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# Knowledge about language in the Australian curriculum: English

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## **Keywords**

curriculum, australian, language, about, english, knowledge

## **Disciplines**

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# *Knowledge about Language in the Australian Curriculum: English*



Beverly Derewianka

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## *Abstract*

*Somewhat surprisingly, an explicit knowledge about language has been often absent from English curricula. The new Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2012) has taken a fairly radical step in placing knowledge about language at the core of classroom practice, thereby raising the issue of an appropriate model of language to inform the Language Strand of the Curriculum. This paper will outline the rationale behind the Language Strand, and will then make explicit its underlying model of language. The paper thus provides a context for the ensuing articles in this Special Focus Issue of AJLL, which take up various concerns in relation to implementation of the Curriculum and especially of the Language strand of the English Curriculum. The paper concludes by canvassing a number of issues relevant to the development and implementation of the Curriculum: student outcomes, terminology, and pedagogy.*

The Shape Paper (ACARA, 2009), that guided the development of *The Australian Curriculum: English* (ACARA, 2012), characterises English as a coherent body of disciplinary knowledge that students are to develop over the years from foundation through to senior secondary. Three key, interrelated elements are identified: an explicit knowledge about language, an informed appreciation of literature, and expanding repertoires of language use. Of these three, it is the Language Strand – and in particular the approach to grammar – that is arguably least understood. The aim of this paper is to clarify how a ‘knowledge about language’ is conceived in the English Curriculum and to discuss some of the issues raised by the introduction of the Language Strand in the national Curriculum. This paper also serves as an introduction to the Special Focus Issue in that it provides an overview of the functional approach to language taken up in the subsequent papers. In the absence of a background document from ACARA (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority), it is intended that this paper should provide a succinct, accessible account for teachers of the model underpinning the Curriculum.

In the 2009 Shape Paper (ACARA, 2009) the Language Strand was described as a *coherent, dynamic, and evolving body of knowledge about the English*

*language and how it works* (p. 6). By specifying knowledge *about* language, the Curriculum is giving language itself a visibility that has often been lacking. Language is thus recognised as an integral part of our lives that is worthy of study in its own right. It is through language that we shape our thinking, create our identities, engage with others, experience the pleasure of good literature, analyse, critique and reason about the world.

The more elaborated Framing Paper (ACARA, 2008) that preceded the Shape Paper stressed the important role that language plays in learners' lives:

All students need to develop their understandings of how language functions to achieve a range of purposes that are critical to success in school. This includes reading, understanding, and writing texts that describe, narrate, analyse, explain, recount, argue, review, and so on. Such an approach aims to:

- extend students' language resources in ways that support increasingly complex learning throughout the school years;
- help students deal with the language demands of the various curriculum areas;
- enable students to move from the interactive spontaneity of oral language towards the denser, more crafted language of the written mode;
- help students, in their speaking and writing, to move to and fro between the general and the specific, the abstract and the concrete, and the argument and the evidence;
- raise students' awareness generally of interpersonal issues such as how to take and support a stand in an argument, how to express considered opinions, how to strengthen or soften statements, how to interact with a variety of audiences, and so on. (p. 10)

To capture the critical role of language envisaged in the Curriculum requires a rich, robust model of language that is powerful enough to deal with all the demands made upon it. These include:

- supporting students' learning from the early years through to late adolescence;
- strengthening language and literacy development across the curriculum;
- encompassing the basic skills as well as a focus on meaning;
- operating at the levels of word, sentence and text and being able to explain how these are interrelated;
- providing a basis for teaching and assessing oral interaction, reading, viewing and composing;
- providing explicit assistance for students with specific language needs (e.g. EAL, Indigenous);
- heightening the appreciation of literary texts;
- contributing to a critical analysis of discourse; and
- fostering in students a curiosity about how language works.

In proposing such a central role for language, the new Curriculum deliberately challenged teachers to re-imagine what a future-oriented discipline of English might look like. It required a theoretical underpinning that was

relevant and forward-looking, encompassing the above-mentioned dimensions of language in a coherent framework and enabling the Language Strand to interact with, inform and enhance the other Strands of Literature and Literacy. Without such an integrating framework, the Language Strand would be at risk of degenerating into a disjointed collection of unrelated items: a bit of phonics, a bit of grammar, a bit of discourse, a bit of punctuation, and so on. To avoid this, the Curriculum needed a unifying model of language in context which could bring together both form and function, operating seamlessly from the level of discourse down to the phoneme. The following section will expand on the architecture of the Language strand on which it is based, and the ways in which the various elements are related.

