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Grammatical Concepts Paper

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**Introduction**

When it comes to teaching English, there is no other subject that makes students cringe more than having to learn grammar. Grammar is the underdog of the English classroom, not often looked forward to by students and perhaps even some teachers alike. To the student’s mind (coming from someone who was a student herself not very long ago) grammar instruction just seems unnecessary, distracting from “the good stuff” like reading interesting novels and writing. The truth of the matter is, however, that it could not be more integral to a full understanding of literature. Without a steady grasp on grammar, how could one begin to compose eloquent, flowing, and beautiful sentences? How can one fully analyze a work of literature without being aware of the conscious grammatical decisions made on the part of the author? So, being a future teacher, I want to try to shake my students of the feeling that grammar may not be worth learning. I want to show them just how important it is to our understanding of our own language, as well as show them that it isn’t a subject to be feared. Teaching grammar doesn’t have to just be about “you need a comma here” or “this tense is wrong here.” Teaching it like that will only detract students and not make any real progress. That’s why I want to show my students that knowing about grammar can really make a huge difference in their writing, and make a bland piece a bold one. Here, I’d like to describe a few different grammatical concepts that I find important, and give explanations for how I would teach them as well as why I would teach them.

**Grammatical Concept One: Passive Voice**

**Description of Concept**

In order to fully understand passive voice, it’s worth going over what exactly “voice” is. What indicates the voice of a sentence is the relationship between the subject and the verb. When the “agent” (the thing performing the action) is front and center as the sentence’s subject, that’s known as active voice. In the majority of sentences, the subject is also the agent doing the action described by the verb. But that isn’t always the case; sometimes it can be appropriate for the direct object to steal a little bit of the spotlight. When the direct object (the thing that is being acted upon by the agent) is the subject of the sentence, it’s called passive voice. Now, it’s incredibly important to distinguish between the subject of a sentence and the agent. When you change a sentence into passive voice, you are not making the direct object into the agent. Just as before, the direct object is still being acted upon, and now the agent is either the object of the preposition *by* or completely excluded from the sentence. As for the verb, it becomes a past participle and is preceded by a form of *be* as an auxiliary. For an example, look at this sentence: “The monkey was taken to the veterinarian by the kind, old gentleman.”

**Why It’s Important to Good Writing**

Passive voice is often looked upon with a bit of scrutiny. If used incorrectly, passive voice can make sentences that are too wordy, awkward, or just plain vague. Personally, I’ve been warned by past teachers and professors alike that passive voice should be avoided in all circumstances, but I think that’s the wrong way to go about it. Passive voice is very useful for when you want to shift the reader’s focus away from the agent and instead zero-in on what is actually happening. If you want the reader to focus more on what’s happening to the direct object, passive voice gives you a way to do that. Not only that, but passive voice can also add to the flow of a piece of writing by making transitions between sentences easier. For example, look at part of this passage provided in “Understanding English Grammar” by Kolln & Funk:

“If Americans are truly interested in saving the rain forests, they should move beyond rhetoric and suggest *policies* that are practical – and acceptable – to the understandably wary Brazilians. *Such policies* cannot be presented as take-them-or-leave-them propositions.” (320)

Here, the subjects that refer to each other in these two sentences have been italicized. Notice how the passive voice used in the second sentence allows the writer to smoothly transition their idea from sentence to sentence, without the focus being lost. The *policies* being talked about are still front and center, and the reader can easily grasp that they are what’s important here. So, passive voice is definitely something that should be taught. It shouldn’t be discouraged, as it can make clear points which would otherwise be muddy if worded differently.

**How I Would Teach It**

The best way I can explain it is this: think about the parts of a sentence as actors in a play. The subject is the actor in the spotlight, the main character, the one that we need to be focusing on. Now, depending on if that actor is doing an action, or having the action done to them, makes it either active or passive voice. An example I might set up would be a murder-mystery theme, with a sentence being “Professor Plumb was poisoned during the dinner party.” Because I’m a pretty visual person (and a lot of students are too) I’d use whatever tools are available to me to draw a picture of a stage and the actors. “Professor Plumb” is our main character here, so I would label him as the subject, but emphasize that he is NOT the one doing the poisoning here. Thus, Professor Plumb is both the subject AND the direct object, this statement is definitely passive. Then, I would show them an alternate, active voice version of this sentence, maybe “Colonel Mustard poisoned Professor Plumb during the dinner party.” This murder-mystery isn’t much of a mystery anymore is it? This illustrates one of the uses for passive voice mentioned earlier, that it takes the focus away from the agent. To hit it home, I’d ask my students to write a sentence or two in active voice, and then to convert that sentence into passive voice so they can try it for themselves and see how much it can change.

**Why I Would Teach it This Way**

Since passive voice (and perhaps voice in general) is sort an abstract idea, I want to try to make it as accessible as possible and use a comparison that students may be a bit more familiar with: plays. Thinking about the parts of speech as actors gives them a clear comparison to make, and paints a picture that can really help rationalize the concept. Imagining it like this also helps to explain exactly why the passive voice is useful, and when it’s appropriate to use it. The very end bit is also important, as it shows students firsthand how passive voice affects a sentence. Making comparisons between the two voices like that can heighten the students’ understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of both.