

DEVELOPING STUDENTS' GRAMMAR SKILLS

Andrew P. Johnson, Ph.D.
Minnesota State University, Mankato

Learning about grammar doesn't have to be boring and meaningless. This chapter starts by dispelling some myths, other wise known as silly grammar ideas. It ends by describing seven activities that can be used to develop students' ability to use conventional grammar.

SILLY GRAMMAR IDEAS

The word “grammar” can send shudders up and down the spine of most middle school students. Why is that? Perhaps it is because of some of the myths or silly ideas that have perpetuated around grammar. Seven silly grammar ideas are listed here.

Silly grammar idea #1: In order to be effective, grammar instruction has to be boring and meaningless. Truth: Not.

Silly grammar idea #2: In order to be able to write, students must be able to identify and define grammar sub-entities such as a pronoun, gerund, participle, superlative, relative clause, coordinating conjunctions, causative verbs, past participle, intransitive verb, ergative verb, imperatives, intransitive verb, dangling modifiers, predicate, past participle, transitive verb, prepositional phrase, reflexive pronouns. Truth: Knowledge of grammar is but one component of being able to write. Knowledge of grammar is important; however, knowing the 5-step writing process, being able to use a grammar-check on a computer, and knowing how get help editing from others is more important.

Silly grammar idea #3: If students have trouble writing, they just need a little more grammar instruction. Truth: Sometimes an over-emphasis on writing sub-skills makes it more difficult to write. This is because, instead of seeing writing holistically or in a global sense, it becomes perceived as a complex myriad of little sub-skills

Silly grammar idea #4: There is a correlation between student's knowledge of grammar and the quality of their compositions. Truth: There is little relationship between the teaching of grammar and the quality of students' written compositions.

Silly grammar idea #5: Good writers are good grammarians. Truth: If this were the case, grammarians would be our best selling authors and always win the Pulitzer Prize.

Silly grammar idea #6: Study grammar outside a meaningful writing context (doing grammar exercises in a book) improves students' ability to use grammar correctly in authentic writing situations. Truth: Studying grammar outside the context of authentic writing actually makes it more difficult to transfer these skills.

Silly grammar idea #7: You can teach writing and grammar without being a writer. Truth: All teachers of writing must write and share their writing with students. Would you take piano lessons from somebody who never played the piano?

GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION

Grammar is a study of how our language works. Learning to use certain conventions of grammar enables us to effectively create and transmit ideas from our heads out into the world through our writing and speaking. Traditional grammar instruction was very prescriptive (see stand-alone approach below). That is, it would prescribe what you must do or should do with the expectation that you would be able to transfer these ideas directly to your writing and speaking.

While, on the face of it, this seems to make sense, let me ask you this: How did you learn the basic grammar rules for speaking? Were you drilled in elements of grammar apart from any

meaningful speaking context? I don't think so. You learn to speak and you acquired the basic rules of grammar by speaking and getting response to your ideas, by hearing other more mature speakers, and by having incorrect grammar attended to in the context of your authentic speaking activities.

Grammar instruction is important; however, time spent composing has a more positive effect on grammar and writing than time spent teaching grammar (Hillocks, 1986). This means that grammar instruction must be short and explicit, and then practiced, and reviewed in authentic writing experiences. In this sense, writing and speaking are skills that are developed, not content to be taught.

Approaches to Grammar Instruction

There are three common approaches taken to the teaching of grammar:

1. Stand-alone approach or isolated approach. Grammar instruction is done as a separate class apart from any real reading or writing through the use of worksheets and/or artificial activities and assignments. In the 70s, we did a lot of sentence diagramming. While there is a place for an occasional worksheet, this is not a very effective approach to helping students develop their ability to use grammar knowledge. There is very little transfer to real life writing situations.

2. Immersion approach. Here students are immersed in real life writing and reading situations. This immersion is an important aspect of helping to develop mature readers and writers, however, without instruction learning is not very efficient or effective.

3. Embedded approach. This is the most effective approach to grammar instruction. The teacher looks at students' papers to see what types of errors they're making. Based on his/her observation, skills are selected for short mini-lessons or coaching sessions. This is a very direct approach to grammar instruction as students are being given explicit and direct instruction on those aspects they are using in their authentic writing.

TIPS FOR DEVELOPING GRAMMAR AWARENESS

Listed below are seven simple tips for helping students to develop an awareness of grammar in their speaking and writing.

1. Use lots of real writing. Authentic writing with feedback and response from classmates and teachers is most effective in developing grammar awareness.

2. Use worksheets judiciously. There's nothing wrong with worksheets. They're tools; however, like any tool, their effectiveness is determined by how they're used. Whenever possible, have students work in pairs to complete these. That way they hear the thought process of others. Remember, the goal is learning and writing, not completing a worksheet and getting a score to record.

3. Keep skills instruction brief and quickly paced. Students need some explicit instruction related to grammar. That is, they need to be told exactly what a noun, or incomplete sentence is (see *Appendix A* for the basic grammar rules).

