With his love of learning, a largely supportive school environment, an encouraging family, and a passionately caring, highly literate mom, Alex is in an enviable position for developing into an ever stronger reader and writer. To me, Natalie suggests in her account of tutoring Alex some critical principles of teaching and learning — and of literacy — that Alex’s situation reflects but that sometimes in the realities of school and classroom life are liable to be overlooked. None of these principles seems much to do with syntax, yet I believe they help to account for Alex’s learning to manipulate sentence structures through his mom’s tutoring and, so, may have a great deal to do with syntax in the end:

- Teaching and learning are in many ways acts of love and faith, undertaken between individuals who believe in one another’s abilities — the teacher in the learner’s ability to rise to the occasion of transforming unanalyzed experience into valued skills and knowledge, and the learner in the teacher’s ability to “stand for” the broader cultural landscape into which he is gaining access through this critical teacher-learner association.

- Learning to write is largely a cumulative process that depends on time, on repetition, and on the teacher and learner’s assumptions that the
way they habitually fill the time is relevant to the culture and society in which they live.

- Literacy — the acts of reading and writing, as well as the texts read and written — shapes and defines human relationships. It is not surprising that "English is a bond" that Natalie and Alex share. Language and text-based bonds are the stuff of a literate society.

- In literate contexts, whether at home, in school, or in the community, lived experience and textualized experience appear almost to meld: textualized versions of experience assume value and a life of their own.

As none of these principles (except perhaps the last) gets expressed as such in this essay, I push them in order that they will be the kinds of generalizations that get remembered from Natalie and Alex’s experience.

I worry that, in contrast, Natalie and Alex’s unique mother-son/teacher-learner relationship appears to support what I believe are some unsupportable generalizations, which do get either articulated or implied in this essay, and I want Natalie to rethink them. Specifically, I cannot support the implication that

- poor and haphazard teaching (Alex’s English teacher appears by Natalie’s descriptions to be a pretty weak teacher at best) is not simply poor and haphazard teaching (sometimes a cigar is, in fact, simply a cigar) but rather a reflection of some broadly accepted yet wrong-headed theory about teaching written English in the schools

- the “thousands of fifth graders” who are not learning about restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses (or, for that matter, about cumulative sentences) in their classrooms would find the experience as compelling as Alex does working lovingly with his mom

- any fourth- and fifth-grader can “easily handle” college material on writing, including practice with language structures

- educational systems in the rest of the world are comparable to the U.S. and Canadian systems and that if basic composition courses (which presumably focus on language structures) can’t be found in them beyond middle school (an observation that I unfortunately have no means here either to refute or corroborate) it is because all students in those systems have mastered composition. (I think, for example, of highly stratified educational systems such as that found in Great Britain, where only students who have already shown a mastery of academic skills have access to higher education. Theoretically, “basic” courses would not be offered because “basic” students are not admitted.)

- the American-born among the workforce do not, ipso facto, write clearly or conventionally and that, moreover, we have to blame for this situation a curriculum that has left syntax in the lurch. These generalizations are troublesome in no small measure because they are based on inadequate data.

The heart of Natalie’s article, however, is not expressed in these relatively peripheral points. The question she asks is: Can and should syntax be taught, particularly to elementary school children? Natalie shows us that Alex has learned a lot about sentences and that he gained this knowledge by, at least in part, actively producing sentences at his mother’s behest. But Alex’s progress stems not merely from the fact that Natalie and Alex study syntax — it is also the context in which this learning takes place. Some of the ways Natalie works with her son are a prescription for effective practice. All that I have read and experienced convince me that to master extended writing (which by definition includes sentence-level structures) across real communicative contexts, children need an intimacy with written language. This mastery is fostered in part by reading a great deal from different types of texts, in part by doing lots of writing of different kinds along with getting feedback on how they are doing, and in part by addressing language structures consistently and above all in meaningful ways. While many of these practices are becoming increasingly common in American classrooms, Natalie and I would agree that there is little evidence that meaningful instruction in syntax occurs as a matter of course.

However, by placing so much emphasis on a single instructional technique — sentence combining — Natalie may be overlooking the nature of syntax as a
living, changing, context-defined language characteristic, part flexible linguistic convention, part personal style, that reflects, among other things, the writer’s purpose, the particular content that needs to be communicated, and the particular social/cultural situation in which communication takes place. Which is to say, most of the time, it doesn’t do to write like Faulkner.

So, Natalie’s essay alerts us to the genuinely perplexed positions in which teachers and others operate as they try to promote language and literacy development in our schools. All students need to learn how to read and write. And they need to be taught in ways that foster comprehension, analytic, and culturally astute thinking.

Thus, in the spirit of adding to the store of information that Natalie has already developed, and to help clarify some of the interpretations of language and learning in her essay with which I disagree, I offer the following research-based observations:

- It is true that children cannot read if they do not “get” the alphabetic principle, and most children need deliberate instruction in sound-letter correspondences in order to break the written code. But children _can_ write without deliberate instruction in syntax. Syntax is not to writing what the alphabet is to reading.²

- Part of the writing development process is for text to increasingly carry the writer’s meaning, with decreasing need to supplement text with oral explanations or other symbolic tools. That young children’s writing needs partially to be “explained” to be understood reflects, then, a normal part of their literacy development.³

- Despite this focus on early childhood literacy development, taking the point of view of readers — who need appropriate contextualization and cues to understand what they read — is a writing skill that is ever in process: mature adult writers, not only children, have often to explain what they’ve written (including their sentences) and need reader feedback to nudge them into being more explicit, more clear, more informative than the writers themselves realize they are being.³

- Students need feedback on their written work, no matter whether they are writing sentences or extended pieces of discourse (or writing spelling tests, or …) as immediately as possible, from teachers and when appropriate from peers or others. As Natalie knows from her work with Alex, students cannot simply write for real audiences and real purposes and learn to write. Alex is certainly writing for a real audience, his family. But we cannot conflate teaching that encourages writing for real audiences and purposes with teaching in which students do not get other kinds of instruction, including feedback on their sentences. The two are not — and should not be — mutually exclusive.⁴

- Children do not simply “transcribe” simple isolated utterances when they write, in part because, like adults, they don’t think in simple isolated utterances. The very fact that novice writers produce stilted or choppy sentences indicates that writing is not a simple translation of thought or speech, but a complex sociocognitive transformation — which can be coaxed through teaching.⁵

- Practice in sentence-combining is not essential to good writing. It can be a challenging linguistic exercise that allows children to manipulate sentence structures and in that way become more analytical and knowledgeable about language. As Natalie’s case suggests, it can also be a kind of enjoyable language game that people share with one another. But students also need to be able to adapt their language according to communicative contexts, which raises the question of whether sentence-combining practice in and of itself “transfers” — and such transfer has not been proved generally to occur.⁶

- “Writing correctly the first time and every time” sounds like a dream come true. But writing is more than shaping sentences into sophisticated structures. Since writing means reading and interpreting the world, making contact with others, taking one’s place within different text-based communities, it is an activity fraught with false starts and inappropriate realizations, at every level of language. Knowing this is knowing something important about the writing process.⁷
All that said, I want to return to Natalie's story about teaching Alex to write and to underscore the following insights from her story. Writing does help to define our personal, professional, and cultural identities. And writing does hold infinite creative possibilities. Knowing these things is at least in part why Natalie cared enough to tutor Alex in the first place and, later, to write about the experience — and why I wanted to think seriously about what she wrote and to offer this commentary as my perspective.

Notes


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