

How Much Grammar Is Enough? Transcript of Episode 389

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the *Arts of Language* podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, “IEW.” My name is Julie Walker, and I’m honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Julie Walker: Andrew, this is one of those podcasts that we have to keep it short because that's how long my walk is, so 30 minutes or less, and then we'll go in and cool off. But there's so much great content that we could be talking about because we're taking one of your talks, *But. . . But. . . What about Grammar* and trying to shrink it down.

So we're doing a summary of that talk.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. Yes. Well, you can't live in this world very long without people asking, “What about grammar?”

And unfortunately there seems to be two attitudes, both I would consider extreme and less than ideal. One attitude would be you have to start teaching grammar at a young age and you have to hammer it and you have to do a lot of grammar year after year after year. And it's a core, main subject, and that's what we do.

Julie Walker: That's right.

Andrew Pudewa: And I would say you find that attitude in kind of old-school homeschoolers, some of the classical education people, some of the classical schools. And so they'll start in first or second grade trying to hammer grammar information into kids.

And then the other extreme is, well, we live in a modern world, and grammar just isn't all that important anymore. And it's just not something. . . you should be able to learn grammar just by reading and even writing maybe, but you don't want to stress over it.

And I think both of these attitudes are a bit extreme because as we know, in many cases, if not most, all cases, the wisdom is in the balance.

So the first question is: Is grammar important? I would argue, yes. And there are lots of good arguments for grammar being an important thing to learn. I think the best ones are based on number one, precision of communication, that precise language is important, the ability to read and know what you're reading, to write and communicate what you're trying to say.

That's very key. It's key in business, it's key in ministry, it's key in politics particularly. It's key for the continuation of progress in civilization. But then the next question would be, well, if that's true, when and how should you teach it?

And this is where I might disagree with some of my well-meaning colleagues, that English grammar or grammar in general is a kind of abstract thing. And you often end up not serving students well when you try to teach something before they're developmentally ready for it. Try to teach an abstract idea before the child can grasp it, then that's frustrating, and you can sometimes peek out the appearance of learning without much real learning going on.

Or you just get someone who hates it and why would anyone hate grammar? It doesn't even make sense to me because grammar is inherently good. It's inherently beautiful. It's the structure of language. But if you start teaching it kind of in the wrong way at the wrong time, like anything, you can get someone to hate it.

So my talk, *But. . . But. . . But. . . What about Grammar* kind of addresses this paradox that it's very important, and yet we don't necessarily want to push it too early. Those of our listeners who are familiar with the Dorothy Sayers comparison of the developmental stages of children, the Pol Parrot stage with grammar, and then the, what she calls, pert stage.

Julie Walker: It's alliteration.

Andrew Pudewa: I would just call flat out, obnoxious. But that pert stage with the liberal art of logic and then the poetic stage with that of rhetoric. So therefore we should teach young children grammar, middle-aged students logic and older kids rhetoric. There's an error in this, and I don't think Dorothy Sayers would have agreed with the way some people are applying this concept.

So I actually wrote an article once called "No Grammar in the Grammar Stage, Please." Because when we're looking at young children, and then we're forcing this abstract and this technical analysis, and it doesn't fit or work, especially for some of the kids. Then, are we really doing what she was talking about?

She talked about how young children in the Polly the Parrot, Pol Parrot stage, they just absorb information very easily. And she used as an example how you can memorize a sequence of words or a Latin paradigm or poetry or something, and you don't have to understand it all, but you can memorize it.

Right, so you can take a child and teach them: *amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatis, amant*, and they don't have to understand all that to get it in their brain, and that's okay. They can learn a poem and not understand all the words in that poem or understand what that really means. Does anyone understand what any poem really means? But there's still value in stocking up, if you will.

The words and the sounds and the language and the paradigms. So that's what I think she was talking about, and it resonates with me, because of course, and we've talked about this any

number of times on this podcast, building what I would call the inherent grammar or inherited grammar, and that's mostly through environment.

So you inherently know that you wouldn't say, "Me go to the store yesterday." That just wouldn't work for an English speaking person who grew up speaking English. Why? Well, you could dissect that grammatically and talk about the case of the pronoun and the tense of the verb, but you wouldn't need to do that in order to just know that it's not the way we speak.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: Now a person who's learning English, they might say something like that because they don't have that inherent knowledge of grammar. So really that's by far the most important thing, is this great database of good, correct, and beautiful language that is built up through hearing language, hearing good literature, being read, and even memorizing poetry, memorizing little bits of language, whether it's scripture or excerpts of speeches or poems.

Julie Walker: You should do a whole talk on this, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: I think we just did talk about this recently.

