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Grammar in the early years: A games-based approach

Imogene Cochrane
Erskineville Public School

Amelia Reece
Erskineville Public School

Katie Ahearn
Erskineville Public School

Pauline Jones
University of Wollongong, paulinej@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

The Language strand of the Australian Curriculum: English provides scope for students to develop their understandings of how an author's purpose drives specific language choices in texts, including the use of a range of clause structures and word groups, and patterns of cohesion across texts (ACARA, 2013). This functionally oriented grammar content, and the metalanguage associated with it, needs to be explicitly taught so that students can confidently analyse the deliberate language choices made by authors, as well as make informed personal choices when developing and expressing ideas in their own texts. This paper will model the manner in which one school developed and integrated the teaching of grammar, from a functional perspective, into existing literacy session routines. In particular, the paper details how a dialogic approach (Alexander, 2008) and a framework of games-based pedagogies were used in the Early Years classrooms within the context of an author study. The paper demonstrates high levels of student engagement with the functionally oriented grammar content and details their new knowledge and understandings through peer interactions and their written work.

<div align="center">PETAA Paper 192</div>

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Introduction

The Language strand of the *Australian Curriculum: English* provides scope for students to develop their understandings of how an author's purpose drives specific language choices in texts, including the use of a range of clause structures and word groups, and patterns of cohesion across texts (ACARA, 2013). This functionally oriented grammar content, and the metalanguage associated with it, needs to be explicitly taught so that students can confidently analyse the deliberate language choices made by authors, as well as make informed personal choices when developing and expressing ideas in their own texts.

This paper will model the manner in which one school developed and integrated the teaching of grammar, from a functional perspective, into existing literacy-group structure. In particular, the paper details how a dialogic approach (Alexander, 2008) and a framework of games-based pedagogies were used in the Early Years classrooms within the context of an author study. The paper demonstrates high levels of student engagement with the functionally oriented grammar content and details their new knowledge and understandings through peer interactions and their written work.

This PETAA Paper :

• demonstrates how to integrate functionally oriented grammar into existing practices in early primary classrooms within a whole-school approach

• reviews benefits of games based pedagogies for fostering student dialogue and high levels of engagement

• presents detailed examples of lesson activities including functional grammar games .

A whole-school approach: Our experience

Grammar has been identified as a focus area in our school plan and in order to address this aspect of the curriculum we entered into a professional partnership with academics from the University of Wollongong who were able to assist us in developing our knowledge about language and related teaching pedagogies. We had been teaching grammar but this often occurred in isolated situations and involved students completing worksheets to identify categories such as nouns and verbs in an 'add-on' de-contextualised manner, drawing on a traditional approach to teaching grammar. We wanted a more contextualised approach: one that would enable us to work with the texts, activities and routines of our existing literacy programs. We also wanted a cumulative approach to teaching grammar across the school, one that involved building on students' growing knowledge from year to year. Further, because oracy is a key component of the school literacy program, we recognised the importance of fostering students' use of a shared terminology or metalanguage (Derewianka, 2011) to support rich conversations around text. It is crucial to mention here that a shared metalanguage through which staff dialogue took place was pivotal to the success of our whole-school approach.

We began our grammar teaching at the level of the clause. As Table 1 shows, important understandings about the clause accumulate across the Early Years of primary schooling. This knowledge provides students with the necessary tools to analyse and understand language beyond Stage 1 and into the later years of schooling.

Table 1: Understandings about the clause Foundation to Year 6.

Foundation	Recognise that sentences are key units for expressing ideas
Year 1	Identify the parts of a simple sentence that represent 'What's happening?', 'Who or what is involved?' and
Year 2	Understand that simple connections can be made between ideas by using a compound sentence with two or more clauses usually linked by a coordinating conjunction

Source: English Scope and Sequence Foundation to Year 6 (ACARA 2013)

In our classrooms, learning about the clause was integrated into the existing literacy sessions. Over a term we looked at a number of picture books written by the Australian author, Alison Lester. We studied these texts as part of our modelled and guided reading time when students had the opportunity to appreciate and delve into these rich texts, with their dynamic visual images. When students were fairly familiar with the content and themes of the texts, we then used these same texts as the basis of our grammar teaching. The books also provided familiar language for the students to recast and manipulate during game-based learning time, which will be discussed further.

