



Introduction: Rethinking grammar – as choice

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Historically, the teaching of grammar has been concerned with *accuracy* and *correct linguistic forms*, and repeated studies have indicated that such teaching has no impact on the quality of students' writing. Our own research has taken a different stance, conceiving of grammar as concerned with *effectiveness* and the *function of different linguistic choices*.

This view of grammar is informed by Halliday's functionally oriented thinking about language and his view that becoming increasingly proficient as a language user is a process of '*learning how to mean*' (Halliday, 1975). Halliday argued that grammar was '*concerned with language in its entirety*' (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 20) at the level of words and vocabulary, sentences and syntax, and paragraphs and texts. Our research has addressed grammar holistically as an integrated part of the writing curriculum and is fundamentally about the making of meaning by exercising linguistic choice.

Grammar as Choice – the Pedagogical Principles

Through a cumulative set of studies over 15 years, we have researched this idea of linguistic choice as a meaning-making resource in writing in both primary and secondary classrooms and have robust evidence of its potential for helping young writers to understand the power of the choices they make in writing and thus to improve their confidence as writers. The approach helps learners to appreciate the important differences achieved by making different linguistic choices and, through this, helps them to consider their readers and how they want their readers to interpret their writing. Take, for

example, the three sentences below, each describing the same key moment in the narrative:

A sword came up out of the lake.

A hand holding a sword came up out of the lake.

And, to my amazement, up out of the lake came a shining sword, a hand holding it, and an arm in a white silk sleeve.

(From Michael Morpurgo: *Arthur, High King of Britain* [1994, p. 40])

The first and second versions of this plot moment offer the reader little detail, other than the basic action. The third sentence, however, gives the reader more precise visual detail, through the noun phrases (*a shining sword; an arm in a white silk sleeve*), and also cues the reader emotionally towards the sense of excitement. The writer not only tells us directly that the character feels '*amazement*' but also makes the syntax of the sentence support the notion of unfolding wonder. The sentence begins with the literary use of '*and*' as an emphatic starter, and then two adverbials foreground the character's reaction (*to my amazement*) and the location of the action (*up out of the lake*). This syntactic choice leaves the reader waiting to find out precisely what it is that is rising out of the lake and promotes amazement. This sense of anticipation is further heightened by the inversion of the usual subject-verb position in English with the verb '*came*' preceding the long subject. What we write and how we write it are inextricably intertwined: the craft of writing is essentially about how we shape the relationship between the message and the way we communicate it.

To support teachers practically in teaching grammar in this way, we have developed a set of pedagogical principles to guide planning and classroom interactions. We have called these the LEAD principles, based on the acronym formed from the initial letter of each principle. These principles reinforce the purposeful integration of attention to grammar and linguistic choice within the teaching of writing. Table 1 below presents the LEAD principles and exemplifies them using the sentence example discussed above.

Principle	Explanation	Classroom Example
LINKS	Make a <i>link</i> between the grammar being introduced and how it works in the writing being taught	Understand how syntactical choices can alter how a key plot moment is presented, linking the choice of fronted adverbials and subject-verb inversion with how drama and anticipation are created.
EXAMPLES	Explain the grammar through <i>examples</i> , not lengthy explanations	Give students the syntactical chunks of the example sentence for them to manipulate and see the variety of choices available.
AUTHENTICITY	Use <i>authentic</i> texts as models to link writers to the broader community of writers	Use the sentence <i>'And, to my amazement, up out of the lake came a shining sword, a hand holding it, and an arm in a white silk sleeve.'</i> from Michael Morpurgo's <i>Arthur, High King of Britain</i> [1994:40].
DISCUSSION	Build in high-quality <i>discussion</i> about grammar and its effects	Discussing the <i>effect</i> of the different syntactical choices and how Morpurgo's choice creates a sense of drama and anticipation.

Table 1: Grammar as Choice: the LEAD principles

The Key Findings

From the cumulative set of studies we have conducted, we have been able to demonstrate the benefits of teaching writing in this way. Our results indicate that:

- ▶ **Linking grammatical choice and rhetorical effect** in writing can help improve children's writing. In one of our studies, secondary-aged students taught this way increased their attainment in writing at almost double the rate. The rate of improvement in primary-aged children tends to be less dramatic, probably because some of them are still acquiring mastery of spelling and composing skills, but also because their teachers are not always literacy specialists and are less confident talking about grammar and grammatical choice.
- ▶ **Weaker or struggling writers** can be supported using this approach, provided that the grammar-writing links taught target the identified needs of the learner. In one study, we first assessed the struggling students' written texts to identify their principal problems in writing narrative and then developed the teaching to address these. This led to a statistically significant improvement in their writing.
- ▶ **Reading comprehension skills** for older students are also improved by teaching grammar in this way. Because of the use of authentic texts as models for making links between grammatical choice and rhetorical effects, students strengthen their capacity to analyse texts, particularly in terms of the writers' language choices.

At the same time, we have been able to identify factors which limit the effectiveness of the approach and thus limit the likelihood of improving attainment in writing. The key factors are:

- ▶ **Teachers' subject knowledge** is a critical factor. Not all of our project teachers were confident with grammar themselves, particularly at clause and syntax level. This meant that they sometimes struggled to explain things to students and to answer student questions, and they found it challenging to look at texts and notice how the grammatical choices were functioning. Ironically, it sometimes meant that

they focused too much on grammar as form and did not consider the rhetorical effect.

