



SWITCHING STUDENTS ON TO GRAMMAR

When I was visiting a school recently, I walked by a mother who was dropping her kids at the front gate.

"Yesterday when I come to pick y'up, youse weren't even here. Tonight it's different, right?"

She then slapped a kiss on each of their cheeks and was gone.

It made me think of the article I was currently writing – *this* article on grammar.

Some may assess what this mother said from a grammatical perspective, and gasp in horror – but if we view it from a communicative point of view, it is absolutely fine. These kids knew *exactly* what Mum meant!

A few weeks prior to this, I had posted a question on the Love and Reilly Facebook page. In relation to punctuation and grammar. I had asked "Do punctuation and grammar *really* matter?" The responses had been very one-sided and, I must say, the responses were also emotional.

"Of course they matter! How could they NOT?"

"Kids of today have no idea about the difference between "YOUR" and "YOU'RE". How will they ever get a job?"

"It's messaging on mobiles and Facebook that are causing all the problems. How are kids meant to write grammatically at school when they aren't doing so at home?"

I can guess, however, that many of the individuals who choose to "like" a Facebook page such as Love and Reilly's are probably a bit biased towards the preservation of the standards of language in the first place, and the nature of the responses were not unexpected. These standards that I refer to, include language rules and structures such as grammar and punctuation.

Why Teach Grammar?

The reason I embarked upon writing this article was that I have had many requests from teachers regarding how to best teach grammar (and punctuation). From what I could ascertain, these - sometimes exasperated requests - had arisen largely from the introduction of the Australian Curriculum (2010) and the NAPLAN testing. Specific standards for the use and knowledge of grammar and punctuation throughout school had been outlined and teachers felt they needed help addressing them. Although this may have been the motivation for many teachers emailing me, it is ludicrous to assume that we are solely driven by tests and standards. To teach grammar well, we need to know and *believe* WHY (and WHEN) it is important – even before we think about HOW to teach it.

After lots of thought and reading, I think it boils down to three major reasons;

- 1) Grammar allows us to convey a message **clearly**. It helps **avoid ambiguity**.
- 2) Grammar allows us to be **succinct**, thus making language more **efficient**.

- 3) Use of grammar can influence the judgement of the user's character, social status, intellect or ability.

Clarity

Take, for example, the following:

"I was eating the cake when he came in."

My use of grammar here, immediately gives you a clear picture that I was in the process of eating a cake when a male walked in. If I'd said, *"I'd eaten the cake when he came in"*, you would know that there was no cake left to eat.

A very young child, or even an individual with a language impairment, may only be able to formulate an utterance such as *"I eating all the cake. He comed in"*.

This is somewhat ambiguous. Was all of the cake eaten or was it in the process of being eaten? Did the male enter while the cake was being eaten or after it had been eaten?

Efficiency

Consider another example:

"A lady was chasing me. The lady was wearing a long velvet dress. She seemed really angry."

With a little grammar magic, I can make this into; *"A lady, wearing a long velvet dress, was chasing me and she seemed really angry"*.

Without the adjustment, the first sentences were clear and unambiguous, but the communication was wordy. Grammar allows us to use language *efficiently*.

Judgement of Status

It was interesting to note that many people who responded to my post "Is grammar important", responded more from how our students will get jobs and how they will be perceived.

To many, if you are to prove yourself as a literate (and possibly capable) individual, you must have good grammar.

If we look at the history of English, one of the main pushes behind grammar being standardised was so that members of "polite" society could speak in this code and thus, separate themselves from the uneducated, lower classes. In the days of old, you could clutch the rules of grammar like a Gucci handbag.

Speaking "the King's English" was something for formal and official contexts, but if you wanted to affirm your status, you could flaunt them to try and impress. Meanwhile, others were sneering and saying "Grammar what? I don't care about no grammar."

Defining Grammar

It is always difficult to fit language into a box, so what one person sees as grammar may be different to that of another – but neither will necessarily be the more correct.

In the field of Linguistics, grammar includes all rule-governed and pattern-based aspects of a person's language. This includes how sounds, words, sentences, symbols and meaning etc. can combine for communication.

Schools, however, have traditionally taken on grammar to mean **the study of sentence structure, especially with reference to syntax and morphology.**

For the purpose of this article, this is the definition we will use.
So let's look at **syntax** and **morphology**.

***Syntax = The study of word order and sentence structure.** Every sentence must have a noun phrase and a verb phrase. Syntax defines the order of the words within the phrase. It also defines the order in which the phrases of a sentence can occur to be meaningful and grammatical.

I can say "*THE COW... WAS CHEWING*" but I can't say "*COW THE... CHEWING WAS*" nor can I say "*WAS CHEWING ...THE COW.*"

Syntax governs how we:
1) order words within phrases and
2) order phrases within a sentence.