### *A relevant model of language*

Australia has been at the forefront of developing a contemporary model of language to inform teachers' literacy practices. Over the past twenty years, researchers and educators have been trialling and implementing a functional approach to language, concerned with how language functions to make the kinds of meanings that are important in our daily lives, in school learning, and in the wider community. A functional model of language has its roots in the work of Professor Michael Halliday (e.g. Halliday, 2009; Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Halliday does not see language as simply a collection of rules and labels for grammatical categories. His interest is in language as 'a resource for making meaning' through which we interactively shape and interpret our world and ourselves. Based on the work of Halliday, educational linguists such as Martin (1985), Christie (2005) and colleagues introduced a functional approach to teachers and students in the early 1980s, initially through the notion of 'genre-based pedagogy'. Their concern was not so much with 'teaching grammar' but with social equity and ensuring that all students have access to the linguistic resources needed for success in school. Over the years, this approach has come to inform syllabuses and literacy programs across Australia. Increasingly, it is being taken up in countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, Brazil, Chile, Sweden, Denmark and some parts of the USA.

The following sections will describe in some detail how a Hallidayan functional model of language informs The Australian Curriculum: English.

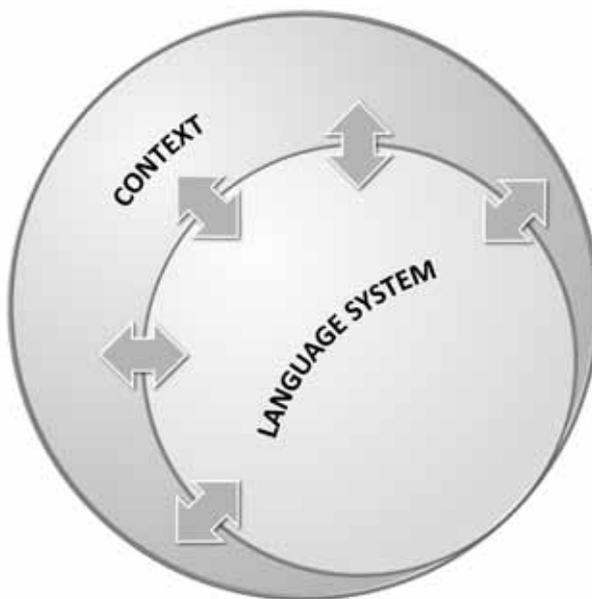
### *Language in context*

A functional model describes how language varies from context to context. It shows, for example:

- how the language of mathematics differs from the language of history;
- how the language we use when talking to close friends differs from giving a formal oral presentation to an unfamiliar audience;
- how spoken language differs from written language;

- how the language choices we make in writing a narrative differ from those we make when writing a scientific explanation.

While traditional grammar was typically taught in decontextualised ways, a functional model sees an intimate relationship between context and language use. Figure 1 represents the relationship between context and the language system.



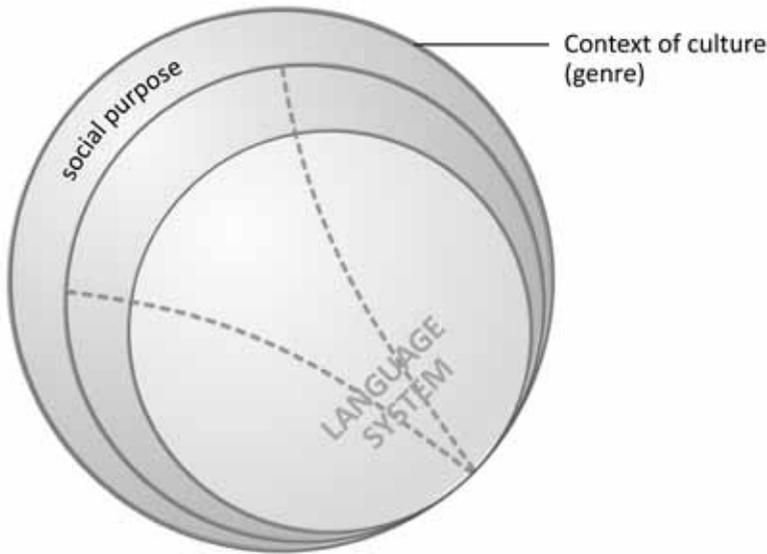
**Figure 1: The language system in a dynamic relationship with the context**

At the broad level, the language system has evolved within the context of a certain culture to meet the needs of that culture. It therefore has certain characteristics because of the jobs it does in the culture.

### Genre

At the level of the cultural context (Figure 2), Rose and Martin (2012 in press) identify the various purposes for which language is used in society. English teachers have long recognised the importance of purpose as an individual's reason for using language. Martin (2009), however, extends this to 'social purpose' – the ways in which language is used by a discourse community to achieve its communal purposes. In the discourse community of schooling, for example, language is used for such purposes as explaining phenomena, arguing for a position, recounting what happened, giving instructions, providing information, creating and responding to literary works, and so forth. These purposes are realised as '**genres**'. Genres are seen as social practices – dynamic, evolving ways of doing things through language. This is a

salutary reminder, when text types have become entrenched in syllabuses and textbooks as static, formulaic ‘recipes’.