- ▶ **Too much imitation** – it is important to use authentic texts to emphasise the choices that published writers make and to ensure that connections are made between reading and writing. However, we have also found that the text can be used too rigidly as a model for imitation, leading to writing which is too close to the original and not authentic in itself. The use of authentic texts should open up a repertoire of possibilities for developing writers, not suggest they should simply copy what another writer has done.
- ▶ The **quality of the classroom talk** is crucial in enabling transfer of learning from teacher to learner. In all our studies, there was a strong link between how well the teacher opened up discussion about language choices and created thinking space for students and how confidently those students could subsequently make their own linguistic choices in writing.

Metalinguistic Understanding and Metalinguistic Talk

The learning benefit of teaching grammar as choice rests in the fostering of developing writers' metalinguistic understanding of the choices they make in writing, and this is why the quality of classroom talk is so important. Talk is often used in writing classrooms, but it is usually talk *for* writing, which is focused more on generating ideas for writing, supporting content development. The talk we are interested in here is (metalinguistic) talk *about* writing which develops more specific understanding of the relationship between language choices and making meaning in writing: metalinguistic talk is not simply *using* language but *talking about how* language is used. Metalinguistic talk encourages the articulation of thinking about linguistic choices and is a way of exploring the relationship between a writer's authorial intention, the linguistic choices which realise that intention, and the intended effect on the reader. It is also a pedagogical tool which, through enabling and encouraging this verbalisation of choice, allows teachers to determine and extend the level of metalinguistic thinking and understanding that students have developed.

Because this 'meta' talk is so central to the learning process, it is important to plan lessons which move away from teacher-centred talk to student-centred talk and which involve students in active and purposeful discussion about language choices. Such talk is best undertaken in pairs or small groups, and some only require three to five minutes of lesson time (see Table 2).

Encourage students' metalinguistic thinking about grammatical choices by inviting them to:

- ▶ discuss what might go in blanked-out gaps in the text
- ▶ compare two different versions of a phrase, sentence, paragraph
- ▶ discuss different choices made by different authors in the same writing genre
- ▶ use text manipulation activities, such as a sentence divided into its syntactical chunks and each chunk produced on separate cards, to explore different possibilities of choice
- ▶ collaboratively compose or rewrite a short piece of text together
- ▶ discuss focussed language questions on a piece of text, including their own or a peer's
- ▶ engage in tasks where students highlight or underline aspects of the text in pairs
- ▶ explain their own authorial choices in their own writing to peers
- ▶ make revisions to their own writing and explain and justify them to peers

Table 2: Strategies for promoting student-centred metalinguistic talk

At the same time as planning student-centred activities to encourage metalinguistic thinking and discussion, it is also critically important for teachers to develop skills in managing whole-class metalinguistic talk. This is hard to plan for, as it is a very 'live' activity, responding to the uniqueness of every lesson. In our research, we have identified both constructive and less helpful kinds of teacher-led discussion. The less helpful discussion closes down meaningful talk by: accepting answers too soon and moving on; leading students to the 'right' answer that was in the teacher's head; spending too much time checking students' grasp of the grammatical form and not enough time on the

grammar-writing link; and generally talking too much, so that students have no space to express their thinking.

In contrast, constructive metalinguistic discussion is more genuinely open, focusing more on exploration of choice rather than seeking correct answers, and using the students' responses to build the next sequence of questions. Two strategies that came up regularly in purposeful metalinguistic talk were the use of questions that opened up thinking and questions which invited students to elaborate on what they had said. These are explored further in the two examples below:

Example 1: Opening-Up Questions

Student: *'As she slowly floated away into the mist, it was just like she vanished into nowhere.'*

Teacher: *What do you think, Charlie?*

Charlie: *I think it was quite good, but I think he could have, like, used a better word than 'floated' because when it says 'floating', I can't really imagine how she went away.*

Teacher: *Ok. You can't imagine her floating? Maybe?*

In this short exchange, the teacher takes one child's response (his selection of a description he felt was successful in his own writing) and invites Charlie to comment on it, with the opening-up question of *'What do you think?'* Charlie responds by picking on the choice of 'floating' as an image that does not quite work for him, although he does not confidently verbalise why. The teacher supports the verbalisation by reformulating it as *'You can't imagine her floating'*, but her use of a questioning tone and the follow-through *'Maybe?'* continues to open up space for Charlie to think about this, or disagree.

Example 2: Questions Inviting Elaboration

Emma: *And she's wearing a gown of wine-red.*

Teacher: *OK. Talk about that a bit more?*

Emma: *She wouldn't wear a white dress.*

Teacher: *Why?*

Emma: *Because if you were not evil, you would, like, wear yellow.*

Teacher: *Anyone got something else to comment on Emma's wine-red colour? Hassan?*

Hassan: *It's like blood.*

Teacher: *Like blood. So think carefully when it comes to yours, think about the colours your writing is using.*

In this second example, the students are discussing how character can be inferred from the descriptive detail the author chooses. Specifically, they are discussing the description of a beautiful, but evil, witch in an Arthurian legend and the author's choice of the noun phrase 'a gown of wine-red'. The teacher first invites Emma to elaborate more on her answer (which included no explanation or justification) through 'Talk about that a bit more?'. This is followed up with another question (Why?) asking Emma to expand on her answer, and the student provides more explanation, although it is still only partially verbalised. So the teacher moves the discussion along by passing the thread of thinking to Hassan, who offers an association between the colour red and blood.

In both these examples, the students are learning how to express and verbalise the relationship between a grammatical choice and its effect in the writing being considered, and the teachers' questions stimulate both deeper metalinguistic thinking and better verbalisation.

Our own research, and the research represented in this issue, point to a reimagining of grammar – as a fertile, productive and purposeful strand within the teaching of writing – where the focus of attention is shifted from compliance to rules, to a more subtle understanding of how language works, and to the power of authorial choice.

References

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