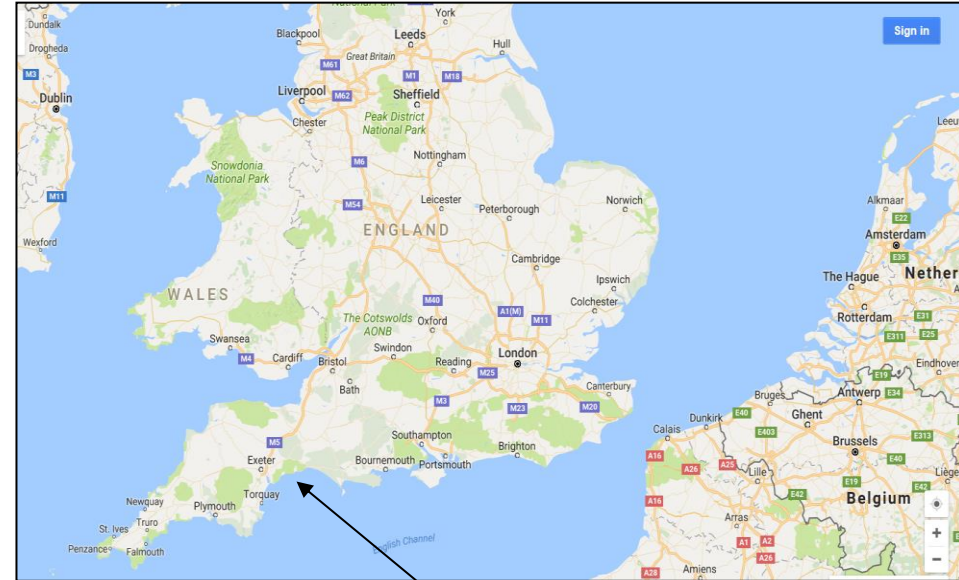# GRAMMAR WITH A PURPOSE

Debra Myhill

Exeter

Saludos
desde Exeter
☺

Grammar in the Curriculum

Why teach grammar?

- To understand the structure of your own language?

- To avoid making mistakes in speaking and writing your own language?

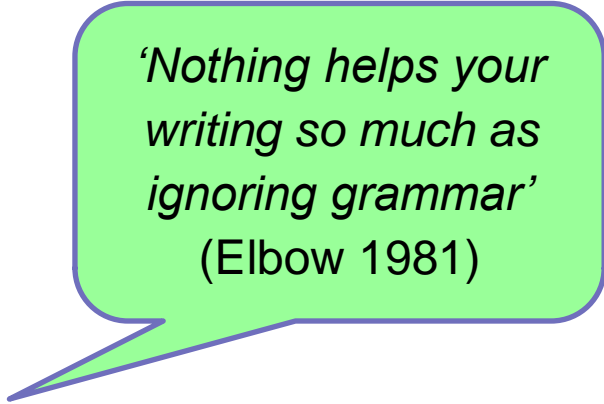- To develop understanding about how texts work and make meaning?

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Grammar: in Anglophone countries

For more than 50 years, divided professional and policymaker perspectives:

□ grammar does not help language users

□ grammar is about error correction

□ grammar is necessary for language proficiency

□ grammar and creativity are opposed…

'Nothing helps your writing so much as ignoring grammar'
(Elbow 1981)

More polemic than informed debate.

Research on Grammar

- ❑ Repeated studies showing **no evidence** of impact on writing (Elley, Barham and Lamb 1979;   EPPI 2004; Graham and Perin 2007)

- ❑ Studies investigated teaching a grammar course and teaching writing separately

- ❑ No studies which investigated teaching grammar meaningfully in context of the teaching of writing

- ❑ No studies conducted in the UK educational context

- ❑ But our own recent research, where grammar, reading and writing are meaningfully connected, is showing very positive results.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Theorising Grammar

Prescriptivist/descriptivist distinction:

❑ A **prescriptivis**t theory of a grammar-writing relationship would argue for the importance of grammar in securing correctness in written expression;

❑ A **descriptivist** theory of a grammar-writing relationship would argue for the importance of grammar in illuminating how written text generates meaning in different contexts.

