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Power Play: From Grammar to Language Study

This piece explores how moving from grammar instruction to language study empowers students and their writing. The authors detail how to leverage what students already know and how certain language moves negotiate power.

Grammar vs. Language

If grammar is a benighted term, let’s set it aside, at least temporarily. What are we really after, anyway, when we teach sentence-level concepts and conventions? “Grammatical correctness” may seem like the obvious short-term answer. But “correctness” is an externally imposed, negatively reinforced, school-centric criteria that doesn’t motivate many students. People need to feel personally invested in challenging work to create something of value. Why would student composing be any different?

A better goal might be grammatical fit, with students recognizing the power of specific language choices and the range of rhetorical options for communication, whether academic, professional, social, or personal. Substituting the more innocuous phrase language study for the G-word suggests a wider purpose and shifts students to more constructive work with words. Consider these benefits:

1. Language study aligns with all levels of the profession, kindergarten through college, and it’s right there in how we describe the field: “English language arts.”

2. Language study offers a better template to explore the region between a single word and a larger passage. Studying the language of a sentence (or a line, stanza, or paragraph) presumes a specific user of language (a writer, speaker, or composer) and thus a specific rhetorical situation. With its morass of rules and conventions, grammar as a conventional classroom focus often leads in the opposite here is perhaps no word so haunted in English language arts as “grammar.” Utter it in a classroom and call forth a legion of negative associations. Endless arcane rules never mastered. The tedious trivia of worksheets and drills. Essays marked in frustrated teacher shorthand.1 Watch students resign themselves to another trek through the academic wastelands, self-doubts confirmed: I’m not good at this, I don’t know this, I’ll never get this.

For those leading the grammar expedition, it’s usually not much better. Ask English teachers why they chose this career, and many will cite a love of books and speak warmly about the joys of reading and discussing literature. Others will invoke the power of writing, the transformative experience of finding their own voices on the page. Few will identify grammar as their motivation, even though every riveting passage or well-turned phrase could not exist without it. Our experiences with grammar as students long ago probably weren’t positive or constructive, and many of us now tread uncomfortably in this terrain.

We need a shift of perspective, a different lens through which to consider how language moves. Scholarship suggests that lessons embedded in the power dynamics and contextual needs of real communication situations might be a good start (Dunn and Lindblom; Micciche; Sanborn; Sledd). In this spirit, we offer suggestions that have helped us re-envision how language discussions can begin in classrooms.

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direction: toward a realm of abstract, supposed truths (where the author's intentions and options are minimized or ignored) rather than contextual fit.

3. A language study approach invites us to view privileged dialects such as Standard American English or Academic English as a form of foreign language, which they are since no one is raised as a native speaker of either one. The power these dialects possess is socially granted rather than inherent, and a language study approach can expose assumptions of morality and privilege to help students crack these useful codes.

4. Starting from a linguistic perspective (rather than the often-alienating nomenclature of grammar) acknowledges students themselves as legitimate experts with language in their own right.

Perhaps this last reason may seem naive or even ridiculous to some readers. Yet, consider this: If your students are first-language English speakers, they have an innate understanding of the language. Research indicates that by 18 months, children are mastering basic language structures (Curzan and Adams). By the time they enter high school, students can be quite sophisticated—and even brilliant—with what they can do with words. They've used language to talk their way into advantageous situations and out of troublesome ones, to entertain and impress their friends, to counsel, console, and cajole. Their language use identifies them as members of specific communities and cultures, and whether consciously realized or not, they can shift between registers and dialects depending on the situation.

They've had years of experience processing language, and while they may not know the terminology or be metacognitively practiced, they have a deep familiarity with the structures of English.

Yet conventional ELA approaches often assume these same students know little about language and how it works.

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We think that in beginning any language instruction (including writing), we should leverage what students already know and can do, an approach that not accidentally respects them as language savvy. In the following, we detail activities that draw on students' language awareness to build confidence and extend understanding.

### Innate Understanding: Word Endings

Students already possess intuitive knowledge about words and the roles they play in sentences. They may not be able to formally express this awareness (e.g., "suffixes indicate particular lexical categories"), but you can help them realize their understanding through simple, low-risk activities. For example, add "ish" to "child," changing it to "childish," and you've created an adjective. Add "er" to "play," changing it to "player," and there's a noun. First-language speakers know innately which suffix belongs to which lexical category without formal instruction. This can seem miraculous to students, as the meanings seem to emerge from their own minds. Try this experiment:

- Assemble a list of noun and adjective suffixes (a Google search can give you a complete list of suffixes for various lexical categories). Write them on the board in a mixed-up order.
- Ask your students to call out words they know to be nouns, and then choose one of these that has the potential to serve as the base for interesting and amusing new words (see below).
- Next, ask your students to create new words using the noun you've chosen and the suffixes on the board. With the noun monster, for instance, you're likely to get words such as monsterism, monsterful, monsterdom, monsterable, and monsterless.
- Ask students to create sentences using each of these new words. Almost invariably, students will put the noun-suffix words in noun slots and the adjective-suffix words in adjective slots.
  - "The monsterless house sat quietly in the woods."
  - "Monsterism is the process of creating creatures in a lab."
- After they've created a number of sentences, ask students to identify the function of the
new word in the sentence. (Is it important that students know or hear the grammaphile term lexical category? We don’t think so, at least not yet.)

