ERRORS AS DISCOVERIES: AN ASSIGNMENT FOR PROSPECTIVE ENGLISH TEACHERS

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In 1963, the now famous report by Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer was, supposedly, the death-knell for the role of grammar in teaching writing. The oft-quoted summary of these researchers' finding is, "The teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing" (37–8). One might think that for most classroom teachers this report had pronounced the end of the teaching of grammar. On the contrary, for the last seven years in an upper division grammar course where I have taught prospective English teachers bound for secondary classrooms, I have found that these students still expect to teach grammar to their classes, and furthermore, they believe grammar will be central to their courses.[1]

By *grammar* these students do not mean "the capacity for language" which is innate to humans (Hartwell's grammar number 1, 111); nor do they perceive grammar as systems to describe language use (Hartwell's grammar number 2, 114). Instead, the prospective teachers arrive in class with two more common definitions of grammar: first, that grammar is Standard Edited English (SEE) or "traditional schoolroom grammar" (Hartwell's grammar number 4, 119) which covers punctuation and mechanics, and that second, grammar consists of rules which help writers produce "correct" "usage" (Hartwell's grammar number 3, 110). And for these students, usage means using the right word, such as *lie* versus *lay* or avoiding substandard or even informal English, and in order to become educated only this one cloak can be the right dress for language; anything else is not *de rigueur*.

As a result, these future teachers tend to believe that the rules in handbooks are inviolable; they think that only one "dialect" (SEE) is accepted; they expect to provide their students with this one "correct way" to "do" sentences; and on their students' papers, they plan to ferret out errors based on SEE.

I wanted to help these prospective teachers dispel their dichotomous approach to language, gain a sense that more than one dialect (SEE) could be accepted, and understand that the variations from the handbook rules ("errors") might even be rhetorically based. So I asked them to complete an assignment which is based on three core principles. First, I will briefly summarize these three principles: a linguistic definition of *usage*, new perceptions of "error," and a rhetorical perspective on grammar. Then, I will describe the assignment, an assignment which demonstrates to prospective teachers that so-called "errors" can be discoveries.

The first principle underlying the assignment was the linguistic definition of *usage*. Of course, for the last fifty years the linguistic community has attempted to show that most of the usage rules are so narrow, ill-defined, inconsistent, unclear, and often illogical that it becomes difficult to discern what the one "correct" usage is (Algeo, Baron). Instead, linguists have cast off the right-wrong aura surrounding the term *usage* in order to define it as "the collective term for the speaking and writing habits of a community" (Crystal 22). With this wider definition, proper usage is a matter of dressing differently for different occasions so that the writer's or speaker's sense of register (James Stalker's "situational appropriateness" [467]), the audience, and the need for clarity determine "correctness." Then, for prospective teachers like my students, *usage* should mean, according to the educator Robert C. Pooley, "the development of sensitivity to and proficiency in the use of words, idioms, and constructions *according to the nature of the communication*" (506, emphasis added).

Besides a new view of usage, these prospective teachers also needed to be aware of a second principle: the nature of errors. Instead of a dichotomous approach of right versus wrong, the prospective teachers should understand that "errors" often reveal a writer's development and rhetorical intentions (Shaughnessy, Bartholomae). A misspelling, for example, might suggest a writer's general inexperience with writing (Shaughnessy); an error might be dialect interference or a writer's misperception of the rules arising from an "intermediate system"

(Bartholomae 257) in the writer's head. So, teachers need to consider the context or "act of composing that presented the erroneous form as a possible solution to the problem of making a meaningful statement" (Bartholomae 307).

While Mina Shaughnessy and David Bartholomae see errors as reflecting the writer's development and aims, Joseph Williams shifts to the reader and whether he or she even recognizes errors in published writings. In his essay "Phenomenology of Error," Williams asks, "Does the reader respond to the broken rule?" "Is the reader's response favorable?" Thus, for Williams, writing conventions (and so-called "violations" of those conventions) are socially constructed, with error lying more with the reader's responses than in rules found in handbooks.

The third principle underlying my assignment for prospective teachers is often called "rhetorical grammar." The leaders in this field, including Rei Noguchi, Martha Kolln, and John Dawkins, argue that grammatical choices are related to the meaning and emphasis which the writer-rhetorician wishes to achieve. Instead of limiting grammar merely to checking for subject-verb agreement and the placement of commas, rhetorical grammarians argue that grammatical choices for sentences (Kolln) and for punctuation (Dawkins) create focus and impact, thus achieving a rhetorical effect. So, teaching grammar as a tool to improve the content and organization for readers means grammar is more than "being correct" — it means using an intuitive grasp of the language to affect readers (Noguchi).

Can these three principles of grammar instruction — the linguistic definition of *usage*, new perceptions on the nature of error, and a rhetorical perspective on grammar — unite to help students understand that handbook rules are not the only dialect, that "error" or linguistic deviation from SEE can be analyzed in various ways, and most important, that some of the variations in SEE can be related to rhetorical concerns? In other words, can prospective teachers of writing discover that "like many styles of dress appropriate to different social occasions, English permits several 'standards'" (Lindemann 68–9)?

