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Can we use Grammar to Support Students' Communication Skills?

Rebecca Blaxell*

*Edith Cowan University, r.blaxell@ecu.edu.au

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Abstract

Communication skills consistently rank as one of the skills most desired by employers and is included in the graduate attributes at ECU. This paper looks to examine why sound grammatical skills are considered important and what role it plays in the development of communication skills. It looks at the role of grammar in the tertiary classroom and at possible ways that university educators can help support students' understanding of the grammatical structures needed in the text types that are most closely associated with the workforce. Using Halliday's interpretation of register, grammar can be considered in terms of the function needed to support communication. This paper discusses the three elements of register: mode, tenor and field, as a way of approaching grammar teaching in the classroom.

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Background

The skills that employers want from graduates are limited and well documented. In Australia, a new framework outlining the key skills employees are required to have is currently being developed (DEEWR, 2012). The initial report highlights three key "Skills Clusters" which are areas that employers focus on when considering a potential employee. These three Clusters are the ability to: Navigate the world of work; Interact with others; and Get the work done (DEEWR, 2012). While these three areas focus on different elements needed in the work force, all three require an employee to have soundly developed communication skills.

This is unsurprising given that one of the skills considered most desirable by employers is that of sound communication, with 75% of employers listing it as the most desirable skill in potential employees. (Graduate Careers, 2011). The ability to communicate includes the ability to speak, listen, read and write effectively and is central to an employee's ability to integrate successfully into the workforce. Within each of these elements of communication lies a subset of skills. For example, there are many skills that are required to be able to write well: an understanding of audience, style, syntax, spelling and punctuation are some of these.

The focus of this paper is on the need for students to understand and be able to use grammar effectively in order to best support their ability to engage in effective written communication. Sound grammatical understanding is regularly cited in the media as a skill employers desire and one that is frequently lacking in students (Graduate Careers, 2011). This suggests that there is a strong need for graduates who are able to speak and write in Standard Australian English- the English that, at least in Australia, is predominantly connected with the notion of sound grammar. This is not an unreasonable demand when it is the employee who will represent the company and always be responsible for communication between the company and the clients or customers.

There is a strong sense that students are not receiving the instruction necessary for the development of sound communication skills. Tapper and Gruba (2000) highlight the fact that very few Australian universities have compulsory written communication classes, and that while there may be some disciplines within a university that require students to take a writing class, not all disciplines do this. Further to this, they argue that some disciplines do not even offer elective classes for students wishing to develop their written communication. This suggests that students are not necessarily being offered the instruction necessary to develop an understanding of the technical aspects of good writing. While some students arrive at university with a soundly developed ability to write, this is not always the case. Some students may have been exposed to traditional grammar in very formal lessons while others may not have received any instruction in grammar throughout the duration of their compulsory education. Recently, as the whole language approach was at the centre of much English teaching, exposure to explicit lessons in grammar (and other technical aspects of written communication) has

ECULTURE

decreased. However, rather than focus on what students are not bringing with them upon arrival at university, attention needs to be paid more to what ECU students are bringing with them.

Students arrive at university from much more diverse backgrounds: age, socio-economic, academic attainment, prior employment. In addition to this, universities now are more accepting and supportive of applications of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. "In 2009 approximately 73 per cent of ECU's commencing undergraduates entered Bachelor courses on a basis of admission other than ATAR, up from 62 per cent in 2008" (ECU, 2009). This increasing diversity in the students' educational background and as such the degree to which students arrive at university with exposure to formal learning of "correct" English has an impact on the students' ability to write using conventions that are expected when writing at an academic level.

