Grammar without Grammar:
Just Playing Around, Writing

Deborah Dean

hen I first started teaching, grammar education was specifically addressed in my district's learning objectives: students will identify adjectives and adverbs; they will diagram subjects and direct objects. As a new teacher, I did my best to meet the objectives. I tried to make the content interesting and, somehow, connected to writing: we wrote clues for treasure hunts using prepositional phrases and descriptions of our own "wild things" (à la Maurice Sendak) with elaborate adjectives. Once, I spent a week teaching verbals with comic strips to a ninth grade honors class, only to receive a scathing letter from a parent condemning me for spending "countless hours on stultifying grammar exercises." Although we had spent around four hours total—hardly countless—and although I didn't think writing bubbles for comics counted as stultifying exercises, I could see the parent's point. How did this help my students with their writing?

When the district dropped the grammar items from the mandated objectives, I dropped the grammar units from my curriculum. I mentally rubbed my hands together: now I could spend more time on writing. Yes! But then I found that when my students' writing needed help, we didn't have a common vocabulary to discuss the problems. I bumbled around for a few years, trying first one strategy and then another, hoping to find a way to solve this dilemma, not wanting to return to what I hadn't seen work (and what research had been telling us for years did not work) but not knowing exactly what else to do, either. I tried some sentence combining; there was some improvement. Eventually, I came across a book by Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert Connors, Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, and I decided to try an even older method than traditional grammar instruction—sentence imitation.

Starting Out

I started badly. I did so many things wrong that it's a wonder the strategy ever really worked. On the first day, I brought in a model sentence written by George Orwell—one from Corbett and Connors's book: "The gallows stood in a small yard, separate from the main grounds of the prison and overgrown with tall prickly weeds." I asked students to look at the sentence on the overhead screen and analyze its construction—list the parts of speech or the parts of the sentence in sequence. They looked at me blankly.

When the district dropped the grammar items from the mandated objectives, I dropped the grammar units from my curriculum. I mentally rubbed my hands together: now I could spend more time on writing. Yes! But then I found that when my students' writing needed help, we didn't have a common vocabulary to discuss the problems. I bumbled around for a few years, trying first one strategy and then another, hoping to find a way to solve this dilemma, not wanting to return to what I hadn't seen work (and what research had been telling us for years did not work) but not knowing exactly what else to do, either. I tried some sentence combining; there was some improvement. Eventually, I came across a book by Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert Connors, Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, and I decided to try an even older method than traditional grammar instruction—sentence imitation.
observation—something is there that we can see—and the second part has two descriptors, each with a little section adding more detail about the descriptive word. The two descriptors are like each other in how they are worded.” I started to see life in a few eyes instead of that glassy stare.

My students really liked the personal one: “If Mrs. Dean continues to require such strange tasks, it is good that responses are scored more for participation than for quality.” We never mentioned subordinate clauses or parallel structure, but my students laughed at my sentence, and then went to work on their own, using both constructions.

Playing Around

As the days progressed, we practiced different constructions in the first minutes of class. We never again brought up parts of sentences in grammatical terms. Each day, students would write two or three sentences patterned after the models, and then some would share their sentences. With few exceptions, all could follow the structures without knowing the names for them. Sometimes, some of the attempts were awkward or clumsy, but those examples were often more useful for discussion, as students suggested ways their peers could revise or rephrase what they had written. This was a time to experiment, and no one seemed to feel threatened once they understood that this was just practice. Eventually many students started sharing the sentences they weren’t sure worked as they wanted them to, instead of the ones they were sure of, so that the rest of the class could help them rewrite. This was a time to risk without worrying about product—and the students really liked it. It was a kind of word game.

Generally, the students wrote their sentences about what they knew—the school, the football team, life, current events. Sometimes sentences were about class members, which I allowed as long as they weren’t hurtful. After all, it was hard to ignore the basketball players who had shaved their heads the night before and were sitting in the next row. They had to be the topic of some of these sentences. Sometimes, however, I would ask students to write three sentences and require one to be on the text we were currently reading—Brave New World or King Lear, for example. The more capable the students became, the better they were able to handle this introduction of required content to the task. For the most part, these imitation activities were a way for students to work with language, to consider different ways of expressing an idea, and to begin to understand that many options for expressing an idea or thought exist—and that they had the ability to work to find more effective constructions.
I found sentences everywhere. Reader's Digest quotes were favorites, but I found several in Sports Illustrated articles as well. Children's picture books are also good sources of great sentences that many students may find interesting and unintimidating. One good example for sentences of exposition in a children's book is Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra by Andrea Davis Pinkney. It has sentences like this: “For all those homebodies out in radio-lovers' land—folks who only dreamed of sitting pretty at the Cotton—the show helped them feel like they were out on the town.” And this: “And whenever a pretty-skinned beauty leaned on Duke's piano, he played his best music, compositions smoother than a hairdo sleeked with pomade.” This book is also a gold mine for teaching about effective use of fragments (although we don't have to call them fragments). Another favorite children's book is Valiska Gregory's Through the Mickle Woods. A good model sentence from that book is, “They walked together through the cold until they saw a light, small as a firefly, from a cottage in the distance.” Although this sentence is narrative, the potential for explanation is great: similes and subordinate clauses and relationships explained with prepositional phrases. But I don't mention that anymore.

