

TOO OFTEN TRADITIONAL WRITING INSTRUCTION MEANS TEACHING GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS

Con Arlene Stover

Instruction in grammar and mechanics has been the traditional fare of writing instruction in many English classrooms.

However, some current research suggests that instruction in grammar has little, if any, favorable effect on writing of students. As a matter of fact, since teaching grammar takes the class time that students could spend on writing itself, and since its usefulness is unclear to many students, the effect of such teaching may be even harmful.

Why do we cling to this "traditional" method of teaching when studies show it does not help students to write better and classroom experiences reinforce this finding? Several explanations come to mind: habit; fear of trying something new or fear of losing our prestige by admitting we do not actually know the "correct" way to teach writing; a preference for the easy way; or a misunderstanding of what grammar actually is. Perhaps, several of these possibilities contain elements of the truth.

In the November, 1978, issue of the Scientific American, an article entitled "The Acquisition of Language," by Breyne Arlene Moskowitz, suggests the problems facing writing teachers as they plan their curricula:

In order to understand how language is learned it is necessary to understand what language is. The issue is confused by two factors. First, language is learned in early childhood, and adults have few memories of the intense effort that went into the learning process, just as they do not remember the process of learning to walk. Second, adults do have conscious memories of being taught the few grammatical rules that are prescribed as "correct" usage, or the norms of "standard" language. It is difficult for adults to dissociate their memories of school lessons from those

of true language learning, but the rules learned in school are only the conventions of an educated society. They are arbitrary finishing touches of embroidery on a thick fabric of language that each child weaves for herself before arriving in the English teacher's classroom (p. 92).

The formal study of English is unique. In what other area of study do students come to school already proficient? Students come to us having completed the greater part of the language acquisition process, knowing the subtleties of their native language as it is spoken in a

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variety of situations. They do not address their grandmothers in the same manner as they speak to their peers or siblings. Likewise, they can apply this competency to their writing. For example, I have asked my students of varying ability levels to write four letters about an incident, one to be sent to a grandparent, one to a friend who has moved, one to the local newspaper, and one to be handed in as an English assignment. The results are always the same: the details are very similar, but the language and style of each text varies greatly. After the assignment has been completed, we discuss the letters. The students know that as the audience and purpose of writing vary, the writing differs.

I begin my writing classes by asking students to bring to class a sample of effective and a sample of ineffective writing. They share them with the class. Writing samples come from posters, insurance forms, newspapers, magazines, the Bible, and even textbooks. Based on the discussion (I stay in the background), criteria for effec-

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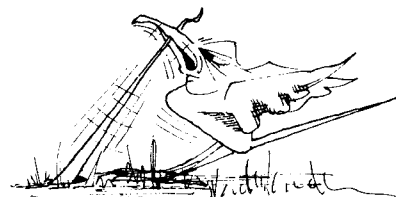
tive writing are developed by the class. The typical class list includes: word usage, figurative language, communicating clearly with the printed word, and so on. Seldom is grammar (the naming of word classes and of their syntactic functions) mentioned. These lists demonstrate that students have definite feelings about what constitutes effective writing.

Because the students have access to a repertoire of linguistic competence, good writing instruction does not try to put language data into the brain. Realizing that we are not filling empty boxes, writing teachers should make students conscious of the sophisticated linguistic and rhetorical skills they already possess, and then design classroom work to enable students to control their skills with precision and effectiveness. If students are forced to focus on the structural accuracy of their use of language, it gets in the way of ideas. Often students either won't write, won't write anything significant; or they will produce grammatically correct, but empty compositions.

Recently, my eleven-year-old son brought home two of his writing assignments. One was a "book report type." It lacked purpose; it was dull; and it was filled with errors. The second was a writing on the imagined life of an apple. Of course, he had an interest in the second topic--he knows about apples; his dad has a fruit farm, and he helps his dad on the farm. This writing was filled with memorable lines, delightful ideas and knowledge about the raising of apples. As the style came to life, most of the mechanical errors disappeared. No, he had not had an extensive grammar review during the time between assignments. No one had taught him the "magic" of composition. He is, after all, only a sixth-grader. In the apple assignment, he had a purpose and an interest. The assignment was real for him--it was not something he was doing simply to please the teacher, or worse yet, his "English teacher-mother."

Writing Instruction Should Focus on Process, Not Product

Writing requires practice; we can not simply teach all about writing and the rules of the language without letting our students practice, anymore than we can teach all about swimming without making the student get into the water and swim. One does not learn to drive by memorizing the parts of the car, the names of the muscles involved in the actual driving task, and the laws of physics which are operating on the driver and vehicle. Driving requires practice and assistance in the acquisition of the skill. It is a process beginning with the desire to get a car moving and progressing to parallel parking. Rules and procedures must be learned when the need for them is created; otherwise they are series of meaningless exercises. While we do not expect the child to skip or run before he toddles, traditionally we have expected a correct writing product before the child has experimented sufficiently with the writing process.



Progressing at successive levels, the student writer needs the freedom to try, the security and support of someone who cares, the encouragement to try again, and, most of all, the desire to write. Once the student freely expresses his ideas and understands the process, he can begin to learn to control it for his own purposes.

It follows that the writing program in an English classroom must facilitate language use and language experimentation. Integrated language study should be at the center of the program--not isolated grammar study. Using a variety of techniques, the teacher may provide the student with useful writing experiences, "fun" language activities, and even games

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in a natural language-learning process of trial-error-feedback.

The role of the teacher is vital to the success of any writing class: The writing class should not be teacher-centered; it should be student-centered. In a student-centered classroom, the teacher is a motivator, facilitator, and feedback source. Teachers must begin where the students are, not where they think students should be.

The purpose of writing is communication (to write about something, in some medium, for some purpose, and to someone). The writer knows that his obligation to the reader is to express himself in his best possible manner. Therefore, the emphasis in writing instruction must be on effectiveness of texts and not correctness of units of the texts.

Traditionally, grammatical punctilio in writing has been taught the wrong way, at the wrong time, and for the wrong reason. It should be meaningful and functional for the student. Usage and mechanics should be treated as editorial tools which can serve to make texts more generally understandable. As the student realizes the demands of the business world and the academy, he will want to know their writing conventions. Then he will learn them; not when he is told to correct ten sentences with agreement problems for homework.

The issue is not whether teaching correctness in writing is right or wrong. Rather it is one of timing and purpose. I believe Johnny can write--but only if we let him. Too often, we have imposed before the students have composed. We have filled them with rules for surface production while ignoring the deep structure of language. We have to stop frosting the cake before the batter has been mixed and baked.

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Robert Root (cont. from p. 47)

Events

February 6, 1980, **Writing Across the Continuum Conference**, MCTE Region 6 and Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant.

February 14-16, 1980 Midwest Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College, Kalamazoo Center Hilton Inn, Kalamazoo, MI.

March 6 **Regional Conference**, Northwestern Michigan College, Traverse City.

March 13-15, 1980. **Conference on College Composition and Communication**, Washington Hilton, Washington, DC.

March 21-23, 1980. **National Conference on Language Arts in the Elementary School**, St. Anthony Hotel, San Antonio, TX.

March 26-29, 1980 Joint Meeting: **Secondary School English Conference and Conference on English Education**, Omaha Hilton, Omaha, Nebraska.

If you are aware of upcoming meetings, conferences, and other events in writing, please send information for inclusion in this feature to: Robert Root, Department of English, Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant 48859.

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