Watch Your Language: Teaching Standard Usage to Resistant and Reluctant Learners

Mark Larson

Standard English: A widely used term that resists easy definition but is used as if most educated people nonetheless know precisely what it refers to.
—The Oxford Companion to the English Language, 1992

When I was in high school, my language skills (or lack thereof) landed me in a remedial English class called Hurdles. I don’t know what the curriculum planners were thinking when they gave the program that name, but the designation has cemented in my mind an enduring metaphor for the way I have viewed the relationship between grammar and writing ever since. Though I am now an English teacher in that same school and a published writer, I continue to be adversely affected by Hurdles English and other classes like it. As I write or talk, I still see myself proceeding from a starting block: the first sentence of my communication—to the finish line: the last sentence. Along the way, there are hurdles—arbitrarily placed, fabricated obstacles—which, depending on my grammatical prowess, I will either clear or trip over. In Hurdles, I completed a blizzard of worksheets and memorized a lot of rules, most of which are now lost to time, but I did not learn much about language. I learned even less about writing, except that it is as easy as crossing a minefield.

When I walked into my first classroom as a teacher ten years ago, I started out teaching in the manner by which I had been taught. The students in my culturally diverse English class worked from a yellow grammar skills book, suspiciously similar to the one I had used sixteen years earlier. I circled every error in their writing and made students complete Correction Sheets—a listing of their errors. I was attempting to straighten my students’ grammar the same way my orthodontist had straightened my teeth: by force. Later, when I was assigned a course load that included both freshmen and seniors, I discovered that most of the seniors remembered little or nothing of what I knew they had been taught in their first, second, and third years. That’s when I began to ask questions, but not about the failings of the students. I started with the basics.

Nonsense Rules of Grammar: A History

Why is it a crime to end a sentence with a preposition? What’s wrong with contractions? And why can’t I begin a sentence with a conjunction?

I keenly remember, as a student, sitting in my English classes believing that my teachers were making up all this nonsense as they went along. I recently found that this may not be so terribly far from the truth.

In The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language, Steven Pinker (1995) tells us that most of the persnickety rules of our grammar (subject and verb must agree in number: never use the double negative) make no sense. As an example, Pinker points to this “alleged barbarism”:

“Everyone returned to his seat,” says Pinker, “makes it sound like Bruce Springsteen was discovered during intermission to be in the audience, and everyone rushed back and converged on his seat to await an autograph” (378).

The punctilious rules which I was forced to memorize and which I later tried to drill into the skulls of my students are, according to Pinker, “bits of folklore that originated for screwball reasons several hundred years ago and have perpetuated themselves ever since.” He traces “the scandal of language mavens” (experts) to the 18th century when London became the po-
political and financial center of England, and England became the center of a powerful empire:

The London dialect was suddenly an important world language. Scholars began to criticize it as they would any artistic or civil institution, in part to question the customs, hence authority, of court and aristocracy. Latin was still considered the language of enlightenment and learning . . . and it was offered as an ideal of precision and logic to which the English should aspire. The period also saw unprecedented social mobility; and anyone who wanted to distinguish himself as cultivated had to master the best version of English. (373)

Suddenly there was a demand for manuals of style and usage. Then, as now, trends were largely shaped by market forces. Publishers of these manuals, in an effort to outsell one another, began including “greater numbers of increasingly fastidious rules that no refined person could afford to ignore.” Thus, according to Pinker, “most of the hobgoblins of contemporary prescriptive grammar (don’t split infinitives; don’t end a sentence with a preposition) can be traced back to these eighteenth century fads” (373).

So out of the basic human drive to be “distinguished as cultivated” arrives, among other things, standard English. Today, we continue to recite these rules to hapless would-be writers and public speakers, instilling in them a fear of the hobgoblins and hurdles to which they can easily fall victim if they do not proceed with caution. To trip is to reveal your status as an outsider, as not cultivated, ambitious, or refined—as unable to live up to the standard.

