

Shifting Perspectives about Grammar: Changing What and How We Teach

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What is it about teaching language that makes it so problematic? Is it because language is connected to who and what we are and everything we do? That has to be part of it. I know that I've been through my share of discussions about language and how to teach it, with those involved holding a variety of perspectives. I've watched those discussions shift over the years of my teaching as something new comes up and perspectives shift again. Today, when I read articles or hear discussions about teaching grammar, I find interesting dichotomies in perspectives. Some people see language issues as right or wrong: That's it. No flexibility. This perspective is evident when people look at issues of language in stark contrasts instead of in relation to context. Even if teachers don't think of grammar that way, the use of worksheets or testing often suggests the right/wrong dichotomy. After all, we "correct" the worksheets; students ask us for "the right answer." Even the idea of people's usage being "corrected" by English teachers suggests this perspective: right or wrong.

Another dichotomy is evident when I hear teachers speak of grammar as opposed to content. This is apparent when teachers say they have to decide between helping students write about something interesting and substantive *or* helping them learn punctuation and usage. This dichotomy suggests a separation between what we say and how we say it; perhaps it even represents the conflict between the writing process movement and traditional instruction. Although most of what I read and hear in these discussions comes from teachers and parents, students hold some of those same perspectives about language. Right/Wrong. Either/Or. One way or another.

Shifting these perspectives is one of the first challenges to seeing language instruction from a more effective position. Shifting perspectives has been the story of my teaching life.

Past Tense

When I first started teaching, my district required traditional grammar instruction: parts of speech, diagramming, etc. I was comfortable with that perspective because that was the idea of grammar I had been taught: grammar as terminology unrelated to writing; grammar as right and wrong. Because it had been a few years since I'd pored over Warriner's as a student, I depended in those early years of my teaching on the textbook I had been given to help me deliver the expected instruction. I studied the appropriate chapter and then reviewed it with my students before assigning them the questions at the end of the section. Even though sometimes the ten questions at the end of the chapter had a ringer among them that required knowledge above what the chapter had addressed (infinitives among the prepositional phrases, for example), we carried on. When our school got a computer lab, I figured out how to use the lab to make grammar instruction more interesting. I loaded ten sentences from our textbook onto a document students could open in the lab. Then they would highlight or change the font in some way to identify parts of speech: italicize the nouns, underline the verbs, make adjectives Garamond bold, and so on. We were still doing the same old stuff—but now we were using technology!

My practice was the classic example of right and wrong: language as answers in the textbook,

totally removed from what my students wrote and spoke. We were doing the work of grammar study. Students didn't use what they learned in these lessons, at least overtly, in either their writing or their speech. But I didn't worry. I don't think they did, either. I don't think any of us assumed that was the point. The point was to *know grammar*. The answer sheets and quizzes would show that, right?

Eventually, the district changed its policy. Was it—finally—in response to the influential Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer report that had found that teaching grammar did not improve writing? I don't know. After all, it was more than 20 years after the report. This shift moved the purpose of language instruction away from just being able to get good scores on the quizzes or being able to identify parts of speech on district tests. Grammar was about writing now. When the policy changed, I happily left behind the textbook and the parts of speech and diagramming and worksheets. I knew the research current at the time said to teach grammar in context (Weaver). I didn't know exactly what that meant or what it looked like in a classroom, but I figured it meant not from textbooks. So I had my students practice compound sentences by writing about what they would take with them if they were going to be stranded on a desert island or practice using adverbs by writing a fake police report about a robbery at the Twinkie factory. It was different from a textbook; after all, my students were doing their own writing. But in some ways it was not so different. Do writers really think that way: Let's make sure I put plenty of adverbs in this explanation? Or that I use all compound sentences in this paragraph? I was mixing grammar instruction with students' writing, true, but it seemed pretty far removed from the writing they might do naturally. I was trying to change my perspective, but I was finding it a journey without a lot of maps.

In my search for direction, I went back (a long way) to the idea of imitation as a way to study grammar (Corbett and Connors). In my case, my students and I imitated sentences from published pieces of writing so that we internalized the patterns of more experienced writers. My students liked this practice: they could use their own ideas but set them in the patterns of other writers. My

students wrote about sports or current school events or whatever they wanted in the patterns of sentences I brought to class.

- To the person who expects every desert to be barren sand dunes, the Sonoran must come as a surprise. (Spinelli 87)
- To students who have never worked with sentence imitation, the practice must seem somewhat like a puzzle.

