Playful explicitness with grammar: a pedagogy for writing

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Abstract

The place of grammar within the teaching of writing has long been contested and successive research studies have indicated no correlation between grammar teaching and writing attainment. However, a recent study has shown a significant positive impact on writing outcomes when the grammar input is intrinsically linked to the demands of the writing being taught. The study adopted a mixed methods design with a large-scale randomised controlled trial accompanied by a qualitative dataset, which provided contextual information about how the intervention was implemented. In this paper, we will outline the pedagogical principles that underpinned the intervention, and illustrate both the theoretical grounding and practical classroom examples that exemplify the approach. We will argue that any future policy or professional development that draws on this research must take account of these pedagogical principles, rather than focusing too superficially on either the grammar or the teaching materials which exemplify them.

Key words: intervention, pedagogy, writing

Introduction: grammar and writing

The contested history of the role of grammar in an English or literacy curriculum has been well rehearsed, indeed repeatedly rehearsed, over time (Braddock et al., 1963; Locke, 2009; Myhill and Jones, 2011; QCA, 1998) and it is a debate that stems from fundamental epistemological disagreements about the value of knowledge about grammar. The abandonment of grammar teaching in most anglophone countries in the 1960s and 1970s followed the Dartmouth Conference of 1966 in the United States and the widespread view that formal grammar teaching had no part in an English curriculum, or worse, that learning grammar was damaging to children's language development (Elbow, 1981), with a *harmful effect* upon writing improvement (Braddock et al., 1963, p. 37). However, whilst terms such as 'abandonment' may reflect a dominant perspective, they do not reflect the inevitable variety of practices and diversity of beliefs that characterise English classrooms around the world, and grammar has always been taught in some classrooms. Moreover, notionally at least, in England, grammar has been a mandatory part of the curriculum since the introduction of the National Curriculum (DES, 1990), with a more prescriptive outline of required grammar in the 1995 version (DfE, 1995), and considerable emphasis upon grammar in the English/Literacy component of the National Strategies that followed in 1998. What remains true, however, is that at policy and professional levels, there is ambiguity and ambivalence about the role of grammar in the curriculum.

This ambivalence is particularly keen in relation to the impact of learning about grammar on other aspects of language performance, especially writing. There have been repeated studies or reviews that have shown no evidence of a positive impact of teaching grammar on children's writing (Andrews et al., 2006; Elley et al., 1979; Hillocks, 1984; Wyse, 2004). However, these studies have largely investigated whether teaching a discrete grammar course improved writing attainment, and frequently the 'non-grammar' group had additional opportunities to write. There have been no large-scale studies that investigated the benefit of creating an integration of writing and grammar, where relevant grammar was meaningfully introduced at appropriate points in the teaching of writing. The study (Myhill et al., 2012) that informs this article set out to address this gap: in this article, we seek to articulate the theoretical thinking underpinning the pedagogy adopted for the study and caution against policy mandates which ignore the importance of principled pedagogical understanding.

Grammar for writing: the research study

Conceptualising grammar

One challenge confronting any researcher of grammar is the multiplicity of meanings and connotations that the word evokes. Everyone knows what grammar is, including Joe Public and Percy Politician, and everyone has a view: indeed, many have their own bête noire of grammatical impropriety. And here is where the problem begins. Contemporary linguistics consistently conceptualises grammar descriptively, the study of language as it is used, in different contexts and in different social settings. In contrast, the public, and even at times the professional, view of grammar is prescriptive, specifying how language should be used. Prescriptive views of grammar are "often social rules that are believed to mark out a speaker or writer

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as educated or as belonging to a particular social class" (Carter and McCarthy, 2006, p. 6). At a policy level, grammar becomes inexorably conflated with moral propriety and combating "dark social forces" (Cameron, 1995, p. 96), whether that be Norman Tebbit connecting grammar with street crime (Cameron, 1995, p. 94) or the *Evening Standard* reporting that the London riots in 2011 could be attributed to the fact that young people did not know how to speak properly (Johns, 2011). From an educational perspective, grammar has been cast as an antidote to all things bad, where "strong doses of English grammar" will act as "a cure for some of our educational ills" (Elley et al., 1979, p. 3). Certainly, a dominant educational view of grammar is that it is about the avoidance or remediation of error: it is about accuracy, correctness and 'proper' English. This stance is likely to result in grammar teaching characterised by learning grammar rules, undertaking decontextualised exercises and drills, and feedback which corrects grammatical errors.

