Re-thinking Grammar as a tool for learning literacy

Debra Myhill
God morgon och tack för att ni lyssnare på engelska.

Min svenska är inte så bra!

Hälsningar från Exeter!
THE GRAMMAR PROBLEM
The Place of Grammar in Literacy

- International divergences on value placed on grammar in the literacy/language learning curriculum;
- Anglophone countries largely ceased teaching grammar in the 60s and 70s after the ‘Dartmouth conference’ in the US in 1966;
- Far Eastern and Middle Eastern countries routinely teach grammar;
- Other European countries vary, both in terms of how much grammar is taught and what commitment there is to it.

- So what is the place of grammar, if there is one, in the literacy classroom?
The Place of Grammar in Literacy

- Research about the efficacy of grammar teaching has strongly argued that it is ineffective (Braddock et al 1963; Hillocks 1984; Hillocks and Smith 1991; EPPI 2004; Graham and Perin 2007; Wyse and Torgerson 2017).

- ‘a harmful effect on the development of original writing’

- a negative effect for ‘the explicit and systematic teaching of the parts of speech and structure of sentences’

- ‘Nothing helps your writing so much as ignoring grammar.’
The Place of Grammar in Literacy

- Second language/additional language/foreign language learning
- Long tradition of teaching grammar as the foundation of learning another language: a structural approach focused on the form of the language and on accuracy;
- This approach rejected by the significant international adoption of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which focuses on meaningful communication in authentic contexts and immersion in the target language – no explicit grammar;
- But CLT is now being critiqued – authentic contexts are never fully authentic in a classroom, and the absence of grammar can lead to inaccuracy which hampers communication.
- The tension here is between a focus on grammatical form or a focus on meaningful communication.
The Place of Grammar in Literacy

… grammar is a broken subject… Grammar is often ignored, broken off altogether from the teaching of literature, rhetoric, drama, composition, and creative writing. Grammar is the skunk at the garden party of the language arts.

(Haussamen 2003)
The very model of an amateur grammarian (with apologies to Gilbert and Sullivan)

I am the very model of an amateur grammarian
I have a little knowledge and I am authoritarian
But I make no apology for being doctrinarian
We must not plummet to the verbal depths of the barbarian

I’d sooner break my heart in two than sunder an infinitive
And I’d disown my closest family within a minute if
They dared to place a preposition at a sentence terminus
Or sully the Queen’s English with neologisms verminous

The Place of Grammar in Literacy

- So what is the place of grammar, if there is one, in literacy teaching?

- Do we teach grammar so that learners can identify nouns and verbs etc?

- Do we teach grammar so that learners understand the structure of their own and other languages?

- Do we teach grammar so that learners will not make mistakes in their writing or speaking?

- Do we teach grammar so that learners can understand how texts and language works in communicating meaning?

- These are key questions if we are re-thinking the role of grammar in literacy teaching?
Reframing the Debate

- Teaching learners what a noun is, or to distinguish between a subordinate clause, will not make them better writers.
- Teaching learners to put in certain grammar constructions, such as fronted adverbials or a passive, will not make them better writers.
- Testing learners on their discrete grammatical knowledge will not make them better writers.

- But this does not mean there is no value in knowing about grammar.
- Grammar knowledge can be *usable knowledge* which helps readers and writers understand how texts work.
- Grammar knowledge is a resource for *crafting and shaping meaning* in a text.
RE-THINKING GRAMMAR
Implicit (Tacit) and Explicit Knowledge

- All native speakers of a language have a huge amount of subject knowledge of grammar but it is *implicit* ie the user cannot explicitly explain what he or she has done eg
  - *He goed into town.*
  - *She bought a red big handbag.*

- *Explicit grammar knowledge* can be verbalised and is accessible for discussion and scrutiny eg
  - *That is a passive.*

- Being able to identify a noun as a noun is explicit grammar knowledge, but it doesn’t make children better noun users, as they can already use nouns and have done since they started speaking. The explicit grammar knowledge has to be applied to a meaningful context eg
  - *That is a passive – I’ve used it to foreground that information.*

Explicit knowledge is ‘learning’ knowledge: it can be used to develop greater understanding, to solve problems, to share thinking = pedagogically important.
Functional Grammar

- Functional grammar enables us ‘to show the grammar as a meaning-making resource and to describe grammatical categories by reference to what they mean’ (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004:10).

