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Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to my colleagues at Grand Valley State University as well as the peer reviewers at LAJM for their thoughtful feedback on this article.

METHODS

Daily Oral Language, the Bell Tolls for Thee: A Critique of Daily Sentence-Editing Exercises

KAREN PEZZETTI

As a teacher educator, I have the privilege of observing students and teachers at work in many different kinds of schools. This year, I noticed many middle and high school teachers leading their students in daily sentence-editing exercises such as Daily Oral Language (DOL). DOL (also recognizable under other names such as Daily Language Practice; Daily Editing; Correct-Alls; Grammar, Usage and Mechanics (GUM); or MUGShots) is a classroom practice consisting of editing decontextualized sentences, often completed at the beginning of class as a bell-ringer or do-now. Publishers selling pre-packaged sets of error-riddled sentences advertise their materials as a quick and effective way to help improve students' grammar, writing, even their test scores. This is an alluring promise!

It certainly would have tempted me as a young teacher. When I taught high school English in urban and suburban schools in California's Bay Area, I grappled with the question of how to help my students write more effectively. As I read my students' writing day after day, I longed to know how to help them write more powerfully. My students were clearly brilliant; they could teach us all some very important lessons about life and language. But I feared that the mistakes in their writing would keep many readers from taking their ideas seriously. Moreover, my students lacked the syntactic tools they needed to craft powerful sentences and paragraphs. I had little in my toolbelt to support them. I had not received successful grammar instruction myself, and my teacher education courses seem to have elided the issue altogether. Finally, there were already so many demands on my instructional time – how would I ever fit in grammar instruction? If a mentor had handed me a set of DOL materials, I certainly would have used them. Therefore, it is partly with my novice teaching self in mind that I write this article.

The teachers that I interact with chose to implement

DOL routines for a number of excellent reasons including the following: a desire to begin class in an efficient, productive, non-threatening way; an impulse to engage students in investigating and playing with language; and, foremost, the goal of helping students to write clearly and correctly. While the DOL routines that I observed this year appeared, at least superficially, to meet each of these goals, I argue below that upon closer inspection, DOL actually worked against these important ends. I contend that educators who use DOL and other daily sentence-editing exercises ought to re-evaluate this instructional choice.

Below, I first offer a brief description of DOL and the way this sort of exercise was implemented by my student teachers and their cooperating teachers in the classrooms I observed this year. Second, I share three reasons why I believe English Language Arts (ELA) teachers should abandon this instructional practice. Finally, I conclude with a short list of guiding questions that teachers could consider as they plot new beginning of class routines as well as a vignette that illustrates an alternative to DOL.

What is Daily Oral Language (DOL)?

If you attended or taught in an American public school between 1950 and the present, you are likely to have experienced some form of sentence-editing exercises. Perhaps the following routine will sound familiar to you: as the bell rings, the teacher directs students' attention to two or three sentences that are each filled with grammatical errors. These sentences might be pulled from a workbook or other pre-packaged material and are each about a different topic, unrelated to anything the students are studying. Students are tasked with identifying the grammatical and spelling errors in the sentences. After some independent work time, the teacher leads a whole-class debrief.

Below, I share a vignette illustrating the way that DOL was implemented in several

of the classrooms I observed last year. This incident is reconstructed from my observation notes, although I've altered some key details (including the actual sentence) for purposes of anonymity. For a carefully recorded transcript of a similar scene, see Godley, Carpenter, and Werner (2007).

All right, guys," says Jenny, an earnest, White student teacher, as she adjusts the focus on the document camera. "1st hour found 24 errors in this first sentence. Let's see if you can beat that!"

The tenth graders, all young people of color, work in pairs to copy the first incorrect sentence onto small whiteboards:

mexican troops lead by major general santa anna ended a 13 day siege on the alamo which recaptured the texan fort however at the cost of the 1500 mexican soldiers who died in the battle not to mention the lives of the 186 volunteer texans on march 6 1836

Copying the sentence takes several minutes. Many students automatically draw three short lines under the first letter of the first word, add a period to the end of the sentence, and then stall out. With the whiteboard held at arm's length, a few students swipe at their boards to add commas, seemingly at random. I hear one student ask another, "What's this? A siege?" (He pronounces the word so it rhymes with "oblige.") The other student shrugs, indifferent. Meaning is irrelevant here.

