

Lewis & Clark High School

Department of English

Position Statement on the Teaching of Grammar

Through discussion in the department during the fall quarter,

this document was drafted by

Adam L. Wolfe

Lewis and Clark Teachers of English

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Abstract

This serves to explain different ways to teach grammar and why the Lewis & Clark High School (LCHS) English Department made the decision to use a “Hybrid” approach. We, here at LCHS, will combine the isolated and whole language approach to teaching grammar.

Within this packet, works of the hybrid approach can be found along with reasons why this route has been chosen.

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Lewis & Clark High School
521 W. 4th Ave.
Spokane, WA 99204

Dear Parents,

Welcome to the December 2012 Lewis & Clark High School Parent-Teacher Organization meeting. The goal of the LCHS English Department is to provide students with a solid and well rounded English grammar background to prepare them for college and the work place. The meeting's focus is on the future English grammar education of students. Sample assignments are provided and we are eager to hear any feedback whether, positive or negative. We have also included suggestions as to what parents can do, at home, to help the student succeed. The LCHS English Department is looking forward to collaborating with you to ensure every student's success.

Respectfully yours,

Adam Wolfe

Teacher of English
Office hours
M-F 2:30-5:00PM

Introduction

Grammar is the hardest part of the English language. Very few rules are set in stone, and most every rule has an exception: for example “I” before “E” except after “C.” In most cases this rule works; then we have words like *proficient* or *society* where the rule fails. With rules such as the example given, that are not always hard and fast, how can we expect our students to always be correct? Expecting perfect grammar, without editing, is an unrealistic goal. We will use both, isolated sentences and a whole language, centered instructional method.

How grammar should be taught or whether grammar should be taught in grade school has been a hot-button issue within formal education for several decades. Some say it should be taught as early as first grade, while others say it should be left out of education entirely. The tenants in both camps present valid arguments.

Position 1

David Mulroy, points out in his book: “The War Against Grammar” that according to “the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) decades of research has shown that instruction in formal grammar did not accomplish any positive goals and was actually harmful because it took time away from more profitable activities” (Reedy in Mulroy 1). It must be made clear that this is not Mulroy’s point of view. Rather, he is enraged that the NCTE would take such a position. Mulroy believes grammar should be taught to each student. “Opposition of teaching grammar is now almost universal among professors of education and the 80,000 members of NCTE---almost but not quite. In 2000 Mulroy attended the annual conference of ATEG (The Assembly for the Teaching of English in Grammar). There were less than thirty in

attendance” (2). Not even .0004 percent of members of the NCTE attended the meeting even rounding up, 99.9996% of English teachers are against teaching grammar. No wonder there is a “need for remedial English in the college level... because they were not taught English grammar in grade school” (2). Constance Weaver states: “[S]tudents who were taught the conventions of language in the context of their writing generally made better use of writing mechanics than did students who has studied these skills in isolation” (Weaver 16). Further supporting that whole languages is the best approach.

Countless students across the nation could be spared the time and expense of having to take what is essentially an elementary level English course at a university, had the k-12 education system not denied them the basic building blocks of what will be expected in the real world. The goal at LCHS is to avoid having any of our students, once graduated, not have to take a remedial English course.

Position 2

One of the components of the hybrid approach is a technique called “Minimal Marking.” We have decided to use Richard Haswell’s “Minimal Marking” in conjunction with the hybrid approach to teach grammar because it is a part of Vygotski’s scaffolding structure called the zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development is...

The instructor marks where an error is, but does not identify it. As the instructor grades and reads essays she simply places a check in the margin to mark an error. Each check mark represents one grammatical error, therefore two marks represent two errors and so on and so forth. This technique shows the student where the error is but does not identify the error(s).