- Re-framing of grammar as more than a description of the structure of language but fundamentally as resource for meaning-making (Halliday 2003; 2004).

- ‘Whereas traditional approaches conceive of grammar as a set of structures which can be assessed as correct or incorrect, Halliday sees language as a resource, a meaning-making system through which we interactively shape and interpret our world and ourselves’ (Derewianka and Jones 2010:9).

Adopting a functionally-oriented approach to grammar focuses on meaning: how we write something is as important as what we write.
Grammar as Choice

- Carter and McCarthy (2006:7) conceive of grammar as having two strands: *grammar as choice*, as well as a grammar of structure.

- ‘Grammar is seen as a network of inter-related meaningful choices’ (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004:49)

- ‘The point of grammar study is to enable pupils to make choices from among a range of linguistic resources, and to be aware of the effects of different choices on the rhetorical power of their writing’ (Lefstein 2009: 9).

Showing learners the grammatical choices writers make, and the grammatical choices they can make as writers, can enable them to have more conscious control of how their writing communicates their intended message.
The Power of Choice

I found him in the garage on a Sunday afternoon. It was the day after we moved into Falconer Road. The winter was ending. Mum had said we’d be moving just in time for the spring. Nobody else was there. Just me. The others were inside the house with Doctor Death, worrying about the baby.

He was lying in there [ ]. It was as if he’d been there forever.
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He was lying in there in the darkness behind the tea chests, in the dust and dirt. It was as if he’d been there forever.

Why do you think David Almond chooses these prepositional phrases?
I found him in the garage on a Sunday afternoon. It was the day after we moved into Falconer Road. The winter was ending. Mum had said we’d be moving just in time for the spring. Nobody else was there. Just me. The others were inside the house with Doctor Death, worrying about the baby.

He was lying in there *in a silken shawl with golden beading along the tasselled edges*. It was as if he’d been there forever.

What difference do these choices of prepositional phrases make?
Going Meta!

Metalinguistic Understanding

- Looking at language, not just using language
- Those moments when users ‘shift their attention from the transmitted contents to the properties of language used to transmit them’ (Cazden1976:3).
- ‘the ability to take language as the object of observation and the referent of discourse’ (Camps and Milian1999:6).
- a) ‘the explicit bringing into consciousness of an attention to language as an artefact’
  b) ‘the conscious monitoring and manipulation of language to create desired meanings grounded in socially shared understandings’ (Myhill 2012:250).
- Metalinguistic understanding is thinking about, reflecting on, and discussing language and how it is used.
Grammatical terminology is a *metalanguage*, a specialist vocabulary for talking about language:

- Rhetoric has its specialist vocabulary: ethos; pathos; logos; tricolon; anadiplosis…
- Literature study has its specialist vocabulary: metaphor; pathetic fallacy; assonance; alliteration…
- Media studies has its specialist vocabulary: connotation; denotation; mise-en-scene; cropshot…

- In general, specialist vocabulary enables higher-level discussion in that domain.
- The use of metalanguage helps metalinguistic thinking.
Metalinguistic Understanding

- We know from research that *metacognition* is a predictor of success in writing.
- Metalinguistic understanding is a subset of metacognition – the bit that focuses directly on language use.
- Creating opportunities in the literacy classroom for learners to talk about, investigate and explore, and reflect on language use in the texts they read and in their own writing builds metalinguistic understanding.
- This supports growing independence as a writer – making choices and decisions that are informed by an understanding of how texts work.

The pedagogical importance of explicit teaching of grammar as a meaning-making resource is that it develops learners’ metalinguistic understanding: knowledge of their own.
The Re-Thinking of Grammar

- Explicit knowledge is usable ‘learning’ knowledge: it can be used to develop greater understanding, to solve problems, to share thinking = pedagogically important.

