DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 532 CS 217 654

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TITLE How Teachers Can Use Grammar To Help Young Writers.
PUB DATE 2001-07-00
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Joint National Conference of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (Hobart, Tasmania Australia, July 12-15, 2001).
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.era-publications.com.au/contact_fsrc.html.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Writing; Editing; Elementary Education; *Grammar; *Student Needs; Teacher Role; *Writing Processes; *Writing Skills; *Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS Professional Writing

ABSTRACT

Grammar, historically, has been taught in a manner that leaves young learners wondering why they need to learn it. The problem has been partly that teachers have not been provided the insights needed to move the teaching of language conventions and grammar from the position of "textbook exercise" to that of "tools of the trade" as used by professional editors and writers. This paper aims to give teachers practical insights into grammar so that those who already know what a pronoun is, will then say "Now I know, as a writer, why I needed to know that." The paper notes that, in pedagogy, the editorial function is often given a limited definition, while in a professional environment, editing is invariably conducted at four different levels and often by different people--the commissioning editor, the structural editor, the copyreader, and the proofreader. But, it adds, the principles involved with respect to the writing process are the same. After offering some suggestions to teachers about editing in the classroom, observing grammar in context, the value of shared reading, playing with language, and problem solving, the paper states that it is easier to teach children how to use a dictionary, a thesaurus, and a writer's guide than it is to teach them how to spell every word and remember every writing convention in the language. (NKA)

How Teachers Can Use Grammar to Help Young Writers.

by Rodney Martin

HOW TEACHERS CAN USE GRAMMAR TO HELP YOUNG WRITERS

Rodney Martin
(2,700 words)

Rodney Martin presented this paper at the joint national conference of Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) and the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) held in Hobart, July 2001.

Grammar, historically, has been taught in a manner that leaves young learners wondering why they need to learn it. The problem has been partly that teachers have not been provided the insights needed to move the teaching of language conventions and grammar from the position of 'textbook exercise' to that of 'tools of the trade' as used by professional editors and writers. The objective of this paper is to give teachers practical insights into grammar so that those who already knew what a pronoun is, will then say "Now I know, as a writer, why I needed to know that".

EDITORIAL FUNCTIONS

What do teachers and editors have in common?

Both teachers and editors are charged with the responsibility of assisting writers to improve their work to a point where it is ready for presentation (publication) to its intended audience. It is proposed that an understanding of the editorial roles in the publishing industry has practical relevance to teachers. Naturally there will be differences in the positions of editors and teachers because of the relative maturity of their clients, the available resources and the number of clients being managed at any time. However, the principles involved with respect to the writing process are the same. In pedagogy, the editorial function is often given a limited definition. In a professional environment, editing is invariably conducted at four different levels and often by different people – the commissioning editor, the structural editor, the copyeditor and the proof-reader.

Commissioning editor

The commissioning editor in a publishing house is responsible for soliciting manuscripts from authors (usually by preparing a brief for the work required) and making publishing decisions with respect to unsolicited manuscripts. It is possible, indeed not uncommon, for an editor to reject a manuscript that is subsequently adopted by another publisher and becomes a best-selling title. Equally, it is not uncommon for an editor to accept and publish a manuscript only to find that is fails miserably in the marketplace. So it is necessary for commissioning editors to have a clear view of their audience (market) and of the nature of works that will appeal to that audience. It is this understanding that provides the basis for a writing brief, or for the assessment of solicited and unsolicited manuscripts. For both fiction and nonfiction, the editor must make a general judgment regarding the likely success of the work in engaging the reader by evoking some form of emotional response.

Structural editor

The structural editor improves the text in terms of its communication of topic, theme, text type/format, organization/structure and style. This requires a view of the text as a whole and whether it achieves the writer's objective. The editor focuses on the quality of the characters, setting, plot, writing style and theme of the work in terms of its intended audience and purpose. By focusing on these five elements, the editor is able to identify strengths and weaknesses in a manuscript and, if necessary, make recommendations to the author for improvement. The editorial assessment of non-fiction is based on the integrity of the

information offered in a text, the clarity and logic of its structure and expression, and the relevance of its style and format to the intended purpose and audience.

Copyeditor
The copyeditor focuses on the author's grammar, punctuation and style to ensure that the text has clarity. This involves identifying, for example, instances inaccurate or inappropriate usage, redundancies, ambiguities, contradictions, omissions and any other factor that restricts the author's effective communication with the audience.

Proof-reader
The proof-reader focuses on details such as accuracy in spelling, punctuation, usage and capitals. This is a final attempt to identify and correct errors prior to the publication of a work.

Editing in the classroom
Seasoned, professional authors find it very difficult and impractical to edit their own writing. Yet many professional writers also work as editors. So when we ask children to edit their writing, we are asking them to do something that the professionals do not do. It is recommended though, that children be given the opportunity often to act as editors for other children.

