

Misconceptions and Difficulties in the Acquisition of Metalinguistic Knowledge

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This paper describes the outcomes of an investigation into the misconceptions and difficulties encountered when learning grammar. The study is based on evidence collected from a class of twelve-year-olds who were engaged upon a workscheme focusing on grammar, and two cohorts of PGCE English students undertaking an intensive grammar course. The analysis suggests that learning metalinguistic knowledge can be made problematic for several reasons. Firstly, learning is confounded by the acquired misconceptions which learners bring with them, often misconceptions created by teachers and textbooks. Secondly, there are specific characteristics of English grammar which cause confusion, particularly the mobility of word class. Finally, the process of acquiring metalinguistic knowledge can be hampered by cognitive difficulties related to the conceptual demands of grammar, the transfer of learning from passive to active understanding, and the patterns of inter-connected learning in grammar. The paper suggests that too much professional energy has been attributed to the debate about whether grammar should be taught or not, whilst insufficient research resource has been allocated to investigating how pupils learn. The findings point to a need for development of metalinguistic subject knowledge in teachers and for further research on pupil acquisition of metalinguistic knowledge.

Introduction

The history of the teaching of English grammar for the past thirty years or so has been dominated by debate about the value of explicit metalinguistic knowledge for school pupils, and particularly by arguments concerning the beneficial effect, or otherwise, of grammar knowledge on pupils' writing. Attention has focused upon research (Robinson, 1959; Harris, 1962) which appeared to prove that pupils' writing remained qualitatively unchanged by the experience of grammar learning. More recently, the validity of that research has itself been contested (Tomlinson, 1994) and the issue of grammar in the curriculum has again emerged as a source of controversy. In the UK, the National Curriculum revision of 1995 and the National Literacy Strategy, implemented in 1998, both place a renewed emphasis on explicit grammar teaching. Moreover, the mooted introduction of grammar tests for 14-year-old pupils has foregrounded the issue: the possibility of statutory testing of grammar has forced English teachers to consider grammar anew.

However, the issue of grammar teaching has tended heavily towards polarities, often grounded in political or ideological views. Within the wider context of educational reform, the debate about grammar has been less about grammar itself than about 'the particular values and standards the idea of grammar has been made to symbolise' (Cameron, 1995). The way rational argument about grammar has been hijacked to support broader political arguments concerning the decline of moral standards and the need for order and authority is well

described by Deborah Cameron (1995: Chapter 3). Within the teaching profession, scepticism about the merits of compulsory grammar in the English curriculum is voiced by a generation of teachers who never learned grammar themselves, whilst enthusiasts wax lyrical about its benefits. Geoff Barton (1998) laments the absence of grammar teaching as 'the scandal of the late twentieth century' and, with a rhetorical flourish, concludes that the experience of grammar for pupils will bring 'liberty, not repression'. But the notion of liberty through the development of grammar knowledge contrasts with John Keen's (1997) reminder that grammar is 'a means of maintaining the dominance of standard forms over local speech patterns'. Barton and Keen highlight the socio-political polemic which has characterised the grammar debate for nearly forty years. Both professionally and politically, and for differing reasons, the topic of grammar in school has revolved almost exclusively around notions of whether it should, or should not, be taught.

The pity of this position is that very little genuine research attention has been accorded to the way pupils learn grammar and the problems and difficulties they face in acquiring metalinguistic knowledge. In the late 1990s there has been a proliferation of educational textbooks to support grammar teaching in response to its renewed emphasis in the curriculum. Invariably, these have played to teacher anxieties about what and how to teach grammar, and provide teachers with materials to use in the classroom. The new clutch of grammar textbooks tend to fall into one of two camps. The first includes those books such as *Basic Grammar* (Schiach, 1995), *My Book of Grammar* (Blackman, 1997) and *Collins School Grammar* (Mannion, 1997) which are essentially a series of grammar exercises. These books appear to be predicated upon a remedial construction of grammar: without 'good understanding' of grammar 'our writing would be difficult to read and understand' (Blackman, 1997) and if we know the terminology of grammar then we can 'understand our mistakes' (Schiach, 1995).

