

Integrating Writing to Grammar Instruction: The Case of First-year Students at ENS of Bouzaréah

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Abstract

Our experience in the teaching profession for long years has shown that Grammar instruction that is separate from writing doesn't improve learners' writing skills. An approach to teach Grammar in the context of writing is needed because what all learners need is guidance in understanding and applying those aspects of grammar that they regularly learn. Because Writing is a complex and challenging activity, we suggest that the most beneficial way of helping students is to use, above all, students' writing as the basis for discussing grammatical concepts from oral language to written language. Integrating Grammar instruction into revising and editing process helps learners make immediate applications, thus allowing them to see the relevance of Grammar to their writing. By connecting their knowledge of oral language to written language, teachers can demystify abstract grammatical terminology and concepts so that learners can write with great confidence. This paper will justify the need to integrate Grammar into Writing. An action research will be used as a starting point to demonstrate what strategies can be used in class to encourage learners to set their own goals and encourage them to become autonomous learners.

Keywords : Grammar instruction; writing process; personal editing, grammar concepts; autonomy.

الملخص:

قد أظهرت خبرتنا المهنية طويلة في التدريس، أن تعليمات النحو المنفصلة عن الكتابة لا تحسن مهارات الكتابة لدى المتعلمين. فهناك حاجة إلى منهج لتعليم قواعد اللغة في سياق الكتابة، لأن ما يحتاجه جميع الطلاب هو التوجيه في فهم وتطبيق تلك الجوانب من قواعد اللغة التي يتعلمونها بانتظام. ونظرا لكون الكتابة نشاط معقد وصعب، فإننا نعتبر الطريقة الأكثر فائدة لمساعدة الطلاب هي استخدام كتابة الطلاب كأساس لمناقشة المفاهيم النحوية من اللغة الشفوية إلى اللغة المكتوبة.

ويساعد دمج التعليمات النحوية في عملية المراجعة والتحرير لدى المتعلمين في تقديم تطبيقات فورية، وهذا ما يسمح لهم برؤية أهمية قواعد اللغة في كتاباتهم. فمن خلال ربط معرفتهم باللغة الشفوية وإسقاطها على اللغة المكتوبة، فإنه يمكن للمعلمين إزالة الغموض عن المصطلحات والمفاهيم النحوية المجردة ويتمكنوا من الكتابة بثقة كبيرة. هذه الدراسة سوف تبرر الحاجة إلى دمج قواعد اللغة الشفوية في الكتابة، وسيتم استخدامها كنقطة انطلاق لإظهار

الاستراتيجيات التي يمكن استخدامها في الصف الدراسي في تعليم اللغة الأجنبية وتشجيع المتعلمين على تحديد أهدافهم الخاصة وتحفيزهم ليصبحوا متعلمين مستقلين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تعليمات النحوي، عملية الكتابة؛ التحرير الشخصي، المفاهيم النحوية، الاستقلال الذاتي.

1. « introduction »

For university students of English, the ability to write academic text effectively is one of the most important skills required. Moreover, being proficient in writing in English will enable student teachers of English to be successful teachers. Writing has always been considered an important skill in teaching and learning.

By contemplating and closely observing authentic events in my grammar class I came to the following question; ‘ What can I do to improve my grammar class and enthuse my students to learn grammar?’

I have tried to assess what has been happening in the grammar classroom. I asked students how they feel about grammar, about language, and about learning. With this monitoring process as a background, I have presented some of the outcomes from conversations with my first-year students who were invited to reflect on their learning grammar with the help of writing . We have worked on the principle that it is more effective for them to experience things than being told about them. This, because learners are naturally curious, playful and ambitious in their experiments with language; they make their own versions of things they want to say. This expressive language reflects their thoughts, feelings and attitudes. Furthermore, it leaves the speaker freer to express his thoughts, and this in turn is reflected in a relative looseness of structure.

The shift of focus from the traditional teaching method of grammar turned passive learners to enthusiastic and passionate ones.

These following are words collected from my own students, randomly selected during my action research, when asked about their attitudes with regard to the new approach:

‘...I find being able to put my views down on paper and being write which so aids the other reasons i gave for writing. In my previous years of schooling i didn’t have this freedom to express myself, this i found very frustrating because i always thought that what we were being told to do was completely worthless -’

‘ i am sure i get more out of i write now than i did then.’

‘ I used to be a spectator. Now I am the creator of my words and thoughts.’

‘ writing freely makes me want to write more and more.’

‘ Now grammar has become much more fun, i do not apprehend grammar classes anymore.’

‘ i found the class more interactive with this method. I like it because I can talk with my classmates.’

