Pumpkin Soup and grammatics: A critical literacy case study with Year 2

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Abstract

Critical literacy and the discourse analysis which it employs have usually focused on texts which are ultimately viewed negatively for such problems as bias, use of stereotypes and the marginalisation of minority populations and dissenting views. Classroom practices in critical literacy have relied mostly on content analysis as a tool for developing students' critical orientation to text. This paper argues for the need to examine the language of texts in order for critical literacy to take account of form and not only content, and in particular the value of systemic functional grammar as a tool for understanding and talking about text. It also argues for the inclusion of more positive discourse analysis in the classroom critical literacy program.

The case study describes classroom work with Year 2 children reading and talking about the picture book Pumpkin Soup by Helen Cooper. The main data used are transcripts of classroom talk in which the children demonstrate beginning critical understandings of the constructedness of narrative. The development of these understandings is interpreted using the Vygotskian notion of 'Zone of Proximal Development'.

Introduction

Research into the role of grammar in the school curriculum has for many years now focused almost entirely on the specific question of whether knowledge of grammar helps students to write more effectively (Andrews et al. 2004a, 2004b; Braddock, Lloyd-Jones & Schoer 1963; Hillocks & Anderson 1992). Yet current policy and practice in English curricula around the (at least) Western world address more or less evenly reading, talking and listening, as well as writing. In this environment, the focus on grammar for improving written composition seems increasingly and unnecessarily narrow – a form of tunnel vision which has perhaps unwittingly excluded from study other potential applications of grammar in the classroom.

This paper explores some work with a class of Year 2 children in which they applied grammatical knowledge to their reading and interpretation of a literary text. The case study is an excursion into the potential of grammatics[5] (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004) as a tool for what might be termed 'positive critical literacy'. The paper will first outline 'critical literacy', and some reasons for developing a 'positive' critical literacy. The pedagogical approach which was employed in the case study will be outlined, followed by a description the actual classroom work in which groups of students discussed a narrative picture book. The children's talk about grammatics in relation to this story is offered as evidence of an emergent 'positive critical literacy'.

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[5] 'Grammatics' is a term suggested by M.A.K. Halliday, founder of systemic functional linguistics. He distinguishes between 'learning grammar' in the sense of learning language (such as when toddlers begin to use verbs in their speech), which we achieve without conscious effort, and 'learning *about* grammar' in terms of conscious metalinguistic knowledge (such as learning what we mean by 'verb') (Halliday 2002). The parallel can be made: grammatics is to grammar as linguistics is to language. This distinction is helpful in clarifying what we mean by school children learning 'grammar' (actually grammatics, by this definition), since the complaint is sometimes made that teaching grammar is really only a matter of bringing to consciousness knowledge which students already possess at a deep level.

Critical literacy – and why 'positive'?

The development of students' ability to critically reflect on what they read and view has been an area of inquiry and interest in education since at least the 1990s, and is what we have come to know as 'critical literacy' (Fairclough 1992; Lankshear & McLaren 1993). A critical literacy approach argues that students should be encouraged to understand that texts act upon the reader / viewer / listener, and in particular that texts represent the world and experience in different ways and that these representations will always be infused in some way, sometimes quite subtly, with values. Students who have developed a 'critical literacy' will be competent to identify those values, and scrutinise and challenge them, taking appropriate social action in response where they believe it is warranted. It is therefore argued that children should be taught not merely how to read and write in terms of mastery of skills, but that they should also be taught about how language choices function to achieve certain effects, and how language is used to include or exclude certain groups of people or points of view. In Australia this critical dimension to literacy teaching is familiar to many teachers as one of the 'four roles of the reader' (Freebody 1992; Freebody & Luke 1990; Luke & Freebody 1999): that of 'text critic'.

A persuasive case has thus been made for the need for critical literacy – for teaching students to read thoughtfully and even resistently. Logically this would seem to open up the usual possibilities of criticism, that is, of evaluating a text as either successful or not. But in practice the analyses typically offered by advocates of critical literacy have concerned texts which misrepresent or marginalise minority groups and positions, which bolster the status quo and which perpetuate discriminatory views. That is, texts which are ultimately viewed negatively by their 'fair-minded' critics[6]. In critical discourse analysis, comparatively scant attention has been paid to texts which offer positive ethical and humanitarian values.

