

GRAMMAR GAMES IN THE BUSINESS WRITING CLASSROOM

Helen A. Soter
University of West Florida
hrichard@uwf.edu

Lisa Schottenhamel
University of West Florida
ls47@students.uwf.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a grammar game used to teach business students grammar rules in a way that reduces anxiety and motivates learning. Grammar instruction is often filled with terminology that intimidates many students, so it is important to explain grammar and writing issues using simple language rather than the complex jargon understood only by English majors. These games also enhance metacognition as students rely on one another, rather than just solely relying on the instructor, for explanations and answers to challenging problems. Students become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses and can transfer this knowledge to writing assignments in other classes and in the business world. Making the games competitive also keeps students engaged and focused on the lesson in a way that lectures and worksheets cannot; therefore, these games can be an alternative to the traditional grammar lessons.

INTRODUCTION

Many students are entering college with almost no previous instruction on the rules of grammar, yet college instructors, including composition instructors, do not teach grammar because they expect the student to have this knowledge already. For those writing instructors who feel that grammar is important and should be taught, coming up with lessons and activities to teach these rules and allow students to demonstrate their knowledge can be a challenge. Grammar lessons can be boring, and if the student feels there is no value to learning grammar, then the lessons may be ineffective. Warberg's study (1984) on the teaching of grammar in the business writing classroom indicated that there was no real difference in writing improvement when grammar instruction was given and when it was not. One possible reason that there was no difference could be in the way that the grammar lessons were conducted. If the business writing student does not see the value in the lesson, or has a strong fear or dislike of writing, then grammar lessons will most likely be ineffective. Rather than argue for or against the teaching of grammar in a business writing class, this paper will instead discuss one technique for teaching grammar to business students: the use of a grammar game in lieu of classroom lecture. The purpose of this paper is to give business writing instructors another way to teach grammar to students so that the knowledge is used to improve the writing of the student.

TEACHER PERSPECTIVE

In my business writing class, which is a junior-level writing course for business majors, the majority of my students come

into the class with weak writing skills, yet they are overconfident and think they know enough to get by. Unfortunately, in basic writing assessments done within the first few weeks of school, they soon realize that they do not have adequate writing skills to even "just get by" in today's business environment. This weakness puts them at a disadvantage and makes them less able to compete in an environment that places a high value in written and oral communication skills.

I have observed that students in my classes who have had grammar lessons prior to college are usually the better writers. These students have a better understanding of the basics of sentence structure, although they may not be able to explain why, and can put these sentences together into a coherent letter or memo. The weaker writers often claim that they had very little to no grammar instruction prior to college (and sometimes not even during college). Students who have been exposed to grammar prior to college and then exposed to it again in composition classes have less fear of writing as compared to those students who have not had grammar lessons in the past. To many students, grammar is very complicated and the terminology, such as *appositive phrase* or *verbals*, is intimidating. In addition, business writing students will not need to know these terms since they are not seeking careers as English teachers. Rather than knowing the terminology, the business student needs to know basics such as the function of nouns and verbs and that to add clarity, nouns and verbs often are attached to descriptors. The simplest language is often best when teaching rules of grammar; otherwise, the terminology can intimidate the student who then develops—or in most cases, continues—an intense dislike and disregard of grammar. According to Tibbetts (1975), the terminology is not useful in real-life writing and the technical terms should be avoided when possible. The fear of grammar is not limited to just the business major; most students have this fear or at least a dislike of grammar. Tengku Paris and Yussof (2012) note in their study of pre-TESL students in Malaysia that grammar can be very intimidating to students; and in order for students to get the most out of grammar lessons, the fear associated with the lesson must be eliminated or reduced. Damodare (2012) explains the difficulty of teaching English classes in rural colleges, which often lack adequate facilities or resources. To get the students interested and engaged in grammar lessons, the instructor must use creative strategies such as the use of games, puzzles, or other fun activities (Damodare, 2012). Getting the business student to engage in a grammar lesson can be a challenge for the instructor. One way to engage students is through the incorporation of grammar lessons in the form of a competitive game.

Zarzycka-Piskorz (2016) claims that *gamification* can motivate students in the language classroom through the desire to win or receive a reward. The reward must be something

significant enough to motivate a desire to win. The risk involved, however, must be minimal or else the experience becomes too stressful to be effective. Setting the grade at a “C” just to participate provides for the low-risk element to keep the experience positive and productive; increasing points for correct answers and offering a bonus for the winning group is a reward significant enough to drive most students to succeed. Teamwork is also important in the experience because it promotes a sense of belonging (Zarzycka-Piskorz, 2016, p. 34). Students engage in dialogue with each other regarding how to solve the problem at hand and inadvertently end up tutoring each other on particular grammar issues as they debate the correct answer.