Accuracy in writing is necessary, but not sufficient to generate good writers.

Theorising Grammar

Hallidayian underpinning:

❑ *how* we write something is as important as *what* we write

❑ learning how to mean; grammar as a resource for meaning-making; (Halliday 2003; 2004)

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

Theorising Grammar

Mum, the window is broken.

Mum, I broke the window.

Different meanings are implied by the use of the active or passive here.

Theorising Grammar

- ❑ Carter and McCarthy (2006:7) write of the **grammar as choice**, as well as a grammar of structure.

- ❑ Show learners how the grammatical choices they make can alter the way their writing communicates and their understanding of the power of choice

- ❑ This approach develops metalinguistic understanding about writing and being a writer: explicit knowledge which can be internalised

OUR RESEARCH

The Exeter Pedagogy

A creative grammar-writing relationship

❑ Explicit teaching of grammatical points **relevant to the learning about writing**

❑ Developing young writers' understanding of the **language choices they can make in their writing**

❑ Developing young writers' knowledge about **how language choices shape meaning**

Four Key Teaching Principles

➢ **Make a link** between the grammar being introduced and how it works in the writing being taught:
eg exploring how past and present tense are used in newspaper reports for recount and comment

➢ Explain the **grammar through examples**, not lengthy explanations:
eg exploring how prepositional phrases can create foreshadowing in narrative through a card sort of prepositional phrases from 'The Lord of the Flies'.

➢ Build in **high-quality discussion** about grammar and its effects:
eg discussing as a whole class the different grammatical choices in two students' drafts of the ending to an argument piece.

➢ Use examples from **authentic texts** to links writers to the broader community of writers:
eg using World Wildlife Fund campaign material to explore the language choices in persuasive writing

Our Research Evidence

❑ Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) with 12-13 year old students: significant positive effect;

❑ Two quasi-experimental studies looking at the approach with weak writers and at the reading-writing link: positive effect;

❑ RCT with 9-10 year olds: positive effect;

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

Study 1:The RCT component

- Cluster RCT

- 32 schools (year 8)

- 32 participating teachers

- Baseline grammar test for teachers pre-randomisation

- Pre-test/post-test writing task for students

- Intervention group: grammar taught in context of writing

- 3 Teaching Units: Narrative Fiction;   Argument; Poetry. 3 weeks per term.

- Stepwise linear regression modelling

The Qualitative component

- 3 classroom observations per class

  - ☐ How strategies are implemented

  - ☐ How students respond

- 3 post-observation student interviews

  - ☐ Metalinguistic understanding

- 3 post-observation teacher interviews

  - ☐ Pedagogical decisions

  - ☐ Beliefs about grammar teaching

- Collation of within-year writing samples

- Linguistic analysis of pre and post test writing samples

Results

- Statistically significant positive effect for intervention group: e = 0.21

- Intervention group improved their writing scores by 20% over the year compared with 11% in the comparison group

- The grammar teaching appeared to have greatest impact on able writers

- BUT Able writers in the comparison group barely improved over the year

- Teachers' subject knowledge of grammar was an influencing factor.

Study 2: Struggling Writers

- Focus on whether the embedded grammar pedagogy is successful for weaker writers

- Quasi-experimental design

- 14 classes; students aged 12-13 (7 intervention; 7 control)

- Same pedagogical approach but input matched to learners' writing needs (eg from visual narrative to verbal narrative)

- Small statistically significant positive effect ($p = 0.05$)

Study 3: Reading and Writing

- Focus on whether the embedded grammar pedagogy improved reading comprehension as well as writing

- Quasi-experimental design

- 12 classes aged 14-15 (6 intervention; 6 control)

- Context of national examination (GCSE) of English which involves a adding comprehension test followed by a writing test

- Statistically significant positive impact on both reading and writing outcomes

- Impact on reading comprehension was most strong on questions which required language analysis and impact on writing was strongest on the sentence structure and punctuation aspect of the scores.

