Grammar re-imagined: foregrounding understanding of language choice in writing

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ABSTRACT

The topic of grammar teaching has remained a stubbornly contentious subject of discussion for more than 50 years, tending towards binary, even polemical, positions. Yet scrutiny of the research shows how little attention has been afforded to considering what the relationship between learning about grammar and learning about being a language user might be; or to effective pedagogical practices for teaching grammar. Instead, the debate has reverted to inappropriate "what works" discourses. This article discusses these discourses and the need to re-imagine why and how we teach grammar, drawing on sustained and cumulative research evidence.

Introduction

The topic of grammar can claim a truly chequered history. No other aspect of subject English, other than perhaps the teaching of phonics, has provoked such sustained and unresolved debate about its value and its place in the curriculum. In the past 50 years or so, it has been variously described as having a "*harmful effect on the improvement of writing*" (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer 1963, 37); "*a waste of time*" (Muller 1967, 68); worth "*ignoring*" (Elbow 1981); and as "*the skunk at the garden party of the language arts*" (Haussamen et al. 2003 px). The substance of this debate has been extensively addressed (e.g. Denham and Lobeck 2010; Kolln and Hancock 2005; Locke 2009); and it is not the purpose of this paper to repeat it again here. However, one characteristic of this long-standing debate is its tendency towards binary, even polemical positions which begin with a stance for or against the teaching of grammar, and summon evidence or argumentation to support this stance. See for example, articles against grammar teaching by Wyse (2001) and for grammar by Hudson (2004). As a consequence of this, discussion of the role of grammar in the English curriculum is frequently dominated by a desire to prove that it "works" or not, rather than by a desire to understand the nature of children's learning and the multiple complexities of any individual classroom context.Table 1

Of course "what works" in an educational context is a much more complex question than its brevity implies. Underpinning the idea of "what works" is a medical model of efficacy, based on an interaction between a medical intervention and a human subject. But, as Biesta notes, "*a student is not an illness just as teaching is not a cure*" (Biesta 2007, 8) and learning is

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not a simple interaction between input and output. It is complex and nuanced, with multiple actors, and, crucially, teachers who enact their classroom practice in a myriad ways. And, in a world which – at the time of writing – is acutely aware of medical interventions, the Covid vaccine is illustrating that, even in a medical context, the question of what works is not simple. What is effective for some is less effective, or even inappropriate, for others. Moreover, the efficacy of grammar seems to be questioned far more than other aspects of English teaching: for example, questions are rarely asked about whether being able to name metaphor or enjambement improves literary critical analysis; or whether story mountains help narrative writing; or whether rhetorical questions and emotive language really strengthen the persuasive argument. To an extent, an understanding of pedagogy and learning would signal that an answer to such questions would never be a simplistic yes or no, but a more indeterminate "it depends", because pedagogy and learning are shaped both by individual learners' aptitudes and capability, and by how teachers plan and enact their teaching.

This article takes as its starting-point the recognition that teaching and learning are complex, situated endeavours, and therefore a consideration of the role of grammar in teaching and learning English needs to be cognisant of this. The team of researchers in Exeter have undertaken a series of at least fifteen cumulative studies about grammar and grammar teaching over a period of more than 20 years. These have investigated various aspects of grammar and grammar teaching, adopting a range of methodological designs from efficacy trials through corpus studies and longitudinal qualitative studies (see Appendix 1). The studies have provided rich insight into the ways in which understanding of grammar can help young writers not simply to achieve higher writing attainment scores but also to understand better the nature of the language choices they make as writers. Critically, they have also provided evidence of where grammar teaching is less successful and what aspects of teaching mitigate against successful integration of grammar in English. Informed by these studies, and other international research in the field, the stance I take in this article is not a binary one of being for or against the teaching of grammar: rather I propose a re-imagining of how we think about grammar, both in terms of the possibilities it offers for supporting young writers' understanding of linguistic choice in their writing, and the need to constantly focus attention on teaching and learning.