Writing from within the critical discourse analysis community itself, Martin (2004) has argued for more attention to be paid to *positive* discourses, in part to assist (in his case, university-) students to recognise and write inclusive, fair and in other ways laudable texts. In fact, in order to redress the imbalanced focus on mainly negatively evaluated texts, Martin goes so far as to suggest that for a time at least there should be a *preference* for critical study of worthy, beneficial and fair texts, in his terms: 'positive discourse analysis'. There is by implication, therefore, space to include more 'positive' texts within the scope of critical literacy in the primary school. It is into this space that the following case study may be placed.

The text with which the children worked is a quality narrative picture book: *Pumpkin Soup* by Helen Cooper (1999, 1st edition 1998)[7]. This is an entertaining and wittily illustrated story. Its three characters – a cat, squirrel and duck – are good friends who share the jobs in the home cooperatively, but along strongly demarcated lines. One day the little duck (the smallest and apparently youngest character) decides it's 'my turn to stir the soup' and trouble ensues, with the disregarded duck eventually leaving home. The cat and squirrel soon rue their unaccommodating ways and desperately want their friend Duck to return, which he finally does. The resolution involves redrawing the lines so that the duck's culinary enthusiasms are incorporated, and calm is restored in the cabin (well, a temporary calm anyway, as the last page humorously reveals).

Pumpkin Soup is a story which offers positive values about friendship and cooperation, communicated warmly and in language which is beautifully crafted and at times even poetic. It is not the kind of text which advocates of critical literacy have typically brought to our attention. Yet it is nonetheless a text worthy of critical exploration, and for this reason was selected for this case study. The selection of *Pumpkin soup* for the present research was also based on the belief that it would be a suitable and enjoyable text for

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[6] What constitutes a fair treatment is of course contentious, and this present argument does not assume that the advocates of critical literacy necessarily occupy any moral high ground.

[7] *Pumpkin Soup* won the Kate Greenaway Medal for children's illustration in 1998. The book has since been followed by sequel texts which attest to the popularity of the text and its characters: *A Pipkin of Pepper* (Cooper 2004) and *Delicious!* (Cooper 2007, 1st edition 2006).

a class of seven year olds to engage with closely
in a sustained manner. The quality of the narrative offers much to interest and engage, including from a grammatical point of view, and the story readily bears repeated visits.

Pedagogical considerations

There are many ways in which critical literacy might be incorporated into classroom practice, and for the purposes of this present discussion, reports of classroom applications of critical literacy in the primary classroom were sampled from Australian education databases. Interestingly, while there were many articles which argued for the importance of a place for critical literacy in the classroom, and these often included suggestions for putting it into practice (a notable early example is Comber, 1993), there were comparatively fewer reports in which examples of situated classroom practice were described[8]. This present work therefore contributes in some measure to the documentation of critical literacy as practised in actual classroom settings.

Critical literacy in the classroom: negative and content-focused

The surveyed literature revealed two dimensions of the classroom application of critical literacy which are particularly relevant to this case study. Firstly, most classroom studies reported on critical literacy of the negative kind, that is, the texts studied were viewed more negatively by the students as they became more critical readers and viewers, and indeed this was usually the stated hope or aim of the teacher. Secondly, in most studies the children's attention was directed to aspects of the content of texts, such as characterisation, and less attention, if any, was given to the form of the texts. Both these facets of critical literacy practice will be considered in turn.

By far the larger proportion of studies describing classroom explorations in critical literacy have focused on negative critique. That is, the texts which students studied in class are viewed more negatively at the conclusion of a unit of work than they were initially. It is in fact extremely difficult to find any Australian reports of primary school classes working positively and critically with texts, at least under the descriptor of 'critical literacy'. Typically, students have been asked to examine and learn to *resist* questionable messages in the media, popular culture and sometimes in books for children. For example, students have been led to regard more negatively: advertising material (Comber 1993); TV soap opera (Lacey & Pitt 2000); merchandising aimed at children (Longfellow 2002); and stories which are deemed to have stereotypically gendered characters (Comber 1993; O'Brien 1994). Texts in these classrooms were also problematised in terms of what they *don't* say, such as what kinds of gifts are not likely to appear in the Mother's Day junk mail (Comber 1993). One of the salient aspects of these various studies is their shared concern to help children see that texts are constructed objects – that texts are shaped to create certain effects or ways of seeing the world:

> … instead of treating fictional narratives, for example, as slices of life, [students can] see them as deliberately constructed pieces of writing.'

> (O'Brien 1994)

This concern with 'constructedness' coincides with the classroom work described in the present case study. Where the present work differs, however, is in its focus on *positive* criticism.