A closer look at the literacy lesson:

Functional grammar was targeted during a 1-hour literacy session on one day a week. Our typical literacy session began with a whole class orientation, followed by small group collaborative activities, and a whole class plenary, as shown in Figure 1.
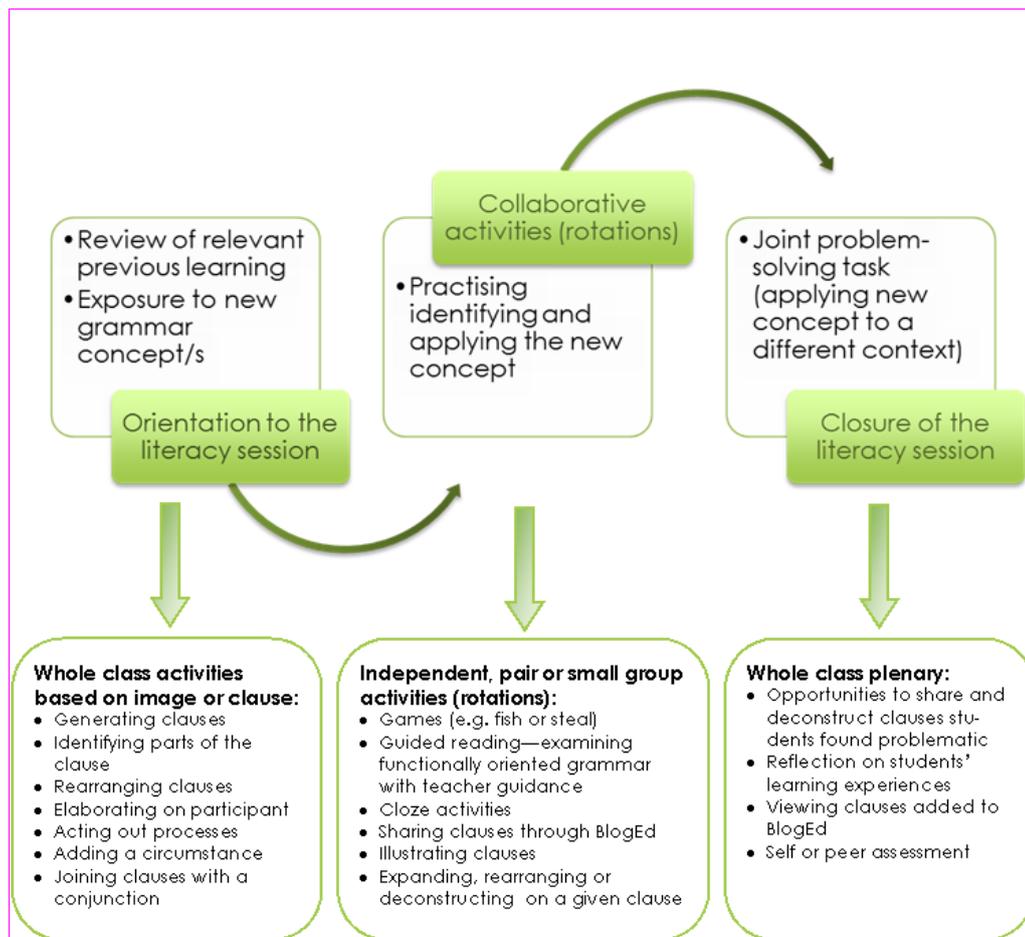

Figure 1: A typical reading session focused on grammar

A typical reading session with a grammar focus began with a dynamic narrative image, taken from a familiar Alison Lester text, with students asked to discuss what was happening in the image. Together we would generate clauses, eg, 'The monkey is swinging from the vine' and then used that clause for further analysis of the parts and their function. Using the prompt 'show me the action' we assisted students to focus specifically on the process in the clause, eg, 'is swinging'. Then we asked the question: 'Who or what is involved?' and asked students to identify the Participant eg, 'The monkey'. Finally we used the prompt 'Is there any extra information that tells us where, when, how or why?' and assisted students to identify the Circumstance eg, 'from the vine'. As we progressed through this process, over a series of lessons, we introduced a system of colour coding for parts of the clause to assist students in their clausal analysis.

