

**"It Comes out Weird to Me:"  
Perspectives on Grammar and Writing**

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**ABSTRACT.** In a very practical way, grammar is the foundation that speakers and writers rely on to communicate. The integration of grammar and writing instruction in classrooms is essential for building students' awareness of the numerous ways in which they can use language. By teaching students how to use their words and their ideas to create writing for readers to enjoy, teachers encourage students to use their abilities freely. Through this teacher-researcher project, the question of how grammar and writing instruction assists or hinders students' writing skills was studied. Based on interviews, a brief survey, and examples of students' writing, it was found that the students wanted more practical assistance in writing and grammar. The implications for teaching grammar at the high school level are discussed.

For over 70 years, language arts teachers have been concerned with the issues of grammar and writing instruction. This concern was completely justified based on students' writing, which was often lacking in coherency and grammatical structure. Fortunately, teachers and other professionals realize today that the traditional, humdrum grammar and writing lessons have not affected either students' written work or their speech. They realize that changes are needed in these areas to make it possible for students to express themselves more proficiently.

Through working with a language arts teacher as part of the teacher-researcher project in my educational psychology class, I became quite interested in the relationship between grammar and writing instruction, and the effect that it has on students' written work. I wanted to know if the students were absorbing the lessons, if they were utilizing the information, and if they were even considering this issue at all.

In this paper I will discuss the students' attitudes toward grammar and writing instruction in the language arts class that I studied. Moreover, I will suggest a possible link between these students' writing skills and the dilemma of providing grammar and writing instruction in classrooms today. The question I examined was: Should grammar and/or writing be taught, and if so, how?

### The Controversy

Teachers often make a distinct separation between grammar and writing instruction. This results in a deficiency in students' writing skills. Both grammar and writing instruction are held in opposition. These two foes could, collectively, be helpful partners to students if they were not perceived as mutually exclusive. Linda Cleary eloquently expressed the significance of writing. She said: "Writing is an extension of language that is valued by our society" (1975, p. 1073). Not only is language a precious gift, but the ability to extend it is as well.

Writing and speaking are examples of language extension. And the magnificent beauty of these extensions is the way they can be expressed. It is an author's or speaker's creative and individual combination of words that captures readers' attention so that the author's or speaker's intentions can be appreciated and understood. Students should not fear writing; they should consider it a great adventure of thoughts through words. In our society we read magazines, novels, essays, journals, newspapers, and a variety of other texts for enjoyment and information. All of these written materials are in some structured form. The words, sentences, and paragraphs are all combined so that readers will be able to understand the meaning of the written work.

I believe that many English teachers fear that students' creativity will be stifled if grammar is mentioned during writing instruction. In the classroom, students are taught to write expressively for the purpose of the teacher evaluating it. But there is a wide spectrum of styles that students are not aware of. For students to be able to write well, a firm understanding of grammar and writing principles is necessary. As Constance Weaver said:

Writing is a way of coming to know, an interaction with one's own thoughts and emotions; it is also a way of communicating ... and finally a way to shape one's perceptions and understandings. Beginning writers seem to operate under the assumption that the purpose of writing is to express ideas for the writer's own satisfaction ... this expressive function is a natural consequence of children's egocentrism ... the child is primarily concerned with expressing his

or her own meaning, and automatically expects this meaning to be understood (1979, p. 56).

It is important for students and teachers to understand that writing can be used appropriately for private or social expression. Furthermore, by understanding that structure in writing only enhances its expression, it allows students to appreciate a variety of creative ways for expressing themselves through writing. In essence, the breakdown between the instruction of writing and grammatical techniques has been the breakdown in students' writing skills.

## **Method**

### **The School**

The Florida State University School is a model laboratory school which, as my teacher researcher quoted from a pamphlet describing the school, "develops and tests educational innovations to benefit the public schools throughout the state of Florida." The school provides the Florida State College of Education with a place for creating, testing, and refining both old and new ideas. These ideas can be disseminated on a wide basis, since the diverse student population is selected to be representative of the student population in the state.

