

The Role of Grammar in Improving Student's Writing

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Grammar is the sound, structure, and meaning system of language. All languages have grammar, and each language has its own grammar. People who speak the same language are able to communicate because they intuitively know the grammar system of that language—that is, the rules of making meaning. Students who are native speakers of English already know English grammar. They recognize the sounds of English words, the meanings of those words, and the different ways of putting words together to make meaningful sentences.

However, while students may be effective speakers of English, they need guidance to become effective writers. They need to learn how to transfer their knowledge of grammatical concepts from oral language to written language.

Effective grammar instruction begins with what students already know about grammar, and it helps them use this knowledge as they write. By connecting their knowledge of oral language to written language, teachers can demystify abstract grammatical terminology so that students can write—and read—with greater competence and confidence.

What Does Research Say about Grammar and the Teaching of Writing?

Research strongly suggests that the most beneficial way of helping students improve their command of grammar in writing is to use students' writing as the basis for discussing grammatical concepts. Researchers agree that it is more effective to teach punctuation, sentence variety, and usage in the context of writing than to approach the topic by teaching isolated skills (Calkins, 1980; DiStefano and Killion, 1984; Harris, 1962).

As students revise and edit their writing, teachers can provide grammar instruction that guides students in their attempts to identify and correct problems in sentence structure and usage. For example, a teacher who sees that many students are writing sentences containing misplaced modifiers can present a mini-lesson on this concept, using examples from student writing. The teacher can have students edit their own and one another's drafts for this problem.

Integrating grammar instruction into the revising and editing process helps students make immediate applications, thus allowing them to see the relevance of grammar to their own writing.

To What Specific Aspects of Writing Does Grammar Contribute?

Because writing is a complex and challenging activity for many students, teachers should focus on the grammatical concepts that are essential for the clear communication of meaning.

Research conducted since the early 1960s shows that grammar instruction that is separate from writing instruction does not improve students' writing competence (Braddock and others, 1963; Hillocks, 1986). In addition, research indicates that the transfer of formal grammar instruction to writing is not applicable to larger elements of composition. Through detailed studies of students' writing, Shaughnessy (1977) concludes that the best grammar instruction is that which gives the greatest return for the least investment of time. Shaughnessy advocates four important grammatical concepts: the sentence, inflection, tense, and agreement. She recommends that teachers encourage students to examine grammatical errors in their own writing. She also cautions teachers not to overemphasize grammatical terminology to the detriment of students' ability to understand and apply the concepts.

Weaver (1998) proposes a similar approach to teaching grammar in the context of writing. She writes, "What all students need is guidance in understanding and applying those aspects of grammar that are most relevant to writing." Weaver proposes five grammatical concepts that enable writers to show improvement in sentence revision, style, and editing. (See chart below.)

A Minimum of Grammar for Maximum Benefits

1. Teaching concepts on subject, verb, sentence, clause, phrase, and related concepts for editing
2. Teaching style through sentence combining and sentence generating
3. Teaching sentence sense through the manipulation of syntactic elements
4. Teaching both the power of dialects and the dialects of power
5. Teaching punctuation and mechanics for convention, clarity, and style

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Rather than strive to teach all grammatical concepts to all students, teachers should prioritize and provide instruction on the grammatical elements that most affect their students' ability to write effectively. Teachers should also be sensitive to individual students' readiness to learn and apply grammatical concepts.

How Does Sentence Combining Improve Writing?

Sentence combining is the strategy of joining short sentences into longer, more complex sentences. As students engage in sentence-combining activities, they learn how to vary sentence structure in order to change meaning and style. Numerous studies (Mellon, 1969; O'Hare, 1973; Cooper, 1975; Shaughnessy, 1977; Hillocks, 1986; Strong, 1986) show that the use of sentence combining is an effective method for improving students' writing. The value of sentence combining is most evident as students recognize the effect of sentence variety (beginnings, lengths, complexities) in their own writing.