**Figure 2: Context of culture**

To an extent, genres are predictable as they have evolved in particular ways to achieve their purpose. Without a certain amount of predictability, the discourse community would be in a constant state of insecurity. As the community’s purposes grow and change, new genres arise. And with increasing complexity of purpose come increasingly complex genres – hybrid genres, genres within genres, subversive genres, and so on.

The Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2012) indicates a range of genres or text types that would be relevant and appropriate for learners to engage with at each stage of schooling. In the preface to each year, a selection of genres is outlined, grouped broadly into texts that entertain, persuade and inform. In Year 3, for example, students are encouraged to engage with narratives, procedures, reports, reviews, poetry and expositions. In Year 10, the list of genres is extended to include discussions, literary analyses and transformations of texts.

In the Content Descriptions of the Language Strand, reference is made to how different genres are organised to achieve their purposes:

*Understand that the purposes texts serve shape their structure in predictable ways (Year 1). (ACARA, 2012, p. 28)*

*Understand that different types of texts have identifiable text structures and language features that help the text serve its purpose (Year 2). (ACARA, 2012, p. 36)*

## Register

At the level of specific situations within the culture, the model indicates how choices from the language system are influenced by certain features of the situation. Halliday (Halliday & Hasan, 1985) identifies three key features in any context of situation: the field, the tenor, and the mode. (Refer to Figure 3.)

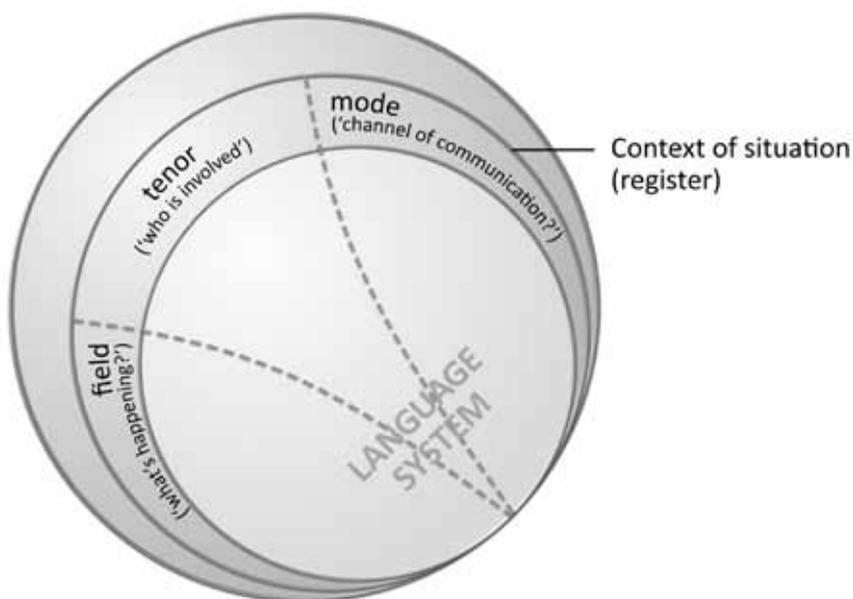


Figure 3: Context of situation: register (field, tenor and mode)

The **field** refers to the subject-matter. In a school context, for example, our language choices will vary depending on the curriculum area and the topic. Subjects such as science, mathematics, history and English each have their own ways of using language. The topic of condensation, for example, will employ quite different language choices from the topic of the gold rush.

The **tenor** refers to the roles we take up and our relationships with others in any situation. This reflects the notion of 'audience' that is commonly referred to in English teaching. Tenor encompasses such matters as how the status, level of expertise, age, ethnic background, and gender of the participants can have an impact on the language used. It considers how well they know each other, how frequently they meet and how they feel about each other. It takes into account the various roles that people take up in their daily lives: student, teacher, mother, child, spouse, client, customer, employee, and so on. In writing, it involves being sensitive to the needs of an unknown reader, using language to engage with the reader and create a certain rapport.

The **mode** refers to the channel of communication being used. Whereas traditional grammar deals only with the language of the written mode, a

functional approach describes how spoken language differs from written language – an important consideration as students move from the oral language of the home and schoolyard to the increasingly dense and compact language of the written mode in academic contexts. Mode can also refer to visual and multimodal texts presented through a range of media.

Any combination of these contextual features creates the **register** of a situation. In one situation, we might find a couple of classmates (tenor) discussing (oral mode) their favourite movie (field). In another situation, we might imagine a student interacting with a favourite author (tenor) writing in a blog on the author’s website (written mode) about a book she has just enjoyed (field). Given a particular register, we can predict the kinds of language choices that would typically be made in that situation. These core features of the context were reflected in the original Framing Paper (ACARA, 2008, p. 11).

