

# GRAMMAR AS A MEANING-MAKING RESOURCE FOR IMPROVING WRITING

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## Abstract

This article will begin by briefly outlining the long-standing, and contested, debate in Anglophone countries regarding the place of grammar in the L1 curriculum, and will underline how Anglophone countries in general have not valued grammar in the teaching of L1 (or in L2). It will illustrate how current national policies have re-positioned grammar, with particular reference to England and Australia, and it will review recent research which demonstrates that explicit grammar teaching can support learner outcomes in reading and writing. Drawing on a Hallidayan theoretical framework for grammar, which emphasises grammar as a semiotic resource for meaning-making, the article will offer a theorized rationale for the inclusion of grammar in the L1 curriculum. This argument will be evidenced with data from a series of related studies and will address a) linking grammar and the learning focus for reading or writing in a meaningful way; b) the role of talk in supporting the development of students' metalinguistic knowledge; c) students' conceptual understanding of grammatical terms; and d) the place of teachers' grammatical subject knowledge in supporting a meaning-rich approach to the teaching of grammar. The article will conclude by signaling key lines of enquiry for future research.

Keywords: metalinguistic understanding; writing; grammar; metatalk

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The place of explicit grammar in first language teaching has a chequered history, particularly in Anglophone countries, characterized by an underlying uncertainty regarding the educational value of teaching grammar. In the light of this, the aim of this paper is to offer a theorized rationale of a place for grammar in the L1 curriculum. Of course, the very term 'grammar' itself means different things to different people, and it is the different views of what grammar is which shape many of the opposing views this article. At its simplest, grammar is '*the business of taking a language to pieces to see how it works*' (Crystal, 2004: 10) and traditionally this has involved focusing on morphology, the structure of words, and syntax, the structure of sentences (Carter and McCarthy, 2006: 2). For this paper, however, we take a view of grammar as '*concerned with language in its entirety*' (Halliday and Mathiessen, 2004: 20), involving words, sentences and texts, where text is '*a process of making meaning in context*' (Halliday and Mathiessen, 2004: 3).

The detailed history of the contested nature of grammar in the L1 curriculum has been well-described by many authors (Kolln & Hancock, 2005; Hudson & Walmsley, 2005; Kamler, 1995; Myhill and Jones, 2011), and is a debate which has largely been conducted without reference to, or contributions from, L1 research in other languages. The influence of the US Dartmouth Conference in 1966 has been far-reaching in this respect: its advocacy of a grammar-free Language Arts curriculum prompted the widespread abandonment of grammar teaching in the US, England, Australia, New Zealand and English-speaking Canada. As a consequence, professional and political stances on the curricular role of grammar lack consensus and reflect a diversity of views from those who see grammar as remediation of inaccuracies (Macdonald, 1995), or grammar as the keystone in upholding national standards and combatting social ills (see Cameron, 1995 for a fuller discussion of this issue) to those who see grammar as the enemy of creativity and self-expression (Wyse, 2004), and those who see grammar as a tool for talking about language and empowerment in understanding how language works (Carter 1993).

This lack of consensus is vividly demonstrated by two recent blog entries by Bas Aarts (2016), a linguist at a UK university, and Michael Rosen (2016), a children's author, well-known in the UK. The blog entries are triggered by national debate in the media in England and Wales surrounding the government's national tests for children aged 7 and 11 on spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG [see DfE, 2013a]), in which children are expected to identify grammatical features and distinguish correct constructions from incorrect ones. The two blogs exemplify the nature of this debate, particularly the opposing views of linguists who value grammar in its own right and educationalists who see it as stifling and limiting of children's engagement with language. In Bas Aarts' blog entry, he responds to some of the particulars of this debate and maintains that:

Our aim is for kids to enjoy learning about the language they use every day, to understand how it works, and to use it more effectively both in their formal and creative writing. We hope that we can make a difference in improving children's literacy. (Aarts, 2016)

Rosen picks up on this and ripostes:

He tells us that his 'aim is for kids to enjoy learning about the language they use every day'. It's an honorable aim. However, one thing SPaG most certainly is not, is about 'the language they use every day'! SPaG is fundamentally a supposed method to teach children how to write standard English. In fact, children see, hear and imitate many other models of written English and they all speak in various forms of 'spoken English' which operate with many conventions not covered by SPaG. One simple example: 'Where you going?' 'Out'. There is no part of SPaG that 'teaches' what is going on in this interchange. So I have no idea why Bas concocts the fantasy that SPaG is about 'the language they use every day'. (Rosen, 2016)