4. Use posters and bulletin boards as reminders.

5. Find ways to get students talking about their writing (peer group editing is one way to do this).

6. Promote voluntary reading. Wide reading is the cure for almost everything literary.

7. Become aware of your own grammar as you are speaking and writing. Make sure you use correct grammar in your speaking. Correct children's grammatical mistakes without calling a great deal of attention. Example:

"Mr. J, I seen three deer last night."

"You mean you saw three deer? How exciting that must have been. Tell me about it."

In this way you are still honoring the idea while making the quick correction.

STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING GRAMMAR SKILLS

This section contains a description of eight strategies or activities that can be used to enhance students knowledge of grammar.

Daily Oral Language (DOL).

Daily oral language is a quick, effective way to teach and reinforce grammar and punctuation. Simply write one or two sentences on the board in which there are grammar or punctuation errors (see Figure 1). Then ask volunteers to come up and correct an error. Students should correct only one error and then explain why they made their correction. This allows others to hear their thinking and enables you to conduct quick grammar and punctuation mini-lessons. DOL should be kept fairly fast-paced. Eventually, you may include a short paragraph instead of sentences.

You can find DOL sentences on the Internet (do a search using the terms: *daily-oral-language*). You could also buy books with lots of DOL sentences in them. However, I've found that it is always more effective to create your own sentences based on the types of errors you see in students' writing and hear in their speaking. Also, create sentences and paragraphs that are about (a) your students, (b) your students' their lives or experiences, or (c) books, subjects, themes, or topics you may be studying.

Figure 1. Examples of daily oral language sentences.

bill run fast

- Bill ran fast.
- Bill runs fast.

sara is going with bill to wisconsin

- Sara is going with Bill to Wisconsin.

kirsten bob said you know it ain't time for gym class yet

- "Kirsten," Bob said, "you know it isn't time for gym class yet."

jim don't know we don't do recess today.

- "Jim doesn't know we aren't having recess today.

jenny, she lost her new pen

- Jenny lost her new pen.

Sentence Combining

Sentence combining is a method of teaching grammar intuitively. In sentence combining, students are given two or more sentences. These sentences make come from a book they're reading, a unit their studying, current events, or their lives. They must then combine the

sentences while keeping the same ideas. The goal is not to make a longer sentence, rather, to develop more effective sentences. The resulting sentence must be a complete sentence and use as few words as possible. This is a naturalistic approach to grammar as students naturally look for nouns, verbs, propositions, and connecting words to construct new sentences.

Sentence combining invites students to experiment with word choice and order. They begin to realize that there're many ways to build sentence (see Figure 2). This provides a more authentic context in which to talk about nouns, verbs, capital letters, and periods. These are the steps:

1. Write two sentences on the board (or three for more advanced students). The sentences don't have to be related to each other; however, it is helpful if they are related to students' lives, experiences, or something they may be studying in another class.

2. Ask students to combine two sentences into one. They can write their sentence ideas down in a journal or on thinking paper (scratch paper). You can experiment by having students do this orally. They could also do this in pairs or small groups. This enables them to talk and hear the thinking of others. Students should share their ideas with the group or class in some way.

3. Share your own combined sentence or write one student's on the board. Analyze sentences only after students have created them. Identify and discuss the various types of words used and why. Have a list of possible connecting words someplace on the board or word wall (and, or, unless, because, also, etc.). You might identify the thing words (nouns), action words (verbs), and describing words (adjectives). This is a quick and simple way to review the elements that are needed for a complete sentence.

Important note: Always reinforce the notion that a sentence is a complete idea. It needs to make sense by itself. Encourage students to read their sentences out loud to see if they make sense. This can be done quickly by having students turn to a neighbor to share their sentence.

Figure 2. Examples of sentence combining.

- Mickey is a dog.
- He belongs to Andy.

Possible Sentences

- Mickey is a dog that belongs to Andy
- Andy's dog is named Mickey.
- Mickey the dog belongs to Andy.

To extend this activity:

- Ask students to insert words in their sentences to create silly sentences, scary sentences, mysterious sentences, complicated sentence, etc. This is the type of open-ended activity in which students can participate at their own level. Encourage more advanced students to include special words or concepts in their sentence.

- Provide three or more short sentences and ask students to communicate these ideas as effectively and smoothly as they can (Figure 3). They may write two or more sentences or even a paragraph. The goal is smooth effective communication. Again, encourage students to read their sentences out loud to check for accuracy, completion, and fluency of one idea to another.

