Grammar for Writing: Linking grammatical choices with their effects in writing

Debra Myhill

All art is achieved through the exercise of a craft, and every craft has its rudiments that must be taught.

Fairfax and Moat (1998)
INTRODUCTION
The Reader and the Writer

To become writers children must read like writers. To read like writers they must see themselves as writers. Children will read stories, poems, and letters differently when they see these texts as things they themselves could produce; they will write vicariously with the authors. (Smith 1983)

The active reader reads more than the words and more than even the ideas: the active reader reads what the writer is doing. The active reader reconstructs the overall design, both the writer’s purpose and the techniques used to realize that purpose. (Bazerman 2010)
Key Message 1:

- Our approach to grammar integrates the teaching of reading and writing.
- It asks writers to look, through their reading, at what other writers do;
- It asks writers to be the readers of their own writing;
- It asks writers to think about their own readers:
- It shows how grammar choices are one way of managing the reader-writer relationship.
Improving Outcomes in Writing

- Create space to engage the imagination and the emotions – helping writers want to write before focusing on how to write;

- Create understanding of how to manage the writing process (self-regulation) and avoiding teaching that writing is a rigid ‘plan-draft-revise’ process;

- Provide explicit teaching of how to be successful, with a clear focus on how choices shape meanings;

- Generate high-quality (dialogic) talk which fosters thinking about the writing process and writing choices.
Teaching Writing Creatively

- To write well we all need to have something to say and a desire to say it;
- Before young writers can meaningfully attend to how they have written something, they need to have engaged with what they want to say – the ideas;
- Engaging young writers’ imaginations, emotions and personal beliefs is a really important part of teaching writing;
- Allowing young writers freedom to explore ideas, test things out, and to write to find out what they want to say is critical

- We often move far too quickly to pinning things down, to being explicit too soon, and making writing a very linear process – we need to create space for exploration, experimentation and re-drafting.
- This is built into the way we plan for teaching writing.
Key Message 2

- This project focuses on how grammar can help young writers to understand better how to shape and craft their writing.
- So there is a lot of grammar!

- But a healthy, productive writing community embeds this grammar naturally within the broader setting of playfulness and experimentation, creativity, attention to the writing process explicit teaching, and talk about writing.
- It’s not grammar all the time!
Explicit Teaching of Writing

WRITING: GRAMMAR AS CHOICE
An Illustration

And out of the mists came a **figure** in flowing green, walking across the water.

- Read this sentence aloud – where will you put the emphasis?
- What possibilities are there for re-ordering this sentence?
- How does this change the emphasis?

A **figure** in flowing green, walking across the water, came out of the mists.

- Read both these sentences aloud – how do they portray this moment in the plot differently? How might you film these two sentences?
- What do you think is the effect of moving the adverbial ‘**out of the mists**’ to different places in the sentence?
- What do you think is the effect of the putting the subject (**a figure**) after the verb (**came**) in the first sentence?
I found him in the garage on a Sunday afternoon. It was the day after we moved into Falconer Road. The winter was ending. Mum had said we’d be moving just in time for the spring. Nobody else was there. Just me. The others were inside the house with Doctor Death, worrying about the baby.

He was lying in there [...]. It was as if he’d been there forever.
I found him in the garage on a Sunday afternoon. It was the day after we moved into Falconer Road. The winter was ending. Mum had said we’d be moving just in time for the spring. Nobody else was there. Just me. The others were inside the house with Doctor Death, worrying about the baby.

He was lying in there in the darkness behind the tea chests, in the dust and dirt. It was as if he’d been there forever.

Why do you think David Almond chooses these prepositional phrases?
The Power of Choice

I found him in the garage on a Sunday afternoon. It was the day after we moved into Falconer Road. The winter was ending. Mum had said we’d be moving just in time for the spring. Nobody else was there. Just me. The others were inside the house with Doctor Death, worrying about the baby.

He was lying in there in a silken shawl with golden beading along the tasselled edges. It was as if he’d been there forever.

What difference do these choices of prepositional phrases make?
Key Message 3

- Teaching writing with attention to grammar is not about telling children how they should write; it is about showing them the repertoire of choices available to them, and discussing how those choices create different meanings.

NOT:
- You should use fronted adverbials to make your writing better.

