
Filling the Attic

Alexandra Glynn

Let's climb up into the attic and see if we can't think of some ways to improve the textbooks and worksheets we assign our students. Perhaps we are thinking "I am only teaching grammar here, no need to get carried away and go shop the rummage sales for something interesting to put in the attic." But, if we think about it, perhaps in teaching grammar and some of the seemingly more uncreative areas of our courses, this is exactly what we need. For in teaching grammar, one uses example sentences. One points to example forms. And one expects students to write sentences displaying their grasp of grammar. The question is, out of what sort of sentences are we taking our examples? For it is likely that what we take for examples will come back to us again in the sentences students write for us and for the rest of our society later in their daily work.

To illustrate. Today I wish to teach my students SVO. To do this, I give them this sonnet from Shakespeare:

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
But as the ripper should by time decease,
His tender heir might bear his memory:
But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,
Feed'st thy light'st flame with self-substantial fuel,
Making a famine where abundance lies,
Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel.

Thou that art now the world's fresh ornament
And only herald to the gaudy spring,
Within thine own bud buriest thy content
And, tender churl, makest waste in niggarding.
Pity the world, or else this glutton be,
To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee.

Then I give them these instructions: “To make things rhyme, or to give more weight to certain things, poets play with syntax. Sometimes they put the adjectives after the noun they modify. They change the order of the verbs, subjects, objects, and so on, and they put clauses of explanation in-between the subject and the verb, so that you, in essence, have to ‘wait to get the verb’, or some other part of speech that you normally would expect to appear in another part of the sentence. In the sonnet above, find at least three ‘mistakes’ of syntax in sentences or parts of sentences that include at least a noun and a verb. Copy out that part of the sonnet in which you found the mistake, exactly as it is written. Then below it, rewrite the phrase, using the same words, into more ‘natural’ word order for English. Remember that the subject can at times be ‘you-understood’ and so you will have to write that in. The first one has been done for you.”

S V

S V O

S V O Io

1. From fairest creatures we desire increase,
We desire increase from fairest creatures.
- 2.
- 3.

As students do this exercise, they do not necessarily have to understand all of the sonnet, or know its “meaning.” They simply are learning SVO. So they are exposed to Shakespeare in a very easy and non-aggressive way. But if we furnish our students with exercises such as the above in our teaching of grammar, we familiarize our students with some Shakespeare as we learn grammar, rather than with random sentences. When

the blocks of texts with which we review rhetorical features are rhetorical masterpieces, we imprint those forms and ways in some small measure into our students' working collections of features, words, and manners upon which they must draw when they write.

If a student's mind is like an attic, why not clutter it up with some rusty antiques, faded stock certificates, costume jewelry, and yellowing silk? It might make for more interesting cleaning when one tells them to finally organize that attic in a paper. Of course, the debaters among our students will argue that one man's clutter is another man's organization. Be that as it is, right now, it often seems as if the attics are filled with reams of IBM data sheets, with an occasional tattered briefcase in the corner. What we expose our students to, even in some of the most seemingly uncreative, non-rhetorical portions of our courses, comes out later; it will either be a fascinating dress-up addressing questions, or displaying language that shows an awareness of the conversations about who we are and what our society needs from us, or it will be a stack of briefcases stuffed with plain white sheets of copy. Or, maybe, something in-between.