

SoMIRAC CONFERENCE

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Marvin Terban

WHO SAYS GRAMMAR CAN'T BE FUN?

The Future of English and the Common Core

English today is under attack. More and more people are using hand-held digital devices as the main means of sending and receiving written communications and they don't want to use extra thumb strokes to type punctuation, capitalization, and full words. Advertisers distort the language for their own purposes. Adults use the language incorrectly and publicly. Students are confused, making it more difficult for teachers to teach correct English.

A 2012 study at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, NC, concluded that the more 10 to 14-year-olds texted, the worse their grammar became. A study of text messages among students at American University in Washington, DC, showed that only 29% of the texts used final punctuation.

"Twitter slang" (the use of abbreviations and acronyms in place of full words, phrases, and sentences) is invading our language (examples: Brgr, Wtr Mln Wtr, Tkts, etc.) so that internal vowels are starting to disappear. Use of picture icons is beginning to replace the use of words in texting.

Outside of school students are on the Internet, playing video games, watching blockbuster movies, etc. By contrast, one study of 22,000 high school students (conducted by the Born This Way Foundation) showed that in school most of them are tired, stressed, or bored.

Printed reference books are disappearing. The material in these books is readily available online, and students prefer accessing information online to looking stuff up in books.

Handheld digital devices should be thought of as powerful mini-computers which give access to enormous stores of information. Our focus should be on training students to use these devices as learning tools, rather than as the means of time-wasting and meaningless communications, games, net surfing, social activities, etc.

The Common Core and individual state language arts standards are extremely high and often surprise and challenge teachers and frustrate students and their parents, but with the "right method," ways can be found to teach the new material in fun and involving ways. Mr. Terban's "right method" is humor, which he considers the most useful, but underutilized, teaching tool to counteract students' perception of grammar as boring. In his classes and books he uses riddles, rhymes, jokes, fun challenges, memory tricks, word games, and whatever else works to engage his students and readers.

Many studies have proven the great power of humor in the classroom to interest and motivate students. A teacher can use humor to create a positive learning environment, animate a stagnant class, make even the most rigorous learning

enjoyable, maximize the retention of the subject matter, and reduce test anxiety. Surveys of students about the most memorable characteristics of their best teachers usually put having a sense of humor at the top of the list.

Mr. Terban suggested that teachers teach English as a foreign language to all their students, especially native-born English speakers, because his observations have shown that students outside the United States who study English as a foreign language often have a better grasp of its basic structure, grammar, and vocabulary than native English speakers.

Mr. Terban also stressed the importance of proofreading to avoid embarrassing faux pas and demonstrated the following techniques that he uses in his books and teaching to make learning language arts skills more fun and engaging:

- **FRACTURED FAIRY TALES** to encourage proofreading
- **RIDDLES, ADS, and HEADLINES** to teach homonyms (homophones) and homographs
- **JOKES** to teach how to decode wordplay
- **RHYMES** to teach irregular nouns and verbs
- **MEMORY TRICKS** to teach spelling, uses of nouns, parts of speech, etc.
- **CARTOONS** to teach a variety of grammar skills like "who/whom."
- **POSTERS** to promote good grammar
- **SIMPLE EXPLANATIONS** and **FUN EXAMPLES** to teach the figures of speech
- **EASY-TO-FOLLOW STEPS** and a **HUMOROUS APPROACH** to teach research skills
- **LONGEST WORDS, EPONYMS, and REDUPLICATIONS** to teach vocabulary
- **STUDENTS' DRAWINGS** to teach idioms.

Mr. Terban urged teachers to make sure that their own grammar skills are strong so that they can teach them to their students. He said that language arts skills begin with grammar and that grammar begins with the parts of speech.

He concluded by sharing his favorite jokes about easily confused words, pronouns, idioms, vocabulary, spelling, and misplaced modifiers.

Called a "master of children's wordplay" by ALA [Booklist](#) and "Mr. English for Kids" by the Children's Book-of-the-Month Club, Marvin Terban is Scholastic's Professor Grammar. For more than fifty years, he has taught at the Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School in New York where he develops humorous teaching games to help students understand the mystifying idiosyncrasies of the English language. Those games grew into the series of thirty-eight popular and funny books on English for which he is known. He has spoken at school and educational conferences around the world.

Contact Marvin Terban through his website, marvinterban.com, or directly at mterban@verizon.net

amazon.com/author/marvinterban

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lt2NvRd_Q-0

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marvin_Terban