When editors counsel authors on their work, they usually acknowledge those aspects that they see as strengths, prior to entering discussion on weaknesses. Likewise, in the classroom, initial discussion of what works in a text, gives the child confidence to address what does not work.

When children are asked to edit their writing, they invariably operate at the proof-reading level –identifying spelling errors and omissions in punctuation and capitals. No amount of proof-reading will improve a text that is structurally flawed. It is important that children become accustomed to working at the higher structural levels of thinking about text. This might be achieved by encouraging children:

- to undergo significant pre-writing activities involving brainstorm sessions, research and discussion of audience and purpose;
- to share and discuss big book text models of particular text types or genres and identify the elements of their framework or structure;
- to become familiar with patterns of narrative and non-narrative texts through shared reading;
- to storyboard their intended texts by planning the contents page (nonfiction) or diagramming the order of events in a plot (fiction).

OBSERVING GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT

The contribution of the genrists
The work of the genrists gave us significant insight into writing by examining the ways in which authors construct texts to achieve a certain purpose with an audience. The work of researchers such as Beverly Derewianka[1] demonstrated how different text types have particular structures and language features. For example, instructions or procedural texts usually involve the use of lists (materials needed), the imperative voice (commands/instructions which include action verbs), numerical sequencing of events (numbered steps) and quantification (details of amount, size, weight etc).

In classroom practice, with an understanding of text types teachers can identify clear examples of specific aspects of text organisation, grammar and style, so they can be shared and demonstrated in an explicit manner with children within the context of a piece of writing.

In principle, by planning lessons through the use of text types, there is no language feature that could not be observed and taught within context.

There is, however, a modern trend for authors to blur the edges of the genres. For example, in *One Week With my Grandmother*[2], author June Loves alternate chapters of fiction recount (diary) with nonfiction procedure (instructions for activities).

The Value of Shared Reading

Shared reading and writing provides an ideal classroom setting for the demonstration and modelling of various text structures, types, features and styles. There has been a tendency for teachers to choose and use big books for the sake of their topic (eg dinosaurs, rainforests, whales etc). If children need to explore content, they might do well to achieve this as individuals or in small groups as part of their reading research for writing. Shared reading gives the teacher the opportunity to use the big book as a tool for demonstrating the ways in which texts work. Any big book might be a model of a particular text type; the teacher is a model of a proficient reader using that text type, drawing attention to and encouraging children to discuss specific text features and their effect on the audience. This ensures that any discussion of specific language knowledge occurs with a context of its use.

The Relative Simplicity of English Grammar

The idiosyncrasies of English spelling are well-documented and often lamented by young learners or those learning English as a second language. English spelling is complex, but of course can still be presented as a fascinating study or challenge to learners.

Grammar is essentially about the arrangement of words to make meaning. It is primarily concerned with links between the event (action) of a sentence and the subject (agent or cause) of that event. Further words, phrases and clauses can enhance communication about that primary meaning.

English grammar, unlike its spelling system, is relatively simple. Unlike many languages, English does not often depend on inflections (word endings) to determine whether something is the subject or object of a sentence. Nor does it assign a gender to most words, hence requiring the user to know whether it should be *le porte* or *la porte* (the door). English has just one form of the definite article *the*, and only three forms of the second person pronoun (*you*, *your*, *yours*) regardless of whether the reference is singular, plural, masculine, feminine, formal, informal, subject or object (case). English speakers can indeed be grateful for this simplicity.

People demonstrate an understanding of English grammar if they speak or write in a manner that is understood by another English speaker. The proficiency of their understanding might be judged by the complexity and clarity of their language use. English speakers therefore 'understand' English grammar to some degree. However, people often find difficulty in describing the nature of their use of the language. All this means is that English speakers more often have a limited knowledge of linguistics.

Linguistics is irrelevant to young learners as a study in its own right. It is abstract by nature and therefore beyond the capacity for their understanding anyway. A basic vocabulary of linguistics, however, does provide a means of discussing and considering text in a succinct manner. Furthermore, an understanding of grammar can be gained in an intuitive manner in much the same way as very young children intuit the structures of language through its use, eg I *goed* to the shop and I *buyed* a toy. There are simple strategies that can be employed in the classroom to enable children to engage with the language in an enjoyable, functional and

challenging manner. These strategies can be given a context that makes the learning meaningful in terms of its having an application to writing.

There are strategies that professional authors and editors use to solve problems in writing. These strategies can be taught and practised as skills that are valid for the learner's lifetime. They empower learners by making them independent of changes in language conventions within their lifetime.

Playing with the Language

Children can play with the language by expanding an utterance. Here is a very simple sentence.

The dolphin knew.

