CONCRETE GRAMMAR: NONTRADITIONAL METHODS OF TEACHING TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR

Helene Krauthamer

Introduction

We all learn best what we teach ourselves. As a college teacher of developmental writing, I have learned that grammar instruction is helpful and indeed welcome to my students, particularly when presented in an interactive, contextual manner whereby students discover grammatical principles through demonstrations and hands-on activities. Most lessons involve the essentials of grammar with a minimum of terminology, permitting students to experience grammatical concepts in a concrete, rather than an abstract, fashion. This approach appeals to students of varied learning styles and expands their understanding and appreciation of grammar, suggesting that it may be even more suitable for students in the K–12 levels. Whether or not this series of workshops is responsible for the writing improvement of the students remains to be experimentally tested, but the enthusiastic responses of students warrant their further development.

The Grammar Question

To teach grammar or not to teach grammar? That's the question apparently still in the minds of writing teachers, as anyone can see by following the numerous threads in the NCTE - Talk listserv on the topic of "teaching grammar," by reading the November 1996 issue of the *English Journal*, or by studying the various articles compiled in the 1995 volume *The Place of Grammar*

in Writing Instruction. To summarize the many viewpoints, we who teach writing seem to be struggling with this dilemma, torn between research showing that teaching grammar is "harmful" and pressure from the outside world demanding that our students write grammatical sentences (cf. Hartwell, Kolln, Noguchi, and Weaver for further discussion).

The "harmful" hypothesis, stemming from the statement that "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" (Braddock et al. quoted in Noguchi 2), has been at the center of the controversy. Some claim that the "harmful" hypothesis is no more than a convenient excuse to avoid teaching an unpopular subject. Many teachers hate to teach grammar, and, not surprisingly, many students hate to learn grammar. (See Brosnahan and Neuleib for further discussion about how English teachers in particular often have no affinity for the subject.)

Although writing teachers are trained to read their students' papers for rhetorical features, there is still much pressure from the public at large to focus almost exclusively on grammar. Whereas style, organization, and development also play a role in writing, the "grammatical" features of spelling, verb forms, or diction are the target of criticism. Few people outside of academia would even use the term "grammar" in its linguistic sense to refer to the abstract rules of the language, acquired intuitively when we are children, that render sequences such as "Mary it got has" ungrammatical but "Mary ain't got it" as grammatical. From the perspective of the English teacher, and probably the public at large, neither is grammatical, and "good grammar" becomes equivalent to appropriate usage. Students enrolled in Advanced Grammar are typically surprised to be diagramming sentences and expanding verbs rather than learning how to avoid run-ons and verb errors. The linguistic distinction between "descriptive" and "prescriptive" grammars has not entered the public domain, and, I suspect, many in our increasingly pragmatic world wonder why to

study the structure of English if not to improve the use of standard English.

Even the most well-meaning, linguistically aware, rhetorically trained teachers of writing, when their resistance is down, may succumb to the feeling that all that counts is this sense of grammar. Holistic grading sessions often begin with admirable critiques of development, thesis, organization, and stylistic elements, and, a thousand essays later, end with a hasty grade based on whether or not the writer has used "good" English! Usage errors are among the few truly objective aspects of writing; whereas we may dispute whether or not a passage is logically organized or fully developed, we generally agree on the agreement of subjects and verbs. Ultimately, "grammar" counts, and, like it or not, our students must learn it.

Alternative Methods of Teaching Grammar

But how? Traditional methods of teaching grammar involve asking students to learn a nomenclature for items they cannot recognize, terms that suit Latin but are stretched to fit English, such as infinitives, appositives, and cases. As Shuman points out, "Teachers and students cannot discuss writing effectively or efficiently unless they share a common vocabulary that relates to language" (117). Does this, however, just add to the complexity of teaching grammar? Grammar methods that require students to diagram, parse, or draw trees for sentences are asking students to not just understand the structure of a sentence but to also learn a metalanguage that is far removed from the ultimate objective of clear writing. Grammatical terms such as "absolute" or "participle" distance the students even further. The very students who are having problems writing Standard English are also likely to have problems learning grammar when taught by traditional methods.