At the heart of the oppositions represented here are two key issues: firstly, the dichotomy of descriptive and prescriptive grammars, and secondly, the usefulness of grammar in learning about language. In a nutshell, a prescriptive theory of a grammar-writing relationship would argue for the importance of grammar in securing correctness in written expression; whilst a descriptive theory of a grammar-writing relationship would argue for the importance of grammar in illuminating how written text generates meaning in different contexts. The government tests fuelling the blogs are prescriptive, whilst Rosen holds a descriptivist stance. At the same time, Aarts' hope that learning grammar might '*improve children's literacy*' epitomises a second opposition, that knowing grammar does or does not improve children's writing. There are many teachers and researchers who have argued and still argue that teaching grammar does not improve writing. The original impetus for the abandonment of grammar teaching in the 1960s, stemmed from research which found no positive relationship between the teaching of grammar and competence in language use. Having reviewed a body of research on grammar and writing instruction, DeBoer (1959: 417) concluded that '*in all these studies . . . the results have been consistently negative so far as the value of grammar in the improvement of language expression is concerned*', a conclusion echoed by Braddock et al (1963). Hillocks' substantial meta-analysis of studies in 1984 again questioned the validity of grammar instruction for improving writing, a finding reiterated more than 20 years later in Graham and Perin's (2007) meta-analysis. In the UK, two systematic reviews (Andrews et al, 2004a; 2004b) again argued that there was no evidence of any beneficial effect of grammar on students' writing outcomes. Indeed, there is no logical, cognitive or educational reason why the ability to name and identify grammatical structures might be expected to improve writing. In the context of this long-running, heated and often polemical debate, this article will briefly present how current national policies have re-positioned grammar, with particular reference to England, the US and Australia, and it will review recent research which demonstrates that explicit grammar teaching can support learner outcomes in

reading and writing. It will then offer a theorised rationale for the inclusion of grammar in the L1 curriculum.

## 2. GRAMMAR IN CURRICULAR POLICY IN ANGLOPHONE COUNTRIES

Although grammar as a part of the L1 curriculum was largely rejected in Anglophone countries following the Dartmouth Conference of 1966, more recently there has been something of a turnaround in curriculum policy, primarily in England and Australia, but also to a lesser extent in the United States. In England, the introduction of the first National Curriculum in 1990 was part of a political endeavour to raise literacy standards within a conservative ideological framework emphasising Standard English, spelling and grammar (see Myhill, 2011). This first National Curriculum was an extensive document and although grammar was included, it received no great emphasis, and pedagogical attention focused largely on sociolinguistic approaches to issues of Standard English and dialect. Since then, there have been four further revisions of the National Curriculum (DfE 1995; DfE 1999; DCSF 2007; DfE 2014), each representing differing emphases on the place of grammar in the language curriculum. The 1995 version explicitly referred to discourse and sentence structure and word classes in the writing curriculum mandated for secondary students (age 11-16), but the 1999 and 2007 versions are less explicit. However, the most recent version (DfE 2014) is distinctive in giving significant attention to grammar, firstly by delineating very explicitly the grammatical knowledge to be addressed, and secondly, by developing a new national test at age 7 and 11 which tests grammar (and spelling and punctuation—see DfE, 2013a). It includes a statutory Annex which specifies the metalinguistic terminology which students must be taught in each year group of primary education (see Table 1 below), with the specification that they *'should learn to recognise and use the terminology through discussion and practice'* (DfE, 2014: 66).

*Table 1. Mandatory metalanguage in National Curriculum (England)*

| <b>Year Group</b> | <b>Required Metalanguage</b>   |
|-------------------|--|
| 1 (age 6)         | letter, capital letter, word, singular, plural, sentence, punctuation, full stop, question mark, exclamation mark  |
| 2 (age 7)         | noun, noun phrase, statement, question, exclamation, command, compound, adjective, verb, suffix, adverb, tense (past, present), apostrophe, comma                                      |
| 3 (age 8)         | adverb, preposition, conjunction, word family, prefix, clause, subordinate clause, direct speech, consonant, consonant letter vowel, vowel letter, inverted commas (or 'speech marks') |
| 4 (age 9)         | determiner, pronoun, possessive pronoun, adverbial   |
| 5 (age 10)        | modal verb, relative pronoun, relative clause, parenthesis, bracket, dash, cohesion, ambiguity   |
| 6 (age 11)        | subject, object, active, passive, synonym, antonym, ellipsis, hyphen, colon, semi-colon, bullet points   |

Whilst the metalanguage specified clearly is predominantly grammatical, it includes other metalanguage, such as *synonym*, *bullet point* and *ambiguity* which might not usually be considered as grammatical terms. The grammar Annexe includes an opening statement which ostensibly sets out a rationale for its inclusion. It recognises that we learn the grammar of our first language *naturally and implicitly through interactions with other speakers and from reading* and makes a pedagogical argument that explicit knowledge of grammar gives writers *more conscious control and choice* and that this knowledge is best developed within the context of teaching reading, writing and speaking (DfE, 2013b: 64). Yet the listing of terminology required for each year group, and a national test whose format asks students to identify errors and to identify and label grammatical features is at odds with this. The National Curriculum for secondary students (age 11-16) is extremely brief (6 pages compared with the 69 pages in the Primary National Curriculum document), and the references to grammar refer to paying attention to *accurate grammar*; to the use of Standard English; to the use of grammatical knowledge to improve the *coherence and overall effectiveness* of their writing; and to *drawing on ... grammatical constructions from their reading and listening, and using these consciously in their writing and speech to achieve particular effects*' (DfE, 2013c: 5). What seems evident is that the curriculum is ambivalent about whether its pedagogical rationale is prescriptivist, a stance particularly reinforced by the national test, or descriptivist, as implied in the statements relating to the use of grammatical knowledge to support more conscious linguistic decision-making about effectiveness of written texts.

