

CONFERENCE AND WORKSHOP REPORTS

GRAMMAR? MAKING SENSE?

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Introduction

What is it about the word, ‘grammar’? It is a word that strikes panic into the hearts and minds of teachers widely regarded as expert in their knowledge about language. In fact, ‘panic’ was the first word used by the recent workshop for ACT TESOL teachers held at Reid CIT on Saturday October 29. Although most TESOL teachers recognize the importance of a knowledge about language, many express anxiety about the adequacy of their knowledge, particularly their ability to answer hard questions put to them by second language learners whose knowledge of grammar often exceeds their communicative competence. TESOL teachers are not alone in their uneasiness about grammar. In 2001, Jenny Hammond and I completed a study of the views of classroom English teachers about matters such as literacy and grammar. Of the 126 teachers we surveyed across all educational systems, over 90% felt it was important to teach knowledge about language. In fact, 86% expressed a view that functional grammar was important. However, very few of this large number (only 12%) felt that they knew enough about grammar to do it justice in classroom teaching (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 2001)¹.

The same mixture of ‘panic’ and ‘buzz’ marked the early discussions about grammar on the Saturday workshop. In about equal measure, primary and adult TESOL teachers acknowledged the difficulty and the importance of effective grammar teaching. Some participants expressed insecurity about their own knowledge of grammatical metalanguage; others referred with chagrin to the fact that their adult students often knew more about grammar than them and asked ‘hard questions’. Particularly galling are students’ questions which highlight the lack of logic in many areas of English. Other participants referred to the ‘buzz’ when some aspect of English grammar falls into place, when ‘you get it’ and things ‘begin to make sense’. A knowledge of grammar provides second language learners with structure, patterns and can be a positive experience for second language learners. Of course, there can be a ‘dissonance between grammatical competence and communicative competence. Knowing that a structure is grammatically correct and knowing how to use it appropriately in a given context are different orders of knowing. In fact, the early discussions in the workshop raised some of the ‘big questions’ of grammar in TESOL. These include the following (with thanks to Misty Adoniou for her recording of them):

How do we move from ‘knowing about’ grammar to teaching grammar?

How do we make our teaching of grammar interesting and relevant for learners?

How do we integrate grammatical competence and communicative competence?

How do we deal constructively with the irregularities in English grammar – problems of the definite article, prepositions, phrasal verbs, complex tenses?

¹ Hammond, J. & Macken-Horarik, M. (2001) “Teachers’ voices, teachers’ practices: insider perspectives on literacy education”, *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp.112-132.

How can we actually improve students' writing through grammar?

The truth is that English is a very difficult language to learn. Irregularities in structure abound and students often experience its grammar as unpredictable, complex and 'messy'. How do we teach grammar or more broadly, knowledge about language (KAL) so that we can help our students to see and make use of the regularities and patterns underlying English? How do we work with the tension between the 'mess' and the 'patterns' in English grammar?

Of course, the first step is to see the patterns at work in English at different levels. This took us into the next phase of the workshop: the steps we take in making sense of grammar.

1 Three steps in the study of grammar

David Crystal maintains that there are **two steps** we need to take in the study of grammar²:

- (i) to **identify units** in the stream of speech (or writing or signing) – units such as 'word' or 'sentence';
- (ii) to **analyze the patterns** into which these units fall and the **relationships of meaning** that these patterns convey – patterns such as subject and predicate and what this pattern allows us to do.

However, it seems to me that we have an additional step available to us if we adopt a functional approach to grammar:

- (iii) to **explain the part these patterns play** in human meaning making – relating language choices to the contexts and practices in which they are embedded

In my view, as a functional linguist, traditional grammar has much to offer in step 1 of Crystal's procedure. It develops what Halliday calls 'the constituency principle', an awareness of the elements or constituents of a sentence, a clause and a group. Knowledge of the formal structure of nouns and noun groups (or phrases) is a big help when it comes to identifying the people, places and things referred to in a text. Knowledge of verbs and verb groups gives us a sense of 'where the action is' in a sentence. The same goes for all parts of speech and parts of the sentence. Parsing helps us to identify the units of structure in a stretch of language and a rudimentary idea of the work done by these units (e.g. 'The subject of the sentence is what the sentence is about', 'A pronoun stands in for a noun' or 'An adverb adds meaning to a verb', and so on.)

