

Introductory Paragraphs and Conclusion

A rule is an accepted principle or instruction that states the way things are or should be done, and tells people what they are allowed or not allowed to do. Rules do not only exist within the context of conduct and action, but are also implicit and explicit in systems of language. The academic community puts forth a set of language rules for students to follow. In "Academic Writing" (2002), Janet Giltrow introduces genre theory and explains that different social contexts require different styles of speech and different forms of expression. However, when people learn language, they also learn to evaluate users of language. According to Giltrow, people's attitudes toward language provide evidence of "symbolic domination," in which psychological and social processes reinforce social inequities. Similarly, in "Verbal Hygiene" (1995), Deborah Cameron analyzes language as a social activity that conforms to rules; attempts to control and regulate language are associated with "conservative, elitist, and authoritarian" forms, namely "prescriptivism. Cameron further suggests that people follow rules automatically. However, a knowledge deficit exists within both Cameron and Giltrow in that both neglect to inquire as to how students look at rules. In fact, why do students demand and accept rules rather than demand reasons for rules? Is language serving students well as a vehicle of communication as well as idealization? How do language rules promote or inhibit learning? A group of 17 English 199 students conducted a focus group to provide insight into how students perceive and process rules. This would facilitate the extrapolation of beliefs and perceptions regarding language rules. The focus group data reveals that students in general have mixed feelings and attitudes towards language rules. However, they do not question the origins of rules because they have trust in those who have more education and high academic standing than them. These findings will be examined in relation to Cameron's discussion on "rules and reasons", Giltrow's discussion on genre, and Vivian Zamel's "Strangers in Academia" (1995), which recommends the "model of possibility".

In "Academic Writing", Giltrow claims that "linguistic relativism" (in which different languages have different structures) can be applied to genres within one language. There is no unitary correct form. However, if students use inappropriate forms of writing for a particular genre, or the wrong writing format, they fail to comply with the genre's norms, no matter how perfectly their work is composed (Giltrow, p. 24). For instance, when a student wants to write a thank-you letter to the English professor at the end of the semester, she or he should write the letter at the right time and on letter paper rather than lined paper. Failure to do so will violate the genre's norms and no matter how well this student writes, this piece of writing is meaningless. Therefore, the purpose of rules is to make student's writing comprehensible and clear to others. However, the focus group discovered that they were often confused about what exactly the rules were, which inhibited learning and prevented them from questioning the origins of rules.

Conclusion

Rules both promote and inhibit learning. Without rules, there is no way for others to understand what students want to say. Rules provide students with a necessary framework for communication and ideation. Due to "symbolic domination", students accept rules automatically. Contrary to what Gibbons claims, students in the focus group did not express apprehension about rules, only the desire to master

them. Unfortunately, rules are often incomprehensible to students, and require more explanation. Sometimes they cause student to make their writing unnecessarily complicated, and create complex but unclear sentences. Moreover, it takes time for students to familiarize themselves with every norm in writing. When students learn the rules for a genre, they may have difficulty interpreting and applying them to another genre. Zambel's 'Model of Possibility' provides a method by which teachers can promote learning. Clear guidelines and meaningful comments will help students practice rules and make their writing better. It is also important to consider that while the lack of a unitary system allows language to grow and adapt, it also confuses students tremendously. For example, different courses in the same discipline apply different terms, guidelines and rules. Future research might investigate whether this inconsistency in rules is moving the discipline forward, or stalling it.