An Act of Theft: Teaching Grammar
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An Act of Theft: Teaching Grammar

I. Introduction

"Writing" has come to the public's attention: people in schools are talking about it in earnest; NEH is funding grants on it. Crisis or not, the publicity calls us to reconsider our current practices. One aspect of teaching writing that bears reconsideration is the teaching of grammar. On the one hand, from Mina Shaughnessy's work\textsuperscript{1} and our own classroom experience it is clear that grammar is often highly problematic for students and teachers. On the other hand, investigators have concluded that the direct teaching of grammar has limited usefulness in relation to teaching-learning writing.\textsuperscript{2} This conclusion doesn't seem entirely logical, since familiarity with constituents usually aids work on a whole project. The conclusion may reflect on methods of teaching grammar, rather than on any inherent lack of relationship between grammatical facility and writing proficiency.

In this paper I suggest several curative and preventative ways to deal with students' grammatical difficulties. The object of dealing with grammar is to enable students to acquire grammatical facility: that is, an ease of usage and the flexibility to choose from various grammatical options. The methods I suggest—grammatical problem solving, grammatical worksheets, and grammatical poetry (or linguistic yoga)—are grounded in the following propositions: (1) Grammatical facility is no guarantee that a student will be able to solve complex academic-cognitive tasks, but it will cut down on the "noise" and the spiraling anxiety which accompanies the writing through of such tasks when this facility is absent. (2) For students to acquire grammatical facility they must be active learners. Conversely, if our pedagogical interventions are to be effective, they must turn problems over to students. (3) As a corollary, it is not enough to make students conscious of problems with various and sundry markings on their papers. Indeed such markings tend to make students negatively self-conscious. (4) By and large, those grammatical constructs with which we choose to have students work need to be derived from the context of students' written


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work. Rather than dealing with grammar in a global way, I work with problems as they arise in a given student’s work. (5) In addition to directly approaching grammatical difficulties in order to “cure” them, there are preventative measures. These activities involve manipulating, playing with, and stretching syntactic forms, making a kind of poetry. (6) Finally, the teaching of grammar should not occupy large amounts of classroom time, nor grading time.

II. Pedagogical Context—Active Learning

The task students encounter in writing papers is twofold (at least): they are trying to make sense of a particular academic-cognitive problem (in history, sociology, etc., and they are trying to articulate their solutions to someone else in writing. In a word, they are transforming information. Grammatical errors, like larger organizational problems, are a kind of noise which should signal the teacher of a difficulty in (1) solving the problem or (2) articulating the solution. Often it is difficult to separate the cognitive from the linguistic. However, the level of overall coherence is one clue as to whether the student’s difficulty is basically with the specific task or with the transcribing of it. A lot of organizational difficulty can be read as a cognitive issue—the structure of the task which the student is trying to solve isn’t clear enough to him/her. The repetition of grammatical errors or the wavering between a correct structure and an erroneous one indicates a linguistic difficulty. If grammatical problems seem to arise from the linguistic part of a student’s work, most often the problem reflects an absence of linguistic facility rather than a deficiency of linguistic knowledge.3 The lack of facility has an affective consequence: it makes students uptight, or negatively self-conscious, about committing a solution to writing.4 This anxiety can spiral around to compound the initial academic-cognitive problem. Students are likely to overshoot the mark by cramming sentences with too much information, or to over-cautiously stick to the simplest of grammatical structures.5

The way students cope with the risk of writing—cramming or trimming—reflects teachers’ “solutions.” Some colleagues in Freshman English argue that grammar will straighten itself out when students have had enough practice writing, and so they underplay or ignore grammar in classes. Others see grammar as quintessential and focus heavily on writing “correct” sentences. Somewhere between laissez-faire and overfocus is probably where the solution lies. It does take time and practice to become proficient, and it also takes input and feedback. Taking the complex task of learning to talk (which all our students accomplish) as a model, we see that it has both components—time/practice and input/feedback.

