Making "Sense" of Grammar Instruction:

A Multisensory Approach to Teaching Grammar

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Background:

For too long, grammar instruction has consisted of worksheets. Circle the errors, rewrite the sentence, complete worksheet after worksheet. Eventually, students taught this way would write a paper, and the red marks would reveal they knew how to edit for grammar, but not how to use it as a tool in writing. These experiences come from the author's own elementary school years and have been confirmed to happen elsewhere through conversations with others across various generations and schools.

Granted, this may not entirely be the fault of the instructor. It can pose a challenge to educate students on such a vital skill when it is not given a place in the standards of learning. In Virginia, the only mention of grammar in the writing Standards of Learning (SOLs) states that "the student will edit writing for correct grammar…" (Board of Education Commonwealth of Virginia, 2010, p. 9). It is mentioned in every grade level once, and then ignored. No emphasis is placed on learning to use grammar in one's writing. Grammar is set aside as teachers are expected to focus on topics that the school system deems to be "more important." Given this arrangement, it can be understood why so much grammar instruction is merely focused on those editing worksheets. However, that does not make it right. As teachers of grammar, it is no secret just how formative grammar instruction can be in the creation of great writers.

When the intense need for grammar instruction faces the constraints of school standards, it is vital to search for the best methods of instruction that engage students and allow them to discover how they can use a tool as powerful as this. Grammar instruction needs to be explicit (Spada & Tomita, 2010), but does not need to be cut and dry or be a worksheet. As an alternative, readers are urged to consider a multisensory approach to grammar instruction, an approach credited with strengthening neural pathways and allowing for faster and easier

information recall (Kelley & Phillips, 2016). This approach looks to blend visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning (Morgan, 2019) to create a stronger understanding of grammar instruction. When this is accomplished, students have the opportunity to see grammar being used, hear the impact it has on a piece, and create their own experiences with it. A multisensory approach to grammar instruction is something that need not take time away from standards-based instruction, and can be seamlessly integrated into lessons on other topics. This approach takes grammar from the page and makes it something students can interact with and manipulate.

In a multisensory approach to grammar instruction, there are three key considerations, each of which will be discussed in depth throughout this piece. It is of the utmost importance for this kind of instruction to be personal, be adaptable to meet the needs of a diverse student population, and involve learning through inquiry.

Recommendation One: Make it Personal

Standard English Grammar has a set of rules that dictates formal writing conventions. A strict interpretation of that fact could lead to a belief that grammar allows for no creativity and no personal expression. However, this article intends to argue exactly the opposite. Grammar can be creative, can be a tool for writing, and can bring one's own voice into their written word. In order to accomplish this, it is essential that grammar is taught in a way that makes it into a culturally relevant, personal experience for students.

Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy pushes for education to be integrated into students' culture. This needs to be prevalent across all subject areas and would prove to be a true asset in grammar instruction. Students need to be provided with choice and variety in the types of stories they read; they want to see themselves reflected in the literature, and doing so creates increased engagement (Feger, 2006). This is partially reliant on the

classroom teacher providing these resources, but should mostly be focused on the students.

Opportunities must be created for students to bring whatever interests them into the classroom.

This can be seen in a variety of ways, and below are just two examples:

- Students should be encouraged to bring in their choice of a mentor text to reference

  during class discussions (Ruday, 2013). Some parameters can be set, such as requiring

  them to bring in a song or a chapter book, but the actual selection of the text must be left

  to the student. In doing this, students are analyzing what they are familiar with, finding

  ways in which different grammatical concepts impact the things they like to read or listen

  to.

- When writing, students should be given choices on what they would like to write about,

  and given a focus on a grammatical concept. Giving students choices creates increased

  engagement- they could be excited to write, and framing their writing with a few specific

  grammatical concepts would allow them to see how they can use grammar to strengthen

  their own writing.

  It should not just be reading and writing, though. Grammar can be used to help students

express themselves creatively and explore their skills in the arts. From visual to performing arts,

students can participate in activities such as the ones described below to experience the way in

which grammar concepts can alter what they read and write.

- Take a story, whether it be a fictional or nonfictional text, and read a section aloud to

  students without showing any pictures. Ask the students to then create a simple drawing

  of what they just heard on one half of a sheet of paper. Then, ask them to draw what they

  hear again, but after a grammatical concept is changed or added. For example, if an

  original sentence read "I studied the photo: two girls sitting at the piano in the inn"

(Turnage, p. 299), students could study how adding adjectives affects a sentence if the word *broken* was added before *piano*.

