CHAPTER 21

WORKING WITH GRAMMAR AS A TOOL FOR MAKING MEANING

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Academic literacies has been described as an "overarching framework" (Joan Turner, 2012, p. 18) which aims to scrutinize critically the dominant values, norms and institutional practices relating to academic writing (Caroline Coffin & Jim Donoghue, 2012). One dominant value, often articulated by some academics and students, is that "correct grammar" at sentence-level is essential for good academic writing. However, this focus on sentence-level grammar is often associated with a top-down prescriptiveness in which "peremptory commands" about correct usage are linked with a negative evaluation of a person's speech or writing (Deborah Cameron, 2007, p. 1).

This chapter focuses on a small-scale project at a post-1992 university[1] in North London, in which a number of first-year "Education Studies and Early Years" students were referred to a writing specialist by an academic in order to improve their "poor grammar." The writing specialist had already collaborated closely with the academic and her colleagues in "Education Studies and Early Years" in developing three "embedded" sessions (Ursula Wingate, 2011) which were integrated within the students' modules, and were delivered during course time. The sessions were broadly informed by a "Writing in the Disciplines" approach, involving collaboration between academics and the writing specialist in terms of the design, content, and delivery of the sessions, and in encouraging students to engage from the outset with disciplinary discourse (Mary Deane & Peter O'Neill, 2011). These sessions aimed to make explicit to students the lecturers' tacit assumptions of what was required in academic writing assignments (Cecilia Jacobs, 2005) in relation to genre, argumentation, structure, academic style, and referencing. Nevertheless, even after the delivery of these sessions, a cohort of 23 students was identified by subject academics as still having significant problems with writing, primarily with "poor grammar." The academic who referred the students to the writing specialist was motivated by a strong commitment to provide appropriate support to these students, as weak grammar had been identified by academics teaching on the programme as the key difficulty which was preventing them from progressing in their studies.

The writing specialist was interested in unpacking the notion of "poor gram-

mar" with both students and academic staff, since labelling students as having poor grammar seems to raise an important issue. To what extent can a focus on grammar form part of an academic literacies approach, since an emphasis on "surface features, grammar, and spelling" is often characteristic of the study skills approach, which attempts to "fix" students' problems with writing in a top-down, instrumentalist way (Mary Lea & Brian Street, 1998). Is a focus on sentence-level grammar compatible with the notion of exploring writing as a social practice, and its concomitant emphasis on issues of identity? The writing specialist was interested in investigating some of the views of academics with regards to grammar, particularly the ways that these manifested in the kinds of comments/annotations they wrote on student assignments. She was also interested in devising and delivering a series of classroom-based activities which might enable students to explore grammar in more transformative ways, for example, by investigating how grammar can be understood as a tool for making meaning, as well as the relationship between grammar, student identities and the complex power relationships both within the university and the wider geopolitical context. This chapter thus begins with a brief discussion of the overall context, and of a small-scale investigation of the views of three academics regarding "correct grammar" and the ways that these were instantiated in the kinds of annotations that they made on student assignments. Sample activities for classroom use are then provided, followed by students' reactions to these activities. We conclude with a brief discussion of some of the tensions and transformative possibilities arising from this project.

THE CONTEXT

The project involved working with a cohort of 23 students, identified by the academics marking their work as having "poor grammar" in an assignment in which students were required to outline and evaluate the contents of a chapter in a prescribed textbook. The cohort of students was linguistically extremely diverse. It included students who described themselves as native speakers of English, but who also used non-standard forms of grammar typical of local communities in London (Sian Preece, 2009). The cohort included bilingual or trilingual students who routinely used grammatical forms which may be considered acceptable in global varieties of English, such as Indian or Nigerian English, but which are generally considered wrong in standard British English (Andy Kirkpatrick, 2007). An example of such a form is pluralised uncountable nouns (e.g., *informations, knowledges, researches).* A third group encompassed international students, who had learned some English at school in their own country. Finally, there was a category of multilingual students, often refugees, who spoke one language at home with their family, had been educated in a second or even third, and had then had to acquire English in informal settings when they arrived in the United Kingdom.

Given the constraints of timetabling, it was decided that four one-hour "grammar" sessions would be provided. Despite the efforts of academic staff to put a positive spin on the sessions, some of the students who were referred to the sessions may have felt stigmatized initially. In questionnaires devised by the academic following the delivery of the sessions, 69% of the students said that they appreciated the offer of help, while 31% said that it made them feel "uneasy," "uncomfortable," and "let down." Thus, it is clear that labelling students' work as grammatically deficient played into a very normative view of what constitutes acceptable academic writing. On the other hand, for many of the students involved, acquisition of sentence-level grammar in English was a largely unconscious process which had never been subjected to conscious analysis or reflection. This had two negative consequences. Firstly, students were limited in the ways that they could manipulate grammar to convey different meanings. Secondly, when students were asked to proofread their work by lecturers, many of them could not identify the ways in which their work departed from the grammatical norms that the lecturers were enforcing.

