Syntax at an Early Age: A Mother Challenges the Experts

by

Natalie Kramer

The woman on the other end of the phone was saying, "I've written this article. I'm sure you won't have any interest in publishing it." She was quick to admit that she had no formal expertise, that her opinions were out of the mainstream and that her only experience as a teacher of writing was as a tutor of her own child. But as it turned out Natalie Kramer did send along her piece, "Syntax at an Early Age." We were delighted to receive an article by a parent, and we were struck by the importance of her major thesis: the systematic teaching and learning of sentence structures is not getting enough attention in American schools. Realizing Natalie makes many controversial points, we asked Stanford professor and former editor of The Quarterly Melanie Sperling to offer her views on Natalie's ideas. This decision initiates what we hope to be a regular feature in The Quarterly: a dialogue between parents, teachers and others in the school community with academics working in the field of literacy education.

—The Editors

I am a self-proclaimed writing tutor. Even though I strongly believed my young son needed more instruction in writing, the decision to teach him myself left me with nagging doubts. As I was only 24 when he was born, I had always felt more like my child's older sister than his mother. Neighbors would watch us as we chased each other down the street playing tag. My son, whose behavior seldom required my correction, saw me primarily as a playmate, not an authority figure. That is until he entered second grade. But let me explain.

Several years ago, I decided to enroll Alex in kindergarten at a private French school on the outskirts of Washington D.C., a decision that turned out to be one of the best I have ever made. My husband and I place great emphasis on education, and the educational philosophy behind this school closely matches our own. The academic program is strictly regimented by the French national program. Everything from grade-by-grade content to methodology is proscribed. The curriculum is highly structured, with traditional, fact-based, direct instruction used for the basic disciplines. In history, for example, the fifth graders learn about the changes in society following the industrial revolution. They learn the historic context for those changes, the events that led up to them and the consequences that followed. Then the children use the facts they've learned about the past to examine issues in today's world, such as union elections.

Despite the apparent rigidity of the program at the French school, the curriculum also stimulates the children's imaginations and gives them the tools that allow them to be creative. As a result of the highly rigorous training the children receive in French language skills, for example, they are able to write wonderful stories and poems in French.

Students at the French school begin to learn to read and write in English in the second grade. Alex had no trouble learning to read in English. Since he was firmly grounded in phonics in French, he transferred his skills with very little effort into English. In fact, reading in English has been one of his greatest pleasures in life.

Writing was a different story, however. The English language program at the school is not overseen within
the curricular guidelines imposed by the French system. Alex received no instruction in writing English in the second grade. Most of the time in the English class was spent discussing “fun” things and reading “fun” books out loud. The teacher did not use a textbook; the children were not given any workbooks. Once in a while, the children would get ditto sheets with spelling words handwritten on them. The words did not seem to follow any pattern, either phonetic or thematic. The teacher sometimes administered spelling tests following the distribution of these sheets. She corrected the tests but never returned them. Instead, she glued them diligently into a notebook, which she kept until the end of the term. The children didn’t see their mistakes corrected in some cases until several months after having made them, and the corrections were never explained in class.

At the same time, the children brought home writing assignments, some of which were projects, some book reports. These writing assignments followed no perceptible rationale or sequence. One of the book reports was on a 90-page biography of Abraham Lincoln. One of the projects involved cutting out of paper the upper body of a giraffe, attaching it to the lower body of a fish, decorating the product with felt and cotton balls, and writing about where this imaginary creature lived, what it ate, and what it liked doing for recreation.

At first, I tried to stay out of it. What could I, a nonnative speaker of English (my native language is Russian), who was not always sure of her own grammar, teach a child? When I realized that Alex had developed an aversion to writing in English, displaying clear signs of distress at his inability to complete the language arts assignments, I spoke to his pediatrician, a lovely older Hungarian lady, who immediately fixed me an excuse from English for Alex (which I did not use). Looking for more practical solutions, I began reading about writing instruction. I consulted a certain number of specialists — a county language arts coordinator, a language arts specialist at our State Department of Education, an editor of language arts materials at Houghton-Mifflin — who agreed that children should become acquainted with the grammar and syntax of subjects and predicates and should have experience breaking sentences into manageable pieces. Finally, to ease Alex out of his frustrations and to compensate for the instruction he wasn’t getting at school, I began tutoring him in writing. I thought it would be a temporary measure, but three years later I am still at it.