To emphasize these principles, I gave my students a two-part assignment. First, for background, students studied John Algeo's "What Makes Good English Good?" to learn the origins of usage rules. They also read Bartholomae's essay "The Study of Error" since it combines a linguistic approach to usage, an analytical approach to error, and an emphasis on the intention of

the writer.[2] As one student commented after reading Bartholomae, "It taught me to look not at the error in students' language but [to look] more effectively [at] why they made those errors."

Then, my students completed a second part of the assignment, a part designed to help them see "errors" as variable and maybe even rhetorical. To do so, students collected and analyzed five different examples of so-called "errors" or "pressure points" in the language where standard rules vary from actual practice. So that the students would have a benchmark of rules to refer to, they all used Blanche Ellsworth and John Higgins' *English Simplified*, a textbook which, of course, presents grammar as both "traditional schoolroom grammar" (Hartwell's grammar number 4, 119) and as correct usage (Hartwell's grammar number 3, 110). And students were also told to consider variations found only *in print* since by the time the "errors" occur in the print medium, they could be on their way to becoming widely accepted. Finally, to discover the variations, students examined reputable publications, recent magazine articles, and one advertisement.

This "collection assignment" had five steps, the first four of which were fairly simple. Students were to

1. find an "error" in the print medium,
2. explain what rule is "broken" in the example,
3. rewrite the example applying the rule, and
4. attach a works cited page fully documenting the example.

However, merely harvesting examples of improper punctuation, incomplete sentences, misused pronouns, and faulty mechanics would mean that students might be perpetuating a dichotomous approach to error, that students might continue to misperceive *usage*, and that students might not gain a sense of the relationship between rhetoric and grammar. To move from the "code level" to the rhetorical level (Horner 191) and to foster a sense of usage and grammar being related to the whole piece of writing (Bill McCleary's "'holistic'" approach qtd. in Gilbert 2), students performed a vital fifth step in the collection. They were to

5. analyze the "error" or variation from SEE by trying to understand the rhetorical intention of the writers. In

other words, students determined the possible relationship of the grammatical to the rhetorical choices by examining the audience, tone, medium, subject matter, and format—all vital features of a discourse.

These "errors" can, of course, be caused by carelessness—like a nodding editor or a "slip of the pen as the writer's mind rushes ahead faster than his hand" (Bartholomae 257). But, as Bartholomae's essay implies, it is also possible to attempt a reasonable analysis by having students use their own experience with writing and rhetoric; hence, they are reacting like trained readers and rhetors, gaining a sense of the sociolinguistic nature of grammatical choices.

What did the students' analyses reveal? Since students in seven sections of an advanced grammar course completed this assignment, I will provide only a few key examples to illustrate their findings.

Audience, as might be expected, was found to have a substantial effect. Writers would rather relate to their readers than necessarily follow standard, schoolroom grammar. For instance, punctuation might be varied to relate the material to the reader's needs and desires. In a print ad for health insurance, for example, one student found the superfluous use of a comma: "A plan that only provides benefits once a person has become sick, doesn't make much sense" (Prudential 7). According to the analysis,

> the writer may be trying to make the diction of the advertisement appear informal and, therefore, friendlier by writing in a manner in which the sentence may be spoken—with a pause. This informality may be especially important to the writer in relating to the readers, since the indecipherable formality of insurance documents has given insurance companies the reputation of being impersonal and perhaps even deceitful. (Brian Hulse)

Apparently, an "error" in punctuation is really not a problem when linked to the rhetorical context of the writing.

A "linguistic deviation" in diction reflects another possible rhetorical choice: adjusting to an audience's feelings. One student found a prime example of a writer altering her diction to fit the reader's fears on the topic of breast cancer. From *Self* magazine comes the following: "Chances are, sooner or later,

there will be a bump or a lump. And, for most women, a *freak-out*" (Blair 161). Although the student argued that SEE rules would have advocated the word *panic* instead of *freak-out*, the student also realized the diction suited the "relaxed and friendly relationship" the writer wished to establish with her readers:

> Many medically based articles, especially those on such serious topics as breast cancer, overwhelm and thus alienate the reader. In this article, however, the writer strives to achieve a 'human' perspective through which the necessary information may be communicated without neglecting the personal and intimate nature of the topic. (Selene Nettles)

Besides the audience, students found that the tone may dictate grammatical choices. *Cigar Aficionado* magazine contained an article on the former football quarterback Terry Bradshaw. In describing Bradshaw's views of another athlete, the article used a fragment:

> Bradshaw first compliments [Randall] Cunningham's early season heroics. *But then the leadership question, the question that had to come, the question that has tugged at Cunningham more than linebackers do.* As Bradshaw speaks, Cunningham's eyes grow narrow. (Shouler 95, emphasis added)

The analysis explained that the incomplete sentence does make sense given the content of the preceding sentence and the tone needed for the audience:

> The author writes a fragment in order to maintain an informal tone pleasing to readers interested in sports and cigars. Although the verb is omitted, the meaning is clear in the context of the surrounding sentences. In this description of an interview with a sports figure, casual, conversational approach is appropriate and desirable, and this sentence fragment helps contribute to such a tone. (Brian Byrd)

