Engaging writers in the Early Years: Grammar games to support writing

Phillip Poulton

I recently read Terry Scott’s (1995) article in the first edition of Practical Primary that explored teaching writing conventions through song. Scott writes about experiences of using song development to engage students in writing, stimulating their interest level and putting grammatical convention teaching back into context. This is a topic close to my heart as a current year two teacher who previously studied and worked as a classical musician. I began teaching in the Early Years and was continually faced with the challenge of making grammar appealing to seven-year-olds. How do we as educators move away from text-based practices, for example worksheets, and engage students through different pedagogical approaches?

Gardner’s (2008) Multiple Intelligences Theory is a powerful and influential teaching tool found in classrooms all across the world. As I searched for engaging lessons in grammar I reflected on Gardner’s ideas surrounding musical, bodily-kinesthetic, logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist and existential intelligences. Gardner argues that such intelligences do not work in isolation but together, and that the mastery of a concept requires repeated exposure. Teachers then have the challenge of accommodating such a wide range of intelligences in order to ensure students understand a topic or element well. To support teachers, Gardner argues ‘understanding is far more likely to be achieved if the student encounters the material in a variety of guises and contexts’ (p. 60).

Reflecting on Gardner’s argument I decided to use my skills in music to create learning experiences that could reach more students. In my classroom students were well exposed to grammar instruction through teacher-led activities and text-based worksheets, which appealed to students with linguistic intelligence. But what about the other students? In order for students with musical and bodily-kinesthetic intelligences to encounter grammar instruction I created a variety of games that combined musical elements of chanting, rhythm and movement with grammar conventions. Such conventions included noun groups, compound sentences and pronoun reference, all of which were a part of my school’s English units for the year.

The games allowed students with a preference for sound and rhythmic patterns and manual dexterity to engage with language features like coordinating conjunctions, nouns, adjectives and pronouns.

Yolageldili and Arikam (2011) support the use of classroom language games as a way of encouraging students to use language in creative and communicative ways. They suggest that games create contexts that allow opportunities for unconscious learning where students focus on the message rather than just the grammatical feature being presented. The following games are whole class based, allowing maximum student participation in a creative and stress free environment. Students are given a context to practise their grammar and an opportunity to take an active role in the creation of grammatical features – something I believe a worksheet takes away from the student.

Noun group circle

This game focuses on students brainstorming noun groups from a given stimulus and increasing automaticity through repeated use. They are engaged in learning about the structure of a noun group and given opportunity to extend their vocabulary through brainstorming and sharing of their ideas. Students need to be seated in a circle
while the teacher takes a facilitating role. The teacher will have prepared two sets of cards with a variety of nouns written on each. I choose to use two sets as it gives more students a chance to create a noun group after each turn. I use blank playing cards and write nouns that link to current literature that we are reading, for example a fairytale unit which includes nouns like witch, giant, troll, princess and dwarf. While students are in the circle, the teacher models the chant that students will say giving ample opportunities for the students to practise saying it aloud before beginning the game. The chant is:

Let's be a noun group, noun group, noun group
Article, describing word, describing word
Noun!

The game should begin when the students are comfortable with saying the words aloud. The cards are passed around the circle in a clockwise direction and students clap the beat as they say the chant. When 'Noun!' is called, the students holding the cards at that point have ten to fifteen seconds to brainstorm a noun group and call it out. For example, if a student is holding the cards with the noun witch on top they may call out the smelly, green witch as their noun group. Both students should be given an opportunity to brainstorm their noun group before the teacher can ask other students for other examples. By calling out their idea a teacher receives immediate feedback on those students who understand the concept or even those students who may require more work on descriptive vocabulary. The top card of each set is put to the bottom so that a new noun is on top and the game begins again. I usually use this game as a warm-up before our writing block, taking around five to ten minutes to complete.

