One thing I know about my ninth-grade students: They come to high school with an extensive background in formal English grammar. They have spent countless hours in elementary school and middle school singing songs and doing worksheets. I’m confident that they passed their grammar tests. A year later, they are poster children for the research that shows that the formal study of grammar in isolation has little effect on writing—no surprise there. The surprise was discovering that grammar and reading comprehension are closely related.

As I analyzed students’ reading responses to *The Odyssey*, it slowly began to dawn on me that they weren’t comprehending the text because they did not understand basic English grammar. Grammar? And reading? There was no way I could deny what students—through their work—were telling me. They needed grammar to improve their reading comprehension and reading comprehension are closely related.

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Approaching Language Study

I decided that I needed to research the connections between grammar and reading. My first discovery was Patrick Hartwell’s article, “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar.” Building on the work of earlier linguists, Hartwell identified five kinds of grammar:

1. **Grammar 1:** “The Grammar in Our Heads,” the innate knowledge of a language, most accessible to native speakers. In Grammar 1, people can’t tell you what the rules are, but they can tell when rules are broken.
2. **Grammar 2:** linguistic descriptions of how Grammar 1 is used
3. **Grammar 3:** language etiquette, “good” and “bad” grammar
4. **Grammar 4:** “school grammar”; parts of speech, sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and the like
5. **Grammar 5:** stylistic grammar, grammar used to teach prose style

Hartwell reinforced my instincts about grammar and reading. Students had studied Grammars 3 and 4 and had not been able to transfer that knowledge to writing or reading. All of them, including the second-language learners, had a good grasp of Grammar 1. Because the students didn’t understand how words function in context to make meaning, Grammar 5 could best help them understand how the parts work together to make meaning.

The key word is *function*, and that led me to functional or rhetorical grammar. Martha Kolln, in “Rhetorical Grammar: A Modification Lesson,” writes of “grammar knowledge as a tool that enables the writer to make effective choices” (29). In “Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar,” Laura R. Micciche writes, “Rhetorical grammar instruction, in contrast [to traditional grammar instruction], emphasizes grammar as a tool for
articulating and expressing relationships among ideas” (720).

Hartwell, Kolln, and Micciche are writing about grammar and composition, although Micciche discusses her commonplace book assignment in which students read and write using rhetorical grammar strategies “to reflect on the interaction between content and grammatical form” (722). My students seemed unaware of that interaction.

What’s Happening: Discovering Action and Character

Because my ninth graders are not strong readers, I had assigned them an easy-to-read Web version of The Odyssey (http://www.mythweb.com/odyssey/) as pre-reading for the textbook version. As they read, they answered who, what, when, where, why, and so-what questions on their “Reporter’s Notes” (Burke 67–69).

I thought the Web version was easy to read, but as I was walking around the lab, observing the students at work, one of them stopped me.

"Mrs. Simmons, I don’t know what’s happening in the story.” He looked pleadingly at me.

“OK,” I said, “try this. Find the happening words.”

He looked at the computer monitor and slowly began to find the verbs.

“Great,” I said. “Now tell me which character is making the happening happen.”

He looked back at the screen and started matching the verbs with the subjects of the sentences.

“Good job. Write those down on your Reporter’s Notes.”

As I observed students in the lab, I saw many others experiencing the same frustrations. I asked them to find the “happening” words and the characters. It worked well. I was pleased with the result but disturbed that the students didn’t recognize the connection between verbs and subjects.

Back in the classroom, reading the textbook version of The Odyssey, I found that this approach was even more valuable. The Web site told the story in basic English sentences; the epic poem form is much more complicated. The print on the textbook page was daunting, so I pulled out some passages and asked the students to create an Action and Character chart. Figure 1, a passage from Circe’s warnings to Odysseus, is an example.

If the students included thunders, I accepted it. It is an action word, although it’s not the main verb in the sentence. Since anguish and strait aren’t characters, I also let the students skip the verbs attached to them. The point is to help them understand the connections within the sentence, to show how words work together to convey meaning, not to belabor grammar terms.