The second group of books, such as *The Grammar Book* (Bain, 1996), *Get the Grammar* (Keith, 1994) and *Grammar in Context* (Barton, 1999) are less strongly dependent upon exercises and promote a view of grammar which is positive and exploratory, recognising the relationship between grammar and meaning. They reject the deficiency model of grammar, attempting 'to look at language in terms of good health, rather than bad, and to make the study of grammar a lively tonic rather than a prescribed antibiotic!' (Keith, 1994). These books offer teachers ways to consider grammar which are purposeful and engaging, and avoid the mechanistic exercise-driven approaches of the first group of textbooks. That they are written primarily to support practising teachers is reinforced by the 'teachers' notes' sections in both publications, which outline either a rationale for the teaching of grammar or provide subject knowledge information of grammar terminology. Grammar books in this group build clearly upon the work of the Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) project (see Carter, 1990; Hudson, 1992). The LINC project was initiated by the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (now the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) in response to the Kingman Report (DES, 1988). The Kingman Report had identified learning about language as a weak aspect of most English departments and argued not for a 'return to old-fashioned grammar teaching and learning by rote' which offered 'a rigid prescriptive code rather than a dynamic description of language in use'.

Rather, Kingman argued for a model of language in use which acknowledged the complexity of language and its varying functions in different contexts.

However, despite approaching the issue of grammar from very different pedagogical perspectives, both categories of grammar textbook share a common feature: they neither acknowledge nor address the cognitive difficulties learners encounter when experiencing the way English grammar operates in texts and discourses. They appear reluctant to engage with learning implications of studying grammar, where 'language is both the object and medium of study' (Carter, 1993).

The Study

In order to explore what might be characteristic misconceptions and difficulties in acquiring metalinguistic knowledge, a group of 26 mixed-ability year 8 pupils (12-year-olds) were observed two lessons a week over a period of a term as they were being taught two schemes of work with a close focus on grammar. The first scheme of work looked at the way grammar operates in printed advertising texts (particularly the use of the imperative, the preponderance of adjectives and adjectival listing and coupling, and the use of abstract nouns). The second scheme of work developed understanding of grammatical features of argument, considering particularly the use of different types of sentence and the use of co-ordinate and subordinate clauses for proposition and justification. Underpinning the schemes of work was a philosophy of grammar teaching akin to that noted above by George Keith and by the LINC project, namely that exploring grammar in action using real texts and making connections between grammar and meaning is potentially exciting. The schemes did not, however, shy away from explicit explanations of grammar terms, when appropriate.

Data was collected from the class by noting examples of misunderstanding or difficulty expressed orally during the lessons, either during whole class episodes, during group task work, or during one-to-one conversations with pupils about their work. In the whole class observation, pupils' questions in particular were noted. During individual or group tasks, pupils were observed systematically and field notes gathered noting problems they were encountering and tasks or texts which posed particular difficulties. The principal written work arising from the schemes of work invited pupils to make explicit reference to grammar features in advertising and argument. Some smaller pieces of written work took the form of contextualised tasks to practise and consolidate understanding of the grammar feature under study. All the written work was analysed for evidence of misunderstanding or for clarity of understanding.

The study is supported by parallel data gathered from two cohorts (each of 28) of PGCE English students undertaking an intensive grammar course to give them sufficient grounding to teach grammar themselves. The students kept reflective journals which provided evidence of both their attitude to grammar and the problems they were encountering. As with the school pupils, field notes were kept for each grammar session, noting particularly the questions they asked and areas of confusion evident as they completed tasks.

In both the analysis of field notes and the analysis of written work, a grounded theory approach was adopted: the data was gathered and the categories

described in this paper emerged from the data, rather than being shaped by the data collection method. Analysis of the results points to a range of difficulties and misconceptions in developing metalinguistic knowledge originating from different sources. These can be broadly categorised under three headings:

- ... misconceptions acquired previously from teachers or textbooks;
- ... misconceptions promoted by the specific characteristics of English grammar;
- ... misconceptions due to the cognitive demands involved in learning a meta-language.

