
Naming What They Know

— Growth Mindsets and Metalinguistic
Awareness in Corequisite Writers —

The issue: grammar anxiety and confusion

“I am sorry about my grammar. I am just no good at grammar. My grammar is terrible...”

Has the situation changed much since 1989?

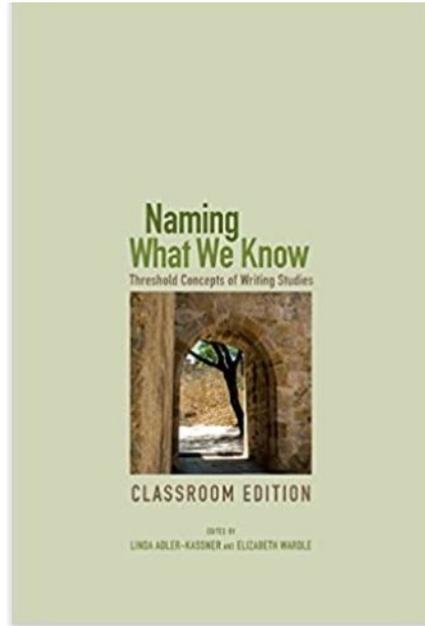
... [W]e are acutely aware of situations when students are able to detect sentence-level problems but have few clues for resolving them. “That sentence isn't right- should I take it out?” a student will mumble as we sit with them. “This needs something, but I don't know what,” another will say. Or, “I know I should be checking for commas, so maybe I should put some in this sentence.” Anxiety, frustration, and anger surface as they flail around knowing that something should be done- if they only knew what.

(Rowan and Harris, 21-22)

Goals for Today's Session

- Define threshold concept, metalinguistic awareness, and metalanguage
- Review results from an on-going study of metalinguistic awareness in first-year writers (in 2-year degree programs or corequisite courses).
- Use insights from those results to suggest ways of structuring discussion about language (and grammar) to leverage student knowledge and build grammar confidence

Threshold concepts: Adler-Kassner and Wardle



Broad, conceptual framework that integrates disciplinary knowledge about writing studies...



The Question

There is a huge gap of missing information here: what do students know????

How can we help students acquire threshold concepts about writing and language (and syntax or grammar, specifically), if we have only named what **we** know--not what **they** know?

We assume deficits and frame student knowledge in the language of a fixed mindset, thus (I believe) exacerbating the anxiety around the threshold...

What do they know → Metalinguistic Awareness

Metalinguistic Awareness:

Most definitions include the following components (see Myhill & Jones, 2015, for an overview):

- Attention on language **as language**
- Some **representation of knowledge** about language (+/- grammatical metalanguage or terms)
- An ability to put knowledge into practice (monitor/control)

Do students have ML awareness?

The study (UNG IRB-2019-071)

19 students, all in 2-year programs and/or corequisite ENGL (0999), Fall 2019.

69 reflection memos (30,202 words)

86 reading journal entries (16,391 words)

Reflection Texts (30,202)**Journals (16,391)**

Term	# of Tokens	Tokens per 1000 words	# Tokens	Tokens per 1000 words
Word	56	1.85	32	1.95
Sentence <i>Topic sentence (4)</i> <i>Run-on sentence (8)</i> <i>Sentence structure (12)</i>	45	1.49	77	4.69
Paragraph	24	0.79	36	2.19
Phrase	1	0.03	13	.79
TOTAL	126	4.17	158	9.63

Grammar Words:

Comma, punctuation, pronoun, transition, aside, clause, first-person, gender, statement, directive, parenthesis, quotation marks, cohesive, italics, period (note what doesn't show up, too!)

Reflection Texts (30,202)			FOLs (16,391) (Asked to talk about language!)	
Term	# of Tokens	Per 1000 words	# Tokens	Tokens per 1000 words
TOTAL	26	.86	29	1.76

Scary Thought: Grammar = ERROR

Word (from the Reflection Memos...)	#Tokens	Tokens per 1000 words
<i>Mistake</i>	36	1.19
<i>Fix</i>	19	0.62
<i>Correct, correction, correctly</i>	19	0.29
<i>Error</i>	9	0.29
<i>Right</i>	8	0.26
<i>Wrong</i>	7	0.23
Total of words related to correctness/error	98	3.24

When students write about their grammar... (memos)

63 occurrences of *grammar/grammatical* in the reflection memos:

→ 11 occur with the word *mistake*,

→ 6 occur with *error*,

→ there are one or more instances of *grammar issues, improving grammar, being not good at grammar, struggling with grammar, correcting grammar, finding grammar confusing, or even seeing grammar as the bane of my existence.*