Hillocks (1986) states that "sentence combining practice provides writers with systematic knowledge of syntactic possibilities, the access to which allows them to sort through alternatives in their heads as well as on paper and to choose those which are most apt" (150). Research also shows that sentence combining is more effective than free writing in enhancing the quality of student writing (Hillocks, 1986).

Hillocks and Smith (1991) show that systematic practice in sentence combining can increase students' knowledge of syntactic structures as well as improve the quality of their sentences, particularly when stylistic effects are discussed as well. Sentence-combining exercises can be either written or oral, structured or unstructured. Structured sentence-combining exercises give students more guidance in ways to create the new sentences; unstructured sentence-combining exercises allow for more variation, but they still require students to create logical, meaningful sentences. Hillocks (1986) reports that in many studies, sentence-combining exercises produce significant increases in students' sentence-writing maturity.

Given Noguchi's (1991) analysis that grammar choices affect writing style, sentence combining is an effective method for helping students develop fluency and variety in their own writing style. Students can explore sentence variety, length, parallelism, and other syntactic devices by comparing their sentences with sentences from other writers. They also discover the decisions writers make in revising for style and effect.

Teachers can design their own sentence-combining activities by using short sentences from student writing or other appropriate sources. For example, teachers who notice many choppy sentences in students' writing can place these sentences on an overhead for all their students to read. Teachers can then ask different students to combine orally the short sentences in a variety of ways.

By participating in oral and written sentence-combining activities, students better understand the ways in which sentence structure, usage, and punctuation affect meaning.

When presented as a revising strategy, sentence-combining activities help students identify short, choppy sentences in their own writing, leading them to combine their ideas in more fluid and sophisticated ways. As students generate more complex sentences from shorter ones, they discover how the arrangement of phrases and clauses, for example, affects meaning and its impact on their readers.

What Strategies Can Teachers Use to Teach Grammar in the Context of Writing?

Grammar instruction is most naturally integrated during the revising, editing, and proofreading phases of the writing process. After students have written their first drafts and feel comfortable with the ideas and organization of their writing, teachers may wish to employ various strategies to help students see grammatical concepts as language choices that can enhance their writing purpose. Students will soon grow more receptive to revising, editing, and proofreading their writing. In writing conferences, for example, teachers can help students revise for effective word choices. As the teacher and student discuss the real audience(s) for the writing, the teacher can ask the student to consider how formal or informal the writing should be, and remind the student that all people adjust the level of formality in oral conversation, depending on their listeners and the speaking context. The teacher can then help the student identify words in his or her writing that change the level of formality of the writing.

To help students revise boring, monotonous sentences, teachers might ask students to read their writing aloud to partners. This strategy helps both the partner and the writer to recognize when, for example, too many sentences begin with "It is" or "There are." Both the partner and the writer can discuss ways to vary the sentence beginnings. After the writer revises the sentences, the partner can read the sentences aloud. Then both can discuss the effectiveness of the revision.

Teachers can help students edit from passive voice to active voice by presenting a mini lesson. In editing groups, students can exchange papers and look for verbs that often signal the passive voice, such as was and been. When students find these verbs, they read the sentence aloud to their partners and discuss whether the voice is passive and, if so, whether an active voice verb might strengthen the sentence. The student writer can then decide which voice is most effective and appropriate for the writing purpose and audience.

Teachers can help students become better proofreaders through peer editing groups. Based on the writing abilities of their students, teachers can assign different proofreading tasks to specific individuals in each group. For example, one person in the group might proofread for spelling errors, another person for agreement errors, another person for fragments and run-ons, and another person for punctuation errors. As students develop increasing skill in proofreading, they become responsible for more proofreading areas. Collaborating with classmates in peer editing groups helps students improve their own grammar skills as well as understand the importance of grammar as a tool for effective communication.

As teachers integrate grammar instruction with writing instruction, they should use the grammar terms that make sense to the students. By incorporating grammar terms naturally into the processes of revising, editing, and proofreading, teachers help students understand and apply grammar purposefully to their own writing. Strategies such as writing conferences, partnership writing, grammar mini-lessons, and peer response groups are all valuable methods for integrating grammar into writing instruction.

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