Gamification can be used to create a sense of unity among teammates who have very different experiences in the kinds of writing instruction they have received throughout their lives. The classroom of today has changed and no longer consists predominantly of 18-21-year-olds who go from high school straight into college. Today’s classroom is a mixture of students of various ages from baby boomers whose technological knowledge comes from instruction by children or grandchildren to millennials who have never known a world without the internet. Tribble, Hoover, and Giambatista (2016) suggest that with experiential learning approaches, business educators should consider the psychological predispositions of today’s college students. In addition to the varying age groups, today’s college classes consist of more students with English as a second language, students from remote or online environments, and students with diverse work experiences prior to their entrance to college. Various psychological measures that Tribble et al. (2016) recommend educators to consider include regulatory focus theory (motivation and self-regulation to achieve a desired goal) and locus of control (a belief in the control over one’s fate). Mixing up the teams throughout the semester gives students the opportunity to work with others whose psychological predispositions may be different their own, yet their desire to achieve the desired goal—to win the game and get the highest grade—is the same.

In my Writing for Business class (GEB3213) at the University of West Florida, I began incorporating a grammar game into the classroom as a way to get the students to learn grammar rules in a fun and competitive way. I broke up the class into five groups and randomly assigned each student to a group so that they did not just choose their friends as their group partners. I then used PowerPoint to present one sentence at a time, each sentence containing only one specific type of grammar error or no errors at all (they had to be able to identify what was grammatically correct as well as recognize sentences that were wrong). Everyone would automatically receive a grade of 75 as long as they participated, so there was no risk of receiving a failing grade for incorrect answers. When the group got three answers correct during the duration of the game, then everyone in that group would receive a 100, giving them an incentive to try to get the correct answer without fear of losing points from their grade for wrong answers. As an added incentive and as a way to engage them in monitoring themselves for fairness (there were severe penalties for use of computer or cell phones), the group with the highest points at the end of the game would receive 10 bonus points and the second-place group would receive 5 bonus points. I would begin with the first group who was allowed a short time to discuss and give an answer. Only one answer could be given, and if the group answered correctly, it received a point; if not, the group did not receive a point, and the second group got the same sentence. Most of the time, the group gave the correct response; a few times, however, a sentence would go through

more than one group before the correct answer was given. When that happened, students became intensely motivated to get the correct answer; the strong desire to “win” and show their classmates that they had mastered something that others had not made them fiercely competitive. All students in the classroom were completely engaged in the lesson, staring intently at the sentence on the screen while whispering to each other possible solutions. I had never gotten 100% engagement in a classroom activity before I started using the grammar game.

I discovered that the students were far more engaged in this method of instruction than when I had them work together on grammar worksheets. Students also enjoyed these games and asked to do more. The grammar worksheets, while they were done in groups and not counted as a grade, were still intimidating to the students; and the weakest writers still felt discouraged despite the fact that the work was not done for a grade, but as practice only. These worksheets were focused on a particular grammar issue, such as commas or pronoun case, so the students knew what kind of grammar error they were supposed to be looking for. In the grammar game, on the other hand, I did not identify the type of grammar issue in the sentence; it could be any grammar error—or even correct, as I made sure at least one correct sentence was in the mix. Surprisingly, the worksheets, which were focused on one grammar issue, thus easier and less stressful, caused more frustration for the students than the grammar game, even though both were group tasks so no one was working alone. There was no fear of a low grade since the worksheet activity was not graded, yet the frustration level was equal to what the student would express when receiving a low grade.

The grammar game reduced the fear that students had in grammar, and when given the opportunity to choose their lesson for the day, the students frequently asked to play a grammar game. To insert a bit of humor into the game, I will occasionally create a storyline to make the game more fun and to increase the likelihood that the students will remember the particular grammatical rules. The following are examples of a series of sentences from a recent grammar game where I incorporated a storyline or theme:

- Little Miss Muffet sat on her tuffet, eating her curds and whey. This made her ill because she is lactose intolerant. (This particular sentence took a few times before a group finally identified that the word *this* needs an antecedent, or as I explain it to the class, *this* what?)
- Not only did Miss Muffet become ill from eating curds and whey, she suffered a panic attack when a spider sat down beside her. (This sentence was used to help them learn that a *not only* needs the coordinating *but also*.)
- Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water, however, their smarter sister, Jean, went to Publix and bought a case of Dasani instead. (This example was used to show that semicolons are needed to separate independent clauses.)
- Jack likes his sister Jill more than his sister Jean. (Does Jack like his sister Jill more than he likes his sister Jean or does Jack like his sister Jill more than his sister Jean does? This example emphasizes that in business, you cannot have two possible interpretations of a sentence, especially on contracts.)