THE LECTURER PERSPECTIVE

Why did the academic staff involved in the project consider grammar to be important, and how did they signal this to their students? What types of grammar "errors" did they consider significant in student writing? In order to explore these questions, three lecturers who had marked student assignments on the course were interviewed. They were also asked to annotate chapter reviews from three students, bearing in mind the main areas of grammar which they felt should be pointed out to students.

The interviews with the lecturers revealed not only a strong consensus about why grammar was important, but a sense that grammar was not just a surface feature of writing, but a tool for communicating meaning:

> … in order to make sure they convey their ideas clearly, they need to learn basic grammar. (Lecturer 1, Interview 22/2/2012)

> Grammar is very important, because the meaning is lost if the grammar is incorrect. The clarity of expression and communication is linked with grammar. (Lecturer 3, Interview 23/2/2012)

In addition to the interviews, the small sample of marked chapter reviews was analyzed, which revealed that lecturers had different approaches to marking grammar in assignments. One lecturer simply underlined errors, without providing any further information; another replaced the error with a "correct" version, while a third provided a "correct" version, but also wrote some explanatory comments in

the margin. Overall, this approach to marking revealed a top-down prescriptiveness aligned to the 'study skills' approach to teaching writing (Lea & Street, 1998).

When the lecturers' annotations for the assignments were compared, it was clear that there was both a high level of agreement about which types of errors should be pointed out to students, as well as a high level of conformity to the norms of standard British English usage. In the interviews, grammatical areas which were mentioned as ones to point out to students included "faulty" sentence construction, incorrect punctuation, incorrect spelling, omission of "little" words such as definite articles, misuse of tenses, confusion between singulars and plurals (including pluralising uncountable nouns), and inappropriate word choice. It was significant that the list included the omission of definite articles and the pluralising of uncountable nouns, which are often features of non-British varieties of English (Eyamba Bokamba, 1992; Kirkpatrick, 2007). For students who are "native" speakers of these varieties in countries such as India and Nigeria, the "mistake" may only become evident in the context of British Standard English.

DEVELOPING CLASSROOM-BASED ACTIVITIES

In order to devise appropriate activities for the students, an analysis of common student "grammar errors" in the chapter reviews was undertaken. From the analysis, it was clear that, in addition to difficulties with grammar, some students had not understood the overall rhetorical purpose of the review, and had simply summarized the chapter contents. This suggests that "poor grammar" can sometimes be a blanket term that encompasses other aspects of "poor" writing. The assignments of other students revealed a good understanding of the purpose of a review, but were grammatically weak, often in the key areas identified by the lecturers. The question which then arose was how to develop students' grammatical competence in these areas in ways which emphasized the meaning-making potential of grammar, while also stimulating awareness of what Ann Johns (1997) calls a "socio-literate" perspective. This meant that the activities attempted to enable students to make connections between grammar and issues relating to identity and power relationships in writing. For example, if students routinely used grammar forms identified as "non-standard" in the British context, either with friends and family in the United Kingdom, or in more formal settings in their home country, then what kind of shifts of identity were required for them to use standard forms in their academic writing? An inventory of classroom activities was developed in response to this. The design of these activities was also informed by some of the evidence in research into second language acquisition that "form-focused" instruction (i.e., drawing students' attention explicitly to the form and meaning of a particular grammatical structure) is beneficial to their learning of grammar (Nina Spada, 2010). The working assumption was that form-focused instruction might benefit

all students in the group, even if they were not second language speakers of English. In addition, the tasks incorporated a number of principles for promoting language awareness, including discussing the language analytically, employing learner-centred discovery activities and engaging students both affectively and cognitively (Simon Borg, 1994).

SOME SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

1. Reflection on Different Varieties of Grammar and Students' Identities

The aim of these activities was to encourage students to reflect on how the grammatical forms they utilized might signal particular aspects of their identity, and to validate the complex hybridity of many student identities as expressed in the grammar they used. Suresh Canagarajah (1999) has pointed to the difficulties that students may experience in bridging the gap between the English they use in their vernacular, and the standard forms used in academic writing. Top-down feedback comments by academic staff underline the notion that there is only one "correct" form of grammar, thus potentially stigmatizing non-standard uses of grammar and the expressions of identity that go along with them.

a. Students draw and discuss diagrams, detailing their own linguistic profile, including the different languages and varieties that they speak, with whom they are used and in what context.
b. Students discuss sentences, contrasting sentences or paragraphs containing standard and non-standard grammatical forms, and explore when and by whom they might use them. For example, with family and friends versus in the university. How might shifting from one repertoire to another feel?
c. Students discuss a series of statements relating to grammar:
   Do you agree or disagree with these statements. Why?
   - Using particular grammar makes you a member of a particular club.
   - Grammar can never be wrong; it can only be inappropriate.
   - Changing the grammar I use, changes the person I am.
d. Students are asked to "think ethnographically" and note down examples of different grammatical forms they notice being used in their daily lives; these can then be discussed in class.

