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Kenan L. Metzger

How Should I Change the Way I Teach/Model Grammar Instruction in my Methods Course? One Teacher Educator's Critical View of His Own Pedagogy

Introduction

As English teachers and teacher educators think about the teaching of grammar, they often think about the teaching of writing. The debate is still whether teaching grammar plays any significant role in the improvement of students' writing, and whether it should be taught in isolation or in the context of writing. A further complication of this argument is the privileging of certain types of English over others. As many students come from more diverse language and cultural backgrounds, educators are faced with the issue of what grammar to teach. Weaver (1996b) discusses the history of grammar, as it began as a way to move up the social strata, and to maintain that strata (p. 3). This point is pertinent to the discussion as teachers consider why they should teach grammar. Are teachers helping students to enter the academy? Is the establishment of a "standard English" a way to distinguish the intelligence of others? It is important to help students be successful in school?

Teachers and teacher educators need to be aware of their rationales for teaching grammar, and their intentioned outcomes. Are they sending the message that Standard English is superior to so called non-standard English? If educators intend to help students enter the academy does that place students outside the communities from which they come?

My interest in the teaching of grammar comes from the perspective of a teacher educator. I teach English education to teacher candidates preparing to enter the field for the first time during their internships. In the first semester, of which this paper is concerned, I teach a methods course for future English teachers, who are at the same time in a setting with a mentor teacher. These mentor teachers will be guiding these students in the following semester during student teaching. I also teach a capstone class during the student teaching semester to help guide candidates through the experience and help them to be as successful as possible. I have struggled with how to teach these future teachers how to teach grammar. I conducted lessons during the methods course on the use of writing workshop, and the use of mini-lessons as a way to introduce grammar issues students are displaying. I then suggested students look for such issues in their own writing as they revise and edit based on the mini-lessons. On a couple levels I have felt remiss in my instructional practices. Despite the fact that I, like many methods teachers, have much material to cover during the semester, I have not felt I spent enough time discussing the teaching of grammar. I have seen the evidence of this when I asked candidates in the capstone course what their main concerns were, and in the top 5 was the teaching of grammar. Also, I have seen one student teacher, whom I was responsible for supervising, being required to change the curriculum at the beginning of student teaching in order to teach grammar as a unit, isolating

it from the teaching of writing. So, on the one hand I may not have taught enough about the teaching of grammar, and on the other hand I may not have prepared candidates for what they would actually have to teach.

Therefore, aside from the fact that teaching grammar in isolation "does not improve reading, speaking, writing, or even editing, for the majority of students," student teachers may find themselves required to teach it anyway (Weaver, 1996a, p. 15). I decided to ask candidates in the methods course what they thought about the teaching of grammar before they entered student teaching. At the same time I asked the mentor teachers to which some of them would be assigned what they thought about the teaching of grammar. My hope was to get a picture of ways in which candidates were being prepared to teach grammar, and how grammar was actually being taught. The reason I wanted to see these pictures is so I could better understand how I as a teacher educator might better prepare my students to teach grammar. My discoveries may shed some light on this subject for other teacher educators. After emailing students and mentor teachers I heard back from 4 student teachers, and 4 mentor teachers. So, this was really a convenience sample and in no way represents any scientific findings. Nevertheless, I found the responses to be quite enlightening and worth some thought and discussion. One of the students was the aforementioned one who had to change her curriculum in midstream. I say midstream because I require my students to prepare a unit in the methods course they will teach during student teaching. I chose to highlight this student's responses in the interest of a more concentrated discussion about the issue of (student) teachers being required to teach grammar in ways not supported by research as best practices.

Weaver (1996a) suggests, for example, "that teachers...examine their own students' writing, and offer the kinds of guidance their students need—mostly at the point of need" (p. 17). A study by Bee (2005) with English language learners suggests that drill exercises help to reduce subject-verb agreement errors. Although this may be true, educators should, as I have suggested, examine the intention of the use of such drills. Certainly, students in this study may have decreased the occurrence of errors, and increased their confidence in the completion of academic assignments, but there seems to be no evidence that their writing became more complex or thoughtful. Weaver (1996a) suggests in using a constructivist model of teaching grammar, students are forming questions about why certain grammar rules apply; thus, they are coming to understand the rules (p. 18). Teachers' attitudes toward students may also play an important role in the teaching of grammar. Shaughnessy (1976) suggests teachers of basic writing often view their students in the same way doctors view patients, looking at deficiencies in their students instead of at ways in which pedagogi-

cal practices may be affecting how students are learning (p. 234). However, if teachers can begin to see ways in which students think and how that is related to how they write, they may begin "to see that teaching at the remedial level is not a matter of being simpler but of being more profound, of not only starting from 'scratch' but also determining where 'scratch' is" (Shaughnessy, 1976, p. 238).