In contrast, the new Australian National Curriculum for English communicates a much stronger sense of purpose for the inclusion of grammar, which rejects simply teaching grammar to label grammatical constructions, and instead clearly emphasises using grammar as a resource for understanding how meanings are made. The curriculum Framing Paper maintains that:

The goal of teaching grammar and textual patterns should go beyond students' labelling of various grammatical categories; it should centre on goals such as clearer expression of thought, more convincing argumentation, more careful logic in reasoning, more coherence, precision, and imagination in speaking and writing, and knowing how to choose words and grammatical and textual structures that are more appropriate to the audience or readership. The goal here centres on the gradually more powerful conversion of 'knowledge about' language into a resource for effective reading, listening, viewing, writing, speaking and designing. (ACARA 2009:6)

The Framing Paper asserts the important of supporting learners in developing '*a coherent body of knowledge about how the English language works*' (ACARA 2009:9) and that this body of knowledge '*can enable students to reflect consciously and with precision on their own speaking and writing, its efficacy, fluency and creativity, and to discuss these matters productively with others*' (ACARA, 2009:9). The curriculum itself uses '*standard grammatical terminology but applies it within a contextual framework, in which language choices are seen to vary according to the*

*topics at hand, the nature and proximity of the relationships between the language users, and the modes or processes of communication available'* (ACARA, no date). It also recognises that *'students' capability to use grammar will exceed their ability to explicitly reflect on grammar'* (ACARA, no date), in contrast to the National Curriculum in England which expects students to learn a grammatical concept, then apply it in their writing (DfE, 2013b: 64). The Australian Curriculum: English is structured around three strands, Language, Literacy, and Literature. The Language strand is comprised of five themes: Language Variation and Change; Language and Interaction; Text Structure and Organisation; Expressing and Developing Ideas; and Phonic and Word Knowledge. Within this, there is no explicit list of required grammatical metalanguage but there are references to clause structures, words and word groups which imply the grammatical terms which will be required.

The United States has no national curriculum but the Common Core State Standards, developed in 2009, reflect policy-makers' view of the role of grammar in the English Language Arts (L1) curriculum. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were developed in response to a 'standards agenda', prompted by concerns that American students were under-performing educationally relative to international peers, and set out what a student should know be able to do at the end of each school year. The English Language Arts CCSS framing statement which describes what college-ready students should be able to accomplish in English makes no direct reference to grammar, though it does refer to *'command of Standard English'* (CCSS, 2010: 7). The standards themselves are divided into four strands: Speaking and Listening; Reading; Writing; and Language. The Language strand is explained as including *'the essential 'rules' of standard written and spoken English'* but also as an approach to language *'as a matter of craft and informed choice among alternatives'* (CCSS, 2010: 8). This dual rationale is echoed in the Anchor Standards for Language which emphasise both the use of Standard English with accuracy in grammar, spelling and punctuation and applying that knowledge about language in context *'to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening'* (CCSS, 2010: 25). The Language Standards themselves make heavy use of grammatical terminology although a considerable proportion reflects usage of particular grammatical structures, rather than explicit knowledge of them. In Kindergarten to Grade 2 (ages 5-8), there is no expectation that students will be able to name or identify grammatical structures, but this is introduced in Grades 3-5. Grade 3 students, for example, should be able to *'explain the function of nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in general and their functions in particular sentences'*; in Grade 4 they should be able to *'form and use'* the progressive, and prepositional phrases; and in year 5, the requirement is for knowledge and understanding of conjunctions, prepositions and interjections, and verb tense. There is very little evidence of any emphasis on *'craft and informed choice'* (CCSS, 2010: 8) but a very strong emphasis on the conventions of language use.

In sum, then, this overview of current curricular expectations of grammar for L1 underline a lack of any common framework or theoretical rationale for its inclusion. The American and English versions, in particular, appear ambivalent in their intentions. In their framing statements, both note the place of grammar in supporting the making of language choices in writing, but the actual curriculum or standards specified appear to value accuracy in terms of conventional usages, especially in the US, and the naming and identification of grammatical structures, especially in England. The Australian curriculum offers the most coherent framing of a pedagogical rationale for grammar in the curriculum; however, the curriculum itself, whilst maintaining the use of '*standard grammatical terminology*' (ACARA, no date) is the least explicit of all three jurisdictions in specifying what grammar should be learned. The tensions that initiated the abandonment of grammar in the curriculum after the Dartmouth Conference remain inherent in these new versions, resulting in curricular descriptions and expectations which have no evident pedagogical coherence.

### 3. RESEARCH EVIDENCE RELATED TO EXPLICIT GRAMMAR TEACHING

In part, this ambivalence in curriculum expectations for grammar in L1 may be due to the nature of the research basis that informs it, although it may also be due to the arbitrariness of the way in which policy-makers use the outcomes of research to inform decision-making. The initial rejection of grammar at the Dartmouth Conference was heavily driven by the research report, *Research in Written Composition* (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones & Schoer, 1963) which concluded that:

the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing. (Braddock et al, 1963: 37)

As Kolln (1981) notes, this statement has been seminal in defining the subsequent debate, and has been repeatedly cited as evidence. Indeed, in England, the Kingman Report (DES 1988), which was one of the documents which underpinned the development of the first National Curriculum for English, argued in phrasing so close to Braddock's original that we might call it plagiarism, that '*old-fashioned formal teaching of grammar had a negligible, or, because it replaced some instruction or practice in composition, even a harmful effect on the development of original writing*' (DES, 1988: para 2.27). Braddock's argument has been confirmed through numerous meta-analyses conducted in the intervening fifty years: Hillocks, 1984; Hillocks & Smith, 1991; Andrews et al, 2004a, 2004b; Graham & Perin 2007; Graham et al, 2015; Koster et al, 2015. All conclude that there is no evidence of any beneficial impact of grammar teaching on writing instruction.

