

Teaching and Learning Functional Grammar in Junior Primary Classrooms

by

Ruth French

B.Ed. (Hons) General Primary, University of Sydney.

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of the University of New England

February 2013

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND
Armidale, NSW, Australia.

Acknowledgements

I have been most fortunate to have benefited from excellent supervision throughout the course of my thesis project. My principal supervisor for the entirety of the project was Professor Len Unsworth, whose insight, wise guidance and strategic advice on all matters from design and data collection to the final stages of writing were enormously helpful. His patience and encouragement were invaluable in bringing the project to completion, and his intellectual stamina and interest in the project often sustained my own.

I am also very grateful to my additional supervisors at different points in the project's progress. Professor Geoff Williams was the original secondary supervisor, although secondary in name only because it was his active encouragement which began the endeavour and helped shape its goals. His suggestions were influential in the design of the classroom interactions of the data collection period, and his challenge to explain practice with sound theory echoed in my mind over the duration of the project. Although his official involvement in supervision could not continue when an overseas position called, our occasional conversations around the subjects of the thesis and his enthusiasm for it continued to inform the work's progress. In the latter stages of the project, Dr Susan Feez was a most attentive additional supervisor, providing careful feedback on analysis and astute editorial advice from her considerable talent for understanding the rhetorical design of prose as well as the intellectual matters to hand, complemented by attention to fine detail. Dr Corinne Buckland was a secondary supervisor for a period and provided personal encouragement, and Dr Mutuota Kigotho contributed both encouragement and sound advice about practical organisational matters.

My gratitude is additionally and most heartily extended to the teachers and Year 2 students whose willingness to invite me into their classrooms made the entire project possible. Their generosity and cooperation provided not only the empirical content of the thesis, but in revisiting their (audio-recorded) words I have kept on learning from them long after our classroom conversations were concluded. I also wish to thank the school principal of the case study site, whose own love of learning led her to accept the project into her school and encourage my efforts.

The Ph.D. project began under the auspices of the University of Sydney, which provided a small grant for the purchase of a transcription machine. The University of New England, Armidale, has hosted the project since Prof. Unsworth's move there during my candidature. Its Faculty of The Professions has held a number of Post-Graduate Student Research Conferences which have been invaluable in developing the work. The university itself has covered the registration costs of these conferences for students, and a series of small grants have contributed towards my travel and accommodation costs in attending.

A number of parts of the thesis have been published, and the discussion in various places has therefore benefited from critical comments provided by anonymous referees and editors to whom I am also indebted.

Finally, I am very thankful indeed to my family, friends and colleagues, for their support of my efforts over a long period. My husband Peter Docherty has contributed more than any other individual, providing personal encouragement, intellectual conversations including insight into interpreting statistics, and thorough reading of and feedback upon most chapters of the thesis. His further support in raising our two daughters has provided spaces in domestic life for study which would not otherwise have been possible. Our daughters Rebecca and Meaghan have

patiently cooperated with their mother's non-involvement in various social activities in order to give time to the work. My parents Rosemary and Graham French provided occasional childcare in the latter stages of the project (Rosemary has been especially generous), as did Naomi Rosso, Joanne Day and other friends and family at different periods. Valuable collegial support has been extended to me by other higher degree candidates in Education at the University of New England, by interested UNE staff, and by colleagues in the Australian community of systemic functional linguists, whose thoughtful questions and comments have prompted further intellectual work as well as sustaining motivation.

Any long journey takes effort and stamina. I have been blessed to know that, even though it has been my journey, I have not had to travel alone. To my supervisors, family, friends and colleagues, and to those whose intellectual work provided pathways for my explorations, my most sincere thanks.

Abstract

The teaching and learning of grammatics ('knowledge about grammar') with young school children is the focus of this study.

Historical literature on the teaching of grammar is widely believed to show that a knowledge of grammar is not effective for improving students' literacy outcomes, usually specified in terms of writing. Under-scrutinised in this research are two issues which bear strongly on questions of effectiveness: the affordances of the kind of grammatical description taught, and the quality of pedagogy deployed in the teaching of grammatics. The thesis explores both these issues. Specifically, it investigates the teaching and learning of aspects of systemic functional grammar (developed by M.A.K. Halliday) within a pedagogic framework based on socio-cultural constructivist theory (L.S. Vygotsky).

