

GRAMMAR WITHOUT SHAME

by GEOFF BARTON

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Grammar produces mixed reactions in people. For some grammar is at odds with creativity. For others, grammar is what allows you to communicate effectively. A quick trawl through writers' views on grammar and style reveals a similar disparity of opinions:

Jonathan Swift:

Proper words in proper places make the true definition of style.

Henry David Thoreau:

Any fool can make a rule and any fool can mind it

Clifton Fadiman:

The adjective is the banana peel of the parts of speech

Joan Didion:

Grammar is a piano I play by ear. All I know about grammar is its power.

Stendhal:

I see but one rule: to be clear

Marshal McLuhan:

Clear prose indicates the absence of thought

Oscar Wilde:

All morning I worked on the proofs of one of my poems and I took out a comma. In the afternoon I put it back.

Eliza Doolittle, Pygmalion

I don't want to talk grammar, I want to talk like a lady -

Here are people who have views on grammar. They see it as either liberating or restricting, an act of freedom, or an act of repression. But the point is they have a view about grammar.

The scandal of late 20th century English teaching is that if we asked most of our students what they thought about grammar, they wouldn't know the meaning of the word.

I believe we've lost our way as English teachers, and certainly lost confidence about what grammar is - whether we should formally teach it and, if so, how.

So at best, we tinker with it, photocopying the odd page of a coursebook from the stockcupboard. We have quick a blitz on nouns or full stops, or reassure by dishing out activities designed chiefly to amuse and entertain. Our nervous message to our students is "you see, this isn't so bad is it?" and we make ourselves feel better for having 'done grammar'.

Or perhaps we ignore it - as I did largely for the first 5 years of my teaching.

Or we make our students jump like confused little dogs through hoop after hoop of meaningless exercises.

Or - worst of all - we say that we teach it in context, and thereby leave a child's experience of formal grammar teaching to total chance. If I happen to notice something they need to know, I teach it: if I don't, it's left untaught. That, I suspect, is often the grim reality of teaching grammar in context.

Sorry to be provocative. But I think we've got it wrong.

We've been duped by the oversimplified sterile debates that have dogged all discussion of grammar teaching. In fact, debates is too dignified a word for the feeble ping-pong arguments that regularly rattle to and fro.

For some, the word grammar appears to summon up a lost world of red telephone boxes and cricket on village greens. Children had scrubbed cheeks, fidgeted less, and knew their place. With the perceived decline of grammar teaching went a culture that was courteous and moral and safe and good.

For others, grammar provokes images of passivity and authoritarianism. Endless drills of pointless parsing are conjured

up, with the clinching argument that it didn't, in any case, help anyone to write better.

And that's it - that's the sum of an eighty-year debate.

This is how it gets kicked around in a hostile press ever eager for easy juxtapositions -

liberal v traditional;

formal v trendy;

parsing v creative writing

Any serious discussion of grammar teaching is rare. That these polarised views are so easy to summon up is a sign of how sterile the debate about grammar teaching has become.

As Professor of English, David Tomlinson, recently wrote:

For many years now, opponents of grammar in the classroom have been able to shut down debate by saying that scientifically rigorous studies have repeatedly shown grammar teaching to have absolutely no effect on developing writing skills. They are mistaken.¹

His real target is critics who happily and unquestioningly cite Nora Robinson. Her M.Ed thesis of 1959 was entitled "The Relation Between Knowledge of English Grammar and Ability in English Composition". Although never published, this work

has proved remarkably significant - in particular the conclusion that:

There is no evidence that there is a higher degree of association between grammar and ability in composition ...ⁱⁱ

Her research was given wider attention by Andrew Wilkinson in 1971, in what Tomlinson describes as “four well-known and highly misleading pages” in The Foundations of Languageⁱⁱⁱ:

Despite his approval, Wilkinson appears not to have read it: his reference is to the 700-word abstract in the British Journal of Educational Psychology, not to the thesis itself.^{iv}

In what resembles a bizarre version of Chinese whispers, Tomlinson traces the influence of Wilkinson’s version of Nora Robinson’s research to the opening for an ILEA booklet of advice for teachers^v. As Tomlinson puts it:

From flawed research to fallacious language pedagogy to misguided advice for teachers in the classroom.^{vi}

In other words, Tomlinson systematically demolishes the original research, and the subsequent assumptions based upon it, to show something important. He doesn’t say that teaching

formal grammar to students makes them better writers. He has no opinion on this. It is that the research which claims to disprove it - which says that teaching formal grammar has no effect - is itself seriously flawed, usually cited from secondary sources, and too often hauled out as a frail plank in a specious debate - that Nora Robinson's research itself was suspect, based on dubious samples.