BUT:
- What happens if you move that adverbial to the front of the sentence? How does it change how we read this sentence?
UNDERSTANDING THE PEDAGOGY
The Exeter Pedagogy

A creative grammar-writing relationship

- Explicit teaching of grammatical points relevant to the learning about writing
- Developing young writers’ knowledge about language in the texts they read and how language choices shape meaning
- Developing young writers’ understanding of the language choices they can make in their own writing

Repertoires of possibility (and metalinguistic understanding)
# LEAD Principles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRINCIPLE</th>
<th>EXPLANATION</th>
<th>RATIONALE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>L</strong>INKS</td>
<td>Make a <em>link</em> between the grammar being introduced and how it works in the writing being taught</td>
<td>To establish a purposeful learning reason for addressing grammar, and connect grammar with meaning and rhetorical effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E</strong>XAMPLES</td>
<td>Explain the grammar through showing <em>examples</em>, not lengthy explanations</td>
<td>To avoid writing lessons becoming mini-grammar lessons, and to allow access to the structure even if the grammar concept is not fully understood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong>UTHENTIC TEXTS</td>
<td>Use <em>authentic</em> texts as models to link writers to the broader community of writers</td>
<td>To integrate reading and writing and show how ‘real’ writers make language choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D</strong>ISCUSSION</td>
<td>Build in high-quality <em>discussion</em> about grammar and its effects</td>
<td>To promote deep metalinguistic learning about why a particular choice works, and to develop independence rather than compliance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LEAD Principles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRINCIPLE</th>
<th>EXPLANATION</th>
<th>CLASSROOM EXAMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>L</strong> INKS</td>
<td>Make a link between the grammar being introduced and how it works in the writing being taught</td>
<td>Analysing how prepositional phrases are used to establish the setting in <em>Charlotte’s Web</em> by E.B. White.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E</strong> XAMPLES</td>
<td>Explain the grammar through showing examples, not lengthy explanations</td>
<td>Displaying the relevant paragraph with all the prepositional phrases highlighted in colour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong> UTHENTIC TEXTS</td>
<td>Use authentic texts as models to link writers to the broader community of writers</td>
<td>Using <em>Charlotte’s Web</em> by E.B. White. as the model text and understanding White’s choices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D</strong> ISCUSSION</td>
<td>Build in high-quality discussion about grammar and its effects</td>
<td>Discussing the <em>effect</em> of the <em>prepositional phrases</em>; the visual detail they provide about the setting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Power of Choice

I found him in the garage on a Sunday afternoon. It was the day after we moved into Falconer Road. The winter was ending. Mum had said we’d be moving just in time for the spring. Nobody else was there. Just me. The others were inside the house with Doctor Death, worrying about the baby.

He was lying in there in a silken shawl with golden beading along the tasselled edges. It was as if he’d been there forever.

What do you think goes in the gap?

Discussion

Why do you think David Almond chooses these prepositional phrases?

Links between grammar and meaning

What difference do these choices of prepositional phrases make?
LEADING Young Writers

- Create a habit of *noticing*: attention to language
- Generate opportunities to *play* with language, including lexical and syntactical units
- Use discussion to *talk explicitly about language choices* and how they help us see, feel or think
- Use *grammatical terminology incidentally* and at a level relevant to the learners
PLANNING FOR GRAMMAR AS CHOICE
# The LEAD Planning Template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Link:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authentic Text:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LEAD Planning Template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRINCIPLE</th>
<th>IN THE CLASSROOM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **LINKS**      | Make a *link* between the grammar being introduced and how it works in the writing being taught  

How the use of *pronouns* can to create a sense of mystery/curiosity:  
*I found him in the garage on a Sunday afternoon*  

**EXAMPLES**  
Explain the grammar through showing *examples*, not lengthy explanations  

Give out cards with a variety of nouns and pronouns which could be substituted for *I* and *him* and invite pairs to play with different versions.  

**AUTHENTIC TEXTS**  
Use *authentic* texts as models to link writers to the broader community of writers  

*Skellig* by David Almond  

**DISCUSSION**  
Build in high-quality *discussion* about grammar and its effects  

Show the first sentence of the novel: discuss Almond’s choice compared with some of the alternative choices. Discuss how not naming any characters creates a sense of mystery – who are they? What will happen?
YOUR OWN EXAMPLE
Planning for Explicit Teaching

- Consider the **types of writing** 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.
- How can you make writing creative – motivating children to want to write?
- What do authentic texts in this type of writing suggest might be an appropriate grammar focus?
- How can you embed this into your teaching units to support learning?
- How can you build in attention to generating ideas, planning, drafting, revising, and proof-reading?
- Metalinguistic understanding (thinking about language)
- Metacognitive knowledge (thinking about the writing process)
Transforming Writing Classrooms

- Remember the big picture: it is not all about grammar.
- Changing practice takes time, and reflection.
- Grammatical knowledge and particularly usable grammatical knowledge that links grammar choice to meaning creation takes time to develop.
- Consider sustained team-working and professional development to embed this in your teaching.
Further Resources

Resources for Teachers:
http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/education/research/centres/centreforresear chinwriting/grammar-teacher-resources/

Cybergrammar:  www.cybergrammar.com

No Nonsense Grammar: Babcock LDP Literacy Team, Raintree (2016)
https://babcock-education.co.uk/ldp/grammarandpunctuation
https://babcock-education.co.uk/ldp/textsthatteach

Essential Primary Grammar
http://www.mheducation.co.uk/essential-primary-grammar
Our Research