Curriculum

In re-imagining grammar in our curriculum in England, it is helpful to understand where we are situated in relation to international perspectives on grammar. In some ways, there is an Anglophone and non-Anglophone distinction, Anglophone countries tending to share the pattern of excluding grammar from the curriculum in the late 20th century and then giving it renewed emphasis in recent decades (Denham and Lobeck 2010; Macken-Horarik et al. 2015; Myhill and Watson 2019). At the same time, many non-English speaking countries have routinely included grammar in their respective curricula, particularly in Europe and across the Far East. However, in the past 10 years, there has been a veritable flurry of international interest, paralleled by research, which is re-examining the role that grammar plays in the curriculum. The international journal *L1: Educational Studies in Languages and Literature* has published three Special Issues on Grammar in the past three years (Boivin et al. 2018; Rättyä, Awramiuk, and Fontich 2019; Fontich, Van Rijt, and Gauvin 2020), and the *Journal of Teaching Writing* has a Special

Issue forthcoming in 2021, exploring linguistically based writing pedagogies. Common to all of these is a critical interest in the nature of learning about grammar and the possibilities of grammar to develop more sophisticated linguistic knowledge connecting language knowledge and experience. There is also a recognition that, traditionally, grammar in the curriculum represented a *prescriptive* view of grammar, which saw grammar as a set of norms, or "*the rules of 'correct' grammatical usage*" (Crystal 1995, 79), whereas modern linguistics, in general, espouses a *descriptive* view, examining how language is used in different contexts. These different ways of thinking about grammar generate different rationales for including (or not) grammar in the curriculum: "*Prescriptive grammarians are judgemental and attempt to change linguistic behaviour of a particular sort and in a particular direction. Linguists, or mental grammarians, seek to explain the knowledge of language that guides people's everyday use of language regardless of their schooling*" (Honda and O'Neill 2008). Underpinning the recent international research is an emphasis on descriptive grammar, eschewing a view of grammar as solely concerned with error correction, and instead seeing "*language as a resource, a meaning-making system*" (Derewianka and Jones 2010, 9); a means of empowerment (Janks 2009; Myhill 2019); and linguistic knowledge as a way of "*resisting fall-backs into prescriptive notions of language*", countering the pressure to teach "*some perceived prestige variety*" of language (Denham 2020, 5). There is also growing interest in cognitive linguistics and the possibilities that this presents for re-thinking grammar teaching (Giovanelli 2014; Giovanelli and Mason 2015; Cushing 2020a; Giovanelli, Harrison, and Nuttall 2020). Originally an approach imported from L2 grammar teaching (see for example, Holme 2009), cognitive linguistics offers conceptual and analytical tools for the analysis and interpretation of texts which have value in educational contexts.

In the light of this, what view of grammar is represented in the National Curriculum for English in England (DfE 2013a, 2013b, 2013c)? The overall Aims for English, repeated in all Key Stages (KS), specify that students should develop "*an understanding of grammar and knowledge of linguistic conventions for reading, writing and spoken language*" (DfE2013a, 3), and that "*It is important that pupils learn the correct grammatical terms in English and that these terms are integrated within teaching*" (DfE 2013a, 5). There is also an emphasis on Standard English throughout all Key Stages, as noted by Cushing (2021). The overview of Writing states that students should develop "*an increasingly wide knowledge of vocabulary and grammar*" (DfE2013a:5). The overview of Reading for KS1 and KS2 notes that good comprehension draws on "*linguistic knowledge (in particular of vocabulary and grammar) and on knowledge of the world*" (DfE2013a:4), whereas at KS3 and KS4 the expectation is that students will "*use age-appropriate vocabulary, including linguistic and literary terminology, for discussing their reading, writing and spoken language*" (DfE 2013b, 3).

However, what is striking is the difference between the curriculum expectations for primary (KS1 and KS2) and Secondary (KS3 and KS4). The KS1 and KS2 Programmes of Study have detailed statutory curriculum requirements for grammar, including, for example, the requirement that year 2 students learn how to use "*the present and past tenses correctly and consistently including the progressive form*" and "*expanded noun phrases to describe and specify*" (DfE 2013a, 22). In addition, the statutory Appendix 2 (DfE 2013a, 64–69) sets out the grammatical terminology which students must learn and on which they are tested at age 11 in the national test of Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling (GPS Test).