The present study also differs from much of the extant reports of classroom work in critical literacy because it is concerned with textual form and not merely content[9]. In the

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[8] Even in the widely distributed (in Australia) PETA publication *Critical Literacies in the Primary Classroom* (Knobel & Healy 1998), only four chapters out of a total of nine contain reports of actual critical literacy work with school students.

[9] The form–content binary is not without problems in that it attempts to separate elements that are inevitably all part of the meaning of a text: you can't really have one without the other.

Australian examples of critical literacy practice surveyed for this paper, almost all the attention of teachers and students was directed to content features: usually type of character, sometimes aspects of plot. It was rarely reported that students had been given the opportunity to consider not only *what* a text portrayed, but also *how* it did so. When this did occur, it was more often to do with the form of visual elements in texts (for example, in Green & Cochrane, 2003) rather than the form of the language.

Towards a language-focussed critical literacy

While content-focused activities are useful to a degree in helping students see that they can be critical, there is a limit to the usefulness of approaches which rely solely on content analysis. To be critical of texts implies the use a range of tools of criticism, and basic content analysis as practised in the above examples is only one such tool. A focus on content typically involves students in activities such as counting and classifying the characters in a book according to gender or race or other kinds of difference, or considering which type of characters bring about the resolution of the plot. Such investigations can be valid and informative, although decreasingly so as texts become less overtly biased – we don't see many storybooks with bad black golliwogs anymore[10]! But, by definition in fact, content analysis does not address how the *form* of a text determines its meanings. An examination of the language of texts is important if critical literacy is going to be taken seriously.

This case study employed some aspects of systemic functional grammar (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004) as critical tools for exploring the language of *Pumpkin Soup*. In this use of grammatics, the study takes a similar approach to a small number of other Australian studies which have also reported using grammatical knowledge for critical literacy with primary school children (Emmitt & Wilson 2005; McDonald 1999; Williams 2000). The main reason for choosing to work with language descriptions from the systemic functional linguistics tradition in the present study was the meaning-orientation of this approach. Systemic functional grammar is designed to describe how choices in wordings create different kinds of meanings, and how patterns of wordings in whole texts work to meet social purposes – that is, how grammatical patterns realise genres or 'text types' (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004). The emphasis is therefore on grammar as a way of understanding choice and meaning ('Which language resources has the author chosen to use?' and 'What effect do these choices have?') rather than emphasising grammar for accurate usage, which was historically the main application of grammar in schools.

The present study focused on introducing students to aspects of the construction of narrative using the book *Pumpkin Soup*. The research explored whether young children could recognise ways in which choices and patterns in the lexicogrammar[11] shaped a story, that is, whether they could connect their emerging grammatical knowledge with the organisation of a whole text. More broadly, the study aimed to explore how students might use metalinguistic knowledge such as descriptions of grammar and text type or genre structure as 'tools' (more about this later) for the development of critical understandings.

However, the distinction between form and content can be useful as an analytical tool, including as a means of characterising different classroom practices used in the study of texts.

[10] The critiques by Dixon (1977a; 1977b), for example, were influential in raising the awareness of these kinds of overt stereotyping. In his introduction to *Critical Language Awareness*, Fairclough (1992) makes the point that as society moves towards treating people more equally, differences in status tend to be played out more subtly in text.

[11] This is the term Halliday uses to include both vocabulary and grammar, which he analyses together. Another way to express this is 'wording' (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004).

Planning a critical journey: 'The Framework' as a way in

An important pedagogical consideration for this study was how to help the Year 2 children to begin thinking critically about texts, as this was a practice quite new to them, especially at the level of thinking about language and form. For a 'way in' to thinking critically with children, the researcher adapted a series of questions called 'The Framework,' developed by British author and critic of children's literature, Aidan Chambers (Chambers 1985, 1994). The Framework was devised for facilitating classroom talk around the meanings of literary texts, including picture books. The Framework questions firstly engage students in 'booktalk' about a text in quite accessible ways, such as asking children to talk about what they liked or didn't like about a book. They then move on to ask children: 'Did you notice any patterns / links?' (Chambers 1985). Chambers argues that in many respects it is the patterning of language and also illustration (in the case of literary picture books) that creates the form and meaning of the text, and he offers evidence of the productiveness of The Framework with excerpts of transcribed classroom talk and with anecdotal recollections from a number of teachers. The potential of this approach as a productive way into critical attention to text form has also been demonstrated in some work with the grammatics of a picture book with upper primary students (Williams 2000)[12]. As the Year 2 children in the current case study already knew about patterns in mathematics and art, it was decided that Chambers' Framework questions would be used as the entry point for bringing the children towards the idea of patterns in language.

