

Susan Losee Nunan

Forgiving Ourselves and Forging Ahead: Teaching Grammar in a New Millennium

While studies show the ineffectiveness of direct grammar instruction to produce better writers, high school teacher Susan Losee Nunan finds that explaining grammar rules provides students with tools for building complex thoughts and expressing themselves more elaborately.

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e worked on complex sentences for a full week. Knowing the punctuational pitfalls of complex sentences, I had taken special care to help my

Texas eighth graders understand the need for a comma after an initial dependent clause. The DOL (Daily Oral Language) sentence should have been a cinch: "If you are good girls and boys santa brought you presents." The class had already capitalized *Santa* and changed the original "brought" to "will bring." All I wanted was for these eager, spongelike minds—soaking up all the knowledge I had to dispense—to notice the comma missing after the initial clause. First class of the day: After puzzling over what Mrs. Nunan, with first-year-teacher confidence, had assumed they would all catch, the students still looked baffled. Suddenly, Matt shot his hand into the air and waved madly, exhibiting absolute certainty that he'd gotten it. Relieved that someone had been listening to the past five grammar lessons, I called on him.

"You change the second *you* to *y'all*," he said, gloating that he had caught what his

classmates had so clearly missed.

He stopped me cold. A Connecticut Yankee, transplanted into South Texas soil, I was amused (OK, really I was appalled) that my students thought this Southernism was an actual rule that the teacher wanted corrected, but when the same thing happened in second-, third-, and seventh-period classes,

I was nonplussed. What had happened to all those drills, minilessons, and sentence strips? Did the lists of subordinating conjunctions hanging on the wall and the miniature duplicate in their student binders mean nothing? How could an obviously colloquial "y'all" have more meaning than the textbook exercises and corrected worksheets over which I had slaved? The universal response to my teaching made clear that the problem was mine; I had to revise how I thought about and taught grammar if I wanted my students to learn and, even more important, apply what they had learned.

(Native) Grammar Acquisition

It took me ten years to realize the handiness of *y'all* as second-person plural. I also learned that students (and most of the general population) view writing differently than English teachers. We frequently look at form; they look at function and meaning. Mina Shaughnessy wonders, "how many readers are likely to have the same sensitivity to error as English teachers" (119). While we are busily reading the list of rules and cautions for use, most people are happily forging ahead, forgiving their mistakes. We all know those folks who have picture-perfect kitchens with the latest tools, tools that rarely see use. For too many of us, grammar rules—the tools of language—become ends in themselves. For the rest of the world, language and its grammar are there for meaning. To add to the confusion, English teachers define *grammar* in many different ways (see a discussion of this topic in Weaver 1–2). For the purpose of this dis-

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cussion, *grammar* means the syntactical choices writers and speakers make, including the punctuation necessary for written clarity.

In the '50s, Noam Chomsky suggested that linguistic systems are hardwired. Baugh and Cable reinforced this idea in the '90s: “knowledge of linguistic universals is part of the innate structure of the human brain . . . [and] study of language [is] ultimately rooted in the biology of the speaking animal” (327–28). While we may not be born with the grammatical patterns of our native language, early exposure to spoken language, combined with the plasticity of the young brain, makes acquiring language as natural and intuitive as learning to walk or ride a bike. As such, most speech is correct and natural. We understand that a “big red house” is different from a “red big house” and that, barring a jailhouse colloquialism, the first one sounds more natural and says what we mean. We know this without learning rules about order of adjectives. Native speakers learn their language through making generalizations and applying them. I remember my son as he learned to talk: “Mommy, Mommy, I runned faster than Daddy,” he’d say, applying the *-ed* rule from “walked” and “talked” to all past-tense verbs. Stephen Pinker states, “[n]euroimaging techniques suggest that regular and irregular forms [of verbs] may trigger different parts of the brain” (86), suggesting that our physical brains are, at least to some degree, hardwired.

Firmly imprinted in our brains, grammar comes naturally, and if written expression defies writing conventions, what is an English teacher to do? Studies show that there is little transfer from grammar exercises to writing. One 1962 study by Roland Harris took place in London with junior high students (Weaver 175). The second study, by Elley et al., explored grammar learning in thirteen-year-olds in New Zealand in 1976 (20–21). Both studies demonstrate that students who are taught grammar through a direct, traditional approach (i.e., worksheet, grammar textbook exercises, and so forth) do not show a significant difference in their ability to construct compositions. Don’t these formal studies only confirm what we, as English teachers, already know?

