Rules and Ideas:
Gaining Access to the Academic Conversation

Recently in the faculty services office a colleague of mine, a professor in the humanities, by chance picked up a paper by one of my students. Aghast, he scanned it, clearly appalled by the glaring verb tense problems, the missing articles, and the subject/verb agreement mistakes. Then he handed me the paper. “Is this just bad proofreading?” he asked. “Or is this student illiterate?” It struck me that this man, a university faculty member, was himself an immigrant, still with a fairly strong accent and grammar that was far from polished. But from his privileged position he was quick to criticize students in a situation he might instead have found familiar.

What he missed in his reading of the essay was the sophisticated, perceptive analysis the student had created in response to a class text, an argument that had gotten lost in the scrambled sentences and ill-chosen words. For this assignment other students had written essays that were grammatically fine but not particularly original, about the need for a mentor to help a person leave the gang life and become committed to their education. In his essay this student had explored the difference between intellectual poverty and economic poverty, and how the two are intertwined, as a child must have the money to attend schools outside the barrios and without economic well-being would face intellectual poverty, a far greater burden for a young Chicano trying to escape the gang life. It was a lovely essay, but its beauty was hidden by the sentence-level mistakes. Unfortunately, so many people in the university see only the surface of writing — the way a piece is written — and cannot engage the intellectual richness behind the language barrier.

Last summer I enrolled in the UCSC Intensive Spanish Program. My goal was to understand my Spanish-speaking students’ sentence patterns and to be able to talk with them occasionally in their familiar language. I gained much of what I searched for, but even more importantly I experienced the trap so many of my students know well: the feeling of ideas silenced by grammar errors, even in the most simple of writing assignments. At one point I was to write an essay explaining what I had done over the weekend. It would have been an easy enough assignment if I had stayed within the boundaries of the nouns and verbs we had studied. But a series of activities listed in identical sentence structures bored me. I wanted to say that I had gone to the funeral of a man who had known me since I was born. Although our families had drifted apart after he and his wife separated, I was honored to be invited to his funeral, where I saw his ex-wife and children, and seeing them him brought back memories of vacations together and
trips to Christmas tree farms. The man and his wife had also been important to me because they had been in Japanese internment camps during World War II, and since my elementary school didn’t teach us about that time in American history, they had been a source of great knowledge for me. It had been a very moving funeral and had left me thinking about friendships and connections and how easy it is to lose track of important people. Although I should have just written that I had been to a funeral, I tried to fit in the ideas that mattered to me. When I got the essay back, I had gotten an A for content and a D for grammar. “Stick with what you know,” wrote the teacher. The problem is that what a person knows and what she can write can be very, very different.

Over this review period, most of my students have been caught in this very bind. Of my eighteen classes, seventeen have been with students who have not satisfied the Entry Level Writing Requirement (ELWR). In my fall Merrill Core courses, I encounter students who, although they have not satisfied the ELWR, may simply need to adjust to university writing. In the winter my students in Writing 20 have still come up short; some are working on essay organization and idea development, but more than in my Core course, I have students whose chief problems are in their sentence structure. By spring I teach Writing 21, a class for students who even now haven’t satisfied the ELWR; for nearly all of them, grammar stands in the way of their ability to develop writing that will earn their ideas respect in the university.

I have heard many people in the university say that these students do not belong here. To me, that issue is irrelevant. No matter how much people can complain about the UC admissions standards or the state of the California educational system, the bottom line is that these students are here and it is our responsibility to teach them to participate in university discourse. When we encourage students to simplify their ideas to fit their limited grammar we are condemning them to remain on the outskirts of the intellectual community that is the academy.

I have had people refer to my classes as grammar classes. Yes, I incorporate grammar into my class plans, but I also honor my students’ ideas and push them to develop their intellectual skills. Much as I did not yet have the tools in my Spanish class to write about internment camps and lost friendships, my students may not have the grammatical tools to explain the connections they see between a class text on racism and their own experiences coming to the United States from El Salvador and encountering police who assume they are in gangs. These are voices we as an institution we need to welcome, and teachers of “ELWR students” should not be the only ones hearing from what are often, in the university, unfamiliar perspectives. I could assign simple topics, in which case my students might appear more literate to my faculty services colleague. But I am
not then teaching them the art of academic writing, which is based on the rich, nuanced thinking they are capable of producing.