Haswell started using the minimal marking technique to allow students to correct their own mistakes. “Minimal Marking” instruction is very basic yet highly effective, according to research. Haswell’s data showed, at the beginning of the semester students made 401 errors collectively and corrected 245 errors, which is a 61.1% success rate. He continues, by the end of the semester the “[o]ver all, the drop was from 4.6 errors per hundred words to 2.2 (52%)” (605).

How does “Minimal Marking” help the student? Not identifying the error forces the student to be less reliant on teacher feedback and to be reliant on grammar lessons that have been taught. Providing a practical application using the student’s work is key. If they can pick out their own errors and correct them, then when they peer edit, the student will be able to spot and explain errors to their peers. Additionally it will free up the teacher and provide her with time necessary to help students who may need further explanation, without holding up or impeding the progress of the class. In other words, “the more the teacher teaches, the less the student learns” (604). “Minimal Marking” is a positive way of making corrections. I know when I was a student and received an essay, edited by a teacher covered in so much red ink it looked as though it had just left a war zone, it was very discouraging and quite frankly, humiliating. Haswell’s technique alleviates much of the stress that a red pen creates, making the editing process less intimidating and more like a game of hide and the error.

Paraphrased from Patrick Hartwell: Our job, as grammar instructors, is to teach the rules of grammar students already know but can’t explain (Hartwell 106). It is known as tacit knowledge, therefore it is our goal to make it as explicit as possible (106). The reason native English speakers cannot explain the rules is because the rules are intrinsic, the student grew up speaking or writing a certain way because that is just how it was, they learn from the vernacular

without and explanation. We will begin the grammar instruction with the seven basic parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives pronouns, prepositions and conjunctions. Once students have a firm grasp on the basic parts of speech we will advance to sentence structure, then phrases and clauses. Students will be tested and asked to have a short essay prepared on a weekly basis to determine progress.

Department Philosophy and Practice

At the LCHS English Department, we believe in success for every student. To ensure each student's success we will practice grammar on a daily basis using isolated sentences and whole language. Another reason for using the hybrid approach is for SAT and HSPE preparation. These tests use grammar in isolation to examine the knowledge of the student. If the student is only taught grammar in context and has become accustomed to that particular style; then we as teachers are not fulfilling our duty to prepare students for future success. This great disservice is guaranteed to knock a few points off of the over all test score; which reflects poorly on the district, the school, the teacher and the student and we only have ourselves to blame.

Whole Language

Students are taught grammar using and entire piece of work so that there is context to each sentence or example. An entire paragraph from an assigned reading might be used and the student will be asked to circle each subject and verb. As the class progresses the same paragraph may be used again and the students asked to find prepositional phrases, or noun clauses. The reasoning for having the whole paragraph is so that students have the context and are not wondering who "she or he" may be. This method is also helpful because it provides and

example what will be expected in the students own work. Wendy Kasten said it best: “ Whole language teaching emphasizes process over product, valuing the process, even the mistakes as part of learning and risk taking” (Kasten 111)

Isolated Sentences

Isolated sentences are single sentences that the student is asked to find a specific part of speech. Most education professionals agree that this style is not as helpful as whole language. However, standardized tests use isolated sentences, such as the SAT and the High School Proficiency Exam (HSPE). If we do not include isolated sentences in the lesson plan we are doing our students a great disservice.

Weekly Testing and Writing

The LCHS English Department tests students weekly to determine student’s progress. Based on test results the teacher will adjust the lesson plan to reinforce areas that may need to be retaught. Weekly writings are assigned so students have a practical application of what has been taught. These writings will be short and should not take more than an hour or two a week. The minimum required length will be set at one page and a maximum of 3 pages. Each writing is required to be in proper Modern Language Association (MLA) format with a works cited page. Late papers will automatically be marked down twenty percent. Students who miss a test will have twenty-four hours to schedule a make up test, to be completed within two days of the missed test. (e.g. A test missed on Friday must be rescheduled the following Monday and taken by the coming Wednesday.)

