
Chapitre 5 | Chapter 5

Grammar, Rhetoric, and «Good Writing»

Susan Dobra
California State University Chico

Grammar indeed originated as a pedagogical and literary genre, and has been revitalized as a logical one; neither its traditional nor its mathematical pedigree is much warrant for taking it for granted that it is the form in which speech comes organized for use. [...] Classical antiquity did not stop with grammar, but went on to rhetoric. [...] So should we, but without the normative, exclusionary bias that has dogged the genre of grammar throughout its history. (Dell Hymes, 1974)

Grammar has an ancient and honourable pedigree—as does rhetoric. Proficiency in both grammar *and* rhetoric is essential to good academic writing. But few of us would argue with the claim that significant numbers of our students have not achieved what we would consider a mastery of grammar. And if our students use the term «rhetoric» at all, they usually do so pejoratively. So our work in writing across the curriculum/langue intégrée aux programmes would seem to be cut out for us. The question is, in what proportions should we teach grammar, rhetoric, and the other components of what we consider «good writing»—mastery of content, critical thinking, organization of ideas—in a university curriculum? Whatever answers we devise will require us to come to some level of agreement about what we mean when we use the words «grammar,» «rhetoric,» and «good writing.» Contemplating our curricular choices in these matters obliges us, as well, to familiarize

ourselves with what is known about the teaching of these. Fortunately, we have a wealth of excellent scholarship, both ancient and contemporary, on which to draw.

For most of us, the term «grammar» takes in a wide variety of concerns—everything from correct punctuation to subtle distinctions between the indicative and subjunctive cases, from the «minimal requirements for communication» to «the internal logic of a language» (Hesbois, this volume). But in order to come to an agreement on what exactly we intend to teach if we advocate teaching grammar, we need to make some discriminations. Patrick Hartwell distinguishes five separate types of grammar, which I will briefly characterize in order to make my point. Grammar 1 is the «tacit, unconscious» system of rules that native speakers of a language—even very young ones—share, but do not have conscious knowledge of. To illustrate, Hartwell points out that virtually any native speaker of English is immediately able to put into their correct natural order the words, «French the young girls four,» even though most could not cite the rule that the order of adjectives in English is number, then age, then nationality. Grammar 2 is the formal, conscious, linguistic description of those rules, which was the goal, for example, of the structuralist or transformationalist linguistic projects. If Grammar 1 is «knowing how,» then Grammar 2 is «knowing about.» Grammar 3 is a kind of «linguistic etiquette» that is often called «usage»—such issues of felicity and infelicity as the use of «he ain't here.» (Edward Finnegan's historical study of usage effectively questions the concept of norms in this category, and the Conference on College Composition and Communication's manifesto, the *Students' Right to Their Own Language*, makes a powerful political statement about enforcement of usage norms in spoken language.). Grammar 4 is what Hartwell calls «school grammar.» He defines this as the textbook grammars which pretend to logic—often derived from the logic of Latin grammars—but which are so idiosyncratic as to be of little use to anyone other than people who already know the rules. Finally, Grammar 5, «stylistic grammar» covers all systems devised to teach prose style, including Daiker, Kerek and Morenberg's sentence combining, Lanham's «lard-factor analysis,» and that old standby, Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*.

A number of implications arise from these distinctions. First, they force us to clarify our discussions. I would guess that most

proponents of «teaching grammar» are advocating the teaching of a combination of Grammars 3 and 4, although linguists may advocate the teaching of some form of Grammar 2. Without knowing for certain, however, it is difficult to agree or disagree with assurance. It is also difficult to envision and debate teaching methods without clear definitions. The most useful implication of Hartwell's distinctions, for our purposes, is that they allow us to look knowledgeably at the research on the teaching of grammar.