However, beyond a basic awareness of the function of units such as subject and predicate, traditional grammar does not offer much when it comes to step 2. Traditional grammar evolved over time to deal with fairly minimal units of analysis such as the sentence and has had nothing to teach us about larger units such as the text or the relationship between text and social context. TESOL teachers have had to learn about these patterns from functional or discourse grammars such as that developed by Halliday and his colleagues.

² Crystal, D. 1987: *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: p. 88.

When it comes to step 3 of the stages of analysis – explaining the part that language patterns play in human semiosis – we are only at the beginning of our endeavours. Human semiosis is both complex and changing and our tools of analysis are very primitive. Halliday has suggested that our grammatical tools are the equivalent of a bludgeon when compared to the rapier-like flexibility of actual language use. Propositional ‘knowledge about’ language comes nowhere near the procedural ‘know how’ embodied in our use of language. This goes to the heart of the question raised by some workshop participants on Saturday: How do we integrate grammatical competence and communicative competence?

Although there are many grammars that have developed to take account of this flexibility and complexity (Crystal lists at least 6 major types of grammar), there are two grammars which have impacted most on language and literacy teaching in Australian schools: *traditional* and *functional grammar*. Let’s look briefly at some of the differences between these two grammars – their strengths and limitations. In the following table, I outline some important differences between traditional and functional grammar. The table presents the differences as if they were absolute. Actually, it is a caricature. As some people in the Saturday workshop suggested, there are some important overlaps between the two, shared territory, strengths and weaknesses in both grammars.

	Traditional grammar	Functional grammar
Starting Point	Standard English & rules of correct usage (e.g. never use the double negative).	Language varieties & resources for making meaning (e.g. what effect the double negative has in creating emphasis).
Focus of study	Focus on form (e.g. what makes something a noun or a verb).	Focus on function (e.g. what is the effect of turning something into a noun? What kinds of noun are preferred in different genres?)
Levels of language	Sentence & below (sentence – clause – word)	Text in context (then sentence and below)
Mode focus	Written language.	Spoken and written language (+multimodality).
Benefits	Simpler and easier to learn; more commonly used in TESOL education.	Enables us to see & understand more about language in context; better for teaching.
Problems	Doesn’t help us understand why texts are the way they are.	Is technically heavy and harder to learn initially (builds in ‘the mess’).

The discussion of differences between each grammar was interesting. A knowledge of traditional grammar terminology is definitely an advantage in teaching English to second and foreign language learners. The functional grammar terminology is not well known in foreign language teaching contexts. Do we combine the terminology? What are the possibilities for moving between the two?

2 Some problem texts

In the first practical activity of the workshop, we looked at four texts produced by ESL students.

Text 1: The Echidna text

Text 2: Sydney's Climate

Text 3: The kookaburra text

Text 4: The best pet

The four texts were problematic in some way and each group looked closely at one of them, identifying areas of weakness to work on with students if they were to produce successful report texts.

We reproduce texts 2, 3 and 4 below, along with comments made by participants about each one. Text 1 is quite long and we did not get time to talk about this one in any detail.

Text 2: Sydney's Climate

Sydney is a beautiful place to visit it has one thing I don't really like that is the weather. Its climate is always different. One day it could be raining and the next day it would be so hot you would have to have a cold shower. I like Sydney's weather when it is nice and sunny I like Summer that is my favourite time of the year, because it is mostly sunny. Although this year in Sydney it wasn't as sunny as I thought it would be. Because half of Summer it was either raining or was very windy and very cold.