Planning with the ZPD in mind

The pedagogy informing this case study drew explicitly from the work of L.S. Vygotsky, including his notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The limitations of space do not permit a more expansive treatment of the ways in which a Vygotskian perspective informed the study, however suffice to say that the teaching sequence was planned in order to ascertain and work within the children's 'zone of proximal development'. Vygotsky's much-quoted formulation of the ZPD is:

> the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

(Vygotsky 1978)

In keeping with this understanding of the ZPD, the classroom activities with *Pumpkin Soup* were planned to allow the children to demonstrate what they knew and noticed at the outset, and then gradually to introduce the metalanguage of grammatical and whole text features in order to see how these might shape and extend the children's thinking.

The Case Study

Background

This case study was situated in a Year 2 class (third year of school – 7 and 8 year olds): '2B'. The class of 29 girls and boys was in a school in the inner western suburbs of Sydney, an area with a mix of socio-economic groups and a range of cultures,

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[12] This research was undertaken and described by Williams (2000) and elaborated upon by Martin (2000) in the same volume. In this research, children used grammatics to illuminate how domestic work was distributed unevenly across characters in a children's picture book, *Piggybook* by Anthony Browne (1986), and how the roles of characters were altered as the narrative was resolved. The present author was the classroom teacher for this research, which was conducted by Dr Geoff Williams who was then at the University of Sydney and was the principal researcher for the project 'Children's Development of Knowledge About Language'. Dr Joan Rothery provided valuable research assistance and in-class support as participant-observer.

including in this class children from Greek and Mandarin speaking families, and children from Italian, Spanish and Indian cultural backgrounds. One student was a recent migrant from Ethiopia who had spoken only Amharic on her arrival in Australia two years before. Most students, however, were confident and fluent in English. The class also included one intellectually disabled student and one student with severe behavioural problems[13].

The researcher worked in the classroom over a period of almost 5 months, collaborating with the class teacher Joanne Baker[14] in a team teaching role to plan and implement some lessons focussing on grammatics which integrated with her own classroom program. There was some negotiation of this agenda, with the research mainly being tailored to the classroom work already sketched out, but also with room for interests of the researcher to be incorporated, such as the picture book study which is the focus of this paper. Typically the research involved a grammar-focussed lesson of up to one hour once a week, with the researcher as participant-observer and sometimes as lesson leader, as was the case in this instance.

Prior to the work discussed here, the children had learnt about 'action verbs' (the term the NSW syllabus uses as an 'equivalent' to the functional grammar term 'material process'), saying verbs and sayers[15].

Teaching and learning experiences

The class teacher read the children the story *Pumpkin Soup* and we learned from the children that they enjoyed the story and illustrations. In particular they responded to the emotion involved in the running away from home of the precocious duck and the humour of the book's ending. The children were consistently attentive and engaged in lessons associated with the book, including throughout the work with grammatics. This is in itself a significant finding, given that in the past students' reportedly negative attitudes to grammar study have been offered as one of the reasons to question its place in the school curriculum (Elley et al. 1976).

The children were next asked to identify the verbal Processes in *Pumpkin Soup* while the book was read to the whole class, and the class teacher scribed the 'saying verbs' onto a chart as the children identified each one. This task was completed with considerable ease by the children, even though they had only learned about 'saying verbs' for the first time eight days earlier. They were able to use a number of cues to identify verbal Processes, such as looking for some quoted speech and then looking for the relevant attendant verb. For example:

Researcher:	How will we know when we've come to saying verb? [pause 5 seconds] Amelia?
Amelia:	There, it'll be something somebody said and it'll have inverted commas around it.
Researcher:	That will be a very big hint. OK, let's keep our eyes peeled. [Begins to read Pumpkin Soup.]

[Whole class lesson, October 18]

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[13] All the students' families gave permission for the children to be included in research except for the intellectually disabled child (who in any case followed an independent program) and one regular class member. Any contributions by these two students to class discussions have been omitted from the transcript data and their work samples were not collected.

[14] Names of all staff and students have been changed. Aliases have been chosen to maintain a sense of the cultural backgrounds of their bearers.

[15] It was a requirement of the NSW Department of Education and Training that the study use the terminology of the NSW syllabus documents, which use the 'conventional' term 'verb' (Board of Studies NSW 2006 [1st edition 1998]). Note that 'verb' is a class label and as such can only be an approximate equivalent to the functional grammar term 'Process', and also that the notion of *types* of Process derives entirely from Halliday's grammar (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004).