- Adopting a functionally-oriented approach to grammar focuses on meaning: *how* we write something is as important as *what* we write.

- Showing learners the grammatical choices writers make, and the grammatical choices they can make as writers, can enable them to have more conscious control of *how* their writing communicates their intended message.

- Explicit attention to grammar as a meaning-making resource develops learners *metalinguistic understanding.*
OUR RESEARCH AND PEDAGOGY
Our Research

A different perspective:

- A fully theorised rationale for grammar in the curriculum
- A corresponding pedagogical model
- Founded on robust empirical studies
Our Research Evidence

- Study 1: Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) 32 classes of 12-13 year olds - intervention group improved by 20% compared with 11% in control group; significant positive effect; stronger for able writers; teacher subject knowledge an issue

- Study 2: Quasi-experimental study investigating the approach with 12-13 year old weak writers: positive effect

- Study 3: Quasi-experimental study, with 14-15 year olds looking at impact of the approach on reading comprehension as well as writing: positive effect for both, but even stronger for reading comprehension.

- Study 4: RCT with 54 primary schools (9-10 year olds): found two months additional progress for the intervention group – a small effect (EEF);

- Study 5: RCT with 9-10 year olds: positive effect (regional study);

- Study 6: Longitudinal study over 3 years of how students develop metalinguistic understanding: conceptual development; application in writing; relationship between teaching and student learning.

- Our evidence is not all positive: there are factors which support or hinder effective implementation.
The Exeter Pedagogy

A creative grammar-writing relationship

- Explicit teaching of grammatical points relevant to the learning about writing
- Developing young writers’ knowledge about language in the texts they read and how language choices shape meaning
- Developing young writers’ understanding of the language choices they can make in their own writing

Metalinguistic understanding for writing
## LEAD Principles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRINCIPLE</th>
<th>EXPLANATION</th>
<th>RATIONALE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>LINKS</strong></td>
<td>Make a <em>link</em> between the grammar being introduced and how it works in the writing being taught</td>
<td>To establish a purposeful learning reason for addressing grammar, and connect grammar with meaning and rhetorical effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EXAMPLES</strong></td>
<td>Explain the grammar through showing <em>examples</em>, not lengthy explanations</td>
<td>To avoid writing lessons becoming mini-grammar lessons, and to allow access to the structure even if the grammar concept is not fully understood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AUTHENTIC TEXTS</strong></td>
<td>Use <em>authentic</em> texts as models to link writers to the broader community of writers</td>
<td>To integrate reading and writing and show how ‘real’ writers make language choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DISCUSSION</strong></td>
<td>Build in high-quality <em>discussion</em> about grammar and its effects</td>
<td>To promote deep metalinguistic learning about why a particular choice works, and to develop independence rather than compliance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LEAD Principles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRINCIPLE</th>
<th>EXPLANATION</th>
<th>CLASSROOM EXAMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>LINKS</strong></td>
<td>Make a link between the grammar being introduced and how it works in the writing being taught</td>
<td>Analysing how prepositional phrases are used to establish the setting in one scene in <em>Charlotte’s Web</em> by E.B. White.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EXAMPLES</strong></td>
<td>Explain the grammar through showing examples, not lengthy explanations</td>
<td>Displaying the relevant paragraph with all the prepositional phrases highlighted in colour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AUTHENTIC TEXTS</strong></td>
<td>Use authentic texts as models to link writers to the broader community of writers</td>
<td>Using <em>Charlotte’s Web</em> by E.B. White. as the model text and understanding White’s choices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DISCUSSION</strong></td>
<td>Build in high-quality discussion about grammar and its effects</td>
<td>Discussing the effect of the prepositional phrases; the visual detail they provide about the setting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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LEADing Developing Writers

- Create a habit of noticing: attention to language
- Generate opportunities to play with language, including lexical and syntactical units
- Use discussion to talk explicitly about language choices and how they help us see, feel or think
- Use grammatical terminology incidentally and at a level relevant to the learners
LEADing Developing Writers

- Different students: L1 or L2/SAL/SFL
- Different students: primary/secondary/adult education

- Choose the *texts* you use as the authentic models to match the interests and experience of your teaching group
- Choose the *learning focus* to match the learning needs of your teaching group.