Students enjoyed the practice—what seemed more like play than study—and seemed to apply at least some of what they were learning to their own writing. Although I sometimes referred to the grammatical terms of the constructions we were imitating, that wasn't the point of it. We weren't practicing sentences to identify infinitive phrases as a possible way to vary sentence beginnings. We were just playing with language, without naming parts, so that students could have more options as writers. A part of me felt justified: Why did students need to know the names of the constructions they were writing? The point of grammar at this time—and in my mind—was to improve writing. Knowing terminology didn't necessarily help writers write better.

Another thing about this practice: There wasn't a plan to our study. We mostly played around with sentences and then plopped the practiced structures into whatever it was we were writing. And, as part of how I understood grammar in context, I would ask students, when they were polishing a piece of writing, to use two of the patterns we had been practicing in class in their polished writing—and identify them in the draft they turned in for a grade. When a student embedded sentences modeled after some elaborate sentences from John F. Kennedy's inaugural address into a paper on skateboarding, I knew something had to change. Even the student understood that something was wrong. Granted she went overboard, using many imitated structures beyond the two I had asked for, but she recognized that the tone of the essay made skateboarding sound like something much more important. She saw that the sentence structures—with their parallelism, antithesis, and verbals—helped create a tone that wasn't quite appropriate for her purpose and topic. I began to understand that I needed to help my students learn

more than just sentence structures if I wanted language study to help them as writers.

About the same time, I learned about sentence combining (Strong) and thought that might also be a way to help students learn grammar in context. I used some sentence combining exercises from books, and students (for the most part) liked the combining activities. I started out, though, with that same old dichotomy: right and wrong. Students joined the kernel sentences into a combination that I matched with the answers in the book. Even when I made my own sets of kernel sentences by de-combining sentences from our reading (Dean), I compared my students' responses to the original sentence. I soon realized, however, that although some of my students' combinations did not match the original sentence I had used, those combinations were not *wrong*. They were just different.

I shifted my perspective again. Instead, I asked students to combine sets of kernel sentences in at least two ways and then share their favorite, explaining why they preferred it. We talked about sentences, not just for their rightness or wrongness, but for what effect they had. For example, we might have had the following three sentences suggested from a combining practice. My questions to students would be these: How do these sentences differ? When might we choose one over another?

- The dog, driven crazy by thirst, jumped over the cliff into the river below.
- Driven crazy by thirst, the dog jumped over the cliff into the river below.
- The dog jumped over the cliff into the river below because he was crazy with thirst.

This conversation was no longer just about right and wrong. There was not a single "right" answer. And we were talking a lot more: using language to learn about language, and considering situation as part of our talk.

The talk that surrounded our work with sentence combining and sentence imitation became integral to our work with language—and I learned a valuable lesson that contributed to my developing perspective: teaching about language without talking is almost useless. We had to have discussions about grammar and its uses and effects for students

to make real sense of what they were doing. Even more importantly, we were learning that there isn't a single, right answer; language effectiveness shifts with situation—and our talk helped us develop this changed perspective. I began to consider what Rei Noguchi observed: that grammar instruction often neglects meaning and meaning relationships (9). My students and I needed to consider that certain kinds of language usage and sentence constructions helped accomplish the purposes—meanings—of specific kinds of texts better than others. That's when I started trying to match language practices/instruction to genre as much as I could.

Present Tense

In my present perspective, I'm still using imitation and combining, but now I match the sentences we imitate or combine with the genre we are writing. Contemporary genre theory helps us understand that genres are textual responses to specific situations, not merely text types (Miller). Situations require participants to interact, and those interactions reflect the nuances of the situation and the participants involved in it. By considering the kinds of language (grammar) that "make a particular text the type of text it is" (Schlepperegell 183), students not only learn grammar in the context of reading and writing, they also learn how grammar can more intimately connect to meaning. That's definitely a shift in perspective.

This present shift is not an easy one to make: There are still some students who want to know "the" right answer and who are uncomfortable with the flexibility of this approach to language instruction—and some teachers and parents feel the same way. And there are other students who like the flexibility and go completely overboard in the opposite direction, thinking there is never a "right" way to use language (what I would call the best or most appropriate choice for a situation). But overall, we are learning that language—grammar—isn't a single construct. We are learning that what we mean by grammar is bigger than identifying parts of speech or even using standard usage expectations. It's not grammar so much as language. We are learning that language is like most of life: about making the best choices out of the options available in our particular situation. So our language work involves

learning the range of options available for different situations—and that requires us to shift perspectives again, repeatedly.

Because of genre considerations, part of the present-tense perspective requires, as well, more attention to rhetorical situation than my previous perspective considered. When students understand that grammar relates to situation and genre, they can understand that text-speak is appropriate language/grammar for a particular situation—texting—but may not be appropriate for a college application or the AP exam or an email to complain about a defective cell phone. Teaching language from a genre approach helps students understand how to marshal their language skills for specific tasks instead of seeing language as a unitary concept. Students learn code-switching, adjusting their language for different genres: different kinds of structures and different expectations for different audiences.