I choose neither to ignore grammar nor to overfocus on it. There is, however, a more fundamental question than “how much.” And that is “how.” People learn

3A syntactic analysis of freshman writing which I did suggests that almost all possible syntactic forms are employed by almost all students. Thus students know the language, although they may not feel entirely easy with it.

4Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations, p. 85.

language, and most everything else, in a context where they are active and interactive. The grammatical difficulties that Freshman students have can only be resolved by them. Teachers have to return the problem to the students in such a way that the students can solve it. Our task is to shape and reshape the problems, not to give solutions—as we often do in marking students' papers for grammar. Our goal is for students to clarify those grammatical paradigms with which they are having trouble.

If we think about the learning of standard grammar as if it were a role in a dramatic production, then the case for active learning is clear. The student's responsibility is to learn the role of an adequate collegiate language learner (so s/he can perform in other courses and on the job), hence s/he must do the active rehearsing and acting. The teacher's job is stage-manager and director: s/he sets the stage and finds the means to direct the students into their roles. It is useful for students to see the teacher perform, but only for the sake of clarification or exemplification.

The usefulness of this dramatic metaphor has been confirmed by pedagogues like Paulo Freire and cognitive psychologists like Piaget. Freire describes learning as an interaction of reflection and action; Piaget, as an interaction of assimilation and accommodation. The point is that the learner is the one who processes information and comes to an understanding about it. Thus the work of the teacher is not simply to present or narrate preprocessed information, but to present information in such a way that it can be processed by the learner.

The basic premise of problem-solving is that a student will learn more if s/he has the opportunity to act. The contrasting method characterized by Freire as a "banking approach," is one where "instead of communication, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students receive, memorize, and repeat." Freire stresses that "knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (p. 58). The task we have as teachers is to re-structure the problems which students have in such a way that they can resolve these problems and understand the solutions because they have done so themselves. If we want students to understand abstract concepts, we need to structure problems which will resolve themselves into these concepts. Out of the best of motives—the desire to help the other, the desire to teach and explain—we can end up taking the worst of actions—acting on the behalf of the other in a situation where only the other can act.

**Conceptual Grammar.**

Occasional grammatical slip-ups are one thing, and fairly consistent errors are another. It is the second thing that concerns us here. A fairly consistent error signifies an underlying "wrong" rule or a confusion about rules. In other words repeated errors represent concepts about linguistic forms. To tell a student s/he

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has written fragments or to correct these constructions won’t resolve the problem. For one thing such teaching strategies make the student passive, and for another thing they don’t hit the problem at the cognitive level. What is needed is a set of problems which breaks down the linguistic form at issue. By way of example I’ll present some tasks that can be used to help a student reconceive rules about fragments.

In terms of transformational grammar fragments “begin” as complete sentences which are to be used later in a transformed way—these transformed sentences are embedded. An example will clarify:

1.0 She works hard for the community.

This sentence (1.0) can be transformed in a variety of ways in order to employ it as a part of a larger whole; it will became a fragment if it is transformed but not embedded, thus:

1.1 *Working hard for the community (or, *Her working....)
1.2 *That she works hard for the community
1.3 *For her to work hard for the community
1.4 *Because/since/when/if (etc.) she works hard for the community.

Once these transformed sentences are embedded they become adequate sentences instead of fragments:

1.5 Working hard for the community made her feel good.
1.6 I said that she works hard for the community.
1.7 It is important for her to work hard for the community.
1.8 Because she works hard for the community, it is a better place.

As a first step in helping students eliminate fragments from their writing, I have them construct fragments so that they can come to see how they are formed.

**Problem 1.** For example: “They teach writing in college” can be turned into the following fragment-sentences:

*Teaching writing in college.
*That they teach writing in college.
*Because they teach writing in college.
*For them to teach writing in college.

Similarly, take each sentence in the following list and turn it into a variety of fragment-sentences:

1. He goes to the store every morning.
2. They write books for students.
3. You write papers for teachers.
4. They take exams four times a year.

