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Teaching functional grammar in primary school

Introduction

Many Australian teachers have come to the understanding that there is a need to teach different genres according to the purpose of the writing. Six key genres have been established as being necessary for study in schools: narrative and recount, procedure and explanation, argument and discussion. When the concept of genre teaching was first introduced, teachers began by teaching the *structures* of each of these genres. Gradually the understanding grew that successful writing in a specific genre involved teaching the specific *language features* and *grammar* of the genre as well.

The systemic functional grammar developed by Michael Halliday (1994) was the logical choice because a grammar was needed that did not just label the parts of a sentence, but actually gave the students the tools required to achieve the purposes of the text to be written.

Teachers attended courses about this new grammar. We started to understand how it worked in theory. We began to use it to inform and assess our students writing, but it took us longer to work out successful ways of teaching it to our students.

There are now many teachers in Australia who have introduced their students to the meta-language of functional grammar. The benefits of learning this language have become apparent in the higher levels of writing produced, as well as the greater sophistication with which students can discuss the language used by others as well as themselves.

This article aims to show how functional grammar can be incorporated into the teaching of a unit of work from the curriculum area of society and the environment. It presents a model for the planning and teaching of functional grammar to primary school students and demonstrates some of the practical ideas that have been used with students.

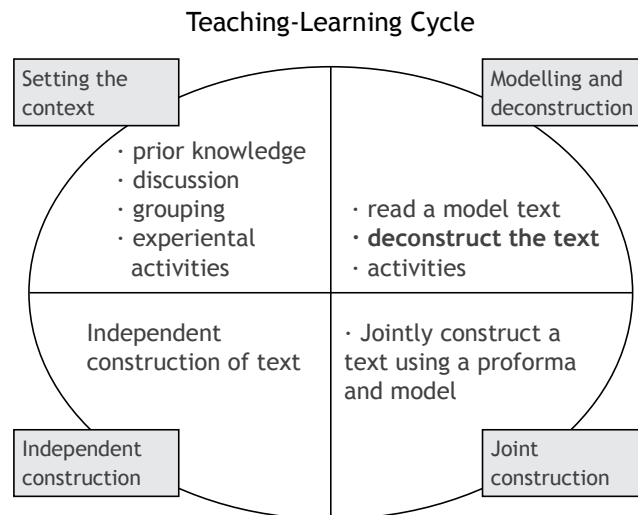


Figure 1. The teaching-learning cycle. Adapted from Teaching ESL students in mainstream classes, language and learning across the curriculum. (Government of South Australia, Department of Education and Children's Services 2007)

Figure 1 shows a model of teaching called the teaching-learning cycle. Teachers are very familiar with the first phase of setting the context, or introducing students to a topic of study. It is the second phase of modelling and deconstruction that is often passed over very quickly or is completely omitted. This is however the vital stage where functional grammar becomes the focus of the lessons and where students can learn the meta-language (names for grammatical concepts) which enables them to talk about language and texts.

Experience suggests that the modelling and deconstruction of a text is essential before students are asked to write their own text in a particular genre. Providing a model and a scaffold are essential in helping them to become successful writers. Imagine a sports coach who talked about the sport and then sent the players into a game without having them first watch many games and without teaching them the skills required to be successful. That coach would quickly be out of the job. And yet teachers are often guilty of doing just this with their students when they ask them to write a text without first showing them what is required and how to do it.

In the joint construction stage, the teacher guides the students in the construction of a new text, using the grammar skills which have been a focus of the deconstruction. Once students have participated in the joint

construction of a text, they are ready to write their own text. This includes drafting, revising, editing and assessing their work.

The teaching-learning cycle is an effective tool in scaffolding the teaching of a unit of work. This scaffolding means that teachers extend the knowledge and skills of their students through a carefully planned sequence of activities. In these activities the learners are pushed beyond their current abilities and levels of understanding. New learning will take place if there is both high challenge and high support. Students are exposed to explicit teaching about language as well as subject matter. Teacher support is gradually withdrawn as the learners become increasingly skilled at completing the task alone.

Using the teaching-learning cycle

When we begin to plan a unit of work, we generally work backwards and forwards through the teaching-learning cycle. First a topic from a particular curriculum area is selected. A decision is then made about which genre will be taught in order for students to be able to write about the topic most effectively.

In the example described below, children were learning about sea creatures and the decision was made to teach the information report genre. If the topic had been food, the genre being taught might have been procedure, in order to write recipes, or it might have been argument in order to argue about why we should eat healthy food. Once this decision has been made, the teaching-learning cycle can begin to take shape.