When students were confident in analysing a variety of clauses, we formally introduced the metalanguage of Process, Participant and Circumstance.

> **Overview of question prompts and metalanguage**
>
> What's happening? Show me the action. (Process – green)
>
> Who or what is involved? (Participant – red)
>
> Is there any other information? Where, when or how? (Circumstance – blue)

Another example of how a clause would be analysed is:

Who/what is involved?	What's happening?	Any extra information?
The girl with the pigtails	*is looking*	*in the chest*
Participant	Process	Circumstance

Note the colour coding for Participant, Process and Circumstance.

The students then completed three 15-minute rotations of collaborative activities, including bookwork to consolidate grammar teachings, our existing comprehension and phonics activities, which support the text and specially designed games to assist students in developing their understandings of functional grammar, before reconvening for a plenary session. These grammar games are described in detail below.

Games-based pedagogy: The benefits of dialogue and engagement

The use of games was a key strategy, which supported students in their uptake of the functionally oriented metalanguage and associated concepts. The games were designed to foster conversations that hinged on using the grammatical metalanguage. The concepts and terminology that had been modelled and jointly constructed earlier in the literacy session were now 'handed over' to the students in a peer-supported situation. Through play, students were encouraged to reuse terminology, to clarify, argue and eventually come to a more thorough understanding about the grammatical concepts in a purposeful context.

> **Why games?**
>
> • 	High engagement levels and positive experiences of grammar
>
> • 	Opportunity for peer-to-peer dialogue to consolidate knowledge and understanding
>
> • 	Building on previously acquired knowledge and skills
>
> • 	Competitive aspect encourages students to debate the validity of responses and be accountable for their language choices

Robin Alexander's model of Dialogic Teaching 'harnesses the power of talk to stimulate and extend pupils' thinking and advance their learning and understanding' (Alexander, 2010). Alexander argues that teaching that is dialogic features five principles described in Table 2.

Table 2: Five key principles of teaching and learning talk

Collective	teachers and students address learning tasks together
Reciprocal	teachers and students listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints
Supportive	students extend their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over wrong answers, and help each other to reach common understandings
Cumulative	teachers and students build on answers and other oral contributions and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and understanding
Purposeful	classroom talk, though open and dialogic is also planned and structured with specific learning goals in view

In our experience, the grammatical metalanguage offered a useful vehicle for fostering the scaffolded dialogue envisaged by Alexander. The five principles of dialogic teaching are derived from four key repertoires that combine *talk for everyday life*, *learning talk*, *teaching talk* and *classroom organisation*.

Of particular relevance to games-based pedagogies for teaching grammar is the notion of *learning talk*. Alexander explains that learning talk consists of a range of opportunities for students to: narrate, explain, analyse, speculate, imagine, explore, evaluate, discuss, argue, justify and ask questions of their own. The games-based approach to teaching grammar has been specifically designed to allow students to participate in these types of talk. In particular, opportunities for talk are built into games, which require students to discuss reasons for their choices, argue and justify their position, as well as ask questions of each other to clarify understandings. Dufficy (2005) further supports the use of collaborative, student-centred activities with a high level of constraint, whereby there is a focus and a framework for how the activity is to be conducted. The clauses chosen for our games were carefully selected to constrain the tasks and set students up for success. Dufficy (p. 57) argues that such activities incorporate repetition, thus providing children with meaningful practice using the same, tightly focused language patterns.

When modelling the games as a whole class, clauses used were directly related to the Alison Lester texts ensuring that students were practising manipulating clauses with familiar language. When students played games independently, they had the opportunity to apply their skills to other clauses as part of the handover process (Dufficy, 2005). The games developed for the literacy session, therefore, were not simply entertaining 'add-ons' but were intended as opportunities for deep engagement.

As well as promoting dialogue, the games produced high levels of student participation and engagement. The importance of student engagement for learning is widely recognised (Dufficy, 2005; Martin, 2007; Martin & Debus, 1998; McInerney & McInerney, 2006). When students are engaged there is increased knowledge recall and they are more likely to approach tasks with persistence (Renninger, Hidi & Krapp, 1992; Turner,1995; Guthrie et al., 1996). High levels of student engagement have also been linked to student achievement, suggesting that students will experience greater learning outcomes when they are engaged in the task (Louden, Rohl et al., 2005).