Our so-called debates about grammar, then, are rarely based upon valid research or placed in any meaningful context of children's grammatical development.

We shouldn't be too surprised or guilty about all of this. Most of us come to English teaching from a distinctly literary background. We did A-level English Literature at A-level, a mainly literature degree, and perhaps came to the classroom with a mission to bring children to the powerful imaginative world of literature.

That's certainly what motivated me - and still does. But just as literature liberates, so does grammar, and even a superficial knowledge of child language acquisition gives us a sense of the stages through which our students progress and, therefore, a clearer perception of what they need to learn in order to develop.

HOW DO WE LEARN TO USE GRAMMAR?

- ① 12-18 months: One-word expressions
We start to say things like: *Gone, more, dada, allgone*
These are also called *holophrases*. Just as a hologram show lots of image, a holophrase can have many meanings. “Mama” could mean ‘my Mummy’, ‘where is Mummy?’, ‘I like Mummy’, etc.

- ② Around 18 months: Two-word sentences
This is the major breakthrough in our ability to use grammar. We start to learn that we can put separate words together in a certain order to create meanings.
See Daddy. Mummy gone. My cup.

- ③ Around 2 years: Sentence structure
This is sometimes described as telegraphic - like a telegram, certain words are left out - grammatical words like *the* and *is* *Him got car. Lady kick ball.*
(The number of words a child can use is probably more than 200)

- ④ Around 3 years: Multi-clause sentences
This is the second major advance: clauses connected mainly by *and, but, then*. This allows children to begin to tell stories, with one event joined to the next.
Mummy have breaked the spade all up and it broken and her did hurt her hand on it and it sore

- ⑤ Around 4 years: Self-correction:
The child sorts out many grammatical errors, learning that we say ‘sheep’, not ‘sheeps’ as a plural. These are some typical errors that the child needs to learn to correct:
It just got brokened. Are we going on the bus home?
- ⑥ Around 7 years: More advanced use of sentence connectives:
really, though, anyway, for instance, of course
The child builds her understanding of the way different constructions may have the same meanings:
The girl chased the boy / the boy was chased by the girl.
- ⑦ Around 8/9 years: Adult ‘definitional’ forms begin:
This is the ability to explain ideas and processes:
Say ‘What’s an apple?’ to a four year old and she’ll point to one. An eight year old will be able to say “A apple is a sort of fruit and it’s round and red and we eat it”.
- ⑧ Around 10/11 years: Continuing progress:
Grammatical development continues through primary years - including irregular verb forms and more complex constructions.

(The child's vocabulary probably exceeds 5,000 words)

I've taught students who appeared to be stuck around point five, even after fourteen years of compulsory schooling. Only by making explicit where I think they should be next can I begin to address their real grammar needs.

My point is that a systematic framework for grammatical development is essential if our children are to make progress - but also all-too-likely to be unfamiliar to us if we have followed the traditional route into English teaching.

The effect of all of this has been a continual sapping of our confidence, with even the best English teachers discussing grammar teaching as if confessing a shameful act.

The Bullock Report of 1975 reported:

A substantial number [of teachers] considered that the express teaching of prescriptive language forms had been discredited, but that nothing had been put in its place.

They could no longer subscribe to the weekly period of exercises, but they felt uneasy because they were not giving language any regular attention. It seems to us that this uncertainty is fairly widespread, and that what many

teachers now require is a readiness to develop fresh approaches to the teaching of language.

Freshness was required because the Bullock investigations had revealed an excessive reliance upon language exercises of dubious usefulness:

Examples we saw included such tasks as: Change all words of masculine gender to feminine gender in "Mr Parker's father-in-law was a bus conductor"; and: add the missing word in "As hungry as a..." , "As flat as a..." .