But teaching from a genre perspective has other challenges, too. A genre approach, with its clear connection between language and situation, seems to be my answer—finally—about how to teach language. But my students' responses require me to enlarge my perspective again. When I match grammatical structures to genres, I sometimes find that students gain only a limited understanding of what I am trying to teach. The structures become something like a formula attached to the genre. So, for example, students might think that they only use appositives in movie reviews just because that is where we study them and consciously incorporate them for a class assignment. It's true that appositives are evident and useful in movie reviews—but, obviously, appositives can also be useful structures in other genres as well. Moving from formulaic use of grammar in genres to appropriate use of them in other genres involves a little more than what I had been doing.

In order to learn this strategic approach to language use, I need to make sure that students are exposed to lots of texts. More than exposure, they need *immersion* in texts of all kinds. It's hard to see how language use in one context differs from or is similar to that in another if a person isn't exposed to very many kinds of texts. Through exposure to multiple kinds of texts, students are more likely to view genres as scenes of both choice and constraint,

of both expectations and flexibility. Language use in genres is similar: appositives may be an expectation for reviews (they help to present information efficiently), but the use of direct quotes might be an option since not all reviews use them. The only way to get at these choices, at both the expectations and the options, is through immersion, comparison, and talk. A lot of talk.

Students need to learn how to think about language use in texts and how to consider the differences and similarities. For instance, after reading several examples of a genre, let's say of online book reviews, students and teachers consider the following questions:

- What do we notice about the language of this genre? How formal or informal is it?
- What do we notice about the way the sentences are structured? Are there similar kinds of sentences?
- What language regularities do you notice across several examples? What language choices do you see only in one or two examples?
- How do these choices compare and contrast to choices in other genres you are familiar with?
- How could the language choices reflect the situation of this genre, its users (writers and readers—and their relationship to each other) and its place (online or in print, for example)?

As is probably obvious, this kind of talk takes time. The immersion in multiple versions of texts takes time. Our preparation so that we have some ideas to guide students through this kind of exploration (even if they notice things you didn't) takes time. And then helping students learn how to construct the kinds of structures or use the kind of language they notice in the genre takes time. This need for time is a challenge, but making the time is worth the effort. When students understand this process, they can transfer the thinking to other genres and other situations. We don't have to teach every genre; we can teach a way of approaching them that will make students more effective language users after our class ends—not just students who can re-create the few genres we had time to teach them in our course.

This talk, essential to language learning, also requires me to bring some use of grammatical terminology back into my classroom. It's difficult to explain to students why subject-verb agreement creates credibility in an online response to a news article, for example, if they don't know what I mean by subject or verb. In my past-tense perspective, I focused on writing. And, quite frankly, most writers—even students—can do more with written and spoken language than they can explain grammatically. I don't think that's a bad thing. I can drive a car, but I can't name the parts of its engine. And I know lots of articulate people who can't tell a gerund from a present participle, but they use them both frequently and effectively. However when we have to talk about language—and with a genre approach we have to talk a lot—some common terminology is necessary. A few terms, really: subject, verb, clause, phrase, modifier, completer.

A key difference to my present use of terminology is that these terms are not meant to be something learned for a test or practiced on worksheets. I usually introduce the terms we need as we are talking about the language of a text and examining what it does. So, for example, I can bring up pronouns during our reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in Atticus's final speech to the jury. If students notice his use of pronouns (Who is called by name and who is referred to almost solely by pronouns—and what is the effect of those language choices?), they learn the terms in the context of talking about effect, not as a separate lesson. Not on a worksheet. I teach subjects and verbs (and other concepts) as part of our reading and writing activities, as a way to understand how certain language choices create effects. Some choices may hinder students' chances of being taken seriously online; they need to understand why. This use of terminology is not simply so that they can identify the subject of a sentence on a quiz or a worksheet. This embedded, integrated, real-life applied approach is a different way to consider grammatical terminology, one that fits with the present genre perspective on language.

Future Tense

What shifts in perspective will the future require? It's not hard to predict that much of our students' future use of written language will be online, and,

as a website sponsored by Michigan State University notes, "Computers are not 'just tools' for writing. Networked computers create a new kind of writing space that changes the writing process and the basic rhetorical dynamic between writers and readers" ("Why Teach"). The language our students will need to know for the future will be language that will help them navigate the digital world—and these new writing spaces—effectively. The closeness between writers and readers will require a care with language that might not have been necessary with the paper-writing more common in the past. I recall a couple of online news articles I have read recently where the comments following the article went off-topic. Instead of commenting on the content of the previous comment with which they disagreed, readers began attacking the language a commenter used, essentially sending this message: "How can anything you say be valid if you can't even use language effectively?" The use of language as representative of ethos, even down to issues of spelling and usage, will be even more important in the close connections between readers and writers in the future. Our students will need to learn to consider these issues through the language instruction they receive.