The games foster engagement in a variety of ways. They provide students with a sense of autonomy and ownership of their learning, require active physical involvement, give

students opportunities to experience success and provide students with immediate feedback.

The games in detail

We present four of the games in detail here. These games, which rely heavily on substantive dialogue between students in order to be played, were designed with increasing levels of difficulty and demand, and ideally should be taught and played in sequence. Although these games were used in the Early Years classroom, all students need to start their understandings about functionally oriented grammar at the level of the clause. These games are useful as they can be easily modified to suit an older audience eg for Stages 2 or 3, and clauses can be changed to incorporate more complex texts. Templates for the dice and the playing boards can be found at:

http://educationalsemiotics.wordpress.com/2013/01/08/imogenes-grammar-games/

Game 1: Race to build a clause

Resources: Dice showing colour-coding and prompts for clause elements and their function, eg, one face of the dice coloured red with the word 'Participant', another coloured green with the word 'Process', another coloured blue with the word 'Circumstance' and so on; laminated strips of cards, also colour coded, each displaying an example of a clause element (eg, a Process – 'was swinging'; a Participant – 'the monkey'; Circumstance – 'from the vine' etc,).

Figure 2: A colour-coded, labelled dice

[Design Insert Race to build 2 here]

In this game, students race to build clauses by manipulating parts of a clause so they make sense. A roll of the colour coded and labelled dice dictates what aspect of a clause (Process, Participant, Circumstance) a student may choose from the pile of sentence strips, and students must fully complete a clause with at least one Process before they can begin their next clause. As parts of the clause are clearly labelled and colour coded, the cognitive demand is kept in check. The game is designed so that all students develop confidence in manipulating clauses and experience the variety of ways information can be arranged in clauses and still make sense. It also gives students an opportunity to develop confidence in using the metalanguage and to judge when clauses have been arranged in ways that don't make sense.

Figure 3: The colour-coded strips of clause fragments

[Design Insert Race to build 1 here]

In the following extract of talk between two students, Sam has just rolled the dice and the blue face ('Extra information?' or Circumstance) has landed upwards.

> **Sam:** Extra information! INSIDE THE DARK CAVE (selects and reads strip)
> **Ella:** Ohhhh! (Rolls dice but it lands on 'What's happening?' for the second time so she misses a turn and passes the dice back to Sam)
> **Sam:** My go! If you get two blue ones, you can pick up (rolls dice and it lands on 'What's happening')
> What's happening (selects strip depicting process 'is hiding')
> **Ella:** Yes! (rolls dice and lands on Extra information)

(selects a strip showing 'on the roof of my house' and places it next to the strips she already has)

THE SHY PUPPY IS SHOUTING ON THE ROOF OF MY HOUSE (reading)

Sam: (Rolls dice and lands on the blue extra information face. Selects strip showing 'beside the ice-cream truck' and inserts in between two strips he already has in front of him – 'inside the dark cave' and 'is hiding')

INSIDE THE DARK CAVE BESIDE THE ICE-CREAM TRUCK IS HIDING (reading)

Ella: Now you have to get a red …

This game is important for developing students' confidence in using the prompts for locating the different parts of the clause and recognising examples of these. The game format facilitates turn taking and the colour coding supports their emerging understandings. In one turn Sam indicates he understands that a clause may have two circumstantial elements (I*f you get two blue ones, you can pick up*). In another (*Now you have to get a red*) Ella demonstrates she knows a participant is needed to complete the clause. Throughout, the students' engagement in the task is evident in the way they initiate exchanges, attend to and respond to each other's contributions. In this respect we suggest that the activity is both purposeful and collective as well as supportive.

Game 2: Fish or steal

Resources: Laminated fish with examples of the parts of the clause attached, game boards, and fishing 'rods'.

In this game, students are required to 'fish' parts of the clause out of the pond and place them appropriately on a game board of partially complete clauses. This time, the examples of the different clause elements have not been colour-coded. Thus, there is an added difficulty of having to identify parts of the clause before placement on the board, and students are required to check their clause still makes sense. The option of being able to 'steal' off an opponent's game board allows not only an added level of engagement, but also gives students a chance to demonstrate that they know how to complete clauses correctly, without having to rely solely on chance for the right card to turn up. The game board is also structured in such a way as to support the understanding of only one process per clause.