Within this body of research, there is a repeated tendency to single out sentence-combining as an approach which is successful (for example, both Andrews, 2004a, and Graham & Perrin, 2007 note its efficacy). This conclusion is based prin-

cipally on a cluster of studies, mostly American, in the 1980s (O'Hare, 1971; Daiker et al, 1978; Hake & Williams, 1979; Hillocks & Mavrogenes, 1986) Sentence-combining takes sentence kernels (simple single clauses) and through a range of exercises encourages young writers to combine sentences into multi-claused sentences in a variety of ways, and encourages writers to develop understanding through manipulation of sentences. However, one significant flaw in many of these studies is that 'success' is measured simply in terms of whether children can create or increase the number of syntactically-complex they produce, rather than in terms of effectiveness, and there are few studies which consider whether the capacity to produce more syntactically-complex sentences transfers into students' writing. It is also founded on a belief that greater syntactical complexity is a marker of writing quality, a proposition challenged by Crowhurst (1980). In general, sentence-combining does not use grammatical metalanguage and pedagogically might best be described as implicit grammar teaching, rather than explicit grammar teaching. To summarise, then, apart from this small clutch of studies advocating the benefits of sentence-combining, there has been a ubiquitous iteration, over 60 years, denying the absence of a causal relationship between grammar and writing outcomes.

Yet, despite the confidence in the causal assertions, the empirical basis of these judgments is not strong. Firstly, many of these meta-analyses form their conclusions on the basis of a very limited number of studies (three, for example, in the case of the Andrews meta-analyses). Secondly, the concepts of 'grammar' and 'improvement in writing' are rarely defined in these studies and are variously interpreted. For example, the Harris study (1962: an unpublished thesis) which is described at length in Braddock's report (1963) compares the teaching of formal grammar with the direct method. One group had traditional grammar teaching (formal grammar), where they learned explicitly about word classes and syntax, and this terminology was used during the teaching of writing and in correcting compositions. The other group had no explicit grammar teaching and the time was replaced by lessons which gave them more time to write (direct method). The outcome measures used to determine the effect of these two approaches was a scoring system looking at how many errors there were in the writing. Thus this study is concerned with grammar as remediation, a mechanism for error correction in written text, and what the study indicates is that there is no transfer of learning from explicit teaching about grammar and errors to writing and students' capacity to correct their own writing.

In contrast, the Elley et al (1979) study used transformational grammar, based on the Oregon curriculum, as the model of grammar and the writing outcome measures included qualitative measures of writing quality, as well as measures of T units, and competence in sentence-combining. Transformational, or generative, grammar draws on Chomskyan thinking (Chomsky, 1965) which challenged traditional structuralist views and posited instead a theory of grammar as generative, whereby new sentences can be transformed from existing ones, drawing on phrase structure rules and transformational rules, and in which cognition had a part to

play. The grammar strand of the Oregon curriculum, developed in the early sixties, set out to move learners beyond *'school-induced prescriptions about the nature and structure of English'*; instead, its objective was to help learners develop a *'formal, scientific understanding of linguistic phenomena'* rooted in transformational grammar and which was *'not so much a specific knowledge of the theory, but rather a sense of how to go about reaching a tentative explanation of one's unconscious knowledge of language'* (O'Neill, 2007: 615). Following the tenets of generative studies, the Oregon curriculum was concerned with making tacit knowledge explicit. Crucially, O'Neill, its architect, argued that *'grammar was to be studied 'for its own sake' in Oregon and Washington, not for any effect that grammatical understanding might have or not have on language use'* (O'Neill, 2007: 615). Thus the Oregon curriculum is neither grammar for remediation nor grammar for improving writing.

The Elley study (1979) had three treatment groups: group one were taught following the Oregon curriculum; group two were taught the Oregon curriculum excluding the grammar strand, and in the time released by this, received extra reading and creative writing; and the third group followed the conventional New Zealand curriculum at that time which included traditional grammar. Students in group one who were taught the Oregon curriculum grammar strand were taught phrase structure and transformational rules and they *'studied and analysed many sentences in order to discover and apply grammatical rules'* (Elley et al, 1979: 8). In other words, there was no pedagogical focus on transfer into writing, or exploration of relationships between grammar and written text. The study found no significant differences between any of the groups in terms of writing performance, other than some evidence that the transformational grammar group were more accurate in usage conventions. The transformational grammar group, perhaps unsurprisingly as this was a central focus of the grammar strand, were significantly better at sentence-combining. Elley et al conclude that *'English grammar, whether traditional or transformational, has virtually no influence on the language growth of typical secondary school students'* but they also observe that their study provides *'little discomfort for those who support the study of grammar for its own sake, or as a means of gaining a greater understanding of their language'* (Elley et al, 1979: 18).