Indeed, from the results of these studies, some educators have concluded that traditional instruction is detrimental because it takes time away from activities that appear to be useful, such as writing

and reading. Weaver reports a more modest, informal study by Finlay McQuade in 1980 that found that, after taking an Editorial Skills class developed to “enhance students’ performance on the College Entrance Examination Board’s Achievement Test in Composition . . . [t]he class average on the pre-test was actually higher than the average on the post-test” (22–23). McQuade further concluded that because of the utter self-consciousness of the second set of essays in an effort to avoid grammatical errors, the post-Editorial Skills class essays were “miserable” (qtd. in Weaver 23).

With the results of these studies ringing in teachers’ heads, the temptation to desert teaching grammar altogether is great. Many have. OK, I confess. I have tried that, too. Teaching grammar, however, is necessary for many reasons.

Grammatical Correctness

We should teach grammar for the traditional reason: Grammar rules are fixed and must be learned because patterns of speech reflect education, class, even morality. Prescriptivist grammarians came onto the English scene in the eighteenth century, compelled to determine for the rest of the English-speaking world what was correct and incorrect in spoken and written language. At the same time, because of the rigid nature of their approach as well as prevalent social attitudes of the time, these grammarians equated correctness (adherence to established rules) with morality. Thomas Sheridan wrote in 1756, “‘a revival of the art of speaking, and the study of our language, might contribute, in a great measure,’ to the cure of ‘the evils of immorality, ignorance and false taste’” (qtd. in Baugh and Cable 270). Grammatical correctness provided a legitimate measure of a person’s character. Lest you were worried and missing the good old days, prescriptivists are alive and well, terrorizing first-year teachers in the teachers lounge. Indeed, I can tell which of my students are products of their classrooms. These students don’t write with any fewer errors than the others, but they’re convinced they are terrible at “grammar,” and they all hate English.

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Attitudes have not changed. Syntax, word choice, and punctuation affect how readers of students' writing perceive the students themselves. A 1981 study by Maxine Hairston demonstrated that this attitude continued for another two hundred years; we see evidence that it persists today. Hairston took sixty-five sentences with various errors and asked professional people to rate the mistakes based on their perception of the "seriousness" of the error (Noguchi 24–30). Her results support what our brief

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history of grammar reveals: We still view grammar and its rules with the same sense of inviolability that those in the eighteenth century did. This suggests an important, albeit superficial, reason to study grammar. When Amber says, "Miss, I ain't got no pencil," I don't correct her or cringe because I don't understand what

she means. I reveal the prevalent attitude when I acknowledge that she sounds uneducated to my linguistic ear (and secretly I wonder how her parents talk at home). Nor do we mistake the meaning of *ain't*. Social convention and status, equivalent to choosing to burp or not to burp at a formal dinner, dictate that we dare not send students into a world that views grammar and proper speech in this way without the necessary tools to succeed.

Rhetorical Grammar

Rules without purpose are meaningless. They do not stick, they are not remembered, they are not used. Learning to use grammar for rhetorical effect, to make stylistic decisions, is the second reason students should learn grammar.

Imagine being presented with a metal, box-like object, called a block plane. You are told to run it with the wood grain, to make sure the edge of the blade is parallel to a flat surface, to use even strokes, to keep the blade sharp. You still don't truly know how to use this tool without knowing that it is useful for making smooth, flat surfaces on a plank of wood or neatly rounding and softening hard, sharp corners of a wooden board. Yet we frequently expect students to understand grammatical rules without enlightening them as to their purpose. A

tool is what it does; its purpose is what makes it exist in the first place. Ultimately grammar is a tool used by writers to accomplish specific purposes. Only after using the block plane—watching perfect strips of walnut curl up in long, graceful spirals and feeling the precise, square, smooth surface left behind—can I understand and use a block plane effectively. Until then, it is a useless tool, taking up space in my shop.