Or maybe not: I hear another student grumble, "Why's it always gotta be the Mexicans dyin'?"

Uncertain how to edit this sentence, or uninterested in doing so, most students chat or lounge as Jenny makes her way around the room, checking in with individual students. "Think about where you've put that comma," she says encouragingly to one young woman who rolls her eyes as Jenny moves away.

At the front of the room again, Jenny gets the class's attention, and reads the sentence aloud in a stilted way (indeed, it would be difficult to read fluently since it has so many mistakes).

For the next six minutes, Jenny calls on students and asks them to share their corrections. A student suggests that "Mexican" and "Texan," should be capitalized. Very few students that I can see have added commas in sensible places. No grammatical rules or conventions are articulated except, "We capitalize the first letter of a sentence." As students offer suggestions, Jenny thanks them for their contributions and tells them that they are right or wrong. Jenny marks up the projected sentence with so many symbols that it becomes nearly illegible:

mexican troops lead by major general santa anna ended a 13-day siege on the alamo which recaptured the texan fort however at the cost of the 1500 mexican soldiers who died in the battle not to mention the lives of the 186 volunteer texans on march 6 1836

Twelve minutes after the bell, sighing, Jenny has the students wipe off their whiteboards and "get ready for class." The students appear eager to erase the evidence of their frustration and boredom, wiping away the sentences with more energy than I have yet witnessed in this classroom.

As with any instructional practice, the efficacy of DOL exercises can vary by the particular ways they are implemented. Some of the ways that DOL was enacted in the classrooms that I observed may have departed from the original creators' visions. For instance, in the lessons I witnessed, students rarely explained the reasoning behind their choices. (There was little that was "oral" about the Daily Oral Language.) Furthermore, students never wrote or saw the sentence correctly – they just covered the sentence with editing marks. Finally, in these instances, students were not explicitly taught the grammatical rules and structures that they needed to successfully revise the sentences. However, even if my student teachers had been enacting the most robust, student-centered, critical-thinking-focused version of daily sentence-editing exercises, I would still take issue with this instructional practice for the reasons I explain below.

First, though, I ought to admit that in offering the following critiques of DOL, I'm doing little that is original. As Jeff Anderson (2005) points out, the National Council of Teachers of English has been arguing since 1936 that decontextualized grammar instruction does little to improve students' writing. In the last eight decades, numerous studies and reviews of the literature have reached the same conclusion (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Schoer, 1963; Hillocks, 1986; Hillocks & Smith, 2003; Noden, 1999; Hyler & Hicks, 2017; Smith, Cheville & Hillocks, 2006; Smith & Wilhelm, 2007; Weaver, 1998). In fact, Hillocks (1986) argued that since decontextualized editing exercises can divert class time away from authentic writing and thinking about writing, routines like DOL may actually slow students' growth as writers. In a meta-analysis of the literature, Graham and Perrin (2007) found that decontextualized grammar instruction correlated negatively with students' writing proficiency. Since daily sentence-editing exercises took pernicious hold of American Language Arts classrooms, scholars and researchers and literacy coaches have spoken out loudly and clearly about its drawbacks. I think of DOL like an invasive plant: a particular

species brought in to solve a specific problem that begins to multiply too rapidly, to take over, to steal nutrients from valuable and beloved natural resources. In these situations we must work together to remove the unhelpful invader and nurture useful alternatives in its place. A one-time effort with shovels and trimmers isn't enough; we need a deep understanding of the problem and a systematic, sustained effort to change practice. I see this article as one small contribution to this effort.

Why Teachers Should Stop Using Daily Sentence-Editing Exercises

Reason #1: DOL does not help students become better writers.