These two studies pointedly exemplify some of the difficulties with the empirical base underpinning assumptions of grammar's value or otherwise. Different models of grammar are used (structuralist; transformational; and more recently, functional grammar); and the pedagogical purpose of grammar is rarely articulated, leaving it to readers to surmise. In some, such as the Elley study, a curriculum designed to promote knowledge of grammar for its own sake is tested for its effect on writing performance, with no logical causal hypothesis expressed. In others, such as the Harris study, the grammar focus is on whether explicit knowledge of grammatical rules and usage conventions transfers into students' own writing. Notably, however, none of the major studies have considered whether teaching grammar which explored the inter-relationship between grammar and shaping meaning in

writing might lead to beneficial outcomes in writing performance, nor have they considered the role that classroom interaction might play in supporting transferable grammatical knowledge. Equally, all of the studies, without exception, have eschewed providing any theoretical foundation for the causal relationships they were testing.

#### 4. A THEORISED RATIONALE FOR THE INCLUSION OF GRAMMAR IN THE L1 CURRICULUM

This article sets out to address this lacuna in the empirical corpus in order to offer a theorised rationale for the inclusion of grammar in the L1 curriculum evidenced with data from a series of related empirical studies which we have conducted over a period of ten years. At the heart of our approach has been the principle of studying grammar in the context of writing. Earlier research studies and practitioners have often advocated contextualized teaching of grammar: for example, Harris suggested that *'simply discussing grammatical constructions and usage in the context of writing'* (Harris, 1962) was more useful than formal grammar instruction; Calkins (1980) recommended teaching punctuation in the context of writing; Hilllocks and Smith (1991) maintained that sentence-combining practice would be more effective if it were combined with discussion of stylistic effects; and Van Gelderen (2005:217) argued that a *'meaningful context may provide a sounder motivational basis for acquiring writing fluency than exercises with isolated sentences'*. But although the idea of 'grammar in context' may seem an antidote to decontextualised drills and exercises, there are multiple interpretations of what in context means, including mini-grammar lessons within an English/Language Arts lesson; doing decontextualised grammar but with an authentic text; and lessons with no explicit teaching of grammar but responding in feedback to any grammar issues raised. For us, Lankshear's comment that *'a text is meaningless without a context, a discourse to inhabit'* (Lankshear, 1997: xvi) is particularly salient: the communicative power of any grammatical choice in writing is realised in a context, both intra-textual and extra-textual. Teaching grammar in context involves making connections between linguistic choices and how they shape meaning and connect with their readers: in other words, *'grammar instruction influences writing performance when grammar and writing share one instructional context'* (Fearn & Farnan, 2007:16).

However, the principle of teaching grammar in context is fundamentally a pedagogical principle, not a theorised position. Our understanding of grammar in context has been grounded in a theoretical framework underpinned by a Hallidayan conceptualisation of grammar as a semiotic resource for meaning-making (Halliday, 2003; 2004). Arguably, the clearer rationale for grammar articulated in the new Australian curriculum reflects this Hallidayan thinking: Macken-Horarik (2011: 1) suggests that *'its view of grammar is a deeply contextual one where language functions to enable us to interact with others, to express and develop ideas, and to*

*comprehend and create coherent texts.*' Hallidayan grammar is functionally oriented, fundamentally concerned with grammar in use '*related to the study of texts, and responsive to social purposes*' (Carter, 1990: 104). In contrast to earlier research which positioned grammar largely as either traditional, structuralist grammar for remediation of errors in writing, or transformational grammar to develop learners' explicit knowledge about language, especially sentence structure possibilities, for its own sake, functional grammar is interested in how language works to create meaning, and the multiple variations which exist between language use in different contexts. As Derewianka and Jones maintained:

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 & Jones, 2010: 9).

In line with this functional theorization of grammar, we have drawn on Carter and McCarthy's (2006: 7) emphasis on the dual nature of grammar, both as a grammar of structure, which describes language as a system, and as a grammar of choice, where language users can communicate and create meaning through '*a huge network of interrelated choices*' (Halliday, 2003: 8). Pedagogically, this theorisation of grammar offers the opportunity to develop learners' metalinguistic understanding about writing and being a writer, and to develop explicit knowledge about language choices in writing which can be internalised. We are less interested in writers' capacity to identify grammatical structures than in their capacity to make linguistic choices: in other words, it is more important to know *how* a passive construction alters the emphasis in information conveyed than it is to know *that* it is a passive construction. The identification of a passive structure is closed knowledge that points only to itself and of itself has no obvious application to writing. In contrast, considering how a passive is used and its relationship with the meanings invoked by the text establishes a direct association between a grammatical choice and meaning which has real application in writing. In different contexts, a passive might create suspense by with-holding the agent of an action; it might support the cohesion between two sentences; it might allow a writer to foreground important information at the start of a sentence; it might suggest objectivity by distancing the person responsible for an action and so on. This kind of engagement with grammatical choice makes high demands of teachers' subject knowledge, not simply of grammar but of how grammar shapes meanings—a point developed in more detail later in this article.

This theoretical rationale is realised in practice through a well-articulated set of pedagogical principles (Jones et al, 2013b). These principles support teachers in explicit teaching of grammatical points within a sequence of writing lessons, where the grammar introduced is *relevant to the learning about writing*. This is undertaken with the aim of developing young writers' understanding of the *language choices they can make in their writing* and developing young writers' knowledge

about language and **how language choices shape meaning**. These pedagogical principles are outlined below:

1. **Make a link** between the grammar being introduced and how it works in the writing being taught: *for example, by exploring how the past and present tense are differentiated in use in newspaper reports for recounting the reported event and for journalistic comment on the event.*

This principle supports the development of metalinguistic understanding of the purposes and effects of linguistic choices through the direct establishing of connections between a particular grammatical construction and how it is used in a particular text.