Examination of this scholarship reveals a crucial point that has been made over and over by linguists, writing researchers and rhetoricians: knowledge of grammatical systems—such as Grammars 2 and 4—has no connection to linguistic performance or ability to write—Grammar 1. Linguists Noam Chomsky, Mark Lester, Francis Christensen and Stephen Krashen; writing researchers Janet Emig, Mike Rose, and James Britton; and rhetoricians Martin Steinmann, Jr., and Hartwell, among many others, agree on this. It is as close as issues such as these come to being proven.

This is not news, nor is it some by-product of the latest fad. As early as 1963, Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer published a comprehensive study of all the research into writing that was available at the time. They concluded the following:

In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in composition, even a harmful effect on improvement in writing. (37-8)

Twenty-three years later, in 1986, George Hillocks published a similar report that reviewed 2,000 studies judged to be both relevant and based on systematic analysis of a data set. His research concurred with the earlier conclusions:

One of the strongest findings of this study [...] is that grammar study has little or no effect on the improvement of writing. The same is true for emphasis on mechanics

and correctness in writing. In fact, some studies indicate that when correctness is heavily emphasized in marking papers, the quality of student writing diminishes significantly [...]. (225)

Given the consistency and thoroughness of these reports, their findings are difficult to argue with.

This is not to say that language users do not or cannot learn to apply rules consciously. Recent books by Rei Noguchi and Martha Kolln focus on linguistic rules that may be useful to writers in certain situations. But the percentage of rules that can be learned and usefully applied in practical situations is so low as to be of negligible value in teaching grammar for the purposes of developing speaking or writing competence.

The most convincing scholarship on this point comes from the field of linguistics—specifically from the second language acquisition theories of Stephen D. Krashen. Krashen distinguishes between second language *acquisition*—«a subconscious process similar to child language acquisition»—and second language *learning*—«a conscious process ('knowing about language')» («The Role of Input» 1). Acquisition occurs only through input, not by practicing output and being corrected. Krashen maintains that theories about second language learning hold true also for university writing instruction. He argues, based on extensive research, that acquisition in both spoken and written discourse is «a far more powerful and central process than learning,» while conscious learning acts only as a «monitor» or editor of output, and only under very limited conditions:

Some adults (and very few children) are able to use conscious rules to increase the grammatical accuracy of their output, and even for these people, very strict conditions need to be met before the conscious grammar can be applied. («Applications» 61)

These conditions, all three of which must be met to allow the opportunity for «slight but significant» use of conscious grammar, are 1) time to use the rule consciously, 2) a focus on form, and 3) knowledge of the rule.

He points out that, while on a grammar test these conditions may hold, they are unlikely to be met in most normal discourse situations. Therefore, although the learning of some rules and editing techniques may have a «small part» in a program of writing instruction, their role in the acquisition of written discourse is negligible.

What does work, according to Krashen, is reading for interest and/or pleasure, and instruction in writing processes. Research shows that acquisition requires «comprehensible input» in relaxed conditions where meaning is forefronted. Therefore, Krashen infers—and preliminary research seems to corroborate—that a necessary, but not sufficient, characteristic of good writers is that they will have done more pleasure reading than poor writers. In other words, «input is in fact responsible for the acquisition of planned discourse[;] we acquire the ‘feel’ for the style of sophisticated writing via large amounts of reading for meaning» (1) Reading «provides ‘competence,’ in the Chomskian sense, the tacit knowledge the good writer has of what good writing is, that he or she cannot always describe» (9).

However, there is evidence that some aspects of writing «performance» *can* be consciously learned by some writers. (Krashen theorizes that these would be readers as opposed to non-readers.) Research into what constitutes an effective composing process may provide guidance in teaching strategies that lead to the development of writing performance. Janet Emig and Sharon Pianko have shown that good writers plan more, both before and during their writing, and revise more than poor writers. Sondra Perl found that poor writers see revising as essentially editing for correctness. Perl, Pianko, and others, such as Michael Stiff and Mina Shaughnessy, have found that such attention to the mechanics of form during the writing process is actually detrimental to the student’s development as a writer. A comprehensive report by Freedman, *et al.*, at the Center for the Study of Writing at the University of California, Berkeley, states, «Basic writers have been found to follow an orderly procedure as they write, [...] but lose their train of thought because they spend so much of their energy during composing attending to mechanical concerns.» (4) Models of composing processes devised by Linda Flower and John Hayes map the cognitive processes of competent writers. These «problem-solving» models provide important guidelines in encouraging the development of proficient writing processes in students.