The data for the project are drawn from two case studies conducted in Year 2 classrooms. 'Slices' of the case study data are used to analyse and interpret: ways in which to begin the study of a functional grammatics with young novices; benefits from knowledge about verbal Processes for children's improvement in expressive oral reading and punctuation of direct speech; the application of grammatical and genre knowledge in developing a critical reading of a narrative; and early moves in using the grammatics of Theme in one specific aspect of writing. A significant contribution is the project's incorporation of transcribed classroom talk, which is used to illuminate situated practices in teaching and learning grammatics, including the ways in which teacher talk and class discussion mediate the learning of grammatical concepts. Evidence is provided for the accessibility and utility of a grammatics drawn from systemic functional grammar, with the grammar's orientation to *meaning* in language being central to its potential.

Attention to pedagogic design is also argued to be integral to the development of a productive grammatics for schools. The thesis recommends the principled design of forms of semiotic mediation used to teach grammatical concepts (including teacher talk), and the thoughtful and meaningful integration of grammatics with other dimensions of the English/literacy curriculum so that grammatics is taught 'in context' but also with a view to longer term development of a flexible, systematic understanding.

Publications during candidature

- French, R. (2009). *Pumpkin soup* and grammatics: A critical literacy case study with Year 2. In T. Hays & R. Hussain (Eds.), *Bridging the gap between ideas and doing research – Proceedings of the 3rd Annual Postgraduate Research Conference, The Faculty of The Professions, University of New England, Armidale NSW* (pp. 69–84). Armidale, Australia: University of New England.
- French, R. (2010). Primary school children learning grammar: Rethinking the possibilities. In T. Locke (Ed.), *Beyond the grammar wars: A resource for teachers and students on developing language knowledge in the English / literacy classroom* (pp. 206–229). New York, NY: Routledge.
- French, R. (2010). Starting points in teaching grammatics: Children learning about verbs. In T. Hays (Ed.), *Bridging the gap between ideas and doing research – Proceedings of the 4th Annual Postgraduate Research Conference, Faculty of The Professions, University of New England, Armidale NSW* (pp. 79–106). Armidale, Australia: University of New England.
- French, R. (2012). Learning the grammatics of quoted speech: Benefits for punctuation and expressive reading. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 35(2), 206–222.

Table of contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract	v
Candidate’s certification	vii
Publications during candidature	viii
Table of contents	ix
List of figures	xv
List of tables	xvi
CHAPTER 1 Introduction	1
CHAPTER 2 Critical review of research into the teaching of grammar in schools	
2.1 Introduction	11
2.2 The prevailing wisdom: “perceived irrelevance”	12
2.2.1 Current and historical opinion	12
2.2.2 The Braddock Report	14
2.2.3 The Dartmouth Seminar	18
2.3 Review of select historical studies	20
2.3.1 Basis for selection of studies	21
2.3.2 Early research on teaching grammar	22
2.3.3 The Harris study (1962)	34
2.3.4 Elley, Barham, Lamb and Wyllie (1976) – the ‘New Zealand study’	45
2.3.5 Sentence combining	48
2.4 Recent research in teaching grammar	49
2.4.1 Research into teaching and learning of systemic functional grammar in schools	49
2.4.2 Research on ‘embedded’ or ‘integrated’ teaching of grammar	55
2.4.3 A recent meta-analysis	57
2.5 Conclusions	60

CHAPTER 3 Theoretical orientation

3.1	Introduction	63
3.2	Choice of type of grammar	64
3.2.1	Traditional school grammar	65
3.2.2	Transformational / generative grammar	75
3.2.3	Systemic functional grammar	82
3.3	Choice of pedagogical approach	89
3.3.1	Pedagogy in earlier grammar research	90
3.3.2	Psychological assumptions from Piaget: Is grammar too abstract to teach?	93
3.3.3	Challenging the assumptions: possibilities from Vygotsky	96
3.4	A way ahead: Bringing together the theoretical approaches of Vygotsky and Halliday	99
3.4.1	The role of social interaction in development	101
3.4.2	The role of language in the development of thought: a form of semiotic mediation	110
3.4.3	The teaching of grammatical knowledge to school children in the work of Vygotsky and Halliday	118
3.5	Summary and implications of theory for research	123