Acquired Misconceptions

It was evident that the year 8 pupils brought with them a variety of schemata for some aspects of grammar, particularly the lexical word classes. This existing knowledge was frequently vestigial, and often restricted to a partial definition of a word class without any consequent ability to match that definition to words in text. Typical of these partial understandings were explanations of adjectives being 'describing words' and adverbs 'telling you more about a verb'. These partial understandings led to difficulty in determining word class accurately. For example, the notion that adjectives describe ignores the way other lexical words, particularly verbs and adverbs, can create description. When looking at the use of adjectives in advertisements some pupils related more strongly to the semantic idea of description than to the grammatical relationship between adjectives and nouns, and identified as adjectives other words which were giving descriptive details about the product or its effects. So, in the following sentence taken from an advertisement for a mountain bike

Featuring our unique sculptural hingeless design for improved fit, strength, durability and aerodynamics.

the nouns 'fit', 'strength', 'durability' and 'aerodynamics' were misunderstood as adjectives by some pupils 'because they were describing what the bike has got'. Likewise in an advert for a bubble bath with the invitation to 'light a few candles and pamper yourself' the verbs 'light' and 'pamper' were identified as adjectives because they 'described what you could do with the bubble bath'.

The understanding of an adverb as a word that modifies a verb led to misconceptions rooted not in semantic misunderstanding but in incomplete grammatical understanding of the additional functions of an adverb. Again the study of advertisements, which often make heavy use of an adverb modifying an adjective ('deliciously soft'; 'seductively smooth') highlighted pupils' difficulty in this area because of their previously acquired and partial knowledge.

A further group of previously acquired misconceptions were due to pupils being taught grammatical facts which modern linguists would claim to be erroneous. Foremost of these relates to the concept of tense, and the confusion of tense and aspect. Pupils had been taught that there were three tenses (at least): past, present and future, and they would identify present progressive aspect as a present tense and so on. This error almost certainly derives from teachers who were themselves taught a Latinate model of grammar and have had no opportunities to update their subject knowledge and the error is frequently reiterated in

grammar textbooks ('The tense of the verb in a sentence shows the time of the action: past, present or future' Schiach, 1995). The misunderstanding may be reinforced by modern language learning: both French and German have more tenses than English. The difficulty was more acute with PGCE students, who had often studied a second language to A level. They overlaid their understanding of English tenses with terminology learned in a second language, particularly the conditional, perfect and pluperfect tenses.

A final cluster of misconceptions which were common to both PGCE students and year 8 pupils were 'grammar rules' which led to mechanistic articulation of a rule with no corresponding understanding of its grammatical implications. The two most common 'rules' mentioned were that every sentence must have a verb and that a sentence should not begin with 'and' or 'but'. For the year 8 pupils the conviction of the need for a verb within a sentence was strong, despite the fact that only two children in the class could actually identify a verb within a sentence. Some PGCE students clung to the same view, though with better understanding of the verb; worryingly, however, they adhered to the view from a standpoint of correctness, even though the group had explicitly studied the writing of a pupil who made effective use of a verbless sentence in a previous (non-grammar) session. In both cases, these 'rules' act as straitjackets, where the rule can be stated and applied formulaically with no correlative grammatical understanding which would permit constructive and appropriate 'rule-breaking'.

Underpinning the misconceptions that learners acquire from teachers or textbooks is a problem with definitions. The most common definitions given for word classes used both at primary and secondary level equate nouns with naming, verbs with doing and adjectives with describing. Many commonly used textbooks, and grammar books designed for use by the general public, perpetuate these definitions. As we have seen above, these definitions cause difficulty when applied to real texts. The association of doing with the verb is perhaps the most confusing definition as so many verbs, particularly 'to be' and 'to have', possess no obvious active quality. The pitfalls of weaknesses in defining grammatical concepts was noted almost forty years ago by Gurrey (1962) who insisted that it goes 'against the grain of our professional conscience to present conceptions that are expressed in muddled language'. There are times when the definition seems to become more important than the metalinguistic feature it describes, making learning grammar 'a fetish of labelling and definition as though these were ends in themselves' (Cameron, 1997) and promotes a distance between grammatical concepts and their use in texts.

Misconceptions due to the Specific Characteristics of English Grammar

In attempting to address the way children learn grammar, it ought to be axiomatic that we ask if there are characteristics of English grammar which might cause pupils difficulty. Yet few educationalists have done so, despite the fact that linguists would be able to answer the question readily. There exists a belief that grammar is a monolithic entity: just as many non-linguists find it hard to appreciate that Standard English and dialects each have their own equally

systematic and organised grammar, so many non-linguists are also unaware that grammars vary from one language to another. English grammar has many features which contrast with patterns found, for example, in Italian, French or German. This variety between grammar systems in different languages is compounded in English by a variety of different systems, or models of grammar, which use common terms to mean different things, or use different terms to describe the same thing. The National Curriculum for English specifies relatively few grammar terms but the National Literacy Strategy is highly explicit about terminology. Its glossary reveals the extent to which it is an eclectic hotch-potch of terms from diverse linguistic systems. The difficulty this creates is that the metalanguage of grammar, which is intended to enable shared understanding, is itself a source of varied interpretations.