Table 1. The required grammatical terminology for KS1 and KS2.

Year Group	Specified Terminology
Year 1	letter, capital letter, word, singular, plural, sentence, punctuation, full stop, question mark, exclamation mark
Year 2	noun, noun phrase, statement, question, exclamation, command, compound, adjective, verb, suffix, adverb, tense (past, present), apostrophe, comma
Year 3	adverb, preposition, conjunction, word family, prefix, clause, subordinate clause, direct speech, consonant, consonant letter vowel, vowel letter, inverted commas (or "speech marks")
Year 4	determiner, pronoun, possessive pronoun, adverbial
Year 5	modal verb, relative pronoun, relative clause, parenthesis, bracket, dash, cohesion, ambiguity
Year 6	subject, object, active, passive, synonym, antonym, ellipsis, hyphen, colon, semi-colon, bullet points

In contrast, at KS3 and KS4 there is no such specification, and far more reference to linking grammar with "*meaning*", "*effectiveness*", "*evaluating the effectiveness and impact of other writers" grammatical choices*', and recognising differences between Standard English and other varieties of English (DfE 2013b, 4–5). Although the curriculum states very clearly what terminology must be taught, it cannot be described as reflecting a wholly prescriptive view of grammar, but neither is it a descriptive view: it veers uncertainly between focusing on accuracy in usage and looking at how grammar works. There is a sense, perhaps, that the primary curriculum is very *form*-oriented in contrast to a more *function*-oriented secondary curriculum. What is evident, however, is that there is no transparent purpose for the inclusion of grammar in the curriculum, unlike, for example, in the Australian National Curriculum which sets out clear goals for teaching grammar, including "*the gradually more powerful conversion of 'knowledge about' language into a resource for effective reading, listening, viewing, writing, speaking and designing*" (ACARA 2009, 6).

Grammar for a purpose

The starting-point for our own research on grammar teaching has been the importance of establishing a clear purpose for grammar in the English curriculum to inform the development of appropriate classroom practice. We have adopted the theoretical thinking of Halliday and his view of grammar as "*a system of meaning potential*" (Halliday 1978, 39) as the basis for developing our pedagogical approach. It is worth noting that Halliday's work has been known in the UK since the 1970's, and informed both the Language in the National Curriculum project and the National Literacy Strategy. Halliday's thinking represents a move away from *form-focused* approaches to grammar, concerned with the structure of language, to a *function-focused* way of thinking about grammar as a system, which looks at "*grammar as a meaning-making resource [and] to describe grammatical categories by reference to what they mean*" (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004, 10). In contrast to traditional school grammar, Halliday's functional grammar looks at how any given grammatical form, such as a verb, performs different meaning-making functions in different communicative contexts. Through his concept of lexico-grammar, Halliday proposed "*the unity of grammar and lexis*" (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 64), positioning grammar and vocabulary on a continuum, and he argued that syntax and morphology are "*both part of grammar*" (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 24). Thus meaning-making is not simply about the lexical meaning of words, as explained in a dictionary, but also about the way word choices and relationships, syntax and grammatical choices also shape meaning. *Choice* resonates

throughout the composing process: be that at word level, at syntactical, clause or sentence level, or at the level of textual organisation through cohesion, coherence and text structure.

Significantly, as an academic linguist, Halliday was also profoundly concerned with language learning, and how children learn how to make meaning (Halliday 1975). Clark argued that Halliday's approach challenged normative political views of grammar because he stressed *"the social, cultural and creative aspects of language that influenced and altered its use"* and he emphasises "*that learning is, above all, a social process"* (Clark 2005, 42). The purpose of learning grammar is not to learn that you should use fronted adverbials, but that you should learn *how* the choice of a fronted adverbial alters how meaning is conveyed in a clause or sentence, and therefore *whether* the use of a fronted adverbial fulfils your authorial intentions or not. This way of thinking about grammar moves away from pre-scriptive rules of usage (which are not the same as the deep underlying rules of grammar which native speakers of a language learn implicitly) to a view of grammar as fundamentally linked to the process of composition. Or as Crystal puts it, "*The educational aim today is to place grammar within a frame of reference which demonstrates its relevance to the active and creative tasks of language production and comprehension*" (Crystal 2004, 10).