2. Explain the **grammar through examples**, not lengthy explanations: *for example, by exploring how prepositional phrases can create foreshadowing in narrative through a card sort of prepositional phrases from Golding's opening to 'The Lord of the Flies'.*

This principle enables explicit teaching of grammar-writing relationships without the learning focus being diverted from the effect of a grammatical construction into lengthy grammatical teaching episodes. The grammatical metalanguage is not avoided but is presented in different ways through showing examples of the target structure.

3. Build in **high-quality discussion** about grammar and its effects: *for example, by discussing as a whole class the different grammatical choices in two students' drafts of the ending to an argument piece and discriminating between the different choices the authors' have made.*

This principle targets the development of metalinguistic understanding through fostering talk for learning which surfaces and makes available for reflection the connections between grammatical choices and their meaning-making realised in writing.

4. Use examples from **authentic texts** to links writers to the broader community of writers: *for example, by using World Wildlife Fund campaign material to explore the language choices in persuasive writing.*

This principle ensures that metalinguistic attention to the grammar-writing relationship is always meaningfully contextualised by looking at texts written for authentic communicative purposes, not texts written to exemplify a particular grammatical or compositional point.

The use of this theorization and its pedagogical realization has informed our research in this area over the past ten years, and our studies have indicated that this approach can have significant benefits on writer outcomes and on students' metalinguistic understanding for writing (Myhill, 2011). Our first study in this area (Myhill et al, 2012; Jones et al, 2013a) was a randomized controlled trial, involving more than 700 children aged 12-13. Three teaching units, which adopted the pedagogic approach outlined above, were developed by the research team. The units, addressing narrative fiction, argument, and writing poetry, were taught one a term over a period of a year. The comparison group also taught three units of work on

the same topics with the same learning objectives and assessment outcomes, but they received no teaching materials and had to devise their own teaching content. The outcomes of this study indicated a significant positive effect on the writing outcomes of the intervention group. It also indicated that the beneficial effect was stronger on more able students, but the able writers in the comparison group made no improvement at all over the year, making it difficult to determine whether these results were indicating that the pedagogical approach is less effective for weaker writers, or that conventional teaching of able writers is not enabling their development as writers. As a consequence, a subsequent smaller study was undertaken focusing on weaker writers. In this study, a preliminary analysis of the students' writing was undertaken to determine their principal learning needs, and a teaching unit was developed, again following the principles of our pedagogic approach, which addressed these needs. This intervention also had a statistically significant positive effect (<http://bit.ly/2ckPX6C>). A further study considered the effect the approach had on students' comprehension skills (Myhill and Watson, 2016) and again found a positive effect.

In our more recent studies, we have been less interested in determining the pedagogical efficacy of teaching grammar as a meaning-making resource through statistical methods, and more interested in detailed qualitative analysis of the teaching and learning it represents. We have looked closely at teachers' subject and pedagogical knowledge (Myhill, Jones and Watson, 2013; Wilson and Myhill, 2012) and how this influences what happens in the classroom. A further strand of our research has looked closely at the nature of the talk occurring around the grammar-writing relationship, particularly how the teacher facilitates metalinguistic thinking and discussion around grammatical choices (Myhill et al, 2016; Authors & Newman, 2016). This set of studies has provided accumulative evidence of aspects of pedagogy which act to constrain or to enable effective metalinguistic learning about being a writer, and these will be addressed in turn below.

#### *4.1 Linking grammar and the learning focus for reading or writing in a meaningful way*

One of the key pedagogical principles of our approach is to ensure that there is a clear learning purpose for addressing grammar, which enables writers to see the connection between a grammatical choice and how it shapes meaning in writing. Given that so many of the earlier studies which demonstrated no evidence of impact of grammar teaching on writing were founded upon isolated and decontextualized teaching of grammar, the significance of linking the grammar to learning is central to supporting transfer of learning into writing. It is the explicit attention to and exploration of the relationship between grammatical choices and the communicative effects they create in writing which is distinctive about our approach.

Likewise, the advocacy of authentic texts at the heart of this approach is predicated upon the idea that the best models of writing are those written for real pur-

poses and real audiences, rather than contrived to exemplify a particular point. We see these as 'mentor texts' (Murphy, 2012) which enable teachers to connect developing writers with the language choices made by real world writers. The concept of using models is familiar in classrooms in England and teachers are comfortable with modelling as a pedagogical tool. However, our research suggests that there is variation in how teachers use texts as models which affects the efficacy of the approach. In some cases, the use of the model text is reduced to an exercise in reproductive imitation at best, and at worst, to arbitrary substitution of words, phrases and ideas. In our current study, *Writing Conversations*, a longitudinal study tracing the metalinguistic development of two cohorts of writers over three years (aged 9 and 11 at the start) has provided evidence of this dependence. In the example below, Henry's class of eleven year olds are considering persuasive writing and have been looking at a campaign text written by the *Royal Society for the Protection of Birds*. It is a well-chosen text as it exemplifies many of the language features the teacher wants to focus on, but it generates writing too dependent on the original model. This is very evident when you compare the first sentence of the model text with the first sentence of Henry's text:

Model text:

Perhaps, like me, you have paused to listen to the haunting melody of a song thrush at dusk, or enjoyed the noisy and energetic squabbling of house sparrows under the eaves.