Furthermore, as Brosnahan and Neuleib point out, those who typically enter the profession, English majors, may also feel estranged from the study of grammar, having learning styles that do not mesh well with the typical teaching approaches (204). Diagramming sentences, categorizing parts of speech, constructing

sentence trees, and other analytic practices that linguists use to better understand the structure of language often disturb those attracted to the study of literature who prefer to discuss ideas, structures, and effects of texts. Brosnahan and Neuleib describe how junior high school teachers who discuss literature with their students "with warmth and enthusiasm" will conduct the grammar lessons "grimly" (207). Negative experiences engender more negative experiences. In other words, the entire learning community in the English classroom may be uneasy with traditional methods of teaching grammar, thus creating an atmosphere unconducive to learning and application.

Many have tried to simplify the grammar that we teach students. For example, Noguchi claims that students need to know only a very limited set of concepts, based on studies of error by researchers such as Connors and Lunsford, as well as Hairston. Connors and Lunsford show that students make only 20 predominant errors, implying then that teachers need focus only on these. Hairston shows that only a small set of errors is significant to readers. Noguchi, therefore, presents a teaching grammar that singles out concepts that help students understand these types of errors. He isolates the categories of Sentence, Fragment, Modifier, Subject, and Verb, claiming that these are easily taught to students by employing their intuitive linguistic knowledge. As Noguchi points out, asking students to learn the metalanguage of grammar is analogous to asking them to decode hieroglyphics (42). Teaching even just the basics, however, presents challenges for teachers and students, as Noguchi admits (38).

For example, a student who is an auditory learner, one who needs to talk aloud and discuss new concepts, may be unable to understand the structure of a sentence by constructing a diagram, preferring, instead, to talk about how the sentence is constructed. In contrast, a visual learner, one who learns best by seeing, may understand sentence structure by looking at diagrams of sentences but would not follow a discussion about the parts of sentences. A kinesthetic learner, one who learns best through touch, might be

left out of both diagramming and discussion and would need to physically engage with the sentence in some way, perhaps by using cards for sentence parts and showing how they all come together in a physical model. The only type of learner who would naturally understand traditional grammar is one who is verbal, analytical, and prone to abstract thought.

The growing realization that teachers must develop flexible pedagogies to reach all their students has led to the development of alternative approaches to teaching.

Sedley, in *Anatomy of English*, uses "discovery activities" that allow students to discover for themselves aspects of English grammar. For example, to illustrate the concepts of morphemes and parts of speech, students are asked first to find words ending in *-en* and then to sort them into groups. Students intuitively "discover" past participles ("beaten"), words with derivational affixes ("lengthen"), and morphemes that cannot be broken into smaller units ("open"). Activities such as these may not necessarily foster better writing, but they do promote greater understanding of the structure of English as students discover for themselves how words and sentences are built.

Some novel approaches to the teaching of grammar have been developed by Yoder, who describes a "Useful Grammar" that she uses to teach grammar to middle school students, exchanging traditional grammatical terminology for more reachable terms such as "adult chunks" for independent clauses, "kid chunks" for dependent clauses, and "fake verbs" for gerunds, participles, and infinitives. Another technique is described by Parser, who illustrates a jigsaw puzzle that she has used with high school seniors to help them see the relationships among sentence parts. Though he is not very explicit about its specifics, Hunter claims to have a model that has improved the writing of learning disabled seventh graders (107) that also allows them to see these relationships in a novel fashion.

Presenting a philosophy that is more inclusive of college students, Weaver discusses the "constructivist model of learning and teaching," saying that learning requires students to construct

concepts for themselves, that learning is very complex and idiosyncratic, and that students need to find their own motives for learning new concepts. This model claims that real learning takes place when teachers provide demonstrations for students, when the students can see the value and relevance of what is supposed to be learned, when the learning experience is "genuine" rather than artificial, and when teachers accept students with all their "errors" (157–160). In other words, grammar instruction must be relevant for students and presented in a context where students are permitted to make errors. Weaver contends, however, that students learn to write by writing and reading, not by learning grammar rules. However, for those students who wish to learn grammatical concepts, and particularly for teachers of English who need to understand grammar, Weaver presents several lessons for teaching basic grammatical concepts using this constructivist paradigm. For example, to introduce participial phrases, Weaver uses selections from literature, such as "'*Still laughing,* Mama bustled about the kitchen until her masterpiece was complete'" (from *The Black Snowman* by Phil Mendez) to illustrate how the participial phrase can be moved to various places in the sentence with varying degrees of effectiveness (215). Similarly, she illustrates the use of passives in texts by presenting passages with passives, often from news stories, and asking students to discuss their impact. Weaver concludes by inviting teachers to experiment with similar methods of teaching grammar.