Thus the official line became that language work (something slightly broader than grammar) was best taught in response to individual student needs, or as the Report put it, teachers should 'operate on the child's language competence at the point of need'

The imagery is fairly baffling but the approach is significant in shifting grammar teaching to a child-centred perspective in which the teacher responds to the student's individual needs. It becomes a pervasive theme of the 70s and 80s.

A decade on and HMI are weighing in with their influential pamphlet, English from 5 to 16, the document which was to lead to the establishment of the Kingman Inquiry into Language. The authors are keen to restate Bullock's view that 'the handling of language is a complex ability, and one that will not be developed simply by working through a set of textbook exercises'.

And thus has developed a dangerously simplistic notion that grammar skills should only ever be taught in the context of students' own work. Our written and spoken comments to the child would allow students to absorb the advice that was relevant to them and eradicate the need for whole-class grammar or exercises.

But the problem, of course, is that teaching it solely in context it makes grammar into a dangerously haphazard affair. Some children learn this; others learn that. None gain an overview or spot a system. They continue to work in a personalised fog, happily having their own errors corrected, but rarely seeing any overall sense of direction or structure or progression or purpose.

And of course the critics are right who lambaste lame and tedious exercises. Absurd grammar drills are a legitimate but easy target. Of course it is pointless to ask students to colour in the adjectives with a highlighter pen, or to change the tenses of fifty verbs - if that is our whole purpose.

But who says grammar teaching has to be like that? Why do critics of grammar always assume that developing students' explicit knowledge of grammar can only be accomplished by resurrecting exercises from long-buried textbooks? If exercises are set as ends in themselves - to pacify or mollify or stultify, then they're worthless - but they can play a distinct role in building students' confidence.

Why have we lost our nerve about setting students exercises?
When I learn to drive I do it by being taught some specific skills;
practising them; and then using them for myself.

You wouldn't sit me in the car for my first lesson and let me
define what I think I need to know. You'd want to give me a
system, an overview. You'd want me to know the right terms for
things - the 'steering wheel' rather than 'the round plastic
covered bit in front of you'. You're not intimidating me with
jargon. You're giving me knowledge, letting me learn and
building my confidence. You're being a teacher.

You teach me a skill and show me a system. I practise
individual skills until I feel I've got them right - and then off I go
- motoring off towards the horizon, alone, unaided, confident,
independent. In teaching me you haven't suppressed my
creativity. You haven't patronised me by keeping words like
'door' and 'clutch' from me. You've taught me and I've learnt.

As you can see, I fear we've lost our didactic nerve on grammar.
We're afraid to educate and feel we have only to entertain. As a
result, the students who need the most formal guidance in using
language end up with least. Next time you read a class reader or
a short story aloud, watch the reaction of the group. Watch what
they do as you read. Some students will follow the text
enthralled and rapt and never look up. Some will pretend to

follow the text, occasionally forgetting to turn the page when you do. And some will gaze into space, captivated and lost in the story, responding fully to the world of the text.

And my guess is that these students will be your weakest writers.

They'll be the ones whose grasp on sentence structure will be least secure. They'll string sentences together with commas - or with no punctuation at all. Paragraphing will be erratic, if it exists, and - as a result - their work will be hardest to follow and most frustrating to return with the ubiquitous teacher's comment: "Good but ...".

These are the children who will be unfamiliar with the written conventions of text. They'll hear language all the time - from family, friends, TV. They'll hear standard English - on TV and at school. But they will also be at a critical disadvantage.

If these students are not following text on the page with the eye as they hear it read aloud, they are missing an essential lesson in becoming a writer. They are failing to connect the aural rhythms of grammar with the conventions of text on the page.

Put less pretentiously, I mean that they encounter less written text anyway. But if they don't follow the text unfolding on the page, whilst hearing the sentence rhythms in their ears, they're missing out. Punctuation will not make sense because they aren't seeing its essential purpose. They'll be duped by the myth that

punctuation is about breathing, taking a breath, giving the reader a pause.