• Emphasize students’ innate language knowledge.

Adjectives in Order

Do you remember being taught that serial adjectives follow a particular order? We don’t. Here’s a sentence:

Madeline gazed up at the ancient, beautiful, round, big moon.

Your students will probably know that “ancient, beautiful, round, big moon” just sound wrong somehow, though they may not be able to explain why.

The issue here is that English has an order for adjectives (Tchudi and Thomas 47), and native language users know this order innately and follow it regularly. Here’s the general order with a few examples for each:

• opinion (best, ugliest)
• size (small, gigantic)
• shape/weight/length (circular)
• condition (new, wet, torn)
• age (young, ancient)
• color (purple, green)
• pattern (striped, paisley)
• origin (Asian, farm-raised)
• material (ceramic, wooden)
• purpose (sleeping, airline, basketball)

We can’t think of many descriptive situations that would call for all of these categories, but some experimentation quickly reveals the order as accurate. Try giving students a list of adjectives for a noun, and ask them to order them in a way that “feels” right. To what degree does their ordering fit with one another and to the list above? What variation is possible and to what effect? Importantly, fidelity to this order is less important than students considering the impact of their choices and noticing their intuitive grasp on how words interact.

Language in Chunks

Our brains process language in chunks, phrases, and clauses, which suggests that we might begin language work by discussing and analyzing these chunks. We borrow this idea from Margaret T. Rustick and follow her steps in our classroom. Begin with an elaborate sentence with plenty of phrases, modifiers, and short clauses. Here’s the sentence Michelle projects in her classroom:

The large red dog, yes, the dog was a bright, luminescent red, hunched over the pavement, seemingly focusing, clearly walking purposefully, towards the darkened, dilapidated house, which seemed eerie, creepy, and cold under the light of the full moon, a place where a large, red—bright and luminescent red—dog would go on such a night. (Crovitz and Devereaux 226)

Split your class into groups. Each group must remove either one, two, or three words from the sentence per turn, but what remains must make sense. Once they have removed all words, students discuss how meaning changed throughout this process. This isn’t necessarily a time for complex academic terminology, but rather a chance for students to see how meanings are assembled through clusters of words. Students can then consider this process in reverse, experimenting with building their own “telescopic texts” beginning from simple sentences (Davis; Sharp).

Three Language Moves

Below, we discuss three kinds of language moves. A conventional grammar lesson might introduce these concepts with top-down technical lingo (i.e., sentence modifiers, complex sentences, passive voice) and follow with stand-alone exercises and worksheets. Instead, we approach these concepts inductively, emphasizing practical and immediate use and positioning students as cognizant, savvy communicators.

Relating Reality

Professional writers paint versions of truth every day (Noden 1–2). Students can shade the truth as well. Excerpt A below is from an article in the New York Times; Excerpt B is our revision.
Example 1
A. Presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush both cut taxes deeply on the promise of economic payoffs, putting aside concerns about deficits . . . (Baker).
B. Presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush both cut taxes deeply on the promise of economic payoffs, putting the American people and their needs first . . .

The bolded phrases paint two different realities concerning the actions of Presidents Reagan and Bush. In the first phrase, the actions of the two presidents read as calculated political moves that may not align with expressed conservative values. In B, meanwhile, Reagan’s and Bush’s actions have transformed from economic risks into patriotic decisions. The phrases in these sentences tell two different stories in the same context, even though the base sentence remains the same. Let’s look at another example.

Example 2
A. The White House released a statement late Tuesday night, blasting the judge’s ruling as an “egregious overreach.” (Gomez)
B. The White House released a statement late Tuesday night, expressing disagreement with the ruling.

As with the first example, changing one phrase drastically shifts the perceived reality of a situation. “Blasting” has a completely different charge than “expressing.” While grammatically both words are doing the same thing, they are rhetorically very different, conveying aggression on one hand and calmness on the other.