Students who participate in daily sentence-editing programs do not become better writers through this intervention. Moreover, and of particular importance to the data-driven instruction of today - they do not even improve at the editing exercises they encounter on standardized tests (Godley, Carpenter & Werner, 2007; Whittingham, 2007). This shouldn't come as a surprise, since decades of research has found that effective grammar instruction must be contextualized within authentic meaning-making processes, in other words, it must be interwoven with students' real reading and writing processes (Smith & Wilhelm, 2008; Weaver, 1998).

Furthermore, neurological research suggests that participating in DOL activities may even reinforce or fossilize students' errors. This makes sense if we consider that human brains are constantly searching for patterns in the visual stimuli we encounter. Many experimental studies have shown that when people are exposed repeatedly to misspellings or grammatical errors, these patterns become reinforced in their own writing. Similarly, repeated exposure to correct spelling and correct grammatical structures is correlated positively with the ability to produce accurate spelling and grammar (Bradley & King, 1992). For instance, in a 2011 study, Powell and Dixon found that when adults were repeatedly exposed to particular misspellings through text messages, they were more likely to misspell those words themselves. Even more alarming, Jacoby and Hollingshead (1990) found that a single reading of a particular misspelled word influenced undergraduates' ability to accurately spell the word later.

In DOL exercises, students focus intently (if they focus

at all) on incorrectly written sentences. As Jeff Anderson writes in *Mechanically Inclined* (2007),

It's not rocket science. One sentence with ten errors to correct is problematic...How will students pick up on the patterns of correctness in language by marking up a sentence beyond recognition?...

With what we know about the brain absorbing information visually, is it a sane educational strategy to have kids stare at something so wrong for the first ten minutes of class every day?" (p. 18)

Routinely focusing on error-riddled sentences, rather than powerful model or mentor sentences, does not help our students learn the "patterns of power" (Anderson & La Rocca, 2017) they need to write effectively.

Reason #2: Daily sentence-editing tasks assume that we can make editing decisions without attending to meaning.

We need to take a step back and consider the larger goals of grammar instruction. As Richard Sterling, former director of the National Writing Project, explains, "The purpose of instruction in grammar is ultimately to guarantee the clearest communication and the fullest representations of the complexities of thought" (quoted in Smith & Wilhelm, 2008, p. ix). While the daily-sentence-editing tasks that I observed last year were assigned with the goal of moving students toward clearer communication, they did not have this effect.

First, most of the daily sentence-editing tasks that I observed involved sentences with words and content unfamiliar to the students. Unfamiliar vocabulary was never defined or discussed; often, unfamiliar words were mispronounced. Furthermore, editing the sentences often required content knowledge the students lacked. Take, for example, the following sentence: "Alaska dubbed sewards folly by those who thought buying it was foolish was purchested from Russia for about two cents an acre what a bargain." In order to "fix" this sentence, students must recognize "Seward's Folly" as a nickname for Alaska. If students had never heard this nickname, or if they don't know this use of the terms "dubbed" and "folly," it's nearly impossible to begin.

Tasks like these embed several dangerous hidden messages for students. First, they reinforce the idea that English class is not about real communication; it's about abstract language mechanics. Second, they suggest that there is always

a single right answer, regardless of authorial intent. As the “Let’s eat Grandma!” joke illustrates, editing decisions must hinge on the author’s intent and meaning.



Cartoon by Jim Pezzetti.

How can teachers help students appreciate the importance of revision and the crafting of a sentence when grammar study is only presented in the context of right and wrong? Finally, perhaps because so many of the sentences were drawn from decades-old instructional materials, they often contained content that students might reasonably object to, or at least want to talk about. Remember the student who grumbled, “Why’s it always gotta be Mexicans dyin?” when presented with a sentence about the battle of the Alamo. Clearly, this young man reacted to the content of the task, yet no curricular space was ever offered for discussion of the sentence’s content. What impact might this have on this young man’s attitude toward school, in general, and English class, in particular?