Henry's text:

Maybe, like me, you have wanted to hear the magnificent singing of the cuckoo bird or the noisy rush of the energetic waterfall, but have you ever realised that most of our enchanting rain forest is being destroyed by man's creation.

In contrast, teachers who use the text as a stimulus for discussion of choices made by the writers and draw out from the text some of the key choices made were more likely to generate writing which adopted features of the model but adapted them to their own purpose. In this way, the text is more of a mentor than a model, enabling appropriation rather than imitation. In another class of 11 year olds, the teacher was sharing a story by Jackie Morris, *The Snow Leopard*, a spiritual narrative about the reincarnation of a child as a snow leopard to protect a Himalayan valley. It is written in a very lyrical style, with substantial figurative language, and it also uses several times a pattern of three co-ordinated clauses with the same subject to convey a sequence of narrative action, for example:

... and the cat stirred, rose and leapt high into the high, wild mountains with the Child clinging tight on her back.

And back in the mountains, the young Snow Leopard looked up at the stars, heard the whisper – and began a new song.

The teacher drew attention to this pattern and discussed its effect, and it was included in a set of possible language choices that the class could make when writing

their own story. In Isabel's narrative, there are examples of this pattern of three clauses, but unlike Henry's example earlier, she has adopted the structure but has not simply recreated sentences highly imitative of the original:

From the first drop of rain, Golden Lion Tamarin squealed the magical mist to clothe the tree tops, danced the trees to break away through the cursed canopy, and then wove amongst the greedy green lands.

She wrapped the trees in loving leaves, crowded creatures onto the tropical trees and gave the plants the sun and water they needed.

Significantly, when teachers use texts in this way, students were more likely to be able to verbalise their understanding.

#### 4.2 *The role of talk in developing students' metalinguistic knowledge*

We have found that the ability to verbalise metalinguistic understanding of language choices made in composing a text is strongly linked to how teachers orchestrate talk in the writing classroom. There is, of course, a significant body of work indicating the importance of talk in fostering learning (Alexander, 2008; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Wegerif, 2011) and key to this research is the way in which opportunities to engage in dialogic talk, exploring ideas and meanings collectively, enables the active construction of understanding. Our approach draws on this specifically in the context of metalinguistic knowledge about writing and advocates the teasing out of language learning through talk, such as, for example, by discussing the first version of the opening paragraph of Orwell's *1984* with the final published version. Such discussions would be located around verbalized understanding of language choices made by Orwell. Troia and Olinghouse (2013: 89) describe this as teachers who '*foster classroom climates which nurture effective grammatical conversations*'.

However, managing high-quality talk which supports the development of metalinguistic understanding is pedagogically challenging, even in a national context which has provided strong encouragement for greater emphasis on talk in the classroom and greater understanding of the role of talk in learning. Our research (Myhill et al, 2016) has indicated how teachers vary in their capacity to lead dialogic talk, sometimes opening up rich discussion about language choices, or leading discussion chains which challenge students to justify their language choices; but at other times, teachers are using talk in a more monologic way, steering students towards correct or predetermined answers. Significantly, our analyses reveal that these variations in managing talk are rarely a simple case of some teachers being dialogic and some monologic: rather most teachers in our study exhibited both patterns, to varying extents. More recently, we have conceptualised the talk that accompanies the teaching of the meaning-making affordances of grammar in composing text as 'metatalk' (Myhill and Newman, 2016), drawing on second language learning research which sees metatalk as a tool for surfacing the way language

works. Whilst in second language learning contexts such metatalk tends to be supporting metalinguistic understanding of the grammatical structures of the target language, we have theorised metatalk as talk about language choices which focus not so much on form, but on function, to make visible and verbalise how meanings are shaped and created in written text. Specifically, we have considered how teachers can create dialogic spaces which allow students to think metalinguistically about their writing. This research has highlighted that becoming 'grammatically dialogic' gives students growing ownership of their own linguistic decision-making in writing, but requires teachers who have confidence in enabling talk which realises this goal.

#### *4.3 Students' conceptual understanding of grammatical terms*

Both the linking of grammar to how it creates meaning in text and the fostering of high quality metalinguistic discussion require strong grammatical knowledge on the part of teachers, which will be discussed further in the next section. But, a key question is to what extent *students* need to know the grammatical metalanguage in order to develop understanding of the repertoire of language choices available to writers. Our view has been that explicit teaching of grammar can help writers to notice how texts are working without necessarily being able to name the grammatical structure. Indeed, our data indicates that students can appropriate a structure in their own writing, but vary in how they use grammatical metalanguage to describe their choices (Myhill and Newman, 2016). Sometimes the grammatical metalanguage is not used at all, but their metalinguistic understanding is, nonetheless, explicitly articulated using everyday language.