**Problem 2.** Take the fragment sentences that you have just made and add whatever elements need to be added to make them complete sentences: For example,

1. That they teach writing in college is of little importance to IBM.
2. Teaching writing in college is an important task.
3. Because they teach writing in college, the literacy rate is going up.
When the fragments have been made into complete sentences, we can ask students to begin to delineate how the fragments are functioning in the sentences—e.g., as nouns which are the subject/objects of verbs, etc. As another task, we can ask students to discriminate fragment-sentences from sentences and to make the fragments into sentences.

**Problem 3.** Some of the following strings of words are fragment-sentences and some are complete sentences; pick out the fragments and use them so that they become complete sentences.

1. Being a good boy.
2. Since he was president.
3. She told me that she worked hard.
4. The plane didn’t land because.
5. When he raised his arm.
6. Being in the old school since he was very young.
7. They left America because they couldn’t earn a living.
8. Going on a vacation to New Hampshire with my friends who had never been to New England.

### III. Worksheets

The way we respond to grammatical difficulties in students’ papers is a significant part of the pedagogical context. The messages we send in the margins of papers constitute some of the most direct statements we make to students about their use of language. Yet these marginal notes have always seemed to me to be incomplete; they feel more like admonishments than adequate explanations. Moreover, if a student reads these messages as something between a warning and a put-down, then a tenuous positive attitude toward writing might slump back into negativity. Finally, the messages make the students passive. All in all the teacher-student interchange is closer to a parent-child interaction than an adult-adult interaction, and is a potential source of minor resentment. These messages pose difficulties for teachers as well. The teacher has to decide which items to work on—how many and in what depth and manner—and in the course of dealing with 25 papers per week over 15 weeks, must often repeat the messages. The teacher’s task can get to be as repetitive and boring as some of the grammatical exercises for students which come our way in plastic-wrapped freebees. This repetition is a source of minor resentment for the teacher.

I think that teachers often feel at a loss in the face of students’ grammatical difficulties, and to make themselves feel better they write marginal notes. This, in turn, pushes the feeling of helplessness into the student’s court. The purpose of a set of worksheets is to end this bad game of grammatical tennis. A set of worksheets can help circumvent the passivity induced by marginalia; they can meet the student difficulty directly and activate the student.

The students I teach encounter the usual difficulties of an urban population of freshman students—fragments, run-ons, past tense markers, and markers for plural, possessive, and third person singular present—and I have constructed a work sheet for each problem. The worksheets are explanatory, illustrative, and
There is an adequate definition/explanation of the problem. In general, the explanations are grounded in transformational grammar, and explore the distinction between spoken and written English—this being the source of most confusions. A number of typical examples of the problem are presented along with instructions and examples for resolving the problem. Instructions are given to the student to do several tasks: (a) to correct the problem as noted in his/her work; and (b) to generate five additional sentences using the same grammatical structure as the sentence with which he/she had difficulty.

For the teacher a large amount of repetitious explanatory work is eliminated because the worksheets provide definitions and illustrations. I can note the problem in the margins of a paper and attach an appropriate worksheet. It is often the case that a student’s paper will contain both correct and incorrect versions of the same structure; I cross-note these in the paper in order to give the student a contrastive model of his/her own. For the student some measure of mystification is eliminated, and more, he/she can act on the problem at hand rather than be a passive recipient of (often inadequate) information. I generally allow ten minutes or so of class time to work on problems when papers are handed back.

Finally, the worksheet idea could extend beyond the English Department’s writing courses. Teachers in other disciplines would often like to help a student’s writing along and thus reinforce what we are trying to do. Many willing teachers find, however, that they don’t know quite what to do or how to begin, and don’t want to expend large amounts of time on it. It is important for us to think about reaching these teachers since they have a profound effect on our own work as well as on our students’. I find that the content of a student’s paper can be overlooked in the face of grammatical problems. It’s as if the teacher becomes so enraged at grammatical discontinuity—a set of linguistic rules that don’t match his/her own—that the meaning of the student’s work is not perceived. Teaching students who are in a relatively new linguistic context where language rules are enforced but not explained by the community is a difficult task; the difficulties are compounded by inadequate responses from English teachers and defensive ones from other teachers. Worksheets won’t bring an end to our difficulties, but they will make an important wedge.