**Compound sentence circle**

This is a similar game that is simple and repetitive, allowing students to become automatic in their responses as they use coordinating conjunctions – such as, as, and, or, but – appropriately by responding to a simple sentence provided by the teacher. Again students are seated in a circle and listen carefully to the teacher as they model the chant. The chant is:

Simple sentence, simple sentence
Let's become a compound sentence
And, or, but, so!

Once students are familiar with saying the chant aloud without error the game can begin. The teacher will have prepared four flashcards, using the coordinating conjunctions of and, or, but and so (other conjunctions such as yet, nor and because can be added in later). Students pass around the flashcard set in a clockwise direction, keeping the beat on their knees as they say the chant. When 'So!' is called the student holding the set needs to call out the conjunction on top. The teacher responds with a beginning simple sentence and then the student must use the appropriate conjunction along with a responding simple sentence. For example, if the student had the conjunction card but the teacher could say 'Mr. Poulton went to the shops' and the student may respond 'but he could not find his wallet.' Students are practising using their knowledge of conjunctions and attending to meaning by responding with an appropriate second simple idea, thus creating a compound sentence. The student then puts the used conjunction at the bottom of the pile and the game begins again. As students become more familiar with the game, different conjunctions can be added or a time limit placed on brainstorming to make it more competitive. I always provide immediate feedback to students about their response to my simple sentence and praise correct use of a conjunction. This game again can be used as a formative assessment tool to identify students who may be having difficulty with joining two simple ideas together as a compound sentence.

**Pronoun reference circle**

This circle game allows students to revise their knowledge of pronouns and to use the correct pronoun in reference to a previous concrete or proper noun. Students are seated in a circle and listen to the teacher who says:

I, me, we, she, it
Which one are we going to pick?
They, you, his, her, us!

Once the chant is memorised the game can begin. The teacher is required to prepare a range of
sentences on small strips of paper and placed in a paper or plastic bag. The sentences should involve the repetition of a concrete or proper noun. For example:

‘Mary and Jane went to the movies.’ ‘Mary and Jane decided to see a funny film.’

The aim of the game is for students to take an active role in deciding which pronoun they can use to replace the repeated noun and ensure it correctly refers to the beginning sentence. For example the student may respond:

‘Mary and Jane went to the movies. They decided to see a funny film.’

I always find it best to model an example sentence before the game begins. Once familiar with the task, students begin to say the chant and pass the bag around the circle on the beat. As we land on ‘Us!’ the student with the bag retrieves a paper slip from inside and reads aloud exactly what s/he can see. This also highlights the repeated noun to the students. The student can then re-read the sentence using the correct pronoun reference. Usually in my class, in which I have created a supportive environment, I ask the students to give a thumbs up or down to provide immediate feedback to the student. If correct, the game continues with the student keeping their sentence and passing the bag along.

Use of these games is entirely up to the teacher whether they are used as warm-ups before writing or as consolidation of previous work. They require minimum teacher preparation time, allowing me to focus on student responses and thus assisting to create a creative and stress free learning environment. I do not believe that these games should be used in isolation, but rather in conjunction with explicit instruction, where the teacher models appropriate identification and application of grammatical features in writing. Rinvolucrri (1990) supports this idea, suggesting that games can be used in the three stages of grammar instruction as diagnostic, attainment or revision type exercises.

In order to support and extend our students’ writing we as teachers should be creative in our pedagogy and create learning experiences that reach out to all learners and their intelligences. Such a position then mirrors Scott’s (1995) idea of using music to demonstrate ‘how our language is constructed in a meaningful and functional way’ (p. 18) and how students can take an active role in constructing an understanding of grammar conventions.

References

Phillip Poulton is an early career teacher, currently teaching year two at Ironside State School in Brisbane. He is particularly interested in explicit instruction and inquiry learning in the Early Years. Phillip is currently studying towards his Master of Education at the University of Southern Queensland and was a recent presenter at the Primary English Teaching Association Australia ‘Write Now’ conference on creative grammar instruction. Email: pjpou0@eq.edu.au