Writing Across the Curriculum

Grammar and Errors in Student Writing

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What Does Writing Studies Research Say?

Bean (2011) offers an excellent summary of the research in writing studies regarding grammar. Perhaps the best place to start, however, is with Hartwell's definitions of grammar:
Grammar 1 = native speaker's innate knowledge of their native tongue.
Grammar 2 = linguistic sciences descriptions of the way language works
Grammar 3 = linguistic etiquette/usage
Grammar 4 = school grammar
Grammar 5 = stylistic grammar

Grammar 1 is known to all school-aged children and adults. Grammar 2 is a scientific model of Grammar 1, and it is not useful in learning Grammar 1 for native speakers of English. Grammar 3 is not grammar at all but usage. Grammar 4 is, in Hartwell's terms, "unconnected with anything remotely resembling literate adult behavior" (p.
364). Grammar 5, or style, can be taught either implicitly through extensive use of the language (one school of thought) or explicitly through the study of prose style (the other school of thought).

Clearly we cannot teach Grammar 1 or (unless we are teaching a linguistics course) Grammar 2. Grammar 3, or usage, and Grammar 5, style, is similarly outside of the usual focus for instructors in courses that are not focused on writing. Grammar 3, school grammar, has been the subject of hundreds of studies since 1900.

Pressure to teach grammar as a way to eliminate errors in student writing comes from assumptions about these grammars. As Connors and Lunsford (1988) showed, however, the rate of errors in student writing per 100 words has remained relatively constant over the last century at about two (345). In a survey of research into the various

ways grammar has been taught over this period, Smith, Cheville, and Hillocks (2008) found that hundreds of studies of various methods of teaching traditional school grammar to improve the quality of student writing is at best ineffective. At worst, it takes time away from strategies that do work to improve student writing (process approaches, genre approaches), and it also focuses assessment on surface errors and correctness—two features of writing that are easier to identify and appear "objective." School systems create tests that focus on errors and correctness at the expense of audience and purpose, and the result is that students may be able to produce "clean" texts that communicate very little.

Where Do Errors Come From?

Research with student writers at the university level shows that they are capable of correcting the majority of errors they make. Many errors result from poor editing proofreading (Haswell 1983, quoted in Bean p. 75), and Bartholomae showed how students self-correct when reading texts aloud (1980, quoted in Bean p. 75).

Shaughnessy (1977), working with open enrollment students at the City University of New York, showed how errors are best seen as failed attempts by student writers to grow and develop. Without these errors, those students would not try new prose structures and therefore not improve. She advocated that instructors look for patterns of errors in student writing, bring those patterns to the attention of the students, and then work to correct the underlying mistaken rule that students were applying.

Implications For Instructors

Bean points out that the number of student errors increases with the cognitive difficulty of the assignment (77). If instructors ask students to write in an unfamiliar genre, or ask them to create a large (20 page plus) assignment, they can expect the number of student errors to increase. Instructors can exacerbate the problem through their grading practices: while the best students benefit from having errors pointed out on their marked papers, for the rest of the class this practice demoralizes them and does the work of finding errors for them (Bean 78-9).

1. Structure your assignment deadlines and evaluation schemes to require students to proofread and edit their work.
2. Communicate to your students the specific kinds of errors that you find unacceptable.
3. Ignore or minimize the importance of "accent" errors in non-native speakers written texts.
4. Focus your efforts on identifying patterns of error in student writing, and work with students on correcting the incorrect rule they apply that generates the surface error.

References

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