‘ i don’t feel i am in a grammar class. it is not boring anymore. i can work with my classmates and the teacher allows it. it is wonderful’.

The one thing we observed about the responses of the students is the fact that free-writing lets students’ ideas flow smoothly without a hindrance or constraint, thus making the learning process occur effectively and

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effortlessly. It is the argument here that interest plays a leading role in the acquisition of the foreign language. (**Krashen,1987**), states:

The only instance in which the teaching of grammar can result in language acquisition and (proficiency) is when the student is interested in the subject.

It is surely time we began to shift our attention to the effective personal writing of the students in the grammar class. Traditionally, the teacher used to emphasize on exercises that are really grammar exercises in which sentences are strung together in a ready-made paragraph. In a simple exercise, for instance, that requires the student to change all the verb forms in a paragraph from the present tense to the past tense, he is seldom, if ever, told explicitly that the uniformity of tense form in the original paragraph as well as in his new one is an important characteristic of a good, unified, coherent paragraph. In other words, the student is asked to go through a lot of sentence transformations, substitutions, etc., perhaps thus learning the required grammatical structure, but not quite learning what the meaning is. **Ilna LEKI**. (1991) says:

Writing can be fun. Writing classes have changed. They have become more humanistic, more friendly, and more fun. Writing can give a language student a sense of command over the language that no other activity can give so quickly. Acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding. (P. 26).

Likewise, most students' writing focuses on grammar, spelling, and structure and not on meaning, significance and pleasure. Writing "correct" sentences makes students forget what they are writing about. Because English is a second language, mistakes happen all the time. This is why it is important to get students to spend more time writing. They have to think, talk and create on paper. They have to write what they think about. We want writing to be a habit. Habitual writing will influence the style of the students in the long run since most of our examinations are written.

Clearly, students need their own topics as well as their own language; otherwise there isn't much chance of a genuine communication. Here are some reasons why students have to choose their own writings:

1. Deciding what you have to say is probably the hardest and most important part of writing. We cannot take this responsibility away from the students.

2. As students consider, select and reconsider their topics, they experience the revision process. This is often the first and easiest form of revision.

3. When students write what they know and care about, their writing is their own; they are driven to make it good. They supply the initiative and the motivation. (P. 59).

As a teacher of English I value the freedom of choice. Definitely I want freedom in the way I teach grammar integrated with writing. The study shows that the extent to which students meaningfully represent their world will depend on how much opportunity they are given to write expressively.

As **Shaheen (1998)** pointed out:

The idea of being able to communicate easily on paper amazed me. American teachers and students think and talk on paper. Egyptians do most of this by talking. We rarely write. We do like to. What I mean here is significant and enjoyable writing. I want to write more, and I want my students to write more. (P. 43).

When the students' focus is on returning as exactly as possible what they have been given, the sense of reflective, independent self, disappears, leaving incomprehension and resentment or despair. (**Nancy Martin, 1983**), Says:

The very feature which characterizes expressive language is the focus on the student's own vision. Any attempt to divert him from *what he is saying* to *how* he is saying it will be a diversion to his thinking. Thus it would seem that expressive language should be seen as the base from which we move into higher stages of the learning process. This would mean that teachers of all subjects should allow their students to express themselves freely for much more of the time and they could also encourage it, and create situations where it could occur, knowing its importance to a learner. (p. 12).

Writing is important for the articulation of personal as well as public knowledge. To quote from a case study (**N. Martin, 1983**), a 17-year-old student said:

"I often used my writing as a thought-formulating process...It helped me to understand myself and my place in life...In a very indirect way this better understanding of myself helped me to develop an identity and gain confidence in myself as an individual."

And another said:

"...The most outstanding value gained for me was that I became more aware of the outside world."

From the above documentations, it has become clear that the extent to which learners meaningfully represent their world will depend on how much opportunity they are given to write expressively. Following the arguments above, I would like to suggest that paragraph structure and development can be taught simultaneously with grammatical structure, and that this can be explicitly done at every stage of the teaching and learning process. The rest of this paper will illustrate how this may be done.

2. Sentence types and paragraph structure

Descriptive paragraphs tell about or describe a person, place, or thing. Nothing can be more banal than that statement, but it has rarely, if ever, been explicitly pointed out that description generally necessitates the use of simple

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be-sentences, those with either predicate nouns (Sentence Type 1a: He is a professor) or predicate adjectives (Sentence Type 1b: He is strict). A simple descriptive paragraph emerges naturally from a series of such sentences. Along with *be*, the few other verbs that behave as linkers, which are called “descriptive verbs,” are *seem, appear, look, sound, smell, taste, feel*.

