# RAISING THE VOLUME OF STUDENT VOICES THROUGH GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION

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**Abstract:** Teachers who seek to amplify student voice in the English Language Arts classroom must balance students' need for self-expression with the TEKS requirement that students demonstrate command of standard English. Teachers also face a curricular landscape in which they are discouraged from teaching grammar in isolation but are held accountable for students' understanding of grammatical concepts. In this paper, we review recent research in linguistics and rhet/comp that speaks to these dilemmas. First, we explore the relationship between implicit and explicit language learning and what it means for formal grammar instruction. Second, we look at how the context of communication influences whether readers notice and are troubled by grammatical errors and consider what this means for grammar instruction. Third, we examine the grammaticality of nonstandard dialects and look for ways to bridge the gap between standard and nonstandard English. We also share research-based, classroom-tested assignments that go beyond grammar drills to raise students' metalinguistic awareness and increase their productive control of English.

*Keywords:* grammar, grammatical error, standard English, linguistics, TEKS

The next time Hollywood depicts an inspirational English teacher, do not expect to see stirring scenes of grammar instruction. If we see anyone teaching grammar, it will be the staid, old teacher down the hall who serves as a foil for the hip, young teacher who gets through to students by helping them find their voice. For those of us whose teaching will never appear on the big screen but who nevertheless seek to "raise the literacy volume in Texas," the question of what to do about grammar is more complicated. On the one hand, we *do* want students to find their voice, to express themselves, and for some students that means departing from the strictures of standard English. On the other hand, we also want students to be *heard,* and we know that in many circles they will be dismissed if they do not observe the rules of standard English when speaking and writing. In this article, we draw on recent research in linguistics and rhetoric/composition to help teachers think through some of the tensions between linguistic diversity and standardization. We also share some research-based, classroom-tested assignments that facilitate effective, impactful, and culturally sensitive grammar instruction.

### Teaching Grammar Without Teaching Grammar

We teach grammar constantly, even if we never teach grammar. This statement, paradoxical on its face, makes sense once we distinguish between two distinct, nearly contradictory meanings of the word *grammar*. In popular usage, grammar usually refers to the prescriptive rules and arcane terminology that characterize traditional grammar instruction. Among linguists, on the other hand, grammar most often refers to the internalized linguistic system that a person develops through language immersion, a system so deeply embedded in the unconscious as to be nearly inaccessible. In other words, grammar can refer either to explicit rules or to a system that cannot be codified into explicit rules. Patrick Hartwell (1985) illustrates the difference between these two meanings of grammar in the following anecdote:

> I have asked members of a number of different groups—from sixth graders to college freshmen to high-school

teachers—to give me the rule for ordering adjectives of nationality, age, and number in English. The response is always the same: "We don't know the rule." Yet when I ask these groups to perform an active language task, they show productive control over the rule they have denied knowing. I ask them to arrange the following words in a natural order: French the young girls four. I have never seen a native speaker of English who did not immediately produce the natural order, "the four young French girls." (p. 111)

We posed Hartwell's questions to a room of over 100 ELA professionals at this year's TCTELA conference, and we received a similar response to what Hartwell describes: silence when asked for the rule, followed by a chorus of "the four young French girls" when those words were displayed out of order. The audience demonstrated complete command of a rule they could not name.

Internalized grammar, exemplified by our instinctive knowledge of how to order adjectives of number, age, and nationality in English, develops through language immersion, and this is why we are always teaching grammar whether we know it or not: every conversation we have with students, every text we have students read, and every essay we have students write immerses them further in standard forms of English. As for traditional, explicit grammar instruction—the terms, rules, exercises, and worksheets that many of us remember from school—this practice has receded from most K-12 curricula. The ELAR TEKS, for example, never mention the word *grammar* in the standards for elementary, middle school, or high school.

The decline of traditional grammar instruction resulted from decades of empirical research that failed to demonstrate its effectiveness in improving linguistic performance, as summed up in a 1985 NCTE resolution: "ample evidence from 50 years of research has shown the teaching of grammar in isolation does not lead to improvement in students' speaking and writing" (para. 1). One need not wade through 50 or 100 years of research studies to be convinced of the limited effects of explicit grammar instruction—these findings accord with our common-sense understanding of how language works. For example, referring back to Hartwell's (1985) anecdote, we can easily imagine a group of English-language learners memorizing the rule for ordering adjectives of number, age, and nationality in English, but it is hard to imagine that this act of memorization would increase learners' instinctive, productive control of the rule. Conversely, native English speakers can, if given a moment, piece together an explicit rule for ordering adjectives of number, age, and nationality, but they usually do so by thinking of examples (e.g., "two old British ladies," "five forty-year-old American men," etc.) and then abstracting a general rule from what their minds did automatically.