In our study, therefore, we began by clarifying our theoretical conceptualisation of grammar in order to develop appropriate pedagogical practices through which to make connections between grammar and writing. We adopted Carter and McCarthy's definition of grammar as being "concerned with how sentences and utterances are formed" (2006, p. 2), incorporating the structure of sentences, syntax and the structure of words, morphology. We also included within the umbrella of this definition the structure of texts, discourse. It is a fully descriptive view of grammar, interested in developing learners' knowledge about how language works in different contexts. Carter and McCarthy usefully distinguish between grammar as *structure*, how words, sentences and texts are constructed, and grammar as *choice*, the range of possibilities open to a language user. They argue that "the grammar of choice is as important as the grammar of structure" (2006, p. 7) and in the study reported here, the focus was upon the grammar of choice. It is essentially a rhetorical view of grammar, interested in how language choices construct meanings, and recognising that "the grammatical choices we make, including pronoun use, active or passive verb constructions, and sentence patterns – represent relations between writers and the world they live in" (Micciche, 2004, p. 719). This links well with the idea of writers as designers (Myhill, 2011a; Sharples, 1999), which sees writers as agentive, creative shapers of meaning, designing texts in terms of ideas, layout, voice and including grammatical choice. It encourages a playful attitude towards language, exploring the possibilities and limits of what language can achieve. Working from the premise that grammar serves as a semiotic mediating tool, to develop knowledge about language means to become metalinguistically aware and to be able to think grammatically about language (Williams, 2004, 2005). Likewise, Vygotsky (1962) argues that what learners will develop as mediational means for future activities is influenced by what they have become aware of in language. He described writing as the "deliberate structuring of the web of meaning" (1962, p. 100). Accordingly, our goal was not to teach about 'correct' ways of writing, but to open up for young writers a repertoire of infinite possibilities for deliberate structuring and authorial decision-making.

The intervention

The study informing this article is reported more fully elsewhere (Jones et al., 2012; Myhill, 2011b; Myhill et al., 2012). In a nutshell, the study involved one Year 8 class drawn from 32 schools in the Midlands and the South-West. Following a test of teachers' grammatical knowledge, the teachers were matched for strength of subject knowledge, then half the classes were randomly allocated to a comparison group and the other half to an intervention group.

The intervention involved the teaching of three writing units, addressing fictional narrative, argument and poetry writing. Each unit lasted for 3 weeks of lessons (approximately three 1-hour lessons per week) and one unit was taught in each term of the school year. Learning objectives for each unit were selected from the Framework for English (DfES, 2001), which at that time was the curriculum document informing teaching in English secondary schools – in this way, the learning outcomes were wholly compatible with national expectations. A detailed set of teaching materials was devised for each writing genre in which grammar features relevant to the writing being taught were integrated: for example, looking at how noun phrases can support effective description of settings in narrative. The teaching focus of each unit was writing, not grammar, and the creation of the teaching materials was informed by the theoretical conceptualisation, outlined above. The comparison group addressed the same learning objectives, the same medium-term plan, and produced the same written outcomes, but they did not receive the detailed lesson plans with the embedded grammar.

