

Issues of Grammar and Correctness

Approaching writing as process allows students to focus on and strengthen their own editing and revision skills. What are some common issues with grammar and correctness, and strategies that encourage students to deal with them?

Eliminating errors in student writing is a slow and difficult process. The old model practiced by writing teachers was premised on teaching formal grammar through workbook exercises that focused on issues like punctuation, usage or sentence construction. A landmark research in composition studies by Braddock et al (1963) concluded that teaching grammar however, does not improve writing, and profoundly influenced the emergence of the 'process movement' in teaching writing.

1. Approaching Grammar

"Knowing Grammar" can be distinguished into "knowing how" and "knowing about." While the former refers to the preconscious internalization of rules that native speakers learn as toddlers, the latter refers to the knowledge of a conscious nomenclature for describing and analyzing the structural features of language. In other words, it is like the difference between throwing a curve ball and being able to explain the physics of a ball's motion!

Assignment 1: Flobbing sallably, glotty yofs sambolated in the wickersnacks.

What were the yofs doing?

Were the yofs norgy or glotty?

Do we have one yof or more than one?

Can you identify the adjective or the participial phrase?

Assignment 2: Explain to a non-native speaker when English speakers use the articles a, an and the in front of nouns and when they don't.

Consider: Here is a cookie. Here is the cookie. Where are the cookies? I think I smell cookies. I like sugar. He brought the sugar.

Can you frame the rules of usage?

Five meanings of Grammar

- a. Grammar 1: The "grammar in our heads" that allows us to talk, hear with comprehension, read and write.
 - b. Grammar 2: The scientific attempts to understand and describe the preconscious rules of grammar 1 by linguists.
 - c. Grammar 3: The grammar of linguistic etiquette (usages like "ain't," "brung," "he don't") that signal class or social distinctions. "He brung the luggage."
 - d. Grammar 4: Traditional school grammar with little explanatory power as grammar 2 and largely used in the service of grammar 3.
 - e. Grammar 5: Stylistic grammar that studies language beyond the sentence level and is concerned with matters of coherence, gracefulness and rhetorical effectiveness.
- The ability to use language flexibly and fluently is a function of grammar 1 which requires participating in a rich language environment and is independent of our ability to describe language with grammar 2 or grammar 4 concepts and terms.
- The common meaning of the concept of "bad grammar" ("he brung it") has little to do with grammar itself but is concerned with conformity to social conventions. It is a usage matter than a grammar matter.

The Politics of Grammar and Usage

a. Nonstandard dialects and prestige dialects: Where is "he brung the luggage" appropriate usage?

b. Identity and usage: Asserting roots; gauging status.

c. Empowering choice: Avoiding unintentional errors in any dialect of usage.

The role of grammar 3 and grammar 5: For academic, business or professional writing where audiences expect “standard edited English.”

2. The Problem of Error

- There are consistencies in types and frequency of errors across time, but differences in the kinds of errors observed.
- There are many more correct sentences than flawed ones in actual overall count of errors. Teachers often read student writing with the purpose of finding errors; hence the perception of error is often shaped by our psychology of reading.
- The kinds of errors that bother readers vary widely. (Can you name a few that bother you?)
- Many student errors result from inattentive editing and proofreading and if given a chance to revise, students correct them.
- When asked to read their drafts aloud, students unconsciously correct many of their mistakes.
- Student errors are systematic and classifiable.
- Errors increase with greater cognitive difficulty of the assignment.
- Errors disappear as a student progresses through multiple drafts!
- Teachers can expect to see sentence problems in first drafts and essay exams.
- Traditional procedures for grading and marking (red ink circles) can exacerbate the problem.

3. Strategies

a. Help students appreciate that unintentional sentence-level errors will harm the rhetorical effectiveness of their writing.

- i. Status-marking errors
- ii. Very serious errors
- iii. Serious errors
- iv. Accent errors

Assignment 3: Mark the student Writing Sample Handout 1 for errors. Distinguish between different meanings of grammars and classify the errors you notice.

b. Shift commenting strategy from editing-oriented comments to revision-oriented comments.

Assignment 4: Consider Writing Sample Handout 2. How would you comment on it if you were making editing-oriented comments? Consider Writing Sample Handout 3. How would you comment on it if you were making revision-oriented comments?

References:

Bean, John. 2011. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.