Things get murkier when we try to integrate explicit grammar instruction with the implicit grammar learning that comes from language immersion, but this is what the ELAR TEKS requires. The TEKS's integrated approach to language arts instruction forecloses the possibility of teaching grammar in isolation, but it also presumes that students will learn formal grammatical concepts at some point. Already by the end of kindergarten, for example, students are expected to edit their drafts (with adult assistance) in accordance with conventional forms of "sentences," "verbs," "singular and plural nouns," "articles," "adjectives," "prepositions," "subjective, objective, and possessive pronouns," "capitalization," and "punctuation" (TEA, 2017, standard 10D). So, the question is: how are ELA teachers supposed to equip students with a working

knowledge of formal grammatical concepts while at the same time ensuring that students remain immersed in authentic language tasks? There is so easy answer to this question, but a growing body of research suggests that formal grammar instruction can be beneficial when rooted in authentic, meaningful acts of speaking, listening, reading, and writing (Ferris, Eckstein, & DeHond, 2017; Gartland & Smolkin, 2016: Jones, Myhill, & Bailey, 2013; Larsen-Freeman, 2015; Myhill, Jones, & Lines, 2018; Myhill, Jones, Lines, & Watson, 2012; van Rijt, Wijnands, & Coppen, 2019). The hypothesis behind these results goes something like this: Our internalized grammar controls our everyday language use; if we learn a grammar lesson while in the act of everyday language use, this lesson may modify our internal grammar, which will then modify future language use. We might draw an analogy between this type of embedded grammar instruction and athletic coaching. Coaches do not simply explain techniques for shooting a basketball or hitting a baseball in the abstract; rather, they have players practice these skills and then deliver targeted instruction in the context of actual performance. Similarly, grammar instruction is most effective when delivered in the context of students' attempts to communicate purposefully in an authentic rhetorical context.

### Sample Assignment: Field Notebook

The Field Notebook assignment (see Appendix A) is an example of grammar instruction embedded in authentic literacy practice. Students choose a writer whose work they read outside of school and examine the writer's use of various grammatical elements. For this assignment to meet its learning objectives, students *must* study a writer whose work genuinely communicates with them, a writer whose work registers with students' own internal grammar, even if it deviates from standard English. This means students must be free to choose *any* writer of *any* type of texts—song lyrics, movie scripts, blog posts, social media content, and so on. Although this may sound like self-directed reading gone too far, the primary objective of this assignment is not for students to emulate mentor texts but rather to conduct fieldwork in the manner of a sociolinguist.

This assignment does require students to understand specialized grammatical terms. In addition to the fact that the ELAR TEKS require a working knowledge of these terms, some specialized terminology is unavoidable if students are to develop the metalinguistic awareness required to isolate, name, and modify the linguistic conventions that constitute their own internalized grammars. NCTE (2002) sanctions the use of formal grammatical terms because "it is the language that makes it possible for us to talk about language" (para. 1). In other words, although NCTE condemns the teaching of grammar in isolation, it does not recommend dispensing with all vestiges of formal grammar instruction.

### Teaching Grammar That Matters

If we think of grammar as a codified set of rules, then any violation of those rules is as wrong as any other and should be marked accordingly. But if we think of grammar as something people *experience,* the question of what constitutes a grammatical error becomes far more complicated. For example, does the breaking of a grammatical rule count as an error if it does not impede communication? What if no one even notices the error? Can following the rules (e.g., "it is I") actually be erroneous if doing so makes a bad impression on our intended audience? Does breaking a rule (e.g., "hey, it's me") constitute correct usage if it meets audience expectations? This tension between grammar as a set of rules and grammar as a linguistic experience is reflected in the TEKS standards

themselves. Beginning in third grade, students are expected to "edit drafts to demonstrate a command of standard English" (TEA, 2017, grades 3-5 standard 11D; middle school standard 10D; high school standard 9D) in one standard, only to be told to "publish written work for appropriate audiences" (grades 3-5 standard 11E; middle school standard 10E; high school standard 9E) in the very next standard. But what should students do when standard English is not the appropriate register for their intended audience?