I recognize that many high-stakes standardized tests require students to perform editing tasks in ways that, at first glance, may appear similar to what we ask students to do in exercises like DOL. However, the forms of questions on these tests differ from DOL exercises in important ways. First, many assessments, such as the Smarter Balanced and PARCC assessments used by twenty US states (Gewertz, 2017) require students to edit particular sentences within a longer text such as a paragraph or essay supposedly written by a peer. On these exams, then, students have at least some context to guide their editing choices. Second, most grammar and usage questions focus on a single grammatical issue at a time rather than an error-riddled sentence. This allows students to home in on one aspect of grammar or usage. Third, in addition to multiple choice editing questions, most of these tests also have a writing portion in which students are expected to write clearly and correctly. DOL exercises do not prepare students for this portion of these assessments.

In pointing out these differences, I am certainly not advocating that teachers adapt their grammar instruction to more closely mimic what students are required to do on high-stakes assessments (since, as I explained above, decontextualized grammar instruction in any form is unlikely to be effective). Instead, I am trying to highlight some of the ways that daily sentence editing exercises do not deliver what they promise. Contrary to the assurances on the packaging, DOL exercises do not make students better test takers or better writers.

Reason #3: DOL is entrenched in language ideologies that are especially harmful for speakers of stigmatized dialects of English.

In their year-long ethnographic study of a classroom’s daily sentence-editing routine, Godley, Carpenter and Werner (2007) concluded that the

dominant language ideologies promoted by the Daily Language Practice activity conflicted with research on effective language and literacy instruction for speakers of African American English (Ball, Williams, & Cooks, 1997; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1992, Lee, 2000). Students’ home dialect, African American English, was neither validated through the activity (Delpit, 1995) nor viewed as a resource (Lee, 2000), but rather treated as a linguistic deficit because it did not adhere to the grammar of written Standard English. (p. 123)

According to Godley et al. (2007), DOL communicates a dangerous implicit message to students – that “Standard” Academic English is the only legitimate dialect of English and other dialects are wrong or broken. In fact, many of the “incorrect” sentences that appear in the DOL workbooks contain verb forms that are grammatical in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) but ungrammatical in Dominant English. Take, for instance, this sentence from a first grade workbook: “she move from evansville indiana last year.” This sentence follows one of the grammatical rules of AAVE by indexing the past tense with the time marker “last year” rather than an –ed past tense verb marker (Wheeler & Swords, 2006). Therefore, this would be an appropriate and grammatically correct verb form in AAVE. A sentence like this might present an opportunity to engage students in what Rebecca Wheeler and Rachel Swords (2006) call “contrastive analysis” – the systematic study of two or more languages to

determine their similarities and differences. However, when teachers use a daily sentence-editing approach, they tend to slip instead into a discourse which marks the standard or mainstream dialect of English as correct and all others as incorrect. As Godley and her colleagues explain, "...these sorts of activities alienate students from academic language by presenting appropriate language as monolithic and distant from students' own language use" (Godley et al., 2007). DOL communicates strong messages to students about who is smart and who is not, about who may continue to speak as they always have, and who, on the other hand, needs to change in order to be welcome in school.

Rather than reinforce Dominant English's superiority, our grammar instruction should include explicit discussion of the existence of multiple Englishes and the relationship between language and power (Young et al., 2014). As Godley and her colleagues argue, "it is critical that all students – speakers of stigmatized and standard dialects – gain an awareness of their own beliefs about language and language users so that language ideologies and their attendant power structures can be questioned and changed within broader social contexts" (2007, p. 124). DOL works directly against this charge by making it appear obvious and evident that there is one single correct answer for all contexts and that all other variations are wrong. Judging the languages spoken by Black and Brown students as inferior is a form of linguistic discrimination that has observable negative effects on student achievement.