BEING AN OUTSIDER

A few years ago I attended a luncheon honoring a writer whom I admire. I was the invited guest of one of the club members. This was a society bash, not the sort of function I normally attend. My first faux pas was dressing incorrectly. My friend had said it was a lunch, so big deal; I wore a sweater. This turned out to be a suit affair. Everyone knew except me.

I sat uneasily at a table spread with, among other things, three forks, two spoons, a stack of plates in graded sizes, and several glasses, one of which contained a napkin folded like a swan. I wondered about every move I made. Not knowing the rules of so complex a meal, I knew I ran the risk of making my next ignorant blunder at any moment, possibly resulting in the embarrassment of my host. Is it OK, I wondered, to undo the swan, and if so, when? Which fork do I use for what? I felt conspicuous, as if every move I made revealed my status as an outsider.

As my uncertainty increased, so did my resentment; and as my resentment swelled, so did a curious determination not to be identified with these people. I resented even those few who gently tried to include me. When I reached for one of the larger forks, the woman sitting next to me tapped the smaller one at my setting. Her well-meaning effort to help me feel “at home” only accentuated my status as an alien, as someone in need of guidance. The last thing I felt like was a human being sitting down to a meal, something I had done countless times before. Finally, I wanted to relieve myself of the strain of trying not to stand out. I wanted first to make a speedy exit, but then I developed a compelling desire to find a way to define and proclaim myself. I wanted to grab the wrong damn fork, use it as conspicuously as possible and holler, I don’t want to be one of you anyway!

How often have we heard variations of I don’t want to be one of you anyway! in our classrooms? When we listen, we can hear it in our students’ anger, in their withdrawal, in their refusal to do “our” work, in their defiant rejection of the prescribed rules of “proper” grammar. Every year, students will proclaim what they think is a fail-safe rule of thumb for taking grammar tests: “If it sounds weird, it’s right.” I believe they are saying, What you are teaching feels wrong. It isn’t me. It’s you. I’ll play along, but I won’t incorporate it into my real life.

In “What It Means to Be Literate,” Robert Gundlach (1992) acknowledges that when teaching language skills to children: “teachers . . . frequently face resistance that they have not created. Sometimes students’ resistance is social, even political. To participate cooperatively in school language practices is to cross a boundary of social identity that some students do not want to cross” (366).

Lisa Delpit (1995) hopes that teachers will “recognize that the linguistic form a student brings to school is intimately con-
nected to loved ones, community, and personal identity. To suggest that this form is ‘wrong’ or even worse, ignorant, is to suggest that something is wrong with the student and his or her family” (53).

I believe we intensify our students’ resistance to the lessons we have to teach them when we are equally resistant to crossing the same boundary in their direction. This may be a result of the failings of our own education; we have so rarely seen it done. In *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde (1984) wrote that “we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion.” Without a rational examination of what a standard language is, how it develops, and the ways in which it can be misapplied, we end up with the problem Jenny Cook-Gumperz and John Gumperz have identified: that “theories of educatability”—the basis for judgements about who can or should learn what—are often built around small linguistic features” (Gunlach, 367).

A strict and inflexible insistence on standard English as an “ideal” form of language to which all cultivated folk aspire stratifies rather than unifies our complex society. It magnifies our differences, and legitimizes our intolerance of those differences. Most insidiously, however, it allows us to feel benevolent as we strive to be inclusive, not by extolling language differences, but by hammering those differences down into stupefying sameness. Those students who resist, who “obstinately” grab for the wrong fork or leave in despair—well, we tried, we offered; we just don’t understand why they refused our good intentions.

DOES ANYTHING GO?

Am I saying, “anything goes”? Absolutely not. Am I saying that grammar and grammar instruction are unimportant? Not at all. I see two primary reasons for “correcting” our students’ grammar, both of them important.