Julie Walker: Look for a link in the show notes for *Nurturing Competent Communicators*

Andrew Pudewa: Putting it in the context of this is grammar. This is teaching grammar. When you read beautiful literature or even picture books that are well written to young children, you are teaching them the grammar of the English language. When they memorize nursery rhymes, mother goose, simple poems, Christina Rossetti, you're teaching them grammar.

Julie Walker: Yes. So you can check that box.

Andrew Pudewa: That is by far the most important thing. And if you had to not teach any other grammar except for that, that would be the thing that would give them the best facility to. In speaking and writing correctly and well for their whole life. So we don't want to get past that. And I think that's honestly what Dorothy Sayers was talking about when she equated the, what Marie Montessori would've called the absorbent mind of the Young Child, and this Pol Parrot grammar stage.

Okay, now we look at the next, what I would call division or aspect of grammar, and that would be "applied grammar." Okay, so you hear something and you know that it is not correct by your inherent grammar, and you can fix it. You, you can, you can say that's not right and the right way to do it would be this.

If you had a child who said, "Me go store yesterday," you would rephrase that for them and say, "No, I went to the store yesterday." And then you get the case of your pronoun and the tense of your verb, and the whole thing works, but you're not explaining that. You're just fixing it.

Andrew Pudewa: And so then as the student gets older, they're able to read something and they compare that thing with their database of language. And it either fits as correct or legal or acceptable or right or or stylish, whatever, or it doesn't. And then, they would apply the knowledge they have and say, okay, here's what would have to change for this to work better. It's really hard in grammar to say right or wrong because there are so many things that are not quite legal by the current grammar standards but are very stylish.

In fact, you could take things that were written a hundred or 150 or 200 years ago or 400 years ago, and they wouldn't pass a Microsoft Word grammar check today, but they're still good quality language. And so I think we want to be very careful and say this is correct by a modern standard or this is not correct by a modern standard, even though it might be the way that someone might have said something a long time ago.

So we're then constantly kind of editing, right? And that's what we're doing. Sometimes we just edit intuitively. That's really what tests like the SAT or ACT on the language portion. That's what they're checking—not can you identify all of the things in this sentence and label them? No. Like a grammar book might try to teach.

It's more along the lines of what's the best option for a combination of words to fit in this spot and say what this should mean. So it's applied grammar. And I would argue that is more important than the analytical. And so that's where we want to work. I think a lot is in helping students learn essentially how to proofread something.

Julie Walker: Sure. So inherent, applied, and analytical.

Andrew Pudewa: analytical. And that would be the third division or category?

Julie Walker: Sure. And you, I couldn't help but notice you used the term several times, you're going to fix it.

Andrew Pudewa: Isn't that what we're looking at when a student writes something? If you proofread it, what's your job? Fix it. Right? If it's missing an *s*, put in the *s*. If it's got the wrong word, cross it out and put the right word. If it's missing punctuation or it's a run-on sentence, well, put a period, put a capital and add a conjunction, in a comma. Do whatever you have to make it legal by a modern standard. So that would be “fix it.” And I like that. And I think we have used that long before we came out with a product by that title.

Julie Walker: Our *Fix It Grammar* is kind of based on that idea, but it does take it a step further and does get into analytical grammar.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. And so there's that segue into—now we're going to teach the student to identify certain things, but we start with those things that are also dress up techniques in our writing program. So there's a consonance there. So oddly, we don't start with nouns, we start with -ly adverbs, right? Why isn't a noun more important?

Well, who's to say? But the thing that kids are familiar with would be this easy-to-identify thing. Then we build up there into more parts of speech, and then we understand phrases and clauses and what words start phrases and what words start clauses. And then we can get pretty technical. I mean, honestly, if you were to finish our *Fix It* book six...

Julie Walker: *Little Mermaid*.

Andrew Pudewa: ...you would have learned more technical analytical English grammar than 99.99999999% of all English speaking people on Earth. Which brings up another question—how much grammar is enough?

Julie Walker: Right, right.

Andrew Pudewa: People will ask me that, like how much grammar is enough? I don't know how much music is enough, how much art is enough? If you just did *Fix It* 1, you'd know more grammar than a lot of high school or college students.

Julie Walker: This is true.

Andrew Pudewa: Is that enough? Well, it depends on what you want to do. If you could play Suzuki book one, is that enough? I don't know. It's better than nothing. But you could keep going. And so one thing I like to point out to people is that grammar is an art, not a science. And to get the nuance of those words, you go back to the original meaning—*art* in Latin is *artis*, which is art. It's something, it's something you do, right? You do the thing in order to learn it. That's an art. Whereas science comes from *scio*, which means to know.

And so you can know stuff. And those are really two different things. Mortimer Adler differentiated between information, concepts, and skills in this same way.