One way to resolve this dilemma is to limit the category of "appropriate audiences" to the professional and academic realms and then focus instruction on the preferred conventions of those discourse communities. In fact, a robust body of research has attempted to determine what type of errors professionals notice and deem serious (Beason, 2001; Boettger, 2014; Boettger & Moore, 2018; Brandenburg, 2015; Gilsdorf & Leonard, 2001; Hairston, 1981; Leonard & Gilsdorf, 1990). This research has produced valuable results that can help teachers stay up-to-date on which grammatical conventions matter most to employers. For example, all the studies cited above have found that professionals are greatly bothered by sentence fragments. Also, professionals are bothered by run-on sentences, though more so by fused sentences than by comma splices. This research also demonstrates that the errors professionals notice and the degree to which those errors bother them change over time. For example, in the earliest study of this type, Hairston (1981) surveyed 84 professionals and found that apostrophe errors (e.g., its/it's) and homonym errors (e.g., their/there) were not terribly bothersome, but a more recent study (Boettger & Moore, 2018) of 303 professionals found that these were the second and third most bothersome types of errors after sentence fragments. Although this research remains far too limited in scope to provide anything like an exhaustive list of grammatical problems for teachers to target, it does give teachers a place to start.

On the other hand, research into what errors bother professionals has been criticized on methodological grounds. Such criticism was summarized pithily by Joseph Williams (1981) nearly 40 years ago: "the trouble with asking people [about] good usage is that they are likely to answer" (p. 154). What Williams means is that in order for a study to determine which errors in a text are troublesome, study participants must be directed to *look* for errors, which distorts their normal reading habits. When we ask professionals to read for surface-level errors as part of a research study, as opposed to reading for content in an everyday work situation, we prompt them to notice more errors—and to be more bothered by those errors—than they would under normal circumstances. Williams himself helped demonstrate this phenomenon—and created something of a stir among compositionists—when he revealed in the final paragraph of his article that he had inserted about 100 grammatical errors throughout the text. Because Williams's article appeared in *College Composition and Communication*, the flagship journal for college writing instructors, and because readers were reading for content rather than for errors, few noticed or were bothered by errors that they might have marked in a student paper. The methodological problem that Williams identifies (and demonstrates) seems impossible to solve. How does a researcher determine which errors bother readers under normal circumstances without intervening in a way that fundamentally alters those circumstances?

Although we cannot know for certain which grammar rules matter most, we can draw some important lessons from research into readers' experience of error. For one thing, we should stop reading student work under the assumption that it is defective. If we provide students with engaging assignments that offer them genuine opportunities to communicate for authentic purposes, and we train ourselves to read our students' work for its content, we might find that we notice fewer errors. Those errors that we continue to notice and that distract us from our attempts to glean meaning from student writing would then become the target of instruction. Combining these errors with those errors that trouble professionals would result in a more limited and impactful set of lessons than is provided by handbooks or style guides that attempt to be exhaustive. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to assume that students would be far more motivated to learn grammar lessons that were limited in number, that helped them communicate more clearly when they were *trying* to communicate (as opposed to trying to avoid the red pen), and that reflected the concerns of potential employers.

**Sample Assignment: Grammar Log**

The Grammar Log assignment (see Appendix B) allows teachers to target those errors that are most bothersome to readers and tailor instruction to each student's individual struggles. Teachers may mark all instances of a given error type or mark only the first couple instances and ask students to locate the rest. Students use their log (1) to keep a running tally of all the times they commit a particular type of error, (2) to correct these errors, (3) to record the applicable rule in their own words, (4) to reflect on why this rule gives them trouble, and (5) to develop a plan for internalizing the rule. NCTE (2002) points out that "students benefit much more from learning a few grammar keys thoroughly than from trying to remember many terms and rules." To this end, teachers should ask students to log only one or two types of errors for any given writing assignment.

## Teaching Grammar That Is Culturally Sensitive

When we instruct students to use language in one way rather than another, we risk creating a hierarchy in which one variety of English is deemed inherently superior to other varieties. The TEKS do little to alleviate this danger. In requiring students to demonstrate command of standard English—and only standard English—without any acknowledgment of the legitimacy of nonstandard dialects, the TEKS permit the misconception that standard English is *correct* English. Sociolinguistic research reveals that the vast majority of non-specialists continue to believe in the existence of a correct form of English (Curzan, 2014; Lippi-Green, 2012; Wolfram & Schilling, 2015), despite the fact that linguistic research has proven that all dialects are equally rule-governed and thus equally grammatical. The situation seems not all that different from 1974, when NCTE's Resolution on the Students' Rights to Their Own Language stated flatly that "on the subject of language, the general public is . . . ignorant," yet this "seldom prevents people from discussing language questions with an air of absolute authority" (p. 1). According to NCTE's landmark resolution, the privileging of standard English over other dialects "leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans" (p. 3). Such advice is "false" because it is counterfactual, and "immoral" because it presumes that the English used in certain communities is inherently deficient.