Concrete Grammar

Congruent with the constructivist philosophy, and in accordance with Noguchi's concept of teaching only the bare bones of grammar, I have developed a workshop approach to teaching the basic elements of grammar for writing instruction, frequently involving concrete objects so that I have come to call the whole method "concrete grammar." These lesson plans are described here, as well as the responses of two groups of college students.

These lessons require the students to observe and participate in demonstrations of grammatical concepts, thereby fulfilling several requirements of the constructivist paradigm: students construct their own hypotheses about language; they apply what they learn to their immediate writing concerns, illustrating both the relevance and authenticity of the concept; and the exercise welcomes grammatical errors as new "data" to be discussed. Concrete grammar lessons also appeal to all types of learners: visual learners see the concepts on their worksheets and on the blackboard, auditory learners have the opportunity to discuss the concepts with others, and kinesthetic learners use the concrete "manipulables" that are part of the demonstration. Most importantly, students see the connections between what they learn as grammar and what they do as writers.

Students respond quite favorably, even enthusiastically, to these workshops, emerging with a better understanding of these concepts, as well as the vocabulary to talk about these aspects of grammar as they apply to grammar. Following each workshop plan is a description of the immediate responses of two groups of students in an urban university, the first, a developmental writing class of twenty freshmen students, and the second, a writing seminar of seven graduate students who needed to satisfy a writing proficiency requirement. I presented each workshop (with the exception of workshop II that was designed after the semester was over, in an effort to fill in some gaps) every two weeks over the course of the semester. Although I made no concentrated effort to investigate the immediate effects of each workshop, overall student writing improved by the end of the semester. The frequency of errors decreased in their writing, both in and out of class. Furthermore, students spoke more knowledgeably and comfortably about grammar issues when discussing their papers, referring with ease to the grammatical concepts discussed in the workshops. Finally, students evaluated the class sessions very favorably in their end-of-the-year course assessments.

The Complete Concrete Grammar Workshops

	Title	Objective
I	Differences between Speaking and Writing	To identify and explain SLIPs
II	Editing Conventions	To identify and explain specific editing rules from actual texts
III	Subjects and Verbs	To identify and explain grammatical subjects and verbs
IV	Sentences	To identify and explain phrases, clauses, run-ons, fragments, and the function of punctuation
V	Pronouns	To study consistent pronoun use
VI	Verbs	To practice verb expansion, tense, and irregular verb forms

Concrete Grammar Workshop I: Differences between Speaking and Writing

Objectives: To identify and explain SLIPs

Materials: Tape recorder, paper, pens, blackboard and chalk (or overhead), timer

Demonstration:

A student speaks before the class for one minute on a topic (e.g. "Why I Attend College"). As the student is speaking, the remaining students try to transcribe on paper what the student is saying, and a tape recorder tapes the student's discourse. After one

minute, the tape is stopped and then replayed as the student tries to transcribe what he/she said onto the blackboard (or overhead). The tape is replayed as often as necessary until an illustrative transcription is on the board (or overhead).

On a chart on the board with two columns, one labeled "Speech" and the other labeled "Writing," students transcribe the oral discourse into written discourse, and note the differences between them. They identify problems that occur in the transition from orality to literacy.

Observations:

Most likely, nobody is able to transcribe the entire discourse after one hearing, illustrating the fundamental difference that speech is much quicker than writing, that we can pack a far greater number of words in a minute of speaking than in a minute of writing. Implications are that speech involves more repetition, more "fillers" such as *well* and *uh*, less time to organize thoughts and use precise language, more opportunities for ambiguity, but also more opportunity for audience feedback. Students also observe that facial expressions and body language have no equivalent in writing, unless they are given as stage directions, and that intonation is only weakly conveyed through punctuation. Playing the tape so that students can raise their hands when they hear periods illustrates the continuity of speech, in contrast to writing, which requires discrete units. Ask students why sentence boundaries are essential to writing, and then point out how fragments and run-ons result when students are unaware of these boundaries. Discuss also the variation in pronunciation of various words of the speaker, and ask the students to transcribe some specific words precisely as the speaker says them. This should lead into a discussion of the need for standardized spelling. Play the tape to hear how the speaker says a particular verb, and focus on the verb ending. Most likely the inflectional ending is so reduced as to be barely perceptible, leading to a discussion of the very common but serious grammatical error of subject-verb agreement. Discuss the use of pronouns, if they are "vague" or inconsistent.