Although audience and tone are powerful forces, the medium, too, may affect a writer's choices. The title of an annual report written by a school district contained the following

problem in pronoun case: "Dropout Prevention Programs Help Students and You and *I*" (Marks). The student's analysis argued that the medium—in this case the formal register of an annual report—probably led the writer to "err" by using a nominative case for the pronoun:

> The writer is interested in creating a high level of formality in this work; this article is intended to represent the school system in Berkeley county [South Carolina], and the writer believes that the formality invoked by the use of *I* will best represent the school system. (Karen Powell-Crooks)

The grammatical choice illustrated above is obviously related to "hypercorrection," in this case described by the student in rhetorical terms.

In the same vein, a weekly television guide which was found in a local newspaper contained an "error" in diction, a choice based on the medium and the subject matter. In describing the movie *My Cousin Vinnie*, a sentence read, "Chuck, a burly fellow prone to cowboy hats and loud conversation, is the 'sort of' ugly American Vinnie doesn't like" (McAlister, N. pag.). Although in SEE *sort of* might be considered informal, the choice of diction matched the medium and subject:

> The writing is very informal. After all, it's targeted toward the basic television audience. The phrase "sort of" fits naturally into the sentence. . . . It is the likely choice of usage. It's informal and seems somewhat indicative of the movie being described and the audience towards which it is geared. (Melodi Jamison)

One final example shows that in addition to subject matter, format can also dictate a mechanical problem of faulty hyphenation. One student discovered a misused hyphen ("mu-dhole") in a newspaper story about a parking lot (Porter 3–B) and related the problem to the format of a newspaper:

> The margins of this newspaper are even, and in order to make the word mudhole fit the line, the word has been broken at a place that is not between syllables and not between consonants. This example is showing that the structure of the columns is more important than word

dividing because of the limited space there is to expand. (Kristi Rogers)

Hence format, probably determined by a typesetter, was more vital than knowledge of hyphenation.

An objection to this collection assignment might be that it fosters grammatical anarchy or the attitude that "anything goes." Actually, instead of encouraging students to abandon the notion of error, the assignment promotes an analytical attitude toward errors. By relating errors to rhetorical choices, students should realize that different media and audiences might mean different grammatical and usage rules, implying that SEE can have many registers. So, as Bruce Horner says, the SEE of textbooks is still "negotiable" (176) in other discourses besides that of the academic community. With such a view, students can understand better the nature of error, seeing it as Horner explains:

> The status of the form as an error depends largely on the relationship between a particular writer and a particular reader at a particular time—the status and authority which, in a particular time, the writer claims and which the reader agrees to accord the writer. (174)

Thus, the assignment helps prospective teachers see error not as a dichotomous right-versus-wrong, but as a continuum that reflects the rhetorical context of the writing. The assignment also helps students who will become teachers of writing. Instead of merely memorizing the rules of traditional grammar, these students can develop their problem-solving skills as they try to determine why writers have made certain choices; in fact, developing such skills helps students teach their own classes. As Janice Neuleib and Irene Brosnahan explain,

> They [the students] have to understand stylistic choices, and they have to analyze errors so that they can show [their own] students how language works. When teachers do more than 'cover grammar,' writers will improve their writing by using the grammar they have learned. (33)

In fact, one of the students commenting on the collection assignment seemed to sense the utility of the exercise: "My mom

says she wishes she had thought of such a creative assignment when she was teaching school."

Naturally, not all students reacted to the assignment in this way. Several students said they "could not find any errors." Ironically, their not responding to print "errors" underscores one of Williams' points, namely, that errors can be defined as errors only so far as readers notice them. Thus, these students were, indeed, learning about the nature of error. Another student commented that he saw errors in print all the time, so why bother to collect them? As the student explained, "The [collection] assignment was not very helpful—I noticed these things anyway, so I felt like [sic] I was wasting my time." Actually, he was not wasting his time because he was indirectly experiencing another of Williams' types of error, namely, the recognition of error. So, although some students felt they did not benefit from the assignment, they did, inadvertently, acquire some insight into levels of "errors" or "mistakes."

As Nell Ann Pickett and Ann Lester have written, "The resourceful person can turn mistakes into fortunate discoveries" (570). By having students find and analyze "mistakes," the collection assignment fosters a sense that rules in handbooks are not set in proverbial stone, that the variations from these rules can reflect actual usage (in the linguistic sense), and that these variations may even be based on rhetorical choices. Therefore, by examining the employment of the language (real linguistic "usage"), the assignment makes lessons on grammar seem like part of the "everyday language experience" (Noguchi 6), or, as one student commented, "It was difficult, but it was good in that it forced us to apply what we had learned to real examples." So, errors can, indeed, be "discoveries."

NOTES

1 For their very helpful comments on this manuscript, I would like to thank the kind reviewers of the *Journal of Teaching Writing*. I would also like to thank the dedicated students in my sections of Modern English Grammar.

2 Williams' essay could be assigned as well since both foster a less dichotomous approach to error.

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