8 Ways to Teach Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar

How do we help our students to become more confident with the demands of 'SPaG' in formal writing? **Francis Gilbert** sets out some approaches based on investigating and working with language in real reading and writing contexts.

For many English teachers, teaching Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPaG) is daunting. The stakes have always been high: students who are not good spellers, struggle to punctuate correctly, and have a tendency to use non-standard forms in their writing are unlikely to achieve highly in exams. But since 2010, the stakes have been ramped up another notch as Conservative ministers have imposed SPaG tests on primary schools and insisted on greater weighting on SPaG in GCSE and A Level English exams – all of which has raised anxieties considerably.

English teachers could be forgiven for feeling very jaded about SPaG. During my career as an English teacher, and now as a teacher-educator, I've always felt very ambivalent about it. The grammar books that I was asked to use in some schools where I taught – such as *First Aid in English* (Maciver 2004) and others – were horribly dull and didn't achieve good results: pupils would plough through various tasks and tests and then forget all that they had supposedly learnt when they came to do some 'real' writing. I found, though, that the message got through when I myself was enthusiastic about language and showed that I loved investigating it.

With this in mind, this article aims to provide some tried and tested ways to diffuse some of these worries about SPaG, drawing together the best research and practice.

1. Etymology: discovering the magical origins of words

On one of those occasions when I discovered the power of enthusiasm and investigation, I saw that too many students in one class were not spelling 'necessary' correctly. *'Hey, this is a weird word, isn't it?'*, I said. *'Because you'd think it should be spelt 'nessersary'. So why is there is a 'c' acting as an 's' in it?'* Then, in front of the class, I looked the etymology up – and this is what I found:

> ***Necessary, adj***
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> *late 14c. "needed, required, essential, indispensable," from Old French* necessaire *"necessary, urgent, compelling" (13c.), and directly from Latin* necessarius *"unavoidable, indispensable, necessary," from* necesse *"unavoidable, indispensable," originally "no backing away," from* ne- *"not" + cedere "to withdraw, go away, yield" (from PIE root* ****ked-*** *"to go, yield"). The root sense is of that*

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from which there is no evasion, that which is inevitable. ***Necessary house*** *"privy" is from c. 1600.* ***Necessary evil*** *is from 1540s (the original reference was to "woman").*

https://www.etymonline.com/word/necessary

This led to a discussion about how the word comes from the French and Latin. We all laughed about 'necessary house' when I told them what a 'privy' was; we thought about it meaning 'no backing away'. Now a sort of magic pervaded the word – and the students' ability to spell it improved. From that time onwards, I began to discuss the etymology of important words with my classes, finding that it really helped with pupils' spelling.

2. Working words out: modelling learning

Some teachers might bridle at the thought of looking up a word in class with students, because, as an English teacher, students think you are supposed to know the meaning of every single word in the language, and their spellings. This is, of course, an absolute impossibility. Moreover, research has shown that when a teacher 'models' how they discover things in front of the class and then encourages their pupils to do the same, they really help their pupils to learn both more quickly and more happily (Watkins, 2010).

What does this mean in practice? It means being honest! If you don't know the meaning of a word in a passage you are reading, then tell your students that you find it difficult and show them how you might work out the meaning. Recent research (Giovanelli, Mason: 2015) has shown that reading is often best taught when a teacher doesn't know the text and is reading it the first time with the students – or at least giving the impression that they are. In part, this produces better outcomes from students because the teacher is able to model how they find out what difficult words and phrases mean by re-reading them, by asking questions, by looking up words in a dictionary. I have observed too many lessons – and been guilty of delivering them myself – where the meanings of difficult words are supplied in a glossary. The process of looking words up in a dictionary aids spelling and comprehension because students will internalise the word, making it their own.

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3. Reading aloud: expressing yourself, finding your errors

Getting students to read aloud is really important if you want them to improve their SPaG. This became clear to me when I once asked a student to read what they had written in their book to me. (I was sitting beside them so they weren't embarrassed that everyone was listening.) Their work, which I had not marked, was full of SPaG errors. As they read, they began to realise most of their own mistakes: spelling, punctuation and grammar. The act of reading aloud was absolutely central to them realising their errors. From that time onwards, I asked my students to read their work to each other in pairs or groups on a regular basis and found that if I asked them to stop and correct their work when appropriate, this had amazingly good results.

4. Real contexts: SPaG through reading and writing

While decontextualised tests can have their place (see below), the overwhelming evidence is that pupils learn to spell, punctuate and discuss grammar when they are reading 'real' pieces of writing and exploring 'real' situations. This is why giving them lots of high-stakes spelling and grammar tests where they are only writing one-word answers is a waste of time.