Study 4: Primary

- Smaller scale replication of Study 1 in primary school

- 29 schools: 15 control; 14 intervention

- Positive effect for intervention group but also very variable 'class effect'

- National-funded study (EEF) with 54 schools found small effect (two months additional progress) but problematic research design. Currently being re-run with 150 schools

Taking Stock

- drawing attention to grammar-meaning relationships at relevant points in the teaching writing is an effective way to improve student outcomes

- it seems to be generalisable across multiple groups, but there are factors which affect its success or otherwise:

  - Teachers' grammatical subject knowledge

  - Teachers' capacity to see how texts work grammatically

  - Teachers' confidence in managing high-quality talk about writing

More qualitative work is needed!

Study 5: Metalinguistic Development

- 4 year longitudinal study

- Tracking 4 cohorts of children (two classes aged 8; two classes aged 11) over 3 years

- In-depth qualitative study: teacher planning; classroom observation; video capture; student writing conversations (interviews)

- Investigating how children develop metalinguistic understanding about writing and how this is linked to teacher input

- Data which reveals conceptual development of grammatical knowledge; the nature of transfer from verbal understanding to writing; the relationship between student learning and teaching)

- Still being analysed!

UNDERSTANDING THE PEDAGOGY

Four Key Teaching Principles

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Linking Grammar with Writing

Writing Focus	Writing a Science text
Grammar Focus	How adverbials are used to add precise detail in an information or explanation text
Real Text Example	*Male kangaroos **push, pull** and **wrestle** <u>with their arms</u>, and **may** kick <u>out</u> <u>with their great feet, using their strong tail for support</u>. They **are** battling <u>for females at breeding time</u>.* (From *Children's A-Z Encyclopedia*, Miles Kelley)

The grammatical structure selected (adverbials) links with the learning about writing which the teacher is addressing.

Linking Grammar with Writing

Writing Focus	Persuasive writing
Grammar Focus	How abstract nouns can be used to carry the weight of ideas in a persuasive argument
Real Text Example	*The terrorists thought they would change my <u>aims</u> and stop my <u>ambitions</u>. But nothing changed in my life except this: <u>weakness</u>, <u>fear</u> and <u>hopelessness</u> died. <u>Strength</u>, <u>power</u> and <u>courage</u> were born. I am the same Malala. My <u>ambitions</u> are the same. My <u>hopes</u> are the same. And my <u>dreams</u> are the same.* (From Malala Yousafzai's speech to the UN, 12 July 2013)

The grammatical structure selected (abstract nouns) links with the learning about writing which the teacher is addressing.

Noun Phrases: Describing Characters

Building detail by adding information after the noun (post-modification):

Character	Determiner	NOUN	Adjectives	Non-finite clause
Merlin	his	**face**	parchment-silver	etched with age
Guinevere	her	**fingers**	long, white and dancing	
Morgana	a	**lady**	dark-haired and beautiful	wearing a gown of wine-red
Morgana	the	**words**		flowing from her lips