- The LEAD principles are generic across all learners: it is the text choices and learning focuses which will vary according to age and linguistic experience.
THE PEDAGOGY IN PRACTICE
The next day was rainy and dark. Rain fell and dripped steadily. Rain fell and ran down where thistles and pigweed grew. Rain spattered and came gushing out. Rain fell as they grazed. When the sheep tired of standing, they walked slowly and.

If you were painting this scene, what would you include in your picture?
The next day was rainy and dark. Rain fell on the roof of the barn and dripped steadily from the eaves. Rain fell in the barnyard and ran in crooked courses down into the lane where thistles and pigweed grew. Rain spattered against Mrs Zuckerman’s kitchen windows and came gushing out of the downspouts. Rain fell on the backs of the sheep as they grazed in the meadow. When the sheep tired of standing in the rain, they walked slowly up the lane and into the fold.

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Beyond the footsteps of the greatest explorers and up past the reach of the trustiest maps there lies a kingdom called Erkenwald.

Here, the sun still shines at midnight in the summer, glinting off the icebergs in the north and slipping between the snow-capped Never Cliffs in the west. But it does not rise at all in the long, cold winters. Then, the nights bleed on and on and the darkness is so thick you cannot see your hands in front of your face.

This far north, even the stars do not behave as you might expect…

From *Sky Song* by Abi Elphinstone
Creating a Setting

The shore was fledged with palm trees. These stood or leaned or reclined against the light and their green feathers were a hundred feet up in the air. The ground beneath them was a bank covered with coarse grass, torn everywhere by the upheavals of fallen trees, scattered with decaying coconuts and palm saplings. Behind this was the darkness of the forest proper and the open space of the scar. Ralph stood, one hand against a grey trunk, and screwed up his eyes against the shimmering water. Out there, perhaps a mile away, the white surf flinked on a coral reef, and beyond that the open sea was dark blue. Within the irregular arc of coral the lagoon was still as a mountain lake—blue of all shades and shadowy green and purple.

From Lord of the Flies by William Golding
Learning Point for Writers:
One way to establish a *setting* in narrative is to use *prepositional phrases* to create a *strong visual description*.
# The LEAD Planning Template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Link:</th>
<th>How prepositional phrases can be used in a narrative to create a visual description of a setting.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examples:</td>
<td>Prepositional phrases identified in red in extract, with preposition italicised and noun phrase underlined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic Text:</td>
<td><em>Charlotte’s Web</em> by E.B. White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion:</td>
<td>Discussion of how the edited text with no prepositional phrases and the authentic text enable a visualisation of the scene – painting a picture in the reader’s eye.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Creating Emotional Argument using Noun Phrases

Early morning in Kenya. A smell hangs in the air. In a clearing lies an elephant’s body. Already her flank is whitewashed with droppings: nature is taking its course. Yet this is no natural death: the mess reveals the truth. This is the poachers.

What is the implied argument here? How might you strengthen this?
Early morning on the edge of Kenya’s Masai Mara National Reserve. The stench of death hangs in the air. In a blood-stained clearing lies the body of an elephant. Already, her flank is whitewashed with vulture droppings: nature is taking its course. Yet this is no natural death: the bloody mess, where her tusks have been brutally hacked from her face, reveals the grim truth. This is the work of ivory poachers.

Worse, the tragedy does not end there. Beside the fallen giant stands her calf, still very much alive. Terrified and weak with hunger, it waves a tiny trunk towards the wheeling vultures. But it’s alone. The traumatised herd has scattered. A whoop announces the arrival of the first hyenas.
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Learning Point for Writers:

One way to develop an argument is to use extended *noun phrases* to create *an emotional appeal through the detail conveyed*. 
The LEAD Planning Template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Link:</th>
<th>How noun phrases can provide emotional detail which establishes an emotional argument.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examples:</td>
<td>Extended noun phrases highlighted in red on PPT.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic Text:</td>
<td>‘In the Line of Fire’ from the World Wildlife Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion:</td>
<td>Discussion of how the two different versions of the text create an argument, and how the extended noun phrases in the authentic version creates emotional appeal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A closer look at grasslands