Check out the structure of those sentences. They begin with a clause that describes factual events in fairly neutral terms, followed by a phrase that offers an interpretation of the events through elaboration. This is a common structure in expository prose, particularly in descriptive reporting, one that students can easily practice. Almost all students can write a simple sentence about a recent event they’ve witnessed. With the addition of a modifying phrase, they can experiment with controlling a reader’s understanding of that event depending on what is emphasized. These experiments open up interesting conversations about responsibility and the ethical use of power. When does a depiction of a factual event transition from a reasonably accurate interpretation into a distortion, and how do we decide? In a time of “fake news” accusations, this work takes on particular significance.

Nuancing an Argument
When you hear “complex sentence,” what’s the first thought that comes to your mind? If you’re like most English teachers, it’s likely “sentence structure,” “sentence variety,” or something similarly sensible. These are useful points of discussion with our students—teaching sentence variety, for instance, can be crucial in understanding narrative pacing and characterization. But the complex sentence is also intimately connected to nuance in argument. Rather than a series of assertions in a vacuum, effective arguments acknowledge counterpoints—the real concerns of those who think differently—and complex sentences offer a concise way to do just that.

We like to pair complex sentences with Kelly Gallagher’s “Four-Square Argument Chart” (177). Figure 1 is one example of what this might look like involving an argument for permission to attend a party.

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FIGURE 1. Four-Square Argument Chart for Permission to Attend a Party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are the main points of your argument?</th>
<th>What are the main arguments of your parents?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• I will be with my close friends you know well</td>
<td>• College students are throwing the party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I will drive, so we will be back by midnight</td>
<td>• The party is far out of town and a long way to drive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are the counter-arguments you will hear from your parents?</th>
<th>What are the counter-arguments you would present to your parents?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• We don’t know the people throwing the party</td>
<td>• Through my previous behavior, I’ve shown that I can make good choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We don’t like you driving late at night</td>
<td>• I am familiar with the area in which the party is taking place</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once students have had an opportunity to consider the various positions of an argument, the complex sentence becomes a powerful rhetorical tool. Differing views can be acknowledged even as one's own stance is asserted:

- Although you don’t know the people throwing the party, I will be with Jae and Alex, who you have known for ten years.
- Even though you’re worried that the party is being thrown by college students, I’ve been out with strangers before and shown that I can make smart choices.

Using complex sentences in argumentative writing—or in discussions—allows us to show respect toward another’s beliefs and concerns. Other language moves do similar work. For example, conjunctive adverbs can help writers make that critical pivot between perspectives as well:

- The party is several miles out of town; however, I am familiar with the area, and you know that I’m very careful driving at night.

When we make these turns in our writing, acknowledging alternative perspectives while stating our own, our audiences tend to be more receptive to what we have to say.

Emphasizing (and De-emphasizing) the Doer

Everyday language choices can make for fascinating discussions of language and power. Most young people are skilled at manipulating sentence structure to highlight or hide their roles when describing particular events, and low-risk activities can call forth this knowledge:

- Your friend’s Frisbee, which you borrowed, ended up lost in the lake. Now you need to explain what happened. Your task: Write two notes to your friend.
  - In your first note, take the blame for losing the Frisbee.
  - In the second, tell what happened but avoid responsibility.

In responding to hypothetical situations, students can draw on similar experiences to notice and analyze language choices that shape meaning. Adolescence and adulthood involve negotiating episodes that deal with guilt, responsibility, and blame—and by extension, personal integrity and honor. A conventional grammar lesson that starts with a teacherly explanation of active and passive voice—unlikely to interest most students—can be reconceived as an opportunity to consider the ramifications of real (or invoked) language in specific contexts. Rather than locking language concepts into separate mini-units, simple situations like that above invite a messier discussion of many different options dealing with questions of power and ethics:

- Is the statement “the Frisbee got lost” a lie? A half-truth? Something else? Does it matter?
- When should we confess to wrongdoing, and when is it acceptable (if ever) to use language to obscure guilt?
- What are the power implications of the following statements?
  - “I flunked the class” vs. “The teacher flunked me”
  - “We broke up” vs. “I got dumped”
  - “I got into an accident” vs. “I wrecked the car”

As students leverage their understanding in this sphere, teachers can introduce examples from media reports and current events—celebrity statements, political non-apologies, public confessions—for how they handle matters of truth, power, and integrity.

Now What?

When we foreground situations and skills that students recognize, these experiments can help them understand the utility of language moves across contexts. Rather than handing students a worksheet that asks them to identify the participles in preselected sentences, maybe we ask them to consider the following.

Scenario: Part of your job as stage director for Awesome Playhouse is helping actors understand mood and tone. Instead of just telling actors how they should feel, you find it helpful to show that mood and tone are communicated through action and posture.

For example, consider the sentence “John picks up the knife.”

If we need to show that John is angry at this moment, we could say “Angrily, John picks up the
knife,” but this doesn’t help an audience see John’s anger. A better description might be “Shaking with rage, John picks up the knife.” That’s something an actor can demonstrate through a physical performance.

