Teacher to Teacher

What Is Your Most Compelling Reason for Teaching Grammar?

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I teach grammar for two reasons. The first is that grammar instruction gives students metalanguage, "language about language." Having this, students can learn a great deal more about how to communicate clearly than they can without it. The second reason is that students are interested in language—its changes and variations—and they feel gratified to learn how it works and what it can do. Whether I am teaching Shakespeare or contemporary literature, oratory or poetry, writing as a means to learn or writing through process, the effort that I've put into teaching grammar pays off.

But aside from its utilitarian purpose, grammar instruction is fun. Everyone seems interested in language on some level. As John Crow of Florida Southern College points out, properly structured grammar instruction is highly brain-compatible because the brain is a pattern-seeing device and grammar is a patterned system (email message to the author 5 Jan. 2006). If we go with the natural ability of the human brain to make meaning through patterns, we can easily teach grammar and have it be something that delights students because of how much of the system they come to us already knowing. I use visuals and manipulatives to teach English grammar as a slot-and-filler system: students literally build sentences with color-coded blocks. We all know how much young children love to learn through colors and blocks. Well, secondary students (and adult learners) love this, too.

The English language, despite its complexity and flexibility, is simple when we understand it through patterns: With just a handful of sentence patterns, with expandable and shrinkable noun phrases and verb phrases, we can accomplish the most extraordinary of human capabilities: communication.

The better to communicate: that is my most compelling reason for teaching grammar.

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My son just received a performance evaluation of his first eight weeks on his first real, career job. The communications section of the rubric began with, “Written communications are logically organized, have appropriate level of detail and are free from spelling errors and grammatical mistakes.” He is working for a financial consulting firm doing internal audit. The expectation is that everyone should write well.

I teach grammar to ensure that all my students, not only those with English teachers for mothers and pedants for fathers, will graduate knowing how to write without grammatical error. Wonderful ideas aren’t enough; students need to be able to present their ideas with clarity and precision. Correctness matters.

In my classroom, I do not dedicate weeks of concentrated study to grammar. Rather, I take five minutes daily to present sentences that feature grammatical errors. My tenth graders and I make the corrections, reminding ourselves of the rules that explain the corrections: parallel structure, subject-verb agreement, unclear pronoun references, split infinitives, and so forth. These short, focused grammar lessons reinforce what students know but have forgotten and fill in gaps in prior instruction.
With Mark Twain I believe that “Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society.” Grammatical correctness is like apparel. Before writers are judged for the content of their work, they are judged for their grammar. I want my students to have influence on society. That is why I teach grammar.

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Several decades ago, NCTE resolved that students have “the right to their own language.” That resolution is a reminder, a directive, to teachers that we have an obligation not only to respect every student’s home language but also to understand the ways, if any, in which the dialects in our classrooms differ from what is called Standard English. For me, that resolution has always had a second, equally important, meaning: It also means that every student has the right to know how extraordinary their human gift of language really is; it means that every student has the right to a language education.

I believe it is the responsibility of English teachers to give students every opportunity to learn the vocabulary, the language, of literacy. In every other class in their schedule, they learn that discipline’s special vocabulary: the language of mathematics, of history, of biology, of soccer. And, as in those disciplines, learning the vocabulary of language arts is not a one- or two-semester project; it develops throughout the years. Even in the early grades, children can learn a simple vocabulary for discussing reading and writing; by middle school, as their literature becomes more mature, that vocabulary will grow as their knowledge of sentence structure grows, as they learn the choices available for coordination and modification and subordination. By the time they graduate from high school, students have the right to a fully developed vocabulary of literacy, along with an understanding of the social and political power of language.

Learning grammar means bringing to a conscious level the language expertise students know subconsciously, the miraculous system that was almost fully developed when they started kindergarten. When learned systematically, this language of literacy will stay with them; it will remain a meaningful part of their education; it will give them a sense of control in their dealings with language throughout their lives.

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I teach grammar because it is the doorway to the human soul. Its intricacies trigger our laughter, our tears, our dreams. Grammar is the secret muse of all expression, the portrait painter of life’s emotions. It allows us to feel the touch of a lover’s hand on a bridge in Madison County and hear the cracking voice of the oldest living confederate widow. It gives poets the syntax to paint braining teasers that will delight readers for centuries and helps truck drivers with the “gift of blarney” to spin captivating tales for their buddies over a morning cup of coffee. Nothing in life is more essential, more sensitive, more intrinsic to the human soul. When students come to share this vision, grammar bridges the world of living to the world of writing, reading, and speaking. How could we not teach grammar?

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So often grammar is taught from the perspective of deficit. Students, particularly those who speak a dialect, are considered wrong, and so there is a strong temptation to drill students in the rules of correctness in the hopes of transforming them. But the promise of upward mobility is not a compelling reason to teach grammar. It is, in fact, disrespectful. We should teach grammar to help students gain flexibility in their use of language. Just as we wear different clothing for different occasions, we “wear” language to suit a particular audience and purpose. Rather than tell students they are wrong when they say “I ain’t got no pencil” or “I have to get my picture tooken,” usages I often heard in the rural district I taught in, why not celebrate those linguistic structures and use them as examples of diverse language use? Linguists are quick to remind us that all dialects are valid. They are rule-bound and predictable, and therefore correct within their group of users. Misguided English teachers might cringe at “I seen him yesterday,” but they should understand that “I seen him” is not bad English.
Had economic situations developed differently, “I seen him” might be considered part of Standard English today. The fact that it is not part of Standard English has nothing to do with grammar and everything to do with culture and power. Grammar becomes a highly compelling subject for students when they can use their own language and play with it, recast it in other modes for other audiences than their immediate peers and family. This is true for all students, regardless of dialect. Grammar lessons become something more than an issue of correctness or the identification of parts. They become the stuff of meaning. What happens when a phrase moves from one part of a sentence to another? How is meaning affected when we add direct address? What happens when we code-switch? How would we code-switch any given phrase?

