Podcast 467: The Grammar of Thinking with Pamela White

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: If you read a long sentence and you can't know or figure out what the subject of the sentence is, you can't know what it means. If you don't know what it means, you can't gain any value or enjoyment.

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: Happy March, Andrew Pudewa.

Andrew Pudewa: Time flies when you're having fun, doesn't it, Julie?

Julie Walker: sure does. I think of the, the in-like-a-lion, out-like-a-lamb thing with March. And truth be told, we're not actually recording this in March, so I don't know if this came in like a lamb or came in like a lion.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, you can prognosticate.

Julie Walker: Oh, okay.

Andrew Pudewa: It's always nice to know the future. It's always good to anticipate the future, kind of like it's good to anticipate the next part of your sentence.

Julie Walker: This is true. Well, and I do have to speak to that. That's not what we're going to talk about today, but I could absolutely predict what the weather is going to be in California in March. Because it's Southern California, because it's almost always the same.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, that's like grade 2 math.

Julie Walker: Yeah. Late night and early morning low clouds.

Andrew Pudewa: You can still do it.

Julie Walker: yes. You can still do it. Here in Oklahoma, it's a little bit unpredictable.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, well, that makes life exciting. But no, I think there is a connection between anticipating the next part of your sentence and what we're going to talk about today,

Julie Walker: Well, it's true, but I don't want to go there quite yet, because I want you to share a couple of the jokes that you came in this morning with. Two really good jokes that I think our listeners would love to hear.

Andrew Pudewa: and I'm supposed to remember them?

Julie Walker: One has to do with a cantaloupe. Cantaloupe.

Andrew Pudewa: Why should you not eat cantaloupe and cauliflower at the same meal? It will give you a feeling of melon-choly.

Julie Walker: Ha ha ha.

Andrew Pudewa: There's that one. Here's a different one. I didn't tell you this one. I have this grandfather clock and for 90 years it went tick-tock,tick-tock, tick and then it stopped doing that and it just went tick tick tick. so I took it into an old German clock repair guy. And he looks at it and he says, "Yes, we have ways of making you tock…"

Julie Walker: Awesome. Well, I know that once upon a time, Andrew, you had the idea of writing a joke book and tying it into why it's funny based on the rules of grammar. And this, of course, is our topic for today because this is March, and March is in some circles called National Grammar Month.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, really?

Julie Walker: Yeah, I think it's because it's one of the only dates on the calendar that has an imperative.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, technically, I think March the 4th is National Grammar Day because it is the only date which is a complete sentence. March "forth"

Julie Walker: Exactly. So we're just going to expand it, and here at IEW, we're going to be talking about grammar all month because we've got lots to talk about.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it's a big subject, grammar. And I was thinking a lot about how easy it is for students to not say what they're trying to say, rather than to say what they're trying to say. And there's a meme rolling around right now. And they'll put this little tagline on all sorts of different pictures or circumstances. "I don't think that says what you think it says." That's not even an odd thing for a teacher to say to a student.

Julie Walker: Exactly. Exactly. Probably a line from Princess Bride, it sounds like.

Andrew Pudewa: Possibly. Yeah, I haven't memorized the whole movie like you have.

Julie Walker: Well, and of course, if we're talking about grammar, and you mentioned the "how to think," of course, this is our theme for the year, how to think. And you alluded to the idea of grammar being an important component of thinking and learning to think. And because of that, I thought, well, we've got literally the person that wrote the book on grammar available to us, and let's invite her to join us on this podcast.

Andrew Pudewa: the woman who for years and years has been the go-to person for the nastiest grammar questions we come up with.

Julie Walker: It's true. And

Andrew Pudewa: Or that people send to us.

Julie Walker: Exactly. And so, of course, we have with us today as a guest on our podcast, but hardly a guest, certainly a friend, a good friend, the author of *Fix It! Grammar*, Pamela White. Pamela, thank you so much for joining us today.

Pamela White: Thank you.

Julie Walker: So just going back to what we started talking about, and that is this theme of how to think. How do you believe grammar plays a role in thinking?

