Using Freshman Composition to Analyze What Students Really Know About Grammar

“They should have learned that stuff in high school” is the lament of many freshman English instructors. Unfortunately, however, many students don’t come to college with an understanding of grammar as a tool for writing Standard English. In this study the author takes a clear-eyed look at the problem of untaught and unlearned grammatical skills and suggests some ways to tackle this predicament.

Matthew Teorey

Although the linguistic community rejected the prescriptivist approach to grammar instruction nearly one hundred years ago, many college teachers of freshman composition, myself included, seem reluctant to reject this approach completely. As a post-modern college instructor of freshman English, I resist using an outdated, rule-centered approach to teaching grammar. However, like many other instructors, I cannot rid myself of certain prescriptivist assumptions about my students. Even after years of teaching, I have come to realize that I begin each semester with the expectation that either my students already know how to use grammar correctly or they can and will use the handbook I provide to teach themselves the grammar rules and conventions they need to know. This assumption frees me to focus my teaching almost entirely on critical thinking and writing strategies. As it turns out, none of the handbooks, high school English classes, or cryptic symbols that we teachers have scrawled in the margins of student papers has done the job. Many grammatical errors still appear in my students’ papers.

Recently I have begun to reassess my approach to grammar. For several frustrating years, I looked at my students and wondered why they were making so many simple grammatical errors and why they were not improving during the semester. Then I realized that while I needed to understand their deficiencies, I also needed to examine my own expectations. To understand the level of grammar competency my students have entering my classroom, I decided to conduct a study of how they approach grammatical errors and compare the results to my expectations of them. I hoped that once I understood what I expected from my students, how far from my expectations their abilities actually were, I could construct a teaching method that would address my students’ actual skills and needs. By doing this I would begin to find my way out of a pedagogical dilemma. Simply put, the dilemma is this: I and many other composition instructors have rejected using a prescriptive approach to grammar instruction in our classrooms. However, at the same time, we seem reluctant to reject the niceties of Standard English. We just don’t think it should be our job to teach them. We assume that high school teachers still spend a substantial amount of class time teaching the grammatical terms and rules of Standard English to prepare their students for our classes. We begin each semester holding on to the shaky belief that almost every student has a relatively solid grammatical foundation. Unfortunately many students lack a clear understanding of how Standard English works. Unaware of the terminology, they struggle to understand and correct the many “frag” and “parallelism” notations on their papers. The gap between a teacher’s expectation and the student’s reality creates the troubling perception that although knowing Standard English grammar is essential, only an essay’s content, authorial voice,
What Students Really Know About Grammar

and audience are worth class time—and, by implication, the students’ full attention.

Since I started teaching composition in 1997, I have noticed an increasing number of college freshmen in my classes who struggle, and often fail, to use Standard English in ways that professional people consider appropriate or grammatical. Furthermore, most of the students entering my classes and my colleagues’ classes do not understand and cannot explain how Standard English grammar functions, which limits their ability to compose acceptable essays, proofread their work, and review their peers’ writing. For example, if I ask a student to explain why a sentence with a comma splice in a classmate’s paper is ungrammatical, the student often either does not think it is ungrammatical, cannot answer, or says, “the sentence just doesn’t sound right.” A goal of the work I report on here is to identify the percentage of my students who do not know what sentences are ungrammatical and what percentage rely on problematic approaches, like “it just doesn’t sound right,” in the identification and resolution of grammatical errors.

One reason my research may be useful is that it challenges the assumption some instructors make that students can and do use prescriptive grammar handbooks on their own to learn the rules and apply those rules to their essays. In an effort to prepare students to communicate in ways that professional people will respect, some instructors circumvent the linguistic community’s distaste for the prescriptive approach by forcing students to use a grammar handbook instead of teaching grammar rules and conventions in class. Their covert reliance on a prescriptive approach allows instructors to spend most of their class time on content issues, ignoring grammar except when grading papers. When we refer grammatical questions and problems to a handbook, the appropriate use of Standard English seems a proofreading afterthought, a minor element of style, or an inferior annoyance that can cost the student an A, but one that is ultimately unattached to a composition’s content. Further, students who conscientiously peruse the handbook to find solutions to grammatical problems become frustrated when the handbook does not adequately explain why their teachers wrote “awk” or “coherence” and similar terse comments in the margins of their essays. I believe it’s time to drop the facade of social and linguistic progressiveness and develop useful approaches of teaching grammar in the classroom instead of transferring that responsibility onto confused students and prescriptive handbooks.

Although I have been told by more experienced instructors that students can and do use the handbook, I have noticed that my students rarely use these books to teach themselves the rules or to transfer those rules to their writing. Most of them refuse to use the handbook even if I give them a page number to refer to. They often complain that the handbook is useless and, at the end of the semester, they sell it back to the bookstore, often unopened.

