

## Grammar and Approaches to Error: Some Research and Advice for Grading

Writing teachers are often asked why we don't teach "grammar." In fact, we do teach grammar, but typically we do so in the context of students' writing rather than as a separate category of instruction. Patrick Hartwell's article "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" gives a good explanation of the grammar we acquire when we learn our first language, the rules we learn along the way—correctly or incorrectly--and the grammar described in our grammar books. While Hartwell identifies five levels of grammar in his article, the three described here are particularly useful in thinking about how and whether to teach grammar separate from a student's writing:

- **Internalized grammar**, i.e. the grammar in our heads. How many of us, for example, can give the rule for arranging the adjectives in this sentence? "Four little French girls walked to school." Or for making plurals of these nonsense words: thole, flitch, plast?
- **Grammar as general rules**, which may or may not be applied in practice. We have rules for article use, for example, but also lots of exceptions. Why do we say in American English, for example, "I went to college" versus "I went to a university."
- **School grammar**, i.e. the names and functions of parts of speech and parts of sentences. Most of us native speakers could probably parse this nonsense sentence: The scallywags gamboled falloly in the boody mires. (e.g. "scallywags" is a plural noun and the subject of the sentence). We often draw on school grammar to decide whether to use "she" or "her," for example, or where to insert punctuation. In order to draw on school grammar, however, we first need to notice that there might be a question about which word form or mark of punctuation is correct.

Why do the errors in students' writing "excite our fury," Joe Williams asks in "The Phenomenology of Error." We often don't notice errors in our peers' prose or in professional work, he says, because we are not looking for errors. We find so many errors in student work because we expect to find them and we watch for them. Errors are located not simply on the page, he argues, but also in readers. Moreover, some errors are particularly noticeable and stigmatizing, e.g. ESL errors, class-based errors, and dialect errors (especially black vernacular). What errors do you tend to notice? Tell students!

### Advice on grading:

- *Give feedback on content and structure first.*  
Students will often fix sentence-level errors when they revise. Sentences that you may have spent your valuable time editing may not even show up in a revised draft. When you focus on editing errors, students may also miss the message that their paper requires larger scale revision.

- *Think of minor errors as a kind of “foreign accent” in the writing of your non-native students.* Ask yourself what errors you’re willing to tolerate and how flexible you can be (based on your sense of the workplaces your students will be entering). It’s also helpful to consider all of the “Englishes” spoken globally and the impact on *our* standard edited English.
- *If errors interfere with meaning by “disturbing syntax,” correct the sentence and give an explanation of the serious error(s), if possible.* Here’s an example: “English language use much people.” This sentence contains two “minor” errors-- “much people” instead of “many people” and a missing article for “English language.” It also contains a “disturbing” syntax error with the subject and object of the sentence reversed. If the sentence is changed to “Much people use English language,” is it more acceptable to you? (credit for example to Leki, p.130).
- *Practice a limited approach to feedback.* Comment on only some of problems, not all. ESL writers frequently think that they will improve if all of their errors are corrected; however, research on second-language writing shows this is not necessarily the case.

*Works Cited:*

- Hartwell, Patrick. “Grammar, Grammar, and the Teaching of Grammar” *College English*. (February 1985).  
 Leki, Ilona. *Understanding ESL Writers: A Guide for Teachers*. Boston: Boynton/Cook, 1992.  
 Williams, Joseph. “The Phenomenology of Error” *College Composition and Communication*. (May 1981).