



Making Grammar Meaningful

Grammatical subject knowledge and pedagogical principles for grammar teaching

Ian Cushing & Bas Aarts set out the fundamental principles of subject knowledge and pedagogy that teachers need to know to approach grammar teaching effectively.

In a recent set of interviews with teachers about grammar as reported in *Literacy* (Cushing 2018), the following comments emerged:

Grammar is like a virus that has spread from KS2 to KS3 and 4

It's infected English. It's like the subject is diseased with grammar all of a sudden

It's painful. English teaching needs curing of grammar

There are a few things at work here which we'd like to unpick. Firstly, such negative reactions to grammar and grammar teaching aren't all that uncommon. We understand these views – grammar features prominently on the current National Curriculum, and yet the government has offered no support to teachers in developing their subject knowledge. For many teachers, they simply haven't had adequate training in grammar and so it comes as no surprise that many feel under-confident when it comes to teaching it. The

KS1 and KS2 Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling (GPS) tests have understandably caused concern amongst teachers, given that they assess decontextualized grammar knowledge with zero reference to meaning.

However, we'd like to suggest that with a little bit of grammatical subject knowledge, and some ideas for teaching grammar in what we'll call 'meaningful' ways, we argue that teachers can shift their thinking away from the 'grammar is a virus' or 'grammar is a cockroach' metaphor as in the Twitter post above, and towards a view where grammar is seen as an enabling tool for text analysis.

Why teach grammar?

Well, why teach anything? Why teach about history, simultaneous equations, or photosynthesis? The question of what constitutes 'worthwhile knowledge' is a big one, which we simply can't address here. But we do argue that if you teach grammar, then you're teaching something that is worthwhile. First of all, knowing

something about how language works is a useful thing in its own right because the study of language is a ‘window to the mind’: it helps us to understand who we are, how we ‘tick’, and how we engage with others. If that leads to an improvement in literacy rates, even better. Knowing something about how language works helps us to interrogate and unpick texts, from everyday language such as advertisements and emails, to more ideologically laden texts such as political discourse. Knowing something about language enables your students to be more critically astute and to notice the linguistic landscapes of the world around them. Whilst the government’s Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling test in Year 6 at KS2 is in many ways problematic and reflective of a rather reductive understanding of ‘grammar’, we still maintain that grammar is something worth knowing about.

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To teach grammar well then, you need at least two things: (1) the *what*, i.e. grammatical subject knowledge, and (2) the *how*, i.e. some pedagogical principles for grammar teaching. In the sections that follow, we’ll look at each of these in turn.

Subject knowledge

Grammatical form and grammatical function

There is one aspect of grammar that isn’t made clear in the National Curriculum, or indeed, in many grammar textbooks, and this is the difference – and relationship – between **grammatical form** and **grammatical function**. A good understanding of these notions is fundamental to getting a grasp on how grammar works. Put simply, form and function are two ‘levels’ of grammatical analysis, each which come with their own set of terms. The level of grammatical form is concerned with the category labels that we can assign to linguistic units, whereas the level of grammatical function is concerned with the role that those linguistic units play in a sentence. Form and function each have their own set of metalinguistic terms, and it’s important to keep these separate:

Grammatical form labels refer to **word classes** (noun, adjective, determiner, verb, adverb, adjective, conjunction, preposition), **phrases** (noun phrase, adverb phrase, adjective phrase, preposition phrase) and **clauses** (main clause, relative clause, subordinate clause).

Grammatical function refers to notions such as subject, object, adverbial, complement and modifier.

Any stretch of language can be analysed on both these levels. For example, the sentence *the children devoured those new books* can be broken down as follows:

FORM	main clause						
	noun phrase				noun phrase		
	determiner	noun	verb	determiner	adjective	noun	
	<i>the</i>	<i>children</i>	<i>devoured</i>	<i>those</i>	<i>new</i>	<i>books</i>	
FUNCTION	subject				object		

The whole sentence is a main clause (it only has one verb, *devoured*), with a noun phrase (*the children*) functioning as the subject (the entity that is performing the action of the verb), and another noun phrase (*those new books*) functioning as the object.

One of the important things to note about this approach is the fact that linguistic units carry two terminological labels at the same time. Two levels of analysis (form and function) yield two separate sets of terms. So *the children* is a noun phrase (form) and a subject (function) at the same time. But crucially, the same kind of unit can be given a different function label. Our sentence above illustrates this: here we have a noun phrase functioning as subject, as well as a noun phrase functioning as object. It’s also important for an understanding how grammar works to look at the company that words keep in a sentence. For example, *those* can be a determiner if it introduces a noun (as in *those new books*), but a pronoun if it takes place of a noun (e.g. *I want those*).

The tables below indicate some of the different categories that can perform the functions of subject, object and adverbial:

FUNCTION	FORM		
subject	noun	noun phrase	pronoun
(the ‘do-er’ or ‘be-er’ of the verb)	<u>Teachers</u> are wonderful people.	<u>All teachers</u> deserve a pay rise.	<u>She</u> is a fantastic teacher.

FUNCTION	FORM		
object	noun	noun phrase	pronoun
(the thing affected by the verb)	I really hate <u>cricket</u> .	Pass me <u>the ketchup</u> .	I love <u>that</u> .

FUNCTION	FORM				
adverbial	adverb	adverb phrase	preposition phrase	subordinate clause	noun phrase
(when, where, how or why something happened)	We ate the soup <u>slowly</u> .	<u>Very quietly</u> , they sipped their cold soup.	<u>In the afternoon</u> , we’ll go and eat soup.	We cooked some hot soup <u>because it was freezing</u> .	We froze the soup <u>the next day</u> .