Thinking more specifically about the *characteristics* of English grammar, the mobility of word class in English poses significant difficulties for both native and second language learners in acquiring metalinguistic understanding. In its development from Old English to its present day forms, English has lost the majority of its inflections, retaining principally inflection for plurality, for comparison of adjectives, and for verbs to indicate person, number and tense. The loss of inflections has meant that word order in a sentence is very important in English, more so than it once was. Dick Leith (1983) gives the example of the sentence 'The boy killed the bear': in English, if the subject (boy) and the object (bear) are reversed, the meaning of the sentence is changed entirely. In Old English, however, the same basic sentence 'se cnafa of-sloh þone beran' can be reordered in a number of ways because the inflections indicate the relationships between the words (in this case the -n ending indicates the object and the -a ending indicates subject). But a direct consequence of the loss of inflections is that, although in English word order is important, the same word can act in a different function depending on where it is in a sentence. The word 'book' for example can act variously as a noun, a verb or an adjective (nominalised) depending on its function in the sentence:

I'll *book* him for that foul. (verb)

Give me that *book*. (noun)

Boys get trapped into the boring *book* syndrome. (adjective)

This mobility of word class in English, or functional shift, as it is sometimes called, causes learners of the metalanguage difficulties for two reasons. Firstly, the spelling of the word cannot be relied upon to give clues as to word class. The -ing and -ed inflected endings of verbs may well indicate a verb, but as participles they may also be nouns or adjectives. The following sentences, taken from the year 8 pupils' writing, are all examples of contexts where the present participle with noun function confuses learners – a confusion compounded by the fact that in each case the obvious semantic verbal quality of the noun is accompanied by a verb expressing a state of being, or in the case of the final sentence, no verb at all.

Hunting is wrong.

There should be tough sentences for drink driving.

Smoking is bad for your health.

England, a place of happiness, France, a place of mourning.

The second area of difficulty prompted by functional shift is that knowledge of a word's existence as, say, a noun does not mean that its function in a sentence will always be as a noun, as we have seen above with the word 'book'. For the year 8 pupils studying printed advertising techniques, the widespread use of pre-modification of the head noun, often using nominalised adjectives, created confusions. Examples taken from the advertisements studied are quoted below, with the nominalised adjective which pupils identified as a noun underlined:

a promotional stamp book
 help turn mud and straw houses into bricks and mortar
basil and tomato sauce
 a Sainsbury's Bank Classic Visa Card
 Britain's favourite antiseptic skin healing cream

At the heart of this confusion is a misconception regarding the fixedness of word class in English which teachers and textbooks rarely acknowledge. Indeed the tendency to write example lists of word classes in isolation from usage encourages learners to believe that if 'table' is a concrete noun it is always a concrete noun, and if 'dance' is a verb, it is always a verb. Part of the challenge for teachers of grammar is to discourage learners from a conception of grammar as the naming of parts, but rather to see word class in terms of meaningful relationships between words within sentences and texts:

It's a matter of recognising that grammar is not just a box of labels in a dissection laboratory but a living force used every moment words are uttered. (Keith, 1997)

Misconceptions due to the Cognitive Demands of Learning a Metalanguage

Conceptual difficulties

The word 'metalanguage' is itself a reminder that the study of grammar is conceptually challenging, using language to describe language. In the past this supposed abstraction has been used as an argument against the teaching of grammar, although English teachers are not reluctant to teach other abstract terms such as metaphor, simile or pathetic fallacy. Nor is children's vocabulary for English devoid of abstractions – most pupils are perfectly comfortable with concepts such as the word, the paragraph, the poem or the speech. However, observation of the year 8 pupils do indicate that for some aspects of learning metalinguistic knowledge there are conceptual difficulties.

Discriminating between concrete and abstract nouns raised a series of conceptual problems, problems which were quite different for PGCE students compared with those generated in the year 8 teaching. The school children had relatively little difficulty grasping the basic difference between a concrete and an abstract noun, particularly when they were only asked to discriminate between nouns. However, when they were considering texts more generally a repeated pattern emerged of confusing abstract nouns referring to emotions with the adjectives that described the same emotion. So pupils would claim that adjectives

tives such as 'angry', 'lonely' or 'sad' were abstract nouns because they were describing emotions: conceptually the lexical meaning of a word was interfering with understanding its grammatical function.

