

To teach grammar, get to the point



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I imagine inflicting the following stunt on a class of eight-year-olds. As part of their English education, you want them to expand their vocabulary, so you prohibit the word “got”. At that age, “got” is an overused catch-all verb.

To reinforce your point, you ask the class to write “got” on pieces of paper, march them into the school yard, dig a hole, and one by one you ask them to drop their papers into it. Then you take a spade and bury them.

The psychological message is clear to an eight-year-old. Get your grammar wrong and you’ll be buried alive.

I did not make that up. It was a real practice in our schools during the regime of old-school grammar. This was a rigid, dull, moralistic approach to language that fell out of favour three decades ago. The problem was, we threw the rest of grammar out with it, and ever since we’ve been turning out graduates with little understanding of the mechanics of English.

But now grammar is back in fashion. Kevin Rudd’s draft national English curriculum has probed community sentiment and the verdict is in: everyone wants grammar back in our schools.

Not surprisingly, that’s as far as the consensus goes. While we agree that grammar is a good thing, we can’t agree on which grammar is best. For 30 years, our education system has been in the linguistic no-man’s-land of a great grammar war.

In one camp are the traditional grammarians, advocates of the conventional eight parts of speech, such as nouns and verbs, adjectives and adverbs. The

traditional arsenal is imperfect but it has the most enduring support.

In the opposite trenches are the linguists, in disciplines with ominous titles like systemic functional grammar and transformational grammar. These are highly complex grammars that offer sophisticated insights into our language. It’s just that so few of us can actually understand them.

Then there are the grammar sceptics, who cite studies showing that students learn well enough through “receptive competence” of grammar and that, for “most people, nothing helps writing so much as learning to ignore grammar”.

In the middle of this battleground are English teachers, some attracted to the old-school, some schooled in traditional grammar, some who learned little of anything, and others recruited to

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the belief that grammar is harmful. It’s no wonder our students are confused.

So who is winning the war? Well, it’s official. The National Curriculum Board has declared that traditional grammar will be the main form taught in our schools. Most educators will support this as a consensus position, but anyone who remembers the bad old days will welcome it with mixed feeling.

Our biggest mistake would be a return to old-school methods, which conflated grammar with usage and elevated simplistic rules to the status of catechism: thou shalt not split an infinitive; thou shalt not start a sentence with a conjunction; thou shalt not end a sentence with a preposition.

No serious writer would take these rules remotely seriously. Yet the old

school suggested the slightest deviation was a sign of moral failing, punishable by being buried alive with those rapidly composting pieces of paper with the word “got”.

An even bigger war crime of old-school grammar was that it was drop-dead boring. It was rote learning without understanding. We had to parse and parrot word classifications without understanding how we might apply that knowledge. And knowledge without purpose is knowledge rapidly forgotten.

Unfortunately, the new English curriculum may be falling into the same trap. The current draft divides English teaching into three strands: language, literature and literacy. It seems that “language” is where kids will learn the theory of grammar but “literacy” is where they will do the actual writing.

Why do we need this separation? My own experience is that unless these two are closely intertwined, students rapidly switch off. They learn best when a small chunk of grammar is immediately applied to a practical purpose.

So by all means, teach kids about subjects and objects but show them how to use these to turn passive sentences into the active voice and improve clarity. Teach them the difference between dependent and independent clauses but then show them how to vary sentence structures for rhetorical impact.

The Plain English Foundation takes just this approach in its writing workshops, and when it surveyed 7500 students about what they enjoyed most, the No. 1 topic was surprising: grammar.

There is a hunger out there to understand the mechanics of English, and we can feed it by reintroducing traditional grammar. But we must also learn our lesson and not return to an old school that taught the subject in a dull, simplistic and impractical way.

Neil James is the executive director of the Plain English Foundation and the author of *Writing At Work*. He will be part of the Much Ado About Grammar panel discussion at the Sydney Writers’ Festival on Sunday.