For the next phase of our work, the children worked with the researcher in small groups. These were the three existing mixed ability small groups in which they usually worked during English / literacy lessons[16]. As preparation for these group lessons, the verbal Processes which the children had previously found in *Pumpkin Soup* were scribed onto green ('verb coloured') cards by the class teacher. Each card featured a stylised mouth shape to indicate that it represented a *saying* verb[17], and all of the saying verbs from the book were presented, including repeated words.

Figure 1: A 'saying verb' card

In each group the researcher and children then reread the book and sorted the cards, arranging them in the order they occurred in the story and putting verbal Processes which were on the same page underneath each other. The result of this activity looked something like this:

Table 1: Verbal Processes in *Pumpkin Soup* narrative

murmured	said	squeaked snapped	wailed stormed scoffed	muttered	sniffed wept	wailed squeaked	whispered yelped	shrieked	didn't say said

The next move in this lesson was to ask the children if they could 'find any patterns' in the 'saying verbs'. The children in 2B had no previous experience of this 'booktalk' (Chambers' 'Framework') in their class work with literary texts. As a result, their first responses to the question: 'Did you notice any patterns [in the saying verbs]?' focussed on the kinds of patterns with which they were already familiar, such as spelling and mathematical patterns. For example, they noticed partial numerical patterns and alphabetical order (see Appendix, Excerpt 1.1), simple repetition of whole words and word endings (Excerpt 1.2), and repetition of initial letters (Excerpt 1.3). The children were clearly unused to thinking about the meaning-making possibilities of word patterns.

The following step in the lesson was to ask the children to recall what the parts of a narrative were. They had learned about narrative structure already, some of them in earlier grades but certainly within the first half of their current school year their teacher had taught them the following simple narrative structure[18]:

Orientation ∧ Complication ∧ Resolution

Each small group of children had members who could recall these stages of a typical simple narrative, and as they recalled them they were written onto cards for all the children to see. Children and researcher then worked together to place the cards above the relevant saying verb cards, so that the narrative stages ('text level' features) were

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[16] In fact the children often worked in four groups: three groups of eight children, each group roughly parallel in ability to the others; and one smaller group of four students who were deemed the least able in literacy and often received more intensive teacher attention and specially tailored work. For the discussion of grammatics in *Pumpkin Soup*, the small group of least able students joined with one of the other groups. This was a common practice in class 2B, and it allowed for interaction with potentially more able and insightful peers for the benefit of the less able students.

[17] This iconic representation was initially adopted in the project 'Children's Development of Knowledge About Language' (University of Sydney), directed by Geoff Williams.

[18] The generic structure is described in this way for teachers in the NSW syllabus support materials (Board of Studies NSW 1998)

mapped onto the grammatical features. This produced an arrangement of cards on the floor like this:

Table 2: Narrative stage labels in relation to verbal Processes in *Pumpkin Soup*

ORIENTATION	C O M P L I C A T I O N								RESOLUTION		RE-COMPLICATION
	murmured	said	squeaked	wailed	muttered	snifled	wailed	whispered	shrieked	didn't say	said
	snapped		snapped	stormed		wept	squeaked	yelped			
			scoffed								

At this point, the question about patterns in the saying verbs was reiterated:

Researcher: OK. Now I'm going to ask my question I asked before, again. Can you see any patterns with the saying verbs now?

Children: Oh!

Researcher: Think about the orientation, complication and resolution of the book.

[Koalas–Bottlebrushes group, November 3]

It was the researcher's hope that the children would now be able to see a co-patterning of the verbal Processes with the narrative stages of the text. That is, the verbal Processes express increasing upset and trouble in the first part of the complication, leading to sadness and remorse, and this changes to shrieking with delight and a friendly silence about the duck's imperfections ('didn't say a word') in the resolution. When the duck speaks again after the apparent restoration of a negotiated harmony, it is to introduce on the picture book's penultimate page a humorous 're-complication' which leaves the reader keen for more. The verbal Processes help to carry the narrative forward. They are not coincidentally related to the progress of the story, nor are they merely interesting variations on the word 'said' intended to keep the reader's attention. They are among the linguistic resources deployed by the author in the integral weaving of lexis and grammar which *is* the story. In terms of systemic functional theory, the lexicogrammar 'realises' the narrative.

