

# Quiz Mastery: Students as Bloggers and Testers in Pursuit of Grammatical Competence\*

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## Abstract

This article considers the challenges confronted by instructors of composition and writing skills in higher education. Identifying key aspects of grammar, syntax, and punctuation, it argues that a grammatically informed terminology is helpful to learner-writers endeavouring to improve the clarity of their written assignments. To aid assimilation of this terminology, and the concepts it signifies, e-learning tools can be integrated into the curriculum so that students can consolidate knowledge through their own construction of it. As they create blogs and peer to peer quizzes, they become more theoretically and practically informed about the basis of effective writing practices.

**Keywords:** Academic Writing; E-Learning; Grammar and Pedagogy; Infographics; Weblogs; Reflective Learning

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## 1. Introduction

The practice of readying students potentially to teach material they have recently learned is widely thought to be pedagogically sound. The well-known saying attributed to Confucius, ‘tell me and I may forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I will understand,’ is a familiar one to those interested in ideas related to learning and teaching. In our shared module called Composition and Writing Skills (Incorporating New Media Text Production), student involvement has proven indispensable to the mastery of subject matter. Specifically, when we have assessed our learners in their abilities to articulate and disseminate their new understandings and, later, to test their peers, they have acquired a greater degree of expertise. To this end, the new media component of the module is crucial. It enables us to prepare our students to be active participants in a digital society. The Irish Department of Education, as well as employers generally, call for a high competency in digital literacies so that our global citizens are in a position to “effectively interpret, manage, share and create meaning in the growing range of digital communication channels” (Dudney et al, 2014:2).

Many third level students in Ireland, though eager to write, express anxiety about the conventions of formal grammar and syntax ordinarily required in academic contexts. Instruction is necessary but often not sufficient to deep learning, given the unfamiliarity of the vocabulary related to the subject area. While many learner-writers have a good sense of sentence structure, and even of style, others do not. In our experience, many, no matter how competent, lack the terminology used in discussions of grammar, syntax, and punctuation. This terminology can be immensely helpful to those wishing to improve the clarity of their assignments and other written submissions.

## 1.1 The module.

Our module's first class session begins with an introduction to the eight parts of speech. Typically, our students can identify nouns, pronouns, and verbs immediately. But, prior to instruction, they struggle with distinctions between adjectives and adverbs and usually cannot determine prepositions, articles, and conjunctions. The syntactic functions served by the parts of speech are best illustrated through examples of semantic difference. We ask our students, for instance, to attempt to 'morph' random words from one form to another, where possible. They swiftly see that beauty (noun) becomes beautify (verb), beautiful (adjective), and beautifully (adverb). When the same transition is attempted using the word ugly, they discover that it takes only one form, that of adjective. With a suffix, though, it can become a noun, 'ugliness.' The root word 'wonder' morphs nicely, too. It presents itself as 'adjective' in the sentence, 'the chicken smells wonderful,' but as 'adverb' in the sentence, 'the chicken smells wonderfully.' In the first example, the chicken is, presumably, cooked and ready to be served. In the second example, the chicken in question is living and has a refined sense of smell as would, for instance, a sniffer dog, the kind that assists with police work. Any chicken with so sensitive a nose would be, indeed, 'a wonder' (noun).

Playful experimentation with these words and others, manipulated in multiple contexts, helps to convince learner-writers of the precision afforded by specific word forms – i.e., parts of speech -- and readies them, first, to recognize phrases and clauses, then to create phrases and clauses, and, ultimately, to manipulate them for effect.

This cognitive transition from definition to application, however, does pose several challenges. Understanding how the parts of speech are used to draft meaningful utterances is more complex than merely understanding what they are. While the difference between a noun and a verb is an easy one for students to grasp, the difference between a subject and a predicate is less obvious. In this respect, students require further instruction to see that function is more relevant than form.

Accordingly, ensuing lessons centre on grammatic and syntactic relationships within sentences. We work our way through example-material that establishes these relationships with class sessions proceeding along the following lines:

A subject is the do-er of the action in a clause, and a predicate is its verb expressing tense. Subjects are usually but not always nouns. In the sentence 'Skiing is my favourite sport,' the subject is a verb used as a noun. This is called a gerund. The sentence, 'Skiing is my favourite sport,' is comprised of a single clause. A clause is a group of words containing a subject and a predicate. The sentence, 'Skiing is my favourite sport but, unfortunately, my boyfriend hates snow,' is comprised of two clauses. The first is independent and the second is dependent. The second clause contains a parenthetical modifier, the adverb 'unfortunately.' It describes the verb 'hates,' which is the predicate of the second clause. A dependent clause cannot stand on its own except for rhetorical or stylistic effect.