But we you dig deeper, students describe language as...

abstract, annoyed, amazing, bland, brilliant, cheesy, choppy, clean, clunky, coddling, compassionate, compelling, concise, confident, consistent, credible, dense, direct, dragging, dramatic, effective, engaging, exaggerated, exceptional, fluff-and-filler, formal, frantic, funny, graphic, helpful, honest, humble, informal, informative, invested, jumbled, Big/Little League, motherly, nervous, nonchalant, optimistic, organized, outspoken, passionate, perfect, personal, persuasive, poignant, powerful, pushy, raw, realistic, relatable, relaxed scholarly, reliable, sarcastic, serious, settled, short, simple, sloppy, smart, snarky, soft, sophisticated, straightforward, strong, tangible, understandable, unique, uncomplicated, violent.

Some Preliminary Conclusions: Metalinguistic Awareness

1. Metalinguistic awareness is often SENSORY (not analytical or stated in grammatical metalanguage):
 - a. Sound
 - b. Movement
2. Students are beginning to be aware of the experiential, interpersonal, and rhetorical EFFECTS of language, but not always how these relate to linguistic choices:
 - a. Language mediates experiences of the world
 - b. Language constructs identities
 - c. Language connects to other people

Hearing Texts...

I remember that my writing was the first one to be pulled up on the white board through the projector. Mrs. Moore actually **made me read my own writing** which shouldn't really be something like “OMG” but i read it anyways. While reading my summary of “why you are going to need this for college **I was actually impressed the way I write** because it seemed really good and I guess that was my reaction because I only read that once and that was while I was writing it. (8AA)

But because of this class, I can proudly say that not knowing **how to sound** while writing, or having to write in a tone that you are not used to, is not a problem and does not make you wrong or a bad writer. You can't just quit because it's something you aren't unfamiliar with, and it's a part of growing as a writer: being able to handle a situation or setting that isn't necessarily in your comfort zone. (16F)

Revising this paper was mostly made up of adding in my sources and making sure I had more analysis than summary. I struggled with getting my words to express how I felt and worried that **it sounded too much like me just** describing *what* he said, and not *why* it worked. (16AA)

Language choices construct identity--and do things...

She starts off with **egging the reader on** by asking the reader if they doubt her and to “Test it out.” This was her power sentence and engagement, showing her **certainty to her claim** and intriguing the reader to keep reading and following on with what she is trying to prove. The way the author wrote this gave off **a strong personality**, as if she dared someone to question or doubt her. Her strategy is very persuading to the reader, it gives off a feeling of **authority and reassurance**. (13.3)

David Sedaris says “I’m still waiting”. This one sentence is a whole paragraph why? Because he wants to make you as a reader think. It makes you take a pause in the narrative to give you time to think in your own mind what he is waiting for or why? (10.2)

In Hylands conclusion he again uses first person, closing with, “I have argued that all writing has a voice...” and “I have suggested here are an attempt to model how writers convey such a voice;...” Which seems pretty powerful to me, being the fact that he’s saying ‘I’. As if he’s saying ‘here are my reasons and you should follow it.’ (13.4)

Doing things with language...

The author uses “we, you, they, us” making it sound like shes using this article to talk to herself to and joining herself with the reader. (18.3)

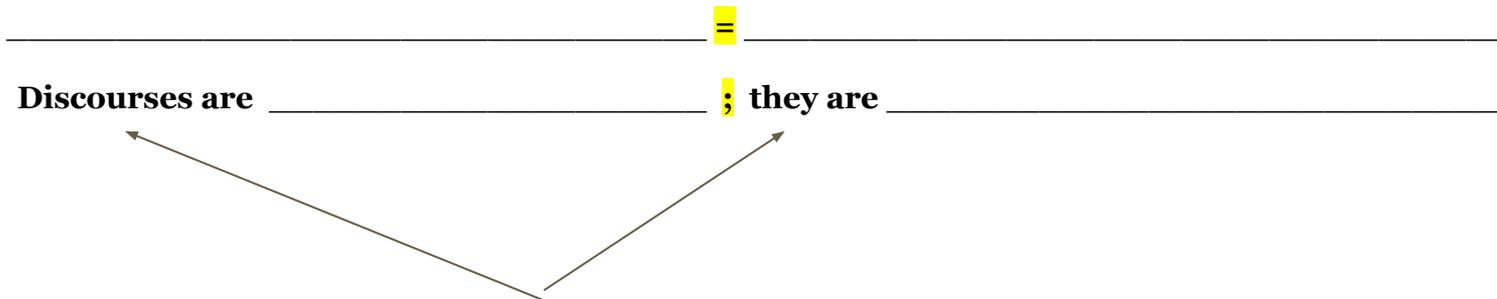
Ken Hyland comes off very informative. He has a way of explaining things clearly without being snarky or sounding like a know it all. (7.4)