Interestingly, some of the children still did not 'see' the pattern just described. This same lesson was conducted with three groupings of students over roughly consecutive days and in two of these three instances, the children continued to attend to the kinds of patterns they had observed earlier in the lesson, prior to the application of the narrative stage labels to the display of saying verbs. For example:

Researcher: Now – here's my big question – have a look at the saying verbs. Orientation – there aren't any. Complication – starts off with 'murmured'

and ⌐'said', then ⌐'squeaked' and ⌐'snapped' -

Philip: ∟two, ∟three, ∟four–

Researcher: No, not counting them, thinking about the words, Philip. We're not counting them.

[Gum Blossoms group, October 31]

Excerpt 2.1 in the Appendix shows that even with some very strong hinting from the researcher, the Koalas–Bottlebrushes group still struggled to look beyond the detail of the spelling of the words or how many were on each page, to consider their role in the text as a whole. The task of identifying a pattern in the saying verbs was clearly not a straightforward one for these young learners. The children were very keen and

suggested what patterns they could, but the idea
of relating grammatical elements to story structure was a new challenge.

Was this then too demanding a task for 7 and 8 year olds with only a few weeks' experience of learning grammatics? The evidence indicates that it was indeed challenging, but not in the end impossible. Some children actually saw the pattern quite quickly, such as the Kookaburras group, the one group of the three in which some children picked up the pattern straight away after the application of the narrative stage labels to the saying verbs (Excerpt 3.1). Eventually the Koalas–Bottlebrushes group also began to notice that there was a co-patterning of grammatical elements with generic stages in the text and that the verbal Processes had emotional import (Excerpt 3.2). And in a discussion (initiated by one of the children) about whether the verbal Processes were varied only for decorative purposes, Karin was clear:

Researcher:	Do you think that Helen Cooper, when she wrote the book, just put words like 'wailed' and 'stormed' and 'muttered' and 'sniffed' and whatever in the Complication just to make it more interesting?
Children:	Yeah.
Child:	No.
Child:	Maybe it's –

Researcher: Was there another reason as well?

Karin:	Not just interesting. To make it sound more like what happened in the story. How like 'stormed', 'wept', 'sniffed' and 'wailed' and 'squeaked' – they're all sort of Complication-y sort of words.

[Gum Blossoms group, October 31]

Interpretation

The transcript data of the *Pumpkin Soup* lessons demonstrate that by the end, the children were operating at a level beyond what they could initially do on their own. The children had brought to the lessons their existing knowledge of verbal Processes and also of the stages of a narrative, but they did not bring these two kinds of knowledge about language together of their own accord. They seemed initially to be enmeshed in the more concrete patterns that were visibly evident in the verbal Processes: consistent '-ed' endings, for example[19], and a move to seeing how the wording contributed to the shaping of the story was not possible for these children when they had the verbs alone laid out before them. It was the inclusion and relevant placement of the narrative stage labels which mediated their move to a more abstract level of thinking about the language of this picture book.

In terms of Vygotsky's ZPD, the case study demonstrates how collaborative talk and the use of carefully selected learning materials can lead children towards higher, more abstract thinking. For Vygotsky, the move to higher mental functions is facilitated and shaped ('mediated') by the kinds of tools – material or mental – available for solving given problems (Cole & Wertsch 1996; Vygotsky 1962). In the case study, these tools included the language used by the researcher (such as the 'patterns' question), the metalanguage from systemic functional linguistics (such as the green 'saying verb' cards and the narrative stage labels), and the ordered way in which the lesson materials were arranged. Before entering the ZPD, that is, at their initial independent level of mastery, the children could only identify graphological and morphological features patterned across some of the verbal Processes. It was the introduction of the Orientation / Complication / Resolution cards which assisted the children to make insights not previously possible. It is in this sense that the students were working in the

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[19] Although even at this level the children understood that some abstraction was needed in that they were searching for common features across different items. They were looking for generalisations, and generalisation is a kind of abstraction – it involves moving from thinking about various elements as discrete to thinking about their shared features.

'zone of proximal development', achieving through mediated activity (mediated both by the lesson materials and by the language and interactions of the questioning researcher) what they could not achieve alone: a more abstract understanding of the language and form of a narrative text[20].

Conclusion

The children in 2B were new to the challenge of being critical readers, and almost new to an understanding of grammatics. Yet the evidence from this study is that, in interaction with each other, the researcher and the carefully presented lesson materials, they were able to begin to articulate a relationship between aspects of lexicogrammar and the shaping of a whole text: the picture book *Pumpkin Soup*. Here is evidence in the actual words of the children and their interactions with the researcher for the beginnings of a language-focussed (and not necessarily negative) critical orientation to the 'constructedness' of narrative. It is also an entirely different way of using grammar in the classroom from what most people, including educational researchers, have thought grammar was for.