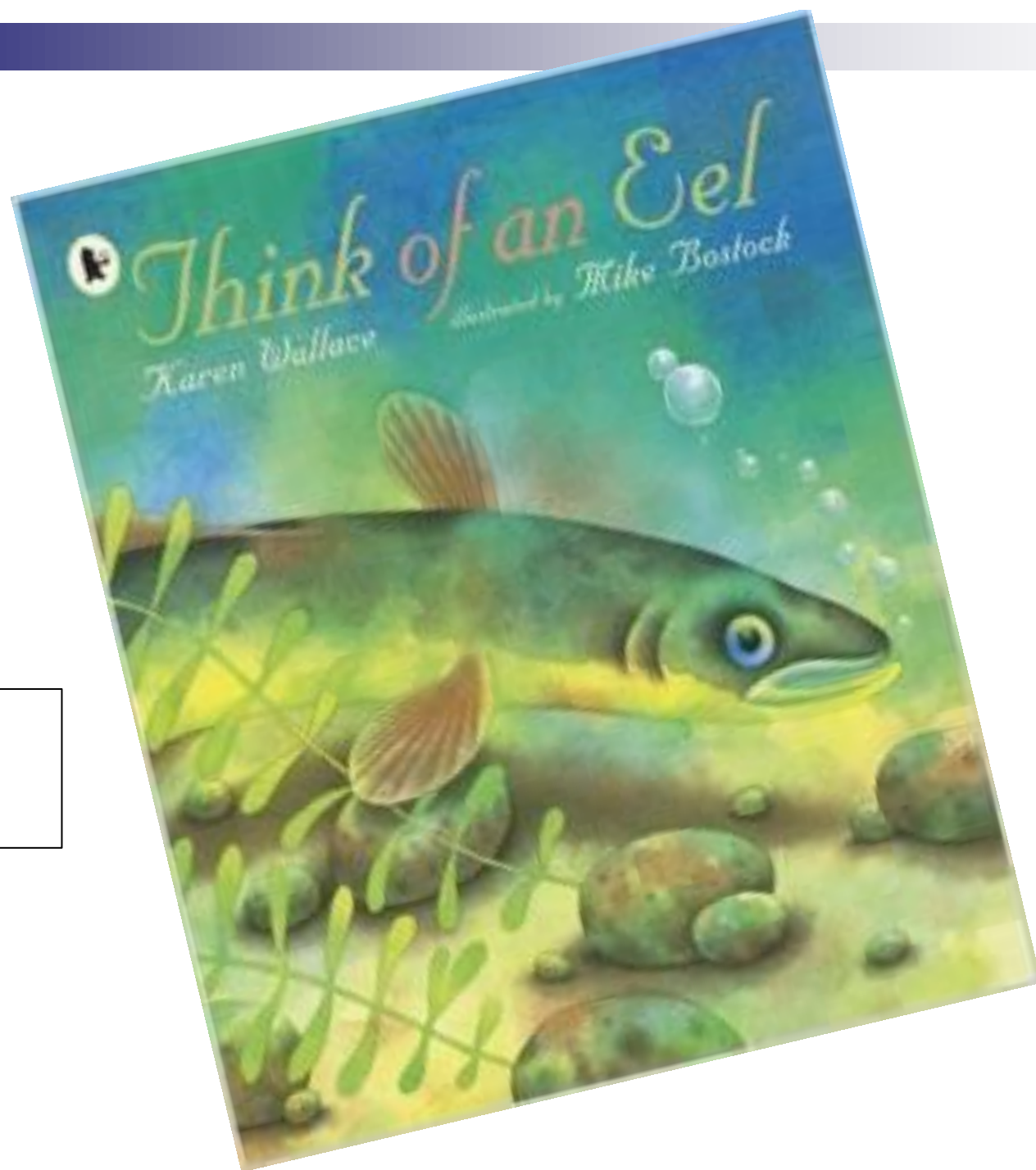Examples of Noun Phrases

… her **fingers**, long, white and dancing, …

… her **eyes**, wide and intense, …

… a **lady,** dark-haired and beautiful, …

… the **hood** of his dark cloak, …

… his **face**, parchment-silver and etched with age …

CREATE YOUR OWN NOUN PHRASES WHICH CREATE A VISUAL DESCRIPTION OF THIS CHARACTER

Dual text:
Science text
Poetic text

Sentence variety in *Think of an Eel*

Into the river he swims like a mad thing. He wriggles up rapids, climbs rocks around waterfalls. River banks guide him. Nothing will stop him.

After eighty days' swimming, not eating, not sleeping, eel's long, winding body is worn out and wasted. He spills the new life carried deep in his belly, then sinks through the sea like a used silver wrapper.

Student Talk Task: discuss sentence variety in this extract

Think about:

- Sentence length or shortness
- Syntax
- Literary devices

Transforming Texts: *Think of an Eel*

After eighty days' swimming, not eating, not sleeping, eel's long, winding body is worn out and wasted. He spills the new life carried deep in his belly, then sinks through the sea like a used silver wrapper.

Student Writing Task: Rewrite this paragraph as a science text.

After eighty days' swimming, without food or sleep, the eel's long body is exhausted. The male fertilizes the female' s eggs, and then dies.