Conceptual confusion over the distinction between concrete and abstract nouns was evident amongst PGCE students, largely because they were intellectually capable of recognising the linguistic difference between the words 'concrete' and 'abstract'. Whereas the year 8 pupils accepted the difference between nouns which label things which can be *observed and measured* (Crystal, 1996) and nouns which label ideas, thoughts, feelings and concepts, the PGCE students problematised the issue. They were able to appreciate that some nouns could be concrete in one context and abstract in another, but this understanding led to some students discerning abstraction where it did not exist. Whilst studying an extract from *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, considerable discussion revolved around the nouns 'daughter' and 'calving'. Some argued that you did not see a daughter, you saw a female and the word daughter expressed the relationship between her and her parents, a relationship which is abstract. Likewise for the word 'calving' the argument was made that although it is possible to see a cow calving the word refers to a process which is abstract. In both cases conceptual difficulty has occurred by thinking too hard about the way words and their referents relate: a more positive aspect of this is that the difficulty is also a consequence of learners who are genuinely trying to gain ownership of metalinguistic knowledge, rather than accepting given knowledge at face value.

A further conceptual difficulty experienced by the year 8 learners is closely related to word class mobility in English, as previously mentioned. From observing the processes used by pupils to determine the word class of a particular word, it seems that most words carry a dominant meaning or grammatical function which frequently overrides the way a word is actually used in context. In the sentence 'People like you deserve better' a large number of pupils identified 'like' as a verb, because they lifted the word out of its context and used their knowledge of 'like' as a verb in a sentence such as 'I like chocolate' to arrive at their answer. Similar conceptual overriding occurred with words such as 'sport', where the noun function appears to take precedence over verbal function in learners' schemata. This mapping of the dominant use of a word onto its other uses may be another incidence of lexical meaning interfering with grammatical function: from the examples collected it seems that the meaning of the word is a stronger conceptual influence than the function it performs in a sentence.

When looking at clauses and clause structure, the year 8 pupils grasped the conceptual distinction between co-ordinate and subordinate clauses very quickly. The image of a pair of balanced scales was used to illustrate co-ordinated clauses, reflecting both the balance between the two clauses and the independence of each of the clauses. To support understanding of subordinate clauses the image of a tractor and trailer was used to illustrate the concept of the dependency of the subordinate clause upon the main clause. When looking at texts with co-ordinated and subordinate clauses in which the clauses had been identified, pupils had little difficulty determining what type of clause they were. However, pupils found it considerably more difficult to deconstruct sentences into their respective clauses. Two conceptual problems hindered this understanding:

firstly, deciding which words 'chunked' together to form the clause, and secondly, locating the finite verb. In the case of the former, pupils could not always see the syntactic blocks of the sentence, and frequently selected blocks which were not clauses, or which combined two clauses. The two sentences below exemplify this – the clause separations selected by pupils have been indicated with slashes:

Do not think it is an image/snatched from the Bible.

Many lose/their parents and others/who are close to them.

It is clear that the pupils were trying to use conceptual knowledge, but as in previous examples, they have made stronger use of semantic associations than grammatical structures. Of course, part of the conceptual problem inherent in this difficulty relates to the second conceptual difficulty in breaking sentences into clauses, that of identifying the finite verb. Considerable confusion arose from the use of participles, which clearly looked verbal, but which were not finite (for example, the past participle 'snatched' in the sentence quoted above). Participles acting as nouns or adjectives also provoked conceptual confusion – the process of looking for a main verb seemed to encourage the discernment of verbal possibilities in many words whose grammatical function was not as a verb.

Difficulties in the transference of learning

Another cluster of cognitive problems was evident when pupils moved between explanation of a metalinguistic feature and looking at those features in texts. Pupils frequently revealed understanding at an abstract level which was not transferable to their own or others' texts. This seemed to be true, regardless of whether the feature was introduced first and exemplified through text, or whether pupils explored features in texts and were then informed of its metalinguistic label. Once the metalinguistic term had been introduced, subsequent application of that understanding to 'live' text often highlighted the difficulty of moving from one to the other. This was usually because the variety of possibilities in text was greater than the examples already encountered and required pupils to understand the concept fully, not merely the clues which suggest its presence.