Punctuation is the written equivalent of intonation: it's about communicating meaning. I get to the end of a sentence, I use a full stop to signal the end of a unit of meaning. It's not because I need to draw breath. I place commas around a relative clause: The old man - who was skating on thin ice - seems depressed. The commas are parenthetical - they section off a background unit of meaning.

I can teach this, though with many students I won't need to. If they have internalised the implicit rhythms of sentence grammar and the semantic function of punctuation, they're on their way to written success.

It's the other students who worry me - the ones who gaze out from the stories we tell. These are the ones who most need to be taught about sentences and punctuation.

Returning a piece of work to them saying ... 'Careful with the full stops'. 'Don't forget your paragraphs' 'Try to control your expression more.' ... just writing such things is wasting our time and theirs. How can I be careful with full stops if I don't know what full stops do. You tell me they go at the end of a sentence, but I'm unclear about what a sentence actually feels like. They haven't heard enough sentences and followed their patterns. Their heads aren't full of sentence styles.

As a result, they bring you a rough draft and say defensively: “this is a rough draft - I haven’t put the full stops and commas in yet” as if they expect to sprinkle them on like salt.

And these are the students who, in my experience, can be made to feel secure by the safe predictability of structured exercises. They love the possibility of getting ticks and crosses - a sense that there can, even in English, be correct and incorrect responses.

These are the students who have been most betrayed by a fudged and cowardly retreat from grammar.

My worry used to be that teaching grammar was somehow opposed to teaching literature. I’d be better off immersing my students in great works and assuming they’d absorb something of the writers’ styles and techniques. But of course they don’t. And even if they did, isn’t it a dubious, utilitarian enterprise - reading Thomas Hardy and Doris Lessing to teach about full stops?

I now realise that to work with grammar doesn’t mean we’re going to sacrifice literature. Shakespeare and Dickens and Jane Austen seemed to cope with being taught grammar AND still be creative. It isn’t an either/or world. I’m proposing that a systematic approach to grammar will actually liberate these students, not only in their writing, but in their reading.

I think we sometimes underestimate the powerful effect of grammar in helping us to make judgements about students' work. What's the different at GCSE between a D and a C: the chief difference, I suggest, will be control of sentences - writing in clearly demarcated sentences - demarcated by capitals and full stops. Do that - with sound-ish spelling - and you'll get a C. Rightly.

Difference between a B and an A? Partly vocabulary: we expect an A candidate to sparkle. Partly ambition. But, chiefly, sentence variety.

Some examples. First, Helen in Year 10:

The party had been fun; we had danced for ages. As it came to a finish we had all been kicked out and friends had drifted away into the night in little groups, slowly getting quieter.

It was a dark night but not cold. A breeze came in gusts and rattled tin cans in the gutter every now and then. Apart from that it was quiet

This is assured, controlled writing. It's already around grade A at GCSE, partly because of the evocation of atmosphere and the precisely-honed vocabulary. But it's also to do with the poise of the sentences - the balance of the opening sentence; the

complexity of sentence two; the clear simplicity of sentence three. Helen knows instinctively that interesting, lively writing needs to contain a variety of sentences, and she achieves this range of sentence styles effortlessly and to impressive effect.

Compare Rodney, also in Year 10:

My name is Rodney I live at 14 brock park drive my birthday is on the 1st July I am 15 years old I go to Huntington School The lesson that I do at school like PE, Art, office Tech and science and the lesson I don't like is English.

There is evidence here that Rodney is thinking in sentences, but his style is colloquial, linear, and lacking control. He knows some written conventions - capitals for the name of the school, but he isn't secure in his grasp of how to mark sentence boundaries. The rhythm is a plodding tone of simple sentences - statement, then statement, then statement, then statement - and we respond to it with dismay and sadness.

Now look at Kelly. She's also got a restricted range of sentence styles, but has absorbed advice on sentence type and punctuation

...

There main thing that I think has changed me over the last few years, was the death of my Auntie. This may not seem much, but as you read on you will see why I feel the way I do. My Auntie Barbara was my best friend; I could always talk to her about anything and I knew as I talked to her I was talking to her in confidence.