Action and Character became a way of clarifying difficult text. For their course portfolio at the end of the school year, students identified their favorite reading strategy and explained why it was effective. I was surprised by the number of students who chose Action and Character. The strategy was effective, they said, because it required them to slow down, read, and reread the passage. They did close reading to figure out the action and the character. Deanna wrote, “When I was working on it, I struggled on it really bad. So I had to work really hard just to get it done on time and it really made

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE 1. Action and Character Chart from The Odyssey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great captain, a fair wind and the honey lights of home seek you (Odysseus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are all you seek. But anguish lies ahead; lies anguish god</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the god who thunders on the land prepares it, prepares god</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not to be shaken from your track, not to be shaken god</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in rancor for the son whose eye you blinded. blinded you (Odysseus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One narrow strait may take you through his blows: may take strait</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
me think a lot and really hard.” Lonnie identified the effectiveness of Action and Character with an interesting simile: “It’s sort of like a closed caption for books, but the downside is that you have to do it yourself.”

The chart, a graphic map that students created as part of the activity, also helped them grasp the meaning of the passages. They saw the underlying organization of the sentence and also how the sentence functioned in the story’s larger context. Mindy and Rodney used this organizational strategy on later assignments, too. Mindy wrote, “It showed me which characters did what . . . because I had to write their actions out onto the chart. Overall, it helped me a lot with other assignments on the Odyssey.” Rodney echoed Mindy: “I can look back on that [Action and Character] and make another chart and get my work done and it will be halfway decent.”

Action and Character also helped students establish patterns in their reading. “I learned from this that every action has a certain character. If you know who is doing the action you will know what is going on in the story,” Yeimi wrote. Beau described how parts of a sentence work together to make meaning and how the sentence adds to the meaning of the larger context. “It gives you a description on what the character has done through the story like Cyclops eating men that is a good description on how action and character work together to make your story better,” he wrote. Claudia provided evidence that Action and Character helped her inferential thinking: “It helped me to understand the characters [sic] way of life and to see what kind of person they are [sic] by looking at their actions.”

Action and Character was not difficult for the students. They were using rhetorical grammar quite adeptly to understand The Odyssey at higher thinking levels—identifying textual patterns and character analysis and motivation, for example. In her article, Micciche writes, “I believe that the examinations of language made possible through rhetorical grammar pedagogy encourage students to view writing as a material social practice in which meaning is actively made, rather than passively relayed or effortlessly produced” (719).

My students were actively making meaning from their reading by using rhetorical grammar; they were engaging with the text, making connections among words and phrases, and making powerful inferences. A byproduct of their reading was a growing awareness of the power of a writer in choosing words and phrases to create an effect on the audience—Hartwell’s Grammar 5.

But the progress students were making by charting action and character for difficult passages was not carrying over into their reader-response journals. In spite of my constant admonitions and frequent modeling to “use context—before and after your passage—to read for the answers to your questions,” the students were still generating lists of questions without any indication that they were reading for the answers. They were also making lists of vocabulary words or summarizing passages without referring to the context. Something wasn’t working.

In desperation, I pulled out some passages for a directed-response exercise. I gave them a two-column sheet—text in the left column, with a blank right column—and asked them to write their responses in the right column. Once again I told them, “Don’t just write questions. Read to find the answers to your questions. That means finding the passage in your book, reading into and out of the passage.” When I read their responses, I was appalled. Their responses had only a tangential connection to the reading.

Curious, I went back through the stack of papers and a lightbulb went on.

Pronouns. They weren’t connecting the pronouns to their antecedents.

Making More Connections: Pronoun and Antecedent

Back in the classroom, I announced my discovery and asked students to list personal pronouns. I didn’t want case, person, or number—just a list of pronouns. In all four ninth-grade classes, the room became deathly still. Students looked at me with terrified eyes. Grammar 4 was rearing its ugly head. “Think about the grammar songs you learned in middle school,” I said.

The point is to help them understand the connections within the sentence, to show how words work together to convey meaning, not to belabor grammar terms.
Finally, one student said, “I.”

“Good,” I said, and wrote it on the overhead transparency. The ice broken, the students generated a table of personal pronouns. I told them to use the table to find the pronouns in the passage, underline them, and draw a line to the antecedent. As they worked, they began to pick up the pattern: “I” was the person speaking, “you” was being spoken to, and “he” or “she” was being spoken about. They also began to realize that they had to use context to identify the antecedent since they needed information that wasn’t in the single passage to which they were responding. Overall, Pronoun and Antecedent was an easy activity for the classes and it showed them a pattern among sentences and paragraphs that helped to establish meaning in their reading.