Back-Door Grammar: Start with What They Know

Exercise: The “Center of Gravity”

In “Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: introduction,” by James Paul Gee Discourses are ways of being the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs.” This sentence is powerful to me because it helps me understand what a discourse is and how to act with a discourse.... The sentence contains **the formula** on a discourse. (9.1)

→ What’s a formula? What’s the pattern you’ve got here?



How would you describe it? (Part 2: Tone→ Syntax)

*There are a handful of articles that can inform and or try to give help but how many go the extra mile to make sure that you understand and go into extra detail and also successfully do so in a **humble** way? Not very many. The author states, "Much of this work, I think (and hope), shares at least some of the assumptions of the following papers" (1). (5.1)*

- Can you specify what makes this humble? Can you make it sound arrogant? How?
- Qualifiers (softeners or hedges)
 - Much of
 - I think
 - (and hope)
 - at least some
- Can you move the "I think (and hope)"?
- Read it aloud. What happens with "and hope"?

Noticing and Awareness Exercises: What do you see?

Alexie said, “He bought his books by the pound at Dutch's Pawn Shop, Goodwill, Salvation Army and Value Village. When he had extra money, he bought new novels at supermarkets, convenience stores and hospital gift shops.”

- Why is it important to include “When he had extra money”?
- Is it a sentence? Why not?
- We could call this the “circumstance” slot:
When _____, sentence.
After _____, sentence.
At the _____, sentence.

What else goes in the “circumstance” slot right before the sentence? (transitions, contrasts, reasons....)

Can we put the circumstance at the end of the sentence instead of at the beginning?

Why do you think Alexie put it here?

Embodied texts: using the voice, face, hands, etc.

There is no such thing as writing in general. Do you doubt this claim? Test it out. Go to your desk right now and attempt to write something in general. Do not write for any specific audience, purpose, or context. Do not use any conventions that you've learned for school, work, creative writing, and so on. Just write in general. (from Wardle)

Much of this work, I think (and hope), shares at least some of the assumptions of the following papers... (from Gee).

See Giovanelli (2014) for more on embodied learning...

Applying the Back-Door to Students' Own Texts...

When I was writing my narrative essay I struggled big time to write it because I have never written 'big' essays for school before; In high school all my teachers would only make us do worksheet after worksheet. In school I was never taught how to write strong paragraphs. When I was writing my essay I actually ended up writing two essays because I was very insecure about my first one so, I wrote another one, but then went back to the first one, it was like that, back and forth for a long while until I finally figured out what I wanted to write, and even then I still needed to figure out how to put all my information together and get my thesis and conclusion, there was so much left for me to add on. While writing my essay I would stay up till midnight to make sure that everything I had was at least good to turn in. (12LN)

- Student reads to me...I read back to the student.
- Impressions? Circumstance slots? Information chunks? What's iffy?
- What blows me away?

Point of Contention: Coverage

Can you “cover” the grammar you need if you take the back-door approach?

The early set-up:

- We use language to make sense of the the world and what we know (experiential)
- We use language to negotiate relationships and identities (interpersonal)
- We use language to navigate what we read and see (textual)
- We follow language conventions according to the context (genres)

Make notes on language concepts covered so that you can circle back to them...

Wrapping Up: Confidence Building in Dialogue

“Our own argument is that learners’ capacity to **think metalinguistically about writing** and to **enact that thinking in the composing of text** is enabled through **high-quality classroom talk**. ... Potentially, classroom talk can be the cultural tool which supports the construction of shared declarative metalinguistic knowledge and the psychological tool which supports writers’ cognitive capacities to use that knowledge procedurally in the shaping of their own written texts.” (Myhill and Newman, 2016, p. 178. Emphasis added).

The take away? Through the back-door approach, we ...

- Invite students to talk about language,
- Scaffold that talk by
 - Starting with what the students recognize in the language
 - Connecting talk about writing to physical experiences (with gesture, metaphor, analogy)
 - Building room to reflect, revise, and revisit
- Monitor our own talk in relation to prescriptivism and fixed mindsets,
- Give ourselves--and our students--grace, and (finally)
- Celebrate progress!

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