You're far better off using some of the excellent resources published by the likes the University of Exeter: these are free, research informed and supported by yours truly, NATE (see below for details). These resources can be used in the classroom with little or no modifications. They model for teachers how the teaching of grammar in particular can be embedded within the teaching of such texts as *A Monster Calls*, *Touching the Void*, *Lord of the Flies* and *Great Expectations*. If you don't feel confident about teaching grammar, they are a great place to start because lesson plans and resources are provided. Once you've used them, you'll grow in confidence and then use their ideas to inform your teaching of other texts.

The English and Media Centre's *All Sorts* (a series of teaching ideas, resources & plans) also contains some brilliant ready-made lessons on the teaching of spelling

('Word Banks') and grammar ('Proper English') as well. Recently, *How to Teach Grammar* (OUP 2019) by Bas Aarts, Ian Cushing, and Richard Hudson has also illustrated best practice.

5. Marking: approaches to assessment

One of the problems with marking every single piece of work for SPaG errors is that pupils don't learn to look for mistakes themselves, but expect the teacher to do this. Furthermore, teachers don't acquire a proper record of the errors. One of the best ways to assess SPaG productively, then, is to write students' errors on one 'assessment' sheet while you are marking a set of books. Keep these sheets in your record systems, which could look like this:

Spelling issues	Punctuation issues	Grammar issues	Other points

You can then experiment with not marking students' work but simply telling your classes that you found these errors, getting students to re-read their work to see where they made them, and asking them to correct their errors. This helps them to acquire the vital skill of proof-reading and saves you a great deal of time too.

The key point is to gain a central record of errors/issues and then systematically target addressing them in your subsequent lessons. Putting all your comments on one sheet is a great way of doing this. You show parents and managers that you are marking the work by photocopying this sheet and asking students to put it in their books, and then reflect upon how they are addressing the relevant issues. Research (Black *et al.* 2004) shows this is a more effective and much less time-consuming way of marking than annotating individual books.

6. Finding patterns, making sense

NATE published a wonderful resource in 1996 entitled *The Grammar Book: Finding Patterns – Making Sense*, which just about sums the whole thing up. Teaching SPaG effectively is about encouraging students to see the patterns that exist in spellings, sentence structures, word order and meanings. When you look closely, strict 'rules' rarely exist, but recognisable patterns often do. For example, some spelling patterns are much more reliable than others: the famous '*i before e except after c*' rule' has so many exceptions (neighbour, weight, etc.) that some experts claim it's not worth teaching. Estimates say that there are 923 exceptions and only 44 words that follow the rule. The appendix for the National Curriculum is pretty useful in terms of suggesting 'rules' but its prescriptive approach is not helpful for nurturing enlightened teaching which really gets students improving their spelling.

7. Creative re-drafting

As an English teacher I never enjoyed giving spelling tests; I learnt quite quickly that scouring pupils' work with red marks highlighting all their inaccuracies was not productive. I realised that it was much better to systematically get students to re-draft their work, considering deeply how I might motivate them to do this well.

A great way to do this is to give pupils real audiences to write for. This makes a huge difference. So, for example, some of the most effective SPaG lessons I taught were when I asked my difficult Year 9 students, many of whom struggled with SPaG, to write exciting stories for the new Year 7 students; drafting was built into the process and much else beside.

The Year 9 students met with the Year 7s, interviewed them about the stories they liked, then planned and drafted their stories a few times, getting their peers to assess and correct them; at the same time I circulated

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around the class doing 'in-class' marking where appropriate. I made a point of saying that I expected the students themselves to make the stories 'SPaG'-perfect and that they were role models for the Year 7 students.

This sense of having a real audience inspired the students to correct errors themselves and learn from their mistakes. Because this idea worked so well, I used it to inform my teaching when SPaG problems occurred with other classes. For example, I once received some very weak essays on Shakespeare's *Macbeth* from my Year 10s. Instead of getting them to re-write the dreary essays and correct errors, I asked them to use their knowledge of the play to write *Macbeth* leaflets for my Year 7 class, which were aimed at giving eleven-year-olds a sense of the plot, characters, themes and imagery. The Year 10s learnt more about *Macbeth* and SPaG than they'd ever done when writing 'lit-crit'-style exam responses because they were motivated to tell the Year 7s about what they knew.

8. A case for explicit instruction?

All this said, research also shows that short bursts of targeted, explicit, 'decontextualised' instruction can have its place, particularly with pupils who are struggling. Harris *et al.* (2017) point out that '*weak spellers are weak writers because they spend much of their time thinking about how to spell words rather than thinking about the content of what they are writing.*' (p. 264). This research team go on to point out two vital strategies that go hand in hand: (a) teaching students how to spell high frequency words they don't know how to spell automatically and (b) teaching students how to plan, draft, re-draft and evaluate their work (as suggested in no. 7 above).