- Mary had a little lamb that looked kind of like one of Little Bo Peep’s missing sheep.
(*Kind of* is used incorrectly when an adverb such as *somewhat* should be used instead.)
- In fact, Little Bo Peep was pretty certain that Mary had stolen the lamb, so she sued Mary in small claims court.
(The same rule as the one in the previous sentence. The adjective *pretty* is used incorrectly as an adverb.)
- Producing a receipt from the local pet store, the lamb clearly belonged to Mary.
(The lamb is not producing a receipt, so this sentence is an example of a modifier error.)

As I advance through the slides, I can hear students discussing the possible answers amongst their group. As they are debating the answer, they are explaining the rules of grammar to each other to either validate the answer they think is correct or to argue against an answer a group member wants to give. I do not intervene at all until the correct answer is given. The students are demonstrating metacognitive skills through this activity and sharing what they do know and are confident about with the rest of the group. They are also learning that grammar is not some mystical advanced knowledge that is possessed only by English teachers or famous writers. It can be learned, and they can even teach each other as they learn and apply various rules.

It is important for the writing teacher, however, to make sure that students are applying these rules they are learning to their own writing. When the students write a persuasive memo or have to deliver bad news in a letter, they need to apply their grammar knowledge in these writing assignments. Using the same language to describe errors (for example, *this* what? or who is doing the action—Mary or the lamb?) helps the students understand the importance of learning the rules of the language.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

During the summer of 2016, I enrolled in Writing for Business (GEB3213) only because it is mandatory for all Business majors. The shortened semester was about six weeks in length, with classes held twice a week for three hours each. This block of time seems very long when you are in the midst of it; most of our class time was spent learning and practicing different letter and memo formats. The professor did her best to make the material as interesting as possible, and her efforts were greatly appreciated; however, there is nothing exciting about business writing. For me, not only were grammar games both a welcomed break from “normal” class and a promise of the potential for extra credit, but they provided lessons and challenges I was not previously aware I needed.

After speaking with many of my classmates on the subject, I have come to believe that although the vast majority of undergraduate students do want to know how to communicate effectively, grammar is a subject that they are often both uncomfortable with and resistant to. Regardless of the fact that many of us have never actually had a proper grammar lesson, we would like to believe that we know exactly what we are doing. We feel that since we speak English, have written more than a few papers, and have received good grades on those papers, we should be able to get by, if not excel, with the knowledge that we already possess. A required Business Writing course seems like it should be an “easy A” for any

fairly-educated individual, but the very first class meeting often reveals what most of us are hesitant to admit. Students are known for having increasingly poor grammatical skills, and we are not the exceptions.

In the typical American K-12 classroom, grammar lessons have been greatly de-emphasized because of the idea that an overly technical view of the English language can actually detract from a student’s ability and desire to write (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Schoer, 1963). While this opinion may hold true in creative writing, it’s an unfortunate stance in the context of the business arena, where grammatical errors are viewed as incompetency and accuracy is directly tied to credibility (Bullard & Anderson, 2014). The love/hate relationship that I personally have with grammar stems from my lack of confidence in the subject. It can be embarrassing to admit that one’s communication skills are deficient, and the tedium of learning or relearning grammar rules can lead to decreased attention span, which only compounds the issue. The use of active learning methods breaks up the monotony and can encourage otherwise unmotivated students to not only learn, but also retain information at an increased rate (Tengku Paris & Yussof, 2012).

The most obvious benefit I received from playing grammar games was being reminded of the many useful rules of proper grammar and diction that I had forgotten. My classmates and I were divided randomly into groups of five or six and shown slides, one at a time, that each contained one sentence. Group number one had the first opportunity to guess the mistake in the sentence and tell how to correct the error, if there was one at all. If the first group guessed incorrectly, the second group would try and correct the same sentence, and then the next group, and the next, until the sentence was corrected. If the first group got it right they received a point and then a new sentence was shown to group two, and so on, until the entire PowerPoint had been corrected, and we had a winning group with the highest number of points. I initially believed that I would be amazing at this game, that misplaced commas and incorrect punctuation would be the bulk of the errors. I was mistaken. By the end of that class period, I was more than a little bit annoyed and embarrassed by how many things I either did not remember or did not know at all, and I realized that I had a lot of work to do.

Metacognition refers to self-knowledge; it is not only the understanding that one still has more to learn, but it is also an awareness of what needs to be learned (Jiang, Ma, & Gao, 2016). Playing grammar games definitely increased my awareness of where I stood in comparison with my classmates, and helped me to discover my strengths and weaknesses. Games naturally encourage participation while making the players forget about the potential to be wrong. I noticed myself and other students answering out loud without fear of punishment or judgement, and in doing so, we began to self-monitor and self-evaluate without realizing what we were doing. Friendly competition can be an incredibly encouraging motivator, and it increases our desire to retain as much information as possible so that we might guarantee a win in the future.

Active or cooperative learning encourages increased personal assessment and improvement, and using games to help facilitate the learning process is beneficial for both the student and the teacher in a multitude of ways. This method of instruction can reduce anxiety in introverted students who would normally shy away from public interactions for fear of criticism. Games that are played in groups encourage cooperation and can be great tools for shy students since they

require additional communication and the exchange of information for participation. An added bonus is that rather than depending exclusively on the authority of the professor, students who work together in low-risk situations benefit from learning to look to one another for advice and knowledge (Yu, 2005). Essentially, this practice of reciprocal teaching encourages metacognition and allows students with a greater mastery of the subject to peer tutor those who need more help (Wells, 2011). Gaining respect for and trust in our peers is not only beneficial during classroom exercises, but it is also advantageous when we are choosing study partners, searching for someone to edit a paper, or deciding who best to collaborate with on a project.

Because laughter and fun can help relax a stressful environment, I feel that learning grammar through playing games increases the transfer of knowledge. Using and applying information one has gained in a similar subject is considered *near transfer* and applying it in a different context or subject altogether is considered *far transfer* (Perkins & Salomon, 1988). Perkins and Salomon suggest that students should be taught to foster successful transfer and that instruction should be designed with transfer in mind so that what is taught in the classroom can be applied elsewhere. Often times learners find the concept of transfer difficult to master; it's much more difficult to compose a well thought out business memo than it is to circle correct answers on a worksheet. In order for transfer of knowledge to be successful, metacognition should be promoted, and grammar games can be the perfect vehicle (Tinberg, 2015). It can be confusing to read about modifiers or participles in a book, but when an incorrect sentence is dissected, discussed, and corrected for the entire class to see, it increases overall understanding and gives participants something more concrete to recall in the future.

Being assigned to random groups was something I found to be very beneficial. The rapid pace of the game combined with the contrasting learning and communication styles of previously unknown classmates was a crash course in organizational behavior, and it was interesting to both watch different roles emerge and learn which personalities fit into those roles. I, along with my teammates, had to learn how to communicate effectively under pressure and without the benefit of time to patiently explain ourselves. Although this increased interaction could be frustrating at times, it ended up being one of my favorite parts of playing the game. In the end, I met a lot of new people that I probably would not have spoken to otherwise,

and those newly formed connections have made it easier to choose groups and partners in other courses.

CONCLUSION

For the writing instructor who chooses to incorporate grammar lessons into the classroom, a grammar game is one way to teach particular rules in a way that engages the students and keeps their interests. The games can decrease the tension and reduce the anxiety many students have about grammar and writing problems. Business writing instructors should avoid the technical jargon that intimidates students and explain the rules using plain language and specific examples. It is important for the instructor to note the importance of particular rules in relation to real-life scenarios so that the student understands how to apply the rules of effective written and verbal communication in the work environment. Millennial students in particular need to be aware of the limits of technology and that knowledge of word choices and sentence structure is still necessary despite the prevalence of spell-check and grammar checkers. The team approach to playing the game can be good practice for the teamwork that will be needed in the work environment, so the students gain much more from the grammar games than just grammar knowledge alone. Unlike the composition class assignment that the student typically works on alone to achieve his or her own goals, the grammar game as a business writing assignment enables the student to learn that teamwork is necessary in the business world in order for all to attain company goals. Students learn that their diverse backgrounds and experiences along with their various psychological predispositions can be beneficial for the group to achieve a common goal.

Grammar lessons do not have to be complex and can actually be turned into fun and engaging assignments. Getting the students engaged is the key to the effectiveness of the grammar lessons. If the lessons are boring or if the student feels it is too difficult to attain the goal (good grade and/or improvement in writing), then the information learned may not be retained and applied outside of the classroom. Further studies are needed to determine the effectiveness of grammar games versus traditional grammar instruction and the metacognitive effect that these games have on the student. It would also be interesting to see other types of grammar games besides the one described in this paper and possibly a comparison of various types of games used in the business writing classroom.

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