

Syntax and “Sin tax”

By Bella Hanson

“I would consider to take another online course.”

“I want learn more English.”

I taught a group of college students about ready to get their B.S. in Elementary Education. They were having trouble passing the writing part of the Basic Skills Test for Teachers and signed up for practice in improving their writing. When I encountered written sentences such as the two above (and there were a lot of them), I would ask them to read the sentence out loud and ask them if it *sounded* right to them. After all native speakers often make a writing choice based on what sounds right to them. Almost all of my students would look puzzled and say that it didn't **not** sound right. Perhaps their English speaking and writing had become functional for them, and it may have become fossilized.

It was difficult to know where to start. Teaching infinitives just didn't seem like the answer. They were in their senior year of college! Had the focus been on mastering oral language all these years of education, and syntax was never corrected in their speaking? Had they never had enough practice writing correct sentence structure? When one considers that syntax (form) is at the sentence level, had they not yet understood basic sentence syntax? It seemed like they were just writing sentences “in the dark.” They wanted to write correctly, but it all came out on the paper with the verbs all jumbled. The students were Hmong and Hispanic and had little or no education in their native language. My experience with them may not parallel other learners' language production. Yet, it seems to be a problem at most ELL levels.

What is your experience with incorrect syntax?

How much skill building should be taught to master formal sentence correctness?

I have asked ELL teachers in ABE if and how they teach syntax. As a way of adding humor to correction some have suggested adding a “sin tax” for incorrect syntax in a sentence. It would be levied to point out incorrect use of form. The sin tax could then be used for special class projects.

All attempts at humor aside, in their belief that students don't master one grammar structure at a time, teachers are using the focus on form approach to language teaching, rather than teaching grammar in isolation. Learners' attention is drawn to grammatical forms in the context of meaningful activities, and the teacher's attention to form is triggered by learners' problems with production (Long, 200).

In contemplating how long this approach takes to help ELL students arrive at some level of mastery, one can't help but think that there has to be some methods in addition to focus on form which help the writing process to proceed faster.

What ideas do you have? What works with your students? My reading and discussions have produced some ideas in instructional strategies in teaching about syntax.

- Some teachers teach sentence diagramming. For a visual learner, this seems like a sensible approach to understanding syntax.
- Reading out loud increases familiarity with correct sentence form. Readers can become more knowledgeable about correct syntax in meaningful context. It begins to *sound* right.
- Language experience stories offer an individual or group experience in writing sentences with various verb forms.
- Writing in a dialogue journal with feedback from the teacher regarding sentence structure reinforces correct sentence form.
- Pair work is used in reading and speaking; what about pair work in writing sentences and taking about form?
- And the old directive for almost everything: practice, practice, practice. This gives opportunity to experiment with writing and try different constructions to make themselves understood in correct syntax.

It would be beyond the pale to add a “sin tax” for inappropriate syntax. I am of the opinion, however, that from early on it is important to help learners know and use correct sentence form.

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