Through the cumulative suite of research studies outlined in Appendix 1, we have developed, tested and refined a pedagogic approach to the teaching of grammar which draws first and foremost on Halliday's functionally-oriented thinking, and which emphasises the notion of **grammar as choice**. The goal of teaching is to support students' under-standing of this crucial relationship between grammatical choice and meaning-making, and to enable them "*to make choices from among a range of linguistic resources, and to be aware of the effects of different choices on the rhetorical power of their writing" (*Lefstein 2009, 382). Our research has demonstrated that teaching grammar as choice can improve students' writing attainment (Jones, Myhill, and Bailey 2013; Myhill et al 2012), but also that in some contexts the efficacy of the pedagogy is limited if teachers are not confident in implementa-tion (Tracey et al. 2019). Although we have focused principally on the teaching of writing, one study included an evaluation of the effect of this approach on reading comprehension, and found a strong positive effect on students' capacity to discuss the use of language in GCSE-type comprehension papers (Myhill and Watson 2017).

At the heart of our pedagogic approach is the importance of making connections for learners between a grammatical choice and how it subtly shapes or shifts meaning in their own piece of writing: in direct contrast to a traditional view of teaching grammar as a system with a set of grammatical terms in the "*hope that students will somehow connect the analysis of language to the production of it"* (Vande Kopple 1998, 5). To support teachers in implementing this pedagogy, we have created the *LEAD Principles* as a way of framing planning and teaching. These are set out below, but are discussed in more detail in Myhill, Watson and Newman (2020):

Link: Make a **link** between the grammar being introduced and how it works in the writing being taught

              Connecting grammar and writing; a functionally-oriented meaning-making

Example: Explain the grammar through **examples**, not lengthy explanations;

              Teaching grammar-writing links explicitly – but not being deflected into grammar lessons

Authenticity:	Use examples from **authentic texts** to link writers to the broader community of writers
	Showing student writers the grammar choices published writers make (and building the reading-writing links)
Discussion:	Build in **high-quality discussion** about grammar and its effects
	Fostering metalinguistic understanding through dialogic talk

It is important to see the LEAD Principles as a scaffold for developing teacher confidence in using this approach: they are not intended as a rigid framework for teaching, but rather as a way of supporting teacher thinking. In time, teachers do not need the LEAD principles, as this way of working, foregrounding grammar as choice, becomes more naturally and holistically embedded in how they think about teaching writing.

The LEAD Principles promote student learning about how written texts craft and shape meaning, not only at the lexical level of vocabulary choices, but also at phrase, clause, sentence and text levels. Take the example of the sentence below, from former Children's Laureate Michael Morpurgo, where he re-tells the story of King Arthur. The sentence occurs early on in the story, and describes a boy's first sight of King Arthur's hall:

> *At one end of the hall was a staircase hewn out of the rock, winding its way upwards into the smoky darkness*. (Morpurgo 1994, 13)

Syntactically, this is an AVSA (Adverbial-Verb-Subject-Adverbial) sentence, but that is simply the description of its structure. How are those structures operating in this sentence at this point in the narrative? One way to consider this is to invite students to play around with other possibilities for this sentence, without removing or adding anything, and to discuss how they communicate identical information but in subtly different ways. Some possibilities are listed below:

- *A staircase hewn out of the rock was winding its way upwards into the smoky darkness at one end of the hall.*
- *Winding its way upwards into the smoky darkness was a staircase hewn out of the rock, at one end of the hall.*
- *Winding its way upwards into the smoky darkness, at one end of the hall, was a staircase hewn out of the rock.*

The point of this discussion is not to decide which sentence is better, but to draw attention to the different effects each option establishes. In Morpurgo's example, the initial adverbial supports the cohesion of the narrative at that point: the reader has been introduced to "*a huge hall*" and "*the middle of the hall*" in the previous sentence, and the fronted adverbial sustains the physical description of the setting. But the subject-verb inversion and the final adverbial seem to follow the boy's eyes as he looks across the hall, seeing first the staircase, then its rock composition, and finally its disappearance into the darkness. For developing writers, a link has been made, through discussion, examples and the use of authentic text, between a writer's choice and an interpretation of the effect of that choice. The purpose of teaching grammar in this way is to open up understanding of writerly choices, and the rich repertoire of possibilities available every time we compose a text.