In a meta-analysis of studies on the teaching of composition, Hillocks (1984) concluded "The study of traditional school grammar [sic]...has no effect on raising the quality of

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student writing" (p. 160). However, he does name the most effective model of instruction as the environmental model. The characteristics of this model are a high degree of student involvement, and "structured problem-solving activities, with clear objectives planned to enable students to deal with similar problems in composing" (p. 160). Although, grammar is often a required subject in schools, research shows teaching grammar in isolation does nothing to improve students' writing. There is evidence to show teaching grammar as a subject does improve students' grammar scores on measures of grammar outside of a contextual framework; but is that our only goal as educators? If we want students to become more thoughtful writers, while at the same time more successful on school writing assignments, then it is useful to think of ways to teach grammar "in the context of real writing problems" (Hillocks, 1984, p. 160).

Considering all this, I set out to answer three questions to shed light on and perhaps further examine the complexity of the issues surrounding the teaching of grammar:

1. What strategies should we consider when integrating grammar instruction?
2. What role does grammar instruction play in the teaching of writing?
3. What do teachers and teacher educators need to know in order to facilitate research based language policy in their schools and districts?

Discussion

I received responses to these questions from 4 cooperating mentor teachers. One of them is a department Chair for Communication Arts at an urban high school, who teaches 9 - 12 grades. Another teaches English I through English IV. One of them teaches English 110 (and I included this because I liked it) "but has an attitude." Finally, one of them teaches juniors and seniors in AP subjects. When asked the question "what strategies should we consider when integrating grammar instruction?" one mentor teacher responded:

"I use the students' own writing examples to demonstrate problems with conventions. Students also do not seem to retain instruction in grammar unless

they have exercises to apply mini-lessons over and over again."

This seems to confirm the need to teach grammar in the context of writing. Also, as I do in my instruction, the use of mini-lessons is advocated. As one of Weaver's (1996a) participants puts it "Disguising my grammar behind the mini-lesson format in the writer's workshop has prevented me from having to endure a repetition of last year's groans regarding how boring grammar is" (p. 20). On the other hand, this teacher characterizes students' writing as having "problems with conventions." A more critical view is to consider if the conventions being taught are of the dominant culture, in this case school culture and language.

Another mentor responded "I would suggest strategies that incorporate students learning grammar using their own writing. But, as I have found, they need to be taught specific grammar principles, and this is a little hard to do without some sort of prepared example."

So, the suggestion is to give examples beforehand but then apply them to students' writing. The question is how you present the examples and what the teacher's intention is. Are students being asked to critically examine grammar rules, why they are being used, and when they are appropriate? A comparison of how different rhetorical contexts related to students' differing cultural experiences might be helpful. This response came from the teacher with an attitude:

"Grammar at higher levels is instructive but ultimately a waste of time. It is very hard to internalize grammar at an older age. Yes, you can teach an old dog new tricks, but not to catch a Frisbee."

On the surface this seems to imply teachers should not teach grammar at all. Perhaps, however, this is a different way to think about teaching writing. Perhaps we could teach different kinds of writing in differing rhetorical contexts, concentrating on how well one's ideas are communicated not necessarily on "correctness."

According to a mentor teacher "I believe grammar instruction should be integrated into the English reading and writing curriculum. Good writing should be practiced and good literature studied to give students the practice they need to become better masters of their language."

This does fit with the idea of integrating grammar with writing. However, I am cautious in endorsing this practice fully, since the implication is students' language is only academic in nature. Students' language is more multi-faceted, as they speak and use language differently in different situations. I know that if I told my students in the urban middle school where I taught they could only speak "school English," it would not serve them well in their inner city neighborhoods. Their friends might think they were trying to act like they

were superior. This hearkens back to the historical origins of grammar, used to climb or maintain social strata.

I received responses to the question "what role does grammar instruction play in the teaching of writing?"

One mentor said, "Students cannot proofread effectively if they do not understand the conventions. Peer editing is useful in writing, as long as students are taught HOW to peer edit in advance. It is helpful to identify one problem at a time, rather than working on several problems at once. For example, students go through and underline letters that need to be capitalized... We have a brief whole class instruction on proper nouns and...check for capitalization...move to end punctuation...how to insert proper punctuation and...mark/edit a paper."