Grammar teaching

We take the view that successful grammar teaching is characterised by a contextualised approach. Put simply, this means that we believe that students should look at the grammar of ‘real’ texts (literary and non-literary discourse) and explore how grammatical choices serve to construct and shape meaning. We can show how this is done by applying some grammatical knowledge to a reading of an extract from *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. At this point in the novel, the narrator (Jonathan Harker) has an increasing sense that he is being held captive in Count Dracula’s castle, where he recently arrived on a business trip.

What I saw was the Count’s head coming out from the window. I did not see the face, but I knew the man by the neck and the movement of his back and arms. In any case I could not mistake the hands which I had had some many opportunities of studying. I was at first interested and

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somewhat amused, for it is wonderful how small a matter will interest and amuse a man when he is a prisoner. But my very feelings changed to repulsion and terror when I saw the whole man slowly emerge from the window and begin to crawl down the castle wall over the dreadful abyss, face down with his cloak spreading out around him like great wings. At first I could not believe my eyes. I thought it was some trick of the moonlight, some weird effect of shadow, but I kept looking, and it could be no delusion. I saw the fingers and toes grasp the corners of the stones, worn clear of the mortar by the stress of years, and by thus using every projection and inequality move downwards with considerable speed, just as a lizard moves along a wall.

Before looking in detail at the grammar, we advocate that students are given plenty of time and space to respond to the text on their own terms. This might involve prompt or trigger questions such as ‘what does the text make you think, see and feel?’ or ‘in what ways are the characters represented?’. In other words: don’t start by asking students to ‘hunt’ for grammatical features, but by eliciting reader responses which can then be accounted for by doing some close textual analysis.

The first thing to note might be the sense of unease, disbelief and uncertainty that the text evokes. The writing is filtered through a first-person point of view (note the first-person pronoun *I*, which functions as the subject a total of ten times, usually followed by a verb of cognition or perception such as *saw*, *knew*, and *thought*), which can project a subjective sense of unreliability. Do we really trust the things that the *I* tells us is happening? The uncertainty is developed further through the use of modal verbs such as *could not mistake*, *will interest*, *could not believe*. Note also the use of negation here, in the use of *not*. Negation has a conceptual effect whereby in order to not think about something, you have to think about it first – it’s as if Harker doesn’t want to believe what he is seeing, but can’t help himself from thinking it. Dracula emerges slowly from the window, and we see that Stoker uses noun phrases that describe specific body parts, rather than the whole body. So, we read about *the Count’s head*, *the face*, *the hands* and *the neck* gradually appearing, before *the whole man* is revealed, which evokes abstract feelings of *repulsion* and *terror* in both the reader’s and the narrator’s mind. And Dracula’s body parts don’t move in human ways – the animal metaphor (*begin to crawl*; *like great wings*; *just as a lizard moves along a wall*) serves to heighten the idea that what Harker is seeing is not human. The castle itself is vividly described using preposition phrases (*from the window*; *down the castle wall over the dreadful abyss*), building a rich fictional world that feels real.

A meaningful pedagogy

There are lots of other grammatical patterns and features we could discuss here. But rather than labour the point, we’ll end by outlining what we believe to be a meaningful and worthwhile grammar pedagogy.

- Good grammar teaching requires both grammatical subject knowledge and grammatical pedagogical knowledge.
- Try not to rely on reductive, ‘proxy’ definitions for grammatical categories (e.g. *a verb is a doing word*; *an adverb ends in -ly*), and instead use rigorous and systematic grammatical information.
- Let students work out grammatical patterns and their significance for themselves, rather than

looking for pre-determined features decided for them by teachers. In other words – don’t start by asking students to find certain grammatical features – let them do it for themselves.

- Grammatical terminology is important because it allows students to be more efficient, systematic and accurate when it comes to describing how language works. But the use of grammatical terminology is limited if all students are doing with that knowledge is spotting and labelling linguistic features.

Further support and resources

In this final section, we list some further sources of support that we hope you will find useful.

Web-resources

Englicious: a resource website for teaching all aspects of the English language, with lesson plans, activities, assessments, videos and a grammar glossary. Find it at www.english.org.

Grammar Bites: a regular *Times Educational Supplement* column covering grammatical subject knowledge, teaching ideas and grammar issues. Written by Ian Cushing and Mark Brenchley. Find the archive at <https://www.tes.com/author/mark-brenchley-ian-cushing>.

Grammariansm: a blog about English grammar, for teachers. Written by Bas Aarts. Find it at <https://grammariansm.wordpress.com/>.

Teaching resources from the University of Exeter’s Grammar as Choice project, which investigated the impact of contextualised grammar teaching on writing: <http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/education/research/centres/centreforresearchinwriting/grammar-teacher-resources/samplelessonplansandschemes/>

Books and further reading

Aarts, B., Cushing, I. & Hudson, D. (2018). *How to Teach Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Clayton, D. & Giovanelli, M. (eds) (2016). *Knowing About Language: Linguistics and the Secondary School Classroom*. London: Routledge.

Cushing, I. (2018). Grammar policy and pedagogy from primary to secondary school. *Literacy*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12170>

Fenn, R. & McGlynn, A. (2018). *Teaching Grammar Through Literature*. London: Routledge.

Giovanelli, M. (2014). *Teaching Grammar, Structure and Meaning*. London: Routledge.

Courses

We run two courses on grammar at UCL (also available as INSET half/full-days in your school):

English Grammar for Teachers is a subject knowledge course, covering the fundamentals of English grammar as laid out in the National Curriculum.

Teaching English Grammar in Context is a course exploring pedagogical principles and methods for integrating grammar into your teaching.

The *English and Media Centre* in north London run various courses for grammar and language teaching.

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