Whether used self-consciously or intuitively, different techniques accomplish different objectives. Harry R. Noden explains the idea that grammar is an artist's tool: "writing is not constructed merely from experiences, information, characters or plots, but from fundamental artistic elements of grammar" (1). When we give students the stylistic tool of different kinds of grammatical constructions, we enable them to express ideas in artful ways. Martha Kolln, a strong proponent of traditional grammar, also advocates teaching rhetorical grammar "as a tool that enables the writer to make effective choices" (29).

Students deserve to learn these purposes and put grammar in their writing toolbox to make their written communication as effective as possible. Like any other device to help with cooking or cleaning, or a tool for a professional trade, grammatical tools will be used more effectively if we use them frequently and purposefully.

Language and Thought

The most important reason to teach grammar hits at the heart of what teachers hope to accomplish: to give students the tools by which to think with greater breadth and depth and act independently on those thoughts. Complex sentence structure and complex thought are mutually dependent; they are the chicken-and-egg conundrum of language. Lev Vygotsky in *Thought and Language* writes extensively on the interrelationship of thought and language. Unlike Piaget, who believed in the self-centeredness and isolation of a young child's thought and language development, Vygotsky declares, "[d]irected thought is social" (16) or related to communication. He further asserts that experience precedes and leads to thought, effectively linking thinking and social reality. Thought development is determined by language, and instruction precedes development. As we

develop writing and related areas such as grammar, we develop speech and thought.

Thought and language are inextricably linked, with language not only reflecting culture and experience but determining them as well. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis of language and culture both supports and allows us to extend and apply this idea. Through anthropological studies of many different cultures and language, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf determined that not only does experience dictate language and culture but language itself controls experiences as well. This hypothesis concludes that, through syntax and vocabulary, language drives and determines thought patterns almost totally. The linguistic and sometimes the cognitive interpretation of the physical world or the abstract concept of time is dictated by what the limitations of a specific language allow. Whorf writes that “[w]e dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. . . . [T]he world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds” (213). The linguistic systems of our native languages build, and sometimes limit, the neural pathways for our thoughts and logic.

Whorf demonstrates the effect of these hard-wired grammatical systems when he compares the Hopi language and English: “‘lightning, wave, flame, meteor, puff of smoke, pulsation’ are verbs—events of necessarily brief duration cannot be anything but verbs. . . . Hopi, you see, actually has a classification of events (or linguistic isolates) by duration type, something strange to our modes of thought” (215). Grammatical nouns or objects in one language are not necessarily so in another; however, the grammatical wiring in a native English-speaker’s brain interferes with his or her ability to grasp the Hopi’s sense of verbness.

Whorf writes that language sculpts thought: “It was found that the background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual’s mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade” (212).

As teachers we can draw two conclusions from this staggering information. The first is that if home,

society, media, and lack of printed literature limit students’ exposure to language, then they will also limit students’ capability for complex thought. If, on the other hand, we introduce students to ways to express themselves, language and grammar that are more complex, and sentence structures that inherently require more intricate thought patterns, then we not only allow them to express deeper ideas accurately, we also give them the tools to entertain those thoughts. As we provide students with the means to write in more elaborate ways, we also facilitate multifaceted interpretations and analyses of experience. We must push students into what Vygotsky called their “zone of proximal development” so that they can think and express deeper thoughts appropriately.

Unfortunately, schooling necessitates some linear teaching and educating en masse rather than solely on an individual basis. Students come to us at unique stages and with different capabilities. We have 25 or 150 students, and our lessons cannot target individuals as specifically as we would like. However, generic exercises are not the answer.

Teaching Grammar Differently

We must teach grammar, but we must teach it in a different way than in the past. An analogy is helpful at this point. I didn’t develop my hobby of being a furniture-maker overnight. Instead, I moved into a wonderful, old house that desperately needed work. Circumstances forced me to acquire, apply, and practice skills that I had never used before. One person gave me a table saw, another gave me a router, a third volunteered as my uncomplaining consultant, and I was unstoppable. I asked questions and read books to learn how I could make the house livable. At first renovations were amateur and minimal, but in using various skills over and over in different contexts I became adept at carpentry, and eventually those same abilities began to translate into creating real furniture: sleigh beds, dining-room tables, entertainment centers. The first time fixing up my home I did more wrong than right. I am on my second round of restorations now, but this time the remodels are something I am proud of.