**Task:** Use a participial phrase to transform the following script notes. Your goal is to help the actors playing these roles “see” what they can do to communicate the intended mood.

1. The young woman stands near the window (mood: anxiety)
2. The president addresses the reporters (mood: determination)

(Crovitz and Devereaux 115–16)

Scenario-based language approaches ask students to consider language moves within the context of realistic situations, helping them understand how language gets things done.

We want to be careful not to oversell the impact of this work. These are low-risk forays into language options, playful experiments that position students as inquisitive and capable, able to draw usefully on the resources of experience. We’re well aware that writing improvement is an incremental, long-term process, and these tactics are a subtle repositioning of student agency on that path. The nexus of power and language is a consistent point of discussion with our own students.

**Our Own Risks with Language**

We all want to build students’ confidence with language. But if we’re honest, most of us have work to do in becoming more confident ourselves. When Michelle first began teaching high school, she was stuck in red-pen mode, marking every error and doling out traditional grammar lessons to little effect. What took her an embarrassing number of years to realize is that language work must be more about effective contextual use than correct answers. Think about Geneva Smitherman’s code-meshing in *Talkin and Testifyin* or a senator’s use of community dialect when speaking with constituents. Language isn’t a matter of right and wrong; it’s about getting things done by knowing the context and acting intentionally on that information. We have to be confident enough as teachers to face the holes in our own grammar knowledge and curious enough to pay attention to how language works in myriad ways around us.

In this article, we’ve only referred to students who are first-language speakers of English. What about English language learners? Are they exempt from approaches that try to leverage student language understandings, especially if these tactics rely on an English-as-a-first-language teacher’s perceptions about what these innate understandings are likely to be?

We don’t think so—but including all students requires some stretching as well. It means that we need to be genuinely curious about how other languages work to create meanings, and that we invite students to draw on and think about their native tongues in a similar metacognitive way. The sentence patterns in Spanish and other languages, for instance, are different than those in English. While a first-language English speaker would say “I like it,” a first-language Spanish speaker would say *me gusta*, which literally translates to “it is pleasing to me.” A first-language Russian speaker might say *ohna uchitsela* with an implied “to be” verb—literally, “she teacher”—a pattern similar to that of African American English. Many languages encode formal and informal registers in noun and verb forms, while English does not. The diversity of students in modern classrooms means that many such examples exist, adding texture to the conversation about language options in different situations.

If we’re not familiar with other languages, this idea might be a little scary. But it’s also an opportunity to model for students a global stance on all kinds of language questions. Whether it’s how grammatical forms in English shift meaning, or how similar choices are manifested in other languages, a posture of engaged curiosity and a focus on how words work in real contexts can help change how students react when we mention “language study”—or, if we must, “grammar.”

**Notes**

1. Yes, of course there are some for whom “grammar” evokes positive and even invigorating associations. We’ve had fans of sentence diagramming report a kind of rigorous puzzle-solving thrill from such work. We would not, however, characterize this reaction as anywhere near common.

2. As a follow-up, ask students to consider how forms common to certain lexical categories are put to work in other roles. Words such as *musical, cellular,* and *hopeful* all have typical adjective suffixes but are occasionally used as
nouns, as in “Elizabeth Warren is sometimes mentioned as a 2020 presidential hopeful.”

3. Similar to the previous footnote, here we have words shifting lexical categories to fulfill an adjectival purpose (e.g., a sleeping bag, an airline ticket, basketball shoes). Such is the versatility of English in actual use.

4. Yes, the technically correct phrasing here is “whom you have both known.” Is it worth correcting right now? In this context, we think that a student’s ability to nuance argument at the sentence level is a more compelling focus.

Works Cited


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READWRITE THINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

This lesson is designed to help students become “rhetorically savvy” through their analysis of their own and others’ grammar pet peeves. Students begin by thinking about their own grammar pet peeves. They then read a Dear Abby column, in which she lists several grammar pet peeves. Using a chart, students analyze each pet peeve and research it to determine its accuracy. By analyzing Dear Abby’s “rant” about bad grammar usage, students become aware that attitudes about race, social class, moral and ethical character, and “proper” language use are intertwined and that the rant reveals those attitudes. Finally, students discuss the pet peeves as a class, gaining an understanding that issues of race, class, and audience’s expectations help determine what is considered “proper” language usage. http://bit.ly/2H0v4

Call for Nominations: CEL Leadership Awards

The Conference on English Leadership (CEL) offers three awards annually recognizing contributions to leadership with the English language arts. Information for each award can be found on the CEL website at http://www.ncte.org/cel/awards; nominations must be submitted by February 1, 2018. The awards will be presented during the 2018 CEL Convention in Houston, Texas.