Point out the wordiness and the repetition. Discuss the diction. On a more global level, ask whether or not the speaker has shifted topics.

Conclusions:

This demonstration should show students that speaking and writing are two very different forms of language, and that making the transition from speaking to writing involves being aware of these differences. When students use aspects of speaking when they are writing, they are committing SLIPs (Spoken Language Interference Patterns) (cf. Krauthamer for further explication of this concept).

Responses:

I have conducted this workshop in most classes I have taught, and students have consistently been excited to realize that speaking habits do emerge in writing, sometimes for the better, but often for the worse. Particularly in the developmental writing class, the students are often not aware of the varying styles of written discourse, that different genres tolerate different degrees of formality. For example, once introduced to the concept of SLIPs, students commented that in materials they read, such as popular magazines and romance novels, they see SLIPs such as fragments and even slang, although these would be considered errors in papers they submit for English classes. Students in the graduate writing seminar also mentioned how their own disciplines or fields of work have different expectations; for example, the field of law forbids the use of contractions, and the field of science discourages the use of first person pronouns. Students in both classes were fascinated by the appearance of the spoken text in writing, observing how odd it looks, in contrast to how natural it sounds, and also noticing the potential for run-ons and spelling errors. They were also relieved to realize that many of the problems they experience when writing are caused not by a lack of "talent" but by the differences between speech and writing. Finally, they came to the conclusion that different situations call for different varieties of

language and that the secret to writing well is to learn to use the appropriate variety at the appropriate time.

Concrete Grammar Workshop II: Editing Conventions

Objectives: To identify and explain specific editing rules from actual texts

Materials: Copies of published essays, paper, index cards

Demonstration:

Tell the students that in the world of the future, as in the earliest days of writing, there are to be no editing conventions, so their job, as the future "anti-editors," is to eliminate all forms of punctuation, capitalization, standardized spelling, and word division. Their objective in this exercise is, in this brave new world, to rewrite the published essays without the "old" rules. However, as they eliminate each rule, they are to write it down on an index card for the "archives." For example, after removing a capital letter from the beginning of a sentence, they should write, "Capitalize the first letter of the first word of a sentence." After they have finished rewriting these essays, they are to share them and read what others have "de-edited."

As an example, students can be shown the following opening paragraph from my book, *Spoken Language Interference Patterns*, the de-edited text, and the list of editing conventions that follow:

Original Text

"Writing is not simply talk or speech written down" (Horowitz and Samuels 42).

The following is a typical dialogue between me, a teacher of writing at an urban university, and my students in a freshman composition class on the first day of class:

Teacher: So, why are you taking English Composition?
Student: To learn English.

Teacher: And what language have you been using up to now?
Student: English?

De-edited Text

Writing is not simply talk or speech written down horowitz and samuels 42 the following is a typical dialogue between me a teacher of writing at an urban university and my students in a freshman composition class on the first day of class teacher so why are you taking english composition student to learn english teacher and what language have you been using up to now student english

List of Rules (Non-exhaustive!)

1. Use quotation marks when quoting the words of others.
2. Capitalize the first letter of the first word of a sentence.
3. Use parentheses around the names of authors for MLA documentation.
4. Capitalize the first letter of proper names.
5. Put a period at the end of a sentence.
6. Use indentation to set off quotes.

Observations:

The students will find it easy to undo the editing conventions, though not so easy to explicate the rules. This is a good time to explain the difficulty of writing grammar books as well as of following the rules. However, when they share the de-edited versions, they should realize how much more difficult reading is without these conventions. Atwell, for example, in *In the Middle* provides some interesting examples (110–113) of how she teaches editing principles to eighth graders in the context of their writing, pointing out the functions of punctuation, paragraphing, and overall presentation.

Topics for Discussion:

Why are there editing conventions? How did they evolve? Are they likely to change? Do they favor speakers of standard dialects? Who writes the style books?