Pamela White: I think it's critical because we learn to think by analyzing data and processing language and a large part of that analysis happens through the task of writing itself. But I think grammar plays an important role too. It's probably not intuitive, but learning grammar develops those synaptic connections in our brain that actually help our minds grasp the meaning of what we read.

As well as make it clear what we mean in our writing. You were talking about that earlier. Are we making it clear to our audience what we're saying? And I think grammar is a very important part in doing that. And especially punctuation guides our understanding of written sentences.

Andrew Pudewa: We think back to antiquity, ancient times. And among the classical education people, there's this idiom, the Greek miracle, right? And what was that? And what we see is that the Greeks took from the Phoenicians, the idea of phonics, we get the word phonics from Phoenician, because they came up with this idea of symbols to represent sounds.

And that was kind of the first. Before that, there were mostly things like the Egyptians used ideographs that were ideas, but this idea, this, this concept of using symbols to represent sounds that build into language. And then the Greeks essentially, I guess, discovered parts of speech and came up with rules that you would use to record ideas in such a way that those ideas could be transferred over time and space. And that was really part of the explosion of philosophy and technology and political ideation building, generation after generation after generation, that Greek miracle of language.

And then, of course, the Romans conquered the Greeks, but rather than replacing what the Greeks did so well, they adopted that and perfected it in a way. And so we look at Latin as the foundation, really, of grammar for pretty much all modern languages and the consistency of meaning. Because if you don't have rules and you just throw words in a mental soup bowl and pull them out at random, you could really mix up what you're trying to say.

So I wonder, Pamela, how you've obviously contemplated a lot the complexity, the potential complexity of language. And you think about the older authors' long, long sentences. First sentence of the Declaration of Independence, 72 words. If you don't get the grammar right, you can't understand what that thing is trying to say.

Julie Walker: Right.

Pamela White: Absolutely.

Julie Walker: So, Pamela, I know that, just restating what Andrew said is, people are saying what, I don't think what you mean what you really meant to say. Why do you suppose that is and why do people have an aversion to even learning grammar?

Pamela White: This has been building for a long time. What is apparent is that, and there's evidence for this, that schools have been de-emphasizing the teaching of grammar for decades now. And interestingly, it's not because they don't find it important, but because they feel that it's too time consuming to teach. I guess they assume that the benefits don't outweigh the difficulties.

Julie Walker: Interesting.

Pamela White: But as a result, we have generations of parents who've been ill-taught, both grammar and writing. And the process of teaching it then seems daunting to them. They don't see any obvious or immediate rewards, and so grammar and writing often get short shrift in teaching. So I think that that aversion comes from not having learned it well themselves, and therefore not feeling comfortable and confident in teaching it and passing those tools on.

Julie Walker: Well, and I love that you said this idea of it takes too long to learn grammar. And I remember as a school teacher, taking my students through the curriculum, and we used the diagramming format to teach grammar. And I know that was so time consuming to try and get them to put the lines in the right places and to connect the clauses. Is this an adverbial clause? Is this an adjectival clause? And it was just painful to watch the students wrestle with this. I enjoyed it because I enjoy puzzles. You're absolutely right. This was very time consuming. And so maybe it's not so much people having an aversion to learning grammar, it's just that they're not being taught.

Andrew Pudewa: We should mention David Molroy's excellent little book, *The War Against Grammar*. And he documents pretty well that there was this move to minimize or even eliminate the teaching of grammar in schools going all the way back to the 80s. So what we're pushing 45 years and the results of that I think have been connected with the overall lowering of literacy.

If you, as he was saying, if you read a long sentence and you can't know. Or figure out what the subject of the sentence is. You can't know what it means. If you don't know what it means,

you can't gain any value or enjoyment. And so, this is very sadly connected with the decline of people being willing to read some of the older great books.

It's too overwhelming. Give me something that's dumbed down to my level of education. And it isn't as though people are not intelligent–they are–but we've just neglected the cultivation of, I guess the word intimacy with language. I like that word, like when you know how to spell words, you love them, you own them, when you can parse a sentence. Actually, when you even know what the word *parse* means, you're happier. But when you can really understand all of the pieces of a sentence, how they fit together and what it means, and maybe even So when you explain that to someone, you have that sense of ownership and there's a joy to that. There's a confidence. So I think this is one reason why people like the three of us are so committed to not giving up this war against grammar.