One category of difficulty related to functional shift, as already discussed above and this will not be discussed again in detail here: suffice to say that the abstract understanding of a given word class could not always be transferred to texts where an understanding of grammatical function had to override other clues to word class. However, a further category of difficulty was detected in relation to active understanding of clauses. Some pupils were hooking their grasp of subordinate clauses onto the subordinating conjunction or relative pronoun, a process which often helped to reinforce the notion of dependency and assisted in the successful identification of subordinate clauses. But when the subordinating conjunction/relative pronoun was omitted, as in the sentence 'I believe George Michael should not be hounded', pupils found it hard to recognise the subordinate clause. When the clue of the subordinator was absent, the metalinguistic knowledge of subordination was rarely sufficient to support confident application to texts. Similar misunderstandings or difficulty occurred

with embedded clauses and with clauses which were themselves interrupted by other clauses.

The cognitive demands involved in transferring metalinguistic knowledge into constructive reflections upon text are compounded by the tendency of textbooks to offer 'perfect' examples, often in single word or single sentence blocks, without acknowledgement of what happens in real texts. In *The Grammar Book* (Bain, 1996) the topic of subordinate clauses is covered in seven lines with two perfect examples of subordination:

A complex sentence has a **main clause** joined to one or more less important or **subordinate clause(s)** by a connective. In the examples below, the main clause is shown in bold, and the connective underlined:

When Kerry got to school, **she was told off for being late.**
Or **Kerry was told off for being late** when she got to school.

I read a magazine while I was waiting.
Or While I was waiting, **I read a magazine.**

By contrast, Collins School Grammar (Mannion, 1997) has at least twelve pages of exercises in some way related to clause analysis, including reference to relative clauses and categories of conjunction. But the explanations are almost always supported by single sentence examples which illustrate the point perfectly. None of the grammar textbooks considered makes any reference to more complex patterns of clause structure or invites readers to look at the complexity of real texts. Many teachers, whose linguistic knowledge may itself be tentative, behave similarly to textbooks – discussing metalinguistic features in isolation and supporting their teaching with easy examples – creating a cognitive schism between grammar in theory and grammar in practice.

Enabling the transfer of knowledge from passive to active understanding is a pedagogical concern across the curriculum, not just in the domain of grammar. But we have not yet explored in sufficient detail how metalinguistic knowledge becomes active knowledge, or the teaching strategies which may promote it. Ronald Carter (and others: see Keith, 1997) argues that it is important to introduce the terminology after pupils have acquired linguistic competence and have engaged in reflection:

. it is pedagogically and strategically preferable for the teacher to generate tasks in which competence *precedes* reflections on language and in which reflection is itself *prior* to discursive analysis of particular grammatical properties. (Carter, 1990)

Although this seems an eminently wise position to adopt, encouraging exploration of language and active engagement with texts, it addresses principally how concepts and terminology might be introduced. There is little guidance given in educational or professional sources concerning how to generate active

metalinguistic knowledge and how to convert 'linguistic discussion into learning practice' (Wilkins, 1979).

Inter-connected learning

In considering the nature of learning in grammar, it is important to acknowledge the interrelatedness of some aspects of metalinguistic knowledge with others. Arguably, there is no strict hierarchy of knowledge in grammar and learning about grammar could begin at one of several starting points. Traditionally, many texts and teachers begin with word class and move onto sentences and clauses thereafter, but it is equally possible to begin with sentences and work back towards word classes, or to develop alternative patterns of exploring grammar. It may be that previously we have over-emphasised the categories of word, sentence and text level grammar at the expense of exploiting the way these categories interrelate. The schemes of work for the year 8 pupils observed for this study made some attempt to consider these interconnections. The work on advertising explored the use of imperative sentences, the use of adjectives and the building of elaborate adjectival phrases within advertisements. Likewise, the scheme of work on argument looked at variety in sentence length, alongside clause structure and cohesion across the text.

Observing the year 8 pupils, it was apparent that the attempt to address inter-connected learning was actively helping pupils to make connections between grammar features and language in operation. So, for example, whilst considering a piece from an Amnesty International magazine arguing against capital punishment some pupils (recalling their study of abstract nouns in advertisements) noted the use of contrasting abstract nouns in the title, 'Human Rights and Unspeakable Wrongs' even though the focus of the lesson was not upon nouns. The persuasive effect of the imperative sentence in the adverts studied (e.g. 'Experience Life in the Roar!') enabled pupils to identify and understand the effect of the opening imperative sentence in the capital punishment piece ('Imagine the scene').