IV. Rules and Play: Grammatical Poetry, A Preventative Measure

Problem solving and worksheets directly approach a student’s grammatical difficulties, but it is pedagogically useful to work on grammatical structures in a less direct—less threatening—manner. Directly concentrating on a problem often precludes a resolution. Traditional drills and computerized drills with instant feedback are ways of practicing and reinforcing grammatical habits, but

7Limitations of space prevent my being more concrete here; I would be happy to send copies of worksheets to those interested.
the pedagogical difficulty with such drills is that they tend to overfocus. What
might be called an “assembly line mind set” is likely to come over the student in
doing such drills. Working through drills becomes mechanical, and while the
virtue of drills is their “concentration,” a student doesn’t have to do too much
concentrating.

Another method that yields more, and has more interest for students, is writing
grammatical poetry. The method is grounded in the ideas that Kenneth Koch has
set forth, but it goes in a different direction. The idea of grammatical poetry is
to have students generating poetry which includes grammatical structures; this
allows for a center of interest (creative language use, play), as well as a
grammatical focus. A grammatical element is present, but is not so obtrusive
that it creates an assembly line mind set. For example, to reinforce the structure
of a “but” sentence, I would set up a formula and ask students to write a line
for a collective poem:

Animal1 + verb phrase (include a color and a place), but animal2 + verb phrase
(include a color and a place).

The formula generated a line like this:

Giraffes eat only the tender green leaves from the top of African trees, but hyenas
eat tough raw red meat of animals captured on African plains.

In addition to giving positive reinforcement to grammatical rules, the pro-
cesses of writing poetry and stories have other cognitive and linguistic virtues.
A brief narrative rundown illustrates the potential gains. The first poem I had
students write was a simple collective poem (without a specific grammatical
problem). Following Koch, I asked them to write one line which began with “I
wish” and contained a color, an animal, and a place. I wanted, first of all, to see
how students would respond—would they like the idea or would they be
resistant. I also wanted to see if students would perceive the things that unified
the poem as well as the things that made it less than unified—could they articulate
the reasons that the collective poem worked in some measure, but didn’t totally
work? During the twenty-minute break of a double period class I typed the
poem on a ditto and ran it off. The students were delighted with the poem they
had made; they enjoyed seeing the words they had written and they read it
with enthusiasm. The class was quick to see how the poem worked and didn’t
work. Each line had a similar form—the same four elements—but the poem was
also somewhat anarchic in terms of content and tone—some lines were scat-
ological and funny, others were pastoral or romantically serious.

The distinctions that emerged involved the students in the process of ab-
stracting; they had to group various sets of lines together and derive a gen-
eralization to fit the groups. This kind of cognitive work was precisely the
kind that would be used in learning to read and write about various subjects.
In this particular course, for example, we read Studs Terkel’s Working; one of
the objects in writing about Terkel’s interviews was for students to perceive the
unities and diversities among the workers in any given group. Discussing the

8Kenneth Koch, Wishes, Lies and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry (New
poem as we did provided a very concrete model for the kind of cognitive operation that I wanted to encourage and foster.

Another aspect of writing this poem involved linguistic principles, without being explicitly grammatical. When I asked the class to write a line beginning with "I wish," I also asked them to include a color, an animal, and a place. For the most part students not only followed the rules, but followed the ordering of the elements even though nothing was said about ordering except for beginning with "I wish." After we discussed the first lines which the class had written, students recognized that the ordering of three elements could be done in any number of ways and that elements could be repeated if desired. The second line which students wrote was more playful and energetic. The linguistic goal was to recognize the movability of elements. Students are often "stuck" in certain syntactic patterns; often enough these syntactic patterns create grammatical problems, or they are "boring" in their repetitiousness. If "boring" papers are difficult to read, imagine how difficult they are to write; students must have to hold back a lot of energy, making the process of writing difficult and painful. Seeing that the elements in a syntactic structure are movable—able to be transformed or reoriented—is one linguistic principle which students can become self-conscious about and utilize. After discussing both collective poems, each student wrote his/her own poem of about ten lines following the same rules; these were also dittoed up so that everyone could see what kinds of things would happen by using a simple set of rules.