Specialized vocabulary such as this can be alienating at first and takes time to acquire. One of the aims of our module is to enable students to converse easily about grammar and syntax using the pre-existing terminology available to them. What the terminology offers is a diagnostic framework. It allows for the examination and critique of sample clauses and sentences that we present in class through overhead slides. Flaws and ambiguities in these samples can be identified and remedied. Eventually, students are able to scrutinize their own prose-work and that of their peers. The more comfortable they become with widely acceptable principles of grammar and syntax, the more likely they are to compose clear and effective sentences for general readerships.

## **2. Learning And Teaching Strategies**

Teacher-led classroom conversation is crucial to the acquisition of this new knowledge. Just as with foreign language acquisition, oral expression on the part of learners consolidates understanding. Terms such as subject, predicate, direct object, indirect object, transitive verb, linking verb, subject complement, and so on, do not comprise the ordinary lexicon of most young people in higher education,

whether native speakers of English or not. Roundtable analyses of paragraphs within essays read aloud in class facilitate extended discussions about both the forms and functions of words. These essays can come from the class textbook, *Reading the World: Ideas that Matter* (Austin 2015) and from student assignments themselves. Either serves well, so long as participants begin to put their newly acquired technical vocabulary to use.

Retention, though, is by no means assured. We have found that after the passage of only a few days' time, our students are likely to have lost some understanding of the material or, at least, the confidence to recall it and express it independently. It is at this point that we introduce a sequence of assignments designed to make use of the knowledge recently acquired while also reinforcing it.

One set of assignments involves conventional essay writing based on suggested themes. Instructor feedback and evaluation are attentive to specific grammar items covered in class. Criteria are specific: Essay Number One should contain no sentence fragments or run-on sentences. Essay Number Two should contain neither of these as well as no faulty subject / verb agreement and no faulty modification. Essay Number Three follows in kind, further articulating specific grammar and punctuation requirements and incorporating the previous ones. In this targeted manner, learners are generally able meet expressed objectives.

A second set of interspersed assignments offers our students the opportunity to achieve greater ownership of these newly learned principles of grammar and punctuation, as well as to develop competence with digital tools and their potential for relaying information and ideas in alternative formats. The interactive tools of web 2.0 not only lend themselves to learner-centred approaches but increasingly allow for production rather than just consumption of information to support the expression of creativity, critical thinking and problem solving (Dudney et al, 2014). With the understanding that learners actively engaged in constructing knowledge through the development of digital artefacts are more likely to retain it (Xu, Park

and Baek, 2011), we have sourced educational e-platforms that are both versatile and free of charge so that our students can make independent decisions about which ones to use.

We then assign them to establish and maintain a blog that hosts their tasks along with the module's other documents, progress, and reflections. The blog also links to resources that have been used during term including websites, digital tools, articles and presentations. Though Web 2.0 technology offers countless ways to encapsulate and showcase creative work, blogging in particular has been shown to generate greater student engagement and increased knowledge-ownership (Plaisir, Hachey & Theilheimer, 2011) by which learners can express their individuality in their choices of layout, content, visual template, topics and artefacts (Garrett, 2011; Jafari et al., 2006; Joyes et al., 2010). The selected authoring-tools should be user-friendly and adapt well to learners' needs. As one of our students explains, "*I was able to create a blog that described who I was by adding in images and changing the font colours to colours that best suited me. I'm not good at presenting myself orally. Wix was a great way to express my personality.*"

The choice of a freely accessible blogging tool, rather than the institutional learning management system, not only allows students to revisit their blog well beyond the boundaries of an academic year. It also serves to equip them with a valuable set of digital skills that are part and parcel of today's graduate attributes. To date, all students have gravitated towards the free version of Wix. They generally find it "*easy to use*" as well as "*more than adequate to create an enjoyable webpage from scratch and easy enough for a complete beginner.*" Other student commentary includes:

*"It has been fun and challenging. But nothing feels better than seeing our work presented in a form we never expected before."*

And:

*“Creating a blog was an exciting yet daunting task. I have always wanted to create one but I never knew how to. This part of the Composition and Writing Skills module has been a steep learning curve for me.”*

