

Material Spotlight: Grammar Boxes

By Devon Eamillio, Upper Elementary Assistant

Dr. Montessori believed that in order to teach grammar most effectively, the teacher must make it come alive. She believed that grammar must be presented in such a way that both the imagination and the reasoning mind of the student are engaged. In the elementary classroom, this approach is particularly meaningful, as imagination and reasoning are two major aspects of the mind of the elementary-age child. Instead of teaching language as a strange and arbitrary set of rules to be memorized, we encourage the child to think about why and how language works. Throughout the work with grammar at the elementary level, the children are using their whole body, acting out the parts of speech, following commands, and fetching objects. In this way the children "live the grammar" that is natural to their language.

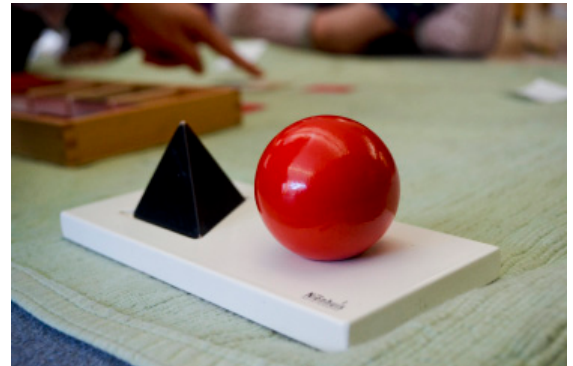
In the elementary classroom, we present language as a mystery or an adventure to be tackled through exploration and discovery. A key tool for this is the Grammar Box material, where children use their reasoning minds to discover the jobs of words in a sentence. The Grammar Boxes are manipulative materials, involving not just the hands and eyes but the whole body.

There are nine sets of Grammar Boxes, each focusing on a particular part of speech: noun, article, adjective, verb, preposition, adverb, pronoun, conjunction and interjection. Each Grammar Box contains a set of large cards on which are printed two short sentences or phrases, along with sets of smaller cards with single words on them. The smaller cards are color-coded, with each color corresponding to a part of speech.

To begin, the student reads the first sentence of a large card. This establishes the point of reference for the work. Then the student acts out the named or implied action of this sentence. For example, if the sentence is "Find four colored pencils," the child will get up and find four colored pencils. Acting out the action or implied action of the sentence brings this activity to life for the child.

SECOND PLANE OF DEVELOPMENT: THE REASONING MIND

Children in the elementary level or Second Plane of Development (from age 6 to 12 years) no longer have an Absorbent Mind; rather, they explore language consciously and deliberately. Through guided experiences in the elementary classroom, children can approach the language they learned subconsciously in their earlier years with intention and rationality. It is the role of the Elementary teacher to offer many opportunities for children to experiment with language and to develop his rational understanding of grammar.



FIRST PLANE OF DEVELOPMENT: THE ABSORBENT MIND

Maria Montessori called the period from birth to the age of six the First Plane of Development. During this period, children develop language through their absorbent minds. For the first three years, children hear complex language and absorb it effortlessly, like a sponge absorbing water. Between the ages of three and six, children start to experiment with language. For example, they begin to investigate different grammar techniques, such as adding prefixes or suffixes to their words: you might hear a young child say "I runned away." At this stage, language is no longer pure imitation. Children in the primary classroom have an understanding of word functions and are introduced to the basic parts of speech.

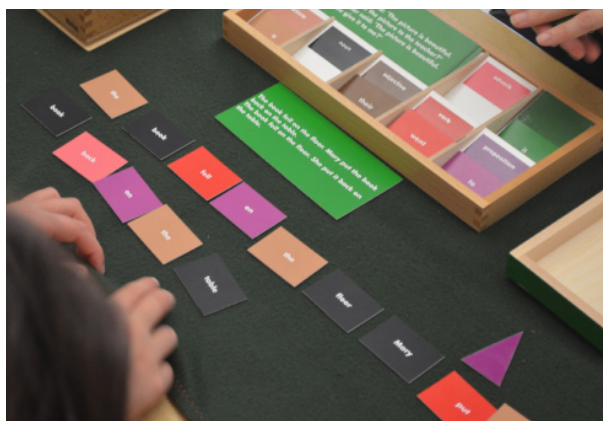
The child now reconstructs the first sentence by choosing from the smaller color-coded cards. Next, the child reads the second sentence of the large card and does the action



in that sentence. The teacher then asks “What changed from the first sentence to the second?” For example, the phrase “four colored pencils” may become “four blue pencils.” The word that changes is the part of speech that this particular Grammar Box is isolating. The teacher will encourage this work by asking the child to think about what the word’s function in the sentence. What question does the word answer? For example, the question “What kind of pencils?” is answered by an adjective.

Each set of Grammar Boxes also contains Command Cards. The teacher introduces Command Cards to expand the children’s comprehension of the part of speech being worked on. To the delight of the elementary child, Command Cards can be fun and silly; they may tell children to do something they would typically not be permitted to do. For the elementary child, this is exciting and engaging. The Command Cards may also require the children to work together and do a short dramatic scene. This engages the elementary child’s natural inclination to collaborate with peers and experiment with language.

The Grammar Boxes entice both the elementary child’s reasoning mind and her imaginative mind. Grammar Boxes inspire children to explore more about the English language, and provide them with the support they need to discover different patterns in the English language, bringing it to action and life.



To learn more about the Language Curriculum at the Primary and Elementary levels, join us
Thursday, February 25, 5:30-7:30 p.m.
Parent Information Series
Primary & Elementary: Language