One practical reason to embrace linguistic diversity in that classroom is that doing so can bridge the gap between standard and non-standard dialects. The TEKS recommend "strategic use of the student's first language" (TEA, 2017, Introduction part 4) when teaching English language learners, and this same principle can apply when teaching students who speak and write in non-standard dialects. Indeed, NCTE (2002) encourages teachers to "learn a little about the noun and verb patterns in Spanish and

African American Vernacular English . . . so that you can make comparisons when discussing standard English" (para. 4). For example, a student whose native variety of English is African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) may pronounce the word *ask* as *aks*, even when reading the word *ask*. Rather than simply labeling this an error and correcting the student's pronunciation, a teacher could point out that in Old English both *ascian* and *acsian* meant "to ask" and were in wide circulation. As the language evolved, communities that used *ascian* shifted to *ask,* those that used *acsian* shifted to *aks*, and both pronunciations have been in circulation ever since. Here is a teachable moment in which all students can learn something about the history of English, the phenomenon of linguistic change, and the different evolutionary branches of English. Another feature of AAVE is the phenomenon of "zero copula," which refers to the absence of auxiliary verbs in certain constructions. For example, the clause "he is my brother" in standard English might be "he my brother" in AAVE. Zero copula is standard in many languages for constructions in which auxiliary verbs are unnecessary for meaning. Here is an opportunity to teach students about linguistic structure and the concept of "semantically null" elements, like auxiliary verbs, that can be deleted without any loss of meaning. The point of these lessons is not to minimize the importance of standard English but rather to teach it more effectively by helping students understand why their own idiolect may be different.

There is, of course, also an ethical reason to embrace linguistic diversity. NCTE (2002) notes that it helps "students feel prouder of their home language when they hear even briefly in school about its grammatical patterns" (para. 4), and surely one way to make students feel alienated from formal education is to tell them that their home language is deficient. By demonstrating that nonstandard dialects are every bit as rule-governed as standard English, teachers not only affirm students' home dialects but also increase linguistic tolerance among all students. For example, a teacher might demonstrate the long, venerable history of the *aks* pronunciation by showing students excerpts from *The Canterbury Tales* or the Tyndale Bible, in which the word is spelled *axe*. Teachers might point out that English-speaking members of the Deaf community in the U.S. say "he my brother" because zero copula is standard in American Sign Language. Or teachers might bring in the local newspaper to show how headlines often use zero copula as a space-saving measure, apparently without reader complaints. Lessons like these allow teachers to demonstrate respect for linguistic difference while still teaching standard English. Students understand well enough that they talk one way around their friends and another way around their parents and another way still around their teachers. They can certainly be taught to appreciate the importance of standard English in academic and professional contexts without teachers denigrating other varieties of English.

### Sample Assignment: Grammar Rants

The Grammar Rant assignment (Appendix C) asks students to record grammatical "pet peeves"—their own or others'—that elicit a particularly passionate response. Students explain the reasoning behind the pet peeve, consider whether the error in question impedes meaning, and reflect on the potential race- or class-based prejudice implicit in people's responses.

This lesson is borrowed from Lindblom and Dunn (2006), who argue that an effective way to get students interested in grammar is to expose them to "grammar rants":  examples of powerful people railing against what they see as unforgivable grammatical errors. Our experience with grammar rants is similar to what Lindblom and Dunn describe, in that students find it engaging and amusing to read people's exaggerated responses to seemingly minor infelicities. Beneath the humor, however, grammar rants convey a serious message to students: people in positions of authority may make judgments about their intelligence and competence based on errors that students themselves believe to be minor.