Grammar and metalinguistic understanding

Raising students' awareness of grammatical choice and communicative/rhetorical effects in writing develops metalinguistic knowledge and understanding about writing. This is important because "meta" knowledge is explicit and thus useable knowledge, giving students greater ownership and authorial agency as writers. Metalinguistic understanding, like its sister concept metacognition, operates at a conscious level and involves the capacity both to engage in "*reflection on language and its use*" and to draw on that reflection "*intentionally to monitor and plan their own methods of linguistic processing*" (Gombert 1992, 13). Returning to Morpurgo's sentence discussed in the previous section, a writing classroom nurturing metalinguistic thinking will enable writers to make choices relevant to their own authorial intentions: for example, an individual writer may decide that she prefers the choice of "*Winding its way upwards into the smoky darkness, at one end of the hall, was a staircase hewn out of the rock*" because the two fronted adverbials, combined with the subject positioned after the verb, create the sense of delay and anticipation she wants to evoke.

Our studies show that fostering this kind of metalinguistic understanding through purposeful grammar teaching draws strongly on teachers' capacity to lead metalinguistic talk. The D of the LEAD Principles is a reminder of this, and we have found that the most effective implementation of our pedagogical approach is where teachers are confident in managing rich and productive classroom discussions about writing choices (Myhill and Newman 2019; Myhill, Newman and Watson 2020). We have called this rich discussion *dialogic metatalk* and it is characterised by metalinguistic discussion which is not focused on "right" answers but open-ended thinking about language choices and possibilities. Crucially, the teacher verbalises for students the link between a rhetorical effect in an authentic text and the grammatical choice which shaped that effect; and invites student verbalisation and justification of the choices made in their own writing. Generating dialogic metatalk appears to be a critical element of learning transfer, moving young writers from a dependence on what teachers suggest are effective choices in writing to a deeper understanding of their own and greater authorial independence.

The differences between effective and less effective dialogic metatalk is thus a key aspect of successful implementation of our pedagogical approach: indeed, the evaluator of our Education Endowment Foundation project (2016) recorded that teachers' use of discussion "*to tease out thinking and choice-making*" was compromised in some of the schools observed (Tracey et al. 2019, 4). Where the talk was less effective, it tended to be monologic and strongly teacher-controlled, rather than creating dialogic space for metalinguistic thinking. Very often the questioning during interaction was closed and directive, with little room for students' own interpretations, and often simply seeking responses which match the teachers' thinking. Sometimes the metatalk was focused on the grammatical form rather than its function, and on exhortation to use a particular form in their writing with the implication that effective writing is essentially grammatical deployment of certain grammatical features. Another characteristic of less effective talk was where the teacher missed an opportunity to pursue metalinguistic thinking when a child said something interesting or showed some misunderstanding that was not picked up. In contrast, we witnessed many examples of effective metatalk, which involved a carefully managed interplay of the interactions below:

Checking Questions:

These were closed questions, but they served a purposeful function in a discussion sequence, typically to correct a grammatical or textual misunderstanding, or to recall a point from a previous lesson needed to build a discussion thread. These checking questions were skilfully used to initiate discussion, or within a discussion sequence, in order to develop the meta-linguistic thinking further.

Opening Up Initiations:

These were questions or statements which were framed to open up students' metalinguistic thinking about a particular point. Often these were *Why* questions, but they included initiations such as *What do you think?, What if … ?, How?* and *Tell me.*

Invited Elaborations:

In contrast to the missed opportunities evident in less effective metatalk, these were questions or invitations which followed up something a student had already said, and typically included invitations such as *Tell me more? Can you give me an example? Why do you think that?* They encouraged students to elaborate upon a point made, or to justify what they had said with further explanation or detail.

