We make sense of teaching through the stories that define and shape our identities. Our stories bind us together, providing us a sense of connection; sometimes they define us through divisions, making it easy to separate the “us” from the “them.” If we are lucky, we find moments along the way to ponder our stories, and sometimes, even to question them, to search for clues about their significance, to dig deeper. Over the past three decades we have had rich opportunities to pause, think, and shape in new ways our stories about many important issues—among them the ways we think about the teaching of grammar and, in a broader context, the teaching of language.

In 1972, as a first-year, rookie teacher in a junior high school in Anchorage, I found myself invited into a story about the teaching of grammar—one of resistance and intrigue. Met at the door of my classroom on that first day by my department chair, I was proudly shown the materials I would have for use with my eighth graders that year: Relatively new literature anthologies—one for each of my 150 students—were stacked neatly by the windows. Beside them rested a single, battered set of *Wariner’s English Grammar and Composition* books.

The school district, I learned, had banned these traditional grammar books several years prior, replacing the familiar texts with new ones that reflected a transformational approach to grammar instruction. Unhappy with this situation, my new colleagues had annually boxed up the Wariner’s books at the end of the year and stored them in a teacher’s garage for the summer. Come August, teachers would retrieve the books. They did this, I was told, to protect the texts from those who would delight in tossing them out while teachers were away on summer break.

As the new member of the faculty, I was invited into the story. My colleagues trusted me to help protect a resource they believed was essential to their instructional program. The importance of teaching grammar in a didactic fashion as a precursor to student writing constituted an unchallenged belief in the department. Faculty members were committed to the notion that eighth graders needed to know grammar—the parts of speech, verb conjugations, the various types of phrases and clauses, and a host of rules that governed usage; moreover, they needed to demonstrate their knowledge through sentence diagramming and various exercises before they began the complicated task of writing. It was the job of the school, my colleagues told me, to prepare all students with basic skills for formal writing, and the no-nonsense approach embodied in *Wariner’s English Grammar and Composition* was the best way to give students the skills and knowledge that they needed.

Even if my teacher training had provided me with sufficient background information about the teaching of grammar—about what was important for students to know and why—I fear I would still not have had the confidence to attempt to modify the story being played out in my department. Rather, as the new kid on the block, I tried to be a part of the story. I made up funny sentences for students to diagram. I spent an entire week teaching the uses of the comma, running off stacks of purple, dittoed worksheets. I rejoiced when class after class did well on the test on Friday only to be filled with
despair for months afterward as students strewed commas across their papers as if sprinkling them from a salt shaker. I cared passionately for the students, and they knew it. Our relationship was strong enough to ensure they would do the work, but no amount of energy or concern on my part could bridge the gap between the brittle grammar I was attempting to teach and the vibrancy of their lived language and experiences.

The most disturbing thing I found about teaching isolated grammar skills was the huge amount of time the exercises took away from writing and reading that mattered. Not surprisingly, before the year was over the students and I developed a story of resistance of our own. Quietly putting the grammar texts aside, we brought in sets of day-old newspapers and studied the subgenres of journalistic writing we found there. We ordered subscriptions to a Scholastic magazine that contained all types of writing that we could read and talk about together. We stirred our thinking on lots of different subjects and issues and then thought together about why particular writers chose the genres they did; why a particular author would choose to write a sentence or paragraph in a particular way; why it is OK to play with rules of punctuation, capitalization, and grammar in some types of writing and not in others. As we thought about the many different representations of language we observed in the stories and articles we read, we found ourselves raising questions—and often I found myself uncomfortable with my lack of explanation for why the only language taught in school so seldom reflected the writing found in the real world beyond the classroom.

Sometimes grammar matters. My colleagues cared as deeply about their students as I did about mine. We all recognized the importance of equipping adolescents for writing tasks that required Standard English usage. And, though our methods for achieving competence in language use for important writing tasks varied, each of us knew that the students’ ability to understand and control their own written language provided them with a degree of power when they entered into certain written conversations beyond our classrooms.

Sometimes grammar really matters, and sometimes it doesn’t. In our zeal to help our students attain power in their written work, it was easy to place all of our emphasis on correctness in a single type of discourse. We sometimes failed to seriously and closely examine the effective ways that writers use language in the novels, short stories, and plays we read in class. We sometimes neglected talking about how writing is central to our capacity to think critically, to figure things out, to learn new things—types of writing in which use of formal grammar and mechanics is of far less concern than in academic prose. When we look at grammar and usage within the context of real reading and writing, we are able to open up conversations that anchor language study in authentic contexts.

In the years since my days as a first-year teacher, our conversations about grammar have been enriched in many ways. Our profession has fostered rich studies to help us understand more about teaching writing and language. Thanks to researchers and writers such as George Hillocks Jr. and Constance Weaver, we have learned the importance of addressing grammar within the context of writing. James Moffett and Betty Jane Wagner helped us understand that grammar and conventions are learned through all aspects of literacy—speaking, listening, reading, and writing. William Strong has offered us successful strategies for helping students manipulate language and think about sentence structure, grammar, mechanics, and usage through sentence combining and modeling, and Harry R. Noden has provided many creative ways to draw students into grammar and language study. Recent work by Edgar H. Schuster and Mary Ehrenworth and Vicki Vinton has challenged us to question traditional grammar teaching practices while also understanding the power that may be acquired through knowledge about language and the ways to use it effectively.

Over the years our stories about language study have changed. We have made substantial progress in thinking about the place of grammar in our curriculum, yet even today, our story is laced with questions and concerns. Is it possible that teaching grammar in context has translated to not teaching grammar at all? Has a concern with grammar even led to less teaching of writing? Too often, new teachers are reluctant to teach writing because of a fear that some issues of grammar or usage will come up for which they have insufficient knowledge. And what about respecting and honoring students’ own language? How do we introduce adolescents into genres and discourse communities that differ
from their own while simultaneously respecting their own languages? Are there aspects of language knowledge that are important for their own sake—apart from their relationship with writing?

The questions are weighty. And, while the inquiry is surely recursive, it is far from circular. Our story about what is important for students to know about grammar continues to deepen, and our questions take us into consideration of issues that are situated in our collective stories at the local, state, and national levels. We are fortunate to have a professional home with NCTE that not only invites but also encourages us into these conversations.

Works Cited


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