While on the surface this appears to be a simplistic problem, in fact the issue is far more complex. As Asselin (2002) argues, any "pleas for the return of 'proper English'" tend to ignore or disregard the reality of increasing numbers of dialects and the significant differences between oral and written language that are present in society. This is particularly true for any multicultural society such as Australia. It is this reality that creates a uniquely awkward position for the university educator. The question then becomes, how do we balance the need to address the content of the discipline with the communication skills students need to be employable and a respect and appreciation for the language skills the student already possesses? It is important to recognise the validity of the language experience a student brings with them, but at the same time, there is an obligation to ensure that students become aware of the gap between their own experience and that needed to be able to write in such a manner as to be considered to have good communication skills by prospective employers. That is, students need to be able to change their language choices according to need. Students need to learn how to "actively code-switch—to assess the needs of the setting (the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose) and intentionally choose the appropriate language style for that setting" (Wheeler, 2008, p.54). The ability to do this then allows the student to decide when it is necessary to use what is commonly termed standard Australian English, thus supporting their ability to communicate well.

The question then is can grammar support this and if so how?

What Grammar?

The first aspect to understand here is that we are not talking about traditional grammar. This is generally what comes to people's minds when discussing grammar. This type of grammar is generally prescriptive and claims a set of rules that outline correct usage and involves the examination of grammar as an object. Traditional grammar considers language in a discrete manner with a focus on rules and systems without regard for the wider implications and uses of language. It is this grammar that many people first refer to when asked about grammar is and what it means. "Most teachers, like most people in the wider community think of it in terms of…nouns, verbs and the like" (Christie, 1996, p.49).

If grammar is considered in this way, then it can comfortably be relegated to those subject areas where perhaps this knowledge is of greater value. For certain disciplines there is value in the analysis of the minutiae of language, the role of grammar and the study of it in an objective manner. However, the formal teaching of traditional grammar in this way has been shown to have little value in the improvement of students' ability to write and produce better quality writing. Hartwell argued more than twenty five years ago that there was little value in the teaching of traditional grammar and cites a number of research projects that suggest the same (1985). Most research suggests that there is little carry over effect at all and as such would not be of significant value in developing students' communication skills. There are some who have argued that the teaching of this grammar is at best a fruitless exercise, and at worst detrimental to a student's understanding of English (Myhill, 2012). It is the understanding that formal grammar has little use and can produce negative effects on students, which has been at the centre debate around the teaching of grammar. Why teach grammar if indeed, it does little to support effective writing or develop sound communication skills?

The recognition of this has led to the question of what grammar might be useful and what role it can play in supporting students' communication skills. The answer to this appears to lay more in the use of functional grammar as a means of greater understanding of language, its function and how it can be used to greatest effect.

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The Role of Functional Grammar

A key distinction between traditional grammar and functional grammar is what the function of grammar is. Where traditional grammar sees language as a fixed object that can be dissected to better understand the mistakes that people make relative to rules created more than 200 years ago, functional grammar sees grammar as a tool. How can grammatical structures best support communication and allow for the speaker to more clearly and accurately express ideas? Language is a system that allows for effective communication between individuals. Function as argued by Halliday, is "a fundamental property of language itself" (1985, p.17). That is when we engage in conversation about language we can't separate it from function. Teaching the rules of this system according to the function to be achieved, allows the individual to adopt different language choices relevant to the social situation. The ability to engage with register (that is mode, field and tenor) is critical in an individual's ability to choose how to interact with another. Without this knowledge, the individual can't make choices and therefore is forced into a certain way of speaking. When we consider grammar from a socio-cultural perspective, we once again recognise how language acts as a mechanism by which people are judged. As Dixon states "language asserts our social group" (p.11, 1975) and as such this is a means by which people can be classified and categorised. This judgement can then preclude an individual from gaining entry into a particular group. For example: an employment opportunity might be unavailable to an individual because they are unaware of the social conventions of writing a job application, or they use inappropriate language in an interview. Even more simply, a person who has poor grammar may be seen as inferior in some way because of the connection between speaking "well" and attaining a "good" education. If aiming for a truly meritocratic society, all individuals need to know the rules about language so they are at least able to make choices for themselves about how they interact with others.