It should be noted, however, that the word order may be perfectly grammatical and acceptable, but still ambiguous. Take for example, the sign to the left, from Oklahoma.

Would you stop to pick up a hitchhiker? Surely, you would if he was being chased by an escapee!

Sometimes a shuffling of word order is required to remove ambiguity.

***Morphology = The study of words, in particular, the smallest units of meaning within a word (morphemes).**

Morphemes might be whole words, such as HE or ATE or NICE or they might be little bits that are "tacked" on to words such as -LY, or -ED or -TION.

Each morpheme carries meaning and there are rules that govern them.

- I can tack -ED on to many verbs to make them past tense. *HOPED SMILED LOVED*

- I can't tack -ED on to nouns. *COWED* (...although as language changes, nouns can evolve into verbs. In some marathon running circles, much to my disgust, it has become known as being "CHICKED" when a male is overtaken by a female runner, and it has now become more standard to use the word "GOOGLED" to express that you have searched for something using the GOOGLE search engine.)

- I can't tack -ED on to ALL verbs to make them past tense. *RUNNED EATED* (...although of course, we will find many young children, or those with language impairments, making these types of errors).

So where does **punctuation** fit in to all of this?

***Punctuation** is part of written language only. We can have terrible punctuation skills, but speak with perfect grammar.

Grammar and Punctuation

Where grammar and punctuation merge, is when punctuation can help mark where phrases start and end, thus allowing a sentence to be read in a grammatical and non-ambiguous manner.

The classic example is *“Let’s eat, Grandma!”* versus *“Let’s eat Grandma!”*

Punctuation also plays a part in that apostrophes are used in the formation of written possessives. The possessive **“s”** is a morpheme (part of grammar) and an apostrophe (part of punctuation) lets us “tack it on” in writing.

You might see a bowl and your friend says “Don’t eat out of that! It’s the **dogs** bowl.”

If this was spoken, we don’t really know how many dogs use this bowl. It could be one or it could be two or more. In writing, however, it would be clearer...

“It’s the dog’s bowl”. (one dog)

“It’s the dogs’ bowl”. (this person must have more than one dog).

Like grammar, punctuation can also be an emotional topic. I hear many people decrying the downfall of English language when they receive a text message saying *“YOUR LATE”, and I must admit, I can’t bring myself to spell this way....BUT...*

Does it REALLY MATTER? The sender of this message may be simply trying to save some time and if the use of language is efficient, unambiguous and suiting the casual context of the exchange, does it REALLY matter?

...which brings us back to the point, **do grammar and punctuation really matter?**

Of Course They Matter!

Because of the first three reasons listed at the beginning of this article, we know that correct grammar and punctuation matter – for clarity of message, for efficiency of communication, and sadly, for reasons of social standing.

In saying this, however, we also need to consider;

What is correct grammar?

Who sets the standards?

Can these standards change?

Should we expect students to use correct grammar at all times?

The Evolution of Language

Language is always changing. This must be appreciated and acknowledged. Every generation thinks that the new generation is falling into a language cesspool, but the truth is, language has always been that way. New words arise, old words fall out of use.

Just listen to how adolescents speak amongst their peers and you will see some classic examples of new language emerging;

"She went like 'OMG you are so not coming over to my place'."

It is important not to get stuck in the "old ways".

Even when we consider Standard English, we must acknowledge that it too is changing. There are also differences between American Standard English and Australian Standard English and with the internet and TV, the changing and merging of standards is taking place and it's taking place possibly faster than ever before.

What is Standard English?

Standard English is the formal register of speech and written language. It is not the language we use with our mates, and may not be the language we speak with our parents. It is certainly not what we would generally use when we write posts on Facebook or mobile phone texts.

Standard English is the language that is usually *understood* by the general population, but not necessarily *spoken* by all. It is the language used by a newsreader, and it's the language used in most grammar textbooks and the language referred to in the Australian Curriculum.

But even Standard English has changed.

Let's take for example, the sentence *"Where did you get your new shoes from?"*

To me, this is a perfectly grammatical use of Standard English. It is not ambiguous, it is clear and complete. Some, however, would say, this is NOT grammatical because they have been taught the rule "Never end a sentence with a preposition".

This "grammatical rule" has certainly been bandied around for many years and taught formally in schools up to the 1970s. It originally arose when a 17th Century literary critic and poet, John Dryden took a dislike to ending a sentence this way, and because he was very respected amongst the upper class of England, his "rule" was embraced whole-heartedly. As Crystal writes, in his book *The Fight for English (2006)*, this happened at a time when "people were looking for reassurance and authority, anxious to find clear-cut ways for distinguishing 'us' from 'them'." When others, such as Shakespeare and Chaucer, were readily using prepositions at the end of a sentence, it was suddenly seen to be a sign of poor grammar usage.