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[20] See Williams (2006 [2004]) for a discussion of the potential of grammatics as an intellectual tool for the development of abstract thought, with evidence drawn from substantial research with primary school children.

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Appendix 1

Transcription conventions:

…	in left-hand column indicates ellipsis of some data
…	in the flow of conversation indicates a pause 3 seconds or less
⌐ L	indicate simultaneous talk

Excerpt 1.1

Researcher: OK would anybody like to comment on any changes or patterns they can see in the saying verbs when we look at the beginning of the story right through to the end? Remember this is not quite the very beginning because at the very beginning there was no talking at all. Or there was, there might have been talking in the, in real life, but in the story there were no saying verbs. What do you notice, Karin? You can take the tape recorder and comment.

Karin: It's only, it's only from 'murmured' to 'wailed', but it goes 1, 1, 2, 3.

Researcher: OK, so ⌐that's a pattern.

Karin: L1, 2, 3.

Researcher: But then it just changes? OK. Any other patterns? Look at the actual words.

…

Researcher: What do you think, Jamila?

Jamila: Um well, with 'muttered', 'said', 'squeaked' and 'wailed', it's in um alphabetical order.

Researcher: That's true – that's another pattern.

[Gum Blossoms group, October 31]

Excerpt 1.2

Child: Is it there's um wailed, and then there's three other words, and then wailed again? I thought –

Child: ⌐– I thought I had.

Researcher: L 'Wailed' is mentioned two times –

Child: I thought I had the [one?] but I didn't.

Researcher: Any other patterns?

Child: Um – one, two –

Researcher: Yes?

Child: A lot of them have, um, '-ed' on
           the end.

[Kookaburras group, November 1]

Excerpt 1.3

Amelia: I've noticed a lot of the words begin with 's'.

…

Amelia: I figured out why a lot of them end in 'd'.

Researcher: Why do they mostly and in 'd', Amelia?

Amelia: Because, a lot of the words end in '-ed' because it's a kind of a verb,
            'cause a verb is a doing word.

[Koalas–Bottlebrushes group, November 3]

Excerpt 2.1

Researcher: Why don't we let Deborah start us off? If you just put your hand up and
            wait quietly I'll pick you, Liz. Don't wave that.

Deborah: Um, that it starts off like: orientation, complication, resolution, then
            there's another complication.

Researcher: Yes, but look at the saying verbs. Is there a pattern with the saying
            verbs? Amelia?

Amelia: I've noticed that some of them, well most of them, have a double 'p', a
            double 'f' or a ⌐double letter in them.

Child: ⌐Double letter in them.

Researcher: Yes. Liz?

Liz: I noticed that in some words at the um, in some words there is um like '-
            ked' and '-ked' there. [pointing]

Researcher: ⌐Yes.

Liz: ⌐And '-ked' somewhere else.

Child: And ⌐'-ked' [in that?] over there.

Researcher: ⌐Very good.

…

Matthew: Well it starts with 'm' then 's' then 's'   ⌐then 's' then 'm'-

Child: ⌐And 's' and 'm'.

Researcher: We talked about that. We talked about the starting letters. It's something
            else ⌐about the orientation, complication and resolution,

Child: ⌐ I know, I know, I know, I know!

Researcher: and how the saying verbs go with the parts of the story. [short
            interruption] Amelia?

Amelia: Well, I've noticed that there's always um, a particular number in, and
            sometimes there's two on a page and there's always a particular number
            in every one.

…

Researcher: OK. Rosemary?

Rosemary: I thought about that, but there, isn't it that, that lots of them have got 'e' and 'i' and ⌐'i' in them?

Child: ∟'i'

Researcher: OK. They do.

Child: Well, I noticed that in the book there is, it's kind of like, like 'squeaked' then 'wailed', it's like a pattern because in the book it's, um, like the next page, it has the same words on the next page? Like –

Researcher: They do repeat ⌐sometimes, don't ⌐they?

Child: ∟Yeah.   ∟Yeah.

Researcher: Good comment.

[Koalas–Bottlebrushes group, November 3]

Excerpt 3.1

Researcher: You know how I asked before about patterns? Have another look. Here's the Orientation, then here's the Complication. Have a look at the saying verbs and see if you can see a pattern now. Thinking about the Orientation, the Complication and the Resolution.

Child: Jane can.

Researcher: What did you notice, Jane?

Jane: Well, at the beginning of the Complica-, Complication, and the, um, beginning of the Reso-, Res-, Reso-, Resolution, um, there,

Child: They both s–

Jane: – the, they both start in a word, a word that you would say um, like, if you were getting angry with someone. Like 'shrieked' and, um, 'murmured'.

