

VIGNETTE: LANGUAGE ABOUT LANGUAGE: A MIDDLE SCHOOL GRAMMAR CLASS

The voices of the seventh and eighth graders in Mrs. Cahill's period 4 class spill out into the hall. Her students are often so boisterous that she feels a little chagrined: "What must people be thinking when they pass by this room sometimes during our Language Workshop?" she thinks.

One thing few people would think is that Mrs. Cahill is teaching grammar. There are no books, no exercises, no diagrams, no rules and maxims to learn. What the students bring to the lesson is their own language, the language they hear in their world. In today's lesson, Mrs. Cahill will teach sentence completeness and the difference between formal and informal registers. She uses the language of street signs. The students call out the street signs they know, beginning with the teacher's cues:

No Parking

Merge Left

The students burst into a torrent of street-sign language: Slippery When Wet; Wrong Way; Go Back; Dead End; No Outlet; Survey Crew Ahead; Last Exit Before Toll. Mrs. Cahill stops after writing twenty sign messages on the board.

"Are any of these complete sentences?" she asks. "Do any have both a subject and a verb?" When the students agree that the street signs do not represent complete sentences, Mrs. Cahill asks this: "What if you were to put the words *You should* in front of these signs? Which ones would become complete sentences then?" The kids test "You should . . ." against the signs.

"You should merge left."

"You should go back."

This is the teachable moment about the understood *you*-subject of commands.

"What other street signs give commands?" The students add "Stop" and "Yield" to their list. Mrs. Cahill explains that in the English language we have a convention that makes commands sound less bossy. "How would you say 'Stop' or 'Yield' more politely?" Of course, everyone says, "Please."

"Are there any other ways to sound polite when making a command? How would you say the other signs politely?"

The kids respond with “Please do not park here” and “Please turn around because you are going the wrong way.”

The teacher points out that although the “please” form is the most obvious, we also can sound polite (formalize our register) by saying, “We would appreciate it if you would park elsewhere” or “It might be a good idea to merge left right about now.” It’s easy for kids to deduce that the formal register might not convey the needed imperative carried by the informal. When it comes to traffic signs, brevity is practical in more ways than one. “When you say it politely, it sounds like they don’t have to do it right now,” remarks one student. “When you just say ‘do it,’ they obey the sign.”

“This is a dead end”; “This is the last exit before the toll.” Mrs. Cahill asks if these statements are polite or impolite. The kids see that they are neither. These iterations are neutral in tone. “How would you make these signs dress down? How would you make them speak in an informal voice?”

“Wrong way, you idiot!”

“Wrong way . . . duh!”

“You better stop!”

“Hey, look at this view!”

Mrs. Cahill asks the students to make columns for phrases and clauses and then for declarative sentences and commands.

Mrs. Cahill’s students think that her Language Workshop is fun, but they don’t always see the connection between what they already know about language and what an English teacher cares about. So Mrs. Cahill prompts them. “What words have we used today that go in our Language About Language notes?” The students keep a section in their English notebook for terms such as *tone*, *command*, *subject*, *verb*, *complete sentence*, *phrase*, *clause*, *formal*, *informal*. Mrs. Cahill’s Language Workshop has looked at advertising, slogans, movie quotations, sitcom titles, music, weather reports, dollar bills, CD jackets, and other examples of authentic language. The students’ Language About Language pages continue to grow with examples and new terminology. And they never use a grammar book!

—Amy Benjamin