Conclusions:

By the conclusion of this workshop, students should be more motivated to learn the editing conventions and more aware of their complexities. Their index cards of the rules could serve as a preliminary set of flash cards to refer to as they proofread their own papers. They should realize that it is necessary to use handbooks whenever they are proofreading, and they should be aware that these rules vary according to discipline, organization, and time period.

Concrete Grammar Workshop III: Subjects and Verbs

Objective: To identify and explain the differences between grammatical subjects and verbs

Materials: Apple, knife, desk (in addition to chalk and chalkboard, pen and paper)

Demonstration:

Cut the apple with the knife on the desk. Ask the students to describe what happened. After the students have written their sentences on their papers, ask them to make predictions about the sentences. For example, will there be two sentences exactly alike? How will the sentences differ? How will the sentences be similar? What does this illustrate about our language?

Ask the students to write their sentences on the blackboard. If a sentence is not grammatical, discuss the various ways to make it grammatical.

Ask the students to identify the grammatical subject(s) and the grammatical verb(s) in each of the sentences. Is the subject always "who or what is doing the action" or the verb always representing an action? Illustrate how "slice" can be a noun, a verb, or part of a verbal. Discuss the differences between active and passive and the appropriate uses of each.

Observations:

Students should observe that although they all witnessed the same event, no two sentences are exactly alike, thus illustrating the creativity of language (and thus illustrating why there can be no honest plagiarism, but the reader should refer to Howard for a more complete picture of how and why students may inadvertently plagiarize). This also illustrates the complexity of writing, providing us with an infinite variety of choices to describe a single event, thus making writing so difficult. Nevertheless, probably most sentences contain a human subject ("the teacher") and an inanimate object ("the apple"). Probably few of the sentences focus on the desk or the knife, illustrating our tendency to view events from a human perspective.

Conclusions and Topics for Discussion:

Students should realize that the subject and verb have a grammatical relationship, that when the subject changes, the verb changes. How does a writer decide what the subject of a sentence should be? Illustrate by asking them to revise their sentences so that the apple, the knife, or even the desk is the subject of the sentence. Discuss the Given-New strategy. Explain how some things are in the consciousness of both speaker (or writer) and hearer (or reader), making these entities "given," while other things that are out of focus we may designate as "new." The optimal arrangement is for given to precede new. We typically focus on the human participants in an event, thus making it more likely that references to people will occur as the grammatical subject at the beginning of the sentence. Explain, however, that if the focus of attention were on some inanimate entity, then it would be more likely that the entity would become the grammatical subject. For example, if everyone had been discussing knives prior to the above demonstration, then some sentences might include "knife" in the grammatical subject position, e.g. "The knife cut the apple." If everyone had been focussing on the apple, it is possible to produce sentences such as "The apple was cut."

Response:

Workshop III was presented to the developmental writing class as part of the grammar explanation for the textbook modules we were working on about the identification of subjects and verbs. It was preceded by a short explanation that grammatical sentences in English require a subject and a verb and that the verb ending will change depending upon the subject. This abstract concept was not getting through to the students, who almost all seemed to hold the idea that verbs represent "actions" and subjects are the ones doing these actions. We then proceeded with the lesson.

Students in the developmental class almost all wrote ungrammatical sentences, but others in the class were able to fix the sentences as a group. They were very insistent that "verbs have to represent actions" and had a difficult time understanding how "be" and "have" could be part of the verbs in sentences such as "she was cutting the apple" or "she has cut the apple."

In contrast, students in the graduate writing seminar wrote grammatical sentences, although there was one comma splice. They seemed to accept the idea that the verb was the word that had a special relationship with the subject.

Concrete Grammar Workshop IV: Sentences

Objective: To identify and explain phrases, clauses, run-ons, fragments, and the function of punctuation

Materials: Chalk and chalkboard

Demonstration:

Tell the students that they are about to play a game called the "Never-ending Sentence." Each student goes up to the chalkboard and adds a clause to a sentence that the teacher has begun, but nobody ends the sentence. The class should make sure that each student adds the appropriate punctuation to avoid run-ons. After

the final student, the teacher or the class as a whole composes a concluding clause that ends with a period.

Mini-lesson:

Explain the difference between a phrase and a clause. Tell students they must use at least one subject and one verb in their contributions. Explain run-ons and fragments. Review punctuation rules for commas before coordinating conjunctions and after subordinate clauses.