Researcher: We might use 'murmured' or 'shrieked' if we're getting angry with someone. What else can we notice? Lauren?

Lauren: That it goes Complication – Resolution – Complication.

Researcher: Yes – that's a pattern. Have a look at these saying verbs in the Complication.

…

[Reading saying verbs as they appear in order from book] Murmured, said, squeaked, snapped, wailed, stormed, scoffed, muttered, sniffed, wept. What do you notice?

Child: They're all, um, sort of sad or um or angry words.

Researcher: Yeah – which ones are sad ones?

Child: Um, sniffed, wept, um, er –

Researcher: Yeah – wailed is a sad one too, isn't it?

Child: Wailed.

…

Researcher: What were you going to comment, Lauren?

…

Lauren: It goes, like, it goes from just
normal then, like, strong and angry and then sad and then happy again.

Researcher: Is that right? Which bit's happy again?

Lauren: Up here – so – shrieked is a happy one.

Researcher: Well, shrieked can be happy or unhappy. In the book, was it happy?

Lauren: Happy.

Researcher: Yeah, 'cause it, they went *"It's duck," they shrieked*. Wasn't it? So it was a happy shriek.

Lauren: Yes.

Researcher: A shriek of delight.

Lauren: Yep.

Researcher: Yes. Which ones were some of the um, angry ones?

Lauren: Um, squeaked, snapped, scoffed, stormed, wailed.

Researcher: Wailed can be angry, can't it?

Lauren: And snapped.

Researcher: Mm.

Lauren: And muttered.

Researcher: Yes, I, I agree. So they were angry here?

Lauren: [And then it's?] a bit sad.

Researcher: Why do they go from being angry to being sad?

Lauren: Because they were trying to say, "Oh, we don't need you" and they were trying to kind of boast about themselves, and then they were, they, they decide they really wanted him back, but, like, and then they started being sad to try and get him back.

Researcher: Yes – they were very sad 'til he came back, weren't they?

Lauren: Yeah.

Researcher: Worried about him. Thank you, Lauren, for your comments.

(Kookaburras group, November 1)

Excerpt 3.2

Deborah: They're um, like, see there's a complication? All the saying words are a bit like, like, say if they're crying or something. Like there's wept and wailed and some of them, like -

Researcher: And why would there be words like that in the complication, Deborah?

Deborah: Um because something's gone wrong. And then in the resolution there's 'shrieked' like they're excited, or 'didn't say'.

…

Hilary: Well … it's kind of like, because they've like yelled, squeaked, wailed and stormed, and um murmured and scoffed in the complication, it's kind of like, because it's in the complication they're kind of like yelling words and like, screaming and shouting and like crying and like, really, things that you wouldn't really want to do.

Researcher: So, these are unhappy kinds of –

Hilary:　　　Yeah

Researcher: – saying verbs? Un-, sort of angry or –

Hilary:　　　Yeah, like, you yelled, or you got a red face when you yelled –

Researcher: Would they belong in the resolution?

Hilary:　　　No way.

…

Matthew:　　Well, they're all kind of sad words up to, up 'til like, the resolution? Under like, ⌐yeah, they're sad words too.

Researcher:　　　└And in the book they, when they shrieked, was that a happy shriek or a ⌐sad shriek?

Matthew:　　└Like, la-

Children:　　Happy.

Child:　　　Happy.

…

Matthew:　　Yeah, and there's sniffed, like crying, so sad and stuff like that and that, because there's, because there's no um saying verbs at the start, um, ,because it's telling, 'cause it's telling you the orientation, 'cause it, say if it said, 'The duck said, "In the morning" ' you wouldn't know where it is and stuff. So, and then it starts as complication – the saying verbs – and they're sad words 'cause it's the complication. And it's, then it goes up to the resolution and they're happy 'cause they see the duck again.

…

Rosemary:　Words almost always, um, words speaks feelings. Because, um, like,

　　　　　　⌐if you say -

Researcher: └Give us an example of words speaking feelings.

Rosemary:　Um, um, [putting on an upset voice] ' "Oh I wish I did that," wailed the cat,' it's that the words actually do it, 'cause if you just said, 'wailed', you don't know, actually know what it said, and it also describes what they're feeling.

Researcher: So these words describe how they're feeling,

Rosemary:　Yes.　　　⌐Yes.

Researcher: as well as └saying they said something?

　　　　　　　　　　　　[Koalas–Bottlebrushes group, November 3]