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ABSTRACT

Answers to questions asked of college freshman composition students indicated that one-third lacked confidence in their ability to write because of their ignorance of the rules of grammar and inability to use correct grammar. This may be a result of the textbook presentation of grammar as a straightforward set of rules to be mastered without discussing the incredible complexity of the language and acknowledging the students' internalized knowledge of linguistic rules. In order to give the students more confidence in their own linguistic abilities, the author devised an exercise consisting of a series of five sets of four sentences, each involving highly complex rules of pronominalization. For example, the first set of sentences requires that the students choose the sentence or sentences in which more than one person is referred to. Through class discussion, students attempt to construct a set of rules to explain their choice. Students then discover that they can understand pronominalization even though they have not received direct instruction in that aspect of grammar. (MKM)

# USING INTERNALIZED KNOWLEDGE OF LINGUISTIC STRUCTURE TO DEVELOP STUDENT CONFIDENCE



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Composition students lack confidence for many reasons, but students themselves often attribute their feelings of inadequacy to an ignorance of the rules of grammar and an inability to use good grammar. To verify that this is a prevalent attitude, I ask my freshman classes, a total of 68 students last quarter, on the first day of class to write answers to at least one of the following questions. What do you feel are your main writing deficiencies? What weaknesses in your writing do you feel you need to work on? What improvements do you feel you need to make in your writing? The responses reflect the entire range of composition problems, including the need for greater precision and for more effective organization, but fully a third of the students specifically indicate a concern that they do not have an adequate knowledge of, or ability to use, what they variously call proper grammar, correct grammar, good sentence structure, rules of grammar, or simply grammar. This same presumption of deficiency is reflected on the second day of class when I assign an in-class essay on the topic "Why should colleges require a course in written communication?" In developing the topic students again comment in various ways, but this time half of them state that they feel they are weak in grammar.

That so many students presume themselves grammatically ill-prepared I find deplorable. But it is not surprising that such a presumption is widespread when we consider that practically every textbook on grammar, composition, or both combined, that the students have used from elementary school on has presented grammar as a body of knowledge to be found in its entirety within the covers of a book, as a fixed inventory of well-known, easily understood rules

which a good writer must consciously learn and master. In short, the book on grammar has been viewed as a closed one, containing nothing but completely described, straight-forward, uncontroversial facts. Of course, all of us, the compilers of the grammar texts included, would admit that the discussion of grammar in any text covers an embarrassingly limited number of superficial rules, that in fact no description of the grammar of English, no matter how grand its intended scope, ever comes close to doing anything but scratching the surface.

But textbooks almost never mention this point and few teachers take the time to stress it either. As a result, students remain largely unaware of the incredible complexity and indeed outright mystery of language structure. More importantly, they remain unaware that their own internalized (i.e. unconscious) knowledge of linguistic rules is infinitely more profound than any treatment of rules they might find in a handbook and that they naturally and fluently use rules so complex they defy the best efforts of grammarians to explain them.

The further result is that students arrive in college classes with no real appreciation for the enormity of accomplishment normal language acquisition represents, with no notion that the language skill they have already achieved far exceeds what skill they might yet need to develop to become competent writers. Thus, over the last two years I have developed a short set of exercises which serve not only to challenge assumptions of deficiency in grammar, but to emphasize the high degree of linguistic competence each student, irrespective of background, has internalized, and, in so doing, to instill in students, at least in small part, a measure of self-confidence.

On the third day of class, the first day of actual lecture and discussion, I announce that I am giving a test, reacted to by students with the usual groans, of course. The test consists of a series of five sets of four sentences, each involving for its proper interpretation highly complex rules of pronominalization--rules whose existence was discovered only about a decade ago and which even today,

despite the best efforts of some of the most skillful researchers in syntax (Langacker, 1969; Ross, 1967; Postal, 1971; Wasow, 1975), remain only partially understood. The first set contains the following sentences (adapted from Ross, 1967)

(1) After John came home, he ate supper.

