

The Case for Grammar

Education theorists reveal their profound misunderstanding of language acquisition.

By Robert D. Shepherd

Babies are born with thickets of neural connections, many of which are weeded out over time. Some neural connections are lost through lack of use. Others are discarded after they have served their purpose and are no longer necessary.

Children are born with the ability to learn languages effortlessly but, starting at about the age of 9 or 10, this capacity begins to break down.

For example, if a small child is exposed to the liquid 'l' sound in Russian, he or she will grow up being able to produce that sound, even if he or she does not learn Russian until much later in life. If the child is not exposed to that sound, then he or she will never be able to produce it as an adult. The machinery for hearing and producing that sound has been weeded out.

Regrettably, education theorists play down the importance of teaching grammar on the basis of children's early ability to learn language. These educationists seem not to know that the machinery ceases to work after a certain age.

If a child has learned a non-standard version of his or her language's grammar, it is difficult or impossible for that child, past the age of 10 or so, to learn a different, standard version using only his innate language-learning ability. That machinery has to a large extent stopped working by that time.

So, for example, if an 11-year-old child has learned to say: "Me and Jamie played some video games after school", that child will have difficulty unlearning this incorrect phrasing unless he receives careful instruction.

Unfortunately, education professors and textbook writers continue to teach the half-truth that grammar develops naturally through simple exposure to language. They need to recognize that the situation is much more complicated than that.

In light of this, how can we best teach older students to correct the non-standard elements in their speech?

Most teachers have been taught that older students will learn to remediate errors if they read and write a lot. Unfortunately, this is not the case. If teachers are going to help older students overcome their internalized grammatical errors, they must realize that simple exposure to print is not enough.

For older students, language learning is no longer autonomic and, for this reason, grammar, usage, and mechanics have to be explicitly taught. Teachers will not find it easy to do this, however. Because of the half-baked ideas of education theorists, most teachers are handed grammar-free curricula and textbooks that contain nothing in the way of systematic grammar instruction.

What can teachers do with students whose syntax rarely exceeds the complexity of Dick and Jane, students for whom 'me and Jamie' is perfectly grammatical, students who sprinkle apostrophes through their writing as though they were salt? Here are a few ideas.

Teach traditional grammar.

Students need to know the basic parts of speech and the basic parts of sentences so that they have a vocabulary with which to talk about rules of and errors in grammar.

Have students model corrections of common errors.

Modeling corrections is a great activity for giving students practice correcting sentence fragments, run-on sentences, dangling modifiers, double negatives, passive constructions, and other common problems.

Have students correct errors orally.

Students benefit from extensive practice correcting errors of a particular kind. Teachers should first model the correction, and then provide additional sentences containing the same kind of error. Both oral and written practice of the correct form should be provided.

Have students memorize passages.

When students memorize passages that contain grammatically-correct syntactic forms that are not already part of their active repertoire, then that form becomes part of the repertoire that is readily available for their own use.

Have students translate to and from slang and informal language.

Students benefit from learning about the difference between the language that one uses with intimates or friends and the language appropriate for formal situations.

Expose students to increasingly-complex sentence structures as soon as they have mastered the basic phonetic code.

Reading aloud to students from engaging but not overly simplified texts is an especially effective means for building syntactic competence.

Keep informal counts of the kinds of errors that appear in students' writing and address the most frequent and egregious ones with direct instruction.

Older textbook programs to which the author of this essay contributed substantially and that remain useful for grammar, usage, and mechanics instruction include *The Writer's Craft*, from McDougal, Littell; *Elements of Writing*, from Holt, Rinehart and Winston; and for challenged students, *English Workshop*, also from Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

(Adapted with permission from a much longer article "The Naturalist Fallacy and the Demise of Grammar Instruction", in the [December 2005 Core Knowledge newsletter](#), Dr. Shepherd is the Educational Materials Director at the Core Knowledge Foundation in Charlottesville, Virginia, and has extensive previous experience in the publishing field.)