

TEACHING AMERICAN SPEECH

SENTENCE-BUILDING PEDAGOGY AND THE ETHICS OF GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION

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What do students want when they sign up for a grammar class? How can we give them what they want while teaching courses that go beyond providing a sense of “doing school” (Pope 2001)? How can a grammar class make a difference to students’ writing beyond the classroom? Talking to and observing the students in English 270, the introductory grammar course I teach within the Department of English at York College, I have developed a response to these questions grounded not just in an academic interest of the structure of language, but also the economic reality of my students’ lives and, in particular, their reasons for pursuing higher education. Whereas composition classes generally focus on the production of academic prose, and so are bound to the world of college, in a grammar class we have an opportunity and a responsibility to look beyond the academic world and to place language in a broader context. As my students tell me, that context is one where grammatical prowess is associated with greater employability as well as intellectual maturity. In their own words, students come to English 270 for “improvement” and “help,” and they expect to leave writing and sounding “better,” “more mature,” and more “professional.”

In this article, I describe my efforts to answer the above questions. These efforts have developed over the course of five years of teaching English 270. My answers, however, are not direct responses to what students say they want: while I try to provide the “help” that many ask for, I work to teach beyond improvement in the sense of teaching “proper English” and all the prescriptive rules that implies. The sentence-building assignments presented here are a product of the tension I experience in my grammar class. While wanting to teach grammar ethically—as something that affirms students’ language instincts, and which includes them and the various languages and dialects of English that they speak in the hegemonic discourses of school and work—I seek to keep one foot in the door of correctness and standardization, in response to the demands of the global linguistic economy and to the place that students at my college identify for themselves in it.

Grammar instruction and analysis tend to focus on comprehension and processing—a demonstration of students’ knowledge of grammar—rather

than on the production of grammatically complex sentences that function appropriately in a longer discourse. A typical task in a grammar classroom involves having students look at a sentence or set of sentences, either standing alone or in their original context, and having those students identify constituent parts of those sentences. We can see this kind of exercise in any grammar handbook (e.g., Maimon and Peritz 2003, 123–35; Hacker 2006, 793). An elementary grammar lesson might focus on asking students to find the verb phrase and the subject of each sentence in a list; a higher-level lesson might involve determining the voice in which each sentence is written or looking at how clauses are coordinated or subordinated in the sentence. Grammar instructors who are more aware of work in applied linguistics might ask their students to search for particular types of sentences within a corpus (see, e.g., Young 2011), but many grammar workbooks still focus on grammar drills, with no context or connection to meaning required.

But what of production? When we teach grammar, how do we make the connection between having students identify parts of speech and parts of sentences and understand how they work, having them look at how other authors build sentences into paragraphs, and using those parts of speech and strategies for building a discourse in their own speech and writing? In this article, I present a pair of sentence-building assignments I have developed for my introductory grammar course. In developing this sentence-building pedagogy, which follows more traditional sentence-analyzing assignments during the first half of the semester, I have also become aware of my obligation, as an instructor at a college where many varieties of English are spoken by students and faculty, to open up a space where students' own English is affirmed as I teach them the rules of the global standard. These rules range from lower-level directions that help students ensure that subject-verb agreement is marked on their verb forms and that their past tense verbs are marked with the appropriate endings to understanding the use of punctuation to mark clausal and phrasal boundaries. Sentence-building assignments offer a first step toward teaching these rules in an ethical way.

THE BATTLE FOR GRAMMAR IN THE CLASSROOM. As is well known, since the Braddock Report (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer 1963) and the Hillocks Report (Hillocks 1986), grammar instruction has been viewed with some suspicion within the academy. These studies have generally been interpreted as concluding that grammar instruction is at best useless and at worst detrimental in classes intended to improve student writing (see Brown 2009 for further discussion). While grammar instruction, post Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer (1963) and Hillocks (1986), has its champions, notably Constance Weaver and Martha Kolln (e.g., Kolln 1981; Weaver 1996; Kolln