Although this does not match the suggestion to integrate the teaching of grammar with the teaching of writing, it offers clear objectives and instructions for students. Also, it helps students think about why they are using the rules they are using and applies them to contextual situations. However, if this is the only way students are being told to compose "properly" the implication is that any other way, such as students' home language, is "improper."

Another response read, "I believe grammar is essential to teaching writing. Grammar is the foundation for creating clear, unambiguous, yet nuanced writing. It is the rule set that clarifies meaning, insuring that the writer and their messages are understood."

I like how these ideas integrate grammar into the teaching of writing, and how they point to larger more important goals like nuanced writing and an understood message.

The teacher with an attitude wrote "Well, it's a good thing in the sense that grammar proficiency will open gates to the upwardly mobile course of aspirants. However, I'm inclined to look more at intention, creativity, and intelligence than form. Not to say grammar isn't important, but mostly as an opener of gates and not a measure of a man or woman."

Once again this points to the function of grammar as a mark of social status, and how much language can stratify our students. This teacher does postulate an important function of grammar as a structural norm. Standard English, or more rightly called school

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English, helps to open gates for our students, especially those from the non-dominant culture. Teachers must, however, help students to think more deeply about why, when, and even if they would want to use school English, what doors it will open for them in society, and what the cost of such entrance is.

Another mentor stated, "I believe that a whole language approach works best—vocabulary and grammatical correctness should be learned in the context of reading and writing." At the same time whole language may be a valuable approach as it advocates for a relational model of language and language development, it may ignore many students, even in secondary schools, who need to begin with decoding and basic syntactical structures. Presumably, grammar instruction can function to introduce students to the basic processes of reading and writing, which should then lead to more complex meaning making activities, such as this teacher speaks of. On the other hand, this teacher speaks of "correctness" without necessarily providing a context of said correctness.

After posing the question "what do teachers and teacher educators need to know in order to facilitate research based language policy in their schools and districts?" I received the following response:

"Teachers and teacher educators need to know that grammar is best taught in scope and sequence from K - 12. Students come to high school with a huge deficit in grammar...Research may say that grammar taught as an independent course does not improve grammar, but my observation is that it does work. For 10 years I taught Modern Grammar and Linguistics. My students did much better in high school English with this foundation."

This teacher's response brings up many questions and concerns. First, I am reminded of what Shaughnessy (1976) says about a deficiency or medical model of viewing basic writing students. This teacher seems to begin by focusing on what is wrong with

students, and makes assumptions about where students are coming from. This teacher says that grammar

Perhaps in our methods courses we need to discuss the issues and conflicting philosophies novice teachers will face, and how to navigate among them.

instruction improves grammar. Grammar instruction may, by logical extension, have a positive effect on students' performances on measures of grammar, such as a grammar quiz; but, according to the research it does not improve student performances on school writing. Perhaps students did much better in high school English, as this teacher says, but what is the evidence of students' achievement?

The next teacher seems to echo these sentiments. "I believe teachers need to have a clear picture of their students' grammatical deficiencies, and have an integrated approach prepared that contains adequate material."

As much as teacher educators may bemoan the presence of such philosophies in schools, they are there. Perhaps in our methods courses we need to discuss the issues and conflicting

philosophies novice teachers will face, and how to navigate among them.

In contrast our attitudinally challenged teacher writes, “‘Research based language policy’ -- what does that mean in English? :-) Grammar is a function of practice and repetition - like hitting a forehand or backhand in tennis. Gotta get those kids and enforce repetition/technique in the formative stages...Grammar is a gestalt that will vary, in various epochs, in importance and salience. The message is not the medium. The message is the message even if inscribed improperly. Grammar is a fluency, a Pygmalion technique - apt for cocktail parties and high society - but ultimately not ontological in scope. :-) mw.”

Here I have left all the idiosyncratic elements of this teacher’s email message to illustrate the point. The message, not the medium, is the message. However, even this teacher is advocating for enforcing repetition at the earlier stages. First, this is the habit some teachers fall into of looking to the earlier grade levels for deficiencies in students. Second, this is still advocating for a set structure of language that may or may not acknowledge alternate or disparate structures based on the variety of cultural experience. The last answer to this question,

I have strong beliefs and experience about what works in the classroom, but in my methods course it is challenging and scary to expose myself by doing what I am asking my students to do.

though simple and short, may speak volumes. “Where are your students’ gaps? What is their reading level? What are their interests?” This is on the one hand a much more pragmatic approach, and on the other a

“Diving in.” As Shaughnessy (1976) postulates, a teacher must “become a student of new disciplines and of his students themselves in order to perceive both their difficulties and their incipient excellence” (p. 238).