- Provide students with a short script. Ideally, it could be a script derived from a book they are currently working on or a historical event they are learning about. Students can be tasked with changing a specified grammatical concept, such as verbs. Students would work in small groups to replace the verbs, and then present the original script and altered script to the class by acting them out.

Strategies such as these are beneficial for all students, as they have the chance to exercise the other half of their brains and do something out of the ordinary, something many would certainly not expect from a grammar lesson. As they are creating, as they are doing, students can realize first-hand the impact of grammatical choices. These activities can be short, but can prompt amazing discussions.

Any of these activities can be adapted to fit the needs of one's class or the focus of a day's instruction. Perhaps what is most important in making instruction personal, however, is creating a teacher-student partnership where the teacher works alongside the students to figure out these different concepts. This can take many forms, from questioning to repeating or simply collaborating with individuals or groups (Ko & Wang, 2008). Working with students beyond simple lecture creates a more personal understanding for them and can allow for individualized instruction. When students are given the chance to participate in activities such as these, where they can work with groups or discuss their thoughts with the whole class, they are able to engage in metacognition and more deeply understand grammar as it applies to them. Vygotsky (1978) argues that cognitive development best occurs in a social situation, and creating personal learning experiences produces this effect for grammar instruction.

Recommendation Two: Adapt Instruction for Multiple Abilities

Students not only learn in different ways, but have varied needs that should be acknowledged and met within a classroom. Whether this is the case with a student who has a mental or physical disability, or a student that is an English Language Learner, instruction must be differentiated to ensure they are learning, growing, and being appropriately challenged.

For a resource on how to adapt a classroom, lessons and assignments, one can look to the three principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL): "multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement" (Kennette & Wilson, 2019, p. 2). This design appeals to students of all modalities and backgrounds (Kennette & Wilson, 2019) to ensure that there is something, whether it be an arrangement, policy, or alternative plan, that makes learning possible for each student. Universal Design for Learning can manifest in countless ways, from structuring a class' pace with room for flexibility to offering content resources through different means such as text and video.

Grammar can already be a difficult concept for students to grasp without being an English Language Learner or having a disability, and the struggle can increase tenfold if a student's life does include a language barrier or handicap. If it is not possible to create a way for a student to participate in an activity as a result of some hindrance, there must be equally valuable alternatives arranged, or a new activity must be chosen for the whole class. It is of the utmost importance that students do not feel alienated as a result of factors beyond their control. There are a variety of methods to incorporate different opportunities for students to succeed. For example, students can be provided with multiple opportunities and modalities to respond to questions and information to display their learning, offering the ability to answer aloud, share with a friend, answer on a game such as Kahoot!, or using a physical response card (Hovey et al.,

2019). It is also essential to provide assistive technology when one is able. Instead of writing out a sentence using pen and paper, a student could be given the option to dictate it into a computer, type on a keyboard, or even trace out the letters on a tablet. Students need to be given chances to express their knowledge in the way that best allows their abilities to shine.

It is recommended that instruction of grammar concepts be taught through explicit instruction that offers models and covers topics in a sequential order (Hovey et al., 2019). It should be designed so that instruction is scaffolded and all students are able to work independently (Hovey et al., 2019). This should include the whole group, small group, and even partner experiences so students have the chance to learn from one another, as well. However, a teacher of grammar must recognize that this timeline could be different for every student, and must be willing to provide individualized tracks and resources when necessary. Given that grammar does have a large visual component, it is also vital that students are offered visual resources when possible. This is an evidence-based strategy that is especially helpful for English Language Learners (Hovey et al., 2019). This can manifest as graphic organizers, anchor charts, videos, pictures, and more (Hovey et al., 2019).

This is far from a comprehensive list of adaptations, but it is intended to engage readers in the process of creating them. It is simply a framework, and one's own individual students must be considered to inform planning based off of this framework. In order to set every student up for success, a teacher must be creative. They must be willing to adapt and listen carefully to the needs of each individual student. Creating a classroom environment that caters to the needs of every student may seem like a daunting task. In reality, though, this approach just asks for small changes to be made over a period of time, and will ultimately bring out the best in each student.