Student Talk Task:

- What transformations are made to alter the lyrical description into a scientific description?
- Could any other changes be made?
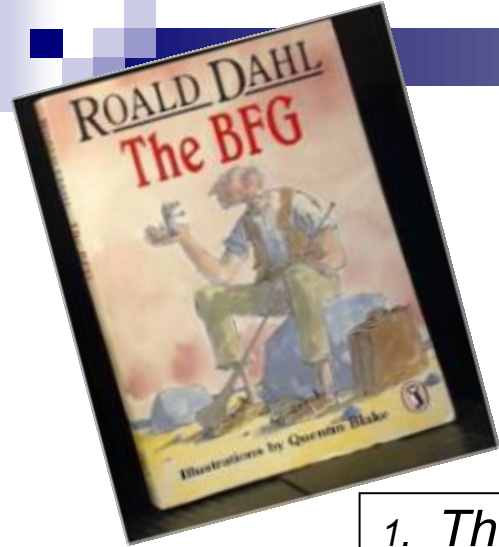
Four different multiply-claused sentences; most of them co-ordinated with *and* or a comma.

1. *They <u>punched</u> and <u>kicked</u> and <u>scratched</u> and <u>bit</u> and <u>butted</u> each other as hard as they <u>could</u>.*

2. *He <u>rolled</u> and he <u>wiggled</u>, he <u>fought</u> and he <u>figgled</u>, he <u>squirmed</u> and he <u>squiggled</u>.*

3. *The giants <u>roared</u> and <u>screamed</u> and <u>cursed,</u> and for many minutes the noise of battle <u>rolled</u> across the yellow plain.*

4. *He <u>took</u> a deep breath, <u>puffed</u> out his cheeks and then whoof!*

5. *They <u>stood</u> up, <u>stretched</u> their limbs and <u>started</u> leaping about in fury.*

Discuss the effect of the sentence structure/co-ordination for each sentence and try to articulate the link between the grammar choice and its effect in that sentence at that point in the story.

Meaningful Grammar

- The goal is not teach children what they must do in their writing, but to develop their metalinguistic understanding of how a particular choice in a particular context creates meaning.

The Passive

❑ How using the passive in writing alters where information is conveyed;

❑ How using the passive in writing with-holds information about the agent (doer);

❑ How using the passive can increase perceived objectivity in writing;

❑ How using the passive can increase the formality in writing.

CONCLUSIONS

Planning for Explicit Teaching

❑ Consider the **types of writing** and the **texts** you will be using with your classes this term

❑ Consider the children you will be teaching and **what they need to learn** about their writing
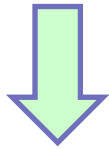
❑ What **grammar** might be embedded into your teaching units to support this learning?

❑ Metalinguistic understanding

Theoretical Conclusions

- Explicit teaching of grammar which makes connections between grammatical choices and meaning-making develops metalinguistic understanding about writing

- A view of grammar as choice helps writers understand that every act of writing is an act of decision-making and some decisions are linguistic

- Our evidence indicates that explicit teaching of grammar as a meaning-making resource is effective, but teaching is a multi-faceted complex activity realised in the moment – teachers' grammatical subject knowledge and capacity to manage effect dialogic metalinguistic talk needs development.

Further Resources

The original Teaching Schemes for the first research study are available free to NATE members on:

https://www.nate.org.uk/resources-from-nate/

Pearson have developed KS3 and GCSE resources using our approach and for which we have been consultants. A free evaluation pack is available at:

http://www.pearsonschoolsandfecolleges.co.uk/Secondary/EnglishAndMedia/11-14/SkillsforWriting/SkillsforWriting.aspx

Essential Primary Grammar

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

Our Research

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Jones, S.M. Myhill, D.A. and Bailey, T.C. (2013) Grammar for Writing? An investigation into the effect of Contextualised Grammar Teaching on Student Writing. *Reading and Writing* 26 (8) 1241-1263

Myhill, D.A. Jones, S and Watson, A. (2013) Grammar Matters: How Teachers' Grammatical Subject Knowledge Impacts on the Teaching of Writing *Teaching and Teacher Education* 36:77-91

Myhill, D.A. and Jones, S.M. (2015) Conceptualising Metalinguistic Understanding in Writing. *Cultura y Educacion* 27 (4): 839-867

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