Another future consideration is that students will be writing in many environments even though it may look like they are in only a few: on their phones or on their computers (which more and more are beginning to be the same device). What I mean by environments is the places students go online to communicate; those can be widely different in expectations. A consideration for future learning about language, then, should include the uses of language that will help students as they move among different online writing situations. Texting will use one kind of grammar (syntax, usage, spelling, etc.), while a website or blog will have different expectations, and the type of blog (political or personal, for instance) will also make a difference. Moving among these will require a wide range of language options, and our students will need to learn even more effective skills for knowing how to adapt to these different situations and their expectations. Their writing in online environments will require even greater consideration of rhetorical situation: register, audience, and tone, particularly. We will need to help them see through the

similarity of tool (keyboard) to the variety in genre by working even more diligently to help them learn how genres situate writers and readers, even online, not just in physical spaces.

Another way online writing will differ from paper writing will be in length; brevity may be more valued than it is currently (140 characters, as in a tweet). Part of this expectation for shortness will be related to the reading characteristics typical of online readers:

- Online readers don't like to scroll through long texts (Nielsen), so texts will generally be limited in length.
- Online readers scan more than they read (Nielsen), so writers will need to be engaging as well as clear so as not to confuse fast "readers."

As Jim Burke notes, "tomorrow's writers will need to be able to convey detailed information in concise language about the length of a haiku" (374). Maybe not a mere 17 syllables, but you get the point.

In a recent conference presentation, Nate Kreuter noted another element that may be part of the future perspective. When we go online, he explains, "Information is not in short supply. Attention is." He suggests that one key to effective communication in this new writing space might be style—an idea that should inform future shifts in perspective. At the same conference, Brian Jackson referred to "pinging," the use of short, directed passages of text that will be typical of future communications. According to Jackson, this characteristic of future texts means that the power of the sentence can be taught "as a full rhetorical strategy in its own right." Sentences. And style. Two possible shifts for future perspectives.

Partly related to style, another aspect of language in future digital environments will be its persuasiveness. Many of the ways writers use language online will be persuasive in nature to one degree or another, arguments both subtle and overt: websites, blogs, commentaries, and comments. Even selling. I think of a posting on eBay I found a few years ago. The last time I visited the posting, the writer, a mother who had taken all her children to the store with her, was being offered more than \$100 for an opened package of Pokemon cards, something she'd purchased without realizing it. Why did she get

such a high offer? It was her writing. She told an interesting, funny story of how she ended up with the cards. Her piece wasn't overtly persuasive, but it was engaging—and, in its particular situation, persuasive because of that. In digital writing, students will need to be able to use language to inform and to persuade, to build arguments in a variety of ways—generally with a close audience and the possibility for the audience to respond, almost immediately, to their use of language. Writers will need to convince readers in many different situations. This knowledge should definitely contribute to a shift in future perspectives.

And So . . .

Shifting perspectives has been the story of my teaching life, perhaps the story of teaching grammar and language in general over the last 25 years. And shifting perspectives is essential to teaching grammar and language today and in the future. Teaching for today and tomorrow requires a more increased awareness of language use and language options in the world around us than was probably suggested by the training most English teachers received in the past. If we really want to help students see language as important to them, as essential to their lives (as I hope they will), teachers will need to develop this broader perspective, this greater awareness of language and its uses in a wider variety of situations. We need to shift perspectives from the narrower ones that may represent our own education or training, and we will need to continue to shift perspectives to adapt to the wonderful ways that language works in all aspects of our students' worlds. 

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Ligatures

New England Primer, 1727

More closely than others
some letters are bound,

as cords of pigment lash them,
inseparable.

The *s* and *h* in *shall* create
a single shape, in lead,

then ink—the *l* and *t* in *shalt not*
pressed so tightly together

they make one body, man and wife
conceiving their children in sin:

seamlessly *f* slides into *l*
in *flesh*—the *s* into *l* in *slips*.

And *c* can't escape
the *t* of *affliction*—

while, more elaborate,

the *rod of correction's* ligature
arcs: a small whip.

Sometimes, in *Christ*,
a perfect hill to climb
yokes the *s* and *t*.

First, last—*stray*
as *instructed*.

Least, most, grapple
with wandering *Lusts*

and *Affections*.

Hasten, blast—in *strict*
justice. *Everlasting*.

—Martha Carlson-Bradley

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