Observations:

It is possible to have a sentence that is infinitely long. Ask the students what grammatical "rules" allow them to keep expanding the sentence (i.e. coordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions). A sentence that is infinitely long is not necessarily easy to understand. Ask the students why. Read aloud a long sentence from a student paper. Ask what function commas and other forms of punctuation serve. Most likely, the sentence will be about one thing, although it probably rambles. Ask the students how they decided to choose the content of their contribution.

Conclusions and Topics for Discussion:

Students should observe that a long sentence is not necessarily a run-on sentence, that a long string of words can even be a fragment, that commas and conjunctions help to segment the sentence into parts that are more easily understood, and that sentences usually, but not always, are about one thing. To those who would like the opportunity to discuss recursiveness, this exercise allows potential linguists to present simple recursive rules such as S→ S + conjunction + S (where S = sentence) that allow us to construct infinitely long sentences. Students should also observe that lengthy sentences are common in speech, stopping mostly when the speaker needs to breathe or to let someone else speak. Ask the students how they would revise the never-ending sentence to be more comprehensible.

Response:

The lesson for the developmental writing class was presented as a lesson on commas and punctuation, introduced with the questions "What is the function of punctuation?" and "What would happen if we didn't have any punctuation marks?" I then told the students that we were all going to write one very long sentence without any punctuation marks, and I began by writing, "One day I came to school and" and then passed the chalk to the first student, who was then instructed to give the chalk to another student when he was finished writing his contribution and so on until everybody had a turn. We discussed why it was so easy for the first few participants to make additions, but why it was relatively hard for the participants at the end. We decided that we were all trying to make the sentence make sense, leading to a discussion about unity and coherence in language, the notion that a sentence is all about one thing. We then read the sentence, making spelling and grammatical corrections where needed, and asking where commas or semi-colons would help us to make sense of it. Whenever the class suggested using a comma, we would then try to determine which "rule" we were using. For example, the "Compound" rule was familiar to many students, though some were confused about what a compound sentence is, or even where to place the comma relative to the conjunction. (One student claimed he thought it didn't matter whether the comma was placed before or after the conjunction, as long as it was there!) Then the "Series" rule emerged, and we discussed whether or not the final comma is optional. The "Introductory" rule came next, followed by a discussion of transitions, direct address, and interjections, leading to a discussion of the use of commas for "Separation." Finally we discussed the use of commas in dates, addresses, and quotations. The same lesson was conducted for the graduate writing seminar class, with no apparent differences, although the graduate writing seminar class had far fewer participants.

Concrete Grammar Workshop V: Pronouns

Objective: To study consistent pronoun use

Materials: Chalk and chalkboard, handouts of a published essay (I've used "How to Put Off Doing a Job" by Andy Rooney.)

Demonstration:

Tell the students that they have become editors in a futuristic world that has expunged the first person pronoun from the language, so that their job is to rewrite the published essay handout using other pronoun alternatives. The class can be divided into small teams, each one assigned a different pronoun. A team member then reads the team's revisions aloud to everyone. Alternately the class can do this together, with a volunteer reading aloud the passage using a specific pronoun throughout, while others in the class make corrections. Then another volunteer can use another pronoun throughout. Ask the class to decide which version sounds best and why.

Mini-lesson:

Put a pronoun chart on the board, illustrating first, second, and third person pronouns in their singular and plural forms in the subjective case. Mention the difference between subject and object pronouns. Review subject-verb agreement, and when students are reading aloud, be sure they emphasize the inflectional *-s* ending in the verb when the subject is third person singular. Discuss the history of *he* as a formerly generic pronoun that is now usually regarded as sexist, and discuss the options available to writers today. (Also ask the students to try a version with *he or she*, and discuss the result.)

Observations:

Students should observe that published writers are consistent with pronoun use and that students should avoid pronoun shift in their own writing. Having alternatives when writing, they must

choose their perspective carefully. For example, *I* typically yields a personal perspective, *we* makes the reader feel included, *you* lends a more didactic tone, *he* may be sexist, *he or she* may be unwieldy, and *they* may make the writing more objective. Students should also note the changes in verb endings and other grammatical aspects when the grammatical subject changes. Changing the pronouns may also create ambiguous or vague pronouns, so note these if they occur.