Grasslands are terrestrial ecosystems dominated by herbaceous and shrub vegetation and maintained by fire, grazing, drought and/or freezing temperatures (White et al., 2000). Grasslands have come under a high degree of pressure from humans, particularly because these ecosystems are usually suitable for agriculture. As of 2000, 45.8 per cent of temperate grassland area had been converted and is now predominantly used for human activities (Hoekstra et al., 2005). Similarly, more than 40 per cent of the Brazilian Cerrado has been converted to agricultural crops (Sano et al., 2010).

The effect of conversion on grassland species is apparent in many systems across the globe. In North America, grassland bird species declined consistently between 1966 and 2011 (Sauer et al., 2013) as a consequence of agricultural intensification (Ref. 2013). In recent years, rapid declines in small mammal populations have been recorded in Australia’s savanna (Woinarski et al., 2010). The grasslands LPI clearly illustrates the effects of conversion (Figure 10). The index is based on 372 populations of 126 species that occur only in grasslands (classified under the grassland, savannahs or shrubland habitats by the IUCN Red list). It shows an overall 18 per cent decline, with an average annual decline of 0.5 per cent. The trend starts to stabilize after 2000 and there is a slight increase from 2004. Conservation efforts have helped stem the decline of some mammal species in Africa and it is these species driving the trend after 2004, whereas the bird populations continue to decline until 2012.

Grassland butterflies

The LPI database does not yet include information for invertebrate species. However, information from other monitoring efforts can help bridge the gap. Since 2005, monitoring data for several European butterfly species has been collected and harmonized for use in the European Grassland Butterfly Indicator for the European Environment Agency (Van Swaay and Van Strien, 2005; Van Swaay et al. 2015).

The LPI methodology is applied to this data, which includes 17 grassland butterfly species monitored in 12 countries. Results show a 33 per cent overall decline over 22 years (Figure 11). Confidence intervals reveal a wide variation in trends as some species are on the increase while others are in decline. However, there is an overall decline which suggests that human modification of habitat is having an impact on grassland species. Furthermore, in many countries in Europe, butterfly numbers declined precipitously before 1990 (Van Swaay et al., 2015); therefore abundance was already historically low at the baseline.

![Graph showing the decline of grassland butterflies](https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2016-10/LPR_2016_full%20report_spread%20low%20res.pdf)
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Kangaroos are found only in Australia and Papua New Guinea. They are a diverse family, with more than sixty different species, and live in a wide range of habitats from wet rainforests through to dry plains.

Kangaroos are marsupials – their young are born undeveloped and then continue to grow in their mothers’ pouches.

Their family name “macropod” means “big foot”. The biggest of all macropods is the red kangaroo. They live in the hot, dry inland of Australia where food can be scarce and water even more so.
Learning Point for Writers:

One way to convey information is to use the present tense to indicate a general universal truth, and the past tense for a particular narrative fact.
The LEAD Planning Template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Link:</th>
<th>How the <em>present tense</em> and <em>past tense</em> can be used in an information text to indicate universal truths or specific narrative facts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examples:</td>
<td>Past and present tense highlighted in different colours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion:</td>
<td>Students to re-read the text in pairs but changing all present tense to the past tense: and discuss the effect of this change.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Explicit knowledge is usable ‘learning’ knowledge: it can be used to develop greater understanding, to solve problems, to share thinking = pedagogically important.

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Further Resources

Resources for Teachers:
http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/education/research/centres/centreforresear
chinwriting/grammar-teacher-resources/

Cybergrammar:  www.cybergrammar.com

Skills for Writing – secondary text books by Pearson.
https://www.pearsonschoolsandfecolleges.co.uk/secondary/EnglishAndMedia
/11-14/SkillsforWriting/SkillsforWriting.aspx

Essential Primary Grammar
http://www.mheducation.co.uk/essential-primary-grammar