

Developing Students' Textual Intelligence through Grammar

I seem to learn the right things in the wrong places. For instance, I learned to teach by working in an emergency room. There, in that unlikely classroom, I learned to listen in eight different directions while answering the phone and correcting the papers I collected during my student teaching classes that day. These lessons served me well when I eventually entered the classroom where things were no less chaotic, exciting, or urgent.

Likewise, I learned some of my most important lessons about writing and sentence structure by reading not a composition book, but *The Carpenter's Manifesto* (Ehrlich and Mannheimer). In their chapter "Structure," they write:

Structure is the guts of carpentry. It's the soul of your work, the built-in strength that withstands everyday stresses. The concepts of structure . . . are basic and relatively easy to grasp. Once you understand them, you'll be able to design and build more efficiently, more economically. And what you build will be strong and long-lasting." (p. 12)

Central to their book is the premise of structure and design as ways of thinking: "Most carpentry projects may seem mysterious at first, their structure and manner of construction a big unknown even to professional carpenters. Our main goal . . . is to communicate to you a *way of thinking, of seeing*—a method of approaching and solving carpentry problems" (p. 8). And so, while reading about carpentry, I was learning about words, for it is with words, from which we make sentences—the build-

ing blocks of focused, well-organized paragraphs—that we create those larger written works.

To push my analogy a bit further, I must understand the tools and materials with which I work if I am to be able to build anything "strong and long-lasting," or, more appropriately, anything persuasive and interesting. Moreover, I must understand how words and sentences work in order to use them in my own writing, but I must also know how others use words, devices, and structures to elicit certain responses in their reading. We often limit our discussion of grammar to writing (i.e., improving students' writing) at the cost of developing their grammatical sense that is part of their textual intelligence. I see many students who are able writers struggle with the complicated grammar of challenging writers. They get lost in the structures and the language, thinking that some sentences are fragments and others are run-ons, while others seem to be just nonsense. We find a good example of this last point in the poem "We Wear the Mask" when Paul Lawrence Dunbar uses the word *mouth* as a verb ("we mouth myriad subtleties") instead of the noun they take it to be. Given that authors of tradebooks and textbooks and sometimes even state-mandated tests use language this way (e.g., The California state test includes a whole section on words that can be used as either nouns or verbs, such as *house, block, band, space, command*), students need to know how to navigate the architecture of the sentences they read.

Such language study hardly need confine itself to or even be based on such grammar texts. Students' lives are freighted with language (in their slang and music, for example) that merits study so that they learn to appreciate not only how the lan-

guage evolved but what it means. The authors of *Language Study in Middle School, High School, and Beyond* remind readers early on that “language should be a central focus for study in the reading and language arts classroom and that gaining mastery over language can be stimulating, enlightening, and enjoyable.” (Simmons and Baines, p. 3)

Textual Intelligence

Textual intelligence (TI), a term I like, refers to our knowledge about how texts—literary and informational, on a page or a screen, spoken or written—work. TI requires that students understand the difference between usage—where and when, or under what conditions a word or its meaning is appropriately used—and grammar—the rules that govern the structural relationships between words in sentences. For instance, a student with high textual intelligence would recognize that while the sentence “I ain’t got no money” contains all the key elements of appropriate syntax and is, therefore, grammatically correct, it does not follow Standard English usage rules.

TI also applies to how texts are made, and how different grammatical structures create meaning for or affect the reader. Writers use their textual intelligence when they do everything from choose the format (poem vs. prose vs. play) or the purpose (to entertain vs. to inform) or the structure (narrative vs. expository). They make TI decisions as they choose the point of view, the tense of the story (past tense, present tense), or the use of foreshadowing or flashbacks. All these choices come from, in part, the writer’s understanding of how language works. Therefore, the more a student understands these workings, the more options he or she has when starting to write.

I tend to think of textual intelligence as an intellectual tool belt. Let me illustrate by returning to my carpenter analogy for a moment. When I prepare to make or fix something, such as a bookcase or a water-damaged wall, I have to decide what tools I need, how the structure works, and what materials will work best on this job. TI asks readers *and* writers to do the same thing with the texts and interpretations they create by asking ques-

tions, such as those on the list below, that lead them to deeper understanding of the written work.