Conclusions and Topics for Discussion:

Although pronouns are monosyllabic, typically unstressed parts of speech, they do have a strong impact on our writing style, and we need to be aware of how we use them. They must be used consistently to alleviate reader confusion; they must be selected carefully and to provide the appropriate tone and perspective; and they must be used unambiguously. Look at writing published prior to 1969. How has pronoun use changed since then? Look at writing published in the 1980's. What "new" pronouns were invented to replace the generic *he*? Look at contemporary published writing. How do writers handle pronouns now?

Response:

This activity provoked a very positive and enthusiastic response from the undergraduate class, who chose to do this as a class, with individuals reading aloud a selected paragraph, using the pronoun they selected, as class members shouted out corrections. As each student read, there was time for questions and explanations about their choices. Because so many students didn't know that they were supposed to change the verb according to the subject, this activity highlighted subject-verb agreement for them. Also, several students had not been aware of the need to maintain pronoun consistency, and the more advanced students benefited from the discussion about the different effect each pronoun has on the overall tone of the passage. Everyone seemed to enjoy the discussion about sexism in language, though most were unaware of the history behind it, and all seemed to pay

particular attention as we discussed the currently acceptable options.

Once again, there was no appreciable difference between the developmental writing class and the graduate writing seminar class. To my surprise, one graduate student asked if it was really necessary to change the verb endings when the subject changed. The smaller class size of the graduate seminar allowed each student to participate fully, and there was less of the "shouting out" that occurred in the developmental writing class.

Concrete Grammar Workshop VI: Verbs

Objective: To practice verb expansion, tense, and irregular verb forms

Materials: Chalk and chalkboard

Demonstration:

Tell the students that the game of the day is to find the most possible ways to expand a verb, using helping verbs, modals, and tenses. Give groups of three or four students approximately fifteen minutes to list on a sheet of paper possible expansions of the sentence "He sings." Remind the students to change the mood, tense, and aspect of the verb, but not to change the subject. After fifteen minutes, a member of each group writes on the board one sentence, without repeating any sentence that is already there. Sort the sentences into categories. Continue taking turns, until the groups have exhausted all the sentences on their list. The group that writes the most sentences is the winner. (Prizes are at the discretion of the teacher.)

Mini-lesson:

Illustrate a verb expansion by using another verb, for example, "walk." To organize their responses, set up the columns "past" and "present," sorting the sentences accordingly. You may introduce the grammatical terms for these constructions (e.g.

simple past, present perfect, present progressive...), if you wish to refer to these terms later in the discussion. Discuss the role of the "helping" verbs *be* and *have* and their co-occurring inflectional endings *-ing* and *-en* (or *-ed*). As the various forms emerge on the board, ask the students to observe any patterns, such as which verb carries the tense or what happens when modals (*may*, *can*, or *will*) enter the sentence. What happens if we insert the verb *do* into the sentence?

Observations:

Students should observe the many forms a verb can take and should be able to sort them into various categories. They should also observe that a sentence may have many verbs, but only one of them carries the tense, which is either past or present. They should also note that English does not really have a future tense but indicates future by using the modal *will* (*I will call you*) or by using adverbs combined with the present tense (*I go to work tomorrow. Later I am jogging.*) Also, students should observe that not all the possible verb expansions are used in their dialects, and that their dialects may have some verb expansions that are not included in standard English. As they list each expansion, ask them to identify those forms that they use in their speech (may be labeled "S") and those forms they should use in their writing (may be labeled "W"). If a form sounds very odd to them, ask them to put a "*" next to it, and compare the results of the class.

Conclusions and Topics for Discussion:

The complex English verb system is difficult for non-native speakers to master, but native speakers intuitively know which forms to use. Dialectal variation in acceptability of some verb expansions may result in errors in subject-verb agreement and wrong verb forms, perhaps due to dialectal interference or the fact that many verb endings (e.g. *-ed*) are often diminished to a voiceless /t/ in speech or deleted altogether. Also, several irregular English verbs deviate from the typical patterns, allowing more room for error. Make up a nonsense verb, for example,

"kip," and try expanding it to discover what the typical patterns are. Students should be reminded to check dictionaries or grammar books for the appropriate verb form when they are uncertain, particularly for such troublesome verbs such as *lie* or *lay*.

