Teaching Grammar

Grammar is far-and-away the most difficult issue in the teaching of writing. On one hand, any number of studies have proven that lectures and exercises on grammatical rules and errors have no success whatsoever in eliminating error from student writing, and some have suggested that, in wasting time that might otherwise be used for instruction in rhetoric, such lectures and exercises actually weaken student writing. Moreover, in so far as such lectures and exercises can make students more self-conscious and undermine their faith in their own linguistic intuitions, they further weaken student writing. On the other hand, however, many and perhaps nearly all faculty not directly involved in the teaching of writing, as well as most professionals outside the academy expect teachers of writing, first and foremost, to teach students to write grammatically. Indeed, nothing else has even a fraction of grammar’s importance. Given its function as a kind of access-code to the professional classes, we do a great disservice to our students if we fail to teach it. The question, of course, is how?

The key to teaching grammar successfully is to do it in a way that safeguards against fostering larger and larger disconnections between student writers, their texts, and their rhetorical contexts. In other words, lectures and exercises, as noted above, are simply no good. Instead, the best approach is to address issues of grammar wholly within the students’ own prose and to make the student as directly accountable as possible for learning it. A good example of this approach is offered by Kevin Murphy. Here is how he describes his method, a method, by the way that seems to succeed in helping students to learn what they need to learn about grammar:

Marking the Essays:
When grading student essays for grammar, I mark all applicable errors using a number and letter, which correspond to the chapter and section of the student’s grammar handbook explaining the rule for that particular issue. For example, if a student makes a subject verb agreement error, I will write 6a, which will refer the student back to the grammatical rule s/he has broken.

Handbook Selection:
I use Hodges’ Harbrace Handbook simply because I am familiar with its format. In order for this system to work, though, one must have a fairly thorough handbook. Condensed handbooks do not generally contain enough detailed grammar instruction for this method to be viable. Although the more comprehensive handbooks are more expensive (upwards of $50), I think it is a valuable investment for the students.

Preparatory Steps:
In preparing to use this system of grading, I typed out a correction key that lists all the chapters and their subheadings along with the grammatical rules they cover. (This step is by far the most time consuming aspect of this system. Once you have made the
correction key, the actual grading does not take long.) Learning the chapters and sections of the most common grammatical errors helps reduce the total time spent flipping through the correction key.

Reinforcing the Rules:
To ensure that my students are actually using their grammar handbooks to understand my editing marks, I require them to type, on a separate sheet of paper, the rule which they have broken and the correction of the error. Students divide the page in two vertical columns with the rules on the left and the corrections on the right. To help streamline the grading process of their corrections, I make them number the errors in their original essays. This step allows me to find easily the specific error in the original essay, especially when the student has numerous problems with the same type of error. I usually allow my students one week to complete these corrections.

Grading Time:
Undoubtedly, this grading process is a bit more time consuming than other traditional methods, especially in the beginning stages of its implementation. However, since using this system, I’ve noticed that having students see in writing the rules which they have broken lends an objectivity to the grading process that they seem reluctant to challenge.