Going back even further, the English language used to have a word "*whence*" which meant "*where from*". Although no longer used, it was once considered grammatical and standard to say "*Whence did you get your new shoes?*". It is quite likely that there was once a time when grandparents shuddered to hear younger generations saying "*From where did you get your new shoes?*"

Language changes.

Although language changes, over the years, and in different contexts, there is certainly a "time and place" for the use of Standard English .

One of the roles of an educator is to help students recognise, understand, speak, read and write in Standard English, *when needed*.

Code-Switching

It is important not to label the language spoken within peer groups or the home as inferior. It may be annoying to hear a 14 year old say “like” four times in a sentence, but if they are communicating effectively with their peers and it’s allowing them “fit in”, is there really any problem? A problem only arises when that 14 year old is unable to submit a formal piece of writing at school without omitting her colloquial

use of the word “like”. Or, if three years later, she goes for a job interview and continues to say “like” four times in a sentence.

Likewise, I would *never* recommend that the mother, who was dropping her kids at the front gate, should speak in standard formal English at all times to her children. I may, however, think to myself that these children *may* have been exposed to less standard English than others, so may find it harder to make the shift to using a more formal language for writing and speaking in academic tasks at school. This can also affect how children can comprehend some reading material as the language in text may be very unfamiliar to the language register that they have been exposed to at home.

The notion of code-switching involves “the practice of moving back and forth between two languages or between two dialects or registers of the same language.”

(www.grammar.about.com) Students should become aware of the concept of Standard English and the grammar that goes with it. They should learn when Standard English should be spoken and written and when it is likely to be heard. At school, as they progress through the years, they should learn to switch from their “yard talk” or “home talk” to Standard English (or “formal” English) for writing and formal oral presentations. Exposure to books and “literate” language is something that helps students make this shift.

Some Ideas For The Teaching Of Grammar

1. Understanding Why Grammar is Important

To me, when teaching ANYTHING, it has to start with *why* it is important to learn it.

If we are to teach grammar well, I suggest that students must first be alerted to the three reasons that grammar is important. This can be done at the start of school, and can also be reinforced in secondary school.

Ambiguity:

*Explore together some ambiguous sentences.

*Explain that in speaking but more so in writing, the listener or reader must be considered.

Are the able to understand what you are saying? Is the message you are sending clear? In writing, one must be *very* careful with ambiguity because the reader will not be able to ask you to clarify if they are confused. This is the same case if you are speaking formally to a large group of people (e.g. an oral presentation).

*Interestingly, some incorrect use of grammar is less ambiguous than correct use. In the mother saying to her kids “youse weren’t even here”, you know she was addressing this comment to both of her children.

Efficiency:

*Show how long wordy sentences can be combined using conjunctions and embedded clauses to make a sentence that is more to the point. In writing, commas can be used to replace “and” and a pronoun can be used to replace repetition of a noun.

Standards:

*Explore the concept of Standard English and how it differs to language you would use with mates or at home. Explore how language is different for a three year old versus a ten year old. Explore how writing a post on Facebook would be different to writing a formal piece of writing at school.

* View other people speaking using different registers of English. You might show some clips of a newsreader, of someone from Home and Away, of a footy player and so on. Likewise, read some snippets from different books. Read some of “Just Tricking” by Andy Griffiths versus “Blue Back” by Tim Winton. How does the grammar differ?

2. Does that sound right?

Metalinguistics means “thinking and talking about language”. It is an important part of teaching grammar. One metalinguistic task is for a student to look at their written work and to assess whether or not the grammar is correct.

Very recently sitting in a Year 1/2 class, the teacher instructed the children to edit their work for **spelling**, for **punctuation** and for **grammar**. She is a brilliant teacher, who uses loads of visuals, explicit, systematic teaching and examples. Each of the above in bold, she wrote on the board and then for each, gave examples. When it came to grammar, she used the example, “If you wrote ‘We was going to the movies...’, ‘we was’ doesn’t sound right, so you would have to fix up the grammar... You would need to write ‘We WERE...’ ”

Learning to use correct grammar is enhanced by exposure to standard grammar, which at school, is heightened through reading and listening to formal language in texts. Keep in mind, that for some children, who have not had much exposure to formal language, the “does it sound right?” will NOT be an effective teaching strategy.

In this classroom, “We was going to the movies” may have sounded perfectly fine for some children, so the error would remain uncorrected.

Always consider the student’s level of language development by listening to how they speak and often this is a good place to start. If a child has not yet *using* the correct use of past tense when *speaking*, they are unlikely to recognise it as wrong in their written work.

3. Providing a Good Model of the Grammar of Standard English

Children need to hear correct grammar! At school, this is the job of the educators to provide a good language model. This doesn’t just mean using correct grammar, but it also means speaking clearly and using “chunking”...