The results

Students' improvement in writing as a consequence of being in the intervention or comparison group was determined through the use of a pre- and post-test of writing, mirroring the national writing test for 13–14-year-olds (Key Stage 3), and designed and marked by Cambridge Assessment who were formerly the test developers and markers for the national writing test at Key Stage 3. The statistical analysis indicated a statistically significant positive effect for the intervention group: over the year, students in the intervention group improved their writing scores by 20 per cent, compared with 11 per cent in the comparison group. The analysis also showed that the embedded

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grammar teaching had greatest impact on able writers. This finding may be attributable to the absence of improvement in able writers in the comparison group, who barely improved over the year, whereas the weaker writers in the comparison group did make some improvement over the year. Finally, the statistical analysis also signalled the crucial role played by teachers' own grammatical knowledge as this was a significant factor mediating the success or otherwise of the intervention.

Having outlined briefly the key design and outcomes of the research study, the remainder of this article will outline the pedagogical principles that underpinned the intervention, and illustrate both the theoretical grounding and practical classroom examples that exemplify the approach.

Framing the pedagogy: key teaching principles

Drawing on this theoretical conceptualisation of writing as design and a rhetorical view of grammar, focusing on grammar as choice, we began creating the teaching materials by first devising a set of pedagogical principles that acted as guides framing the design. These pedagogical principles were as follows:

- grammatical metalanguage is used, but it is always explained through examples and patterns;
- links are always made between the feature introduced and how it might enhance the writing being tackled;
- discussion is fundamental in encouraging critical conversations about language and effects;
- the use of 'creative imitation' offers model patterns for students to play with and then use in their own writing;
- the use of authentic examples from authentic texts links writers to the broader community of writers;
- activities should support students in making choices and being designers of writing;
- language play, experimentation, risk-taking and games should be actively encouraged.

Through the incorporation of these pedagogical principles into the teaching units, the intention was to develop students' metalinguistic understanding through making visible and explicit the authorial choices, the repertoire of possibilities, available to them. The specific theoretical thinking informing each of the principles and examples of how each one could be realised in practice is elaborated in more detail below.

Grammatical metalanguage is used, but it is explained through examples

Although some have argued, such as Robinson (2005, p. 39), that "the role of metalanguage is highly significant in the ongoing development of pupils' language abilities", there has been relatively little purposeful discussion of the place of grammatical terminology in the writing curriculum for first language speakers. Whilst there is an evident precision in being able to use appropriate metalanguage to discuss language, there is always a danger that the terminology obscures the learning focus of the lesson, or indeed becomes the learning focus. At its worst, terminology could become a barrier to learning. As Fearn and Farnan observed, simply being able "to define and identify grammatical labels is not related to writing skills" (2005, p. 2) and our goal was to develop the metalinguistic understanding of the way language was being used, to see how language works. The work of Williams (2004, 2005) in Australia is significant in this respect as he demonstrated that children at an early age are able to cope with the demands of formal linguistic features when grammar forms a purposeful part of textual study. In the light of this, the use of grammatical metalanguage was actively built into lessons, since hearing the terminology used in relevant contexts is likely to support later acquisition of the metalanguage. The decision to use a particular grammatical term was not serendipitous, but purposeful, and was only used "if the term was necessary or useful in helping students understand and discuss the chosen language content" (Mulder, 2010, p. 65). However, the grammatical metalanguage was never the core focus of an activity: examples and patterns were always used alongside the metalanguage to allow students to access and play with a particular structure and discuss its effect even if they did not remember the grammatical name. Keith argued that students needed to explore the metalinguistic concept first before moving into labelling: "grammatical concepts come first, then the terminology" (1997, p. 8). In the classroom example illustrated in Table 1, the term 'modal verb' is used, but the prior exploration of modal verbs in famous speeches and the support of a resource simply listing the modal verbs enable students to access the activity, even if their grammatical understanding of modal verbs is limited.