Pamela White: An adjacent part of that problem is that in the school systems for a long time, and this goes back at least to the 60s, there's been an emphasis on tell me what you feel. So you read a work of literature and the teacher asks students to respond about what they feel, but that sidesteps: What exactly is the writer saying?

And I think our first task has to be what is the writer communicating? What is the writer saying? And then what do you feel about that? But until we understand the written word, until we can truly parse it out and understand it, we don't really have that right to talk about what we feel because we're not responding to the writer. We're responding just to our own internal ideas.

Andrew Pudewa: So true. And, and there's kind of an irony here. To actually articulate how you feel about something to any depth at all, rather than just saying, I like it, or it makes me sad, to say anything worth saying, you need the tools to construct a more complex idea.

Pamela White: Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: So you need it on both sides. The taking in what the writer is saying and what they mean as well as being able to construct a sentence that accurately represents the thought or feeling you have in response to that.

Julie Walker: Yeah, you mentioned earlier, Andrew, the word *parse*, and we should probably define that. And I think of what you're saying right now, grammar is important, vocabulary is important. If we don't have the words to speak our thoughts, then we're not actually going to be able to have those thoughts. And you talk about that on other podcasts.

And this, of course, just beautifully leads us into The incredible miracle, maybe that's overstating a little bit, but just how beautiful our *Fix It! Grammar* program is designed and that: it is teaching grammar. It includes an element of vocabulary because that is an important piece of *Fix It!* and our curriculum team and Pamela worked together for, actually it was a couple years to get this fourth edition off the ground and launched.

It's just so easy to use, and I think, Pamela, one of the things that it does address is that a length of time to teach grammar is so much reduced because 15, that's what we say, 15 minutes a day, you can learn grammar. And it sounds like it's almost too good to be true, and we couldn't possibly be helping people learn grammar in a way that's going to affect their writing and ultimately their lives.

Andrew Pudewa: Critical thinking is such a buzzword. Everybody wants it, but few people can describe or explain, and very few people know how to actually cultivate that. But I would argue that it begins with this idea of parsing, right? And it's funny because I'm teaching Latin to a bunch of little kids.

Julie Walker: Which is why you're using the word parsing because that's what you do.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, they don't know this word. And the Latin 1 book third lesson is parse this word.

And so parsing, I think what it means is being able to break it into its parts. I wonder if those are cognate in any way, but you think, okay, first thing you've got to know is what part of speech is this? Is it a noun or is it a verb? Then if it's a verb, you have to know what tense it is. In Latin, the person and the number are part of that whole word, and so now you have to know the tense, the person, the number, and then without that, you can't translate it.

You can't know what it means. And in English, we use more than just one word to do all that, but you get into nouns, now you have to have the case. So that you know what role that word is performing in the sentence. And we don't use that so much in English; we use more word order. But if you look at some of the really creative wordsmiths of the past from Shakespeare up through some of the poets, even some of the modern poets, even some of the rap that you hear, they will be powerfully unique, but still effective in communicating an idea because they're using the words in the right sequences. And their sentences are parsable. So you can know what's the subject, what's the object, what are their prepositions, where are the objects? You can, if you know what you're doing, you can mix all that stuff up.

Andrew Pudewa: And be really unique and creative with language. But if you don't know that, and you start mixing stuff up, pretty soon, you don't even know what you're saying.

Julie Walker: So, Pamela, I know that in addition to authoring Fixit, you actually use it in your own classes. Can you share some of your experience in teaching with *FixIt!* ?

Pamela White: I'd almost rather go back a little bit in time from how it emerged and the reason I like the approach to fix it far better than traditional grammar programs, which I used to use. It emerged from my frustration with traditional ways of teaching grammar. A long time ago, I used to teach it at college prep high schools, and the students were bright. They were adept at memorizing all of the rules and our grammar handbook. I think we used The Harbrace College Handbook, but I saw disconnect between that memory work and the application. So they weren't applying the rules to their writing. And I felt all along that there

ought to be a more holistic way of teaching grammar so that it's working in the context of actual written sentences.