*students should engage with and construct a wide range of texts, understanding how they differ depending on their **purpose**, the nature of the **audience**, their **subject-matter** and the **mode and medium** in use.*

In The Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2012), reference can be found to the register variables in the introduction:

*language choices are seen to vary according to the topics at hand, the nature and proximity of the relationships between the language users, and the modalities or channels of communication. (p. 6)*

and in each year, though the terms field, tenor and mode are not explicitly used and the descriptions of them are not as systematically developed as they might have been.

### *Language as functional*

Whereas traditional grammar was often taught as an academic exercise in labelling the parts of speech and learning rules for their combination, a functional approach is concerned with how language has evolved in certain ways to enable us to do things in our lives. A functional model describes how language enables us:

- to represent ‘what’s going on’ and construct our understanding of the world (the ideational function of language);
- to interact with others (the interpersonal function of language);
- to create coherent, well-structured texts in both the spoken and written modes (the textual function of language).

Figure 4 indicates how resources in the language system tend to cluster around these functions of language:

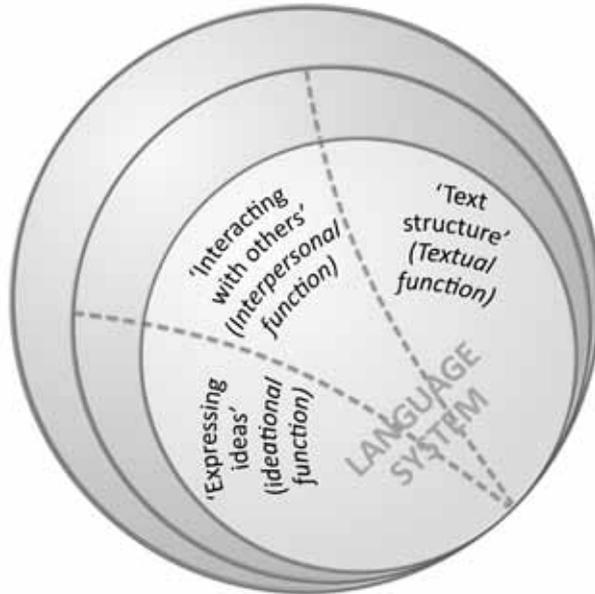


Figure 4: The functions of language

### Representing 'what's going on'

The theory proposes that language is used to represent our experience of the world. Our experience is made up of 'doings' and 'happenings' – the various processes in which we engage, such as activity in the physical world (*sitting, driving, teaching, shopping*); activity in the inner world of thinking, feeling and perceiving (*remembering, knowing, wanting, disliking, seeing*); verbal activity (*saying, spluttering, exclaiming*); along with the process of creating relationships between bits of information (*a koala is a marsupial; it has a pouch*). These **processes** involve a variety of **participants**: doers and receivers of the actions, thinkers, sensors, sayers (along with what is thought, sensed and said). And surrounding all this activity are various **circumstances**: when? where? how? why? with whom? about what?

In The Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2012), this function is reflected in the Language sub-strand 'Expressing and developing ideas'. In Year 1, for example, we find the following Content Description:

*Identify the parts of a simple sentence that represent 'What's happening?', 'Who or what is doing or receiving the action?' and the circumstances surrounding the action. (p. 28)*

The strand later introduces terminology relating to the grammatical forms that realise these functions. In Year 3, for example:

*Understand that verb groups represent different processes (doing, thinking, saying and relating) ... (ACARA, 2012, p. 118)*

Beyond the single clause representing ‘a slice of experience’, the sub-strand also deals with how clauses/‘ideas’ can be combined in various ways, resulting in compound and complex sentences.

### **Enabling interaction**

Language functions to establish and maintain relationships with others. Through language we engage with our listener or reader and with others in the broader discourse community, we take on different roles, and we express feelings and opinions. In the Language Strand, this is referred to as ‘Language for interaction’ and is reflected in Content Descriptions such as the following:

*Understand that roles and relationships are developed and challenged through language and interpersonal skills (Year 9). (ACARA, 2012, p. 117)*

In our negotiations with others, we ask for information, provide information, request services and offer to do things, resulting in patterns of interaction. This is referred to as ‘the Mood system’ (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) and is alluded to in Content Descriptions such as the following:

*Understand that there are different ways of asking for information, giving offers and making commands (Year 1). (ACARA, 2012, p. 28)*

*Understand that successful cooperation with others depends on shared use of social conventions, including turn-taking patterns ... (Year 3). (ACARA, 2012, p. 116)*

Interaction is also imbued with the expression of attitudes: feelings, opinions regarding the qualities of things and judgements of people’s behaviour. Here The Curriculum draws on Appraisal theory – a recent development within the functional tradition (Martin and White, 2005).