Effective metatalk represented a skilful linking of the metalinguistic discussion to the grammar-writing connection which was the learning focus for the lesson. Equally, teachers used the language choices in authentic texts as springboards for discussion, rather than using texts reductively as models to be imitated (Myhill, Lines and Jones 2018). When metalinguistic talk brings together rhetorical purpose and linguistic choice, young writers are supported in recognising how writing is crafted and how they can enact their own authorial agency.

Enabling teachers

However, it is not only students' agency which is important in re-imagining a role for grammar in the curriculum. It is also imperative to foreground teachers as central to any pedagogical approach and needing their own professional agency. One weakness of some studies of grammar, particularly efficacy trials, is a tendency to position teachers as unproblematic implementers of a teaching programme, rather than as critical mediators, managing the teaching and learning needs of students in relation to the expectations of the new programme or pedagogical approach. Our own studies, including the randomised controlled trials, have consistently explored how teachers implement the grammar as choice pedagogy, both through observation and interviews with teachers, and this underlines the centrality of the teacher's role. Our data suggest that, in addition to the capacity to lead dialogic metalinguistic talk, as discussed above, there are three further teacher-focused facets which influence successful implementation of grammar as choice: teachers' subject knowledge of grammar; the importance of sustained Continued Professional Development (CPD); and the effect of national assessment practices on how the approach is used.

Firstly, and not surprisingly, teachers' knowledge of and confidence with grammatical concepts has a strong relationship with their effectiveness in embedding grammar as a tool for making writerly choices in their own classrooms. It has been noticeable when leading CPD in other countries where teachers are routinely taught grammar themselves

that they find it easier to adopt the LEAD pedagogical principles as they are not anxious about whether they understand the grammatical concepts. Many teachers in England were not taught grammar in their own schooling, and their uncertainty with grammar is wholly understandable (Myhill et al 2013). Even with the expectations of the National Curriculum and the specification of required grammatical terminology, we still find that many primary teachers struggle with the grammar when it moves beyond simple examples. However, our data (Myhill et al 2013; Myhill, Watson and Newman 2020) and the later EEF evaluator data (Tracey et al. 2019, 4) highlight that teacher subject knowledge also needs to be assured in terms of recognising how grammar is working in different texts, partly due to a lack of familiarity with a functional orientation. This can make it challenging for teachers to make connections between a grammatical choice and a communicative/rhetorical effect, leading to a more form-focused emphasis on labelling.

Secondly, wherever possible we have always worked *with* teachers on our research projects through sustained CPD rather than through training programmes. This starts from a recognition of the importance and professionalism of teachers, and the need to give teachers agency in how they implement grammar as choice in their own classrooms. It also signals the benefits of collaboration in classroom research, and mutual reciprocality of the expertise that teachers and researchers bring to understanding classroom practice. The goal is not compliance to a programme, but developing professional understanding of the underlying LEAD principles and, with that, greater confidence in adaptation of recommended strategies to meet learners' needs. Biesta (2017) has argued that narrow conceptions of "what works" eradicate " *professional judgement with regard to the 'how' and the 'what for' of professional action from the domain of professionalism"* and that it sees teachers as "*abstract 'machines' in which reflection and judgement are seen as a weakness rather than as an essential part*" (Biesta 2017, 323). We reframe these discourses which position teacher development as concerned with training in "what works" to a discourse which values the professional knowledge teachers bring to a CPD course, and the importance of sustained opportunities to try things out in practice, to reflect, and to share ideas with others.

Finally, our various studies signal how national assessment practices have a direct impact on how some teachers implement grammar as choice in their classrooms. The general washback effect of testing on teaching is well-known: of particular concern here is the specific impact on pedagogical innovation in terms of re-imagining grammar in the curriculum. One impact derives from the Key Stage 2 teacher assessment of writing, where perceptions of what markers would reward led to some teachers deflecting attention away from a connection between a grammatical choice and rhetorical effect. Instead, they conveyed a message that "good" writing must include certain grammatical features, such as adverbials, the passive, or even more bizarrely, nouns and verbs (Myhill and Newman 2016) – a phenomenon also identified by Barrs (2019), Hardman and Bell (2019), and Cushing (2020b). At the same time, the reality of the national GPS test meant that some teachers deviated from the LEAD pedagogical principles to run decontextualised mini grammar lessons (Myhill, Watson and Newman 2020); and the form-focused questioning discussed in the previous section may also have been a consequence of the GPS test.