- How should I write this—as a poem, short story, dramatic monologue, or some other form?
- What type of sentences—short, staccato, or long rolling ones—are most appropriate for the effect I want to create in the reader?
- How do I create a dark (or anxious or somber or comical) tone in a story?
- Should I use a bulleted list here instead of paragraphs? How do I keep everything in the list parallel?
- What words do I need to choose to make the character in my story come alive for the reader?

In short, I want students to understand how language shapes meaning and causes in readers certain feelings. This insight into how texts work will, I hope, give them some sense of power in a world where language is often used to coerce and confuse instead of clarify and communicate. As writers and readers, I want my students to have a tool belt sagging with the intelligence they need to write *and* read different kinds of texts in different media for different audiences and purposes.

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Classroom Connection: What to Do Tomorrow?

So, knowing that I want my students to have a textual intelligence tool belt is nice, but what does that mean actually happens in my classroom? How do I help my students make a tool belt and then begin to use it?

First, it’s important to note that I constantly must remind my students that in Mr. Burke’s class, we use grammar to help us understand how to read

and write better and how to think with greater clarity. How do we do this? We study language by:

- Integrating it into units when it seems appropriate (e.g., have students rewrite a passage into a different tense as part of our study of a story).
- Looking for natural and appropriate opportunities to address grammar in context during class discussions or individual conferences (e.g., breaking down a particularly difficult sentence from a book we are studying, identifying the subject and verb, especially if there is a clause or phrase in the sentence).
- Introducing specific grammatical structures through minilessons prior to writing or within the context of a particular reading assignment.

Second, I give students plenty of opportunity to work on their TI before, after, and throughout the writing and reading process.

Before They Read or Write

These activities develop confidence and competence before students begin an assignment:

- *Grammar brainstorm:* Draw on the board or have students divide a page into three columns with NOUNS, VERBS, and ADJECTIVES at the top of each. What we do next depends on whether we are preparing to write or read. In one scenario, I will tell students they are going to watch a short excerpt from a film (e.g., *Thin Red Line* about World War II). I will have them generate all sorts of very active verbs, nouns, and adjectives that they might use to write about the subject of the film—war. Then, after showing them the scene, I will have them use as many of the words as they can in a descriptive writing activity. Likewise, before beginning a novel or short story, students could brainstorm responses to the topic using the same three headers.

- *Grammatical synthesis:* Ask students to generate a list of adjectives that could be used to describe a character. This activity allows us not only to reinforce what an adjective is and how it works, but to synthesize a wide range of information about a character. It also expands their vocabulary, especially if you revise the list as you go: “Bill, *lonely* is a good word, but is there a more precise word we can think of that describes the way Ana feels in this story?” “How about *abandoned*?” Kody offers. “Yes!” Note, this activity takes place after reading, but before writing about what was read.
- *Annotate directions on tests and assignments:* Have students identify the verbs in written directions and then discuss what those verbs are telling students to do. To explain this activity, first read the following directions which come from an eighth-grade literature book: “As you read this photo essay, ask yourself who is pictured in each photograph and what can I learn about the people in the photos from their facial expressions, clothing, and settings. What mood or feeling do the photographs create? Find several details that describe what conditions were like in Sone’s camp.” After I read these instructions with students, I ask them to annotate the directions by underlining the verbs and then figuring out who is doing the action of the verb and, when appropriate, what the verb is doing. For example, the directions begin “As you read this photo essay . . .” Students underline *read*, noting that they are the ones doing the reading, and they are reading the photo essay. Such work up front not only helps students manage the assignment, but reinforces for them that words have a function and that function informs.

After they Read or Write

After students complete a writing assignment, I want them studying lots of features of their writing. In particular, I’ve found that focusing on a few specifics often leads to wide revisions. There-

fore, here are the specifics we generally address most often.