Table 1: Classroom example of using grammatical metalanguage through examples

Context: writing a persuasive speech
Learning Focus: how modal verbs can express different levels of assertiveness or possibility in persuasion
Resource with modal verbs listed: *can; could; may; might; must; shall; should; will; ought to* following an activity exploring modal verbs in famous speeches.
Task:
- Imagine that you are Roy Hodgson talking to the England team before the penalty shoot-out in the Euro 2012 match against Spain. Write a short 'pep talk', arguing that it is still possible to win, using some of these modal verbs to predict what *might/can/will* happen in the shoot-out.
- **You could start**: "We can win a penalty shoot-out".

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Links are always made between the feature introduced and how it might enhance the writing being tackled

Given that historically, earlier studies on the grammar–writing relationship had established little impact of discrete grammar courses on students' writing, it was crucially important for this study that teaching made connections for learners between a particular grammar feature and its potential meaning-making effect. Indeed, two small-scale studies in the United States that investigated the impact of grammar on writing provide some earlier evidence of the benefits of establishing these connections for learners. Fogel and Ehri's study (2000) focused on supporting learners in recognising the difference between American Standard English and Black Vernacular English (BVE), because their students were too frequently writing in BVE. Using grammar as the tool, they "clarified for students the link between features in their own non-standard writing and features in Standard English" (Fogel and Ehri, 2000, p. 231). More recently, Fearn and Farnan (2007) undertook an intervention study where they taught students sentence grammar in the context of writing and found a positive outcome. Whilst it is not clear that their approach sought to explore the rhetorical and meaning-making potential of grammar, what they did do was to argue that "grammar instruction influences writing performance when grammar and writing share one instructional context" (Fearn and Farnan, 2007, p. 16). For our study, given that the goal in embedding attention to grammar within a writing curriculum was to support writing development, not to learn grammar, considering and discussing grammatical constructions in textual contexts was critical. Considering how grammatical structures create meaning in specific contexts reinforces the importance of context, and understanding the different effects that different structures can create is part of beginning to understand the writer's craft and the possibilities open to a writer.

In this way, establishing links between a grammar feature and a writing context supports development of students' metalinguistic understanding. As noted previously, whilst the use of grammatical metalanguage was not avoided, the focus of the teaching was not on grammatical labelling. Here, there is an important distinction between declarative knowledge of grammar terms, and procedural knowledge, or knowledge-in-action (Gombert, 1992, p. 191). Without this connected procedural knowledge, there is always the danger that the grammar component in a writing lesson is reduced to teaching the "normative structures and grammatical labels in isolation from meaning" prefigured by Derewianka and Jones (2010, p. 14). In the policy context of England, making meaningful connections between writing and grammar avoids redundant learning, such as believing that complex sentences are good sentences or that opening a sentence with an adverb is good practice (Myhill, 2011b, p. 265) (see Table 2).

Table 2: Classroom example of making connections between a grammatical structure and a writing context

Context: writing fairy tales
Learning Focus: the simplicity of noun phrases in fairy tales
Connections between grammar and writing:
Through discussion and guided textual analysis, the teacher draws out the following characteristics of noun phrases in fairy tales:
- Fairy tales draw on oral narratives and written versions retain many of the patterns of oral language. These helped listeners to follow and remember the story. Nouns and adjectives are often used very simply.
- Repetition of adjectives, for example, *long, long ago; far, far away; a dark, dark wood.*
- Short noun phrases with just one adjective, for example, *wicked stepmother; enchanted forest; handsome prince; golden apple.*
- Predictable 'stock' of nouns and adjectives, for example, *beautiful; evil; castle; king; forest; princess*

Discussion is fundamental in encouraging critical conversations about language and effects