and Hancock 2005; Kolln and Funk 2009; see also Micciche 2004), it has been largely excluded from the composition classroom (Young 2011). As well, Connors (2000) describes the process by which, as composition courses moved from an alignment with applied linguistics and formal rhetoric to one with English literature and process pedagogy, sentence-building pedagogical methods such as those espoused by Francis Christensen, Edward Corbett, and John Mellon (1969) gradually disappeared from composition instructors' repertoire. This disappearance occurred despite evidence from several studies that these pedagogies were effective in improving students' writing, based on a number of metrics, including number of words used per clause and number of clauses used per sentence, indicators of sentence complexity and maturity (e.g., O'Donnell, Griffin, and Norris 1967; O'Hare 1973; Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg 1978; Faigley 1979). Some teachers of composition do provide systematic grammar instruction, but, on the whole, fluency and evidence of creative and/or critical thought have been valued over correctness. If an instructor does work on the sentence-level in the classroom, grammar either is treated in isolation from writing, often with short drills occurring at various points during the semester, or in marginal comments and line edits, asking students to correct errors after they have written them rather than teaching strategies to avoid them. The grammar class has thus become the one place on campus where issues of sentence construction in English can be tackled head on.

Tackling grammar head on and in the context of writing is important work, despite the anxiety that has prevailed about grammar in English Departments since the Hillocks Report. Students' regard for standard English has been strengthened by the global economy, where the standard Metropolitan Englishes of the United Kingdom and United States (Canagarajah 2006) function as currency in the job market. So, what do students expect of a grammar class?

WHAT DO STUDENTS WANT? I distributed an anonymous survey to the four sections of English 270 in 2012–13 to discover why students had signed up for the course, what they expected from it, and how they thought it would benefit them. Of the 80 respondents, 53 (66.3%) indicated that they had signed up for the course because it satisfied either a major or a graduation requirement. These responses were often accompanied by another sentence indicating that the students also considered their grammar to be deficient in some way. Sixteen (20.0%) indicated that they were taking the class solely because they wanted to improve their grammar and writing, while 10 (12.5%) indicated that an interest in grammar and language was their primary motivation for taking the course. The remaining respondent—who fit none of these

categories—took the course because the student thought it would open up career options. When I asked students how they thought the course would benefit them, the majority focused on the course’s potential to improve their language skills. They thought it would improve their self-confidence as writers and have a direct impact on the form of their sentences. Just a few mentioned its potential impact on their speech. Some students mentioned its potential benefit from a generative perspective: “I think it will benefit my writing and help me think more closely about the sentences I create on my own based on my knowledge of English”; while others thought it would have a remedial effect: “It would benefit me by helping me to correct myself when I am writing.” Finally, a number of them thought it would help them in their careers; as one student put it, “Many employers in the job market can be huge sticklers for correct grammar.”

What struck me about the students’ responses to the survey was the anxiety around grammar that they expressed. While striking, though, it was not surprising: having taught this course for a number of years, I know that a large part of my task over the course of the semester is to help students feel competent doing the technical work of identifying parts of speech and then to translate this awareness of grammatical structure in others’ work into facility in crafting their own sentences and in recognizing their grammatical idiosyncrasies. Though some will always consider grammar “abstract, boring, and unconnected to their lives” (Marlow 2010, 225), others struggle through the first half of the semester, but then show improvement in their writing in the second half, realizing that the sometimes the tedious work of learning and memorizing parts of speech and the elements of sentences and noun phrases can actually make a difference in their own writing. It is these students for whom the course can have a transformative effect and for whom the immersion in the structure of sentences and texts has real value.

SENTENCE BUILDING PEDAGOGY. The two sentence-building assignments I use in English 270 draw on and extend the effective sentence-combining exercises that were researched and used extensively within the discipline of composition in the 1960s and 1970s. The goal of these assignments is for students to extend their own habits of sentence writing to include more variety and complexity of structure, doing so in the context of developing complex ideas in a mid-length piece of writing.