Even though at the beginning I resented having to do the English teacher’s job, I do not regret having become Alex’s writing tutor. This necessity forced me to become a better writer myself; it made me a more disciplined and a better organized person. Most importantly, I am grateful watching Alex’s skills improve as a result of my efforts. English is a bond that we now share and I hope that Alex will remember our lessons with fondness and appreciation. I certainly will. We laugh a great deal as Alex readily puts to use his wry sense of humor; we both learn new things. It is a pleasure to teach him; he is eager and quick to learn.

But teaching Alex sentence structure has turned out to be no easy task. My model was the language instruction I had received in Russia in the seventies, which included rigorous, explicit, and repetitive training in syntax. I could not have imagined that anyone would attempt to teach writing to children without instructing them in syntax. In my mind, syntax was to writing what the alphabet was to reading. I began searching for some good syntax materials.

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series. They contained a few isolated exercises on sentence structure, but most of the practice focused on conventions such as the series comma, quotation marks, exclamation points, and capitalization. I called a local teaching aid store and explained to a bewildered clerk that I needed materials for teaching syntax to an elementary school-aged child. I was put on hold. When the clerk returned, she explained that she had consulted everyone at the store and that they carried no materials on "cineplex." Despite this, I decided to see for myself what the store carried and I did find some workbooks that included a limited number of exercises on simple sentence expansion and, for older children, on sentence combining.

I used these workbooks to teach Alex simple sentence structure. The Instructional Fair series for second and third grades had the most useful exercises. Each workbook would include one or two practice exercises for each skill. For example, a child would have one or two opportunities in each grade to practice adding a predicate to a subject supplied in the exercise or adding the "where," "when," and "how" details to a bare bone sentence. This was exactly what I was looking for, since Alex’s sentences still looked like transcriptions of isolated utterances—but these occasional exercises were not nearly extensive enough. The textbooks we used as children in Russia included similar exercises in each lesson, so we could build each skill to the point of perfection before moving on to the next stage. The words we used for these sentence structure exercises were supplied. They were taken from the vocabulary unit that we would be working on at the same time. This pattern would be repeated week after week, which allowed us to progressively build the needed skills from the early grades. Using the patterns from the Instructional Fair workbooks and my recollections of how I was taught some twenty years earlier, I began creating my own exercises for Alex.

Alex and I first established that every sentence had to have a subject and a predicate. I would supply fragments of sentences, and Alex would combine them using correct capitalization and punctuation, putting verbs in correct tenses, and providing missing prepositions. So Smokey (our big cat) / Caddy (our terrier) / to hiss became Smokey hissed at Caddy. At that stage, had I asked Alex to write a text without these kinds of exercises, he would have likely produced a fragment, believing that the subject might have been mentioned earlier and not knowing that he had to worry about where it was. In the English class, he would not learn that a sentence had to be a complete thought until fourth grade, yet he had to submit elaborate writing assignments beginning in second.

After Alex mastered the main sentence types, we moved on to modifiers, learning simple modifiers in third grade and clauses and phrases in fourth. This was a pivotal point for Alex. He began to truly overcome his aversion to writing in English when he realized that his sentences could be expressive and powerful. Learning to add different kinds of modifiers and to place them correctly helped Alex realize for the first time that writing was an essential tool for organizing ideas and expressing them clearly. He finally learned to write most of his sentences in such a way that he did not have to explain them to the reader orally first.

The work on modifiers is continuing to this day and is now included in our exercises on complex and compound sentences. Thus, Smokey scratched Caddy gradually became:
Smokey, first lurking in the shadow cast by the sofa and then leaping out like a miniature leopard, scratched the whimpering Caddy on the forehead.

If I had not taught Alex to combine pieces of information such as the ones in the sentence above, he would still be serving them in bite-sized, choppy sentences as many of his classmates still do in fifth grade.

To construct this kind of sentence, I provide the basic information (Smokey lurked in the shadow, Smokey scratched Caddy) and Alex contributes the colorful details (like a miniature leopard). He then constructs the sentence himself, which the two of us then tighten up by eliminating repeated nouns or correcting misplaced modifiers. I believe that this kind of practice in sentence combining is essential to good writing. If I had not taught Alex to combine pieces of information such as the ones in the sentence above, he would still be serving them in bite-sized, choppy sentences as many of his classmates still do in fifth grade. I would still be seeing

The couch cast the shadow. Smokey first lurked in it. Then he leapt out. Smokey looked like a miniature leopard when he did that. Smokey scratched Caddy. He whimpered.

It took several months of focused practice for Alex to learn the ways in which he could combine these bits of detail into one sentence. As K-12 publishers were not providing the systematic, structured instruction in syntax I believed necessary, I turned to the basic composition text from my English 101 course at the University of Maryland to structure the exercises for Alex. A whole chapter in that textbook is devoted to modifiers. For each type of modifier described, including modifying clauses and phrases, there is an exercise.