If making connections between grammar and writing is significant in developing learning about writing, then talk is a key mechanism through which this learning is achieved. The deliberate incorporation of multiple opportunities for students to discuss the grammar points being introduced is founded upon theories of learning that emphasise the importance of talk in fostering effective learning. The talk encouraged by the intervention was exploratory talk (Alexander, 2004; Barnes et al., 1986; Mercer, 2000), where the teacher is not the authority in possession of the right answer, but where the students explore the possibilities of language and discuss their interpretations of effects. For both Barnes et al. (1986, p. 81) and Mercer (2000, p. 55), exploratory talk supports learners in making connections between their learning experiences. It is also important in enabling real learning to occur, in "a collaborative endeavour in which meanings are negotiated and some common knowledge is mobilized" (Mercer, 2000, p. 6), rather than rote or superficial learning transmitted by the teacher. This is perhaps especially relevant in terms of developing metalinguistic understanding about writing, where it is all too easy for teachers to establish formulaic approaches to writing, often driven by the high-stakes testing climate in England (Myhill, 2011b; Myhill and Jones, 2011, p. 265). Talk, therefore, may be the key to moving students from superficial learning about grammar (e.g., add adjectives to create description) to deep learning (e.g., some adjectives are redundant because the noun is descriptive). Kellogg (1994) argued that writers needed metacognitive knowledge to generate *a model of their audience* and to reflect *on rhetorical and content probabilities*, and stressed that teaching writing

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Table 3: Classroom example of a discussion task to stimulate critical conversations about text

Context: writing fictional narrative
Learning Focus: how short sentences can create tension in narrative
Task:
In pairs, read the extract from Peter Benchley's *Jaws* and find the three shortest sentences he uses. Discuss why he might have chosen to make these three sentences so short? What part do they play in the narrative structure of this incident? What effect might they have on the reader?

is as much about teaching thinking as it is about teaching writing (p. 213). The role of the teacher is to act as a "discourse guide . . . using language for thinking collectively" (Mercer, 2000, p. 170) and to facilitate discussion about linguistic choices, possibilities and effects. Through this kind of exploratory talk, students are given ownership in making writerly decisions, and are enabled to "make informed judgements about language," questioning rather than compliantly accepting "socially defined notions of 'good grammar'" (Denham and Lobeck, 2010, p. 230) (see Table 3).

The use of 'creative imitation' offers model patterns for students to play with and use in their own writing

In contemporary classrooms, imitation is frequently a pejorative term, signifying a low level of unoriginal activity, perhaps copying or rote-learning. But imitation, or *mimesis,* has a long history in creative art, drawing on the thinking of Aristotle in particular. Aristotle, in his *Poetics* (1996), considered the relationship between life and art, arguing that it is intrinsic to human nature to be imitative and that we learn through imitation. Although much of Aristotle's thinking in relation to mimesis is about how the audience of creative art is stimulated to understand life and emotions better through the representational imitation of art, it is also about how the artist creates art forms through "perception and understanding of their representational content and structure" (Halliwell, 2002, p. 199). Halliwell suggests that we learn through active experimentation "with story patterns, metrical forms, stylistic registers" (2002, p. 175), and the concept of imitation was central to the study of rhetoric in Western thought. Conscious imitation of artistic role models was advocated and "poets actively sought to imitate exemplary forerunners and the artistic conventions they made authoritative" (Potolsky, 2006, p. 50).

The use of textual models as scaffolds for young learners in writing is much more familiar, through the work of the genre movement in Australia (Martin, 1985; Rose, 2009) and Lewis and Wray's work (1997) on non-fiction writing in England. In essence, the use of

Table 4: Classroom example of using imitation to support the use of model patterns in writing

Context: argument writing
Learning Focus: how using an imperative opening sentence followed by an emotive narrative can act as an effective hook for a persuasive argument which follows.
Task:
Use the following opening of a fund-raising campaign leaflet against animal cruelty as a model for writing the opening paragraph of your own argument.
Picture the scene. There are dogs running wild around a courtyard littered with muck and machinery. There are dogs rammed in cages, noses pressed against the bars. There are dogs whose fur is hanging in great clumps, with bare skin and running sores. The noise of barking and yelping is deafening, but in one cage a golden labrador lies silent, head on its paws, looking at the yard with melancholy eyes.

