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# Syntax in the Schools

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## A Response to Frederick F. Kempner's "Frustrations in the Teaching and Learning of Grammar (Vol. 7, No.1

*Syntax in the Schools* just gets better and better. I particularly enjoyed Frederick Kempner's article, and his conclusions overlap a great deal with what a colleague and I were trying to explain in our recent article, "Explaining Grammatical Concepts," in the *Journal of Basic Writing* 8.2 (1989): 21-41. In that article we also confirm your own conclusions about students' difficulties with identifying subjects and verbs in sentences. It's comforting to know we're all basically agreeing to certain premises.

Muriel Harris, editor  
*Writing Lab Newsletter*

While we're on the subject of the newsletter's getting better: I received several compliments about Volume 7, No. 2. My sense is that many of them resulted from the physical appearance of the issue. For that, I want to thank first the printers here at Penn College who, in addition to doing a fine printing job, also selected the paper. Second, we need to thank all the contributors of short articles and comments. I like long, substantive articles, but if they are all we get, then the newsletter will be limited to long columns of text. I can't lay out what I don't have. (EV)



I have never been one who complains about the signs that say "Go slow." Even "Slow," used by itself, never bothers me. But when I pass the sign to the left, I don't know whether to be bemused or saddened. Since the figure is running, I assume that the sign does not refer to the children's physical abilities. (EV)

## Grammar & the Teaching of Writing at San Francisco State

**Bill Robinson**

In the composition program at San Francisco State University, grammar plays an important, though what might at first seem a somewhat paradoxical, role. On the one hand, we require all our instructors to have read Patrick Hartwell's well known anti-grammar essay, "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar," and we subscribe to what he says, while on the other, we require a grammar course of every prospective instructor and every secondary-education candidate in English. While we think that our students need only a relatively small amount of carefully delimited grammar-based work, we believe that teachers need a great deal of it.

The training of composition teachers is a major enterprise at San Francisco State. We offer a 12-unit Certificate in the Teaching of Composition and a Master's degree in composition. We set aside part-time lecturer positions on our staff to hire up to ten graduate-student instructors every year, and we require that they take the following four courses in order to qualify:

- ENG 657: The Grammar and Rhetoric of the Sentence
- ENG 704: Introduction to the Teaching of Composition [teaching the sentence and the paragraph]
- ENG 705: Seminar in Teaching Basic/Developmental Writing
- ENG 716: Problems in the Teaching of Writing [crafting assignments, evaluating and marking essays, conferencing, classroom management, etc.]

English 716 is the English Department's aboriginal teaching course, inaugurated some time in the

1950s, I think. I instituted English 657, the grammar course, when I became comp coordinator back in the early 70s and discovered (a) that the graduate students enrolling in 716 were barely able to identify subjects and verbs with any consistency and (b) that those applying for instructorships in freshman composition were almost totally unable to distinguish correct sentences from ones containing common syntactical or usage errors. In short, whatever else they could or couldn't do (and in those days, they could do very little), they were unable to mark student papers at the sentence level with any degree of helpfulness or accuracy.

The idea, then, was to provide a course which would give our young instructors the knowledge never to have to write "AWK." Naturally, we wanted them to be able to identify such standard problems as dangling modifiers and predication errors, but perhaps even more important, we wanted them to learn to distinguish between what just didn't sound right to them and what was actually incorrect. It is distressingly common for professors of English to mark incorrect sentences that are simply clumsily phrased or, in too many instances, sentences that the professor would simply prefer to see written another way. Most freshmen are 18 years old, and at that age, the majority do just about everything, including writing, pretty awkwardly. We think that it does more harm than good to cuff them around with overzealous and misguided marginalia, most of them reflecting only the instructor's taste in phrasing.

With the aim, then, of trying to help prospective teachers achieve greater accuracy and precision in their paper marking, I realized that a standard grammar course would not answer. What was needed was a course in common student writing problems and in the grammar required to identify and understand them. Beyond that there was no need to go. And a good thing too, since the course as currently designed occupies a very full semester. Indeed, there are one or two matters we do not cover that I wish we could.

The curious thing about this class is its amazing popularity. Initially, we offered one section of it an academic year enrolling about 15 students. Gradually the need developed to offer it every semester, although the enrollment remained small. Soon, however, students began to show up for the course who had no intention of applying for one of our teaching jobs. At first these were mostly graduate students in our very large MA program in Teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language. The MA TEFL faculty offered nothing like our course, but the students had heard it was useful. Then we began getting creative writing graduate students. Then plain old vanilla English

majors. Then secondary credential candidates. Then the course was made a requirement for the Career and Technical Writing major. Finally, it was put into the secondary credential program, replacing a course in transformational grammar. Now we offer four sections of this course a semester enrolling about 120 students.