Throughout their educational experience at the University School, students participate in a variety of strategy-oriented curricula that provide a more holistic learning environment. Elementary, middle, and high school students experience different teaching strategies that prepare them for the future. In addition, the faculty, administrators, parents, and students are actively involved in programs that support and develop useful skills.

### **The Language Arts Department**

The language arts department at the University School has formulated its own attitudes and structuring principles to enhance students' language arts experiences. For example, heterogeneous grouping and student seating choices are primary strategies used to increase diversity within the classroom structure.

Students have an array of uniquely developed literature classes to choose from. My teacher researcher taught Rock Music and Poetry as one example. This class gave both the teacher and the students an opportunity to engage in enjoyable and practical learning. The students and the teacher learned that by listening to, talking about, and analyzing current songs, an appreciation of various genres is necessary for understanding literature.

Aside from creating a diverse learning environment for their students, teachers in the language arts department developed a specific grammar and writing methodology. The teachers placed their energy on having students produce written material. The teaching of grammar did not comprise a substantial part of the English curriculum. As deficiencies are noted in students' work, the students meet with the teachers. However, the approach varies among the teachers. My teacher researcher discussed students' deficiencies through writing conferences. These talks enabled him to focus on the problems and provided a forum for students to seek assistance.

### **The Classroom**

I observed a combined sophomore and junior English classroom. The classroom was informally structured; the atmosphere was very casual. Daily assignments were written on the board for the students' benefit. Talking was also permitted as long as it was kept to a minimum. Overall, the mood in the classroom was such that the students could relax, have fun, participate in enjoyable talk, and respect each other's freedom.

The students defined the classroom setting through their seating arrangements. The juniors sat on the left side and the sophomores sat on the right. Furthermore, the female students sat at the front/middle of the room while the males sat in the outer seats and in the back. This arrangement demonstrated their expectations of themselves and of their fellow students, and it illustrated their freedom to decide and create their own structure.

### **The Observations**

Initially I observed four different classes that my teacher researcher taught. However, I narrowed my choice by selecting the class that was more culturally diverse and had an equal number of male and female students. I observed this class three or four times a week, noting specific interactions between the students and between the students and teacher. In addition, I made notes regarding how the teacher handled questions, conflicts, and disruptions.

I observed these areas until I developed my research question. As I focused my topic for research, I modified my observations to focus on students' reactions to grammar exercises, grades, and writing assignments. At that point I decided to use interviews, a short survey, and student essays to provide more information about these issues. I also spoke informally with the teacher and several students to learn their perspectives on grammar and writing instruction. These informal interviews helped me focus my interview and survey questions.

### Students' Attitudes

As I began my research, I requested samples of the students' written work. I wanted to obtain an idea of what was expected of tenth and eleventh grade writers. I expected to read fairly coherent essays. Unfortunately, I was extremely surprised by them. I could not believe that tenth and eleventh grade students composed them. Seventy percent of the essays were not coherent at all. The other thirty percent had themes but no structure; it was difficult reading. The errors ranged from lack of theme, illogical event order, and subject/verb disagreement to run-on sentences. The errors were quite severe; yet, the majority of the essays were rated satisfactory or better than average.

As a result, I conferred with my teacher researcher. I expressed my concerns regarding the students' writing abilities. He explained that he did not believe students should be limited in writing, nor did he think that heavy emphasis should be placed on "correctness" too early because writing is an ongoing process. This explanation did not alleviate my concerns because I felt that the students did not realize their deficiencies.

To learn how the students felt about their writing I conducted a brief survey. I asked general questions regarding their interests in school and learning, and four specific questions regarding their thoughts about the writing process and writing instruction. The questions I asked are given in Table 1.