For the first half of the semester, I focus on comprehension: I have the students identify grammatical constructions in noisy, real-world texts, rather than using texts I have constructed or selected for the purpose. For the first assignment, they identify parts of speech and clause types (subjects, verb phrases, independent clauses, dependent clauses) in song lyrics they have

chosen themselves; for the second assignment, they identify noun and sentence modifiers, as well as verbs that introduce quotations (and the quotations themselves), in newspaper articles they have also chosen. The first half of the semester is a fairly traditional grammar class, except that students choose the texts with which they work. We focus on identifying parts of speech and different clause-combining and modification options. I do let go of some elements of traditional grammar: for instance, I do not teach the terms “object” and “predicate,” focusing instead on the primacy of the subject-verb relationship in English grammar. That is, when students can successfully identify the subject noun phrase and the matrix verb phrase of a clause— independent, dependent, or relative—they can identify any other kind of structure at the sentence or noun phrase level. By successfully learning how to identify independent clauses and their modifiers and noun phrases and their modifiers, students are equipped with the tools and the terminology to build the kind of complex sentences they see in the first part of the semester when they turn to their own writing in the second half.

But grammar courses can only have a transformative effect if they move from comprehension to production, and then, only the production of real-world texts. As Celce-Murcia (1992, 406) writes, “any [formal grammar] instruction is more effective if it is discourse-based and context-based than if it is sentence-based and context-free.” Producing texts gives students practice in working at the level of discourse, as they must consider elements such as audience and rhetorical impact when they write, as well as the correctness of their sentences.¹ Comprehension exercises, in contrast, test what students already know; students may not develop any new competencies as they display their knowledge.

Accordingly, in the second half of the semester, we move from sentence-analyzing to sentence-building. Students write two 3–5-page essays in response to two prompts, which ask them to consider their own experiences with reference to a reading I provide (see the appendix for a sample assignment). In addition to writing the essay, they are required to produce and identify examples of various types of sentence and noun modification in their papers, as well as several methods of combining clauses. In the past I have assigned the introduction to Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1989), Mike Rose’s “Blue-Collar Brilliance” (2009), and the introduction to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). In fall 2012, I assigned Richard E. Miller’s “The Arts of Complicity: Pragmatism and the Culture of Schooling” (1998). All of these texts offer students frames through which they can view their own educational experiences and the role of education in their families. I collect and comment on a rough draft, focusing on their engagement with the text in particular: my experience is that, if students are not pushed to

read closely and critically and to represent the ideas in the texts accurately in their own writing, the complexity of the sentences they produce will be limited. That is, without exposure to, and familiarity with complex ideas expressed in complex sentences, students cannot write their own complex ideas effectively (see also Sternglass 1980 and the attitudes of proponents of “imitation pedagogy” discussed in Connors 2000). In their final drafts, I read both for content and for sentence variety and check the counts and accuracy of their labels.

Between the rough and final drafts, students work together to identify the types of sentences and noun phrases they have already written. They look for sentences joined with colons and semicolons, sentences that include dependent clauses (complex sentences), and sentences modified with coordinating adverbs and participial and adverbial phrases, for example. They look for noun phrases modified by relative clauses—restrictive and nonrestrictive, reduced and appositive—and noun phrases modified by prepositional phrases. They are familiar with the terminology because of the analysis assignments they spend the first half of the semester doing, as described above. Finally, when they have identified all of the relevant constructions in their drafts, they count them and compare their count with a required number I include in the assignment prompt. They must then write or revise to include the required number of sentences in the appropriate forms to make up the count, while making sure that the changes they make are appropriate in the larger context of the essays that they are writing.

I now present three examples of student writing to show this sentence-building pedagogy at work. The first two sample paragraphs are taken from the writing of the same student in the third and fourth papers of the course—a student who did very well in the class. The third example is taken from the final paper of a student who did less well. In the first sample, we see several inaccuracies in the student’s mark up: for instance, she has some issues with identifying types of relative clauses and distinguishing relative clauses from verbal complement clauses and coordinating from subordinating conjunctions. The sentences that she produces are, however, complex and sophisticated in structure. The markup and count component of the assignment is indicated in this student’s subscripts.