Their paper is well worth reading if you are teaching students who have significant problems with spelling. They suggest that students with very poor handwriting need to trace words and then visualise them using the 'look, cover, say, write' approach; they also suggest playing spelling games such as Word Bingo in pairs, setting clear goals for themselves. They argue that actually there are only really about a hundred words that most learners find difficult to spell and that if these words are mastered, students will progress quickly. Above all, however, students need plenty of practice with reading and writing.

Resources, Further Reading, References

Aarts, B., Cushing, I., Hudson, R. (2019) *Oxford Teaching Guides: How to Teach Grammar.* Oxford University Press, Oxford. *A short, very useful guide on all the thorny topics. It's particularly good on grammar terminology.*

Bain, Elspeth, *et al.* (1996) *The Grammar Book: Finding Patterns – Making Sense*. NATE, 1996. *Sadly, this wonderful resource too often is languishing on English teachers' shelves in schools. Look at it! Use it, it's great; easy to use and teaches grammar in context.*

Black, P. *et al.* (2004) 'Working inside the Black Box: Assessment for Learning in the Classroom'. Phi Delta Kappan Magazine, 86(1), pp.8–21. *A nice summary of important research into Assessment for Learning, which is very relevant for SPaG teaching.*

Maciver, A. (2004) *First Aid in English*. Hodder Education. London. *A dry text book, which possibly creates more problems than it solves in that many of the tasks are decontextualized exercises, with pupils gaining little idea of how SPaG issues exist in context. Books of this type are widely used in schools.*

Giovanelli, M., and Mason, J. (2015) "'Well I Don't Feel That': Schemas, Worlds and Authentic Reading in the Classroom." English in Education, 49 (1). 41–55. *While Giovanelli and Mason's work is academic, it has huge implications for English teachers; using a powerful evidence base, it argues that English teachers should read alongside their students like a real reader rather than supplying them with lots of pre-prepared interpretations. I would take this a step further and argue that they need to model authentic learning about SPAG (see above).*

Department for Education (2013), National Curriculum – Appendix 1: Spelling. *I find the tone and prescriptions in this Appendix (full of statutory learning of words etc.) off-putting, but the document is clearly laid out. I think the key lesson is that these spellings need to be taught creatively and imaginatively.*

English and Media Centre (2007) *English Allsorts*, including 'Word Banks' and 'Proper English'. *These resources are fantastic! They may be quite old now, but they're gems, and never failed to work with my classes. The unit on Word Banks is particularly good for SPaG.*

Harris, Karen R, *et al.* "Teaching Spelling, Writing, and Reading for Writing: Powerful Evidence-Based Practices." Teaching Exceptional Children, vol. 49, no. 4, 2017, pp. 262–272. *A very useful academic article and resource for teachers working with SEND students who are really struggling.*

Harris, Ann, and Marie Helks. "What, Why and How – the Policy, Purpose and Practice of Grammatical Terminology." English in Education, vol. 52, no. 3, 2018, pp. 169–185. Key quote: *'Teachers may well be without a suitable repertoire of pedagogical approaches at a time when accountability, high-stakes assessment and curricular expectations are at their highest...'* (p. 181)

Kress, G.R., (2000). *Early spelling: between convention and creativity*. London: Routledge. *A classic by the late, great Kress, who did so much to make the teaching of English a creative, joyful process. It is aimed younger children, but so much is appropriate for older students too.*

Maciver, Angus (2004) *The New First Aid in English*. Hodder Education. London. *Arrgh! Death of the soul, but still – or iterations of it – sadly being used in many English classrooms today I think.*

University of Exeter Centre for Research in Writing (accessed 2020) 'Grammar as Choice: Resources for Teachers'. http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/education/research/centres/writing/grammar-teacher-resources/thegrammarforwritingpedagogy. *These resources are really useful, and free; far better than many of the very expensive resources you can buy, so well worth taking a look at them.*

Watkins, Chris. (2010). *Learning, Performance and Improvement.* INSI Research Matters series No. 34. www.ioe-rdnetwork.com/uploads/2/1/6/3/21631832/c_watkins_learning_performance_improvement.pdf. *Watkins really shows how obsessing about results as opposed to nurturing learning in a relaxed, happy way backfires both in terms of results and pupils' attitudes.*

Waugh, David, *et al.* (2016) *Teaching Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling in Primary Schools* (Sage, 2013). *This book is aimed at primary school teachers, but I think secondary English teachers could find it very useful too.*

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