Conclusion

From a theoretical perspective, re-imagining grammar in the curriculum requires a movement away from prescriptive grammar, concerned with (arbitrary) rules of usage, to descriptive grammar; and from form-focused grammar teaching to functionally oriented grammar teaching. Such a re-imagining supports students in developing a metalinguistic understanding of the relationship between a grammatical choice and its communicative or rhetorical effect in a text. Our research has provided repeated evidence of the benefits of this approach, and is aligned with parallel research in other countries (Macken-Horarik et al. 2015). Importantly though, we have also drawn attention to factors which can limit effectiveness. These relate principally to four key areas: teachers' capacity to lead dialogic metalinguistic discussion; teachers' subject knowledge of grammar; the importance of sustained CPD which recognises teachers' professionalism; and the distorting impact that national assessment practices can have on pedagogical implementation.

This article opened by noting the contested nature of grammar teaching. In re-imagining grammar, we need to move away from simplistic views of teaching and pedagogy in terms of "what works". Biesta argues against the idea of evidence-based practice because it draws on a "*causal model of professional action*" (2007, 7), where teachers who follow an agreed approach will all achieve the same outcomes. This is an impoverished and limiting understanding of teaching and learning, which diminishes teacher professionalism and ignores the complexity of teacher mediation of learning. Debating whether grammar teaching works or not is a sterile endeavour: instead, we need real engagement with growing understanding of the ways in which grammar teaching can reap benefits, but also a critical willingness to address factors which can act as inhibitors of effectiveness. Only then might we realise the possibilities of writing classrooms where young writers are metalinguistically discursive, able to enact their own authorial agency and independence.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Debra Myhill is Director of the Centre for Research in Writing at the University of Exeter, and her research has focused on all aspects of writing, particularly metalinguistic talk; grammar and writing; and the writing process.

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Appendix 1: Studies from University of Exeter Centre for Research in Writing

Project Title	Focus	Method	Funder	Date
Writing the Future	Metadiscourse in English and Arabic writing	Corpus study; and qualitative data	Qatar National Research Fund	2019
WORD	Metalinguistic understanding and decision-making in writing	Qualitative study	Australian Research Council	2019
Choice and Control (2): Grammar for Writing	Efficacy trial of functionally-oriented grammar pedagogy	RCT	Education Endowment Foundation	2016
Growth in Grammar	Linguistic characteristics of writing: cross-phase and genre	Corpus study	Economic and Social Research Council	2015
Analysing Characteristics of Writing at GCSE	Linguistic characteristics of writing in different subjects	Text analysis	Pearson	2014
Grammar in Reading and Writing at GCSE	Effect of functionally-oriented grammar on reading and writing	Quasi-experimental	Pearson	2013
Choice and Control (1): Grammar for Writing	Efficacy trial of functionally-oriented grammar pedagogy	RCT	Education Endowment Foundation	2013
Writing Conversations	Development of Metalinguistic understanding	Qualitative longitudinal	Economic and Social Research Council	2013
Supporting Weaker Writers	Effect of functionally-oriented grammar for struggling writers	Quasi-experimental	Pearson	2012
Follow-on Fund: Grammar for Writing?	Implementation of functionally-oriented grammar approaches	Qualitative	Economic and Social Research Council	2011
Grammar for writing?	Efficacy trial of functionally-oriented grammar pedagogy	RCT plus qualitative data	Economic and Social Research Council	2008
Complex Expression in Writing	Syntactic and linguistic complexity in writing	Literature review	Dept. for Children, Schools and Families	2007
Patterns and Processes	Linguistic characteristics of writing at age 13 and 15	Text Analysis	Economic and Social Research Council	2003
Writing in A level Examinations.	Linguistic characteristics of writing in different subjects	Text Analysis	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority	2001
Technical Accuracy Project	Linguistic characteristics of writing at different grade levels	Text Analysis	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority	1999