An essential clue to what practices encourage the development of effective composing processes comes from Nancy Sommers' studies of the effects of our written responses to student writing. If the only writing we see from our students is their «final» papers, says Sommers, we force ourselves into the position of justifying the grade and feel obliged to circle errors, giving them the same apparent weight as marginal comments about content, organization, and other more global, «higher order» features of their essays. But if we allow for some process of revision of each paper, we can prioritize our responses—addressing only higher order concerns in earlier drafts and encouraging editing and proofreading as a final, «polishing» stage in the writing process. This reinforces the view of «correctness» as a necessary consideration, but places more weight on the content of the students' writing. It also frees the student from potentially restrictive attention to mechanics in the more creative stages of her writing process.

A variety of other classroom practices may help. Hillocks' study found that the following have been shown to result in improvement in writing performance: the teaching of planning techniques such as heuristics and «inquiry» («focus on immediate, concrete data of some kind during instruction and practice»); the use of «scales» or «sets of criteria,» applied to students' own or each others' writing drafts, as guides to revision; positive and/or corrective teacher comments (as opposed to negative comments or lack of feedback); sentence combining exercises. Hillocks also did a meta-analysis of the effectiveness of various modes of instruction on the improvement of writing performance. Four modes of instruction were delineated: *presentational* (lecture and instructor-dominated discussion); *natural process* (unfocused freewriting, peer response and revision); *environmental* (highly structured writing-related problem-solving, peer-group response, revision); *individualized* (one-to-one conferences). Hillocks found that the *environmental* mode was responsible for higher gains in writing as well as for longer duration of those gains; it was over four times as effective as the *presentational* mode, the least effective of the four.

Many of these studies depend upon judgements about the features of good writing that transcend considerations of «correctness» and stylistic facility. Good writing, we know, shows evidence of higher-order planning, critical thinking, the assimilation and synthesis of knowledge,

attention to organization. These considerations are notoriously difficult to quantify or even describe qualitatively. They include not only features of the text itself but also metalinguistic properties. As difficult as these properties may be to characterize and assess, they are at least as important, if not more important, than the more nameable and encodable features of discourse.

Among these metalinguistic considerations are rhetorical ones. What do I mean by that? Defining the word «rhetoric» comprehensively would be a project worthy of a much more ambitious study than this one. The art of rhetoric goes back at least to the 5th century, B.C.E., and has gone through innumerable permutations throughout the centuries. One of the more unfortunate of these resulted in the pejorative sense that we usually hear the word used in today. But, simply defined, rhetoric is attention to those components of context that impinge upon the production and consideration of discourse. Rhetorical considerations include the situation in which the discourse is occurring, the audience to whom it is addressed, the purpose of the discourse, the conventions against which it will be perceived. We have an enormous body of scholarship, ancient and modern—from Aristotle to Derrida—upon which to draw to understand the rhetorical dimensions of discourse. When we acknowledge that «one must take into account the particular context in which learners are called upon to express themselves» (Hesbois, this volume), we are drawing on understandings that have been established for centuries.

When we talk about «contextual literacy,» then, we are bringing a rhetorical dimension into the discussion of good writing, because we are tacitly acknowledging that what would be considered good writing in one rhetorical context would not necessarily be considered good in another. Contextual literacy does not preclude standards in written language. It does, however, acknowledge that what might be considered standard in one academic context could not be used as a standard in all contexts. Broadly speaking, there may be certain structures of language that do not deviate from context to context. But these basic common denominators are by and large tacit rather than conscious, acquired rather than learned, and—given the multiplicity of complex choices and cognitive operations that a writer must coordinate to produce a thoughtful, rhetorically appropriate piece of writing—relatively trivial rather than central, even given the necessity to maintain some sense of a standard.

