Building Grammar Back into the Curriculum with IXL

Portola Valley Elementary School District, Portola Valley, California

> "I don't want students. I want learners. With IXL, kids aren't just 'doing school.' They care about what they are learning."
>
> *John Davenport, 8th grade language arts and social studies teacher*

Portola Valley Elementary School District is a small K-8 district in the San Francisco Bay Area. Deep in the heart of Silicon Valley, Portola Valley serves parents who have high expectations for personalized learning, academic results, and effective technology integration. The district adopted IXL Language Arts in 2014 when the school board and parent groups expressed concern about a lack of effective grammar instruction in the district.

What Happened to Grammar?

Eighth grade language arts and social studies teacher John Davenport explains, "There's not a lot of whole-class direct instruction happening here. It's much more about individualizing instruction for each student." The district has embraced various modes of blended and project-based learning, including the flipped classroom model John employs in his own classroom. Rather than traditional textbooks, many teachers rely on carefully curated online tools and curriculum resources, which students access on Chromebooks.

A few years ago, some parents and the school board noted that grammar instruction seemed to have been left behind. The district no longer had a comprehensive basal program that included explicit grammar instruction, and none of the new online tools focused on grammar. The lack of focused instruction was apparent in the writing assignments students turned in. Many students were struggling with the basics of grammar and mechanics. John says, "Basic grammar instruction has never been on the list of things teachers love to teach. It's really hard to get kids enthusiastic about parts of speech and punctuation." John and his fellow teachers tried some old-fashioned workbooks, but they failed to keep students engaged and did not offer much opportunity for personalization.

The school board believed it was time to get a comprehensive grammar program. After some research, the district selected IXL Language Arts to fill the grammar gap in their curriculum.

Engaging Kids with Grammar Instruction

John's students embraced IXL Language Arts right away. "IXL by nature is very engaging," he says. "I've never seen 8th graders voluntarily immerse themselves with grammar they way they do on IXL."

John believes that the immediate feedback and personalized learning offered by IXL is what makes the difference for his students. "With workbooks, they don't really care about what they are learning. It's just an exercise to go through, whether you need it or not. But with IXL, they can focus in on exactly what they need and get personalized help if they are struggling. They're no longer just students. They're learners," he says. His students are also highly motivated by seeing their own progress and earning awards as they master new skills. The elements of gamification in the program activate his students' competitive sides and encourage them to keep working.

John frontloads the entire 8th grade curriculum at the beginning of the year, so students can work through it at their own pace. While all students must complete the required curriculum by the end of the year, they are given a lot of flexibility in the pace and pathways they take to get there. Students work alone or in small groups during class time and many continue to work independently at home. John uses IXL Analytics to monitor their progress, plan individualized instruction for students who are falling behind, and keep his administrators informed. He loves the detail he can get from the IXL reports. "It's one thing to see a report with standards they haven't met. It's another to be able to drill down and see which questions they got wrong and where they are struggling specifically."

Building Better Writers

Since implementing IXL Language Arts, John has noted a marked improvement in his students' writing skills. His students are turning in better responses to writing prompts. Other content area teachers have noticed the improvement as well.

Now that students are more confident with grammar and mechanics, John is able to turn his attention to higher-level writing skills such as organization and voice. "Instead of spending time teaching subject-verb agreement, I can really focus on helping them develop their thinking as they write," he says.

Reaction from parents and the school board has been positive. Parents are pleased that students are getting "traditional grammar, taught in a non-traditional way." As for John, he could not be happier with his students' progress. The difference has been especially pronounced for students who were struggling before. "I don't think they even realize how much they have improved," he says. "The grammar is just natural to them now."

A Model for Success at Portola Valley School District

Here's how 8th grade teacher John Davenport is using IXL in his language arts and social studies classroom:

- Students have a 90-minute block for integrated language arts and social studies instruction each day.

- IXL Language Arts is the core grammar and mechanics curriculum for John's class. He also uses additional online programs for reading comprehension and social studies.

- Portola Valley has a 1:1 laptop program. All students have access to a Chromebook during class.

- John uses a flipped classroom model, in which basic content is delivered online and students have time to work on shared projects and deeper application of concepts in class.

- John begins each day with a short whole-class session to introduce new concepts and set expectations for the day. After that, students grab their laptops and find a comfortable place to work—in the classroom or outside in the courtyard.

- At least half of the block class is reserved for students to work on IXL and other online assignments. The rest of the class time is dedicated to personalized instruction, small group work, or project-based learning.

- Students are free to collaborate as they work through the IXL curriculum. Students often help each other with difficult concepts.

- All content is frontloaded at the beginning of the year so students can work at their own pace through grade-level curriculum. All students are expected to complete the required online curriculum by the end of the year, but are given a great deal of flexibility in how they achieve that goal. Students work through the curriculum both during class and at home.

- John uses IXL Analytics to see who is on track, who isn't, and where he needs to offer targeted intervention and support.