And the problem with most approaches to teaching grammar is that they use, they teach a certain rule and they give sentences that are predictable and that are contrived to fit that particular grammar rule for students to practice. But it's not, it's not sentences that we naturally would speak or write that have all the complexities of grammar and the complexities of errors in them, and they can have any number of errors. And what I've discovered in teaching fix it mainly to high schoolers over the last couple of decades and more when I keep hearing from these students is that their performance on the ACT or the SAT grammar and writing portion improved after using *Fix It!* . And so I asked the question to them and to myself.

Why is that? And I think that the obvious reason is that standardized tests are going to ask students the same sort of thing. Find the errors in the sentences, which is exactly what *Fix It!* has been trained to do in practice daily, but the larger explanation is that *Fix It!* teaches grammar holistically. It doesn't focus on just one grammar problem per sentence.

And Julie, you talked earlier about diagramming, which I wanted to come back to because I love myself. I find it enjoyable. It's fun to do. That's not so true with students' experience, but that's a fun thing. And I think there's a huge benefit in diagramming in that it shows what the constituent parts of the sentence are. It helps us figure out how these different parts of the sentence work together and therefore you can figure out the punctuation. Because understanding that underlying structure of sentences, very simply where your clauses are, where your phrases are, is critical to being able to punctuate them correctly. And diagramming does it beautifully, but, and here's my big but, diagramming splits the sentences visually into their parts. And so, when you finish diagramming a sentence, you no longer see the sentence as it was written. What *Fix It!* does is have students mark those structural parts, but it keeps the sentences intact. So visually students can see how the parts relate to each other, and punctuation is going to make better sense that way.

Andrew Pudewa: And then when they copy it, that is kind of bringing it inside them. It's making it their own thing.

Pamela White: It's taking ownership in the same way they do with writing from their outlines, from their key word outlines. They take ownership.

Julie Walker: I have a question, Pamela, about *Fix It!* and our Structure and Style approach to teaching writing. We, of course, sell *Fix It!* with our Structure and Style for Students products because we believe they dovetail, but we have a lot of families and a lot of schools who just use *Fix It!*. Is it possible to learn grammar without using our writing Structure and Style method and be successful? Part two of that is, are there things in *Fix It!* that will actually help them become better writers if they're actually using our materials, our theme based lessons, our Structure and Style for Students videos?

Pamela White: Grammar is a part of writing. Well, and I think it's an important part of writing. Well, but it's not the whole of it. So, if all you do for your English curriculum is study grammar, you're missing out on a very significant part of learning to think and learning to think critically, which I would argue comes largely through the act of writing.

So, grammar is an important part of it, but you can't isolate the two. The two together if you use *Fix It! Grammar* with IEW methods of teaching writing do dovetail nicely for 1 reason and *Fix It! Grammar* reinforces dress ups and sentence openers. And so it uses similar terminology to IEW writing terminology.

Andrew Pudewa: I think a great analogy, again, is if we go to music or sports. Because if you look at the way people learn music, they will do these exercises, scales, etudes, playing the same few measures again and again and again, to gain the technical skill. On the soccer coach–wind sprints, dribble drills, passing, um, And kids don't like that stuff that much. They don't like the exercises. They just want to play the game and have fun. But the people who do the exercises do better when it comes to learning the new, more complex piece of music or being up against a really tough team on the field.

And I think part of what parents and teachers need to understand is, these exercises, we try to make it as painless and, for some people, maybe we use the word enjoyable, but painless as possible. But the value of doing that is what's going to empower those kids when they hit, kind of, the real world of what they want to accomplish or what they need to accomplish with language. And I just think it's always good to reinforce these analogies because a lot of people have experience with music or sports, but they don't necessarily think about English and writing and speaking and grammar in those same categories.

Julie Walker: Exactly.

Pamela White: And that discipline is absolutely critical to learning grammar, learning to write well, all of these skills.

Andrew Pudewa: I want to throw out a question. I'm sure people have asked you this. I know how I might answer it, but I'm curious how you would. A lot of times, parents will say “Well, we've done X number of years of [fill in the blank] grammar. Is this enough?” How do you know when you've learned enough grammar?