This mismatch between what my students know and what they can write guides much of my teaching. My Spanish class was essentially a grammar class; the primary goal was to learn the fundamental sentence-level rules of a specific language. I was not expected to explore issues of personal experiences and the American history of racism. But the classes I teach are writing courses. I feel a dual responsibility with my students: to honor and respect what they know or think and to give them the tools to present their ideas. If I teach them only grammar, I am not pushing them to join the academic community in their writing. This silence is a loss not just to the students but also to the university culture, as the students’ experiences, so important to an institution that must honor a range of perspectives, go unrecognized. In my work I balance teaching my students to explore the depth of the issues we take on and teaching them to present their ideas effectively.

I think back to what my Spanish teacher wrote: “Stick with what you know.” This comment brings on a paradox—is what we know valid only when we also know how to follow the rules of communicating these thoughts? Then what happens to the knowledge my students can offer those of thus settled into the university? Hidden in their sometimes garbled sentences are ideas that stun me in their maturity. When I look at the content of their essays, I see original thoughts, perceptive responses, interpretations that push me to think in fresh ways, and examples that I myself would never have been able to incorporate. I did not grow up in a tiny village in Laos. No member of my family has crossed the Mexican border into California illegally. I have not had to serve as an interpreter for my parents when they talk with doctors. All of these experiences inform my students’ responses to our texts, and none of them came out in their grammar exercises.

However, I get stuck in another balancing act. If I let my students rest in the safety of what they already “know”—or feel they know—there may be no forward movement in their thinking. My job is to help them think. I need to push them beyond their comfortable zone of knowledge, whether the realm is intellectual thought or the rules for delivering those thoughts. I can give them simple assignments and let them work on verb tense and fragments without examining the depth of the topics they encounter in their readings. But asking them to write about their weekend activities will not help them enter the dialogue so essential to academic development. Simple grammar exercises are not true intellectual prose. I have to push them into examining texts, addressing conflicting beliefs, questioning what they know—all in a language that is unfamiliar and can easily limit what they write.
People comfortable with manipulating English can look at my students’ work and assume my primary responsibility is to teach grammar. But if I did this I would silence the student who compared intellectual poverty and financial poverty. I would allow my students to stick with easy answers to tough questions as long as they avoided fragments and run-ons. It is true that this past spring a number of my students did not pass the ELWR even in their third quarter. For all of them the deciding factor was their grammar troubles. I spent some time reflecting on my teaching decisions. I wondered whether I had cheated my students. Should I have spent more time doing sentence exercises and less time working together to dissect readings? What exactly was my appropriate role as a writing teacher? After looking back at my decisions, I could only conclude that despite their “failure” in their portfolios, I had not cheated them. They had not reached the required levels of writing skills, but they had grown immensely as writers. Readers at the end of the quarter might have been jarred by the number of mistakes in the essays, but nearly always the errors were far less prevalent than they had been ten weeks earlier.

Convincing students who have “failed” that they have in fact succeeded dramatically was difficult because once again their triumphs were limited by the lack of fluency their writing exposed. But many of my students were no longer just telling their stories; they were interpreting them and using them to explain reactions to texts we had read. Growing up in a remote village in China with its own obscure dialect was no longer just a simple narrative, but rather a resource for arguing that language itself can define a person. Yes, despite significant improvement in grammar, this student needed further work on language fundamentals, but if we do not recognize her growth, both intellectual and linguistic, we as an institution can lose her perspective in our conversations.

The history teacher questioned my student’s literacy. A Spanish speaker might have looked at my essay on my weekend and questioned my literacy. In both cases, errors masked ideas. I realize that as I continue to teach Writing 20 and Writing 21, my challenge is to teach my students the grammar rules they will need if they are to make their ideas accessible and respected in our university community. But their growth as writers, as sources of insights that challenge us, benefits our intellectual discourse and keeps the university from being a homogenous population with, itself, a truly limited voice. It is easy to say that these students are unable to join in intellectual conversation, but without them those conversations becomes limited in voice and insights. And as I said to the professor in faculty services, “No, that student isn’t illiterate. He’s learning.”