If good communication is at the heart of why we should adopt functional grammar, then we need to take a step back and think through our teaching as much as the type of grammar we are being asked to teach. We need to think about the purpose of why we are teaching what we are teaching. If we think in terms of what students need to be able to do in a practical sense, then we are better placed to create meaningful activities that will provide them the opportunity to develop the communication skills appropriate to the task.

How do we Actively Include Functional Grammar in the Curriculum? How do I Teach Students about Grammar in their Writing?

It can be argues that the "skill and drill" technique has little place in the university environment. If students wish to reinforce their understanding through repeated practice, there are a plethora of textbooks from which they are able to choose. However, in classes, there is no time to include these types of drills into units and it would be of little use even if these were included. It may be more useful to provide annotated examples of high quality work that demonstrates effective communication. These will allow students the opportunity to reflect on their own work and compare it with work that is closer to the "standard" that is required at university.

The first aspect of deciding what grammar teaching should occur in the classroom is to know what students need to be able to do. That is, there needs to be consideration of the knowledge about language that students need to have in order to be able to communicate effectively.
There are certain grammatical aspects that many students with English as a first language will have learnt through exposure in early childhood. These fundamental features are instinctive and do not necessarily require any formal teaching.

However, there are other areas of writing where to know the features of the text will help the student have control over the text. So, if language is examined from a functional perspective then rather than asking students to focus first on components of grammar when writing, we can ask them to consider how best to structure their writing according to function. Using Halliday's (1985) interpretation of register, the areas of function that students can be asked to reflect upon when creating a text can be:

- Tenor- who is the intended audience for this text and what is my relationship with them.
- Field- what is the text that is being created trying to do. What is the content of the text?
- Mode- how is this information best communicated? (Written format- notes, report, essay, or

verbally- phone conversation, presentation, speech)

So in the University classroom, before students are asked to begin writing a text, ask them to reflect on these three aspects. This discussion provides students with the opportunity to at the very least reflect on the choices they are making when they write and what possible outcomes these choices might produce. For example, when writing an essay, we can use mode to highlight to students that the use of conjunctions to guide the reader as to how ideas in the text relate to each other. Examination of field lets students know whether they will try to examine, analyse or discuss a topic. A brief inclusion of the importance of tenor can be included at the beginning of the semester, to highlight to students how emails to lecturers or tutors should be written according to the established relationship between the two parties.

Modelling good communication skills through the grammar used in documents that we create and distribute to students can also provide further opportunity to discuss the quality of writing and how one document is more effective in communicating than another. The key here is being able to articulate to students what it is that needs to be present in quality writing. This can be difficult, as it often seems to be unclear as to what makes a student's writing more or less effective than another. Here some time spent analysing students' work can be useful. Opportunities for students to engage in conferencing will allow them to critique and compare their work.

A constructivist approach to teaching will give the students the maximum opportunity to engage with the concepts and allow for consolidation. This approach suggests that students should work together to construct an understanding, not simply remain passive recipients of information. While there is room for the teacher to explain rules and there is the need to give multiple examples, Weaver (1996) argues that textbook approaches are the least useful. This is because the examples given in textbooks are artificial, can be overly simplistic in an attempt to make the point clear and don't contextualise the grammar. It is more useful to allow students to write, with the expectation that they will make errors, and then use these errors to highlight the differences between what has been written and what is grammatically appropriate for the task.

Conclusion

The decision to include any non-essential component into the curriculum can not be taken lightly. The pressures on time are well known and there are key outcomes that need to be met within the discipline. However, if we are to consider the graduate attribute of "ability to communicate", there is a shared responsibility for both student and the university. As a university, we are claiming that students will graduate from ECU with a well developed ability to communicate. By explicitly providing students the opportunity to engage in active discussion about the language choices they make, by providing students the opportunity to practice and refine their writing skill and by providing students the opportunity to ask questions and learn about what language choices work best within the discipline, we are supporting students to become effective communicators, ready for the workplace.

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Blaxell: Can we use Grammar to Support Students' Communication Skills?

ECULTURE

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