However, the revision of the National Curriculum in England and the introduction of a national test of Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar for 7 and 11 year olds, has meant that primary classrooms use grammatical terminology significantly more than prior to the test's introduction. Our current longitudinal study (*Writing Conversations*), observing teachers and children engaged in learning about grammar-writing relationships, is highlighting that there are many grammatical misunderstandings evident in students' conceptual understanding of grammatical terms, which, of course, can act as constraints in developing purposeful metalinguistic understanding for writing. Some of these relate to the prevalence of semantic definitions for grammatical terms such as '*a verb is a doing word*' or '*an adjective is a describing word*' which lead students to make incorrect identifications. Similarly, the use of substitutes for grammatical explanations, such as describing a relative clause as a '*drop-in clause*' or modal verbs as '*bossy verbs*' also foster conceptual confusions. At sentence level, student understanding of clauses is severely limited because their understanding is framed by proxies such as the presence of a comma, or sentence length, rather than any secure grammatical knowledge of clause structure. There is an important distinction here between the use of prototypical definitions of grammatical concepts (such as an adverb tells you more about the

verb), which may be starting point for the development of conceptual understanding which can be expanded as learning develops, and the use of semantic definitions which generate grammatical misconceptions completely. These misconceptions are then powerful inhibitors in successfully developing metalinguistic understanding for writing which can enable students to reflect upon their own linguistic decision-making.

#### *4.4 The place of teachers' grammatical subject knowledge in supporting a meaning-rich approach to the teaching of grammar*

The conceptual misunderstandings of students described above are directly related to the explanations that teachers provide, and to insecurity in their own grammatical knowledge. Because of the widespread abandonment of grammar teaching following the Dartmouth Conference, many current teachers received no grammar teaching in their own education and have to attempt to redress this gap quickly, and without formal support. In the UK, grammar has a renewed emphasis in the National Curriculum, reinforced by the SpaG test—yet there has been no serious attempt by policy-makers to address the professional subject knowledge development needs of teachers. Many teachers experience a sense of guilt, fear or anxiety at the shortcomings of their own grammatical knowledge (Watson, 2012), despite their evident professional competence in other respects. The teachers in our studies tend to be stronger in their understanding of word classes, although word class mobility in English often causes confusion: for example, the fact the word '*dance*' can be a verb as in '*I dance weekly*'; or a noun as in '*I was late for the dance*'; or an adjective as in '*She put on her dance shoes*'. However, grammatical understanding at phrase, and especially at clause, level is much less secure. Ironically, in the context of the high-stakes grammar tests, this lack of confidence with grammar can lead to an over-focus on grammar at the expense of making a meaningful link with writing, with the consequence that students see grammatical constructions as things which need to be deployed in their writing to achieve high marks. Frequently, this results in writing which 'displays' grammatical structures, rather than writers who are confident in making informed grammatical choices relevant to purpose and audience. In his blog, Rosen described this phenomenon thus:

I see weird artificial sentences, 'fronted' with phrases and clauses that would be better placed later in the sentence or in a separate sentence, crammed full of redundant adjectives, and with the flow interrupted by unnecessary relative clauses. This then gets marks as 'good writing'. (Rosen, 2016)

In contrast, working with teachers in our studies who have developed greater grammatical knowledge, we have been able to discriminate three aspects of pedagogical subject knowledge which support effective grammar teaching within the teaching of writing (Myhill et al, 2013). This is not simply a matter of their own grammatical knowledge being secure, but equally importantly, that they can make links between grammar points and their function or purpose in written texts; that

they can read students' writing and respond to the linguistics decisions they have made; and that they have the ability to notice salient grammatical features in the reading texts they are using.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Our own cumulative set of research studies on the teaching of grammar in the L1 classroom in Anglophone settings has illustrated both the rich learning potential of grammar as a resource for supporting metalinguistic understanding about writing and improving writing outcomes, and some of the constraints, such as limitations in teachers' grammatical subject knowledge, and the pedagogical demands of managing high-quality talk about linguistic choices in writing, or using mentor texts in ways which support young writers' linguistic decision-making. This article has also illustrated that grammar in Anglophone jurisdictions has had a contested past, and that despite some recent resurgence in curricular emphasis on grammar, policy documents reveal the pedagogical incoherence of the positioning of grammar in the L1 English classroom. The article proposes a coherent theorised rationale for the inclusion of grammar, drawing on a Hallidayan framework where grammar is seen as a resource for meaning-making and an important tool through which language learners can 'see through' how meanings are made.

Because of the contested history of grammar teaching in English L1, the body of research on the subject is weak and fragmented, and preoccupied with proving or disproving the efficacy of grammar teaching. Thus it is a field ripe for new and robust studies which explore core ideas more deeply, through a variety of research designs and lenses. In particular, we need to move away from research which looks only at 'grammar' as a whole to more studies which explore in detail sub-strands of this. There is remarkably little research on students' conceptual learning of grammatical terminology and how they use that learning in their reading or writing, or how grammatical terminology supports, or otherwise, the growth of metalinguistic understanding. Such research might also consider the idea of learner readiness for engaging with the abstract concepts of grammar: when might be the most appropriate time to begin learning grammar, and does that learning need to engage with metalanguage straight away or with other strategies for fostering a developing awareness of language structure? Similarly, research which considers specific aspects of grammar, such as clause structure, sentence variety, or the use of noun phrases and nominalisation, involving both text analysis or corpus linguistics, and classroom-based studies with learners would provide further insight into how language is used. More studies which investigate the relationship between verbalisable metalinguistic knowledge and its transfer into writing and linguistic decision-making would be much welcomed, as would studies which pursue the inter-relationships between teachers' pedagogical practices and students' learning. Finally, there need to be more studies which take a cross-linguistic approach, particularly in terms of pedagogy and student learning. The goal for all those of us interested

in this field must be the development of a rich, robust and comprehensive programme of research, akin to that in the field of reading research, with a cumulative set of studies, from different theoretical and juridicial contexts, building a valuable and valued body of knowledge.

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