Year 9 Geography student

The participants who analyzed this text noted its lack of report structure and its lack of technical information about the temperature of Sydney. It is clear that this Geography student does not have access to the specialized vocabulary necessary to write a factual report and relies on personal experience of the vagaries of weather to construct the text. The participants noted some minor problems with punctuation and said that it sounded very like spoken language. It should be noted that the teacher who assessed this text at the time wrote 'You needed to write a factual text about Sydney's climate, not an English essay'. Although the student can write, s/he is not able to write a text appropriate for this context – an information report about Sydney's climate for Geography.

Text 3: The Kookaburra text

I like kookaburra because they have long wings and a long tail and a long beak. I like when it goes kkkkkaaaa and when they fly around. I like there colour.

This text was produced by Zoran prior to the teacher's introduction of the class to the information report. The participants noted its lack structure and its lack of substantial knowledge of the field (Australian birds). There is a sweetness about its imitation of the sound of a kookaburra but the student clearly needs access to models and to opportunities to research his topic area. Other comments focussed on his problems with reference (plural and singular reference) and his overuse of personal pronoun. Some felt he needed an introduction to topic sentences to do with kookaburras rather than the personal voice of the writer.

Text 4: Fish Report

I think the best pet is fish. Fish is easy to buy. You just need a fish tank and feed them with fish food. You can buy it at the local supermarket.

Fish is a nice pet because it won't bite and it is sometimes small. Some fish can grow to more than 30cm long.

Some fish are expensive but some don't and they are beautiful too. You'll be happy to have a fish as a pet.

Yr 6 student (18 months in Australia)

Participants noted the lack of report structure, lack of coherence and connectives between ideas here – the way discrete bits of information are put down without development. The student needs to understand that the same word, 'fish', can be singular and plural (English is so confusing in its irregularities!) Moving from first to second person is problematic in this text.

3 What a functional model of language offers

What does a functional grammar have to offer in work with students on factual texts? In the next part of the workshop, we moved on to consider the use of categories such as genre, register and lower level choices in the study of the language of information reporting. The point of the exercise was to show how functional grammar works at different levels of attention, moving from text in context (including the social purpose of a given text type) to paragraph level features and then into sentence-level and down. We work on different units of analysis at different levels and they create distinctive patterns of meaning. We applied the model of text in context to a short information report called *The Numbat*, taken from an Encyclopedia and used by Martin and colleagues in their book, *Working with Functional Grammar*³

The Numbat

The numbat is an unmistakable slender marsupial with a pointed muzzle and short erect ears. The body is reddish brown but the rump is much darker and has about six white bars across it. The eye has a black stripe through it and the long bushy tail is yellowish. The toes are strongly clawed and very effective in digging out termites. The tongue can be extremely long, as in all mammalian ant or termite eaters. Unlike most marsupials, the numbat is active during the day. It shelters in hollow logs. It was once relatively common but now lives only in a small area of S.W. South Australia.

The functional model distributes attention across these levels and enables us to work with our students on patterns of choice related to each level. The following table displays the language features we notice at each level and the kinds of work we can do with our students on these features. It is useful to analyze a model text with students and to get them to identify the features in other texts like it.

³ Martin, J. R. Matthiessen, C. & Painter, C. (1997) *Working with Functional Grammar*, Sydney, Arnold.