Pamela White: From my experience, high schoolers do benefit from continuing to study grammar throughout their high school experience. For one reason, they lose the skills, they forget the skills in the same way if you allow them to drop writing dress ups and sentence openers. Those skills atrophy over time, and so I think it is important to keep at least some work using those skills. And the longer students can practice them the more likely they are to have them in their permanent toolbox, and so they can carry them with them forward and then they can use the skills as they want to. And as they work in their adult writing. I'm not sure that that really answers your question, though.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, no, I think it's a very good point because you want to reinforce something until it's just natural and automatic. And so you can practice something and pass, right? You're going to have a passing performance, but to have a lasting effect, it needs to be second nature. And so you're never going to be harmed by doing something until it's easy and natural and you can do it without having to think real hard because now those habits of thought are formed and automatic, kind of like math, right? I mean, you could have a math problem and sit there and try to remember what eight times four is to do this more complex math problem that contains that, but if you just automatically go there, well then the whole problem goes better.

And again, I think there's a great analogy between math and grammar because the automaticity of it, the second nature, I know that I know that I know that, is hugely valuable in both disciplines.

Julie Walker: So Pamela, I have two more questions for you, but I fear we're going to have to put the second question in another episode. So the first question is back to your experience using *Fix It! Grammar*. I know that, of course, you've taught IEW online classes for years, you're no longer doing that, but you do have other students, especially your ESL students, you've told me a few stories about that. Would you mind sharing with our listeners some of what you shared with me about the power of *Fix It! Grammar* with these English language learners who are adults?

Pamela White: Sure, the classes I've taught and the individuals I've worked with have been competent speakers. They have already learned their English. So these are not beginning ESL students, but adults who know how to communicate in English, but want to improve their skills in writing, their skills in communication.

And there are two students I'm going to use as just a example, whom I taught. They were both from India, and they were in the States at the time. One of them was working on a seminary degree, and the other was working on her MBA. And I realized from the beginning that they had serious comprehension issues with the books that they were assigned.

They were understanding maybe one out of every three sentences, and they had weak written communication skills as well. We worked through two levels of *Fix It!*, and after doing so, both of them demonstrated significant improvement in reading comprehension, as well as improvement in their writing and self editing skills.

And what surprised me–I'd expected the latter–I had expected improvement in writing and in self editing, but I was surprised by their better reading comprehension. And I asked them, why does understanding grammar make such a huge difference in your ability to understand what you read? And they explained it in two different ways.

First of all, they said that being able to tease apart the underlying structure of sentences helps them see all the parts of the sentence, not isolated words here and there, and it helped them

put those parts together comprehensively. And then the second reason is knowing why, for example, commas existed in certain places in sentences help them understand the meaning.

And again, I think that boils down to helping them see how words fit together and interrelate, but knowing that this comma has a purpose. Made a huge difference in how they were reading the language itself, which surprised me at the time. Now it makes sense to me because I've seen it so frequently.

Julie Walker: That's amazing. And I tell people, use *Fix It!* because you can now finally understand comma rules.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, commas save lives. You've seen the shirt that says, Let's Eat Grandpa?

With the comma and without the comma. And it's a great example of a huge difference in meaning.

Julie Walker: Well, my last question for you, Pamela, has to do with the tools that we can use. We can use GPS to direct us somewhere, we can use calculators to figure out math problems, we can use spell check to check our spelling. We can also use Grammarly, tools like Grammarly, to help us with grammar. So why do we need to learn grammar?

But I think this is going to lead us into a conversation about AI and how there could be some challenges with that. So, like I said, Pamela, we'll just pick up from there when we next chat. How does that sound?

Pamela White: That sounds great.

Andrew Pudewa: You want one more grammar joke?

Julie Walker: Oh, yes. We need another

Andrew Pudewa: It’s an old one. Everybody knows this joke, but there's no new jokes, there's just new people.

Julie Walker: Great. Here we go.

Andrew Pudewa: The past, the present, and the future walked into a bar. It was tense.

Julie Walker: See you next time.

Pamela White: Thank you.

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, 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.