

The online resource for
principals with students
aged 10 to 14

Matters

March 2009

Making Grammar Improvement Enjoyable

Here's how one small, rural middle school has used "Hammer the Grammar" to energize its language arts program.

by Paul Erwin

A PTA meeting was just breaking up in our school cafeteria when the basketball team filed through from the bus on their way to the locker room. I called out to one of the team leaders, "How did we do, Jamaal?" He paused a moment, met my eye, and responded, "We passed well, we dribbled well, we shot well—we won!"

Three years ago, our principal, several teachers, and I journeyed to Washington, D.C., to accept our hard-earned designation as a School to Watch. We led and participated in several workshops and were impressed with the dynamic spirit we observed among our colleagues from around the country. As the conference ended, we were challenged by our principal, Patricia Underwood, to come up with something unique in keeping with that spirit.

During the long drive back to Brunswick County, North Carolina, we hatched an innovative plan to improve our students' written and spoken language patterns. It would involve all members of the school community, utilize non-instructional time, and appeal to our students—who were predisposed to dislike anything that smacked of grammar or usage.

A word about our students: Brunswick County is a rural, coastal area. Our largest industry by far is tourism, but most of our students don't live near golf courses or the beach. Our buses are much more likely to stop at a trailer park than a gated community. We have a hefty free/reduced-price lunch population, and our racial mix is typical of the rural South. Many students have had limited exposure to standard English usage.

The Plan

We set out to identify about 30 grammar and usage demons that plagued our students' oral and written language patterns. These were combined into a 15-week syllabus, with mini-lessons created for each week.

Each Monday, we taught a new mini-lesson to all our language arts classes. "Challenge cards" were generated weekly that presented faulty sentences and their correct versions, reflecting the objective(s) for the current week. For example:

She shoots *good*, but she can't dribble.
(She shoots *well*, but she can't dribble.)

Throughout the week, teachers took a few minutes here and there during non-instructional time to "Hammer the Grammar" with the challenge cards. Some of the most effective times and locations were in the cafeteria, between classes, and during recess. Administrators and office personnel, media center and computer center personnel, and all our teachers were on board.

Playing the Game

The rules for Hammer the Grammar are simple. The adult reads the faulty sentence; the student responds with the correct version. A correct response wins the card for the student, who writes his or her name on the back of the card, along with the name of the person who made the challenge. The cards are then deposited at collection points around the school, and ultimately make their way to a huge bucket in the library.

With great fanfare, drawings are made during Friday afternoon announcements. We present "I Hammered the Grammar" T-shirts for prizes, and everyone wears them with great pride. (Staff members whose names are listed as challengers win T-shirts, too.)

In addition to cards with faulty sentences, we also focus on irregular verbs and homophones by placing what we call prompt posters on walls and doors around the school. For example:

I will _____
Yesterday I _____
I have _____

Using a set of cards that present about 100 common irregular verbs, such as speak, spoke, and spoken, the challenger reads the sentence fragment prompts and the responder fills in the blanks, in effect conjugating the verb.

The homophone cards offer a different type of challenge. For example:

Has the aspirin taken effect yet?
(Spell *effect*.)

We also use cards that combine objectives with more than one error in a sentence. For example:

Have you drove further today than yesterday?
(Have you *driven farther* today than yesterday?)

In addition to the challenge card program, we decided to address the fact that many students arrive in our sixth grade without a grasp of the fundamental concepts they need to communicate properly. We began with parts of speech, implementing a brief but intense study of sentence elements. Some years ago, we had developed a visual mnemonic system for mastering the

parts of speech, and we adapted it in the form of a flip book that students can use to identify sentence elements. The books have nine pages, each tabbed for a part of speech, with its own set of cues. The dependence on the flip books diminishes rapidly as confidence grows.

As we expected, test scores have improved, and not only for our current students. The first students to Hammer the Grammar—now 10th graders at our high school—scored third-best among schools in North Carolina last fall on the statewide writing test.

A Success Story

Hammer the Grammar has attracted attention. Our county telephone and cable provider has provided funding, we have presented at state and national conventions, and several other school districts have adopted the program.

It has been an exhilarating experience for all of us at South Brunswick Middle School. Who would have thought that grammar could be so enjoyable?

Paul Erwin has been a teacher and administrator at all levels for 42 years. He is currently an eighth-grade language arts teacher at South Brunswick Middle School in Southport, North Carolina. His e-mail address is winston71@mindspring.com.