Before speculating on the phenomenon of this popularity, I'll outline what the course covers. The introduction to the text that I wrote for the course starts with these words: "I will begin with what this text is not. Although the word 'grammar' appears in the title, this is not a grammar of the English language. The real grammar of English is too extensive and complex to be helpful in the teaching of writing. This is what is called a 'pedagogical grammar,' a collection of truths, half-truths, and lies about the English sentence that will help teachers understand what their students write and show them how to do it better. . . . Two other things that this text is not are a guide for student writers and an approach to the teaching of writing."

The work begins with the students' learning to identify ten English sentence patterns, the six standard ones employing linking, intransitive, and transitive verbs, two patterns with complex predicates (a simplification of the reality here), and the patterns employing the expletives there and it. (One of the latter is cleft sentences; we do not specifically cover pseudo-clefts.) After that struggle has ended, we plunge immediately into student writing problems involving the cores of sentences--that is, use of active and passive voices, misused expletives, predication errors, and sentence-organization problems. While studying the latter two, the students learn to analyze not only the problems but also the sources of the problems in sentences like the following, from freshman essays:

The level of achievement of some of our schools is on a much lower plane than that of others.

Virtually nothing can be said against the validity of natural justice because of its ability to take into account the total situation and reach an unprejudiced verdict.

The relation between Shakespearian tragic violence and that of American television, while to some extent related in presentation and reason for existence, has a definite distinction.

Through most of the course, with the exception of only a few units, this is the pattern of the work. The students study a grammatical structure and then work on student sentences involving that structure, identifying both the correct and incorrect uses of it and

## San Francisco (cont.)

trying to see how or why student writers come to grief when they do.

From problems with sentence cores, we move to modification problems, concentrating on errors in adjective clauses and clause-modifying verbals, and then studying the uses of appositives and other free modifiers not so much for their misuse as to identify these constructions that need to be specifically taught, since most students use them too infrequently.

Finally, we cover the misuses of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, parallelism, correlatives, the logic and rhetoric of clause subordination and comma-splice errors. Again, sentences from student essays provide the material for analysis.

This course seems to have developed its popularity for a couple of reasons. Those who want to be teachers like what they take to be its practicality, the fact that all the grammar covered bears directly on student writing. No one ever whines, "Why are we learning this stuff?" Because so many students in the MA TEFL program were taking the class, the faculty of that program set up their own pedagogical grammar course, but since their course is truly just a grammar course, many of their students continue to take ours. But the course also appeals to many students who have no intention of teaching. They take it just because they've heard it's a good course. What they mean when they say "good" seems to be that it simultaneously demystifies grammar and concentrates on its actual effects in writing. A student once said, "This course isn't about what grammar is. It's about what grammar does."

Most people, particularly those with some education, feel that they ought to "know grammar" and that they don't. Of course they know more grammar than anyone could conceivably teach them, but they still feel somewhat insecure about their "grammar." Although this course deals only to a limited extent with questions of usage--which is what the insecurity is really all about--students taking it feel that at last they are learning grammar in a way that makes sense. They also feel--and it is impossible to tell whether this is empirically true or not--that the course improves their writing by giving them more control over it, replacing instinct and hunch in some instances with knowledge. Students taking the department's real grammar courses, the pedagogical grammar class in the TEFL program and the transformational grammar class, report no such felt benefits, nor do they respond positively to these classes at all.

For teachers, the material of this course is such an eye-opener that, letting their excitement get the better of their judgment, they want to dash out and teach it all. That will never do. What graduate students who are already capable writers can get from a class like this is by no means the same as what young undergraduates who are not capable writers would get. So we have a course following it (ENG 704) that spends half a semester on the syntactic structures that freshmen will benefit from studying and on the techniques for teaching them so that the work translates into immediately improved writing. We do not want the kids to be forced to learn a lot of grammar that they will forget precisely as quickly as I forgot everything I learned in trigonometry. In fact, we do not really want them to learn grammar at all; rather we use a certain amount of grammar to try to change some of their writing habits, chiefly to develop a wider and more flexible repertoire of syntactic structures. In this second class we can also cover, in a limited way, some of the topics I wish we could cover with the larger audience in the first class.

In ENG 657 I would like, for instance, to spend more time on the differences between rhetorical and grammatical subordination at the sentence level, a topic that is radically mismanaged in every textbook I have seen so far. I would like to do a unit on the wide variety of issues the apparently simple topic of subject-verb agreement actually subsumes, including Wallace Chafe's very interesting notion of "light" and "heavy" subjects. I would like to do a unit on something of what linguistics has to teach us about our pronoun reference system, another topic that the textbooks fail miserably in dealing with. In an article in the Composition Chronicle some time ago, Bill McCleary lamented that he could not deal with issues of parataxis and hypotaxis in a literature class; I would like to find the time to get into that a bit more explicitly than we now can.

But what we have now has been very successful, and I don't want to tamper with it much. Alas, grammar is long but the semester is short.

[Our readers may also be interested in Bill Robinson's "Teaching Composition Teachers How to Teach Writing," *Composition Chronicle* 3.8 (Dec. 90): 4-6. (EV)]