Making changes such as the ones described here do not need to change the whole classroom dynamic, and certainly do not take away from the learning of any other student.

Recommendation Three: Base Instruction Around Inquiry

At this point in the article, readers are encouraged to reflect on their past experiences as students in the classroom. Consider what still remains in one's memory from elementary school, and then reflect on how that information was acquired. Those concepts that still seem relevant: were they taught through lectures and worksheets, or through projects and presentations? Did these projects and presentations require further research beyond what was covered in class? For many, reflection on these questions will lead to this recommendation: learning that engages students in the process of inquiry allows for longer-lasting learning and understanding. Students conduct investigations and searches, which helps build a more personal understanding (Wilhelm, 2012). Inquiry-based learning in the grammar classroom can take concepts from the page and turn them into meaningful aspects of students' lives (Ruday, 2020).

Inquiry is a process that encourages students to think outside of the textbook and outside of the worksheets. It asks students to synthesize, reflect, and consider what more there is to inquire about (Cousin, Dembrow, & Molldrem-Shamel, 1997). When inquiry is conducted, students have the chance to get out of their seats and bring their focus away from worksheets; they have the chance to convey information that is of interest to them through the means of their choice. It is a more independent process, though it can be accomplished in groups or even whole-class settings. If done effectively, each student will finish the process with a deeper understanding and connection to the material.

To begin the inquiry process on any topic, an essential question is needed. These are thought-provoking questions designed to promote reflection and understanding of learning.

Wilhelm (2012) argues that effective essential questions should be of interest to students and relevant to their personal lives, create an environment that encourages ongoing debate, and challenge students to learn. It should be presented as a problem that needs to be solved, something that connects classroom learning to student experiences (Wilhelm, 2012). Furthermore, it should not limit the students to certain ways of expression. Relating back to discussions on Universal Design of Learning, one should ensure that the way an essential question is represented and structured can allow for multiple pathways to showcasing knowledge. Oftentimes, these are used at the start of a unit to frame what students will be learning (Wilhelm, 2012). This is an excellent way to have students engage with material prior to learning it and be able to make personal connections. When asking these questions, a teacher must ensure that it goes beyond just having students journal or discuss it for the first ten minutes of class. Rather, this essential question should drive the class forward and kickstart the process of student inquiry.

Once the essential question is stated, the majority of the class should be based around student inquiry. This can be done through creating projects that last for a few days, creating presentations, or a variety of other creative strategies that will be addressed momentarily. Regardless of the project's specifics, the inquiry should take most of the class time. This is not to say that one should do away with traditional instruction- in fact, time should still be devoted each day to more structured group learning. Mini lessons should occur to discuss specific concepts in greater depth with students and check for understanding. However, all roads should lead back to inquiry. Teach the grammar concept, and then teach how it relates to the project. It is even a possibility that a new essential question can be offered each day to focus on a specific aspect of a project.

This discussion of inquiry-based grammar projects would be remiss, however, without recommendations of such projects. As with the prior recommendation, the projects described here are merely adaptable frameworks, not a comprehensive list. Here are just a few ideas:

- Ruday (2020) detailed The Grammar Inquiry Project, conducted in an eighth grade classroom and intended to engage students in this inquiry process. Each student was challenged to find an example of a grammatical concept in a student-selected text, and then argue to the class why their example contributes to the effectiveness of the chosen text (Ruday, 2020). The parameters for this project were broad, allowing students to select from songs, books, poems, or any other form of text (Ruday, 2020). In creating a project such as this, Ruday enabled students to showcase their own backgrounds and interests while developing this deeper understanding.

- Another project is one that will fondly be called "Grammar Shark Tank." Like with the Grammar Inquiry Project, students will select a specific grammar concept and will find examples of it within chosen texts. However, it will be framed as something more of a competition: they must pitch their grammar concept to an "author in residence," trying to convince them why they need to use that specific grammar concept in their book.

- Students could also be asked to compare their own writing styles to that of a published author. Through a project, they could practice translating a piece of their original writing to mimic an author's style, and then translate the author's style to their personal technique. In accomplishing this, students must reflect on their writing and the grammatical concepts they feel most comfortable using. In studying another author's style, they have the chance to try out new concepts and consider how that impacts their writing. This project could conclude with presentations of the differences and similarities.