Along with the practice on using and placing modifiers, we did some exercises that helped Alex learn to distinguish between restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses. This concept requires some logical thinking, which Alex found interesting and challenging, as I believe it would be for most of the thousands of fifth graders who are not getting this instruction. Just like with modifiers, I supply the pieces and ask Alex to combine them in one sentence. For example, I write:

The students were tired after a long field trip. The students asked for some quiet time. Alex combined the sentences:

The students who were tired after a long field trip asked for some quiet time. I explain that when the clause is set off by commas, it can be omitted without the loss of essential information. We then discuss the difference between the above sentence and The students who were tired after a long field trip asked for some quiet time.

Many children like to be challenged by these kinds of activities. Alex boasts sometimes that he is using a college textbook. In reality, there is very little in the sections that I use in it that he cannot easily handle, yet the grammar exercises that Alex’s teacher assigns to his fifth grade class still consist primarily of identifying nouns and distinguishing between proper and common ones, something these students successfully learned to do in French in second grade.

Although constructing sentences about our five pets is still Alex’s favorite exercise, I combine our work on syntax with another curriculum strategy that seems to be out of favor. Last summer I found a wonderful vocabulary workbook for Alex in Scotland. I take words from this book, such as “vigil,” “decrepit” or “dilapidated” and ask Alex to create sentences with them. I do not believe it is enough to ask a child to come up with just any sentence for practicing vocabulary. If I told Alex to use the word dilapidated in his own sentence, he would write, “My house is dilapidated.” While he may be practicing the spelling of dilapidated, this exercise would be of limited value. Instead, I supply sentence fragments in which the word is already placed in an appropriate context, and Alex practices the various constructions that we have been working on. For example, when practicing absolute phrases and appositive as modifiers, I supplied the following details, including one of our new words:

Smokey’s eyes were flashing. Smokey kept vigil by dad’s seafood casserole. Smokey is a notorious thief, beggar and glutton. Smokey waited for us to turn our heads away from the table.

Alex then wrote:

Eyes flashing, Smokey, a notorious thief, beggar and glutton, kept vigil by dad’s seafood
I believe that Alex understands that writing sentences effectively helps him create powerful and interesting or funny images, and he enjoys having this ability. Children like being empowered. Having only limited power in many other areas of life, they equate accomplishment with empowerment, be it in sports, at school or in any other area of their activity.

Why, then, is syntax not routinely taught as a part of writing curricula? Why do the authors of a college textbook find it necessary to devote nearly half of its pages to syntax instruction? As my experience with Alex has shown, a fourth- or a fifth-grader can easily handle most of this “college” material. Most other countries do not teach or even review basic grammar in college. In fact, we would be hard pressed to find any educational system outside the United States and Canada that offers basic composition courses beyond middle school. With the advent of the Internet, I was able to pose the question of what happened to instruction of syntax to several professional organizations involved in teaching writing. One of the responses I received suggested that syntax was “in part a lost art.” The explanation continued as follows:

Possibly, in an attempt to stay away from worksheets and drills, the profession moved toward larger units of discourse (paragraph and above), expecting sentences to be formed in the context of writing for real purposes and audiences (letters, reports, appeals, etc.). Departure from syntax instruction also may be a symptom of the move away from formal grammar instruction that has always analyzed syntax without necessarily improving the students’ ability to produce sentences.

Why did the profession make this move on a hunch that sentences are formed by osmosis in the context of “real” writing? Was there any scientific or even anecdotal evidence that would lead to this conclusion? Or was it wishful thinking? When I look at the writing of my American-born colleagues educated in the era of “larger units of discourse and writing for real purposes,” I can’t help but think that the hunch was just that — a hunch. Here are a few examples:

All members were present, John was the lead and Sylvia was the scribe. The meeting began with the
children in non-English speaking countries acquire literacy skills in their native languages, we will see that in addition to direct practice in application of syntactic and grammatical rules, they are also taught to model their writing on examples of mature writers.

For his French classes, Alex has to prepare weekly dictations by memorizing several lines of prose and writing them from memory in class. When I was in elementary school, every week we had what was called précis writing, whereby we would hear a text several times and then relate its content in our own words. Several times a week, we would have homework assignments in which we would simply copy a text taken from a well-known writer. Alex studies Russian once a week from a tutor who still gives these assignments to her students, and I can see their positive effects. All of these types of skill practice, if done consistently — and consistency is the key element here — are beneficial in more than one way. They help children internalize correct sentence structure, word usage and spelling so that they may gradually form the habits of creating correct grammatical and morphological structures in their own writing.