2. Contrastive Analysis

The aim of these activities was to emphasize that the manipulation of different grammatical forms empowers writers to make meaning in different ways. For

example, students compare a number of different sentences or paragraphs contextualized within academic texts, which illustrate contrastive uses of grammar, e.g., the active voice and the passive voice; or the use of the present simple and present perfect, versus the past simple when quoting. Do they reveal any differences about the writer's position in the text (Ken Hyland, 2002), or about the writer's attitude to the contemporary relevance of the quote (John Swales & Christine Feak, 2004)? How would students feel about using them and why?

3. Strategies for "Noticing" Different Grammatical Forms

The aim of these activities was to draw on some of the strategies commonly used in English Language Teaching to enable students to analyze the meanings encoded in specific grammatical forms. This might encourage students to engage cognitively with grammar, rather than slavishly accepting the "correct form" with no real understanding of why they might actively choose to use it.

a. Encouraging students to develop a series of "concept questions," which can help them to disambiguate grammatical meaning. For example, in relation to the sentence *The book is aimed at professional*, students could apply these questions: *Do you mean one, or more than one "professional?" Is this okay in the version of English spoken in your home country? In standard British English, how do you make it clear how many professionals there are*? Students are asked to apply these concept questions when proofreading.
b. Students are asked to compare a text with numerous grammar "mistakes," with a "reformulated text" (Scott Thornbury, 1997) with none. How significant are the mistakes in the original in terms of meaning? In what ways does the reformulated text change the meaning? In what ways does the reformulated text conform to standard usage? How important (or not) is this?

STUDENTS' RESPONSE TO THE ACTIVITIES

All of the activities above were used in the four sessions with the group. Initially, the intention was that the students should keep a reflective log of their reactions to the activities, but disappointingly, the responses to this were limited. When questioned, students mentioned that they were very short of time as they were working on assignments that counted towards their final grades, whereas the logs did not. However, some responses were received:

> I found the activities useful, especially the activity that involved
> us getting into pairs and discussing how our mother tongue

differs from English.

From my point of view all the exercises we have in the lessons are useful but I have find(sic) that punctuation and the use of articles as one of the most important points to remember when we have to write an essay as it can change the meaning of what we are trying to say. It is also important to know when we should use singular and plural, as it might mean the opposite of what we are trying to explain.'

CONCLUSION

During the implementation of this project a number of tensions emerged. One surprising tension was that many of the students were initially keen to "learn rules" about grammar, and tended to classify any deviance from standard British English as "wrong." Discussions about the legitimacy and appropriacy of non-standard English became quite heated, with a few students vehemently insisting on the use of the standard form in all contexts. There was sometimes a slight impatience with discussions about the broader socio-politics of language, with students simply wanting to know what was "correct." This suggests that the views of students reflect the views about language held in the wider society, including the belief that prescriptive rules regarding correct usage are valid in all contexts. Thus, one of the tasks of the writing specialist is to encourage students to question and explore these in order to genuinely transform attitudes regarding grammar. Nevertheless, most students were very appreciative that the complexity of their linguistic identities was valued and seen as a resource, which may not always have been the case within the university context. This would suggest that the activities utilized in the sessions were genuinely transformative for some students in encouraging them to move from a view of grammar as simply "right or wrong," to one in which grammar is regarded as a tool that can be manipulated for expressing different aspects of identity in different contexts. The students thus appeared to develop an improved awareness of the kind of grammar considered appropriate in an academic context, while also feeling that their complex linguistic identities were being validated. For example, a number of students reported on feedback forms that the activities used in the sessions had changed their views about grammar and its relationship to meaning, and that they enjoyed the activities in which they were asked to draw on their own linguistic repertoires.

Another tension was between the academics' comments that grammar is a tool for making meaning, and the evidence from their annotations that standard forms need to be enforced, either by underlining these or providing the "correct" forms for the student. Theresa Lillis (2003) has called for a dialogue to be at the centre

of an academic literacies approach, but lecturers' annotations about grammar generally communicate rather top-down prescriptiveness, with little space for encouraging critical engagement by students. Perhaps marking annotations could instead include "concept" questions relating to any ambiguities in meaning arising from the way a grammatical structure has been used in an assignment. Or perhaps annotations could encourage students to consider more deeply the issues of identity that may arise when they experiment with "new" forms of grammar. Overall, the collaboration between the writing specialist and academics has been transformative in initiating a dialogue about how marking methods could encourage a more dialogic relationship between staff and students, and in encouraging academic staff to consider how their marking practices can move from a "study skills" model of writing to one which is informed by an academic literacies approach. Such an approach enables academic staff to be more cognisant that the grammar used by students is not simply a surface level feature of text, but is often a complex manifestation of students' identities.

Joan Turner (2004, p. 108) has argued for "the constitutive importance of language in the academic context" to be better recognized. As sentence-level grammar is an essential part of this language, it will continue to generate both tensions, as well as creatively transformative responses, among those teaching and researching academic writing.

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NOTE

1. The term "post 1992" universities in the United Kingdom refers to former polytechnics or colleges of higher education that were given university status through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, and also sometimes to colleges that have been granted university status since then.

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