(2) After he came home, John ate supper.

(3) He ate supper after John came home.

(4) John ate supper after he came home.

I ask the students to put a check by the sentence in which there has to be more than one person (John and someone else) referred to. When we check the results, students are impressed to find that every student in the class correctly selected (3), and that almost all (95-100% (depending on the class) correctly selected only (3). Considering that in this, as in any, test situation, the chances are high that some students will not understand the task, the near unanimity of the response is remarkable, and it is obvious to the students that they know the rules at work. But they are even more impressed when I ask them to try to explain the rules involved and they find they can't. To the question "How do you know (3) refers to two different people" the most common answer is "I just know it."

Eventually, with considerable help from me, the students come to see that the basic question posed by the test sentences is that of under what conditions the process of pronominalization can operate forward and under what conditions it can operate backward. We then manage to agree, after much discussion, that, as far as the sentences of this first set are concerned, the following rules adequately account for the facts: pronominalization can always operate from left to right (i.e., forward), as seen in (1) and (4), but it can only operate backward if it is moving from a main clause into a subordinate clause, as in (2). On the basis of (3), it does not seem to work where the movement is from a subordinate clause into a main clause. To illustrate the point, I

suggest that students think of the clauses of the sentences as a series of descending steps, with the main clause as the top step. We then can restate the rule to say that pronominalization can always go forward, but it can't go backward if it's trying to go up the steps.

This explanation admittedly is slightly different from, and does not reflect the technical sophistication of, the discussions of pronominalization found in the linguistic literature, and I refer any of you interested in more detailed analysis to the brilliantly developed articles by Langacker (1969) and Ross (1967). But a major point of this exercise is to let students discover for themselves how complex this process over which they have near perfect internalized control is, not to simply present them with a new set of grammatical rules which, although more complex than the textbook rules, are nevertheless just as incomplete. And the point certainly is not to confuse and bore students with yet more highly technical, jargon-loaded discussion. I save that type of presentation for my linguistics classes.

Next, I challenge the students to find even a mention, let alone a discussion, of backward or right-to-left pronominalization in any handbook on grammar they have ever used, or indeed to recall any instance in their entire lives when they have been taught the rules involved. Of course, most seem to quickly admit that they have never been consciously exposed to the rules. Yet with the near unanimous responses to the test sentences staring them in the face they can't deny that they have learned the rules. I might add here that sentences which use pronominalization make particularly effective examples since this aspect of grammar is presented in grammar books as simple, straight-forward, and not at all subject to question. As the examples show, however, the exact opposite is the case.

At this point, the class is ready to move on to set number two.

(1) John expected that he would win.

(2) He expected that John would win.

(3) John expected him to win.

(4) He expected John to win.

The instructions are the same, and, to no one's surprise, the results are too. Here students recognize in (2) and (4) the restriction against going up the steps to pronominalize backward. But they also see that the rule is not as simple as it seemed in set one. Clearly forward pronominalization is not always possible, as (3) indicates, and most students vaguely recognize that the added complexity has to do with the non-reflexive form of the object pronoun him. I then show them, again without going into complicated detail, that also involved is the reduction of an embedded sentence to an infinitive phrase and the requirement that the subject of this reduced embedded sentence be deleted when it is coreferential with the subject of the main clause.

The students next proceed to the third set of sentences:

(1) John placed the box of shells next to himself.

(2) He placed the box of shells next to John.

(3) Next to John he placed the box of shells.

(4) Next to him John placed the box of shells.