CHAPTER 4 Methodology

4.1	An exploration in teaching and learning grammatics	126
4.2	Rationale	131
4.2.1	Principles informing the methodology	131
4.2.2	Practical considerations informing the methodology	136
4.3	Study design and preparation phase	
4.3.1	Two case studies	139
4.3.2	Description of the case study site	141
4.3.3	Ethics approval	143
4.4	Data collection phase	
4.4.1	Role of the researcher	145
4.4.2	Forms of data	147
4.5	Data analysis phase	
4.5.1	'Slicing' the data	153
4.5.2	Main types of data	154
4.5.3	Analysis of audio recordings	155

4.5.4	Analysis of work sample data	163
4.5.5	Researcher notes and records of teaching materials	164
4.6	Conclusion: a study of possibilities	166

CHAPTER 5 Starting points in teaching grammatics: Children learning about ‘action verbs’

5.1	How best to begin?	168
5.2	Preliminaries: Beginning with students’ existing understandings about language	169
5.2.1	‘What is language?’ mind maps	170
5.2.2	Word sort activity	174
5.2.3	Children’s attitudes and summary of preliminary activities	177
5.3	A rationale for starting with ‘action verbs’	178
5.4	Comparison of two introductory grammatics lessons	180
5.4.1	Similar pedagogical approaches	182
5.4.2	Similar content	186
5.4.3	Different ways of defining action verbs	186
5.4.4	Different genres as contexts for learning grammatics	193
5.5	Implications for theory and practice	195
5.5.1	Problematising ‘grammar teaching’ as a uniform variable	195
5.5.2	Vygotsky, voluntary attention and rethinking what counts as ‘basic’	197
5.5.3	Problems with calling verbs ‘doing words’	202
5.5.4	The semiotic mediation of colour coding for learning grammatics	208
5.5.5	Some further practical considerations for teachers	220
5.6	Concluding comments	224

CHAPTER 6 Children learning the grammatics of quoted speech

6.1	Grammatics – not just for writing	227
6.2	Research on grammar and quoted speech	228
6.2.1	Punctuation and grammatics	228
6.2.2	Expressive reading and grammatics	230
6.3	Design of ‘quoted speech’ study	231
6.4	The grammatics of quoted speech	232

6.5	Assessment of the punctuation of quoted speech	
6.5.1	Methodology	233
6.5.2	Results	235
6.6	Assessment of expression in oral reading	
6.6.1	Methodology	238
6.6.2	Results	249
6.7	Teaching and learning the grammatics of verbal Processes: lessons and reflections	254
6.7.1	Rationale	255
6.7.2	Some teaching–learning activities and reflections on pedagogical design	258
6.8	Interpretation of findings	270
6.8.1	Development of conscious control of quoted speech	271
6.8.2	Implications for pedagogy	272
6.8.3	A pedagogical grammatics for quoted speech	275
6.9	The grammatics of verbal Processes: practical and prospective ...	278

CHAPTER 7 Critical literacy and grammatics: Reading a picture book

7.1	Grammatics for ‘critical literacy’	280
7.2	Critical literacy – and why ‘positive’?	281
7.3	Pedagogical considerations	284
7.3.1	Critical literacy in the classroom: negative and content- focused	284
7.3.2	Towards a language-focused critical literacy	286
7.3.3	Planning a critical journey: ‘The Framework’ as a way in	288
7.3.4	Planning with the ZPD in mind	289
7.4	Teaching and learning experiences	289
7.5	Interpretation	296
7.5.1	Role of voluntary attention	297
7.5.2	Significance of forms of semiotic mediation	299
7.6	Conclusion	301

CHAPTER 8 Teaching and learning about Theme

8.1	Introduction	303
8.1.1	Systemic functional grammar as a grammatics for writing	303
8.1.2	An introduction to ‘Theme’	304
8.1.3	‘Theme’ in school curricula: NSW and the new Australian curriculum	306
8.2	Potential benefits of a knowledge of Theme for learners	307
8.2.1	Research on teaching and learning about Theme	307
8.2.2	Year 2 using Theme in writing – early steps on a learning trajectory	312
8.2.3	Year 6 using Theme in writing – further along the trajectory	326
8.3	Challenges for teaching–learning about Theme	330
8.3.1	Defining Theme for students	331
8.3.2	Achieving a balance between identifying individual Themes and understanding how patterns of Theme build meaning	348
8.4	Conclusions and implications	361