We teach grammar, then, not as a means of taming wayward students, but as a means of developing linguistic flexibility and power.

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No English teacher needs a reason to teach reading or writing or literature or vocabulary. These activities are axiomatic to our function; they define our task. But how can we discuss with students their reading or their writing or literature without providing them the conventional vocabulary for doing so: noun, verb, adjective . . . sentence . . . active, passive . . . past, present, future. . . . How can we fulfill our function and perform our task without providing students a grammar? We cannot; our profession compels us—by definition.

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When should we teach grammar? If what is meant by “teaching grammar” is labeling parts of speech, diagramming sentences, underlining subjects, and double-underlining predicates, we’d say as loudly and as often as we could: “Never!” It breaks our hearts when our daughters “do grammar” in school, and we see how much time and effort they spend for such a dubious return, like when Michael’s daughter came home with an assignment to help her distinguish between the adjectival and adverbial functions of infinitives or when Jeff’s daughter took a test on writing that was entirely multiple-choice questions about grammatical terms. It’s little wonder that one of the informants in our study “Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys”: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002) made the simple pronouncement that “English is about nothing. . . . It doesn’t help you DO anything” (119).

When should we teach grammar? We should teach grammar when it’s needed to help kids do something that matters, and then we should teach it in a way that maximizes the utility of what we are teaching and minimizes the amount of time spent memorizing terms or filling in blanks. For example, one of the strongest commitments we have is that we want students to be prepared both for success in school and for participating in democratic discourse. That’s why we think teaching argumentative writing is so important. One of the challenges that students face in argumentative writing is writing sentences in which they manage the complexity of nuanced thinking. Arguments require structures that kids are unlikely to have mastered in their everyday talk (“Although critics have often contended . . .”). So in the context of a unit in which arguments play a major role, we ought to teach students how to both manage the complexity of the structures that they need and the conventions that are associated with those structures. It may be that some terms will be useful in that effort, but you don’t have to identify an introductory adverbial clause or recognize a subordinate conjunction to write with power and grace.

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When I read the question “What is your most compelling reason for teaching grammar?” my first thoughts were, “But I don’t. I don’t teach grammar. Well, I don’t teach grammar as a separate subject.”

Why not? Most importantly, because such teaching has not proven helpful in improving many students’ writing. The authors of a thorough review
of the research at the University of York put it this way: “In terms of practice, the main implication of our findings is that there is no high quality evidence that the teaching of grammar, whether traditional or generative/transformational, is worth the time if the aim is the improvement of the quality and/or accuracy of written composition” (Andrews et al. 4).

Instead of teaching grammar in isolation, I teach—and advocate teaching—selected aspects of grammar that can help writers add and even generate details (ideas); that can enable writers to adjust their use of language structures to their topic, audience, and purpose (voice, style); that can add variety to sentence structures (sentence sense/fluency); and that can empower writers to use accepted mainstream conventions in such matters as subject-verb agreement, pronoun reference, and punctuation (usage/mechanics). These functions—found in many writing assessment rubrics—are encapsulated in the title of a book I’m working on, Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing (with colleague Jonathan Bush). Such targeted teaching of grammar is positive, productive, and practical—what we call our 3 P’s approach to grammar taught selectively, with and for writing.

What about the SAT and ACT, you ask? These measure not grammar knowledge itself, but students’ ability to revise sentences for effective structure and their ability to edit sentences according to widely accepted conventions for written English. Such revision and editing strategies can be taught in conjunction with the writing process and reviewed—via sample tests—shortly before the tests are administered. That way, we get not only better test scores but also better writing.

Work Cited

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I teach grammar to help students discover how much they already know. As vernacular-speaking students write My goldfish name is Scaley; Waxing mean to get bigger; It take 365 day to revolve around the Earth, teachers traditionally reach for the red pen, ensnaring students in a thicket of corrections. After communicating powerfully in their home communities, students are baffled and disheartened to discover that school and teachers see them as communication impaired.

Insights from linguistics reveal a different story: Students do know possession, verb agreement, and plurality. They have not lost or forgotten the apostrophe -s but instead are following a different grammar pattern (owner + owned). Students’ verbs have not frayed into disagreement; they follow a different agreement rule: Use a bare verb with all persons and number of subjects (I/you/he/she/it/we/they run). And students do not stumble over plurality. The pattern is crystal clear—plurality is shown by number words or context. These students do know English, in one of its many varieties.

I teach grammar to help teachers discover how much students already know. No longer do teachers see students as struggling, making errors, leaving off endings. When teachers recognize the structure in student language, their image of students transforms: Teachers are able to see students as language and culture rich, possessing strong linguistic foundations. Teachers then treat their students as they see them—as able learners.

In this context, I offer teachers research-based techniques for teaching Standard English: contrastive analysis and code-switching. Students compare and contrast the grammar of home speech to the grammar of school speech for the purpose of adding Standard English to their linguistic repertoires. Students then can code-switch to choose the language style to fit the setting.

I teach grammar to help students and teachers discover how much students already know about language. As we recognize and build on our students’ strengths and existing knowledge, again and again, the classroom environment transforms.