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Grammar can be acquired in much the same way. Teachers expose students to different grammatical techniques, determining lessons based on needs they observe in student writing and making lessons memorable so that a skill becomes a part of the students' repertoire. While students might not be able to completely diagram a sentence from this exposure, or identify parts of speech on a worksheet, they become aware of the possibilities and store up tactics in their personal writing files, pulling them out more frequently as they become adept at increasingly complex thinking.

Brain research shows us how to make a stylistic grammar lesson striking and easier to recall. First the introduction must be novel, something that will impress itself on malleable brains. Change location. Use different materials. In addition, it should be fun because when a lesson involves the emotions, it engages the mind. Finally, and most important, it

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should be something that shows meaning rather than merely form. Remember, *y'all* won out over the comma and dependent clause. My students needed a plural form for second person; commas for introductory dependent clauses had not yet registered.

Instead of stopping at the minilesson on verbals, let students act out the possibilities of a participial phrase. After all, a participial phrase is perfect for showing that one actor can accomplish two actions at one time. It layers information. One student acting out two things at once demonstrates the potential. Then, can the students' writing accommodate more action?

This is not to say that technique should be introduced and then tucked away. Anyone who once received a food processor or waffle iron as a gift and then put it away knows how seldom the tool makes it back out to the countertop. Rhetorical grammar must reappear in the classroom frequently in varying contexts: apply the technique in warmups as writing at the beginning of class; revise a prior entry in their journal with the new tool; require exit slips (tickets out of the classroom that use the grammatical tool); practice revising (which can include re-

vising *any* writing); collect student samples as well as those of published writers on butcher-paper wall banners. Students can explore how professional writers use specific techniques in literature and compare them to their own. Awareness of a grammatical technique in a variety of contexts wears that particular brain pathway a little more deeply, making the writing tool easier to retrieve the next time the writer wishes to accomplish that specific stylistic purpose.

Before teachers of grammar can teach grammar differently, they must think differently and approach the subject analytically and pragmatically. Think through the function of a specific grammatical technique or objective. Remember that written and spoken language reflect experience, and think of what that experience or event is. What could a student do or witness that would allow for a natural use of your objective?

I must give you a final warning. The human brain can only hold and act on so much at one time. Noguchi writes that "the surge or grip of ideas sometimes proves strong enough to override the constraints of form" (73). Expect that as your students take risks and try new techniques, they will also make mistakes. Mina Shaughnessy in *Errors and Expectations* reports, "it is not unusual for people acquiring a skill to get 'worse' before they get better and for writers to err more as they venture more" (119). I noticed for years that middle school students seemed to leave dependent clauses as fragments in their writing, never realizing that it was because they had begun to have the complicated thoughts that require complex sentences but had not yet grown into the structure's conventional punctuation. Chelsea demonstrated this perfectly. I conferenced with her for a second time on a short story on which she had been working. It was her third draft, and I noticed that she had more punctuation mistakes, not fewer, in her writing.

Chelsea wanted to point out something else entirely. "Look, Miss. Look at all the participial phrases I fit into my story. I really like this one," she said proudly, pointing to a sentence that had a teenage girl screaming and running simultaneously. After a lesson on participial phrases and an adventure in a parking lot with sidewalk chalk and physical dramatization, she had certainly learned layering action using participial phrases; however, her sentence structure errors had increased dramatically. In fact,

the grammatical syntax of her first draft had a less than 10 percent error rate in her sentence structure. This increased to slightly over 20 percent in the third, edited draft. The complexity of thought and action in her subsequent draft had come at a cost. Experience has taught me that as Chelsea grows into her new talent, she will not only have more interesting ideas to express but she will have the ways to express them and will soon learn the correct punctuation, too.

When you first take the training wheels off a two-wheel bike, children fall. They are working so hard on balance that they don't watch where they are going and hit things. They forget how to work the brakes and can't stop. Writing is no different. Teach students grammar as a tool. But just like the kid who is popping wheelies in no time, your students will become adept at controlling and balancing their newfound writing skills and they will go places, in their heads and in their writing, that you never dreamed possible.

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Susan Losee Nunan has taught middle school, high school, and college in San Antonio, Texas. She currently teaches high school in Northside Independent School District. *email*: susanstre@aol.com.



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