Figure 4: Equipment for the Fish or steal game

[Design Insert Fish or steal jpg 3 here]

In the extract below, Missy and Sylvia are having their turn. Sylvia has just 'caught' a fish and passes the card to Missy to read.

Missy: Fish! Hah! What is it? IN THE KITCHEN (reading)

Sylvia: that's a where

Missy: Oh yeah we can swap (placing it in a 'where' slot and moving the existing prepositional phrase to another slot)

This game is more cognitively demanding for the students. They must not only recognise typical kinds of examples (eg the kinds of extra information that comprise a 'where') but also be able to manipulate different parts of clauses to make new clauses. In this respect, the principle of purposefulness is evident; ie the activity builds on the initial colour matching of the first game to identifying the parts of the clause and to link them with the probes (What's happening?, Who/what is involved? Any extra information?). Here too, the students are encouraged to work collaboratively to complete the clauses on their game board so we suggest the collective principle is evident here too.

Game 3: Come in spinner

Resources: Spinners, gameboards and card strips showing different kinds of Circumstances (eg *gently, early in the morning, in the water*)

This game specifically hones the skill of differentiating between different types of Circumstances (when, where, how). Students use a spinner to dictate which type of Circumstance they choose to complete the clauses on the game board. Even though students are required to identify differences between Circumstances of time, place and manner, the overall level of demand is controlled by labelling all other parts of the clause. When creating the game board, Processes in the clauses were deliberately chosen so as to be compatible with all types of Circumstances, ensuring that students didn't encounter any unexpected difficulties when playing the game.

Figure 5: The board and spinner displayed

[Design Insert Come in Spinner jpg 3 here]

In the extract below, Sam, Hayden and Ella are playing this game. Hayden has just flicked the spinner and it has landed on 'how'.

Hayden:	My turn I got how
Sam:	(picks up strip showing 'in the long grass' to give to Hayden)
Ella:	No happily happily (picking up a strip showing 'happily' and hands it to Hayden)
Hayden:	Okay (putting the strip in correct position in one of the clauses on the gameboard)
	Actually I'll just put it here (moving it to complete another clause)
	THE FAT OLD ELEPHANT IS STOMPING HAPPILY (All laughing)

This game also illustrates the principle of purposefulness by extending students' understandings about Circumstances to include meanings about manner as well as place and time. Here they must link the examples on the strips with the meaning probes on the spinner. As we see from the exchange between Hayden, Sam and Ella, this presents some challenges for Sam who picks up a Circumstance of place in error. Ella corrects him and supplies an appropriate example for Hayden. The principle of supportiveness is evident in this gentle peer correction and the shared humour. They are also encouraged to remake clauses by manipulating different strips further illustrating the cumulative nature of the games design.

Game 4: Crack the clause code

Resources: Dice, playing board, counters, cards with single clauses written on them (eg *The girl in the blue jumper is running down the stairs*)

This game provides opportunity for students to consolidate their understandings of different elements of the clause. Students, in turn, roll a dice and move around a board marked with green squares (Process – What's happening?), red squares (Participant – Who or what is involved?) and blue squares (Circumstance – Any extra information?). Upon landing on a square, students must identify the relevant part of the clause read aloud from a pile of cards by one of the players. The clauses written on the cards are colour coded so that the game is self-correcting. The first student to complete the circuit wins.

Figure 6: Crack the code cards and board

In the following extract, Kai, Max, Frankie and Sam are playing the game. To begin, Frankie has rolled the dice and moved to a red square (Who or what is involved? /Participant). Max has picked up a card and is reading to Frankie.

Max: THE GIRL IN THE BLUE JUMPER IS KNEELING NEXT TO THE CHEST (reading) Who or what is involved?

Frankie: I'm thinking. Who or what is involved?

Sam: yes

Frankie: The girl in the blue jumper? (looking to the others)

Sam: Yes Yes (checks that this Participant is in red)

…

Sam: Five (moving) what's happening

Kai: I read the card (selecting)

Okay so it's the green

THE BOY WITH THE SHORT BROWN HAIR IS LOOKING IN THE CHEST

Sam: is looking in the chair?