Response:

The lesson in the developmental writing class was somewhat more chaotic than I had expected. I introduced it with a journal entry on the topic "Why study grammar?" to which the whole class had positive responses. I then discussed the current controversy in English circles about the need to study grammar in order to improve writing, concluding with my own philosophy that "even though we may not have to know how a motor works in order to drive a car, when a car stops working while we're driving, it helps to know how the motor works." I gave teams of four students ten minutes to generate as many verb expansions as they could, having illustrated some examples with the verb "walk." Because there was not enough time in the 45 minutes I had allotted to the activity, sorting out the verb expansions into categories and identifying awkward-sounding verb expansion was assigned as a suggested activity at home. Surprisingly, several students were already familiar with such terms as "past perfect" and "present progressive," and others were curious about the terminology, so we did do labels for these expansions. To remedy the lack of closure to this lesson, in a follow-up lesson we listed all the verb forms neatly on the board, discussed the differences between verb past tenses and verb participles, and reviewed some irregular verbs. We went over the need for consistency in verb tenses when writing and identified these verb expansions in an essay.

The lesson with the graduate writing seminar class, because of the small size, was not held as a "contest" but rather as a discussion where each student contributed a verb expansion, and each contribution was discussed and labeled. All students in a preliminary writing response to the prompt "Why study grammar?" said that they thought the study of grammar was valid

at this level. Nevertheless, I continuously pointed out the relevance of these grammatical constructs by mentioning the types of errors students make, using past tenses instead of participles or using regular patterns for irregular verb forms. In this class, we also examined a short essay ("The Bounty of the Sea" by Jacques Cousteau), considering the verb expansions. As a home assignment, the class identified the verb expansions for later discussion.

Response to Follow-up to Workshop VI:

The class began with the journal topic "What will our planet be like in 30 years?" After hearing and discussing the students' entries, we next read and discussed Jacques Cousteau's essay "The Bounty of the Sea," which, written 30 years ago, discusses the effects of pollution on the oceans and the resulting consequences for the planet. We compared his predictions to that of the students and discussed what has occurred in the years since. To follow up on Workshop VI, I distributed the complete verb expansion for the verb "write," discussing any remaining questions about grammatical, acceptable, and unacceptable forms for both speech and writing. We reviewed the terminology for the verb expansions and then looked at the essay to find examples of these forms. Then I suggested that we project ourselves 30 years into the future, after the predicted demise of the planet, and that as the only surviving English class we must rewrite all previously written essays, putting them into the past tense and removing all the conditional forms. The class was small, so we did this in unison as a group shouting out the changes aloud. As the students changed the present perfects into past perfects, they became more aware that though present perfect sounds like a past activity, it really is not. Also, as they removed the conditionals, they became aware that the modals really were bearing the tenses for the verbs. Several other words, besides the verbs, required changes as well, so the students became aware of the need for tense consistency and all that entails.

Conclusion

Despite research studies that suggest that the teaching of grammar may do little to improve writing, many teachers realize that students need to have some overt grammatical knowledge simply to discuss their writing errors intelligibly. Traditional methods of instruction involving abstract constructs may only distance students from knowledge they need. Innovative methods that allow students to discover their innate grammatical knowledge and understand the linguistics of writing may prove more fruitful in the overall acquisition of written language. Ideally, such an approach should be introduced to students in K-12 when they are first developing their mental constructs about grammar. Interactive classes are suitable for elementary age students who can comprehend the simpler terminology and who also enjoy demonstrations and group work. In addition to enjoying the active nature of these lessons, middle school students can apply the lessons to more complex written texts. High school students can appreciate how language varieties are suitable in various contexts. At each stage, this approach follows the constructivist philosophy of enabling students to discover for themselves fundamental concepts of grammar in the context of writing.

For college students who have not yet achieved proficiency in writing, this method is an alternative to more traditional methods. By building upon their more mature experience with different varieties of language and by showing how the grammatical principles have practical application to their writing tasks, this method allows students to have a positive, more confident attitude about grammar, as well as to use grammatical terms more ably. Precisely how effective this approach is in improving student writing remains a topic for further research and testing.

Rather than give up on grammar, teachers need to explore new ways to make the topic more accessible and more relevant to their students, while retaining the fundamental concepts. The Concrete Grammar approach may be modified and expanded to suit the needs of any grade level. This method in the context of writing allows students to experience grammar in a concrete way,

rather than as an abstract theory of complex terms. Perhaps by discovering the fun and beauty of grammar, students and teachers will find grammar lessons both enjoyable and rewarding.

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