The sentences occasionally feel to strain, but the clarity of the expression, and the overall control, show how far Kelly has progressed. That semi-colon in the middle of the last sentence is a telling indication of the increasingly subtle grasp Kelly has gained of the way punctuation can shape meaning. She is on her way to becoming not just a compelling writer - but also an accurate one.

I think we've got a mission for these students who are struggling to express themselves in writing. It's all very well to amuse them and entertain them. But they're going to be assessed chiefly in all subjects through their writing. And I believe that the main criterion for assessment in English is grammatical control. Therefore, let's teach them, specifically and systematically, what they need to know.

Last year I taught a Year 9 special needs group who at the end of eight years of compulsory education were not writing in sentences. At the end of the year they could be sitting national tests in English and here they were unable to use the basic tool of written communication - the sentence.

We talked - briefly - about intonation, pauses, eye-contact, gesture and posture; that language isn't see-thorough - we don't look through it to meaning - but that we use techniques and conventions to structure and clarify our thoughts and ideas.

But the main thing I then taught them was about sentences - something I now teach to every class I teach, from Y7 special needs groups to Year 13 Oxbridge candidates:

I suggest that there are 3 basic types of sentences:

- simple
- compound
- complex

simple - has one subject. It tells you about one person or thing - the person or thing who is doing something in the sentence. And it tells you what they did.

Frank ate sausages.

The old grey dog jumped onto the bandstand.

We giggled loudly.

We'd talk about these. That they're the first sentences we learn to speak. "Daddy gone. Mummy hot. Nicky hungry". They'd write a few of their own. Then I'd ask them to write something

to practise - eg write a set of instructions to get someone from here to there. Then we blindfold them and off they go.

The next sentence type: compound sentences
these are simple sentences joined together by simple conjunctions - and, but or or.

Frank ate sausages and
the old grey dog jumped onto the bandstand and
we giggled loudly but then we got told off.

We'll produce long ones and short ones and silly ones. We'll change and for but and see what happens. Students write some examples of their own, followed by a paragraph of autobiography which has to contain simple and compound sentences. Then they write a longer assignment and in my comment I give feedback on sentence variety.

Finally, complex sentences. There are various types. I usually mention two:

relative or wh-clause sentences:

The cat, who was looking aggressive, pounced on
grandma's budgie.

The table, which has writing all over it, looked a disgrace.

I give students a simple sentence:

The old man coughed.

They make it into a wh-clause sentence:

The old man, who I had seen for the first time last week,
coughed.

I mention parenthetical commas - the way we create an island of words to help the reader follow our meaning - and then we all write a paragraph or two using simple, compound and complex sentences.

Next complex type: adverbial clauses:

As I walked down the street, I heard a rude noise.
Despite my iron stomach, I still felt like being ill.

We talk about the formal feel these create and about the brownie points they can earn from examiners. Students practise and then we have another piece of work in which to internalise these sentence rhythms in a broader context.

I'm not suggesting this will create perfect writers overnight - though it has a dramatic effect on some students, who have clearly been longing for structure, for a system for years.

It would be naive to believe we're going to make better writers immediately - this is a long term skill. But once you've established the framework of sentence types - and the fact that sentence variety is the key to successful writing - then other grammar points, hints and tips about style and punctuation can follow on as appropriate. Use of semi-colon will only every be really clear to the child who recognises you want to separate units of meaning and a full stop would be too strong, a coma too weak.

My approach to grammar has been criticised. One linguist told me it was impossible to define what the sentence actually was - that scholars had spent centuries doing so - and that I was oversimplifying.

But in the context of the children I teach who need more than anything else to be able to write in clear, meaningful sentences, I'm happy to construct a definition and use it. If I oversimplify, so be it. If I were teaching science I would start with a simplified model of the world and build upon it.

I suggest that at times we should do the same for English. We should be prepared to say that there are rules and conventions which - at this stage - you need to use. Later, you'll learn to change or break them. Now, part of your training as a writer is to learn to use them.

Thus students learn a rule; practise it through a brief drill or exercise; practise it in a written context; and then place it into a broader context of their own assignments.

For some students, the effect can be liberating. Here's one, a Year 11 student, asked to write about 'A place I know':

Playa Dorado beach in the Caribbean is very clean and one of the whitest beaches I have seen. The sand is soft and there is lots of hotels situated off the beach. Palm trees are at the back of the beach and follow it everywhere it goes. The sea is clear and really warm.