Additionally, this exercise gives us an opportunity to talk about how we innately know how to embed in certain ways, so much so that sometimes we don't even realize that we are doing it.

Sometimes I let students find their own “great” sentences instead of bringing one in for them. I find passages from writing that have numerous examples, and then, as I read the text aloud, I ask students to mark three or four sentences they really like. When I finish, we share our favorites. Students explain why the sentences stand out for them. A favorite text is John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address. I usually use just the second half of it, and students find plenty of sentences in that portion to choose from. After we discuss their favorites, I ask them to write a sentence of their own modeled after the pattern of one of their favorites. Sometimes I've used this activity when we are working on a research paper. Then, I ask students to write the sentence about the topic they have been researching. When the sentences are written, several students share theirs with the class. The sentences sound wonderful. In one class, a student even commented that everyone's topics and findings sounded more impressive written in these sentence structures—which led to a discussion of why every sentence need not be one of these “impressive” ones.

After my students are familiar with finding and imitating model sentences, I want them to start thinking about how these wonderful sentences are put together, but again, I don't want to use terminology that would put them in a coma. I find passages of writing that have interesting content and structure, and then we take the sentences apart. A good text I use is Annie Dillard's book, An American Childhood. In one passage, Annie finds an old nickel in an alley and dreams of the ancient people who must have lost it there (39–41). After we read and discuss the passage, I ask students to identify several sentences they really like and tell the rest of the class why they like them. I select a sentence from the writing and tell the students that we are going to see how many single ideas one sentence contains. This sentence is an example: “The alley ended at an empty, padlocked garage.” We make this list:

- The alley ended.
- It ended at a garage.
- The garage was empty.
- The garage was padlocked.

This is a little challenging for some students, but others are very good at seeing all the ideas nested in a nicely constructed sentence. I ask students to pick any sentence they want from the passage and write all the single-idea sentences they can find in it. As they finish, I ask them to write the list of sentences on the board. For many students, this seems like a game. Invariably, they try to find sentences they believe will reap the longest list. When the board is full, we start looking at the lists. We discover that some people find more embedded ideas
than others in the same sentence, which is okay; this is not an easy task, especially at the beginning. Additionally, this exercise gives us an opportunity to talk about how we innately know how to embed in certain ways, so much so that sometimes we don’t even realize that we are doing it. We try putting some of the lists back together to see if our finished sentence looks like the model sentence. Sometimes it does; sometimes it doesn’t. That is not as important as what the students start to understand at a conscious level about their own grammars. Do students know the names of all the constructions they create when they embed? Not at all. But they begin to see new ways to combine their ideas in their own writing because they have seen how such combining occurs in sentences they like.

**Getting into Writing**

Though these activities raise students’ awareness of the power of language and increase their ability to create stylistically improved sentences, they weren’t meant to be isolated from the students’ writing. They were intended to help improve writing, so, when students are working on a multidraft essay, I start to incorporate the sentence practice into revision. After they have a draft of the paper, I ask them to revise two sentences in the final draft of the essay that follow patterns we have practiced in class. I ask them to star these sentences on the final draft so I can see their progress in stretching their sentence sense. I don’t want my students to get the idea that every sentence should be a structural masterpiece; that would sound terribly contrived and could hinder their voice and sense of control over their text.

As with any learning, the first tries aren’t always wonderful. Some of the sentences sound a little contrived anyway as students try to mold their ideas into sentence structures that are more complex than those they usually write. But they improve. And they like trying this kind of language play. Their sensitivity to language and to what it can do increases. They see a reason to look not only at what they say, but also at how they say it. If I asked them to tell me the names of the parts of speech or their functions in the sentences they construct, they could not do it. But I think I’m finally to the place in my teaching career where I understand that this doesn’t matter. My students are writing, and they are trying to write more effectively, and they understand how to look at what they read as a model for what they want to say. They know grammar—they just don’t know that they do.

**Works Cited**


A former public school teacher, **DEBORAH DEAN** now teaches in the English education program at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

---

**EJ 25 years ago**

**Literacy: An Arbitrary Point of Proficiency?**

“Is it really necessary to place a point on the continuum, to say that above this point is ‘literacy,’ below is ‘illiteracy’? . . . At the root of any concern in the area of literacy is a desire—whether based on altruistic, political, or economic motives—for enabling the individual to cope better with his or her environment. Such being the case, no arbitrary point of proficiency will fit all individuals.”