In the early years of the Curriculum, the focus tends to be on feelings:

*Understand that language can be used to explore ways of expressing needs, likes, dislikes (Foundation). (ACARA, 2012, p. 21)*

*Explore different ways of expressing emotions ... (Year 1). (ACARA, 2012, p. 29)*

In later years, students are encouraged to examine how language can be used to appreciate and evaluate the qualities of texts, things and people and to understand the differences between the language of opinion and feeling and the language of factual reporting or recording. In Year 9, for example, we find:

*Investigate how evaluation can be expressed directly and indirectly using devices, for example allusion, evocative vocabulary and metaphor (Year 9). (ACARA, 2012, p. 86)*

The strength of opinions, evaluations and feelings can be varied. Intensifying or toning down our attitudes is referred to as ‘graduation’ (Martin & White, 2005), as in the Content Description from Year 3:

*Examine how evaluative language can be varied to be more or less forceful (Year 3). (ACARA, 2012, p. 44)*

Engagement with other views and voices is another interpersonal function. This is reflected in such Content Descriptions as:

*Understand how to move beyond making bare assertions and take account of differing perspectives and points of view (Year 5). (ACARA, 2012, p. 58)*

*Understand how language use can have inclusive and exclusive social effects, and can empower or disempower people (Year 10). (ACARA, 2012, p. 94)*

### **Creating coherent and cohesive texts**

The language system includes certain resources that function to create ‘text’. The textual function of language enables the construction of texts that are coherent and cohesive. In the Language Strand, this is referred to as ‘Text structure and organisation’.

The beginnings of sentences, for example, can be used to signal to the reader how the topic is being developed. At the level of the paragraph, topic sentences are used to alert the reader to the main point that will be developed. And at the beginning and end of a text, the opening paragraph often functions to foreshadow how the text will unfold and the closing paragraph often pulls the threads together. These resources are used to manage the flow of information through the text, generally referred to as the ‘thematic’ structure of the text (Halliday, 2009).

In the Language Strand, students’ attention is drawn to how ‘texture’ is created through the use of such resources:

*Understand that paragraphs are a key organisational feature of written texts (Year 3). (ACARA, 2012, p. 44)*

*Understand that the starting point of a sentence gives prominence to the message in the text and allows for prediction of how the text will unfold (Year 5). (ACARA, 2012, p. 58)*

*Understand that the coherence of more complex texts relies on devices that signal text structure and guide readers, for example overviews, initial and concluding paragraphs and topic sentences ... (Year 7). (ACARA, 2012, p. 72)*

In addition, certain devices function to create links between bits of information in a text, forming cohesive ties (Halliday, 2009). Pronouns, for example, are often used to refer back to something mentioned previously in the text.

Throughout the Language Strand, reference is made to cohesion in texts:

*Understand how texts are made cohesive through resources such as word associations, synonyms and antonyms (Year 2). (ACARA, 2012, p. 37)*

*Understand how texts are made cohesive through the use of linking devices including pronoun reference and text connectives (Year 4). (ACARA, 2102, p. 51)*

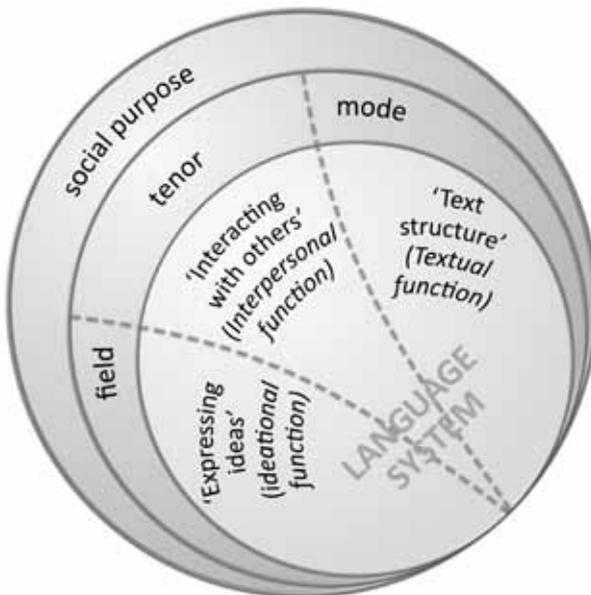
*Understand that cohesive links can be made in texts by omitting or replacing words. (Year 6). (ACARA, 2012, p. 65)*

*Understand how coherence is created in complex texts through devices like lexical cohesion, ellipsis, grammatical theme and text connectives (Year 8). (ACARA, 2012, p. 79)*

*Compare and contrast the use of cohesive devices in texts, focusing on how they serve to signpost ideas, to make connections and to build semantic associations between ideas. (Year 9). (ACARA, 2012, p. 86)*

### **Relating context and language**

A major contribution of the model being developed here is that it allows for a close connection to be made between the context and the language system, as depicted in Figure 5.



**Figure 5: Relating features of the context to the functions of language**

Looking at the diagram, we can see that in a particular context, the **field** (or

‘subject-matter’) will be built up through certain choices from the resources for **‘expressing ideas’** (the ideational function) in the language system. In a procedure for making a cake, for example, it is likely that a number of ‘action verbs’ will be used (*blend, mix, pour*). The participants in these processes are likely to be expressed through noun groups that are not highly elaborated and that represent the utensils and ingredients (*a bowl, the mixture, an egg*). Circumstances of place, time and manner will be critical to achieving the result (*in the oven, for thirty minutes, carefully, with a towel*). In the Language Strand, the relationship between the context (in this case the field) and language choice is exemplified in Content Descriptions such as the following:

*Understand the use of vocabulary in everyday contexts as well as a growing number of school contexts (Year 1). (ACARA, 2012, p. 30)*

*Understand how texts vary in complexity and technicality depending on the topic ... (Year 4). (ACARA, 2012, p. 51)*

*Investigate vocabulary typical of extended and more academic texts and the role of abstract nouns, classification, description and generalisation in building specialised knowledge through language (Year 7). (ACARA, 2012, p. 73)*

In developing the **tenor** of a particular situation, certain choices will be made from the **‘language for interaction’** (interpersonal) resources in the language system. A writer of a travel brochure, for example, might interact with the potential customer by asking questions (*Have you ever wanted to travel to visit a tropical island?*); giving commands (*Just imagine yourself lying on the golden sand under the palm trees.*); and making statements (*You deserve to pamper yourself*). The writer might attempt to persuade the reader through the use of emotion (*You will love ...*) or by describing and intensifying the qualities of the destination (*... this truly luxurious resort*). The writer might also draw on other voices and perspectives such as testimonials by previous visitors. The Language Strand makes reference to the relationship between the tenor of the context and its impact on choices from the interpersonal function:

*Understand that language varies when people take on different roles in social and classroom interactions and how the use of key interpersonal language resources varies depending on context (Year 2). (ACARA, 2012, p. 36)*

*Understand that patterns of language interaction vary across social contexts ... and that they help to signal roles and relationships (Year 5). (ACARA, 2012, p. 57)*

Depending on the **mode** being employed, relevant resources will be selected from the **‘text structure and organisation’** (textual) function of the language system. If the mode is spoken, for example, the language will more likely be spontaneous, ‘first draft’ and embedded in the immediate context. If

the mode is written, it is more likely that the language will be more considered, edited, dense and cohesive within the text itself. If the mode is visual or multimodal, then the nature of the text will again reflect certain design choices. The relationship between the mode/medium and the choices from the textual function of the language system is recognised in the Language Strand:

*Understand that some language in written texts is unlike everyday spoken language (Foundation). (ACARA, 2012, p. 21)*

*Explore the different contributions of words and images to meaning in stories and information texts (Foundation). (ACARA, 2012, p. 22)*

### **Discussion**

From the above, it is evident that the Language Strand of *The Australian Curriculum: English* is informed by an approach that sees language as a system of resources for making meaning. These resources have evolved to meet our needs, enabling us to represent our experience of the world, to interact with others, and to create ‘texture’ in texts. The model suggests a systematic relationship between context and text: the choices we make from the language system are constrained by certain features in the context: the social purpose (‘genre’), the field (‘subject-matter’), the tenor (‘roles and relationships’), and the mode (‘channel of communication’).

Such a model meets the challenges posed by the Framing and Shape Papers in terms of the need for a forward-looking, contemporary approach to grammar that deals with the how language functions in context to meet the needs of students. There are, nevertheless, a number of issues related to the Language strand, some of which will be canvassed below.

### **Student outcomes**

While knowledge about language in a broad sense can be seen as having intrinsic value, questions are often raised more specifically about knowledge about grammar and its utilitarian merit. The research evidence indicates that traditional grammar taught in traditional ways does not improve students’ writing. As far back as 1963, comprehensive analysis of the quantitative literature by Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and Schoer (1963) concluded:

*In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms; the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing. (pp. 37–38)*

In 1986, George Hillocks (1986) reaffirmed the findings of Braddock and his colleagues:

None of the studies reviewed for the present report provides any support for teaching grammar as a means of improving composition skills. If schools insist upon teaching the identification of parts of speech, the parsing or diagramming of sentences, or other concepts of traditional school grammar (as many still do), they cannot defend it as a means of improving the quality of writing. (p. 138)

More recently, Andrews (2005, p. 69), reporting on a review of whether the formal teaching of sentence grammar was effective in helping 5 to 16-year-olds to write better, concluded that 'no research to date has shown that either the teaching of abstracted grammatical rules or a more diffuse 'awareness' of their existence helps in the improvement of development of writing *per se*'.

Over the past several decades, however, there have been considerable advances in our understanding of language and how it works. There is now, in fact, a branch of research devoted specifically to educational linguistics. Drawing on such insights – and using a pedagogy that explores authentic language use in context – there is recent research evidence that the teaching of grammar can in fact contribute to students' literacy development (Hudson, 2001; Myhill, 2005).

Research from a functional perspective shows promise of improved student outcomes. Williams (2005), for example, shows that children as young as 7 have no problems with using functional concepts and terminology and are able to productively apply their knowledge about language in a range of contexts. Similarly, Folkeryd (2006) in Sweden drew on Appraisal theory to assist students in grades 5, 8 and 11 to identify and discuss the evaluative resources used in their own writing of narratives, resulting in substantial improvements. In the USA, Schleppegrell, Achugar and Oteiza (2004) used Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to guide students to deconstruct the language choices in their history textbooks such as nominalisations, choice of verbs, ways of reasoning, ambiguity of conjunctions and time reference. They report that students who participated in the project made significantly greater gains on the state exams than students who had not participated. Similar to the findings of Schleppegrell and her colleagues, results from case studies by a research team in Massachusetts, suggest that participants developed a deeper understanding of disciplinary knowledge and associated language practices. The data also indicate that SFL-based pedagogy supported emergent English as an Additional Language (EAL) writers in analysing and producing more coherent texts reflective of written as opposed to oral discourse (Gebhard & Martin, 2010; Gebhard et al., 2010).

In South Australia, case studies reveal dramatic improvement in the writing of EAL learners. In one instance, reported in Polias and Dare (2006), students were asked to write an explanation of how milk gets from the cow to the supermarket. Following some intensive work on relevant language features such as definitions of technical terms, the passive voice, and using Circumstances of place in Theme position, the students' final drafts were

assessed as several steps higher on the South Australian ESL Scope and Scales (SA DECD).

At another primary school in South Australia (Saracini-Palombo & Custance, 2011), where two Year 6/7 teachers took a strong explicit, genre approach to teaching functional grammar and its metalanguage to their students, there was a marked difference in their 2008 Year 7 National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results, with their students strongly outperforming State and National averages. While the school's literacy results were above State and National averages in Year 3 and 5, the Year 7 results further increased the lead and significantly outperformed Year 9 State and National averages. This was the case for every aspect of the Literacy tests. However, only figures for Writing are included here.

### *Writing results*

	Year 3	Year 5	Year 7	Year 9
National	414.2	486.4	533.7	573.1
State	415.9	481.4	538.6	569.3
School	430.1	509.5	611.8	

(ACARA 2008 cited in Saracini-Palombo & Custance, 2011)

When one looks at the breakdown of student performance across the writing criteria, the difference in the number of students at this school who scored at higher levels in the rubric is substantial, as in the following examples:

Cohesion	National	State	School
3: accurate use of cohesive devices	48%	53%	73%
4: range of cohesive devices used effectively	3%	3%	17%

Sentence Structure	National	State	School
3: simple and compound sentences correct	83%	85%	100%
4: most complex sentences correct	35%	35%	70%
5: variety in length, structure and beginnings	6%	6%	20%

Equally as important as strong performance in NAPLAN was the change in the students' perception and confidence in themselves as writers, with several boys remarking to one teacher that they never thought they could write like that.

Much of the research being conducted in this area is small scale (e.g. Jones & Chen, this Issue; French, this Issue), or at the level of action research studies, such as the one above. With the adoption of a functional approach in the Language strand, there is now the opportunity and need for more large-scale, rigorous research into the benefits or otherwise of an explicit knowledge about language, identifying which features in particular contribute to student literacy outcomes at different ages/stages and the extent to which the learning

is durable and transferable. (See Hammond, this Issue for a brief discussion of one relevant large scale study – the NSW Successful Language Learners’ project.) Future research needs to go beyond traditional concerns regarding the structuring of sentences to address such matters as how students’ knowledge about language might be implicated in their use of oral language, their ability to comprehend, critically analyse and compose written and visual texts from the discourse level down to the word and below, their ability to make discerning linguistic choices in relation to context, and their perceptions of the value of such knowledge.

### Terminology

A key concern during the development of the Curriculum was to ensure that teachers would be able to recognise familiar terminology in the Content Descriptions. And indeed, a cursory glance at the Language Strand reveals terms referring to the traditional ‘parts of speech’ such as ‘noun’, ‘verb’, ‘adjective’, and ‘adverb’. Virtually all grammatical descriptions (including a functional approach) use such terminology when referring to the grammatical classes and the **form** they take. Most contemporary grammars, however, have another layer of terminology that refers to the **function** of these grammatical units. In a functional approach, for example, when discussing how language enables us ‘to represent what is going on’, functional terms are used such as the *processes* in which we engage, the *participants* in those processes and the *circumstances* surrounding the process. This allows us to talk about the kinds of meanings being made by the various grammatical forms. So while traditional grammar is mainly concerned with form, a functional grammar deals with the relationship between form and function.

Ultimately, the question is not so much ‘which terminology to use?’ but what that terminology allows our students to do. A functional model includes most of the terms employed in traditional school grammars, however it differs from traditional grammar primarily in terms of the purpose for learning about language and the terminology needed to talk about the meanings being created.

There are several issues relating to terminology that have yet to be researched. Is there an optimal (or even minimal) number of terms needed to achieve the intentions of The Australian Curriculum? In which year to start introducing metalinguistic terms? Whether to begin with functional terms and introduce the formal terms as necessary – or vice versa? Which functional terms to use? What problems might students experience with abstract, technical terms? Is it possible to use more ‘everyday’ terms and retain theoretical integrity? How to bring about a cumulative, shared, productive metalanguage across the years of schooling as envisaged by the Curriculum? Is such a metalanguage transferable when students study a language other than English? Perhaps the more basic question is whether, in fact, a metalanguage is needed

at all (e.g. Andrews, 2005). Can students simply use their intuitions about language, guided by a teacher who can provide targeted question prompts and model good language use? A major Australian study by Macken-Horarik and colleagues is currently investigating such questions.

### **Pedagogy**

The traditional way in which grammar has often been taught is through exercises from a textbook or 'ditto sheets' at the level of individual sentences and often using inauthentic language designed simply to teach a grammatical point. Because a functional grammar is concerned with extending students' ability to make meaning, it is generally taught in the context of curriculum activities that involve students in using language to achieve communicative purposes. The language relevant to the task at hand is typically taught explicitly at certain points during a curriculum cycle that passes through stages of building up an understanding of the subject matter, modelling the structure and language features of the genre, jointly constructing texts and moving the students towards independent use of the language under focus. Such an approach is based on the notion of scaffolding and reflects contemporary learning theory (Gibbons, 2006). In Hong Kong, for example, Firkins, Forey and Sengupta (2007) describe how an activity-based genre-approach to teaching writing to low proficiency students resulted in a number of positive learning experiences related to students' comprehension and production of well-structured texts, the characteristic lexicogrammatical features of the targeted genres (e.g. choices of processes, temporal conjunctions, tense, modality, and mood), and the overall enjoyment expressed by the students.

Myhill (2005) argues against the 'front-loading' of teaching grammatical features for students to then incorporate uncritically into their texts. She recommends that writing should be viewed as a communicative act with writers encouraged to see the various linguistic choices available to them as meaning-making resources, ways of creating relationships with their reader, and shaping and flexing language for particular effects.

This recommendation is addressed in part by the study by Hammond and Gibbons (2005) which drew on extensive work with teachers to develop a pedagogical model that incorporates both 'designed-in' and 'contingent' scaffolding. That is, at the macro-level, the model assumes a degree of planning and sequencing of activities and content, including language features relevant to the topic, the genre and students' identified prior knowledge. This is complemented by responsive interaction at the micro-level that is contingent upon students' needs as they arise during 'teachable moments' in context. Gardner (2010) similarly describes a pedagogic model which builds in regular sessions of dynamic assessment across a sequence of lessons, affording students the opportunity to move beyond their linguistic intuition towards a more informed understanding of the language resources needed to

achieve the outcomes of the task. Other studies, such as those by Jones (2010) and Moss (2006), examine the kind of teacher-student interaction that mediates student learning.

Andrews (2005) notes that there is still a dearth of evidence for the effective use of grammar teaching of any kind in the development of writing. There is obviously much work to be done in this area in terms of identifying practices that are sensitive to the needs and interests of students, that are flexible, and that make a demonstrable difference to student learning.

### **Conclusion**

Despite concerns such as the above, there is cause for considerable optimism. Policy change is always fraught and at a national level even more so. We are in the beginning stages of a process that will take many years. Over that time, the Curriculum will take on a life of its own as it is recontextualised by the states /territories and interpreted and implemented by schools and teachers. ACARA views the Curriculum as an evolving document that will be constantly refined as teachers work with it in the classroom. Good teachers will look at it as an opportunity to refresh their classroom practices and deepen their professional knowledge. For those looking for a relevant, contemporary model of language to inform their work, teachers are finding that the Language strand offers a sound, theoretically coherent foundation that they and their students can draw on as the basis for lively exploration of language and how it works.

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