The group are taught about sentence variety and the way it can add greater interest to your written style. They then rewrite their paragraph:

The beach in the Caribbean is spectacular. It is one of the cleanest and whitest beaches I have ever seen. The sand is soft, hot and there are lots of hotels situated off it. There are palm trees, which are huge, at the back of the beach and they follow it everywhere it goes. The sea is clear, salty and very warm.

The writing has gained vitality, partly from enhanced vocabulary, but chiefly from a greater sense of sentence variety. It opens with a simple sentence; then a complex sentence; then a

compound sentence; then a complex sentence containing a relative clauses, before concluding with a simple sentence.

The effect is to create much greater control and clarity. A student has learnt a series of skills, put them into practice and, as a result, improved the quality of her work. I cannot make evangelical promises that the effect is always so dramatic, but I have no doubt that a more formal approach to the sentence level of grammar can prove significantly effective in enabling students to write with more interest and precision.

I would therefore conclude with a number of practical suggestions:

1 As English teachers we can wrongly assume that grammar is synonymous with learning word classes or ‘the parts of speech’ - the ability to spot an adverb at long distance. In a school context, that is not the important level of grammar. We need to work at the level of sentences, showing students that there are different types of sentences, that these create different effects. Short sentences can create suspense, or give clarity. Compound sentences can create a colloquial, conversational feel. Complex sentences can convey a bulk of detail in compressed form. Students should look at different types of sentences, hear them read aloud, and experiment with them in their own writing.

2 Students need to internalise the rhythm of sentences. As English teachers it is easy to forget that we are paid-up members of the Literacy Club. Novelist Jeremy Seabrook's autobiographical comment is probably true of many of us: "we passed exams as naturally as others passed water". We write in sentences automatically, unconsciously, because we are familiar with their variety of rhythms and styles.

Keep giving children the opportunity to hear the rhythms of English - and keep insisting that they follow with their eyes as well as their ears.

3 Punctuation should be taught as a written convention of grammar, something which clarifies meaning. It is misleading and unhelpful to tell students to add a comma or full stop because they need to breathe. Punctuation needs to be established as an aid to meaning - a system for helping the reader to gain the subtlety and precision of the writer's meaning.

4 The use of grammar exercises isn't shameful. If we teach students a specific skill, they need to practise it. Then, after a short, intensive burst of reassuring consolidation, they need to move into the context of their own writing and practise using the skill there. In this way the learning development is more logical - learn a skill, practise it, use it in context.

5 Every English lesson should be about more than mere content. If all we talk about is themes or characters or ideas, and

we don't draw attention to structure and language and style, then students are not gaining sufficient experience of the way language is being used in different contexts. Every encounter with every text ought to be inviting students to comment on the writer's use of language.

I wouldn't dare to claim that any of this will transform every student's writing immediately; but a more formal approach to teaching grammar - rooted in the notion of teaching a skill, practising it as a brief, reassuring drill; then using it in context - has made a real impact on the students I have taught. The result has not been to stifle their creativity or suppress their individualism, nor to subject them to an endless diet of exercises. Rather, they have gained greater confidence in their writing and a reassuring sense that writing skills can be learnt, rather than handed down at random by the gods. With that confidence comes liberty, not repression.

Geoff Barton is Deputy Head at Thurston Upper School, Suffolk. He is author of Grammar Essentials (Longman). The article is adapted from a talk given at the English Association annual conference in October 1997.

ⁱ David Tomlinson, Errors in the Research into the Effectiveness of Grammar Teaching, *English in Education* 28:1, Spring 1994, p20

ⁱⁱ Nora Robinson, "The Relation Between Knowledge of English Grammar and Ability in English Composition", University of Manchester 1959

ⁱⁱⁱ; Andrew Wilkinson, The Foundations of Language, Oxford University Press, 1971.

^{iv} Tomlinson, op cit, p21

^v Welch, Thornton and Ashton, London English Papers 1: Helping Pupils to Write Better, ILEA, 1979, p3

^{vi} Tomlinson, op cit, p23