The Numbat at different levels

	Features we notice	Kinds of work we do
Social Purpose of text	To systematically organize and record factual information by classifying and describing a whole class of things.	Talk about the social purpose of this kind of text (information report) and why they are useful for grouping information about things in the world.
Text -level features	Generic structure of report Stages in sequence such as: General Classification ^ Description of attributes and typical behaviours. Register features: building a scientific field of knowledge; adopting an expert’s tenor ; using factual language of the written mode .	Talk about the different stages of the report and the way they work e.g. why reports start with a general classification. Talk about the world created by the text (animals and their place in a taxonomy); why experts classify things this way; the kinds of language they use in their reports.
Para level	Description that taxonomize (e.g. a slender marsupial), grading of attributes (e.g. a reddish brown body), number (e.g. 6 white bars across it).	Talk about the need for precise details in the scientific description of animals – find examples of classification, grading, number, location in this and other reports like it.
Sentence-level features	Declarative sentences mostly simple (e.g. ‘it shelters in hollow logs’) or compound sentences (e.g. ‘the body is reddish brown but the rump is much darker’).	Focus on types of sentences used in reports – simple and compound sentences most often. Talk about why these might be common in information reports.
Word-level features.	Semi-technical and technical vocabulary (e.g. ‘marsupials’, ‘mammalian ant or termite eaters’).	• Focus on words that classify the numbat as a marsupial and words that distinguish it from other marsupial mammals.



There are a number of different workshop activities we can do with our students if we want them not simply to understand but to use the language of the information report. One activity suggested was to build up noun groups related to the phenomenon being studied (e.g. Australian mammals) in talk and in writing, making sure that it includes factual information about the thing. These activities can be fun for students. We can start with a simple noun such as 'mammal' and build up the factual description of this creature before and after the noun (e.g. 'the kangaroo is a marsupial **mammal** common to grasslands across Australia'). Once students have started to research the phenomenon they are investigating, they can be asked to identify some of the noun groups and to show how they are building them up to include classifying adjectives or nouns before the thing and qualifying material after the thing. Intensive work on the language of different genres can pay dividends. Note improvement in Zoran's factual writing after an 8 week unit on reports about sea mammals.

ZORAN

KOOKABURRA BY ZORAN AGED 10 22-8-88

I like kookaburra because they have long wings and a long tail and a long beak. I like when it goes kkkkkaaaa and when they fly around. I like there colour.



WHALES

Whales are sea mammals. They come from a cetacea family.

The Baleen Whales are about 32 metres and they weigh 150 tonnes. Their colours are Grey, Black, Blue and white. The shape of their body is streamlined. Whales are large warm blooded animals which live in water. They have blow holes which they breath through. The blue whale is 100 feet long and weighs 120 tonnes. They have a fatty layer which is called Blubber it keeps them warm.

They eat krill and squid. Their blowhole is for breathing. They come to the surface to let out the old breath and let some new breath come in. The baby is born alive. It's tail comes first so it can swim to the

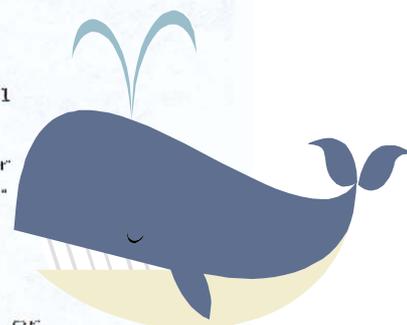
surface to breath. The mother takes care of them and she gives them milk. When it is winter they move up to the equator and when it is summer they move to the North Pole. They don't sleep because they could drown

cause they aren't breathing when they are asleep. Small

whales can only stay under water for six minutes but the big whales such as the Blue Whale can breath under water for an hour or more. Whales live in salty waters. Sometimes they are washed up onto a beach, or left stranded when the tide goes.

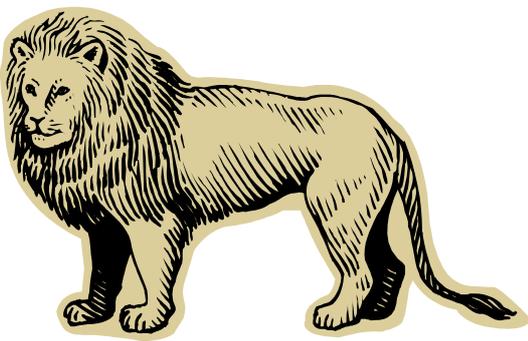
Somoeople think they breach because they are playing or they have barnicals. Some whales are trained to do tricks at zoo. The whales heart beats every one minute. People don't know why whales beach themselves.