Class discussion of Action and Character and Pronoun and Antecedent activities led to some relatively in-depth discussions. Students identified words ending with -ed or -ing as action words without paying attention to how they were used; “rosy-fingered Dawn” is a description, not an action. I knew, after my Grammar 4 experience with pronouns, that labels, particularly unfamiliar ones, could be a barrier. I introduced the terms gerund and participle but asked students to look at how the word was used in the passage and identify it as an adjective or a noun.

When I began to examine my practice in the context of my new learning, I realized that Action and Character and Pronoun and Antecedent were the latest iterations of strategies that I had been using for years that focused on the function of the words in the text. I had been using grammar for teaching reading. With that realization, I revisited some of the strategies that had been successful.

Visualizing Sentences: Sentence Layering

One of my favorite strategies is sentence layering. Sentence layering works especially well when students are lost in a long sentence. Using my background in generative and transformational grammar, I help students identify the base clause and the various clauses and phrases that attach to the base. Then the students “layer” the sentence. Figure 2 shows a sentence from the Cyclops adventure in *The Odyssey*.

I deliberately avoid using grammatical terms with sentence layering, although I might point out a relative clause or a prepositional phrase acting as an adjective or an adverb. I ask the students to construct their sentence layering so that the grammatical structures are parallel on the page, but I don’t enforce it rigidly or insist that they know the names of the structures. I want them to see how the words and phrases work together, not only to create meaning through denotation and connotation but also through sounds and rhythm.

Sentence layering leads to some interesting discussions about writing style and author choice of words and grammatical constructions. What’s the effect of using a long series of -ing words? Why does an author write a series of long sentences, followed abruptly by a short sentence? How do these choices affect the reader? Why write such long sentences, anyway? Why not a series of shorter sentences? Why did Homer use such vivid language? Why does *The Odyssey* have such a strong rhythm?
Hands-on Syntax: Close Imitation

Another of my favorite strategies is close imitation, in which students follow an author’s grammatical construction and syntax to create their own passages. They replicate the prose style, although not necessarily the tone, of the original passage. Amanda responded with a close imitation of the sentence in Figure 2 with, “Not answer nor frown came from him, instead in one move he embraced our family and held all in his arms as newborn babies to join their hearts together, destroying the hate.”

The beginning of Rodney’s close imitation of Wallace Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” entitled “Thirteen Ways of Looking at Debris,” is shown in Figure 3.

Discussions of close-imitation passages are as interesting as the discussions about sentence layering. When students first encounter Stevens’s poem, their unanimous opinion is, “It doesn’t make any sense!” The connections among the stanzas are not as obvious as the students are used to. They start making Stevens’s connections as they make their own in their close imitation.

One of the functions of grammar is to help readers and writers make connections. In Understanding Reading, Frank Smith writes, “fluent reading demands knowledge of the conventions of the text, from vocabulary and grammar to the narrative devices employed” (178). Without being able to draw on their knowledge of grammar conventions, students were unable to make the connections to make meaning out of their reading. Smith writes further, “Understanding how words go together in meaningful language makes prediction possible and, therefore, comprehension” (189).

Grammar in the Context of Reading

As with writing, teaching grammar in the context of reading is more effective than direct instruction in isolation. The important aspect of grammar and reading is that students begin to understand the patterns and connections that make meaning. An emphasis on labeling parts of speech, clauses, and phrases will interfere with the students’ actively making meaning from their work. The most effective approach to teaching grammar in the context of reading is what Constance Weaver calls “Incidental Lessons”: “The teacher teaches something through conversation and casual mention: that is, through exposure more than through direct instruction” (166). Teaching grammar by having students actively work with and manipulate language, both in reading and writing, helps them recognize patterns, essential for good reading. Ron Padgett writes, “Good readers don’t have to focus on every word: they ‘know’ some words by their shapes, their positions in particular sentences, and by the probability of their being there. . . . Good readers quickly recognize usual word patterns because they anticipate them, both visually and contextually” (50).

Rhetorical grammar, functional grammar, and Grammar 5—applied carefully and sparingly—help students learn to recognize the word patterns Padgett writes about. Once they have learned to unpack sentences and passages, they begin real reading and find the power of language.

WORKS CITED


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