I received responses from 4 teacher candidates who were preparing to enter student teaching, and had just taken my Methods of Teaching English course. I highlighted one of them as the candidate who struggled to teach the new grammar curriculum to students living in the inner city. I did this since I observed this candidate teaching and was helping navigate the way through a subject students had little interest in or knowledge of. All candidates identified themselves as high school English teacher.

Answering the question “what strategies should we consider when integrating grammar instruction?” the first response was “Lecture and mini lessons should be used.” My heart sank when I read this, but I realized I may not have modeled the strategies students needed, lecturing too much about pedagogical practices other than lecturing. The irony of this will not be lost on the reader.

The second candidate seemed to point to my lack of instruction as well. “Focus should not be on memorization of

sentence diagramming. Grammar practice should be practical for everyday writing and it should be a part of English class daily. A good way to do so is to make grammar practice part of daily focus work.” This candidate disparaged the use of memorization and diagramming, but only offered daily focus work as an alternative. I may not have offered enough strategies in how to integrate the teaching of grammar as opposed to isolated daily practice.

Another candidate came closer to the ideas discussed in the methods course by stating, “Strategies we should consider when integrating grammar instruction include approaching the whole thing authentically and hierarchically. By authentically I mean we shouldn’t necessarily be having dedicated grammar instruction time out of class, but rather integrate it into what we’re doing in class, such as doing mini-lessons during a writing workshop or taking time out to point out a common grammar mistake that everyone seems to be making and have students go through their own writing and that of their peers to identify and correct the mistake. By hierarchically I mean...Some conventions build upon others that students should already know, and teachers should present things in a particular order.”

I talked about integrating grammar with the writing process and using it as part of the writing workshop. I required that students integrate the use of writing workshop into the units they would be teaching the next semester, but did I model the practice in my classroom? I have strong beliefs and experience about what works in the classroom, but in my methods course it is challenging and scary to expose myself by doing what I am asking my students to do.

Finally, the teacher candidate who had to teach the mandated grammar curriculum said, “Strategies to consider when integrating grammar instruction are... grammar should not be seen as a rigid set of rules and restrictions and be drilled into our students... Our students do not learn best this way and the result would be bored, disengaged students. We need to play on their own prior knowledge and active understanding of grammar... We also need to consider the multiple aspects of learning grammar...students need to be able to learn about it, but also need to learn how to use it correctly...Students can read and understand the rules, but fail in applying them to their own writing.”

This candidate had some good ideas in the beginning, but was taken aback when forced to teach grammar in isolation. However, this candidate found ways to make it engaging, by playing instructional games with students, praising them for doing well, and giving them a sense of accomplishment as they completed standardized assessments. Perhaps I could have built in lessons and demonstrations on how to teach grammar in isolation if one has to. This candidate still uses the word “correctly” implying an underlying philosophy of

privileging school language over home language. As well as demonstrations, perhaps I could have facilitated more discussion of underlying assumptions about language.

Answering the question “what role does grammar instruction play in the teaching of writing?” one candidate responded, “Grammar instruction should be in the context of the students’ writing, teaching the skills that their early drafts demonstrate they lack.” This shows at least this candidate understood what I was trying to impart. Again, I would have done well to demonstrate this more to reach more students. This seems apparent in the next comment: “Grammar is very important in the teaching of writing which is why I think some sort of practice should be implemented daily.” I fear practice here means grammar in isolation with no intention to improve students’ writing.

Another candidate’s comments are encouraging. “Some teachers lament that there’s no longer a place for grammar instruction in school...I say poppycock. Grammar instruction is not only integral to proper writing instruction, but it’s also integral to advanced reading skills. Students need to know what effect the nuances of writing language have on their audience, and how they can...manipulate their audience...believe certain things based on their diction [or] style...It is this same grammatical knowledge students learn while working on their writing that can help them to be better and more thoughtful readers. Analyzing writing of all types from a grammatical standpoint provides just as much insight...as analyzing just the theme [or] point of view.”

I would like to have taken credit for teaching this to this student, but it so closely echoes a mentor teacher’s comments I am led to believe these comments are the result of the candidate’s field experiences. It is encouraging to know these ideas are being propagated in our schools, but it may be a call for more collaboration. Teacher educators could bring like motivated mentor teachers into their methods courses to talk about their successes in teaching grammar.