The teaching-learning cycle in practice

The concept of backward planning is important at this stage. Before starting the unit of work, the teacher needs to have planned exactly what will be required of the students when they come to the independent construction stage of the cycle. Once the end point has been established, decisions can be made about the language skills that the students will need to achieve this requirement successfully. The modelling and deconstruction phases are then planned accordingly. Knowledge about the structure, purpose and language features of each genre is the basis for this planning.

What follows is an outline of the program and activities used in a Year 2/3 class (eight and nine year olds) which was learning about sea creatures as part of a study of society and the environment. The planned learning intention for the unit of work was that students would write an information report about a sea creature and show it as a powerpoint

presentation to other students. This unit of work took several weeks to complete. It was taught jointly by the class teacher and the ESL teacher.

Setting the context

As an introduction to the topic, children were asked to explore several websites to identify some interesting facts about a variety of different sea creatures. They were also directed to books in the library and asked to talk to their parents about what they knew about sea creatures. They watched the movie called Finding Nemo and were asked to identify the different sea creatures in the movie and some facts learned about these creatures.

Children shared their findings. The children also read a story about a shark attack. The story later became a reference point when we compared some of the language features of this text to that of the information report that was to be our focus.

	<i>1. The White Shark</i>	<i>2. Shark Attack!</i>
Cultural attitudes	Scientist: respect and biological interest	Author describing a shark attack
Genre and purpose	Provide biological information	Entertainment and warning about the possibility of shark attacks
Subject matter	The white shark	The white shark
Roles and relationships	Specialised audience, others interested in the field	The general public, in particular beach users and surfers
Mode and medium	Written, journal, text book etc.	Written, book of short stories, school text book
Language choices	Technical, objective, impersonal	Everyday, emotive, personal

Figure 2. Text Comparison

Modelling and deconstructing the text

In figure 3 below, the left column shows the generic model used in planning the teaching of grammar within any genre. The right column shows the

language features of an information report that were explicitly taught to the students in order to assist them in writing their own information reports. Each genre lends itself more readily to the teaching of particular grammar features. For example, if I had been teaching about the writing of a narrative, I would have made speaking and thinking processes a focus as these are useful in developing the characters of a story. In information reports however, relating processes are more relevant because the purpose of the text is to define and describe the subject of the report.

	A functional model of language	Features of an information report
Genre	The purpose and structure of the text	Purpose: to provide factual information Structure: classification and sub-headings to organise text
Field	The content/information of the text – ‘What?’	Noun groups with descriptors, technical vocabulary, nominalisation, relating processes
Tenor	The language expressing the relationship – ‘Who?’	Objective, factual language
Mode	How the text is communicated eg. written, spoken, visual – ‘How?’	Present tense, lexical cohesion

Figure 3. Language features of an information report

In each of the grammar lessons, a model information report text titled ‘Sharks’ was used as the basis for the learning activities. Students were not only learning about this particular creature, but were also learning how to produce appropriately a text about the sea creature of their choice. The repeated reading of the model text was particularly useful for ESL students who benefited from repetition of the language that described the grammar as well as the content.

A class discussion took place about what kind of writing helps us to learn new information: photos, diagrams, headings, dot points etcetera. We talked about who writes these texts, why they are written and where they are found.

The model text of an information report about sharks was introduced (this could have come from a text book, but I find that it is often better to write my own model, as the text books do not always illustrate the specific features that I intend to teach). The model was presented in a powerpoint format, to show what the students were expected to produce. A printed copy of the information report was available in the classroom for easy reference.



Printed model text

Some examples of functional grammar lessons

Genre

The focus of the first lesson in the modelling and deconstruction phase of the teaching-learning cycle was to explicitly teach the purpose and structure of an information report, including the use of subheadings to organise the information.

Information Report

Purpose:

- to provide factual information

Structure:

- introductory classification and general statement
- paragraphs under sub-headings

Children were asked to work in pairs to place information taken from the model text under the appropriate subheadings from the text. They were then asked to begin some research into other sea creatures by using these subheadings on the following matrix to organise their notes.

Sea Creature	<i>Sea dragon</i>	<i>Octopus</i>
Classification		
Appearance		
Diet		
Movement		
Habitat		
Other information		

Figure 4. Sea Creature Matrix

Field

Once students were familiar with the purpose and structure of the information report, a series of lessons followed, each of which introduced an aspect of the functional grammar of field. The intention was to give the children understandings that would assist them both in reading about the sea creatures they were researching, as well as writing their own information reports. The model text was the constant reference point used to illustrate each of the grammar points taught.

In one lesson, students were taught that questions could be replaced by nominalisations to create headings for each section of their report. They were given a sheet with nominalised headings and asked to put jumbled sentences from the model text under the correct headings. Students worked in pairs to do the task. This encouraged them to talk about the topic and use the nominalisations which had been introduced.