At this juncture in the syllabus, the blogs have become inviting receptacles for creative content. Taking Lankow, Ritchie and Crook’s definition of an infographic, or mind map, as an item that “uses visual cues to communicate information” (2012:3), we ask the students to produce digital artefacts that illustrate three items of new learning: 1) the eight parts of speech, 2) phrases, and 3) clauses. Adopting the stance of instructional bloggers, they should imagine their hypothetical target audience as putative new learners to ensure the suitability of their displays. They are encouraged to focus on organisational and aesthetic appeal to aid comprehension and retention, and to encourage viewers to engage with the content in ways that foster clear understandings (i.e. comprehension) and that impart memorable knowledge (i.e. retention). This activity necessitates that they first collectively discuss and decide the nature of constructive feedback and formative peer review<sup>1</sup>. A similar set of ground rules is established, as well, before students begin reviewing at least two of their peers’ blogs using the built-in comment boxes. Though free online mind mapping tools abound, *Easel.ly*, *Visme*, and *Piktochart* are especially adaptable to our prescribed activities.

As they continue to design experimental artefacts, the students also explore video and animation tools such as *Powtoon*, which allows users to create digital stories. These stories may be inspired by a textbook reading such as Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” or John Henry Newman’s “Knowledge Its Own End.” Whatever the contextual backdrop, each learner’s intellectual content finds individualised expression in the production of digital audio-visual clips that serve, as

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1 Numerous studies have found that peer assessment can significantly enhance learning outcomes (Yang and Tsai, 2010; Barak and Rafaeli, 2004; Wen and Tsai, 2010). In particular online peer assessment supports active learning, constructive criticism, and knowledge-sharing as well as enhance communities of learners (Barak and Rafaeli, 2004). Peer assessment has the potential of changing of being an alternative form of evaluation. Yang and Tsai (2010) found that peer assessment on Facebook assists students in improving their grammar skills and enhance their learning desire.

well, to foster within the classroom the multiple literacies that will eventually be required outside of it (Vasslikopoulou et al., 2011).

When they have amassed enough instructional, narrative, and visual data to feel in command of the grammatical subject matter and its terminology, we next ask our students to adopt the stance of mock-assessors and design peer-to-peer quizzes using either *learningapps.org* or *quizlet.com*. These self-directive tools enable them to benefit from peer-learning in the desirably independent way defined by Boud, Cohen and Sampson as "*the use of teaching and learning strategies in which students learn with and from each other without the immediate intervention of a teacher*" (1999). The authenticity of this exercise is among its key components. Each participant serves as both test-maker and test-taker, thus ensuring relevance to their learning needs, as well as high levels of interactivity and multiple pathways towards the achievement of goals (Whittion and Hollins, 2008).

### **3. Conclusion.**

At the end of the year, students are required to submit a reflective commentary outlining their experience of producing digital artefacts, of quizzing their peers, and of maintaining an instructional blog. Based on the SAMR (substitution, augmentation, modification, redefinition) model (Puentedura, 2011), blogging can lead to transformative pedagogies by significantly supporting the redesign of tasks and even allowing for the creation of new tasks that would previously not have been possible. Accordingly, the activities proposed to students involve embedding multimedia artefacts that complement a text-based or audio-based narrative, a reflective diary that fosters critical thinking, and a collaborative peer-review. While reflective writing helps participants to make sense of their learning environment and to focus on new curricular content, it also offers practice in narrative coherence itself, one of the central aims of the Composition module. Because reflective writing is underpinned by the elucidation of opinions, beliefs, feelings and the questioning of assumptions and practices (Hiemstra, 2001; Hughes, 2010), those who undertake it "think critically about successes and failures, extract ideas and information from a variety of

sources, and recognise when current information can be used in the future” (Dalal et al, 2012:75). One of the ways to scaffold reflective writing is to integrate interrogative activities during class time, asking students to consider how reflective writing is different from other forms of writing (Moon 2006), or how a particular assignment will equip them with a set of skills relevant to other courses or to life-long learning (Denson 2011).

We have found that a loose, instructor provided framework offered midway through the academic year is a timely way to enable students to structure paired discussions centring on their quizzes and artefacts. These peer-to-peer conversations offer further food for thought useful to the blogs. Throughout the module, the continuous circulation of classroom content in multiple formats, both actual and virtual, aids in student retention of the subject matter. By end-of-year exam, most of our learner-participants test well in their knowledge of the parts of speech, phrases, clauses, sentences, and the grammar and punctuation conventions of so-called Standard English grammar. Their mastery of this new material is, we believe, partly owing to their ongoing construction of meaning over the duration of the course. Much of that construction is facilitated by the integration of technology which in turn supports the further acquisition of the multiple and finely interwoven literacies so critical to today’s graduates.

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