Chunking sentences into phrases, with a pause in between, is the best strategy to use when speaking to students. It allows students to process each meaningful part of the sentence, and through this, enables them to learn the structure. Pausing after phrases can sound very natural when practised by the teacher.

For example, “In three weeks... the whole Year Five class... will be going... to the snow...”
(TIME PHRASE... NOUN PHRASE... VERB PHRASE... POSITIONAL PHRASE).

Sometimes, when a child is having significant trouble mastering a specific grammatical structure, I might listen to how their parents are speaking and offer some tips. One classic example, is a young child who is having difficulty learning the pronoun “I” and “Me”. Time and time, I have listened to parents provide a model of language that goes something like;

(Mum speaking): “Mum’s got to go now.” “ Give it to Mum” “Mum’s tired.”
How is the child meant to learn the use of “I” and “me” when Mum’s never using it?!

4. Explicit Teaching of Grammar

There is a time for explicit teaching of grammar. It can actually be fun – but only if it is meaningful and if it makes sense. Incorporate the “lingo” (such as pronoun, adverb, past tense) and if possible develop mnemonics (memory tricks) or gestures to accompany these.

Eg. PLOO the PENGUIN is my character who introduces PLURALS – and no child forgets what a PLURAL is after meeting her!

*Eg. When reinforcing **past** tense, I will often use a gesture where I throw my hand over my shoulder when I say a word such as YESTERDAY or LAST WEEK and then I will do it again when I say the past tense of the verb (WENT, ATE).*

Learning is more likely to transfer into knowledge if the new concepts you are studying are related to something meaningful. This is why it is VITAL to transfer all explicit teaching to writing tasks, reading, and speaking activities.

Choosing what to teach and when, is larger than the scope of this article, however some assistance will be given by The Australian Curriculum (2010) which outlines the expectations for each year level. Within the English domain, there are many references to the conventions of grammar.

Remember, however, that good teaching of grammar, will often incorporate other facets of language and communication. For example, teaching how to use the morpheme **-ly** to construct an adverb is a grammar task, but will also help with spelling, and most probably with reading.

SOME COMPONENTS OF GRAMMAR TO EXPLORE;

Plurals – regular and irregular

Nouns and Pronouns

Verbs - Past (regular and irregular), present, future

Possessives: ‘s and possessive pronouns

- Time phrases (include prepositions)**
- Phrases of place (include prepositions)**
- Adjectives (and related suffixes)**
- Adverbs (and related suffixes)**
- Compound and complex sentences (include conjunctions, embedded clauses)**

Sentence Analysis

When grammatical components have been studied, a sentence can be studied and analysed. Instructions such as “Underline all the verbs in red” and “Underline all the pronouns in blue” can be given. Although tedious at times, these activities can really help cement the students’ understanding of the concepts.

Grammar Grid

Provide a table to students with sentence components written down the left. Looking at a piece of text, they must write words they find in the corresponding box. No repeats! The first one to complete the grid wins!



PROPER NOUN			
PREPOSITION			
PRONOUN			
VERB			
ADJECTIVE			
CONJUNCTION			

Alien Talk – For sentences that are “out of this world!”

This is a program by Pelican Talk that explicitly and systematically builds up a sentence (and conversely pulls it apart). It is a fun and easy way to explore sentence components by studying ONE alien at a time who wants to know only about ONE component of a sentence. It starts by studying the ‘WHO’ phrase (the subject), then the ‘WHAT DOING’ phrase (the verb), the WHAT phrase (the object) and then adjectives, adverbs, time phrases (and tense changes), and positional/place phrases.

Finally, lots of aliens can string together in the SENTENCE SPACESHIP and make a grammatical sentence.

Alien Talk also incorporates vocabulary choices and spelling patterns. See www.pelicantalk.com

Grammar Grandma

I find that using Grammar Grandma, helps students group together what we are referring to when we think about “grammar”. Grandma is a big cardboard cut-out that has an apron. In the apron are cards that on ONE side have a label and the other have an activity. Students can draw out a card and the class completes the activity. Examples:

VERB CARD: TASK : Write a sentence with “Yesterday, my donkey...” and continue with a string of verbs, each beginning with P. The person with the most verbs WINS!

ADJECTIVE CARD: TASK: One person must say four adjectives to describe an animal. If someone knows the answer, they generate a question by using the five adjectives and the animal’s name. For example, “Is it a furry, stripy, ferocious, wild tiger?”

References and Further Reading

***Note :** of all the reading I did for this article, my favourite by far was “The Fight for English” by David Crystal. It’s a fantastic read.

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The Australian Curriculum www.acara.edu.au

Alien Talk www.pelicantalk.com (download the overview on the website).

Grammar Girl www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl

Grammar and Composition www.grammar.about.com

This article was written by Lucia Smith. August 2013.