Nominalisation

Changing processes, adjectives or conjunctions into nouns:

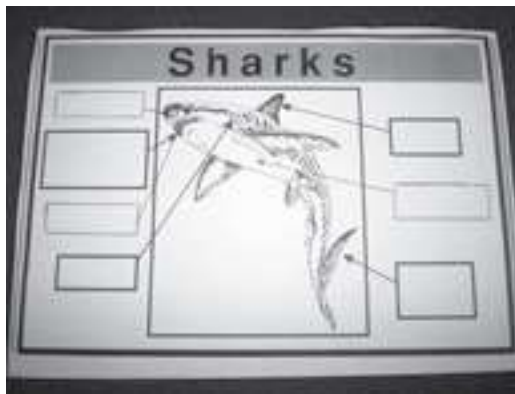
- *What are they?* becomes **classification**
- *What do they eat?* becomes **diet**
- *Where do they live?*
becomes **habitat**
- *What do they look like?*
becomes **appearance**
- *How do they move?*
becomes **movement**



Another lesson focused on the noun groups in the model text. The 'appearance' section of the model text was read and noun groups were highlighted. Students were then asked to use noun groups to label the diagram of the shark.

Noun Groups

- Sharks have **black eyes**.
- The Great White Shark has **3000 triangular, serrated sharp teeth which are 7 ½ cm long**.
- These sharks have **a torpedo-shaped body, a pointed snout and a crescent-shaped tail**.



Noun Groups labelling activity

A feature of information reports is the use of technical vocabulary. At the end of the printed model text was a glossary of technical terms used in the report. Students were asked to complete several activities to help them understand the meanings of the words and the ordering of the words alphabetically.

Earlier in the year, students had been introduced to action, saying and thinking processes.

A feature of information reports is the use of relating processes. The model text was used to identify these processes and discussion took place about their importance in helping to define and describe facts about sharks.

- Sharks **are** fish.
- Sharks **have** streamlined bodies.
- Sharks **don't have** bones.
- A great white **has** 3000 sharp serrated teeth.

Shark Glossary

predator	violent, savage
ferocious	an animal which is hunted and killed for food
serrated	the nose and mouth of an animal
prey	shaped like a half moon
shore	having notches along the edge
temperate	land along the edge of the sea
crescent-shaped	not extremely hot or extremely cold
snout	a meat eater
streamlined	an animal which hunts and kills other animals for food
carnivore	designed to be efficient



*Glossary activity –
students match words to meanings*

*Glossary –
alphabetical order*

An activity using colour coded dice (red for participants, pink for describers and green for processes) helped children to understand the use of relating processes and revised the technical language from the model text.

The introduction of relating processes was a good opportunity to give ESL students practice in subject/verb agreement; an area that can cause great confusion for many learners of English as a second language.



ESL support – subject/verb agreement

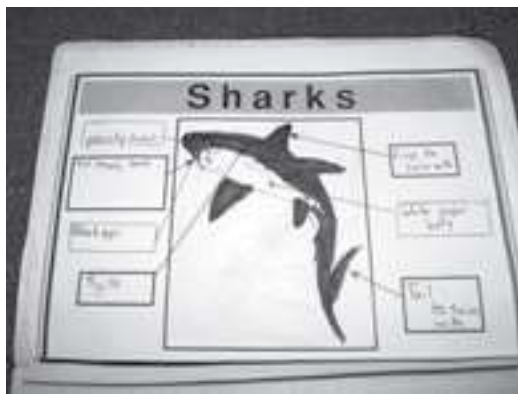
- Sharks powerful streamlined bodies.
- They crescent-shaped tails.
- The Great White a carnivore.
- This sea creature3000 sharp, serrated triangular teeth.
- Great White sharks..... in temperate waters.

is	are
has	have
are	found

Tenor

In this unit of work, only one language feature of tenor was explicitly taught. When children were labelling the picture of the shark, they were told that in an information report the noun groups need to be factual rather than expressing personal opinion. For example they needed to write *small black eyes*, rather than *nice happy eyes*.

In the example below, the child has used the appropriate tenor in all labels except the *red bloody teeth*, which would be appropriate describing a particular shark which had just had a meal, but is not appropriate when describing the general features of a shark.

*Mode*

The activities described above relate to the genre, field and tenor aspects of functional grammar. I wanted to give the students assistance in moving their writing along the continuum from a spoken to a more written form of language. Lexical cohesion is an aspect of grammar that helps here.

When children first start writing information reports they tend to begin every sentence with the key word: "Sharks are....., Sharks have....., Sharks eat....." etcetera. I showed these young writers that there were

other words in the model text that referred to sharks. A cloze activity was given to reinforce this idea and the children then wrote sentences about their chosen sea creature, using as many different ways of referring to it as they could.

