialect became a crucial addition to the course. Crotteau (2007) writes about a test preparation/review course that she was required to teach at her school. The students were Appalachian, and the socioeconomic and linguistic barriers they faced echoed those of students in the area where we lived. She describes how she helped her students develop

writing fluency in their home dialect and then helped them learn standard American edited English conventions as another audience context. Her students passed their statewide writing assessment, but even more importantly, they did so without feeling ashamed of their Appalachian linguistic conventions. Crotteau (2007) valued the dialect her students already had, emphasizing that learning standard American edited English expanded their communication opportunities rather than limiting them.

This idea resonated with my preservice teachers. Up to that point in their formal education, grammar instruction had been about rules, mostly "don'ts": Don't use contractions, don't end sentences with prepositions, don't write the way you speak at home. Those don'ts sent a deeper, more painful message: Don't value how your parents speak, don't respect anything that varies from the "right" dialect, don't let language express thoughts in any way that differs from a pre-set norm. Crotteau's (2007) article showed that students could speak *both* ways without losing access to important things like a high school diploma. From here we moved to discussions of discourse conventions, with the goal of understanding how linguistic norms are established across various groups.

Exploring Discourse

To help my preservice teachers think more deeply about the issue of linguistic norms, I designed a language learning activity. Based on Gee's (1999) concept of primary and secondary discourses, the goal was for them to better understand how language usage becomes a way to establish group membership. We talked in class about what constitutes a group (or, using Gee, a discourse) and how while we are born into a primary Discourse (Gee capitalizes this discourse to distinguish it from secondary discourses), we learn the "rules" for a number of secondary discourses. Rarely, though, does someone who is already in the group sit down and verbalize the rules to us; instead, we figure out how to be part of the group through observation and participation. Preservice teachers then had to choose a secondary discourse to "join"—or at least observe closely—for a few weeks, with the ultimate goal of trying to verbalize the group's discourse conventions. They were to focus especially on language use, but non-linguistic practices such as dress played a role as well. Finally, they wrote a brief reflective paper about what they had learned about their chosen group's discourse conventions.

At first, my preservice teachers were drawn to the espionage sense this assignment would allow. They saw the assignment more as an opportunity to role play than anything else. They soon realized, though, that language was an important tool for establishing (and denying) membership. They wrote of how not knowing linguistic norms for the group could silence them (e.g., not knowing correct terminology in an online gaming situation), cause them to lose credibility (e.g., saying "pee" rather than "urine" at a nurse's station), or become an inclusion opportunity (e.g., being shown how to respond appropriately in a church women's group's scripture discussion). It depended on how sensitive the preservice teacher was to the group's norms and how willing the group was to admit a newcomer. Language was not the only signal of belonging, but it was an important one. Once preservice teachers had complet-

ed this assignment, we talked as a class about how language can become a signal of whether we “belong” or not. This is why grammar usage and dialect become so strictly policed: they serve gatekeeper functions. We are socialized into our

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language conventions (think of how children learn to speak through modeling by important adults in their lives), and this is where the “it just sounds right” concept originates. We then talked about potential problems when the language

a child hears modeled at home differs from the language—and overall discourse conventions—that same child hears at school, which connected us back to the “needs painted” example near the beginning of this article.

The point was to get preservice teachers not only reading about discourse conventions but *experiencing* them in a more focused way. I say “more focused” because these preservice teachers had been experiencing the intersection of discourse conventions and grammar their entire lives. The difference here was that it was done consciously, with an eye towards understanding the larger sociocultural impact. Teaching grammar conventions, even in the context of writing, without also considering the relation of those conventions to their larger social context, only looks at a small piece of a much larger issue. As my preservice teachers started to see their language usage as part of a larger cultural identity, they spoke in class of how freeing it was to talk about the big picture rather than just applying arbitrary rules. They also started making plans for how they would use similar activities in their future classrooms. With this groundwork laid, it was time for the final step: designing language-focused units.

Language Instruction Units

This final assignment presented some unique obstacles. Other than in this one semester, preservice teachers had experienced years—even decades—of language units that only involved several weeks of grammar exercises. They had been reading all semester about larger sociocultural issues related to language use, and they liked the ideas they were learning, but they were unsure how to implement their new knowledge when it didn’t fit nicely with their previous grammar-dominant framework. I handed out the assignment description—design a 3-4 week unit that focuses on some aspect of language usage—and the panicked questions began: “What do we pick for a unit?” “How do I fit all this with all the content standards we have to teach?” “How can I possibly come up with an entire unit worth of material about this?” I reminded them that they were nearing the end of an entire semester of language-related study, and they had read several books’ worth of language-related topics. Surely they could find *something* to expand upon for their future classrooms.

Everyone calmed a bit and we started brainstorming. The issue was not so much that they lacked ideas but that design-

ing a unit that wasn’t centered around a single book was different than what they had ever experienced. Language had always been a tool but not a focus of study. When they got past that hurdle, preservice teachers came up with a wide range of units: understanding of idioms (particularly designed with ELL students in mind), how language gets used for political purposes, persuasion in advertising. One student designed a unit that required her students to literally create their own language, helping them see how grammar rules are connected to larger societal conventions and expectations. For most of these preservice teachers, this assignment was their first opportunity to integrate language study with literature study and writing. Language had always been the medium through which they got to what really mattered to them: literature. They saw how the invisibility of language study contributed to standardized grammar conventions being taken for granted and how the power issues related to language use became hidden. After a semester of exploring larger sociocultural issues in language use, my preservice teachers wanted to design units that would help their future students feel empowered in their language variation rather than penalized for it. Their final products enabled them to do so.

Conclusion

James Britton (1988), in a discussion of writing instruction, introduces a metaphor of trying to reach for an object underneath a couch with a long stick: “if we focus only on the end closest to our hand, then we lose track of what we’re trying to reach with the far end” (p. 19). I think something similar is happening with grammar instruction. We’re focusing—with very good intentions—on the near end, getting the grammar right, and even getting the grammar right in a real-life writing context. The far end is our ultimate goal, however. We want students to understand that language is a means of accessing communicative power. There are deep consequences to how we use language, and language is a key part of how we see ourselves fitting in with the people around us.

Too often in the effort to help students navigate grammatical gatekeeping we miss the larger fact that a gate exists at all. We have very good intentions of helping our students access power by mastering the conventions of standard edited American English, but we don’t have the conversation with students about why language is connected with power and how that connection works. I’m not saying that students need to rebel against grammar conventions or not learn them at all. What I am saying is that, just as grammar is best understood in the context of actual writing and language use, language use itself is best understood within the larger context of how language conventions become part of identity and the establishing of membership. I like to talk with my preservice teachers about how language carries a lot of “baggage” with it. After completing assignments like I’ve described above, they real-

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ize that they have been living with this “baggage” their entire lives. This awareness helps them make more conscious decisions about their language use, thinking about using language strategically rather than passively following rules determined by someone else. They learn that language instruction isn’t about deficits; it’s about actively studying and creating with language.

When English language arts teachers explore language conventions with their students rather than trying to purge dialect problems, they show their students that there are multiple audiences to reach, audiences with expectations. Grammar study can be empowering, but only if we focus on the bigger picture. Perhaps, in the context of a standardized exam or a published essay, students’ conventions “need fixed.” If, however, we can help students understand that those rules are part of a larger discourse and that language identities constantly shift depending on the communication context, then those students can leave our classrooms realizing that while conventions might need to be fixed, their language identities don’t.

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