

Grammar Instruction:
Focusing on the Mistakes Earns Only Headaches

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Grammar FAQ Essay

For years the traditional method for grammar instruction in education has focused on the memorization and drilling of grammatical rules and structures. Educators assumed that if students knew about the categories of grammar they would automatically follow the rules correctly in writing. However, more than half a century of research has proven that this “mistake prevention” method of instruction does not lead to more exact grammar usage in writing. Teachers and researchers alike have discovered that the most effective instructional methods for writing correctly and writing well focus on presenting grammatical forms as useful tools students can use to better their writing, rather than as land mines in the text that can destroy their ideas.

“Mistake prevention” based grammar instruction teaches grammatical concepts in isolation of the communication and composition process. It focuses on usage rules and is carried out through the use of drills, concept repetition, and objective testing, usually on worksheets or out of grammar handbooks. Instead of presenting grammar as a separate subject, grammar should be taught as a tool to improve writing, in conjunction with the writing process itself. The use of grammar is linked directly to creative idea expression and is always explained and practiced within the context of the composition instruction that is occurring.

Over the past fifty years an ongoing body of research has reaffirmed time and again that “isolated, formal, and terminology laden grammar instruction is not linked to improved student writing” (Alsup and Bush 81). Not only does it accomplish little in the way of assisting students to develop functional and adaptive writing and communication skills; this approach does not even succeed in teaching students the classifications, categories, and rules it stresses. “For most students the systematic study of grammar is not even particularly helpful in avoiding or correcting errors” (Hillocks 1986).

There are two main reasons that the old grammar study methods are ineffectual in promoting student learning; they discourage students from writing and waste instruction time on lessons that have no benefit. The disconnected manner in which “rules based” grammar has traditionally been taught, causes students to miss the relevance the subject has for improving the writing and speaking skills they use every day. “It doesn’t take a leap forward in knowledge to realize that separate and isolated grammar instruction typically does not engage most students, in particular because it doesn’t directly connect to communication” (Alsup and Bush 84). Grammar therefore becomes a boring, confusing, and recognizably pointless exercise.

The result? Children become disheartened due to the errors they make and believe themselves to be “bad” at grammar. This leads to the mistaken belief that they are bad writers because the same error marks on their grammar sheets appear on their composition papers. Quite often students with highly imaginative writing and wonderful language skills become too afraid to express or utilize these gifts in their writing because they fear the lash of the red pen. They have been conditioned to believe that it is better to be correct than to be creative. Sticking to simple, easy to express thoughts, these young writers do not dare venture beyond the boundaries of the grammar rules they are familiar with, and some strive to give up the practice of writing entirely.

The method of teaching grammar as a tool for writing is a better way to go essentially because it is not the “traditional” approach. First, it does not require teachers to teach grammar lessons that are wholly separate from other lessons. Second, because the grammar is taught as it applies to student writing, it eliminates the need for a separate grammar textbook (and the convenient, corresponding worksheets). And most important, it encourages students to take a personal interest in the grammar that they are learning

because it directly improves their writing and communicating skills. This way, the teacher's biggest task is not to drag students through a series of seemingly pointless grammar exercises, but to convince students that the grammar instruction will give them a better chance at success.

One of the greatest advantages of teaching grammar as a tool for writing is that the instruction recognizes the difference between spoken and written grammar, standard and informal (Tchudi and Tchudi 202). "Tool" instruction teaches students that there are appropriate uses for "non-standard" English grammar in writing, such as in fiction writing and casual correspondence. Concurrently it teaches the rules of "standard" grammar so that students can communicate in professional situations. This way, the student is prepared for different communication opportunities, but he does not think that he is required to completely give up his unique voice in favor of "proper" writing.

Teaching grammar as a writing tool also implies that it is taught in correspondence with student writing, rather than as a separate, often wasted, grammar lesson. Teachers need only work with students on their writing and, when grammatical issues arise, work to improve those issues. Teachers can use the students' writing as the lesson material in order to convey the relevance of grammar instruction.

The "tool" method is also preferred by many teachers because it eliminates the idea that grammar teachers are inherent sticklers who know every little rule about grammar. Students are encouraged to have discussions with their teachers about their writing without intimidation. They feel safe approaching the teacher with grammar questions because they know the teacher wants to help improve their communication abilities. It teaches students that writing and grammar are not about making or not making mistakes, but rather about improving one's communication ability and conveying

more meaning to the reader. In fact this method of teaching often encourages mistakes from the standpoint that mistakes with advanced grammatical principles are a sign of the writer's growth and confidence, rather than errors that must be eliminated or, more often, avoided all together.

If grammar is to be taught in our classrooms, it must be taught in a meaningful, constructive manner. The "mistake prevention" method has had a long reign as the premier method for grammar instruction, but due to the lack of evidence that it does anything worth while, it is preferable to instead teach grammar as a tool to improve writing. Mistake prevention centers on correcting and avoiding errors in traditional, "standard" grammar usage. It turns the teacher into the bad guy, and essentially tells the students not to screw up...or else. As a result, the students are afraid to improve their writing. "Tool" grammar takes away the fear of correction by encouraging students to explore grammar, with the teacher's help. It focuses on positive improvement rather than on negative correction. Since "Grammar is the soul of humankind," (Noden 202) teachers should give their students all the tools necessary to let their souls reach their zenith.

Works Cited

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