Lexical cohesion

- *Sharks* are fish.
- *One of the largest sharks* is *the Great White shark*.
- *This shark* is *a streamlined swimmer*.
- *Great Whites* can grow up to 6 m long.
- *These creatures* do not chew their food.
- *Young Great Whites* eat fish, while *the adults* eat sea lions and turtles.

Shark reference words

- are fish.
- One of the largest sharks is
- shark is a streamlined swimmer.
- can grow up to 6m long.
-creatures do not chew their food.
- Young eat fish, while the eat sea lions and turtles.

As a follow up to each of the focused grammar lessons, the students completed a similar task for the sea creature which was of particular interest to them. In some cases they worked together and helped each other to complete the required activity. In this way, they were discussing the topic as well as the language features of the report. They were also recording information and preparing to write their own reports.

One further aspect of Mode that was explicitly taught was that of tense. I showed examples of sentences from a recount about a shark attack and highlighted the processes in the past tense. We then returned to the model text and noted that the processes were in the present tense. Some discussion took place as to why this was more appropriate when giving information about something which is a fact all the time and did not occur just once. Children checked their own and each other's work to look for evidence that it was written in the present tense.

Joint construction

Once students had completed the grammar lessons and further research into the creature about which they were going to write, we moved into

the joint construction phase of the teaching-learning cycle. With the class, I constructed an information report about an octopus. I made sure that I had some information to go under each of the subheadings, but I asked the students to help me with ideas. I asked them to help with the editing of the text. I asked leading questions such as: Have I written in the present tense? Have I used relating verbs? Could I write more interesting noun groups for my labels? What other words could I use instead of *the octopus*?

In constructing the octopus report, I deliberately chose the sea creature that had been selected by one of the ESL students who was least confident in English. This joint construction gave her extra support in writing a report that might otherwise have been very difficult for her.

Success criteria			
Organising my information report (Genre)	I have written a title and some information	I have written information under 4 or more sub-headings	I have written the information in paragraphs under 4 or more sub-headings
Using relating processes (is/are/has/have) (Field)	I have used one relating process	I have used more than one relating process	I have used several relating processes and they are used in the correct form (is/are, has/have)
Providing a labeled diagram (Field)	I have included a diagram	I have labeled my diagram	I have used describers in my diagram labels
Using appropriate reference items	I have used the name of the sea creature	I have sometimes used another word instead of the name (they, this)	I have used at least 3 other words instead of the name of the sea creature
Foregrounding (beginning) with topic sentences (Mode)	I have written one topic sentence	I have written topic sentences for at least 2 paragraphs	I have written a topic sentence for each paragraph

Figure 5. Student assessment rubric

Independent construction

Students were now ready to write their own information reports about the sea creatures they had researched. They used the information which they had collected and the grammatical features that they had learned. As they completed their reports, they were asked to self assess their work using the assessment rubric in Figure 5. This gave them the opportunity to see a summary of the necessary features of an information report and to make improvements, after discussion with the teachers.

Students then used their information reports to create an animated power point about their chosen creature. These presentations were shown to the younger students.

Below is a checklist that can be useful for teachers in gathering information about the skills gained by individual students. This can be a starting point for planning the language skills that need to be revised in future units of work or for providing extra learning experiences for some students.

Information report	No evidence	Developing	Achieved
Classification			
Subheadings to organise information			
Labelled diagram using factual describers			
Technical vocabulary			
Lexical cohesion			
Present tense			
Subject/verb agreement			

Figure 6. Teacher checklist

Conclusion

The teaching-learning cycle provides a scaffold for teachers to plan and teach in an organised and explicit way. While teaching the above unit of work, we returned to the model text many times. Each time the students read it, they became more expert in their comments and more fluent in their use of the factual and technical language of the model.

Many grammatical discussions took place as children edited their work and asked their friends or teachers whether a certain word or tense was appropriate.

Some children wrote very detailed reports, others struggled to write just a few sentences, but all expressed a sense of pride in their work as they shared it with the younger children.

As teachers, we felt that we had successfully scaffolded the children into a greater understanding of the appropriate ways of reading and writing information reports. The grammar had been taught and understood within a context that matched the purpose of their task.

This is just one example of how the teaching-learning cycle can be used to explicitly teach genre and functional grammar. We have found that this way of scaffolding consistently results in an improvement in students' understandings of how texts work and how they can successfully produce texts independently. Students also become more critical readers of the written texts of others. Functional grammar gives the students a powerful tool in developing their literacy skills.

Learning through interactive, collaborative language-focused activities which are engaging and enjoyable for students and which are explicitly modelled and scaffolded, brings satisfying results for both teachers and students.

References

- Government of South Australia, Department of Education and Children's Services (2007). *Teaching ESL students in mainstream classes, language and learning across the curriculum*.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1994). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. Arnold.