

Excerpts Taken From “Winning Essay” by Kimberly Ondreck

Brussel sprouts. Cold showers. Grammar rules. Happy am I when I manage to avoid these things. But I tutor ESL and English composition. I cannot avoid grammar rules. Don't get me wrong – I can readily identify ungrammatical language. I simply fear having to name grammar rules. Participial phrases, subordinating conjunctions – it's all Greek to me.

So you can imagine my apprehension when a young woman recently brought her essay to me and said, “I want to work on my grammar.” I launched into a diversionary song-and-dance about how my college's Tutorial Policy prevented me from proofreading a student's composition. But she didn't want proofreading. “I want to work on my grammar,” she repeated....

She began to read. I missed her introduction as I suffered those nagging tutorial worries: Was I knowledgeable enough? Would she think I was a failure? Then I remembered that I had just read about Mina Shaughnessy and her study of basic writers (which this tutee was): The central message of Shaughnessy's work is that ‘teachers should not deal with errors individually; they should seek, instead to determine the patterns that formal errors fall into.’ I relaxed and started to listen, ready to face the challenge of identifying pattern errors.

Guess what I heard – Patterns. Something was consistently wrong with her use of infinitives. And prepositions after verbs. After she finished reading, I pulled a grammar manual off the reference shelf and started flipping through the pages. I talked as I flipped, describing for the student what I had heard in her essay but confessing that I didn't know how to name the errors and therefore couldn't reference the relevant pages in the manual's index.

“Oh, I know what you are talking about,” she said, “and I have that book at home. I know exactly where to find it.” She took the manual from my hands and found the pages that we needed to solve both problems. Success.

For me, this session illustrates the essence of tutoring. Tutoring must be student-focused. Tutorial sessions become productive only after tutors stop worrying about appearing all-knowing and start focusing on the students and their learning. Because I admitted the limits of my knowledge, my tutee learned much more than grammar. She learned how to learn.

Tutoring involves working from the middle – not being a teacher and not being a student – and therefore not know everything but knowing how to find the answer. If I teach a student nothing more than how to find an answer using reference tools or a textbook's index, then I consider the tutoring session a success. I believe tutoring is all about giving students the learning strategies and tools they need to know how to assimilate the knowledge they are encountering in class.