### Conclusion

For teachers who fret about students' "bad grammar" and fear that it gets worse every year, we end with a call for patience. Students at all levels make errors as they grow as writers, and they likely always will. A famous Harvard professor once lamented that he often "found the work of even good scholars disfigured by bad spelling, confusing punctuation, ungrammatical, obscure, ambiguous, or inelegant expressions" (Hill, p. 6). That was in 1879. Lunsford and Lunsford (2008) analyzed a representative sample of college student papers and found that the rate of error was essentially the same as that found in similar studies conducted in 1986, 1930, and 1917. Grammar mistakes just happen. They especially happen among learners, and because our students leave us before they are finished writers, we spend our professional lives working with one group of error-prone writers after another. We will never get all our students producing flawless prose by the end of the term. What we can do is develop students' appreciation for the complexities of language learning and equip them with habits that will ensure continued improvement. If we do that, we will have raised the volume of literacy, even if our ears do not always hear it.

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## Appendix A

**Field Notebook Assignment**

For this assignment, you will take on the role of a linguistic researcher. You will notice and name grammatical elements "in the wild" and then experiment with your findings in your own writing. The closeness to language encouraged by the Field Notebook assignment will require you to dig around in the writing of others and really think about how it works. This intimacy with language is a powerful way to develop "metalinguistic" awareness, meaning an awareness of language as language.

**Tasks:**

1. **Select Your Author**
   Choose an author whose written work you read outside of school. You may choose someone you do not know personally, like a novelist, reporter, blogger, script writer, songwriter, etc., or someone you know personally, like a friend, family member, or community leader.

2. **Selecting Samples**
   Gather at least six different samples of the author's work. Samples can be a few paragraphs or several pages long.

3. **Grammatical Elements**
   Throughout the term, we will study various grammatical elements, like fragments, run-on sentences, verb tenses, active and passive voice, pronoun-antecedent agreement, punctuation marks, capitalization, and mechanics. You will notice, name, and analyze these elements as manifested in your sample texts and discuss how the writer's use of these elements affect you as a reader.



Don't worry. We will discuss each grammatical element and practice noticing, naming, and analyzing it before you begin examining your selected author.

4. **Requirements of the Field Notebook**
   In your Field Notebook, you will include a sample of the author's work along with your annotations of it. The specific requirements of the Field Notebook assignment are as follows:

   - **Note and Name**
     In the sample text, highlight examples of the grammatical element we are currently studying. Annotate the text by commenting on patterns and noting your own reactions as a reader.

   - **Imitation of a Writer's Form**
     You will also imitate the author's use of these elements by including them in your own writing. In these entries (the number of entries required will vary depending on the element), you will not only mimic the author's use of this element, but you will also identify the specific effects created by the use of this element.

   - **The Sage on the Stage**
     At the end of each unit, you will lead a ten-minute discussion on your author. You will provide the sample text to me ahead of time so that I can post it for the other students. Those not presenting that day will annotate others' sample texts as homework.

   - **Show/Tell Essay**
     This part of the Field Notebook will help you see grammar as something other than a static body of knowledge. You will complete a Show/Tell essay (two pages) each quarter about the grammatical elements we've studied that quarter. You will apply the knowledge gained from your work in the Field Notebook by experimenting with these specific topics of study. Practice and play with the grammar techniques we've studied in this quarter. Highlight these moves and use the "comment" button to note their purpose and desired effect.

**Appendix B**

**Grammar Log**

On each writing assignment you complete this term, I will mark two types of surface-level errors that we have discussed in class. Each time a marked error occurs in your paper, make a log entry for it below.

| Assignment Name | Description of Error | Original Sentence | Revised Sentence | How I Will Improve |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Synthesis Essay* | *Sentence Fragment* | *"In the four years since this article was published."* | *"Much has changed in the four years since this article was published."* | *If a group of words doesn't make sense after the phrase "I am convinced that," then I know I have a fragment.* |
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## Appendix C

**Grammar Rants**

Make an entry in the table below for each error mentioned in the "grammar rant" articles we read. Add your own "pet peeves." Ask other people about their pet peeves, and add those. You should make at least 15 entries to receive full credit. At the end of this unit, we will make a class "Top Ten Pet Peeves" and discuss the social implications of each item.

| Pet Peeve | Why It's Considered an Error | Impede Meaning? | Marker of Race of Class? | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *"aks" for "ask"* | *"ask" reflects the correct spelling and punctuation in standard English* | *No* | *Yes* | *I admit I have always thought "aks" sounded ignorant. It now makes sense to me why people use that pronunciation.* |
| *confusing "your" and "you're"* | *"your" means something belongs to you; "you're" is a contraction of "you are"* | *Rarely* | *No* | *I make this mistake all the time when I'm texting, yet it still drives me crazy when other people do it!* |
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