We must also consider the impacts of DOL routines on White students and speakers of Dominant English. Imagine the room full of White youth who learn that "She move from Evansville, Indiana last year" is always and everywhere wrong. Might this not lead these same young people to later judge speakers of AAVE as ignorant or inferior? The Conference on College Composition and Communication made a similar point their 1974 declaration, "Students' Right to their Own Language." "The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans." Not only are DOL routines counter-indicated by 80 years of research, they may also work to maintain the U.S.'s racial hierarchy (Young et al. 2014).

So what should ELA teachers do instead?

There are really two questions embedded here. First, how should English teachers begin class? And second, how should English teachers teach grammar? We must separate these two issues. As I mentioned above, decades of research indicates that grammar instruction is most effective when it is embedded in meaningful, authentic reading and writing tasks. Grammar instruction cannot be relegated to a few minutes at the beginning of the hour; it must be interwoven with students' own composing processes. That said, I whole-heartedly agree with the educators I observe who want to begin class with an inviting, productive routine. This routine certainly does not have to focus on grammar or correctness (and there may be strong arguments against beginning class with topics that many students have had negative experiences with). However, it is possible that, when integrated with other kinds of writing instruction, a bell-ringer can support students in learning to harness the conventions of English so that they can communicate more powerfully.

I hesitate to offer specific "best practices" here because I believe that the best curriculum is crafted by teachers who draw on deep knowledge of their students and their content areas to build bridges between the two. At the same time, there are some practices and approaches that research suggests may be successful with diverse students across varying contexts. I think the key is to begin with some basic foundational principles and then craft solutions that build on those principles to meet our particular students' needs. When weighing possible ways to begin class, I believe we should consider the following questions:

How can we begin class in a way that...

- connects to previous content and anticipates the day's subject matter?
- welcomes all students and implicitly affirms their various languages, cultures and identities?
- requires higher-order thinking?
- centers students' ideas, interests and inquiries?

Of course, this list poses a tall order. Not every bell-ringer needs to meet each of these goals. But wouldn't it be great if they did?

To offer an example of what such an exercise might look like and to pose a contrast with the scene from the be-

gining of this article, here is a second vignette, also drawn mostly from my observation notes but with identifying details altered:

Maya, a White student teacher in her mid-20s, stands at the door and welcomes each of her students with a smile. “Did you find that shoe?” she asks one student. “How was your concert?” she asks another.

The eleventh graders, all African American, settle in their seats and dig in their backpacks for notebooks and photocopies of *Acts IV* and *V* of *Julius Caesar*. On the board is a prompt: Choose one line from the reading for today that you especially liked or that puzzled you. What did you like about it or what puzzled you?

As the bell rings, students squint at the board, flip through their texts and begin writing. Maya sets a timer for four minutes and begins writing as well.

As the timer bings, Maya asks, “Who would like to facilitate today?” Seven hands go in the air. Maya chooses one student to facilitate and another to record her classmates’ participation on a chart on a clipboard.

The student-facilitator reads the prompt aloud and, in a very teacher-y way that earns him grins from his classmates, asks for his classmates’ ideas. Almost everyone raises a hand.

The student-facilitator calls on his classmates, occasionally interjecting some commentary: “You two liked the same line but for totally different reasons. You should talk.” And, “I didn’t understand that line until you explained it right now, so thanks for that.”

After most students have shared, the student facilitator says to the student teacher, “Ms. Maya, we didn’t hear from you. What’s your favorite line?” All students turn to look at Maya, who had written about her own favorite line while the students were writing and taken attendance while the student facilitator was leading the discussion.

“Mine was from Act V, Scene I, ‘If arguing make us sweat, the proof of it will turn to redder drops.’ (A student interjects, “That was my second choice!”) I love the image that this line brings of sweating and then the sweat being so intense that it almost turns to bleeding. I think that’s a really powerful image. I could just see it. Also, it reminded me of how hard I’m going to make you work today.” Students groan, but many of them are also smiling.

Maya thanks the student facilitator, and then directs students’ attention to a new slide. “I’d like you all to play with capturing one idea from or about our share-out using the powerful sentence frame we were practicing yesterday. Remember?” She indicates a piece of chart paper on the wall from a previous lesson as well as a poster of prepositions.