Feedback

LaVona Reeves states in an essay about writer's apprehension: "Just as the students need feedback from the teacher, the teacher needs feedback from the students and should seek it periodically" (Reeves 42). The LCHS English Department will occasionally ask students for their input on how their class is being taught. The questionnaires will be anonymous and the student's answers, along with test scores, will be used to adjust lesson plans and curriculum.

How Parents Can Help

Parents are encouraged to help the student at home whenever possible. We do ask, however, if the parents do not know the answer that they please email the teacher for an explanation. This will benefit all parties involved, in many ways. It educates the student and the parent without having to correct a problem later. Many students are afraid to ask for help, but seeing a parent ask for assistance may help ease the anxiety students feel asking for help. When a parent asks for help it allows educators to educate two people with one proverbial stone. It also shows the student that it is okay to ask for help when a problem arises, rather than to become frustrated and struggle.

One website that students and parents seem to like is chompchomp.com. ChompChomp is a wonderful resource because it provides definitions for grammatical terms it has practice exercises where students can win cool prizes for correct answers such as cars or cash; before hopes are raised too high, prizes have no real world value. If an incorrect answer is given, the prize may be an obnoxious animal, and explanation of why the answer is wrong is given. The

questions on the exercises are modeled after SAT questions and use isolated sentences without context.

Another way parents can help is during the draft editing process. Students will be asked to read essays aloud at home to a parent or a capable sibling. Reading aloud is important because it will allow the student to find errors they typically would not have found. Parents please ask questions if you get lost while the student is reading this will allow the student to clarify verbally which should then be added to the essay.

Parents please encourage your student to read anything and everything. Students who read more perform better on tests and have a higher self esteem. If you find an article in the news paper or journal you found interesting share it with your student and discuss why it was or was not interesting. This will help the student's reading comprehension and the student's standardized test scores. Reading differing points of views also broadens the student's mind to accept opinions that differ from their own.

Conclusion

The LCHS English Department has chosen a new approach to teaching grammar. We call this the hybrid approach. Just like our students are not all the same, having a lesson plan that is mono-faceted -either just isolated sentences or just whole language- will not work. Mixing the isolated and whole language approach, caters to the student's individuality without singling anyone out based on learning style. Using the hybrid approach students will gain a broader grammatical background. We wish parents and students a wonderful holiday season and look forward to a new year with the new grammar education approach.

Sample Activity One*Noun Identification*

The following paragraph is an excerpt from an essay written about credence goods. The goal today is to identify and circle all words used as nouns in the following paragraph. Once you have completed this task write a short paragraph stating how you would fix the problem.

“Sadly, unethical automotive repair facilities exist, and naive car owners are abundant. The repair industry has attempted to solve the over charge and under serve issue with the flat rate system and has done a fairly decent job. Yet, analyzing multiple sources, including my own experience, I realize the root of these problems ultimately stem from the actions of the service writer. As the liaison between customer and mechanic the service writer still works the repair facility who signs his paycheck. Who regulates the actions of the service writer and what can the automotive repair industry do? Since the service writer plays such a critical role in the treatment of a customer; the automotive repair industry needs to acknowledge the service writer is both the first and last employee customers interact with. Any industry action that doesn’t acknowledge the central role played by the service writer cannot solve, or adequately curb the problem of customer mistreatment.”

-Adam L. Wolfe

Sample Assignment Two

Verbs

Today we will be identifying verbs within isolated sentences. The context has been purposefully left out in preparation for the High School Proficiency Exam and the SAT. Underline the verb(s) in each sentence Then write a similar sentence below. Be prepared to share with the class.

1. John was walking up the stairs.
2. Sarah put the groceries away while she listened to music.
3. Mother always said, “if you don’t eat your vegetables you’ll never be strong like daddy.”
4. The mechanic’s position makes it rather easy to take advantage of the undereducated and unsuspecting customer
5. Each day I am bombarded with a plethora of information which I am expected to absorb like a sponge and when questioned, recall on demand

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