CHAPTER 9 Summary of findings and generalisations for design of curriculum and pedagogy

9.1	Introduction	364
9.2	Summary of empirical findings	
9.2.1	Accessibility and utility of select functional grammatical descriptions	364
9.2.2	Affordances of SFG as a pedagogical grammar	366
9.2.3	Importance of teacher talk in mediating grammatical knowledge	367
9.2.4	Quality of pedagogy	367
9.2.5	Towards greater generalisability	368
9.3	Challenges in ‘recontextualising’ grammatics for the classroom...	369
9.3.1	A model of the structuring of pedagogic discourse	369
9.3.2	Grammatics in the curriculum	374
9.3.3	Teachers’ knowledge for teaching grammatics	379
9.3.4	A pedagogy for grammatics	382
9.4	Designing programs of instruction in grammatics	386
9.4.1	Systematicity ‘at risk’: The tension between integration and disciplinarity	386

9.4.2	Systematicity via the (twin-) spiral curriculum	389
9.4.3	Towards systematicity in practice	392
9.5	Looking forward	395
9.6	Final word	397
REFERENCES		399
APPENDICES		
	Appendix A	429
	Appendix B	445
	Appendix C	471
	Appendix D	497
	Appendix E	505

List of figures

	Page
Figure 4.1	Case study design of the project 140
Figure 5.1	Jointly constructed picture description with material Processes boxed in green 183
Figure 5.2	Excerpt from procedural text with material Processes boxed in green 183
Figure 5.3	Analysis of experiential elements of nominal group: ‘doing words’ 204
Figure 5.4	Taxonomy implied by ‘doing words’ gloss 205
Figure 5.5	Transitivity analysis of a clause showing colour coding for functional elements 209
Figure 5.6	Image from cover of <i>An introduction to functional grammar</i> (2nd ed.) (Halliday, 1994) 218
Figure 6.1	Functional grammar analysis of a verbal clause and quoted speech 233
Figure 6.2	Punctuation pre-test results 236
Figure 6.3	Punctuation post-test results 237
Figure 7.1	A ‘saying verb’ card 291
Figure 8.1	Grammatical analysis of a step in a procedure: textual metafunction and logical relations of clauses 322
Figure 8.2	Analysis of textual metafunction of a clause nexus 323
Figure 8.3	Analysis of experiential meanings in clauses leading up to introduction of ‘Theme’ 341
Figure 8.4	Analysis of experiential meanings indicating Theme identification 341
Figure 8.5	Analysis of experiential meanings in clauses defining ‘Theme’... 342
Figure 8.6	Analysis of experiential meanings: ‘Theme’ as Actor 342
Figure 8.7	Analysis of experiential meanings in further clauses defining ‘Theme’ 343
Figure 8.8	Analysis of experiential meanings with embeddings indicated: ‘Theme’ represented as ‘psychological subject’ 343
Figure 8.9	Analysis of single ranking clause defining Theme, with logical relations of embedded clauses shown 345
Figure 9.1	Model of the structuring of pedagogic discourse, following Bernstein (1990) 370
Figure 9.2	Twin spiral or double helix as a metaphor for an ‘integrated’ grammatics 391

List of tables

	Page
Table 2.1	Results on ‘Test C’ (Formal Grammar Test) from Harris (1962) 39
Table 2.2	Measures of written compositions in Harris (1962) 43
Table 3.1	Summary of implications of theory for thesis project 124
Table 4.1	Research questions, data and relevant thesis chapters 150
Table 4.2	Key to transcription conventions 162
Table 5.1	Content of ‘What is language?’ mind maps 171
Table 5.2	Categories of classification used in word sort activity 175
Table 5.3	Comparison of two introductory grammatics lessons 182
Table 6.1	Comparison of punctuation test results 236
Table 6.2	Comparison of punctuation test results with outlier excluded ... 237
Table 6.3	Rubric for scoring dramatic expression in oral reading 247
Table 6.4	Oral reading results 250
Table 6.5	Results of interviews about reading with expression 252
Table 7.1	Verbal processes from <i>Pumpkin soup</i> , presented in story order... 292
Table 7.2	Narrative stages of <i>Pumpkin soup</i> mapped onto verbal processes 293