Now obviously there's overlap. You need to know things to do stuff, right? And doing stuff helps you know things better. But grammar is an art. That's why it's the first of the seven liberal arts.

Julie Walker: Oh, interesting.

Andrew Pudewa: You learn it by doing it, not by memorizing stuff. Right? And because it's an art, you could actually continue to learn it indefinitely.

You could spend your entire life studying grammar and would that be enough? Right? So it gives you a little bit different perspective on that.

Julie Walker: So I have in front of me a pile of our *Fix It* books, and I just kind of want to walk, listener, you, through what we have and what we're trying to do at the age appropriate that Andrew has talked about. So we recommend not starting our *Fix It* program until students are reading at about a fourth grade level and maybe they're starting our writing program before that.

And what do you do about grammar? Well, inherent grammar and applied grammar because absolutely you're applying grammar as you're writing.

Andrew Pudewa: Here's the funny thing. You can actually teach kids to do things more easily than you can teach them to identify things.

Julie Walker: Oh, interesting. Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: So simple little example. I'm sure this has happened to dozens, if not hundreds of our listeners who've taught the structure and style program or whose kids have done it. You could bang your head against the wall trying to get kids to recognize parts of speech in a sentence, but as soon as you put it on a checklist and make them do it, they see it everywhere.

Like the, the typical third grade kid who says, Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Jones, there's -ly adverb in the book I'm reading. Yes, sweetheart. There has always been -ly adverbs in the book you're reading. The reason the child notices it is because they have this ownership of -ly words because they've been writing paragraphs and having to put one in every paragraph.

The same thing goes with everything else. They start to recognize strong verbs when you make them do strong verbs, they start to understand what a verb is when you make them do it. Quality adjectives, clauses and phrases, participles. Even the most sophisticated grammatical stuff, the best way to learn it is to do it.

And I remember when Webster came up with the advanced dress up, the adverb teeter-totter, right? Which is where you, you have dual -ly adverbs and a verb, which is the pivot point, and then an adverb clause on the other side. And then the adjectival teeter totter with the dual adjectives. The noun is the pivot and the who-which clause on the other side.

And I don't know, for some reason. It just brought the whole idea of why we call that thing an adverb clause, or why we call that thing an adjective clause. It just brought it into focus so much more clearly when I saw the teeter-totter.

So doing these things is by far the best way to learn to not only identify, but really understand them.

Julie Walker: Sure. So starting in fourth grade, we've got two levels. *Fix It* Level 1 is *Nose Tree*, and these are stories that the students then fix up. We've embedded the errors.

Andrew Pudewa: It's a sentence or maybe two each day, four days in a week. Right? And they start out super simple, and there's a little checklist at the top of the page that tells the student, here's what you're looking for. You're looking for an end mark that's missing. All right. Well, that's a nice clue. So it's creating a little bit of attentiveness through using checklists, and we know checklists are a real key to cultivating attentiveness. And they fix it, and then they copy it over.

Julie Walker: So there's copy work involved too. So there's two levels for what our level A is, which is grades three to five. There's only two levels for our B, which is grades six to eight. So just relax. You've got plenty of time, and you may want to stop there. You may say, okay, I'm done with level four. I know enough to be able to do well on the ACT or SAT, Andrew.

This is, we've heard this over and over again. People that go through our *Fix It Grammar*, they're able to do very well on those usage exams for college entrance. And then levels five and six are high school level. And if you have a high school student, don't buy level five unless you're pretty sure they've had some foundation in grammar.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. Well, people can get samples of these on our website. So you can, if you think you've got a grammar hotshot 14 year old, you could get a sample and see. Is book five in the zone?

Julie Walker: Right. Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. I mean, I think we have been surprised at the incredible success of the *Fix It*. Number one, and most importantly, I meet kids at every convention I go to. I'll meet a kid who says, "I like *Fix It*. I used to hate grammar, but this is so much better." And they can't necessarily explain why it's better. I could explain to them why it's better, but the most important thing is they now kind of like the thing they used to not like.

Julie Walker: They're more willing to do it.

Andrew Pudewa: And that's huge.

Julie Walker: I say to teachers and parents, "What's the number one goal of learning grammar, at least as it applies to us at the Institute for Excellence in Writing?" For students to be able to write better, to be grammatically correct in their writing, and that's what *Fix It Grammar* does. They're seeing embedded errors in someone else's writing that are in the book and they go, "oh, I make that same mistake. I'm going to now fix that in my own writing."

Andrew Pudewa: And that just takes repetition and maturity. So I often use the example you can bang your head against the wall trying to explain to an eight year old, "A sentence is a complete thought, and at the end of the sentence, you must put a period and then the next sentence must start with a capital."