This first poetry assignment was very fruitful, in concretely presenting a number of cognitive and affective operations; what remained to be done was to include grammatical operations as well. As I read students' papers, the task became clearer. Students had difficulties using semicolons—they didn't use them—and thus wrote "run-on" sentences. To prepare for writing a poem, a problem-solving exercise was developed—the solution to the problem was to be a set of linguistic rules. Taking ten run-on sentences from students' papers, I asked students to discuss the problem sentences in small groups and to derive a set of rules to make the sentences grammatically adequate. They derived a number of rules, one of which was the use of a semicolon. To reinforce this rule, I made up a set of rules for a poem.

\[
\text{Animal}_1 + \text{present action verb} + \text{color} + \text{complement}; \\
\text{Animal}_2 + \text{present action verb} + \text{color} + \text{complement}.
\]

This rule yielded some very nice lines:

- Elephants run blue skies; tigers walk black ground.
- Cows sing blue notes; horses play green guitars.
- Bears dream blue dreams; birds sleep green feathers.
- Grasshoppers jump high above the green grass; ants crawl along the rich brown earth.

And some silly lines:

- Pigs play in blue mud; chickens run up telephone poles.
- Rats jump blue fences; snails run purple obstacle courses.

On the same day as the *Semicolon* poem, we did a *However* poem:
Structure$_1$ is made of something; however, Structure$_2$ is made of something else. Shacks are made of wet feathers; however, gas stations are made of toothpicks. Gyms are made of shit leaves; however, boats are made of dragon tongues.

Generating both collective and individual poems with a focal grammatical element allows a student to become involved with language making, to play with linguistic possibilities, and to utilize adequate grammatical structures. There is hardly a grammatical problem for which a grammatical poem can't be constructed. Many of the students in my class were having difficulties with the past tense, so I constructed a rule to generate lines with a sequence of past tense verbs:

Color + (fantastic) animal + past tense verb + complement (repeat past tense verb + complement five times).

One of my favorite lines from this exercise is this: “The green monster kissed the girl, ran around in circles, jumped in the air, rolled on the ground, skipped down the street, and melted.” In addition to providing an alternative way of doing grammatical work, the collective poems worked well to give group morale to the class. Further, since each student generated his/her own line, there were a variety of models made available to everyone, so that in writing his/her own ten- or fifteen-line poem, each student could tap the resources of the class as a whole.

The principles used to create poems work equally well for stories. Instead of “playing” with a single grammatical element, the stories allow for a multiplicity of elements and greater freedom of expression. Stories are also useful for playing with narrative techniques—sequence and transitions. So, one can set up “story rules” which would include a variety of syntax patterns—use of sentences with “after,” “when,” “since,” etc. One story I asked my class to write was to be about an inanimate object of each individual’s choice; they were to tell the story of this object in the past tense and as if it were human; and they were to include grammatical sentence types—a sentence with “however,” “because,” “after,” a semicolon, and a relative clause. One of the stories which the class thought highly of was about a mixed marriage:

Long ago there was a marriage of two different types of athletic shoes, Puma, the man, and Converse, the woman. Because of their different backgrounds, they were not accepted socially.

Puma’s father did not care who his son married, but his mother hated his wife and her family. Converse’s family had different reactions toward the mixed marriage. Converse’s mother thought Puma was a fine young athletic shoe; however, Converse’s father hated Puma and angrily called him a “sneaker.”

Puma and Converse didn't care what their families thought and moved on Addidas Street.

After the first year of their marriage, a baby athletic shoe was born to them. They named the boy Puma Jr., the proud son of Puma Sr. Their families were outraged and made obscene phone calls to them. They angrily said, “you dirty sneakers, you dirty filthy sneakers, and you have the nerve to make a Pumverse baby.” Puma and Converse both told their families to “kiss their labels!”

This is why the Puma’s who lived on Addidas Street now reside in a country called “Exersole.”