This is not to say that all matters of grammar are uninteresting. Quite the contrary. Making subtle distinctions between linguistic forms can be quite absorbing. But these are rhetorical distinctions, contextual decisions. Communication in language involves much more than conveying information or mastering a common code. Language conveys attitudes and emotions, it frames perspectives, it participates—with writer and reader—in creating new knowledge. Given this understanding of language, what is the relative amount of time and space we should give to the mastery of a standard code?

Making decisions like these about what we should be teaching, and how, and how much necessitates that we seriously consider our priorities in a writing-across-the-curriculum—or any academic—program. What do we value most? Surely we want to maintain some idea of a standard. It is an unfortunate truth that part of the job of teaching writing in a university is to be a gatekeeper. When we encounter students in our courses who have not acquired the forms and conventions of the standard dialect, we may balk at this task or become indignant that the student has passed out of high school, but the bottom line responsibility to uphold a standard is ours. No student should pass out of a university with serious deficiencies in the mechanics of written language. But what is the best way to ensure this? Can we address each student's problems individually? Even if that were possible or effective, would it be desirable? Are grammatical problems a widespread and serious enough problem that we need to subsume other considerations to achieving grammatical fluency?

Our priorities, as well as our knowledge of language acquisition, may dictate otherwise. Many have held for a long time that as students learn to think more clearly, their grammar will naturally improve. And there seems to be some evidence for this—often, a student's linguistic permutations are the result of not being sure of exactly what she is saying. In this case, instruction in more disciplined thinking and reasoning processes results in clearer, more error-free prose.

But, as error-analysis and second language acquisition theory has shown, there are certain types of errors that are not traceable to simple cognitive difficulties. They persist in even the most tightly reasoned argument. Many of us have begun to consider what might be a responsible and appropriate way to address the need for some kind of standard. Yet we are acutely aware of the pitfalls of such an undertaking. One of

the most obvious of these is time. The short span of one term already taxes our students' abilities to assimilate the content material of our courses at the same time as focusing on their writing. Even if we could be sure it would be effective, which Krashen's work casts some doubt on, can we afford to spend time exclusively on instruction in grammar? Or should we await the «teachable moment» to address errors in context?

Another problem is the wide variation, among the students in any given class, in level of competence. Is it fair to waste better prepared students' time to attend to the lesser prepared? Yet another—and perhaps the most ponderous—concern is the effect that a stated focus on grammar may have on students' attitudes towards their writing. We would surely not be serving our highest goals as a program if we were to sacrifice the intellectual growth that comes from risk-taking to a perceived prioritizing of «correctness» in writing.

What all this suggests is that in matters of teaching grammar in the WAC program, we should proceed with care. Addressing matters of correctness to the whole class may tend to skew the focus of our courses and stifle our students' exploration of ideas and writing styles not fully under their control for fear of making errors. On the other hand, too little emphasis on correcting egregious errors on students' papers may be a disservice to those who need to know where they stand in relation to a standard. Where is the middle ground?

It is essential, in considering whatever policies, procedures, and guidelines are appropriate to our program in these matters, that we weigh the implications and possible side-effects of the messages we send to student writers. We need to articulate a standard for good writing. And we also need to continue to encourage quality of thought, creativity, and exploration of ideas. With care, we can harmonize these goals wisely—and in the context of each of our own disciplines as well as that of the university.

Contextual literacy will not transform our campus tower into a tower of Babel. It will not eliminate the context of the university-community-as-a-whole or eradicate the need for communication with the outside world. Contextual literacy—or writing across the curriculum, or the «rhetorical turn,» as it has been called in the philosophy of language—will only enrich our linguistic communities, because it will allow us to have conversations like this one among people who have rarely ever had the opportunity to discuss language or writing together before.

Here is my offer: If you will continue to try to understand me, I will continue to try to understand you.