You can say that a hundred times and they still won't do it, but if you just make them put a period and a capital and a period and a capital and do it a few dozen times, at some point they'll say, "Oh, this is one of them spots where she's going to make me put a period in."

Again, the learn by doing rather than learning by definition or explanation. So important. The other thing I think captures kids about this *Fix It* is one of the same aspects of our spelling program that kids kind like, which is—it's not a worksheet or a workbook approach in the same way. It's more of a self-test, self-correct game.

Okay, so here's the sentence. Here's the checklist of the five things you've got to find in this sentence. Okay? You try it and then you compare because we, in the teacher's book,

Julie Walker: And it's actually in the back of the student book as well

Andrew Pudewa: ...we have the fixed-up version. And you compare the official fixed-up version against your attempt to fix it up. And if you got all those things, you win.

If you didn't, oh, you learned something, but there's no, we're going to grade this or score this, or you have to do two pages of fill in the blank and mom's going to correct it, kind of deal. It's almost so easy. It's too easy to be hard work.

Julie Walker: It can't be effective if it's that easy. Right, Andrew?

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Well, that's kind of what we see in a lot of areas.

Sometimes the simpler, easier, more enjoyable way to do something actually gets you the better results.

Julie Walker: Absolutely. So inherent grammar, those early years—just memorize poetry, read out loud, just have a language-rich environment. As they get older, you can start doing applied grammar, and maybe that's just in their writing. You haven't busted out a grammar book yet. Then maybe fourth or fifth grade maybe that would be a time to consider it.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I, I even think a year of *Structure and Style* writing.

Julie Walker: I agree.

Andrew Pudewa: Then launch into *Fix It* and now it's going to be even easier because you've been using most of those things.

Julie Walker: -ly's and strong verbs and all that.

Andrew Pudewa: And then of course we get to the highest level of analytical grammar. And yes, you could go all the way up through *Fix It* six, and you would have a very high level of experience wrestling with the analytical grammar of the English language.

But it would be a sin of omission were I not to mention the value of learning a foreign language in order to learn your own language grammar much better.

Julie Walker: and you don't have to wait till high school to learn a foreign language.

Andrew Pudewa: No, not at all. I mean, that's traditionally you go to high school and that's when they put you in Spanish one or something.

But you know what's interesting is when you try to teach an English speaking person, English grammar, there's not a lot of relevancy because it's kinda like saying to a kid, "Alright son, sit down (10 year old kid.) I want to give you a lecture on how you ride a bike." The kid's like, "Dad, I know how to ride a bike."

"Yes you do, but you don't know all the biology and physics that makes bike riding possible. You need to know this." And the child is thinking, "What's the point? Could I just go ride my bike?" What? Why? To use English you don't really need to know how you do it if you grew up doing it in an environment where everyone was doing it decently well.

It's when you learn a foreign language. Now you need to know what are those things called and what are the rules that govern their behavior. And if you're doing foreign language, well, you're focusing on learning the structure of language. And the best way is to do cross translation. So you learn enough of a language to translate something from English into that language, or you learn that language well enough to translate it from that language into English.

And this was actually, and I'm just finished reading a book about the type of education that Shakespeare had. And it was a lot of Latin. It was a tremendous amount. In fact, there was no such thing as English class in Shakespeare's day. Grammar school was Latin. And what did you do? You translate something from Latin into English and then from English back in to Latin. And you would have to wrestle with the grammar on all sides of that.

So we discover many adults will say, today, I never really understood English grammar till I took German in college. That's when it started to make sense.

Julie Walker: Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: So I believe that in teaching Latin for six years, I actually learned more of, I don't know what Lewis might have called, the deep logic, the deep understanding of the structure of language from the study and teaching of Latin more than from years of trying to teach English writing.

So you can start a foreign language, I think as early as grade four or five, right around the time you might start a *Fix It*, and then you're going to get everything. If you are reading to kids and they're memorizing and you keep doing that. You're using something like *Fix It!* to help with the application of the mechanics, and you're studying a foreign language where you start to get X-ray vision into the structure of language itself, you're going to do the best that you can possibly do.

And I just finish up one more thing and say a little bit is better than nothing. And a little bit more is probably better than a little bit. But sometimes enough is enough, and you don't have to take things to an extreme to get the advantage. The comparison I would make is training in the gym. And I've learned this the hard way. You don't get stronger by beating yourself up every day. You don't just go in and just hammer it really hard day after day after day after day. That's not the best way to get stronger and become leaner and gain muscle. What's the best way? To do

some and then take a rest and do some more and take a rest and pace yourself and do it differently in different ways, and then you get the maximum benefit.

So I think this parallels into our teaching of academic subjects as well. You're not going to get the best benefit by overdoing anything.

Julie Walker: Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: My pleasure.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Google podcasts, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.