models encourages imitation in order to support initial learning about a text. The same principles of support apply to imitation at sentence or phrase level: imitation is a scaffold that allows students to try out new structures and play with new ways of expressing something. Whilst the precise grammatical metalanguage may be used to describe the pattern, the use of imitation allows the writer to practise and manipulate the structure without necessarily being able to label it grammatically. Such imitation may also be a powerful learning tool in helping to embed new structures cognitively within the student's writing repertoire. Paraskevas encourages her students "to imitate artful sentences, to practise writing their own well-crafted model sentences" (2006, p. 66) arguing that this process enables the internalisation of the patterns imitated, and that "imitation is the first step toward giving writers choices that reflect their stylistic and rhetorical competence" (2006, p. 66). And, of course, creative imitation may be a first step in generating wholly original combinations (see Table 4).

The use of authentic examples from authentic texts links writers to the broader community of writers

There are two important reasons for using authentic texts as models and exemplars in the writing classroom. Firstly, using authentic texts avoids the pitfalls of examples artificially created to exemplify a grammar point which have no resonance of truth. Traditional school grammar books frequently rely on sentences created, devoid of context, to exemplify neatly a grammatical point, and at worst they can be unconvincing and implausible. In the sample materials published for the forthcoming national test of grammar, punctuation and spelling for 11-year-olds in England (DfE, 2012), the passive is exemplified with the sentence, "A biscuit was eaten by Sam", which, al-

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Table 5: A classroom example of using an authentic text to link writers to the community of writers

Context: writing poetry
Learning Focus: how punctuation and syntax can reinforce meanings
Activity:
Using Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est*:
Pairs/Fours:
Give out copies of the poem with punctuation prompt questions. Students annotate the poem with comments on the relationship between the punctuation and the meaning, and the effect Owen might have been trying to create.
Teacher:
Using the teacher-annotated copy of the poem and prompts, take feedback and support students' understanding of the effects on meaning of different punctuation and different sentence lengths. Note, for example, the final stanza is a single sentence with two long subordinated clauses, building towards the main clause, which is the meaning kernel in the poem.

though grammatically correct, is not a sentence which it is easy to imagine ever being used in an authentic context. Using authentic texts offers students encounters with language-in-action, rather than language-for-demonstration: as Paraskevas argues, "students must be given clear, linguistically accurate information about the structure of their language, information they can use to analyse any real language text – not the simplistic sentences that often appear in some handbooks" (2004, p. 97).

A second reason for using authentic texts is that one goal of an explicit focus on grammar in writing is to help young writers to explore what real writers do and the choices they make in order to nurture their own repertoire of possibilities as authors. It helps to connect writers in classrooms to the broader community of writers beyond the classroom and opens up the opportunity that texts themselves might teach about writing, what Ehrenworth describes as "an apprenticeship relation with great authors, even at the level of sentence structure" (2003, p. 92). In other words, using authentic texts makes meaningful links between being a reader and being a writer. It also recognises that writing is a cultural and social practice, and that classrooms are "framed communities in which children learn to manipulate the semiotic resources available to them in order to make meaning" (Andrews and Smith, 2011, p. 24) (see Table 5).

Activities should support students in making choices and being designers of writing

Integral to the purpose of embedding grammar within a pedagogy for writing is the nurturing of students' ability to make informed choices in their writing and to see the process of writing as a process of design (Myhill, 2011a). The underlying idea of design derives from new literacies research that sees literacy as a transformational meaning-making process in which the resources available are re-combined and re-articulated to create a new design (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000, p. 22). In a multimodal world, the notion of design is often equated with visual or layout features, but design choices operate at every level of text production, from choices about the content and ideas and the macro-structure of a text to choices about words, images and syntactical structures at a micro-level. The rich potentiality of syntactic shaping as a design tool is often ignored – the subtle shifts of meaning and emphasis which can be created by inverting the syntax of a sentence so that the subject comes at the end; by choosing to place adjectives after the noun rather than before the noun; by using a verbless sentence and so on. This is the grammar of choice at play.