They are friendly creatures.



4. Comparing and contrasting texts

In the final section of the workshop, we compared the choices made in the information report to those made in a different text type – a short narrative retold by Patricia Scott. The point of this activity was to show how the same units of language – sentences, clauses, groups, etc do very different kinds of work in different texts. A functional grammar enables us to identify the meaning differences in different texts and gives us a metalanguage for talking about these with students. This takes us beyond a focus on units of language and into consideration of the patterns of meaning achieved and the way they vary according to the social context (genre and register) in which they occur. The workshop participants identified some of the different features (e.g. dialogue, evocative language and a complication) in the narrative and then we looked at the language features, using the same table as before.



The Lion and the Mouse retold by Patricia Scott

One day a lion was resting when a little mouse, who lived nearby, ran playfully over his back and down over his head to the ground.

The lion stirred and, reaching out, caught the mouse beneath his paw.
“Mouse,” he said, “you have disturbed my sleep. I think I will eat you.”

“Oh, pardon, my Lord,” said the mouse. “Please do not eat me. Perhaps, if you forgive me, someday I may be able to do something to help you.”

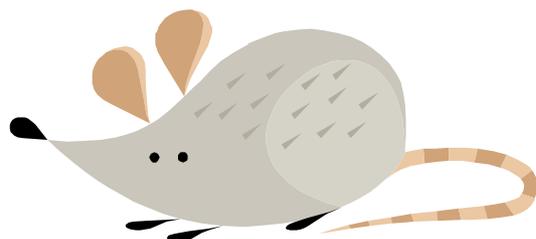
The lion laughed. “You, a little mouse, help me, the king of the beasts?” He laughed again, but he lifted his paw, allowing the mouse to go free. With a hasty “thank you”, the mouse ran off before the lion could change his mind.

Over the next few days, the lion thought of the mouse often, but she kept well away from him. Sometimes he would laugh again at the thought of a little mouse helping the king of the beasts.

But even kings can get into trouble. One day the lion became caught in a net set by hunters. As he struggled to free himself, the net tightened and held him fast.

As luck would have it, the mouse came running that way in search of food. Seeing the lion caught in the net, she called all her friends.

They came and gnawed at the strands of rope. Before long, they had broken the net and the lion was free. Bowing, the lion thanked the mouse. “You were right,” he said. “Even the small and weak can help the strong and mighty.”



The Lion and the Mouse at different levels

	Features we notice	Kinds of work we do
Social Purpose of text	To entertain and teach moral lessons through narrative experience.	Talk about the social purpose of this kind of story (fable) and why they are popular.
Text -level features	Generic structure of fable: Orientation ^ Complication Evaluation ^ Resolution ^ Coda (moral). Register features: building an imaginary field of experience; adopting a narrator’s tenor ; using literary language of written mode .	Talk about the different stages of the narrative and the way they work – e.g. in orientation, in initial conflict, etc. Talk about the kind of world created by the text (animals that can talk); the moral lesson taught by the narrator; the kinds of language used in the text.
Para level (one stage)	Dialogue between mouse and lion	Talk about how we know the lion makes the mouse nervous. Focus on language choices here in the different speech of the two characters.
Sentence-level features	Sentences focussed on reactions of animal characters to one another (often complex sentences)	Focus on types of sentence used by each character and what this tells us about their differences- e.g. ‘Pardon my Lord’. ‘You, a little mouse, help me?’
Word-level features.	• Stylistic vocabulary (e.g. evocative action words eg ‘stirred’ or expressions of politeness by mouse – e.g. Pardon, perhaps, if, may etc).	• Focus on words that show how polite the mouse is; talk about how a confident mouse might talk.

The workshop will hopefully lead to an ongoing conversation between educational linguists like myself and TESOL educators, responsible for inducting early phase learners into the rigours and mysteries of English.