- **Revise the weak or inappropriate verbs** (especially *to have, to be, to get*), replacing them with more precise, powerful verbs. The first time I do this, I write on the board the following words, none of which they can keep in their essay: *is, was, am, were, are, weren't, wasn't, and isn't*. They don't take this well and often tell me how impossible it is to write without these words. After assuring them there are times when these words are appropriate, I tell them to have fun with the constraint, to think of it as a puzzle. As I move around the room and conference with them about their sentences, we often talk about the sentence structure and how it must change to accommodate the new verb. When we first do this work, I am content if they develop a new awareness of their writing ("Wow, I didn't realize I use *is* so much: I used it 12 times in this one paragraph!") To reinforce and extend this way of thinking about writing, I look for places in the books we read to emphasize the way the author uses precise, active verbs. If I find an especially good page or two, filled with powerful verbs, I will photocopy it and have them locate them; then, time permitting, we will discuss how the words strengthen the sentence. Figure 1 shows one student's revision of a particular sentence.

Original student sentence:

Jem is the character who we can relate to in the *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Revised sentence:

We identify with Jem more than Scout when we read *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Alternative revision:

Jem, the main character in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, appeals to the kids today more than his sister Scout.

Figure 1. Student's revision of a sentence omitting the verb "is"

- **Change the tense of the verbs.** I'll give students a specific passage of something they've read, or ask them to find a passage of something they've written, and then have them recast the text of a poem, essay, or narrative into a different tense—past, present, or future. In doing this, students often begin to appreciate why the author chose to write in a particular tense. For instance, eighth graders quickly realized that rewriting the opening paragraph of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the present tense changes the entire perspective from which the story is told. Such exercises help students to understand how language functions to orient the reader in time, and to create different perspectives on the same story or subject.
- **Sentence combining:** To improve students' knowledge of how sentences are made and how they work, I will sometimes use sentence combining. If possible, I will draw the examples from their reading. Sentence combining allows students to create sophisticated sentences as they quickly begin using appositives, participles, and absolutes. In a similar manner, students enjoy taking a combined sentence and un-combining it to figure out what kernels are in the sentence.

Through quick sentence combining (or un-combining) exercises, students quickly see how a writer's sentence construction impacts the reader's understanding. In Figure 2, you'll find several sets of sentences you can use for sentence combining activities with your own students. Be sure to ask them how the combined sentences affect them as readers. Then take the next step, and have them use the combined sentences as patterns for their own original sentences.

Closing Thoughts

We want to accomplish much in our English Language Arts classes. And we are demanding of ourselves and our students. We want to give our students our best so they can do their best. We want to address district and state guidelines while

at the same time addressing individual student needs. We worry when state competency tests appear to be the focus of the curriculum because we believe students should be the focus. We want to teach it all and want to be sure we know what that “all” should include.

State standards can provide guidance and continuity when it comes to addressing what the state has outlined as important knowledge. In most any state, language standards do identify specific skills, such as learning subordination, coordination, and appositives, and often remind us that the more nitty-gritty of writing—legible papers with correct spelling of words—is also important.

Meeting the standards while meeting students' needs is a balancing act and, sometimes, a judgment call. Thank goodness for that emergency room training—it has served me well. But state standards, while providing direction, shouldn't

provide boundaries. Indeed, we must constantly push the boundaries of students' understanding in all areas, including their understanding of grammar and usage. I believe the concept of Textual Intelligence allows us to do just that.

Instruction that attempts to develop a student's Textual Intelligence follows a coherent, logical curriculum that prepares today's students to live and work in tomorrow's society where people must communicate by multiple means. Clarity of thought in such a world will be crucial as we continue to communicate across cultures. The activities outlined in this article move far beyond being simple, fun activities, and push students toward conversations about the nature of language and thought as conveyed through the texts we read and create. With such activities, grammar is not a product but is instead a process that helps students develop and convey ideas. This idea of grammar as a way of thought is not new. Read what Kress and van Leeuwen say about the connection of grammar and thought in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*:

As ours becomes a world made not only of words but images, sounds as well as colors, all of which are increasingly integrated into multimedia constructions, we must return to the notion of grammar as a way of thinking. Grammar goes beyond formal rules of correctness. It is a means of representing patterns of experience. . . . It enables human beings to build a mental picture of reality, to make sense of their experience of what goes on around them and inside them. . . . What is expressed in language through the choice between different word classes and semantic structures is, in visual communication, expressed through the choice between, for instance, different uses of color, or different compositional structures. . . . 'Grammar of visual design,' creatively employed by artists is, in the end, the same grammar we need when producing attractive layouts, images, diagrams, for our course handouts, reports, brochures, communiqués, and so on. (p.3)