From Type 1a and 1b sentences, we move to Type 2 Subject + V *intransitive* (+ Adverb) and Type 3 (Subject + V *transitive* + Direct Object) + Adverb), which together make up most of the sentences used in a narrative paragraph. Whereas the descriptive paragraph most often uses sentences with descriptive verbs, the narrative paragraph uses mostly *action verbs*. Any verb that can be used to answer the question *what does/did he do?* is an action verb; one that cannot be so used is a descriptive verb. Thus, in *What did he do? He ran away, ran* is an action verb, but in *What did she do? She smelled nice, smelled* is a descriptive verb inappropriately used to answer the question.

A series of Type 2 and 3 sentences, i.e., sentences with action verbs, produce a narrative paragraph. However, there is a handful of transitive verbs that are descriptive rather than action verbs, and an enumeration of these is in order if the student’s command of the descriptive paragraph is to be complete; transitive verbs that tell a person’s likes and dislikes (e.g., like, dislike, hate, love, enjoy, as in *He loves seafood*) and his possessions, including relationships (e.g., have, own, possess, as in *He has many friends*). An exercise like the following may be used to teach the student these verbs while teaching him how to write a descriptive paragraph.

Instructions: Describe your teacher as she was before her retirement, using the following information.

appearance: tall, thin, dark

relationships: young and old people, many casual friends, few close friends

likes: children, simple mediterranean food, classical music

dislikes: cranky men, unsmiling young people

The following can be used to produce a narrative paragraph related to the descriptive paragraph one outlined above.

Instructions: Tell what she did after her retirement, using the following information.

a. retirement in 1964

b. change residence – move to Tunisia with her family

c. membership in charity house in Tunis town

d. quiet life until her death

At about this time, teaching the equivalent negative and interrogative forms of the various sentence types will not only expand the student’s repertoire of grammatical structures but will also add variety to his paragraphs.

3. The Topic Sentence

The topic sentence summarizes a narration or description as a single event. The succeeding sentences within the paragraph go over the same ground to retell the narration as a series of events, or the description as a

bundle of details. The topic sentence not only states the topic of the paragraph but also controls or limits the topic so that it can be discussed completely in the space of a single paragraph.

4. Consider the following examples:

1. (a) The little girl went to a birthday party yesterday. (b) She gave her friend a nice present. (c) She and all the other guests wore beautiful clothes, listened to music, and danced. (d) They ate a lot of cake and ice cream.
2. (a) My friend is just like me. (b) She is also a teacher. (c) She is a high-school graduate, just like me. (d) She likes her work at the city and loves cooking and shopping, as I do.

In other words, sentence (a) is the topic sentence. The remaining three sentences, i.e.; (b), (c), and (d) are expansions of the latter. Obviously, the tense form should be identical to the one used for the initial sentence or the topic sentence. It is advisable, therefore, to teach the tense forms with the concept of the topic sentence as a summary narration or description. Many exercises have been used to achieve uniformity in tense forms within a paragraph (e.g., “Change all the verbs in the paragraph into the past tense,” “Substitute other verbs using the future tense,” etc.).

The use of the simple tenses to summarize events in the past or present or future is comparatively easy to impart to students and needs no more than extensive drill on the verb forms. However, the use of progressive tenses is a lot harder to teach because of its implied rather than expressed time span. The present-progressive tense is used in the topic sentence of narrations that extend from a past time to a future time. Consider the following example:

- (a) My brother is studying accounting. (b) He enrolled in a business school last June and passed all of his courses in the first semester with ease. (c) He is taking Accounting 2 now, and (d) he will take two more courses in accounting next year.

The present progressive tense tells the reader that my brother’s studies started some time in the past and that they are still going on, and it implies that they will go on for some time in the future. This allows for the past tense in (b), the present progressive in (c), and the future in (d).

Thus, we can conclude that the past- or future-progressive tense can be used in the topic sentence in a narrative paragraph to indicate specifically that the action of the topic sentence continued for a longer time than the action of all the subordinate sentences. Thus, we have a narration like the following:

Last night I was visiting my girlfriend. She invited me to sit on the porch. While we were sitting there, three boys came by. She called to the boys and invited them to join us. She told me that they were her cousins.

In this kind of narration, the progressive tense of the first sentence means that only a small part of what happened during the visit will be told in the following narration. By implication, much more happened before and

probably after the particular incident to be described, and this could also be summed up by the topic sentence.