The students' responses to the survey were basically what I had expected. The majority of the students responded with feelings of insecurity and confusion about their writing. One student responded to question 6 by writing, "I feel lost and I know what I want to say, but it comes out weird to me." Another student answered the same question by stating: "I never remember how to use the right punctuation because it never seems like it's the same stuff in the book." Most of the students responded in a similar fashion to this question.

I then interviewed several students to gain more insight into their survey responses. Again, most of the students felt as if their writing could be better but they did not feel they were receiving any support that would enhance it. Several students were frustrated because they felt they did not receive enough feedback that would assist them in improving their writing. Most of the students' writing was deemed acceptable by the teacher even though the students themselves found it to be illogical. In fairness to my teacher researcher, I see the lack of guidance in writing and grammatical structure as a problem in the whole language approach to writing, and not as just his problem. He was following a method that I believe has

Table 1  
*Survey Questions for Students*

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1. What class did you enjoy the most and why?
  2. What do you consider "writing" to be?
  3. When do you find it enjoyable to write?
  4. Imagine that you are a reporter and you have an opportunity to write a story. What would your story be about?
  5. If you could stay in one class all day what would it be?
  6. Do you feel confident when you write in class?
  7. Do you understand the writing process? (e.g., developing ideas)
  8. Would you like to have more instruction in writing?
  9. What would you need to know about writing to make you feel more confident when writing?
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gone too far in not acknowledging the importance of giving students more structure in writing. My belief about this issue as an African-American researcher is similar to the position taken by Delpit (1986), who argued that the whole language movement has had a detrimental effect on minority students' writing skills because they lacked the opportunities to acquire these skills in places other than schools.

During the interview, I let each of the students review one of their essays. I found that most of them, after examining it, were not pleased with their work and asked for suggestions. They realized that they rarely thought about what they wanted to say or how they wanted to say it in their papers. Basically the students were confused and wanted to learn how to approach writing differently.

### **Improving Students' Writing**

Because of what I learned from the survey and interviews, I devised an exercise to help them understand the writing process more clearly. The students played the persuasion game which mirrored the writing process. The students were put into six groups and given a sheet that they were to use to build and organize

their arguments. Each group chose a piece of paper with a statement on it. The object of the game was that students had to develop arguments to support their statement. Regardless of how unusual their topic was, they had to present it and persuade the rest of the class into believing it. By the time the teams were finished, each student had a list of arguments and reasons to support his/her topic that would be used as supporting ideas in an essay each student had to write.

I reviewed these essays and compared them to the students' past work. These essays were more logical and intelligible. By having done just this one exercise, I observed an improvement in the students' work. Incidentally, the creative ideas that each group proposed as arguments were incorporated into their essays and logically structured.

Just as I had developed the persuasion game, other creative ideas could be used as vehicles to teach students grammar and structure in writing. I shared the results of my research with my teacher researcher to assist him in planning more effective instruction to help students appreciate the many writing styles available.

### Conclusion

Through my experiences in this class, I concluded that students need more structured guidance in writing. Through teachers' facilitation of grammar and writing instruction, students can learn to express themselves more proficiently. Should grammar and writing be taught? I believe they should. However, English teachers should revise their methods of instruction to provide students with a broader knowledge of our language. The narrow perspective that writing is only a free expression of ideas limits students from becoming more mature writers and contributes to their lack of appreciation for language. Kirby and Liner (1988) stated that "Teachers are often afraid of teaching writing because they don't know enough about how writing is done to teach it effectively" (p. 11). This fear experienced by teachers transmits negative feelings to students about how they can use language more effectively.

The dreadful monotony of grammar lessons can be alleviated through game-oriented activities. As a result, the wonder of learning how words and ideas can be used to create informative papers, thrilling stories, personal prose, dignified speeches, and movie scripts is often missed. Sedley (1990) defined the use of grammar as "... something like a set of blueprints for building a structure. The words that you know are simply the bricks, boards, or other building materials" (p. 1). With this blueprint, students will become more proficient and creatively expressive with their thoughts and opinions.

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