Many instructors do little, if anything, to connect what is in the handbook to their students’ essays. This lack of connection grows from what they see as seemingly opposing demands. On the one hand, the university expects its teachers to provide students a liberal education; on the other hand, the business world expects teachers to teach students to become corporate-minded writers. This leads to a situation in which we validate proper grammatical usage in our comments on students’ papers and our grades, while at the same time we denigrate the prescriptive approach, agreeing with the linguistic community’s claims that such an approach only validates the oppressive nature of our capitalist, patriarchal society. Instructors do not want to reinforce the presumption that the upper-middle-class Eurocentric language shaping our social, political, economic, and cultural life is superior. But instructors also realize that the employers in the professional world, and many of the students themselves, believe that the only way to enter and succeed in that world is to learn and follow the existing conventions of Standard English. So the message many instructors send out to their students is one that misinforms and confuses by simultaneously encouraging respect for the dominant discourse and devaluing its rules as oppressive constructs or as minor proofreading chores that occur outside of class. Students seem to want one or the other or both. In a typical semester, some of my students ask me to help them find their authentic voice in their writing while others demand that I do nothing more than teach them the rules of Standard English so they can become a successful part of the corporate hierarchy. Although I would not choose the latter as a goal for myself, I must realize that the students will be entering a culture that does not care how or why English privileges the writer who is white, male, and financially successful.

Until recently I began every semester hoping and believing my students already understood—or could come to understand with the help of the handbook—the basic grammatical conventions of
What Students Really Know About Grammar

Standard English. I had not resolved the paradox of needing but despising a prescriptive approach. As a result, by the end of each semester, my students' critical thinking skills had developed significantly, but their grammar had improved only slightly, if at all. Owning up to this situation, I decided to try to understand why so many students were struggling to compose appropriate sentences of Standard English and why my approach to teaching (or not teaching) grammar was not helping them. I devised a study to document the problem.

Method

I performed this study on two freshman composition classes at the University of New Mexico. The thirty-four respondents represented a typical cross section of college freshmen, including a diverse mixture of races, genders, and social classes. I gave these two classes a paragraph with a few common grammatical errors that all composition instructors see: sentence fragments, a comma splice, and a fused sentence. I arranged the sentences into a coherent paragraph to approximate the students' proofreading process with an essay instead of giving them single sentences of unrelated content. Each student brought his or her handbook to class the day of the study, and I asked students to use the handbook to help them correct the sentences. In fact, the comma splice was taken directly from an example in the "comma splice" section of the students' handbook (the 2002 edition of the Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers), which also provides a corrected sentence for that example. The other errors in the study resembled examples given in the handbook.

Above the paragraph, I provided written instructions. I first asked students to find any sentence that has an error and rewrite the sentence correctly. I did not provide any instruction about what kinds of grammatical errors to look for. Then I asked them to explain how and why they fixed each error. Finally, I asked them to write the page number of the handbook they used to identify and correct the error or state that they did not use the handbook. After completing the test, I told them which sentences were wrong, and I named the errors (I wrote the paragraph on the blackboard and wrote "frag" next to sentences 2 and 7, "comma splice" next to sentence 3, and "fused" next to 5). I gave them a new test and asked them to repeat the process of correcting the incorrect sentences and explaining how and why they fixed each error. I told them they could use the handbook if they wished, and again I asked them to cite the handbook's page numbers they used.

The first paragraph was written as follows:

Sometimes young students struggle for acceptance among their judgmental, cliquish peers. (1) Since they do not want to be excluded from the group, (2) They often treat other outcasts unkindly, the "in" crowd exerts a lot of peer pressure. (3) Unkind behavior sometimes begins in grade school. (4) Taunts from classmates may harm grade school students if teachers don't intervene the youngsters might even think the ridicule is deserved. (5) These students may begin to hate themselves. (6) The kids society thinks are nerds or dorks (7).

Results

My modest study illustrated what I had already expected: that although many students successfully use their intuitive knowledge of English as native speakers to recognize and correct some basic grammatical errors, they overlook others and even create new errors while editing their work. Certainly students are intelligent and, as Noam Chomsky has asserted, they have linguistic competence even without all the rules and terms at their disposal. However, I have found that when students rely solely on their intuition, problems arise in their ability to recognize the errors, correct the errors, and communicate why particular corrections are necessary.

One of the problems the study revealed is that although many students recognize basic grammatical errors and fix them correctly, many students either do not notice all of the sentences that have errors or they think that some correct sentences are incorrect. Because the sentences in my study and the errors in them were basic ones, I was concerned when half of respondents did not identify all four errors and more than a quarter of them did not identify more than two errors. It is also significant that half of the respondents identified at least one correct sentence as incorrect. Several of the respondents that identified the four incorrect sentences identified at least one correct sentence as incorrect, often creating a grammatical error where none had previously existed.