One is to help kids recognize errors that jeopardize a writer’s intention. At the top of the list, I would place matters of syntax. Run on sentences and unintended fragments can lead the reader’s eye astray and are among my students’ most common errors. Certainly there are others: misuse of commas and semicolons, lack of parallelism, errors in subject-verb agreement. Create your own list with your colleagues.

The other reason I see for correcting students’ errors in usage is to make kids aware of what Maxine Hairston (1981) calls “status markers” such as substandard verb uses: “We seen him yesterday” (176). I fully understand and am trying to respond to the urgency behind Lisa Delpit’s insistence that all students be taught “the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life . . . [and that they] be allowed the resource of the teacher’s expert knowledge” (45). Undoubtedly, our students must be assisted in learning the standard form of English but, as Delpit adds, “they must also be helped to learn about the arbitrariness of those codes and about the power relationships they represent” (45).

I’m suggesting that we re-examine our presentation of language conventions and consider teaching students to “watch their language.” Teach students to observe language and provide them with a vocabulary for openly discussing its many colorful, richly textured variations. Then help them recognize the place standard English, among other language variations, holds in the array of devices we humans find to “give voice accurately and fully to ourselves and our sense of the world” (Hoffman 1989).

CREATING A NEW CLASS

I no longer want to see students sit in classes like Hurdles or even my own classroom of old. I am looking to create a new class. But if I throw out all those grammar books and worksheets, what will I replace them with? How will I be sure that I’m teaching my students to write with clarity? And how will I ensure that all students are taught “the language of power”? Delpit recommends that teachers “support the language that students bring to school, provide them with input from an additional code, and give them opportunities to use the new code in a non-threatening, real communicative context.” Let’s look at each of these charges separately.

1. **Support the language each student brings to school.** In my new classroom, I would like to invite a rational discussion and curiosity-driven examination of language itself to which all students have something to offer. In a very real sense, they are all “experts” in their own
codes. They know the rules, though they probably never think of them as rules. There are strict consistencies, even in what some might call “street slang.” Break those rules, and you expose yourself as an outsider. Steven Pinker cites a study conducted by the linguist William Labov in which he tape-recorded speech in different social classes and settings and tabulated the percentage of grammatical sentences. For these purposes grammatical means “well-formed according to consistent rules of the dialect of the speakers.” He found “higher percentages of grammatical sentences in working-class speech than in middle-class speech. The highest percentage of ungrammatical sentences was found in the proceedings of learned academic conferences” (31).

In my new class, I would like to take the primary focus off of prescriptive rules—what we “ought” to say—and place it on descriptive rules—what people do say (Pinker, 371). I want students to see prescriptive rules as tools, not themselves the focus of our work. I want to immerse my kids in the written and spoken languages that flow through the halls of our multicultural school and the streets of our nation. I want my students to enjoy, appreciate, explore, extol the differences and the effects produced by the differences. I want to give them the skills and a vocabulary to analyze the various language codes they hear.

I want to create a class like the one that Peter Elbow (1990) envisions, a class which will “focus on the productive dimensions of language.” According to Elbow, we are “producers when we make meaning (in both writing and reading) and also when we analyze that process and the scene and the forces that act upon us when we make meaning” (97). I want to raise questions like these in the minds of my students: why do I make the choices I make when I speak, when I write? What are my other options? What are the consequences, benefits, results of my utilizing this code rather than that? What tools do I need to make the point to this particular audience? How might I modulate my “voice” for a different audience? Why did this author make the choices she made in this passage? What drew me into her argument? What alienated me?

2. Provide them with input from an additional code. Tom Romano (1987) feels that good writing is “writing that works.” What works will vary from context to context, and audience to audience. I would like to help students arrive at their own idea of what works by presenting them with “intensive exposure to good examples” (Pinker, 401). These samples need not be long pieces—they may be editorials, articles, short fiction, segments from books I’m reading and books the students are reading, poems, student essays, and my own writings. If I had to choose between their reading a few longer works and a repulsion of shorter, varied pieces, I’d choose the later. Swamp them with examples, not worksheets. Let them read, widely and often.