Encouraging thinking about choices and design fosters ownership and authorial responsibility. It makes the writing process more visible, illustrating concretely that writing is a complex act of metalinguistic decision-making, as writers strive to make their writing match their rhetorical intentions. This kind of sophisticated decision-making is a marker of development in writing. Young writers tend towards thinking about what to say and then writing it down, what Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) call 'knowledge-telling'; as writers develop, they are better able to make choices about how to represent their ideas in text and are 'knowledge transforming'. Mature writers are able to shape "what to say and how to say it with the potential reader fully in mind" (Kellogg, 2008, p. 7). Moreover, encouraging writers to become aware that choices are available to them supports the development of a repertoire of possibilities, and gives greater autonomy to the writer. A reduced reliance on teacher-led recommendations may help to avoid the tendency towards formulaic writing, accompanied by checklists of techniques where inclusion of particular techniques is more important than writerly decision-making (see Table 6).

Language play, experimentation, risk-taking and games should be actively encouraged

The notion of playfulness, reflected in the title of this article, is directly counter to the deficit model of grammar, characterised by prescriptive, rule-bound views and an emphasis on accuracy and error remediation. Playfulness and experimentation help writers to see the elasticity of language, the possibilities it affords and what language can do, rather than what writers must not do. Originality in writing is underpinned by linguistic playfulness: indeed, "creativity requires risk-taking and there is no innovation without creativity" (Sahlberg, 2010, p. 343). Although creativity

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Table 6: A classroom example of an activity supporting the making of design choices

Context: writing argument
Focus: how sentence length and sentence structure can be used to create rhetorical effect in the closing of a persuasive argument.
Task:
Students are given the sentences from the final paragraph of a persuasive speech, each sentence on a separate strip of paper. They are given two sets of the same sentences. In pairs, they create two versions of the ending of the argument and discuss the different ways the two versions work. Finally, they choose and justify the choice of their preferred version.

is not a permissive free-for-all, and "creative education involves a balance between teaching knowledge and skills, and encouraging innovation" (NACCCE, 1999, p. 6), it is possible that in the context of writing we have overemphasised skills at the expense of playful innovation. The pedagogical approach described in this article offers explicit guidance and development of metalinguistic knowledge, but this is overlaid with playful activities that allow exploration and experimentation with new knowledge. Philip Pullman rather beautifully describes this kind of playfulness as fooling about:

> *"… fooling about with the stuff the world is made of: with sounds, and with shapes and colours, and with clay and paper and wood and metal, and with language. Fooling about, playing with it, pushing it this way and that, turning it sideways, painting it different colours, looking at it from the back, putting one thing on top of another, asking silly questions, mixing things up, making absurd comparisons, discovering unexpected similarities, making pretty patterns, and all the time saying 'Supposing … I wonder … What if …'"* (Pullman, 2005).

Ironically, the admonishment of fooling about is a more typical discourse in many classrooms. However, if students are to be allowed to fool around with language, they need classroom environments that recognise the value of constructive 'failure', which understand that a playful, unusual attempt to write in a different way may not be successful, and which "helps young people learn how to cope with failure" (Rolfe, 2010, p. 13). Learning through unsuccessful attempts is rich and productive, but only if students are not censured for their 'failure'. It is also likely that competitive, performative educational cultures, characterised by high-stakes testing regimes, lead to a standardisation of learning, rather than divergent or creative thinking (Sacks, 2000). Indeed, it is significant that in our study, the able writers in the comparison group did not improve over the year of the research. This lack of improvement may be because able writers often play safe and avoid trying out new ways of writing: having mastered repertoires of writing which secure a grade A, they may be reluctant to develop their repertoires by testing out new ways of writing for fear of an impact on their grades, or because of a fear of appearing to be strange or wrong (Sahlberg, 2009). To counteract this kind of safe, strategic compliance requires teachers who are themselves "courageous, risk-taking, playful and intuitive" (Goouch, 2008, p. 99) (see Table 7).