Elsewhere, however, the interrelated nature of learning meant that pupils' grasp of one metalinguistic feature was sometimes made difficult because it was dependent upon them having already grasped other features. To understand main, co-ordinate and subordinate clauses fully relied upon understanding the finite verb; understanding the finite verb fully depended upon a grasp of the notion of subject or of conjugation. This chaining of strands of knowledge did create problems and frequently meant that teaching had to re-address a feature in order to clarify understanding or reconnect pupils' understanding with work already covered. Similar difficulties occurred with PGCE students, for whom the concept of adverbials was made problematic when students had poor grasp of clauses, adverbs or prepositions.

For English teachers this kind of dependence upon prior learning of a concept is unfamiliar: with a recursive curriculum layers of understanding are acquired through revisiting and development. Not being able to explain one concept effectively because another concept has not been understood is a relatively rare phenomenon in English (though much less unusual in subjects such as Maths or French) and it is an aspect of teaching a metalanguage which demands further investigation.

Conclusion

If grammar is to be successfully reintroduced into the school curriculum it is crucial that the public debate ceases to be obsessively concerned with the apparent merits or disadvantages of compulsory grammar, and begins to take seriously the teaching and learning implications. Undoubtedly, grammar makes different cognitive demands upon pupils when compared with other elements of the English curriculum, where the ability to articulate personal responses, arguments, ideas and understanding is often predominant. However, the cognitive demands may not be as unfamiliar as is often supposed: literary criticism has its own metalanguage which is taught in most English departments and media studies involves considerable levels of abstract understanding.

However, this study suggests that, with the prospect of a renewed emphasis on the learning of grammar, the question of how pupils learn is a fundamental one. It is not necessarily the conceptual abstraction of grammar which causes difficulty but the mapping of that abstraction onto 'live' text. Planning and teaching need to address how to provide support structures which move pupils from where they are to the next stage, and which build in opportunities to recap and consolidate upon previous understanding. Likewise, more thought needs to be accorded to how understanding is cemented and made active – the pedagogy of drills, exercises and rote learning has been emphatically rejected but there is less confidence in what should take its place. In learning grammar, as with many other kinds of learning, there is a need for practice and reinforcement to allow learners to gain assurance and secure understanding. Developing positive contexts for multiple opportunities to handle concepts and ideas actively may assist in cementing learning.

A second important issue raised by this study is that of teacher subject knowledge. Not only would secure subject knowledge reduce the number of acquired misconceptions pupils bring with them, but more importantly it would help teachers to guide and support pupils who misunderstand. Currently, many teachers do not themselves have sufficient grammatical knowledge to articulate distinctions between participles acting as nouns or adjectives or as verbs, nor to elaborate upon functional shift. As a consequence they are unable to help pupils precisely at the point where learning becomes difficult. Like spelling, grammar is easier to correct than teach, because correction relies on implicit knowledge, whilst teaching demands explicit knowledge.

In the mid-seventies, the Bullock Report (1975) criticised language teaching in school because 'it identified a set of correct forms and prescribed that these should be taught' with the consequence that teachers 'put the emphasis less on knowing what to say than on knowing what to avoid'. This is the deficiency model evident in some of the grammar text books described earlier. But for the first time, the schism between school grammar and the academic discipline of linguistics is being bridged. The Grammar Papers (QCA, 1998) note the way school grammar adopted a narrow Latinate model which was heavily rule-bound and divorced from the development of linguistics in universities. The current proposals advocating the return of grammar to the curriculum do not suggest a reintroduction of this kind of school grammar which had 'no coherent view of language acquisition or development' (QCA, 1998). Rather they

recommend drawing on the best of contemporary academic knowledge about linguistics and cite academic sources (Crystal, 1995; Greenbaum, 1996). Linguists in university departments are discussing grammar issues with teachers, and there is a new generation of A level English Language teachers who are confident with grammar and excited by it. The time is right to move away from the polemics of why grammar should be taught, and to devote further research and teacher development to how pupils learn grammar. The danger of the current situation is that what is taught may not be learned. It is not sufficient to have lively, active and relevant ways to introduce grammar if the nature of pupils' misunderstandings and misconceptions are not acknowledged.

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