Generation after generation_{Prep.P(1)}, people come into the world_{Prep.P(2)}, find, learn and eventually_{Adv.P(1)} instill these pre-set laws and moral values. From the very beginning, they are not only assigned roles to play in society but in specific settings_{Prep.P(3)} as well, the first, for many, being schools. Each individual, wherever the setting_{Rest.RC}, and depending on their roles, are taught what behaviors are found acceptable. Having modified what they learned_{ParticipialP(1)}, those individuals who question and/or add

on to it_{Res.RC(1)} cannot go overlooked. Though, one could argue that the majority is likely to follow as opposed to doing anything else. Being permanent and granted to all the right to comply or question_{ParticipialP.(2)}, it seems that there exists in everyone a common belief: their duty is to collaborate, “showing that the disempowered willingly and thoughtlessly participate_{Adv.P(2)} in the system_{Prep.Phrase(4)} that insures their own subordination” (Miller, 16). They do not comply because they know no other way, but because in this system, provided is the security to know they will be accepted in society_{Red.RC(1)}, on the condition that they comply. “[Though_{Coord.Conj.(1)}] subordinates [those who are without power_{Res.RC(3)}] neither consent nor resign themselves to their fate_[IC]... they do reliably collaborate_[IC]” thus creating “the impression that they... [Accept] the tenets of a public transcript ideology” (Miller 16). Therefore_{Coord.Conj.(2)}, we find that the people of a society take upon these roles that pre-dictate actions they are allowed and those forbidden_{Red.RC(2)}, roles that James Scott, in his *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, identifies_{verb of saying or doing} to be Public Transcripts, as noted by Richard E. Miller.

In the second example from this student, taken from the final paper in the course, we see that she has done better with her subordinating and coordinating conjunctions, though some problems persist, and new ones have been introduced, such as the overgeneralization of the marker App(ositive). Her sentences are still controlled and complex: there are no run-ons and no abrupt transitions between ideas. Finally, even though not every element is marked, we see the student using a variety of constructions to express her ideas and tell her story.

After_{prep.} about two years_{prep.Ph.} of going to pre-school and hearing my mother say the same thing each and every day, in her soothing motherly_{App.} tone, “Be good, ok. And listen to your teachers”, [I decided, in kindergarten_{RRC} to test the waters,]_{IC} and_{coord. conj} [see what would be done]_{IC} [if_{Sub.Conj.} I hadn’t been as good as she wanted]_{DC}. Although_{sub.Conj} I didn’t wake up that morning with the intentions to disobey her, having considered the idea_{Part.Ph.} [I knew if ever such an opportunity presented it wouldn’t be turned down]_{IC}. So I remember very clearly_{App.Ph} the day_{nounPh} she brought me to class and repeated the same thing, in the same tone_{red} “Be good, ok. And listen to your teachers” and as usual, I said yes. As the day went by, everything was going well and I was happy, until my teacher had to step out the classroom for whatever reason, then we, the students_{RC}, were left with the assistant teacher_{nounPhrase} whose name I don’t even think I knew_{App}.

Finally, we contrast these two passages with the first two paragraphs of another student’s fourth assignment. As we see, the student favors short sentences even in this final assignment. I suggest that without the sentence-building requirements of the assignment, the sentences in this assignment would be shorter still; we see some variety of sentence forms (independent clauses modified by prepositional phrases as well as dependent clauses), and

some variety in the student's choice of noun modifiers. We also note a verb form error in the final paragraph.

As a student, we are exposed to many different environments that shape our behaviors. These can help us make our decisions in life and learn a little more about ourselves along the way. Motivation is the number one priority as a student. Without strong motivation being a student would not have a strong purpose to complete their goals. It is important to develop a strong will, [since]^{SUB CONJ} there are many obstacles provided by the institutional policies.

A students' success heavily relies on the student as well as the institutional policies at [which the school]^{RRC} [that the student is attending]^{RRC}. [Because] there are requirements from the school, the students' goals are sometimes pushed to second priority. As a student of York College I have been subjected to these rules. Such enforcers for the institutional policies come from the guidance councilors, [the so called gurus to career choices]^{APP}, [which are normally not updated]^{RRC}. This can creates problems, as each student is not assigned one councilor but is sent to any random councilor.