As I read their comment that grammar is what gives us the ability to “build a mental picture,” I'm brought back to my opening comments about construction and the book that taught me about writing: *The Carpenter's Manifesto*. The authors of that book on carpentry explain that the “ubiqui-

Set 1:

- Spike sold shoes at the Happy Dogs shoe store.
- Spike was a junior at San Francisco State.
- The Happy Dogs shoe store was a small shop located downtown.

Set 2:

- People came into the Happy Dogs shoe store for many styles of shoes.
- They came in for Sahara desert sandals.
- They came in for two-toned wing tips.
- They came in for black leather punk rock shoes with small animals stapled to the side.

Set 3:

- Because Spike wanted to be a podiatrist, he cared about all kinds of feet.
- He cared about skinny, boney feet.
- He cared about big fat feet with hideous nails.
- He cared about pale, stinky feet with collapsed arches.

Set 4:

- Spike told Bennie he did not intend to be a shoe salesman his whole life.
- Bennie was his boss.
- Bennie was a thin man who always wore loafers.

Set 5:

- Spike believed he could be anything he wanted to be.
- He could be a doctor.
- He could be a teacher.
- He could be the owner of Happy Dogs.

Figure 2. Sets of sentences for sentence-combining exercises

tous box” is the structure from which all things are made. In the English teacher’s case, though, that “ubiquitous box” is the sentence, for it is the sentence, governed by various rules, made of words and images, colors and bytes, shapes and sounds, that combine in our new world of evolving language to create within the reader that pleasure we call understanding.

Works Cited

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Candidates Announced for First Middle Level Section Elections Watch for Your Ballot

The Middle Level Section Nominating Committee (appointed by the NCTE Executive Committee) has named the following candidates for Section offices in the NCTE spring elections:

For Members of the Middle Level Section Steering Committee:

(eight members to be elected for terms varying from one to four years—procedures for establishing the Steering Committee are explained in materials accompanying the ballot)

- Nancy Bass, Moore Middle School, Arvada, Colorado
- Virginia Broz, Fairfield Middle School, Fairfield, Iowa
- Harold Foster, University of Akron, Akron, Ohio
- Carolynn T. Harris, National-Louis University, Evanston, Illinois
- Sandy Hayes, Becker Middle School, Becker, Minnesota
- Judith Hayn, Loyola University, Wilmette, Illinois
- Roxanne L. Henkin, National-Louis University, Wheaton, Illinois
- Gwendolyn Henry, Frederick Douglass Academy, Detroit, Michigan
- Barry Hoonan, Commodore Center, Bainbridge Island, Washington
- Teri Lesesne, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas
- Martha Magner, MacArthur Barr Middle School, Nanuet, New York
- Suzanne Metcalfe, Mears Middle School, Anchorage, Alaska
- Howard Miller, Lincoln University, Jefferson City, Missouri
- Paul Putnoki, Torrington Middle School, Torrington, Connecticut
- Katherine Ramsey, River Oaks Baptist School, Houston, Texas
- Ruthanne Vitagliano, Warsaw Central School, Warsaw, New York

For Members of the Middle Level Section Nominating Committee:

(three to be elected; terms to expire in 2002)

- Maureen Barbieri, New York University, New York City
- Joe Bernhart, Fondren Middle School, Houston, Texas
- Lois Buckman, Moorehead/Caney Creek Academy, Conroe, Texas
- Karen Smith, Arizona State University, Tempe
- Lois Stover, St. Mary’s College of Maryland, St. Mary’s City, Maryland
- Frances Wright-Harold, retired teacher, Hillside, New Jersey

Members of the 2000–01 Middle Level Section Nominating Committee are Elizabeth Close, SUNY at Albany, New York, Chair; Gwendolyn Henry, Frederick Douglass Academy, Detroit, Michigan; Bill Mollineaux, Central Connecticut State University, New Britain; and Lanny Van Allen, University of Texas, Austin.