Only a few students were able to explain why these simple errors are considered inappropriate and why they fixed the errors in the way they did. Most did not use the correct grammatical terms, either identifying the errors without explaining them or simply stating that the sentences "don't sound right." It is certainly problematic for students to rely entirely on
their intuition as native speakers as criteria for finding a sentence with an error when proofreading. As they begin to write sentences and deal with concepts that are more complex, they will have even more trouble determining which sentences do not “flow right” or “sound right” and fixing them correctly.

A second problem my study revealed is that even when students identify an incorrect sentence, they often either fix the error incorrectly or they create a new error when fixing the original one. Although identifying incorrect sentences is important, rewriting them correctly is equally important. In my study, a significant percentage of the respondents who identified incorrect sentences either could not fix the error, fixed the error incorrectly, or created a new error when they revised the sentence. For example, several respondents rewrote sentence 3 without fixing the comma splice, creating sentences like: “The in crowd exerts a lot of peer pressure, they often treat other outcasts unkindly.” Several respondents converted the errors in sentence 5 from a fused sentence to a comma splice, creating sentences like: “Taunts from classmates may harm grade school students, if teachers don’t intervene the youngsters might even think the ridicule is deserved.” and “Taunts from classmates may harm grade school students if teachers don’t intervene, the youngsters might even think the ridicule is deserved.”

In addition, even when the respondents were told what the errors were, only half of the respondents revised the incorrect sentences correctly, and even fewer could or would use their handbook to help them. In fact, when told what the errors were and asked to use the handbook, less than one in five used the handbook and almost none used the handbook productively or correctly. Because many students do not understand, in grammatical terms, why even simple sentences like these are incorrect, they could not fix the error, and they did not know where to look in the handbook for help. Moreover, if the students do not understand, in larger terms, the rules of Standard English and how these rules function in the context of their writing, they unwittingly make new errors as they struggle to correct the original ones.

As instructors, we must realize that because many students are unfamiliar with the grammar rules and do not understand how to fix the error beyond attempting to make it “sound right,” the handbooks and our comments on their papers are often useless. Without understanding the rules for a correct sentence or knowing how to apply the terms in the handbook to their essays, the students’ writing skills will not improve.

**Solutions**

The current approach to grammar by many English instructors fails the students. The prescriptive approach may be outdated, but instructors of freshman composition have not replaced it with another approach that teaches grammar in a meaningful way. While I do not suggest that we return to prescriptive teaching, I do believe we need to acknowledge that many instructors of freshman composition consciously or unconsciously still believe that students need to take a prescriptive approach to succeed as writers and as professionals in the larger society. Many instructors do not teach students to understand why their intuition as a native speaker of English causes them to notice certain “incorrect” sentences but not notice others, nor are they effectively teaching students how to fix errors. Since we continue to grade our students’ use of grammar, we must, instead of shifting responsibility onto the students and the handbooks, actively reconnect grammar to the students’ compositions.

First, college instructors must not assume that their students have mastered the fundamentals of grammar and usage. We must do more than just tell our students, “Look on page eighty-five in the handbook to fix that sentence fragment.” I have found success presenting minilessons on single grammatical problems. Grammar games or contests—such as grammatical bingo—often help transform a dry lecture into active participation. The students sometimes feel the lesson is more relevant, interesting, and “real” when I use paragraphs they have volunteered from their own writing, articles from the school newspaper, or sections I have recovered from my own undergraduate writing. I have found that lessons that are brief, fun, and topical will make grammar less of a chore and more relevant to the students’ writing.
What Students Really  
Know About Grammar  

continued from page 5  

Second, if we expect our students to use a handbook, we should teach them how to use it. I have begun to use the handbook while I am having conferences with students. Instead of ignoring a grammatical error or fixing it for the student, we discuss the error and use the handbook together to solve it. The handbook can be an effective resource if the students know how to access the information in it. Once English instructors recognize and compensate for the limitations of the handbook as a self-teaching tool, students will begin to feel more comfortable addressing grammatical problems and find more success solving them.

Finally, rather than dismissing correct usage of Standard English as a tool to subjugate the masses, we should celebrate it as a tool that will open doors for our students. Grammatical correctness will provide access to our capitalistic society, but it will also help students add their voices to our society’s intellectual discourses and encourage them to strive confidently toward higher levels of critical or social analyses. Writing strategy and content need not be divorced from grammar. English instructors can incorporate the students’ intuitive skills into their compositions by comparing their writing to “acceptable” examples and by spending more time analyzing why and how they write and speak the way that they do. Grammar is still important, and teaching it should not be avoided, reassigned, or dismissed. We need not be prescriptivists, but let us not pretend that we have progressed beyond this approach when we expect the high schools, the handbooks, and the students themselves to teach the students the rules and conventions of Standard English.

References  

Matthew Teorey teaches freshman composition in the Department of English Language and Literature, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.