As we see above, sentence-building exercises do a number of things. First, they help students distinguish which grammatical structures they use consciously and which they use unconsciously. A student who already uses complex sentence structures will have little revision to do at the sentence-level; however, students whose sentence structure tends to clauses and noun phrases modified only by prepositional phrases (by far the most common modifier that I find in my students' writing) have work to do. To succeed in the assignment, students must not only understand what kind of sentences they need to build, but also how to build them. To help them build these sentences, we take examples of two single-clause sentences in class and consider ways to combine them using subordinating and coordinating conjunctions and coordinating adverbs. I also ask them to locate various ideas in space and time, to incorporating prepositions, and to think about how they want their audience to read and respond to the ideas they are presenting, so leading to the use of adverbs. We take it sentence by sentence, and use examples of what students have already done inadvertently in their papers. They read their sentences aloud, I write them on the board, and the rest of the class tells the author what structures they see and hear. The class creates community around sentence building, to a degree that I found surprising the first time we did this activity. Furthermore, the students do much better on this assignment than they do on the comprehension and analysis exercises from the beginning of the semester; it seems that understanding their own use of these structures does, in fact, help them understand the grammatical concepts themselves.

SENTENCE-BUILDING OUT OF SENTENCE-COMBINING. My sentence-building activities are connected with the sentence-combining activities that were popular in the composition classroom in the 1960s and 1970s (Strong 1994; Connors 2000). Sentence-combining activities have students combine prewritten single independent clauses according to requirements presented by the instructor or the textbook. Connors (2000, 103) writes, “Sentence-combining in its simplest form is the process of joining two or more short, simple sentences to make one longer sentence, using embedding, deletion, subordination, and coordination.” An example sentence-combining exercise is shown in (1). Students must form a single, complex sentence using all the single-clause sentences provided. Students see several sets of short sentences that develop on a single topic; the sample shown below is the first set of sentences under the topic “Departure” (example from Strong 1994).

1. The apartment was quiet.
It was punctuated by ticking.
This ticking was insistent.
The ticking was soft.
The ticking came from a clock.

Despite the effectiveness of sentence-combining pedagogies in increasing the complexity of students’ written work, such strategies are no longer widely used in the composition classroom. The criticism that brought sentence-combining down as a dominant pedagogy in composition is described by Moffett (1968), who points to the lack of a broader context available in sentence-combining exercises as the source of the problem: “For the learner [...] basics are not the small-focus technical things but broad things like meaning and motivation, purpose and point, which are precisely what are missing from exercises” (205; quoted in Connors 2000, 110). Sentence-combining exercises make writing sentences a trivial activity, missing the basic point of writing. Sentence-building as part of the paper-writing process avoids this problem. While my students’ grammatical knowledge is built on a foundation of “small-focus technical things,” they put this knowledge to work in a context where they have to address, through their sentences, “meaning and motivation, purpose and point.” Sentence-building pedagogy, in the context of a larger essay, gets us technical expertise—grammar—and contextualized language use—meaning—together.

Teaching grammar using students’ own writing as the course’s source material is central to treating grammar as an appropriate intellectual activity at the college level. If students only build sentences out of perfect, edited input that concerns random subjects in which they have no personal interest or investment, they do not engage with the sentences intellectually or

reflectively. Having had my students do some formal sentence-combining exercises in class and in the final exam as an experiment, I can attest to the often strange—if grammatically complex—output these tasks produce. Intellectual engagement is very important to any writing activity; students have to have something they are writing for, not just something they are writing. The sentence-building assignment I describe above gives them practice in writing in the genre which is most immediately relevant to them as students: formal academic discourse. Furthermore, they can move the skills attained during that practice outside academic discourse: the benefit of focusing on sentences is that they translate between genres, between registers, and, indeed, languages and dialects. But having students develop their sentences in the context of a formal paper means that each sentence they write must serve some rhetorical purpose. This is important in guiding students about what to write and in helping them decide what form of modifier is appropriate in the context. And, importantly, the sentences they write are grammatically complex and grammatically correct. As mentioned above, they show a variety of structures involving phrases and subordinate clauses modifying independent clauses, as well as a variety of noun modifiers. They are also relatively free of the grammar concerns that are often a focus of grammar courses: we see few subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent agreement issues and mostly appropriate punctuation in sentences composed of more than a single clause. Finally, while the students' labeling is not perfect, the combination of sentence-building with grammatical identification and analysis exercises seems to have a strong effect on the form of students' writing.