These activities are also excellent tools for teaching style in writing. While in Alex’s French school, stylistics is also taught directly in later grades, dictations, memory writing and copying of passages from literary works in the early grades help children lay a foundation for rhetorically effective writing later on. These activities are also a means of forging children’s ties to the literary tradition in their language. Alex’s Russian teacher assigns some of the same texts and poems that my husband and I learned in school. When we hear Alex practice these pieces, we can supply the missing words from memory, in some cases remembering them for the first time in thirty years. What is wrong with this kind of sharing of literary tradition? What is so rote or terrible about a dictation or a recitation of an elegant literary passage? In what way do these activities interfere with creativity?

I have never seen Alex plagiarize Anatole France or Guy de Maupassant, but no matter how imaginative he is when he writes in French, his syntactic and stylistic structures are beginning to show subtle signs of their collective influence. Studying and memorizing their texts has not suppressed the originality of Alex’s writing; these disciplines have helped his originality surface and shaped his stylistic taste. This is the direct result of five years of solid, sequenced instruction in syntax and correctly provided exposure to literature — text analysis, memorization — literature examined from the point of view of the power of literary techniques and not merely on the level of what the characters do and why, the only way Alex’s English teacher looks at it.

The following paragraph written by Alex illustrates that fifth-grade writers can incorporate advanced syntactical skills and still express their unique and child-ish individuality:

_A Special Pet_

Cardigan Lewis Gittelson is my special pet. The first reason he is so special is that he is very calm; he is almost phlegmatic. Unlike my other pets, Caddy lets me eat and watch T.V. in peace. The second reason is that he is the most sensitive little guy I know. Once, my mother called Caddy a mean and stubborn terrier because he wouldn’t go out into the back yard. Offended, Cardigan immediately obeyed my mother’s orders. Another reason why I think Cardigan is such a special guy is that he is so funny; he is afraid of my cats! About two years ago, my cat Motey scratched Caddy. Caddy was so traumatized by the incident, that ever since, he has been cautious around both Motey and, just in case, my other cat Smokey. Yet, another reason why I believe Mr. Gittelson is such a special pet is that though he is the quiet type, he loves to listen. Whenever I have one of my school crises, I tell Caddy what happened and he hangs on to my every word, never interrupting. Still another reason is that he simply adores people. He can lick them dawn to midnight. The final reason why Gittelson is such a special pet is that his favorite pastime is sleeping. He could sleep 14 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year! Cardigan Lewis Gittelson is the best dog I know.

Alex wrote this piece at the end of fifth grade, when I assigned a “reason” paragraph to him from the “Writing Skills” workbook by Educational Publishing Service. The “audience” consisted of Alex and me; the “purpose” was learning to correctly use transitions. Yet in this paragraph I notice some carry-over from the “isolated” syntax instruction of previous months. What I notice most of all, however, is the style of an all-American eleven-year-old kid with his infectious humor and passion for animals. No amount of dictation or syntax practice would ever be able to take that away.
I have heard many times that sentence structure is important, but you should “worry” about it only at the end of the writing process, during the editing and proofreading stages. Solid literacy instruction helps ensure freedom from “worrying” about sentence structure at all stages of the writing process. Writing correctly the first and every time can become almost second nature. Of course, editing and proofreading are still necessary because everyone needs a distance from a written piece to assess its strengths and weaknesses, but not because sentence structure concerns should be put off until the end.

Russians often say “koorch dovesyot” when they poke fun at someone who is trying to legitimize his ignorance. Literally it means “The coachman will take me there.” This line belongs to one of the characters from classical literature. This fellow tried to explain that there was no need for him to be well versed in geography because his coachman knew how to get places. Yes, the coachman-editor will rewrite our poorly constructed sentences and the computer will correct our spelling errors. But if the editor has to rewrite our sentences, how much of our own style and individuality will remain?

And besides, what is there to be lost by all of us becoming proverbial “coachmen,” so we can all “get there” on our own? Writing is essential in almost all areas of personal and professional life. Writing defines in part our personal, professional and cultural identity. It is the link to our linguistic heritage. In the process of developing syntactic competence, we help our students think logically and make them aware of the creative possibilities of language. Let’s restore to our children their inalienable right to become empowered and skilled writers, not merely fluent ones, no matter what else they choose to do in life.

Natalie Kramer was born in Leningrad, USSR, where she lived the first seventeen years of her life, moving to the United States in 1979. She is an economist at the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor.