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# ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICAL ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHING GRAMMAR IN THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM: ENGLISH

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## Introduction

In my role as a Literacy and TESOL Consultant, I provide support for teachers F-6 and a bridge between research-based current theory in literacy teaching and classroom practice.

Before I conduct a professional development session, I ask teachers to identify specific programming and teaching issues they wish to address. A recurrent area of concern is one of developing students' use of the appropriate grammatical structures that are required across the various genres. Many teachers state they find it challenging to program and teach grammar, not knowing where to begin. This is consistent with current research outlined, for example, in Hammond and Jones (2012). For many, developing teaching and learning activities to cater for EAL/D students is especially challenging.

In developing a professional development course for teachers I focus on practical activities to scaffold students into genre writing. I draw on current research, in particular that of Derewianka (2012), Derewianka and Jones (2012) and Gibbons (2002) as well as my own experiences of teaching and scaffolding text types in the mainstream to different groups of students, including those from diverse EAL/D backgrounds.

*The Australian Curriculum: English (AC:E)* (ACARA, 2013) places a major emphasis on expanding literacy repertoires in the 'Knowledge about Language' strand. Derewianka (2012) has described the central role of the verb or verb group which sets the scene for the different processes or happenings in each genre.

Reflecting this, I designed a teaching sequence with the main focus on the role that the verb plays in the literary recount text *Where the Forest Meets the Sea* (Baker, 1989). The teaching and learning activities provide a scaffold for teachers to explore with students, for example, how the structure of the verb group in a literary recount differs from that of a debate. It introduces teachers to a teaching and learning cycle that focuses on the social purpose of texts, integrates language, literature and literacy strands in the AC:E and supports the development

and extension of students' literacy practices across learning areas.

## Essential knowledge for teachers – key elements

To plan and implement meaningful, integrated teaching and learning sequences that scaffold and support the development of literacy repertoires, the following knowledge is essential.

### 1. *Knowledge about Language in the AC:E*

As stated, there is a major emphasis on expanding literacy repertoires in the 'Knowledge about Language' strand. It includes:

- Text structure and organisation
- Language for interaction
- Expressing and developing ideas

As an example, the Year 3 content descriptors in the strand Language, Expressing and Developing Ideas, the AC:E (ACELA1482) states that students will 'understand that verbs represent different processes (doing, thinking, saying and relating) and that these processes are anchored in time through tense' (ACARA, 2013, p. 55) with elaborations:

- 'identifying different types of verbs and the way they add meaning to a sentence ...'
- 'exploring the use of sensing verbs and how they allow readers to know what characters think and feel ...'
- 'learning how time is represented through the tense of a verb ...'

These elaborations were used in developing the program focus for the practical activities.

### 2. *Knowing the language features and demands of the genre and text*

Language is central to all learning areas in the Curriculum. It varies according to the context in which it is used. For example, the language of a recipe procedure differs from the language of an information report on a koala. A casual oral exchange differs from that of a debate. The language we use changes according to its social purpose.

A literary text can have unpredictable features, as evident in Baker's text. Initially it is most important to analyse the focus text thoroughly and ascertain

the specific language features and demands it contains. The features of the text relate to the overall **social purpose** and the collection of meanings construed in the **field, tenor and mode** all contribute to the overall meaning (see Table 1).

Table 1: Texts in context

SOCIAL PURPOSE – GENRE		
FIELD	TENOR	MODE
What is the subject matter?	Who/what is involved in the interaction?	Is it spoken or written?
Language, grammar and images used to express and connect ideas: Processes (verb groups) Participants (noun groups etc.) Circumstances (adverbial groups etc.)	Tone and register used to interact with others (familiar, distant, authority)	Text, image and structure/ layout used to create cohesive language

Adapted from Derewianka (2012)

A good place to begin is with a focus on the verb or verb groups that set the scene for the different **process or happenings** in each genre (Derewianka, 2012).

A full explanation of tenor and mode can also be found in this publication.

### 3. Importance of students knowing about grammar

Grammar is the 'glue' which holds a text together. Teachers guided by leaders in language education including Derewianka (2012) draw on this knowledge and teach students to:

- 'reflect on how the English language works
- use language appropriately, accurately
- see that different grammatical forms create different meanings
- critically analyse texts to understand how grammar has been used to achieve certain effects
- have a shared language for teaching and learning about the main features of the English language'

Abridged from: Derewianka (2012).

Children use complex grammar without realising. They need to be able to describe the structure (syntax) of the language and the meaning (semantics) at the level of the word, the sentence and the text (ACARA, 2013, p. 7).

The differences and links between functional and traditional grammar are outlined simply as follows:

**Functional grammar:** looks at the words relating to each other, in context, in a group. It deals with 'chunks' of language.

For example, in the sentence '*The fat bumble bees were buzzing around the hive*'

'were buzzing' is the process – verb group

'the fat bumble bees' are the participants – noun group

'around the hive' is the circumstances – adverbial group.

**Traditional grammar:** looks at the individual word e.g.

*The* (definite article) *fat* (adjective) *bumble bees* (noun) etc.

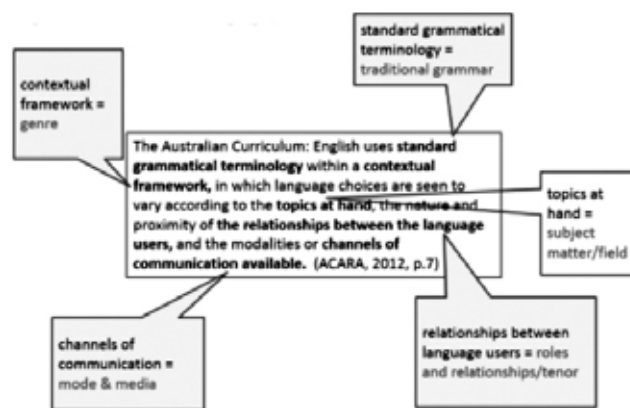
### 4. Seeing language as central to all LAs

'Language is the fundamental resource or tool with which teachers and children work together in schools' (Christie cited in Humphrey, Droga and Feez, 2012, p. 1).

The language strand statement in the AC:E 'informs the planning and conduct of teaching and learning activities in English and provides resources that connect to key concepts and skills in the other strands' (ACARA, 2013, p. 7).

To describe the links between traditional and functional grammar Exley and Mills (2012) analysed this strand statement (see Figure 1). Knowing that 'language choices vary according to the **topics at hand**' (ACARA, 2013, p. 7) is essential to planning effective teaching and learning.

Figure 1. Annotation of the language strand statement from AC:E



Adapted from Exley and Mills (2012)

### 5. What you want the students to learn and the text/s to support it

When planning a unit of work, identify the language requirements and select a variety of texts which support and broaden the language focus. These should include texts where language is combined

with other forms of communication, such as interplay between text and images, non-verbal and multi-modal applications. Identify and plan for any specific problem areas students may encounter, for example, specific needs of EAL/D students. Many languages have very different grammar systems from English which can be extremely challenging for students. (For the learning progression of EAL/D students, see ACARA, 2012).

### 6. Moving from the spoken mode to written mode across various genres

It is essential students develop a good working knowledge of the subject area to facilitate learning the craft of subject specific written language. Developing explicit oral language skills is required **before** writing a specific text.

Furthermore, when we analyse texts we need to think about them in terms of containing more spoken language features or more written features (Derewianka & Jones, 2012) (see Table 2).

Table 2: The shift from spoken to written language

SPOKEN LANGUAGE	WRITTEN LANGUAGE
Interactive and jointly constructed Shared knowledge	Monologue Writer distanced from the reader
Free flowing and intricate	Compact and dense
Spontaneous, first draft	Planned, edited
Embedded in physical setting	Independent of physical setting

(Abridged from Derewianka & Jones (2012))

### 7. Scaffolding the joint construction – ‘designed in’ and ‘interactional’

For some years, researchers including Derewianka (2012), Derewianka and Jones (2012) and Gibbons (2002) have identified the importance of using scaffolding techniques to maintain control over interactions and guide the development of academic language.

**Designed Scaffolding:** This includes classroom set up, student groupings, choice of texts, sequencing of tasks and developing or extending students’ prior knowledge of the topic.

**Interactional Scaffolding:** This includes interactions between the teacher and students in response to teaching and learning activities, such as re-casting, cuing, and recapping oral contributions as academic written language.

### Practical teaching activities

The teaching sequence described here has a middle primary focus, but can be adapted to suit all grades.

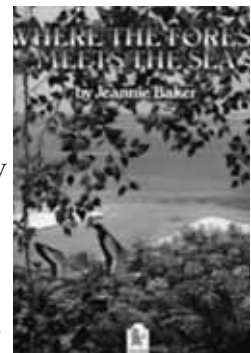
To provide structured support to enable students develop academic language for writing challenging texts, it is essential that teachers employ well planned and defined lessons covering all the above key elements. This should include clear visual support in a variety of forms and scaffolding techniques. In each lesson, particular key elements will take prominence according to student needs and the tasks at hand.

Table 3: Key grammatical features in a literary recount

Language for expressing ideas	Relating verbs (define, describe) Action verbs (describe activities) Saying/thinking verbs (speech, thought) Verbs usually past tense Specific participants Detailed noun groups (describe characteristics, including adjectivals to describe) Circumstances (adverbials express place, time, manner)
Language for connecting ideas	Simple, compound and complex sentences give information
Language for interaction	Affect, judgement appreciation vocabulary Grading vocabulary to intensify descriptions Figurative language such as simile, metaphor, ‘invented’ words
Language for creating cohesive texts	Adverbials and dependent clauses set events in time and place

(Abridged from Humphries, Droga and Feez (2012))

Examine the overall organisation of a literary recount such the one in Table 3 from Humphries, Droga and Feez (2012). I have used the book *Where the Forest Meets the Sea* (Baker 1989) to introduce to students the language of literary recount supported by detailed collage. The powerful, explicit collage images coupled with vocabulary choices expressing specific feelings engages the reader’s attention and senses in a world of imagination. The following sequence also integrates aspects of the language, literature and literacy strands across the curriculum.



### Lesson 1: Engaging students, building topic and language focus

To engage students and introduce an appreciation of literary texts, we discuss the book cover and explore images in the scene. Students draw on prior topic knowledge developed within an HSIE

unit (for example, natural environments). Ask students to predict what they think the book is about.

### Modelling the genre

**Cover the text** throughout the book except for the orientation. Read the **orientation only** to demonstrate the text style and ask students to:

- predict the possible text type
- identify the tense
- identify how it differs from the usual recount structure
- name the main participants
- identify the verbs (happenings or processes)

During discussion, develop a metalanguage (shared language). Explore the differences between a literary recount (no complication) and narrative (complication). Examine the overall organisation of a literary recount emphasising the key features of personal or imagined experience (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Literary Recount



**Social Purpose:** Retells a series of events to entertain. Involves personal or imagined experience.

Structure:

- **Orientation:** sets context for the events that follow and provides information about who, what, where and when
- **Series of Events:** arranged in chronological order
- **Reorientation:** 'rounds off' the sequence with personal comment or interpretation of events

### Scaffolding oral exploration of the genre

Proceed through each image in the book, emphasising the role of verbs by discussing the main characters' actions and feelings while exploring the collages.

Using **probe questions** (Humphrey, Droga & Feez, 2012) scaffolds students' exploring the images to develop deep meaning and focus on:

- What kind of world is the text creating, **literary, scientific, historical?**
- Who or what are the main **participants?**
- What are they **doing/feeling/sensing?**
- What **circumstances** surround the actions?
- What **details** tell us how, when, where and why?'

Next, group students and provide each group

with a different printed image from the book (without text) to later sequence into a draft text. Ask each group to explore the details in the collage e.g. superimposed images of dinosaur, aboriginal children, discuss and share with the class who is involved and what is going on. They identify which images relate to the orientation, series of events and re-orientation and group images under each structure heading.

### Lesson 2: Exploring the role of the verb & planning a joint construction

Figure 3: Tense cards



For EAL/D students, tense needs to be taught explicitly so they understand how speakers and writers use various tenses to create different meaning (Humphrey, Droga & Feez, 2012). I have used this technique with many students and have found it supports the development of the understanding of tense in English, which can be very different in other languages.

In this lesson I use the sequence pictures from the text (Figure 3). However, initially, use pictures of a familiar event such as a school excursion to illustrate the time line. Lay a picture time line on floor. Students move the 'now' card to different points (**time of speaking or writing**) on a chosen picture to show the point in time from **which events are now viewed**. Finally place the other tense cards in the appropriate positions.

### Drafting

Groups re-visit their picture and draft one sentence using a **present tense verb/verb group**.

Many students draw heavily on adjectives to describe the scene. However, at this stage I use minimal recasting when scribing the sentences

and place each under the sequenced image. Later, this becomes an effective learning point when contrasting student writing to Baker’s text. Students identify the verb group which I underlined in green.

Individually, students write the verb choices in their text into a worksheet table under the appropriate **form** column discussing the **meanings** (see Table 4).

*Table 4: Verbs – form and meaning*

Form	Action verbs	Saying verbs	Sensing verbs	Relating verbs
Meaning	go follow arrive	says tells asks	thinks feels wants	be have become seem appear

### Lesson 3 – Scaffolding writing a joint construction

Now read the full text from the book.

Focus on the reasons Baker may have used present tense (seems more immediate and deals with an important issue) and examine the verb **form** mainly used in the text and the relationship with **meaning**. Explore the interplay between text and image **cohesion**, and continue developing a class metalanguage. In my experience, students in middle primary are well able to discuss the reasons for the spoken-like language Baker used and why there is an absence of elaborate descriptive language – could it interfere with the detailed descriptive collage?

Returning to the students’ written draft and working groups, discuss the differences between the two texts, focussing on the effects differing verb choices make. Examine the positive features of their writing and plan an approach to editing and re-casting the text. Here, pay attention to refining wording where required to produce a crafted written joint construction of their literary recount. Often the students’ text contains unnecessary descriptive language. It is beneficial to analyse this with the students. They could illustrate their work accordingly, to redirect the different focus from Baker’s text then produce a class publication.

### Lesson 4: Independent construction

Depending on the demands of the task and the students’ capabilities, independent writing may not be appropriate at this stage. It may take place when the text type is again repeated (see, for example, Derewianka & Jones (2012)).

To scaffold an independent text, provide explicit criteria to reflect the above language features and text type within the same HSIE unit. I usually ask students to begin by writing in pairs, and again it will require discussion, drafting and editing to support developing the craft of writing a literary recount with confidence. Write effective words

and phrases on card for students to draw on and add to; group these according to processes and circumstances.

Consider one of the following approaches:

- Story innovation – write a literary recount with the dinosaur or father recounting their experiences
- Change the tense to the past and explore the beach setting
- Explore a different area in same topic

For detailed teaching and learning cycles refer to the following authors in the reference list: Derewianka (2012); Derewianka and Jones (2012); Gibbons (2002); Humphrey, Droga and Feez (2012).

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