It is apparent from all this that the proper choice of tense forms to express exactly what one wants to say in the entire paragraph as summarized by the topic sentence is clearly a skill that needs to be cultivated early in a writing class. Thus, instead of straightforward lessons on the various uses of the progressive tenses, lessons on their significance to the total meaning of the paragraph are necessary. Instead of straightforward lessons on the topic sentence, which ignore the significance of the verb form used in the sentence, lessons on the implied meaning of the tenses are imperative. In other words, the meaningful way to teach the topic sentence is to teach it simultaneously with the various tenses and their meanings.

5. Unity and Coherence

Unity and coherence are characteristics of a paragraph that is “together.” They are achieved by the correct use of pronouns and articles in the development of the topic sentence, by the consistent use of verb forms whenever called for, and by the masterful use of conjunctions and other connectors or transition words. Lessons on pronouns and articles for paragraph unity and coherence are both necessary and easy. Simple exercises like the following can be used to impart the concept.

- (a) *Sarah* is a student. *She* is very serious in her studies. *She* is an active element in the English team club. *She* is the greatest!
- (b) We saw *an old man* and *a boy* in the cinema yesterday. *The old man* walked out of the cinema, but *the boy* stayed. The old man reached the street and headed home, but the boy just kept day-dreaming.

After pointing out the fact that *she* is obligatory in all the sentences following the topic sentence in (a) if the paragraph is to express continuity and readability, since the use of Sarah in each of the sentences would produce a bad repetitious paragraph, one can do some of the traditional exercises where other nouns, singular and plural, masculine and feminine, will call for proper changes in the pronouns.

Another important factor contributing to successful unity and coherence is, as already mentioned, uniformity of tense forms. The tense of the verb of the topic sentence determines the tense forms of the subsequent sentences, as emphasized above. Repeatedly, students have been told that narration and description of events that happened in the past are expressed in the past tense, those in present time are expressed in the present tense, and those in the future, in the future tense. This is true for simple chronological events that happen in one specific time period, but the student needs to learn, too, about the more complicated type of development where a series of events includes some in the past, some in the present, and some in the future. Thus, type of development needs to be taught after the one-tense paragraph structure has been mastered. The shift from one tense to another as the actual time of the events relative to the description or narration changes ought to

come a little easier if presented in this sequence. The following paragraph illustrates the use of various tense forms within one paragraph:

I came to the United States to study one year ago. In the beginning, I didn't do too well in my studies because I cried instead of studying most of the time. I do not cry anymore, and I study hard. I am doing quite well in my studies now. I am studying advertising. I will finish next year and will go home right after graduation. I will join a business firm back home.

There are many ways in which events may relate to each other. In the above example, we have a series that took place in the past, followed by another series taking place in the present, and a third that will take place in the future. In some instances, actions may overlap. One may begin (or begin and end) while the first is still going on. Or two or more may happen simultaneously. All these require knowledge of tense forms but also necessitate the simultaneous teaching of conjunctions and transition words. This would be the appropriate time, then, to teach these.

From the relatively less complex relationship expressed by such conjunctions as after, before, while, as soon as, etc., the lessons can move onto cause and effect, (because, since, and so on) and purpose (in order to, so that), thus moving from simple sentence structures to complex ones, all within the given paragraph structure.

6. Description and Narration

A totally descriptive paragraph without a single action verb is boring, just as a totally narrative paragraph without a descriptive verb is unusual. Good writers know how to use (and combine) both to good effect. The next logical step after mastery of the two types of paragraph structure is, therefore, learning to merge both types of structure into one. The same principles of unity and coherence, achieved via the correct use of pronouns, articles, and conjunctions, need to be emphasized in teaching this kind of writing. In addition, some rules on the co-occurrence of tense forms of action and descriptive verbs will need to be learned. When action verbs and descriptive verbs occur together in a paragraph, the action verb determines the tense of the descriptive verb.

Unlike action verbs, descriptive verbs cannot occur in the progressive tense because they do not tell about things that happened and therefore about things that are in progress. Thus, I cannot say **President Carter is having big teeth (descriptive)*, although I can easily say *President Carter is having a press conference (action)*. Since the tense of the action verbs in a descriptive-narrative paragraph determines the tense of the descriptive verbs, the student needs to know and follow these rules in his writing:

| <u>Action Verbs</u> | <u>Descriptive Verbs</u> | |
|---------------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| Present | Progressive | Simple Present |

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Past Progressive

Simple Past

Future Progressive

Simple Future

The following examples illustrate these rules:

(a) action verbs in the present-progressive tense, descriptive verbs in the simple-present tense:

Peter is saying something. He is shaking his fist at a woman near him. He is really angry. The woman seems scared and confused. She is moving away.

(b) actions verbs in the past-progressive tense, descriptive verbs in the simple-past tense:

The neighbors were fighting last night. They were yelling and throwing dishes at each other. We were amused at the same time that we were ashamed of ourselves for listening. They seemed still mad at each other this morning, but they were not yelling any more.