At the end of any inquiry project, students should be given time to reflect (Cousin et al., 1997). What did they learn? What did that process look like? What are they still left wondering? It's these considerations that should continue to inform their learning. Those things that they are left wondering should drive further inquiry, whether that be in the next unit or outside of class.

Inquiry-based projects begin with students considering what they are interested in exploring, and pursuing that. These projects need not require ample amounts of structure, and should encourage students to approach it from their own perspectives and demonstrate knowledge through a variety of pathways. It allows students to connect what is learned in school with what they are familiar with beyond the classroom, and creates a more meaningful space for grammatical concepts in daily life (Ruday, 2020). Furthermore, inquiry-based instruction allows students to engage with content beyond just lectures- when they are doing projects based on inquiry, students need to be moving, they need to be discussing, and they need to be creating. When instruction is based around inquiry, students are engaging their senses and their minds. Class time should primarily consist of inquiry-based learning, supplemented with mini-lessons and perhaps even more focused essential questions. It need not always be a large project, either. So long as it encourages students to make connections, conduct investigations, and learn through their own processes, the inquiry is effective.

Conclusion

A multisensory approach to grammar instruction can be structured around following three simple ideas: make instruction personal, adaptable, and inquiry-focused. Grammar is a tool that can transform student writing, and can be used to convey very personal and meaningful subjects. For this reason, it is vital that students understand that grammar goes beyond simple rules, and that creating personalized instruction is the key to revealing how grammar can serve their

writing, rather than control it. When instruction pays attention to the interests and needs of individual students, it better lends itself to the possibility for adaptations. Not only can instruction allow for choice and personal connections, but it can be designed to allow students of all abilities to participate in whatever degree they are able. In allowing for multiple abilities to interact with grammar in a personalized way, teachers are giving each student a fair chance to truly explore the writing tools such an experience can equip them with. An excellent way to provide both personal and adapted instruction comes in the form of inquiry-based assignments. In allowing students to construct their learning around an open-ended question, it brings together the need for choices and multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement (Kennette & Wilson, 2019). Inquiry-based assignments allow students to conduct research based on their personal interests and experiences, allow them to use whatever tools they need to succeed, and create an opportunity for students to go beyond simply writing and worksheets. Through these assignments, students get to see, feel, hear, do, and create grammar. When an educator looks to implement the three recommendations of this article within their own classroom, they should look not to add each individually, but to bring them together, as described above. These three ideas are most effective when integrated with one another.

As these practices are incorporated, consider frequent check-ins with students. A teacher's lessons are only as good as their class' understanding and engagement; an effective lesson depends on both good instruction and interested students. In order to accomplish that, a teacher can create a system to periodically check in with the class and ensure that they feel like their needs are being met and they are being productively challenged. Individual, face-to-face interactions are recommended for this to gain the most organic feedback possible, but it is also understood that there may be time constraints preventing that. As an alternative, educators could

consider asking the class as a whole and having students respond to different questions via

thumbs up or down, or passing around a short survey of open-ended questions. Regardless of the

style, an ideal setup would give students a chance to weigh in as much as possible and as much

as is appropriate. Judging what is appropriate and necessary for one's class is entirely an

individual decision, but a guideline could be looking to check in toward the beginning of every

other new unit. With this timeframe, students are having a chance to regularly share their

thoughts in time to adapt the unit if needed.

      The baseline of each recommendation, even the addition of hosting check-ins, boils down

to two simple words: be creative. That has been restated throughout this piece, and will be

discussed one final time. In order to provide an authentic, student-centered, multisensory

approach to grammar instruction, an educator has to get creative. The simplest option for

grammar instruction is to simply do worksheets, but that in itself is not instruction at all. A

teacher must first inventory the needs and passions of their students, and use this information and

some creativity to make instruction personal, adaptable, and inquiry-based. It takes much

creativity to design approaches that can engage every student and allow them to succeed via their

best methods, but it is possible. Generating questions for inquiry and structuring authentic

projects and assignments is not a trivial task, but again, it is possible. This approach does not

claim to be the easiest, but it is instead a great challenge in which each and every grammar

educator is encouraged to partake. Grammar belongs off the page and in students' eyes, ears,

mouths, and hands, and each student deserves that experience.

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