Table 7: A classroom example of a playful, experimental writing task

Context: writing poetry
Focus: how varying sentence structure and sentence length can create different emphases in poetry.
Task:
Using an exploded version of Sylvia Plath's *Mirror* presented alphabetically as a word grid, students are asked to generate pairs of sentences, experimenting with the possibilities outlined below:
- Beginning with a non-finite verb, adverb or prepositional phrase
- Using a short verbless sentence
- Using a one-word sentence
- Using repetition of a single word or short phrase.

Discussion

The long-running debate about the role of grammar in the curriculum has always tended to focus on grammar as content, a body of knowledge to be acquired, accompanied by unresolved and contested arguments about the educational purpose and value of that body of knowledge. In contrast, the conceptualisation of grammar at the foundation of this study is a descriptive grammar, focusing on the grammar of choice: in essence, then, we are advocating not a content grammar, but a grammar of process. It is based upon the key principle that "knowing grammar is knowing *how* more than knowing *what*" (Cameron, 1997, p. 236) and leads to "a pedagogy which orients learners to thinking about the effects of grammatical patterning in texts so that their meanings can be uncovered" (Clark, 2005, p. 45). For young writers, such an emphasis on grammar as choice and process should support metalinguistic development and foster the ability not only to make explicit choices in writing but also to articulate an authorial justification for those choices. This explicitness enables young writers to exercise "conscious control and conscious choice over language which enables both to *see through* language in a systematic way and to use language more discriminatingly" (Carter, 1990, p. 119). At the same time, becoming attentive to grammatical patterns and structures and understanding how different linguistic choices subtly shade meanings in different contexts may lead to internalised writer

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knowledge, which can subsequently be used without conscious choice. In other words, contextualised grammar teaching, grammar as choice, helps young writers to become more metalinguistically aware.

However, this approach to the teaching of grammar and writing requires metalinguistically aware teaching. The most effective teachers in our study were confident in making meaningful connections between grammar and writing for the students in their own classes, and they had sufficient metalinguistic knowledge themselves to encourage active discussion about authorial choices in writing. Their lessons exhibited the characteristics of description, exploration, engagement and reflection identified by Svalberg as the '*salient features*' of metalinguistically aware teaching (2007, p. 296) and experimental playfulness was evident. In contrast, where teachers struggled with the demands of the intervention, difficulties were attributable to the challenge posed by the grammatical knowledge required and a tendency to try to control students' language choices. The complementary counterpoint to exploratory discussion of language is the habit of explicitness. Metalinguistically aware teachers were able to make "appropriate and strategic interventions" in order to make *"implicit knowledge explicit"* (Carter, 1990, p. 117): they were able to draw out students' implicit knowledge of language, derived from their in-school and out-of-school literacy experiences and make it explicitly available to them as a meaning-making resource.

In many ways, the academic, professional and political debate about the role of grammar in the curriculum has been an impoverished one, rarely rooted in theoretical thinking, robust empirical evidence or authentic classroom practice. The study reported here is not a definite answer to a perennial problem. Rather it foregrounds the importance of articulating and enacting a principled rationale for grammar that can inform classroom practice. Sams (2003) has argued that both traditional and in-context approaches to the teaching of grammar fail because "they treat grammar as something that exists apart from and outside of the writing process itself" (p. 57): what we offer here is a role for grammar, coherently theorised within a pedagogy of writing, underpinned by metalinguistically aware teaching and learning, and framed by exploration, playfulness and experimentation.

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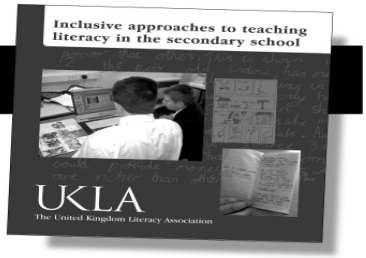

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