

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF GRAMMAR AND CONVENTIONS: Foundational Research

In Constance Weaver's *The Grammar Book* (2007), Weaver presents a framework for teaching grammatical structures. Included in this framework is an emphasis on sharing a "mentor model" from a variety of possible sources: mentor texts, literature created by the teacher, literature created by students, literature created during a writing conference, and literature created spontaneously during a class lesson. The Fundamentals of Grammar and Conventions was developed based on a similar premise. Teaching and modeling grammar and conventions in context helps students become better able to use language as readers, writers, listeners, and speakers. Students will not only notice and learn grammatical and conventional concepts but will also apply them to their reading, writing, and speaking.

Grammar, as defined in *Grammar Alive!: A Guide for Teachers*, refers to two kinds of knowledge about language:

- the unconscious language ability that children develop as they learn to talk; and
- the conscious understanding of sentences and text that can help students improve their reading and writing by building on their subconscious knowledge.

This conscious understanding includes knowing the parts of sentences and how they work together, knowing how sentences connect with one another to build meaning, and understanding how and why we use language in different ways in different social situations (Haussamen, 2003).

According to Weaver, grammar is defined as "the unconscious command of syntax that enables us to understand and speak the language." Grammar in this sense need not be explicitly taught skill by skill since it is what we learn as we acquire language. Connected to this discussion, Noam Chomsky offers additional insight about distinguishing between "deep structure" and "surface structure." He defines deep structure as "the grammar that allows us to comprehend and produce language." This leads to his conclusion that some of the unconscious learning we do as we acquire English is what we internalize, interpret, and produce. Both Weaver and Chomsky present thinking that relies on the belief that the constructivist or transitional model of learning—the view that learners make their own meaning based upon their background knowledge, experiences, and

purposes—seems to connect well to the "learning in context" model. This model contrasts significantly with the reductionist (or transmission) model, in which the teacher (or the possessor of the ready-made knowledge) delivers information and instruction to the students as single skills, or in isolation. Weaver relies on the theorists Edward Thorndike, Madeline Hunter, Brian Cambourne, and Jerome Bruner when determining the type of teaching/modeling that will enable successful learning for students. Her conclusion is that students would benefit from a teacher who is not in the role of critic or judge but instead shares the teaching with a mentor author or gatekeeper. This supports the notion that teaching grammar and conventions in context, while also providing opportunities for practice, is what will assist students in their development as readers, writers, listeners, and speakers. However, she does caution that not all "gatekeepers" or mentor authors are "watchful," meaning that some of them occasionally use examples of grammar and conventions that don't follow a formal structure or rule.

In her book *A Fresh Approach to Teaching Punctuation*, Janet Angelillo offers another suggestion that connects to how children experience the "how" of punctuation. She says, "Perhaps we need to change the way we teach punctuation by leaning toward inquiry and conveying meaning. For example, we might show children HOW punctuation works rather than giving them punctuation rules. We might teach children to value punctuation marks as much as letters and words for conveying meaning. We might invite children to see that punctuation is not something writers add to writing, but it is something writers use to help them compose and to help their readers understand what they want to say" (Angelillo, 2002).

From all of the aforementioned experts in their fields, and for those who follow a more constructivist model, we can draw some guidelines that teachers at all levels of instruction may follow:

- engage students in writing across the curriculum;
- read good literature;
- invite students to notice how conventions are used and their impact on readers;
- think aloud when sharing a read-aloud in order to identify and connect with craft, grammatical structure, and conventions;

- teach grammar and conventions in context;
- follow up with mini-lessons for students who exhibit both a need and readiness for a particular skill;
- remember that grammar is a tool for writers;
- throughout the writing process, note that idea development is influenced by choices regarding grammatical structures within and among sentences;
- use the term “grammatical structures” rather than “rules.” Students need to focus on the structure of ideas, not on memorizing rules;
- emphasize a limited number of grammatical structures and editing conventions at any one time;
- note that depth rather than breadth is foremost;
- analyze student writing, which will allow you to determine specific structures and conventions that you need to teach/model for your student(s); and
- remember that learning to write and speak well is like learning to paint well: studying the masters and daily practice, including modeling, are essential.

Another researcher, Barry Lane, suggests, “Writers don’t need to be given formulas; they need to be shown possibilities” (Lane, 1993). This statement is one that follows along with the thinking of the aforementioned researchers. Through positive modeling, through noticing the decisions writers make, through active conversation and discussion, through conferring with a student about a piece of writing, and through connecting what was learned to future pieces of writing, a student will not only be able to recognize possibilities but will embrace and enjoy them.

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