- The sentence has a subject (The horse) and an event (grazed). Enhance the meaning in this sentence by adding a single word.
  The **grey** dolphin knew.
  The dolphin knew **immediately**.
- Now enhance the meaning in the sentence by adding a phrase.
  The dolphin **with the long fin** knew.
  The dolphin knew **about the sea**.
- Now enhance the meaning in the sentence by adding a clause.
  The dolphin, **which was in front of the boat**, knew.
  The dolphin knew **where the boat was going**.

Obviously, children, in an enjoyable and challenging way, could add words, phrases and clauses to the sentence until it became very complex. In undertaking this activity, children would also discover that the meanings developed by various individuals or groups would be quite different, demonstrating that authors can take a basic meaning then enhance it in an almost infinite number of ways. However, the teacher might them draw attention to the fact that a particular author used the words 'The dolphin dived' within a published big book text.

> *As Seriphos was a town,* ***the dolphin knew*** *the monkey was lying, so he dived, leaving him to swim to shore.*[3]

This gives the teacher the opportunity to have children explore the context of the sentence and discuss the nature and relevance of the author's construction in terms of its purpose.

Children can play with the language by manipulating words. Here is a set of words. Using all the words, create sentences with the same meaning. Use punctuation and capitals wherever needed.

shoe horse you sir said will I this

I said, "Will you shoe this horse sir?"
"Sir," I said, "will you shoe this horse?"
"Shoe this horse, will you sir?" I said.
"Shoe this horse, will you sir?" said I.
"Sir, shoe this horse," I said, "will you?"

Obviously the sentence might have had a different meaning if the subject-verb links were different. However, it can be seen that in English grammar, there can be many ways of expressing the same meaning with the same words. If so, then is there a best way of expressing that meaning in terms of best use of the English language? The words actually come from a traditional verse called 'Shoeing the Horse', beginning:

I said, "This horse, sir, will you shoe?"
And so, the horse, he shod.
I said, "This deed, sir, will you do?"
And so, the deed, he dod! [4]

What can be demonstrated through shared reading, is that the author chose this particular sentence structure because of the need for a certain rhyme and rhythm to fit the text type (parody) and style (a witty ditty). No other structure, in this case, would have achieved the author's purpose – to amuse.

The topic of the parody is irregular verbs. Children might therefore explore and list irregular English verbs. How many are there? Are there patterns or rules that occur within these verbs? Using their lists, children might then innovate on the author's structure to create verses of their own.

I said," This _____ , sir, will you _____?"
And so, the _____, he _____.
I said," This _____ , sir, will you _____?"
And so, the _____, he _____.

Verses created by children could then be combined and published as one comprehensive work. However, the activities in which the children were engaged throughout this project included physically manipulating words to make meaning (hence applying structural editing); exploring and observing different constructions; discussing choice of construction in terms of audience, purpose and style; discussing a specific aspect of grammar (irregular verbs); compiling a word list and observing patterns (sing, sang, sung; swim, swam, swum); and innovating on a text to create texts of their own, with an awareness of audience and purpose. These techniques can be adjusted in complexity to meet the needs of different learners, and in content to address the scope of the curriculum.

Knowing How to Solve Problems

Authors and editors rely on a range of references when making decisions about text. These references include the *dictionary* and the *thesaurus*, both of which are commonly found in the classroom. However, there is one very important reference that professionals use, but is rarely found in classrooms – the *writer's guide* (otherwise known as *style manual* or *style guide*). A writer's guide defines, explains and demonstrates the use of various aspects of writing from whole text to minute details of punctuation, grammar, style and other conventions. Examples give a context for the use of various text features and conventions, and the reference often explains their effect on an audience.

Different references require different skills by the user in order for the references to be of use. A fundamental skill is that of being able to identify the most useful reference for any problem or question. For example, finding the plural form of *mosquito*. A dictionary will probably give this information in a concise manner under one headword. A writers guide will probably give an answer under the headword *plural* and provide the user with information on when words ending with the letter *o* form the plural with *–s*, *-es* or either. It may even list words in these categories.

Which reference would be most appropriate for these questions:

- Discrete or discreet? (A dictionary has two separate entries and definitions; a writers guide would have one entry and compare the use of the words, with examples.)
- Who, whom, which or that? (A writer's guide would explain and provide examples of their use.)

- How do I structure a persuasive text? (A writer's guide should provide a definition of the text type, description of its structure and style, and example(s) of such texts.)
- How to avoid over-use of 'said'? (A thesaurus provides synonyms and antonyms.)

SUMMARY

It is easier to teach children how to use a dictionary, a thesaurus and a writer's guide than it is to teach them how to spell every word and remember every writing convention in the language. If we teach children how to find answers and solve problems in writing, then they are equipped for life regardless of how the language changes in their lifetime.

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EFF-088 (Rev. 9/97)

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