The slide reads:

Powerful Sentence Pattern #10

Prepositional phrase, subject (adverb) verb ...

- After Luis shared his favorite line, Sarah rudely burst out laughing.
- As Sam explained why she chose her lines, I finally understood them.
- In spite of not wanting to do this activity, I actually enjoyed it.

“You have two minutes and then I’m going to have you share with a partner.” Some students stare at the prepositions chart, others begin writing immediately. Maya asks students to confer with a partner for sixty seconds and see if a) their sentence matches the powerful sentence pattern and b) if the sentence pattern helps or detracts from the student’s meaning. One minute passes as students talk and share. There are some giggles.

Maya announces that there is only time for one person to share out a really good sentence. Micah raises his hand and reads with a smirk, “When Jade shared the same line as Dante, I seriously thought there might be a bloodbath.”

The class laughs as Maya adds this student’s sentence to the list of exemplars on the slide. “This is so interesting!” comments Maya. “How might it sound without the word ‘seriously’ here? Turn and talk to a neighbor about whether the word ‘seriously’ here makes it seem as though Micah is more or less serious about the possibility of a bloodbath.” Students chat for thirty seconds, but most pairs don’t seem to come to consensus.

Maya says that the class will come back to the impact of using words like “seriously,” “really,” “literally,” and “virtually” as adverbs later. She thanks all the students for their participation and asks them to turn to a particular page in the play to begin the class’s next piece of business: trying to figure out why Shakespeare uses particular imagery about time in *Julius Caesar*.

Things to note about this particular bell-ringer:

- The activity positioned students as the authority and validated their opinions and ideas.
- The activity oriented students to that day’s class content, in that it asked them to look back at the

reading from the previous night and pay close attention to the text.

- The student teacher wrote along with her students, which added gravity and authenticity to the task.
- Students were able and eager to take on the role of facilitator, which is both empowering and, logistically, frees up the teacher to handle business.
- At the end of the activity, in just four minutes, Maya reviewed a grammatical concept (a powerful sentence pattern) that she had taught previously. Students created their own example sentences that, incidentally, also allowed them to reflect on the bell-ringer.
- There was a feeling of playfulness and engagement throughout the activity.

Unfortunately, this vignette does not offer the reader a glimpse at the series of grammar-focused lessons that Maya and her cooperating teacher had implemented over the previous part of the school year. That is outside the scope of this article. For teachers looking to overhaul their grammar instruction, I recommend *Getting It Right* by Smith and Wilhelm (2008) or any of Jeff Anderson's (2005, 2007, 2017) grammar-focused guides.

I recognize that in this article I have critiqued daily-sentence-editing practices without providing a clear, easy alternative method of teaching grammar. Here's the situation, though – there is no single, silver bullet solution to teaching students to write powerfully. We must beware any curricular materials that suggest otherwise.

Instead of relying on prepackaged materials and their sweeping promises, English teachers must create opportunities for all their students to engage in authentic, meaningful, culturally-relevant reading and writing tasks. Through this curriculum, they must interweave specific instruction in grammar that focuses on identifying and using the patterns that will make students more effective writers. Perhaps most difficult, throughout this challenging work, educators must not elevate one form of English over others. This may sound like a daunting task, particularly if teachers have not yet seen this work done effectively. But it can be done.

As a novice teacher, part of me desperately wanted to begin class with a routine that would take no thought or preparation, that would give me ten minutes to recalibrate, to

take attendance, perhaps, if I was lucky, to use the bathroom. As a more experienced teacher educator, I still see the grace in an opening routine that offers the teacher some freedom, but I have also come to understand that those first ten minutes of class are precious. Not only do these moments set the tone for the whole course, they also constitute a substantial portion of our instructional time. From this new vantage point, I would urge my novice teaching self to put aside daily sentence-editing exercises and, instead, ring in each new hour with a brief reading or writing task that requires higher-order thinking, that centers students' ideas and interests, and that prepares everyone for a productive, engaging class.

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