

10

TIPS FOR TEACHING SYNTAX



1 Linguistic Experts

Students are already masters of language even if they can't explain the technical parts. Treat them this way! Leverage what they already innately know as a foundation of learning language rather than approaching lessons like they don't know their first language. ELL students can still participate in these types of activities, although they will require more explicit instruction. An example of innate language knowledge can be seen in ordering of adjectives. Even without being taught, kids will know "the red, big truck" sounds wrong.

2 Mentor sentences

Find sentences in the literature being read in class. Use mentor sentences for teaching syntax because it increases study investment and helps them better understand sentences they have already read. It shows students what real writers do and the sentences may be more interesting than ones from grammar textbooks.

3 Explicit Teaching

Students can't be expected to figure out how to form complex or interesting sentences on their own. They best be taught how. Anita Archer's "I do it, we do it, you do it" model of explicit instruction is an effective way to teach syntax. It works to build students' understanding before having them practice the skill on their own.

4 Curriculum content

Use curriculum content for practicing syntax. Not only does using curriculum content from what is being taught reinforce the learning of other subjects, it provides more opportunities for students to practice sentence-level writing. By combining content and syntax, lessons become dual purpose and add to the gradual increase in students' writing abilities.

5 Study Sentences

Breaking down and chunking sentences with the class helps students more fully understanding the meaning of focus sentences and shows a format they can use for their own sentences. Language Dives lessons involve deconstruct, reconstructing, and practicing sentences for this purpose. Similarly, lessons from Patterns of Power increase students understanding of sentences and invites them to practice writing similar ones.

6 Building Blocks of Paragraphs

Master sentences before tackling paragraphs. In order to write a coherent paragraph, students must be able to form well written sentences. Until students have sufficiently practiced sentence writing, there isn't much benefit to writing paragraphs. A paragraph loaded with grammatical errors is overwhelming for a teacher to mark and frustrating for the students to write and receive feedback on.

7 Forget Linguistical Terms

Although terms may be needed for discussing parts of sentences that are being dissected and practiced, don't get hung up on students memorizing them. It's more important that they can construct and understand complex sentences than whether or not they can explain the linguistical terms.

8 Writing as a Learning Tool

Teaching students to write is like teaching them to think. Organizing sentences and paragraphs requires organizing thoughts. The same applies to forming arguments and deciding what to emphasize or de-emphasize in a sentence. Applying this approach to writing across the curriculum means students can strategize and nuance their written responses to better communicate their thinking.

9 Sentence Expansion and Combining

A great way students to practice complex sentences is by expanding or combining a kernel sentence with more information. This is a great practice for curriculum content. Students are given a simple sentence and questions, such as "when" or "how," to answer and combine into the original kernel. They can also be provided with two simple sentences that must be combined.

10 Summary Sentences

Writing a summary sentence for a larger passage of writing is an important skill for students to learn for paragraph writing. Summarizing is also a great thinking activity and is easy to apply across curriculum content. Students can read a passage, either fiction or non-fiction, and figure out what's most important for the overarching idea. Then, they use that information to put together a sentence that summarizes it.

References

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