The choices are once again nearly unanimous (90-100% correctly select (2) and (3) correct, depending on the group). The responses to (4), however, are not counted, since there seem to be genuine differences among subjects as to whether (4) is grammatical when the pronoun and noun are coreferential. For many the reflexive pronoun himself seems to be required. In any case, the important sentence here is (3), because forward pronominalization again does not work, but for a different reason than in (3) of set two. Students are at a complete loss to explain what is going on until I suggest the possibility that the phrase

next to John has been moved to the front of the sentence after the pronominalization has occured. I then point out, though, that Postal (1971) devoted a 280-page monograph, the work from which these examples in set three are adapted, to the interaction of movement transformations and coreferential noun phrases, what he called "crossover phenomena," and for all its thoroughness, problems remain and the explanation is incomplete.

The consistency of the response to the fourth set (adapted from examples cited in Ross, 1967) is basically the same. Yet another intriguing problem shows itself.

(1) Because John lost the race, he cried all the way home.

(2) Because he lost the race, John cried all the way home.

(3) Upset because John lost the race, he cried all the way home.

(4) Upset because he lost the race, John cried all the way home.

It is clear to students that (1) and (3) have exactly the same word sequence, except that (3) has an extra word at the beginning; yet in (1) forward pronominalization works and in (3) it can't work. It has to operate backward. By this time students have given up searching for easy explanations. Moreover, those students who have held out up to this point seem now to have resigned themselves to the conclusion that they could not possibly have learned whatever rules are involved from a textbook or in a classroom. To explain these sentences I have to suggest what the underlying structure of (3) might be, and point out that the step rule formulated previously will apply to this underlying structure.

Essentially, the same surface inconsistency appears in set five, again adapted from examples used by Ross (1967).

(1) The sudden realization that John had been unfair upset him.

(2) The sudden realization that he had been unfair upset John.

(3) John's sudden realization that he had been unfair upset him.

(4) His sudden realization that he had been unfair upset John.

In (1) it is not possible to pronominalize forward. The process must move backward as in (2). And in this case, the explanation is about as tentative, poorly understood in its details, and controversial as any issue currently being argued in linguistic theory. It involves positing a deep structure in which the noun realization appears as a verb with John as its subject in an embedded sentence. Of course, I don't run the risk of boring students by mentioning the battle raging in transformational linguistics between the lexicalists and the transformationalists about exactly this contention (see Chomsky, 1970), but I don't have to. These examples are the evidence, if any is still needed by students, that the explanation of the complexities of pronominalization in English lies well beyond the grasp of the grammarians. Yet, faced again with the same consistency of response (86-97%), students are forced to admit that their knowledge of pronominalization is for all practical purposes complete. They are also forced to admit that the knowledge does not depend on social, geographic, or educational background.

This is not to say that many students, though, do not have serious writing difficulties. Indeed, after these exercises and their discussion are completed, all the everyday problems of the composition class remain and certainly I don't mean to minimize them. But in attacking these problems, we ought to spend at least one class period trying to give our students some insight into just how incredibly vast their knowledge of language really is. This is an important insight because students will not always be able to rely on the advice of teachers or textbooks. In the really significant writing situations, the non-academic ones, they will have to have confidence not only in their ability to write competently, but also in the reliability of their own linguistic judgment.

And exercises of the type presented here can help to develop that confidence by clearly demonstrating to students that their own feel for language is highly developed, accurate, and thus much more reliable than they thought.

After they finish the exercises, for example, I point out a final impressive illustration of the extent to which they in fact rely on this unconscious knowledge. In interpreting the sentences of set #2, no students, including those few who gave inaccurate interpretations to set #1, used the rules formulated during the class discussion of set #1. The same was true of the succeeding sets. At each point in the exercise students rely on their own internalized systems, without of course realizing they are doing so, and, as a result, are far more accurate.

Just as important, exercises of this type can contribute to the development of positive attitudes in students since the results seem independent of student backgrounds and we can therefore stress to all students that they have not only the right to their own language, but the right to take credit for having developed adult competence in it.

Finally, if these kinds of exercises result, to however limited an extent, in increased linguistic self-respect, then this suggests that the guided exploration of the mystery of grammar, and I emphasize the word exploration, should be an integral part of the student writer's education.

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