CONCLUSION. Does the sentence-building pedagogy I describe above lead to "better" grammar? I have no conclusive answer to this question; I have not conducted any formal assessments comparing this pedagogy with any others. I do, however, consider sentence-building in the context of students' own writing to be a successful pedagogy in terms of the subjective experience of reading my students' papers. Their sentences are complex but not unwieldy: they frequently consist of more than one clause and/or are modified appropriately with phrasal modifiers. Further, they mostly grapple with the challenging ideas in the texts they are writing about in appropriately complex sentences. I also believe the greater benefit of sentence-building strategies is in what students take away from their grammar course. By making students aware of the structure of their own sentences and discussing the grammatical choices they can make to create more sophisticated prose, the students leave the course with an enduring set of skills directly applicable in other environments, both within and outside the college context. Unlike a composition class, which is specifically designed to prepare students to write

academic discourse, the grammar course that I teach translates into work contexts as well as school ones.

The transferability of these writing skills means that students can exert some control over their own linguistic identities as they move through the world of work. And while the world of work may be beyond the scope of what many college instructors consider when they design a course, it is never very far from the minds of students at a college like mine. My students are workers in the new, flexible economy, and this means that they are participants in the global linguistic economy. Fast capitalism has forced education past the postcolonial sensibility described in such documents as “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” (Committee on CCCC Language Statement 1974) and the “Oakland Resolution on Ebonics” (Oakland Board of Education 1996), both of which affirm the place of diverse Englishes in an academic context. While the various languages and dialects of English that incited these resolutions are still alive—and are perhaps even stronger among students in the college system than they were in the 1970s and 1990s—my students are direct about the necessity of learning the rules of Standard Written English to ensure their place in the upward shift that education seems to promise (see Scott 2009 for a discussion of views of the social mobility afforded by education among students at mid-tier institutions). The assignment sequence I describe here makes grammar instruction more functional, less abstract. It still teaches students the forms of a global standard, but they manipulate the sentences that they build with their own rhetorical purposes in mind. Grammar courses, then, occupy a unique place in the college curriculum, a place where the potential for education as *JUST* preparing good workers in the service economy is mitigated by the potential power that students can wield as they control their sentences and are more confident in their abilities to do so.

APPENDIX

A Sentence-Building Assignment

Writing Your Own Transcript

Our focus shifts in this assignment from analyzing others’ writing to reflecting on your own grammatical choices while and after you write. For this assignment, please write a 4-page essay in response to the following prompt:

What is public transcript? What is a hidden transcript? How do you think these concepts apply in your own college career? Compare and contrast your own experience with that of the students whom Miller writes about.

In your essay, I will be looking for the grammatical constructions that we have been working on for the first half of the semester. I want to see at least three of the each of the following.

- NP with restrictive relative clause.
- NP with nonrestrictive relative clause.
- NP with either a reduced relative clause or appositive phrase modifying it.
- Independent clauses joined by DIFFERENT coordinating conjunctions, with appropriate conjunctions.
- Independent clauses joined by semicolons and colons, or some combination.
- Independent clauses introduced by coordinating adverbs, connected appropriately to the clause before and the clause afterwards.
- Dependent clauses joined to their independent clauses with appropriate punctuation.
- Quotations introduced and punctuated appropriately.
- Prepositional phrases.
- Participial phrases.
- Three other sentence modifiers.
- Three other noun modifiers.

Many of these you will include without thinking about it. So, in order to make you aware of these constructions in your writing, after you have written your rough draft, please go back and underline the required sentences (if you have more, just mark the first three). Then, copy and paste them into the list above, so that I can see that you have identified each of them correctly. (This sheet will be on Blackboard, so you don't have to retype anything).

We will work on the drafting and the listing in class. I am looking for strong, thoughtful engagement with text as well as variety in grammatical structures.

NOTE

1. Of course, this is not the only factor that contributes to educational “transformation.” For instance, Blake and Cutler (2003) cite a number of studies that link positive teacher attitudes with increased academic achievement among their students (e.g., Bowie and Bond 1994; Rickford 1999). Similarly, Alim (2005) argues that critical language awareness on the part of language arts instructors is crucial in helping students adopt a wider range of patterns and usage in their writing. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing these other factors to my attention.

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DOI 10.1215/00031283-0000000