The comments of the struggling teacher candidate reveal much about her underlying philosophy. “Grammar instruction plays a vital role in the teaching of writing. Every day I read papers from my students that have great ideas and structure, but...lacking any basic grammar. It is a challenge to grade this...when it clearly has a purpose but is almost unreadable because of...grammar mistakes. These mistakes are formed by their...verbal use of our language...they write exactly how they talk, not academic...I am dealing with a form of vernacular that is difficult to combat because their code-switching skills have not translated into their writing yet.”

This candidate is showing how underlying assumptions about language and culture may be obstacles to reaching important objectives, by only seeing the deficiencies and not the strengths of students’ writing. Also, there are ways this

candidate could help students to see the importance of differing rhetorical stances, and use the different types of English (codes) available to them for different purposes, not just to enter the academy. Instead of the teacher “combating” students’ vernacular, there needs to be more discussion of the uses of different languages/dialects.

When asked the question “what do teachers and teacher educators need to know in order to facilitate research based language policy in their schools and districts?” one candidate responded, “In order to facilitate research based language policy teachers need to know the research. Schools should probably include...peer-reviewed research in their professional development seminars.” What a simple but often unused practice, and there is a place for more peer-reviewed research in my methods course. Another candidate states “They need to know where their students stand as far as basic grammar skills. Many are behind and the only way to get better is to practice, not to dismiss it.” I would say again we need to practice grammar in the context of writing, but also in the context of a discussion about the privileging of certain dialects over others.

...we need to practice grammar in the context of writing, but also in the context of a discussion about the privileging of certain dialects over others.

Another candidate brings up an excellent point that emphasizes the importance of research based best practices. “Teachers and teacher educators need to know...research is just not enough to convince people at large to implement certain policies and strategies...They need to have the research ready to present to people...ready to defend what we are doing. However, they also need to apply those practices in the classroom before trying to convince anyone else it’s a good policy. It doesn’t...have to be...action research, but at least proof of the policy’s validity in...a real classroom.”

I see this as a call for more collaboration between schools and schools of education. Educators need to be able to say best practices work. Grammar instruction in context can improve students’ writing not only on school writing assignments, but also in all rhetorical contexts in which students find themselves. I find the struggling candidate’s comments particularly interesting in light of the fact that these very practices were seen later by this candidate as obstacles to effective instruction.

“Teachers and Teacher Educators need to be aware that not every research based language policy will be the right fit for their students. While studies do show that good education is standard among both the wealthy district and the urban districts, there is a level of differentiation that needs to be addressed. My kids need to learn the same material as the kids in _____ County [one of the richest counties in the

U.S.], although I am going to have to go about it in a slightly different way in order for it to be relevant and interesting...the only effective way...I have found is to work directly with correcting poorly constructed sentence examples on the board and letting the class work together to make it correct. The main goal should be individualization and differentiation for the unique classes being taught.”

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This is particularly telling since this candidate was expressing these ideas the semester before student teaching. Then, during the student teaching semester when required to change the curriculum to a more prescriptive grammar approach, was bemoaning the practice previously advocated for. Perhaps the ideas sounded good until the candidate had to implement them. It should also be noted the county to which this candidate refers has the highest per capita of individuals on government assistance; further emphasizing the social strata of a small percentage of people with all the money. In addition, this may introduce the point that issues of language and dialect differences surrounding class and socioeconomics are not relegated to urban areas, but are also prevalent in suburban areas.

Conclusions

So, what have I learned about ways I might change my own instruction. It would be beneficial for me to spend more time teaching about grammar pedagogy in my methods course. Specifically, I could model more of what I am teaching rather than lecturing as much. I could set up a writing workshop using the content of the course to show students how to teach grammar in context. Spending more time critically looking at the implications of grammar usage in regards to social strata and differing language structures would benefit students, especially since they will be placed in diverse settings. Collaborating with mentor teachers of our candidates is beneficial, as they can discuss what is happening in schools. Mostly, I would like to examine the question “why are we teaching grammar, and what is our intention?” In the academy we seem to take for granted everyone will want to enter here. Is our only goal to help our students climb the social ladder to success, or are there ways to talk about success in other ways? Can students be shown how to navigate the waters of the world and find rhetorical strategies that will garner them power, not for the sake of power itself, but to lift themselves out of oppression?

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