Twitter Thread by Daisy Christodoulou

Daisy Christodoulou
@daisychristo

Interesting to see lots of talk about grammar lately. Here's a thread from me on why I think explicit grammar instruction is important, but not all explicit grammar instruction is created equal!

I think explicit grammar instruction is important because it helps pupils to write better sentences. Pupils often write run-on sentences, and they aren't sure where they should put a full stop. This makes their writing much harder to understand.

For me, grammar instruction is about sentence structure. It's not about pedantic 'gotchas' designed to show how clever you are or how stupid everyone else is. It's about helping students to marshal their thoughts into coherent, logical sentences.

(On that note, I am sure there will be errors in this tweet thread, because I am writing it pretty quickly. I apologise for them in advance and hope it doesn't impede your understanding too much!)

To write good sentences, I think you have to know what a verb is and what a subject is. So what's the best way to teach those? You can teach definitions - a verb is a doing word, a noun is a person, place or thing, a subject is the person or thing that is doing the verb.

The problem with definitions is that they just aren't enough. You need examples, lots of them. If you just rely on definitions, pupils will develop lots of misconceptions.

Here's an example. Ask pupils to find the verbs in the following two sentences.

I run to the shops.
I went for a run to the shops.

Often, they'll say 'run' is the verb in both of them.

Lots of misconceptions going on here - that if a word involves action, it must be a verb. That words have a fixed part of speech attached to them. That words like 'went' can't be a verb because they don't seem to involve movement.

Expressive Writing is a great writing programme that has lots of carefully sequenced sentence examples that are designed to build understanding of these key concepts and avoid the common misconceptions.

What about grammatical terminology? Interestingly, Expressive Writing does not use grammatical terminology! Instead of using the word verb, it says 'the part that tells what happened'. Instead of subject, it says 'the part that names'.

This was a deliberate choice by Siegfried Engelmann, the creator of EW. He thought that traditional terminology was so badly taught that it just confused pupils and got in the way of understanding how sentences functioned.

I have some sympathy with this point of view, & I do think Expressive Writing is fab. But by the end of the programme, constantly saying 'the part that tells what happened' gets quite tedious and repetitive. You start to realise why we develop labels for important concepts!

In the words of another of my favourite education writers, @Doug_Lemov , labels have a purpose!

> I've given the techniques in this book names. This may seem like a gimmick at first, but it's one of the most important parts. If there was no word *democracy*, for example, it would be a thousand times harder to have and sustain a thing called "democracy." We would forever be bogged down in inefficiency—"You know that thing we talked about where everyone gets a say . . . "—at exactly the moment we needed to rise up in action. Teachers and administrators too must be able to talk about a clearly defined and shared set of ideas quickly and efficiently with colleagues in order to sustain their work. They need a shared vocabulary thorough enough

What about this fronted adverbial, then? I am not that keen on it. I'd rather start with the fundamentals. I would like pupils to really understand what a verb is before they learn about the adverb or the fronted adverbial.

If they can't identify the verb in the following two sentences, I wouldn't want to teach adverbs or fronted adverbials.

I run to the shops.
I went for a run to the shops.

I also worry that fronted adverbials are taught in isolation as a quick fix to improve repetitive sentence openings. So they can get shoehorned in without regard to meaning. EG 'Suddenly, he crept through the darkness'.

I'd prefer to teach other concepts first. For example, I really like @TheWritingRevol lessons on the noun appositive. They focus on meaning - how the noun appositive gives you more information about the noun.

I'm really looking forward to our webinar on Tuesday with @TheWritingRevol where we will be discussing these issues in greater detail! It's for @nmmarking subscribers - make sure you've registered!