3. Give them opportunities to use the new code in a non-threatening, real communicative context. Lisa Delpit says that “learning to orally produce an alternate form is not principally a function of cognitive analysis, thereby not ideally learned from protracted rule-based instruction and correction. Rather, it comes with exposure, comfort level, familiarity, and practice in real communicative contexts” (49).

Once I have established that there are many language variations and have given students a chance to explore nonjudgmentally those variations, I will find ways to stress, not correctness—clearly a loaded word—but effectiveness. I want them to be able to make an informed choice about what language code is best suited for each of a variety of audiences. Many teachers of English may be surprised by how much students already know and can display when given a comfortable “real communicative context” in which to operate. It is not as if our students do not hear the standard form of English every day. Much of what we witness and are likely to misinterpret in the classroom is resistance, shyness, and disinterest, not lack of linguistic ability.

Several years ago, during the riots in Los Angeles that followed the Rodney King verdict, my mid- and low-level classes (largely African American in composition) wrote furious, vitriolic essays. The writing was peppered with slang and cursing. They were saying what they needed to say in the way they needed to say it. They were venting. However, in time, the anger seemed to be chasing its own tail. I searched for a new audience and eventually hit on the idea of...
sending letters to Coretta Scott King at the Martin Luther King National Center for Non-Violent Social Change in Atlanta. When I told my students that it was possible that Mrs. King would read their work, everything changed. Their diction and syntax automatically rose. Gone were the cursing and the slang. They seemed to want to impress her and knew exactly what they had to do to accomplish that. Most of what they needed was already there.

One girl, however, did use a curse word in her letter. A woman from the Center called me, and in the course of the conversation, she mentioned that one letter. She said she was reluctant to give it to Mrs. King because she wanted the girl to understand that the Center is concerned about all types of violence, including rudeness, spreading rumors, stereotyping, and vile language. When I told my student what the woman had said, she changed her letter without a word of protest and insisted that I mail it that hour.

CONCLUSION

Recently, in the faculty cafeteria, in full view of six other teachers, I tripped over a hurdle. And I was surprised by how awful it felt. I had been talking about a particularly difficult but fascinating student who, I said, “has a very unique view of the world.” My error was apparently so intolerable that one of my lunchmates—not an English teacher, incidentally—saw fit to pull the emergency brake on my story. He informed me that I didn’t mean “very unique,” explaining that unique is “an absolute word and cannot be modified by an intensifier, like very.” His correction and the accompanying mini-lesson did nothing to clarify my comment about the student, but it did bring my story to a screeching halt. He glanced around the table as if expecting to be congratulated, not only on his erudition but his benevolence as well. Like he had saved me.

But I didn’t feel grateful. I wanted to deck him. I later mentioned this feeling of anger, which caught me by surprise, to a friend. She suggested that it was born of a sense of shame. Shame? But she may be right. When I was corrected, I did feel as if my disguise had slipped just enough to reveal the truth: I had been admitted into an exclusive club under false pretenses.

It won’t be easy for me to kick this feeling that errors in usage are cause for alarm and shame. It was cemented in place long ago. But my students don’t have to feel it or even know it. I want to clear their path, let them discover ways to proclaim themselves in full voice, confident in their linguistic choices because these are choices informed by a careful, awestruck and delighted study of the multiple options our language provides. Be bold, I will tell them, be original, get as close as you can to what you believe is true, then communicate what you see in a way that will make your reader or listener want to see it that way, too.

Ultimately, writing is not about commas carefully placed or infinitives unsplit; rather, it is as Anne Lamott (1994) says, “about our need to be visible, to be heard, our need to make sense of our lives, to wake up and grow and belong.”

Let’s begin and end with that.

Works Cited


Mark Larson teaches at Evanston Township High School in Illinois. He is co-author, with Betty Jane Wagner, of Situations (1995, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, Boynton/Cook), and his next book, Writing Our Way Out, is forthcoming from Heinemann.