Figure 3. Examples of multi-sentence combining.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mickey is a dog. • He belongs to Andy. • He is a pug. • He loves to snuggle. • He snores when he sleeps. <p><u>Possible Paragraph</u> Andy has a pug named Mickey. Mickey loves to snuggle and he snores when he sleeps.</p>
--

Sentence Elaboration

In sentence elaboration, students are given a sentence with the direction to make it better or more interesting. This allows students to see the basic structure of a sentence while using propositions, adjectives, verbs, and other types of words and sentence parts to make it more interesting. Creativity and humor should be encouraged. For example, you might ask students to make the sentence more mysterious, funny, efficient, fancy, exciting, boring, scary, loud, bizarre, silly, funny, pig-like, old, new, happy, sad, expensive, etc. Again, this is more effective if the original sentence has some connection to what students are reading or studying or their lives and experiences.

Grammar as Inquiry

Inquiry is when students ask a question and then use data to answer the question. In this case, the question is: How many nouns per hundred (NPH) are in this text. To answer the question, students select a spot in a text or trade book, count out 100 words, and record the number of nouns to get a NPH score. You can do this with any grammatical element such as verbs per hundred (VPH) or adjectives per hundred (APH). With younger students use nouns per fifty (NPF).

To extend this activity:

- Older students can find three NPH scores in a chapter or text and then finding the average.
- Ask an inquiry question in which one type of text is compared to another. For example: Are there more NPH in a newspaper or a Harry Potter book? Which author uses more APH: J.K. Rowling, Kit Pearson or Jerry Spinelli? These scores can be record on a graph and compared.
- What type of nouns are found in this story? Look for different types of nouns, adjectives, or verbs (Figure 4). Examples might include floating nouns, nouns that sink, big nouns, little nouns, nouns that bounce, healthy nouns, etc.

Figure 4. Noun categories.

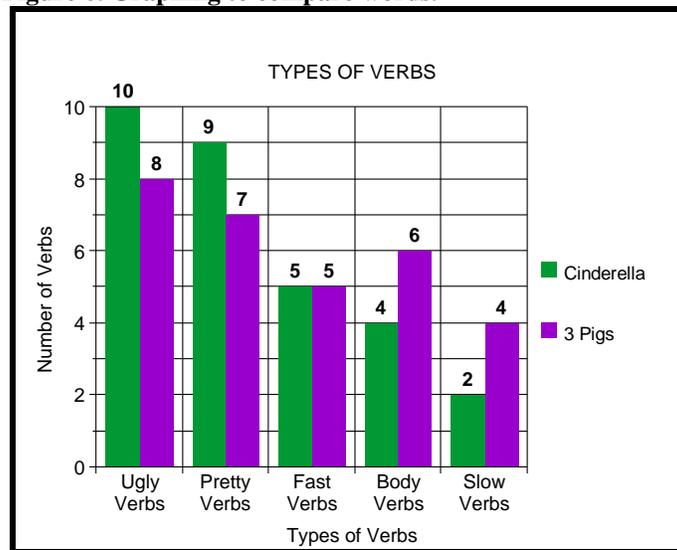
animal nouns	human nouns	non-human nouns

Word Sort

Ask students to identify a specific number of a certain type of words. For example, list 30 verbs found in this story. Then, have students examine the group and arrange the verbs (or some other type of word) into groups or categories (Figure 5). A table or bar graph can be used to record the results (Figure 6). This would enable you to compare the types of verbs found in different story. (Make sure you use the same number of verbs from each story.)

Figure 5. Word sort for verbs.

Fast verbs	Slow verbs	Pretty verbs	Ugly verbs	Body verbs
5	2	9	10	4

Figure 6. Graphing to compare words.**Grammar Treasure Hunt**

Ask students to go on a grammar treasure hunt to find various grammatical elements. Using a book or textbook in which they are familiar, students use a graphic organizer to collect and organize data. Tally marks are then used to keep track of how many words put in each category (see Figure 7).

Peer Editing

Peer editing can also be used for developing grammar skills. Here you would identify three to five specific grammatical elements upon which to focus (see Figure 8).

Figure 7. Examples of graphic organizers for grammar treasure hunt.

Nouns	verbs
\\ \\ \\	\\

Big Nouns	Little Nouns

Adjectives	Verbs

Figure 8. Editing checklist.

	yes	no
1. Stays consistent verb tense (past, present, future).		
2. Compound sentences make sense when pulled apart.		
3. Sentences are one complete idea.		
4. Uses 'don't' and 'doesn't' correctly.		
5. Uses him/her, she/he/me correctly.		

Wide Reading

This isn't a specific strategy, but voluntary self-selected, enjoyable reading is the cure for almost everything. Wide reading provides students with a very implicit sense of the structure of the language.

References

- Hillocks, G. (1986) *Research on written composition*. Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearing House on Reading and Communication Skills.
- Hillocks, G. and Mavrognes, N. (1986). Sentence combining. In Hillocks, G. (ed.), *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching*. Urbana, IL: NCTE. 142-146.
- Johnson, A. & Graves, M. (1997). Scaffolding: A tool for enhancing the reading experiences of all students. *Texas Journal of Reading*, 3, 31-37.
- Pressley, M., Harris, K.R. & Marks, M.B. (1992). But good skill users are constructivists! *Educational Psychology Review*, 4, 3-31.