Contextualized Grammar Instruction for College Transition Students

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Why is grammar important for college transition students?

In academic settings, students are judged by their command of standard English, which may require them to observe rules of grammar and usage with which they are not familiar. Research suggests that rote teaching of grammar does not serve students well. Students do not naturally transfer grammatical rules and patterns learning through worksheet drills into their own writing (Harris & Rowan, 1989; Hillocks, 1986).

Grammatical errors in writing are a common problem facing college transition students. The errors most frequently made by these writers can be divided into several categories, including letter omissions such as “two boy” and “John coat,” redundancies such as “more better,” and shared forms such as “I seen him” (D’Eloia, 1987). The other most-common errors made by these students are fragments, run-ons, and comma splices, which are often viewed as errors in punctuation (Shaughnessy, 1977). Most educators would agree that these students are more likely to succeed in academic settings if they are skilled in writing grammatically-correct compositions.

What is contextualized grammar instruction?

Writing teachers have long searched for effective ways to address the grammatical mistakes made by their college transition students. Traditionally, grammar instruction entailed the memorization of grammar rules and terminology, including rote drills and labeling of sentence parts in workbook exercises. Research has shown that these approaches have little or no effect on improving student's writing (Meyer, 1986; Seliger, 1979).

After a great deal of debate in the last century over whether to teach grammar at all, most researchers now agree that grammar instruction can improve student writing if the grammar is taught “in context” (Goode, 2000; Sams, 2003; Sedgwick, 1989). Instead of teaching grammar only with worksheets filled with drill and practice exercises, contextualized grammar instruction uses authentic and longer texts to teach grammatical rules and sentence structure. The rationale for teaching grammar in context is that because students have difficulty transferring what they learn in drills to their writing, grammar should be taught through the writing itself. Various methods of contextualizing grammatical concepts can be used to improve the writing skills of college transition students.

How is grammar contextualized?

There are many approaches to teaching grammar in context. Some approaches involve teaching the skills and then showing how they can be applied in the context of writing, while others use essays written by the teacher or students to help students discover and learn grammatical concepts. It is useful to categorize the various approaches according to the level of contextualization that is involved:

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1. Somewhat Contextualized Grammar Instruction:
Learning Grammar through Rules and Diagrams
Memory Aids: Teachers can use memory aids to help students remember grammatical concepts so that they can apply those concepts to their writing. Possessive pronouns, for example, can be taught as students chant a memory aid such as “Possessive Pronouns Positively Prohibit ‘Positives” (Brown, 1996). Students memorize the rule and then are provided with examples from their textbooks to contextualize it.

Questioning: Students can be taught to transform sequences of words into yes-or-no questions or “tag questions” to determine if the sequence is a complete sentence. The sequence “Jim and Sue can dance the tango,” for example, can be transformed into the yes-or-no question “Can Jim and Sue dance the tango?” or the tag question “Jim and Sue can dance the tango, can’t they?” and therefore the sequence is a complete sentence (Noguchi, 2001). Because “they” refers to “Jim and Sue,” the student can also easily locate the subject of the sentence and learn about fragments, run-ons, subject-verb agreement, and shifts in person.

Frames: Students can also be taught to locate main verbs by writing sentences into frames such as “They somehow got _______ to __________” where the first blank is filled with the subject in an appropriate pronoun form and the second blank is filled with the rest of the sentence (Noguchi, 2001). For example, “Jim and Sue can dance the tango” becomes “They somehow got them to dance the tango;” thus, dance is the main verb. Sentences can be taken from drafts of students’ essays so that students can use frames to correct errors in their own writing.

Charts: The instructor writes a sentence such as “Those two big babies are crying” on the board and then asks questions such as “What question does the word ‘those’ answer?” (Sams, 2003). Students work through a series of questions in this manner until they eventually realize how adjectives relate to subjects. Students record the steps of this analysis in a chart so that they have a visual display of the process. Students can also write the words of sentences from their drafts into a chart with classifications like “Preceding the Subject,” “Subject,” “Between Subject and Verb,” “Verb,” and “Following Verb” to learn about grammar through the structure of writing (Devet, 2002).

2. Mostly Contextualized Grammar Instruction:

Sentence Combining: Students practice working with a variety of grammatical concepts such as subordination, infinitives, and prepositional phrases. Some activities involve combining sentences with the use of cues, such as apostrophe-s plus -ing. For example, consider the sentences I was worried about SOMETHING and My brother had disappeared mysteriously. Students combine the sentences as indicated by the cue apostrophe-s plus -ing: “I was worried about my brother’s mysterious disappearance.” (D’Eloia, 1987). Other sentence-combining activities eliminate all cues, allowing students to devise their own combinations. The most effective sentence-combining exercises use sentences from student-written drafts or provide context in terms of writer, reader, and purpose (Rose, 1983).

Transformational Exercises: Students practice correct usage by choosing sentences from their compositions and rewriting them. They are asked to change present-tense verbs to past tense or to change first-person pronouns to third-person, and so on (Meyer, 1986).

Sentence Modeling: Students write sentences based on the pattern of a sentence from a literary work being read in class. The teacher can begin by providing blanks to indicate the sentence structure, although eventually students can imitate the sentences without such clues (Sedgwick, 1989). Students can also rewrite sentences from their own journal entries by making them structurally identical to the sentences of a published author (Ehrenworth, 2003).

Sentence Expansion: Students write their own subject and verb and then are instructed to add various syntactical structures like modifiers. Eventually, students are asked to add to the subject and then to add to the predicate in a variety of sentence patterns (Sedgwick, 1989).

Sentence Rewriting: Teachers can mark a sentence in a student’s draft that is in need of revision, but not state what the error is or how to correct it. Students then rewrite the grammatically incorrect sentence on a separate sheet of paper along with an explanation of the error(s) in the students’ own words. If desired, students can also use a writing reference text or a list of common errors provided by the teacher to help them identify their errors. They can then write several sentences using the pattern correctly, keep a journal of their most common errors, and even give a lesson to the class on that grammatical concept (Sedgwick, 1989).

Discovery Approach: Students can draw their own conclusions about sentence structure by analyzing groups of sentences, some of which are correct while the others contain a specific error. For a fragment lesson, for example, students can read a list of 8 related word sequences, of which seven are fragments and one is a complete sentence. The students can then be asked to identify the complete sentence. Each sequence of words is discussed in terms of how it is different from the previous sequence. When the students examine the complete sentence with a noun subject and a main verb, they can be asked to define a sentence in terms of its structural parts (D’Eloia, 1987).

3. Entirely Contextualized Grammar Instruction:

Grammar-Specific Topics: To practice verb tenses, students can be given topics that specifically address certain grammatical concepts, like writing an account of a past experience that might affect a future choice that they will make (Sedgwick, 1989).

Essay Editing Models: Using student papers or a piece of the teacher’s writing as the basis of an editing exercise can help students develop editing skills, making the composing and revising process more productive in improving writing ability (Weaver, 1996).

Self-Correction Strategies: Teachers can develop individual editing checklists for each student, depending on their particular difficulties, and then allow students to correct grammar errors in their own essays (Weaver, 1996). Students can also read their drafts aloud slowly, noting any corrections, and then edit their drafts accordingly. Or, students can read their essays into a tape recorder, noting corrections, and then play the tape back while they follow along and make
corrections. Teachers can also have students read their drafts by starting at the end and reading backwards sentence by sentence, allowing them to focus more on form and the way the sentence is actually written, word for word. As students read their sentences aloud, slowly, or in a different order, their errors may become more apparent to them (Sedgwick, 1989). Students can also circle specific words in their essays, such as past-tense verbs or dependent-clause markers, to develop their grammatical awareness (D'Eloia, 1987).

**Process Methods:** Evaluation sheets can be used to facilitate the peer editing process after the teacher models how to complete the sheet with sample drafts. The class can be divided into groups to proofread other students’ papers, with each group focusing on one or two types of errors, after which the papers are returned to the authors for correction (Sedgwick, 1989). Mini-conferences can be held with individual students to address specific grammatical problems in student compositions (Goode, 2000; Sedgwick, 1989; Weaver, 1996). The teacher might focus on one or two major problems, ask the student how to resolve the error, and then ask the student to correct the rest of the paper (Sedgwick, 1989). Mini-lessons or brief explanations in grammar can also be provided by the instructor during class.

**Which approach should I use in my classroom?**

College transition students will have a diverse array of academic needs. To be effective, writing instruction must take the students’ individual difficulties into account.

It is helpful to begin with an initial diagnostic assessment of a student's needs, perhaps with a writing assignment on a topic that encourages the use of various grammatical forms. After assessing students’ individual grammar and writing difficulties, it is really up to the teacher to determine which type of approach would work best with his or her students.

Various approaches can be used in sequence for the entire class, or teachers can group students by their needs and use a different approach with each group. Students who have difficulties with basic sentence structure may benefit most from contextualized rules and sentence manipulation activities. Learners who have an understanding of basic grammar but need editing practice may find reading-aloud strategies useful. More advanced writers can use checklists to peer-edit with partners. Teachers can regularly hold conferences with students to re-assess their needs and revise approaches when needed.

**References**


