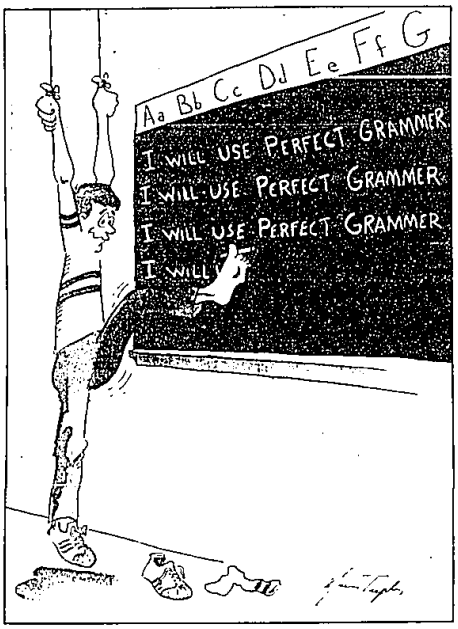
Class keys on grammar skills



By Michael Baharah
special writer

Years from now when students and scholars reflect upon the 1983 academic year, chances are it will be remembered as a year of educational reform. Proposals and recommendations to improve public schools have abounded from the Reagan Administration, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers.

Of all the prestigious blue-ribbon panels examining the state of our schools, not one of them visited John Gumbleton's sixth-grade English class at Jefferson Elementary School in South Redford.

But there panel members would have seen average boys and girls doing well above average English and grammar work. In fact, these sixth graders — every one of them — are doing eighth-grade English work.

VISIT JEFFERSON school and you'll notice a formula for success posted in Gumbleton's classroom: "The Harder I Work, the Luckier I Get!"

The hard work was not the result of force-fed memorizations by a rigid old teacher. Rather Gumbleton tries to combine hard work and enthusiasm with positive reinforcement.

The English workbook, "Basic Language: Messages and Meanings II" is Gumbleton's and the student's grammatical bible. While copies of the book are not available in the classroom, worksheet exercises are used often to help develop their advanced grammar skills.

SUPPLEMENTING THE worksheets, which include sentence diagramming and defining word usage and classification, the students engage in daily classroom grammar exercises at the chalkboard. At the end of every school week, all students have diagrammed at least one sentence in front of the classs.

In case a student makes a mistake while doing the sentences, Gumbleton prefers classmates point out any errors so that diagramming is not strictly a rote response.

Grammar rules governing coordinate conjunctions, intransitive predicates and transactive positives bounce off the walls of Room 20 as if a workshop of English majors was in session.

GUMBLETON believes that the English textbooks available for sixth-grade consumption are too basic and watered down.

"I believe in a challenge," he says.

His students seem to agree. The students' response to Gumbelton's challenge comes not from fear of doing poorly, but from the prospect of what can be gained. There seemed to be in the classroom a degree of status for those who do particularly well in English.

Every student sports a small button that reads, "I Speak Perfect Grammar." And when students are given their turn at diagramming sentences at the blackboard, they have a look of determination to get it done correctly.

GUMBLETON DOES not "run" his classroom. He and his students participate together — something like a doctor instructing his interns. As Gumbleton speaks to the class, he will occasionally make deliberate grammatical errors to induce an admonition of him from the students concerning his speaking faults.

"There is three, four, five and six sentences in the paragraph," Gumbelton barely completes the sentence when the hands go up. One student tells him of his error in using "is" instead of "are."

"Correct," says Gumbleton. The student was beaming — he knew he just earned five extra minutes of recess.

ALL STUDENTS are encouraged to search for grammatical errors heard on television, radio and from their parents and to make note of them for class discussion.

As great as the enthusiasm is for incentives when doing well, equally great is the embarrassment in paying the price for speaking incorrectly. One student misused a word in a sentence and because of a classmate's ear — not Gumbleton's — he was required to do 25 squat thrusts. The student was disgusted — but he did them without too much complaint.

The students, also as a part of the English experience, learn to develop and deliver speeches. Each student joins in constructive critiques of every speech each classmate presents.

The efforts put forth by Gumbleton and his students may be looked upon by some as unnecessary. After all, the kids can learn eighth-grade English in the eighth grade.

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