(c) action verbs in the future-progressive tense, descriptive verbs in the future-simple tense:

George will be looking for a job four years from now. He will be well trained and eager for a good job. Employers will be interviewing at his school and he will be signing up for a number of interviews. He will be self-assured and confident.

The simultaneous teaching of grammar and paragraph structure suggested here has one advantage over most suggested methods of teaching writing.

7. Free-writing technique

The free-writing technique is one of the ways to make writing more like speaking. It is a pre-writing technique which encourages students to overcome their fear of the blank page and their preoccupation with correctness. The idea is simply to write for ten minutes (later on, perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes). Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. If you can't think of a word or a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write, 'I can't think of it.' Just put down something. The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind. If you get stuck, it's fine to write 'I can't think what to say, I can't think what to say' as many times as you want: or repeat the last word you wrote over and over again: or anything else. The only requirement is that you never stop.

In other words, free-writing could be a written version of impromptu or spontaneous speech.

The following procedure is how I organize free-writing in my class. First, students are assigned a topic (hobbies, family, my dream, etc.). Second, they have five minutes to write. Third, students can write anything with any

writing style. Fourth, students can make as many grammatical and spelling mistakes as they want. Students cannot refer to any dictionaries. With this guidance, students are required to write ten lines on a sheet of paper. In this way, students have no recourse other than continuing to write without worrying about grammar, the quality of the ideas, or editing.

Needless to say, the techniques above can lead to an effective transition from writing to grammar practice. The point here, however, is that these writing activities in themselves contain elements which strengthen grammar. This, in fact, is a positive reinterpretation of the role of writing and grammar in the communicative approach. (**F.S. Baskoff, 1981**), states:

Teaching writing and grammar no longer means simply having students do grammar exercises in writing; it no longer means having students manipulating alien texts that have no special meaning for them. Instead, now students are writing about what they are interested in and know about, but most especially, what they really want to communicate to someone else. This desire on the part of the learner to communicate something is very important, if it is already difficult to function in a foreign language, it is much more difficult for students to write if they are required to write about something they have no interest in- when, for example, they don't have enough information on a subject to write about it or they simply have no desire or reason to communicate information (P.2).

For the most part writing is the easiest to do and is likely to have the highest quality when the writer is committed intellectually to expressing something meaningful through writing. The lack of commitment to the topic is a major problem for language students, because if students don't care what they are saying, if they are not committed to what they are saying, they will not take risks with the language; they will stick to what they know they can say rather than trying to find a way to say what they want to say. They will never expand the horizons of their ability to express themselves in their second language.

In this article, I first attempted to reinterpret grammar activities based on the analysis of the nature of written language, and then discussed how writing activities could be put into practice to facilitate grammar learning. It is hoped that the ideas presented will shed some light on the role of writing activities in the grammar classroom.

Writing is the natural outlet for the students' reflections on their speaking, listening, and reading experiences in their second language. When students are not focused on grammatical errors but when they are instead writing freely, writing or trying to write what they think they want to say, they develop confidence and a sense of power over the language that none of the other skills is likely to produce until the students are very well advanced in their language studies. Writing is the one language skill where the language

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student has complete control over that new linguistic code. This feeling of control can be very invigorating and satisfying.

In short, we have come to understand that the most efficient way to teaching grammar that is relevant for writing is to embed it within writing instruction. This method helps teachers to apply a limited amount of grammar instruction directly to writing and enables them to map their instruction in the way that best serves the needs of our students.

8. « conclusion »

The action research set out to investigate whether contextualised teaching of grammar, integrated with the teaching of writing, would improve students' outcomes in writing and in metalinguistic understanding. The action research relied on interviews with my first-year students. The majority of the students responded in favour of the new approach and showed an amazing enthusiasm in class. Some of the randomly selected responses indicate a significant positive effect on them.

It is worth to say that the present study is exploratory and illuminative. It is limited to the analysis of the first-year university students at ENS of Bouzareah. The scope of the research involved the four groups, a total of 260 students. The results reported can, therefore, be regarded as being credible and could be a relative generalisation within this context. The results discussed in this paper reveal that the strategy places learners at the core of the learning process.

The research results show that the choice of integrating writing into the teaching of grammar is a sound decision. This change would probably help both teachers and learners to shift gradually from the previously adopted teacher-centered theory to a learner-centered one.

This strategy is not a challenge and can be easily implemented in different classes. However, due to the limited corpus of the study and its restriction to the first-year students, further future research in other schools, levels and cycles can hopefully support and confirm the finding of this research.

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