Kai: Sorry- is looking (showing Sam the card and pointing to Process)

see where is he looking? In the chest (pointing to the Circumstance)

Once more, the game extends students' understandings about the clause. This game is particularly challenging as students must listen to a clause read out aloud and identify a particular part as an example of a Process, Participant or Circumstance. In the extract above, Frankie demonstrates his growing understanding by identifying a lengthy nominal group as the participant (*The girl in the blue jumper?).* The game also encourages a range of different contributions from each student. For example, Frankie clarifies his understanding (*Who or what is involved?);* Sam affirms Frankie's answer and Kai corrects Sam's response (*Sorry - is looking*), pointing out that 'in the chest' answers the prompt 'where'. To this end, we suggest this game reflects the principles of collectiveness, reciprocity, and supportiveness as well as purposefulness.

In summary, the games together with the other activities in the literacy session reflected the key principles of dialogic teaching. The balance of the games-based activities, teacher-led small group and whole class teaching led to an engaging and supportive environment which fostered students' cumulative knowledge about language.

Expanding students' knowledge about language

Once students were familiar with the metalanguage of functionally oriented grammar and had some experience in analysing clauses and manipulating parts of these through images and games, the next step was to begin formally introducing the concepts into the writing program. As Rossbridge (2008, p. 2) exemplifies, once students have adopted a shared metalanguage they are then able to "identify, discuss and critique" aspects of grammar in their own writing.

We knew it was important to support our students to express more complex meanings through their use of conjunctions to connect ideas. As they now have good

understandings about the clause, they are able to talk about different kinds of clauses (dependent and independent) and are beginning to develop their understanding of the different types of conjunctions, for example conjunctions that relate to time, manner or cause such as *after*, *with* or *because*. With this knowledge, students can make informed choices as to the best conjunction to join their clauses and the purpose that conjunction serves. For more information about the variety of conjunctions and their function see Derewianka, 2011, pp. 90–94.

In the writing sample shown in Figure 7, a Year 1 student edited and assessed her own work by colour coding the clauses in a newspaper article based on the story of 'The Three Little Pigs'. In the opening sentence, the student realised that there was no Circumstance, and added one at the beginning to make the writing more engaging. The student was also able to see that all her sentences used only one clause (signified by having only one Process) and so added the conjunction 'because' followed by a second clause to expand her writing further. As this sample demonstrates, when students are confident and familiar with the metalanguage, and can analyse their own writing, they are able to assess their own work and make improvements more independently. Through their knowledge and understanding of functionally oriented grammar, students can bring their writing under more conscious control, and make specific, targeted improvements.
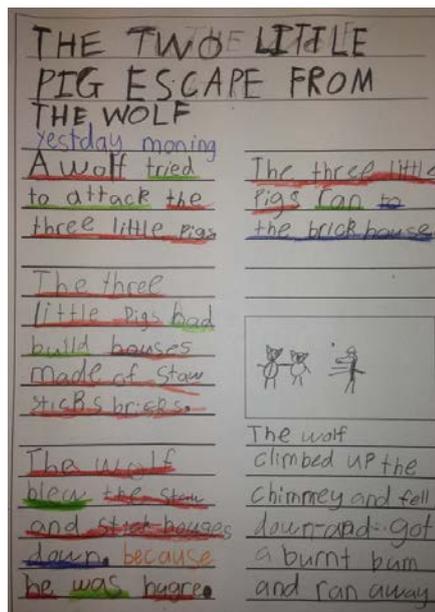

Figure 7: Sample student writing

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have endeavoured to describe our initial forays into meeting the challenge of teaching grammar in meaningful and engaging ways. We reiterate that a key feature of our experience has been dialogue; our professional dialogue with academic partners, among ourselves, and with and between the students in our classrooms. Such dialogue has encouraged us to design the games described above. Our students' enthusiasm for the games, their growing confidence with the metalanguage and our enhanced capacity for sharing that metalanguage with them in our literacy and literature teaching practices give us confidence as we continue to implement the new English curriculum.

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About the authors

Imogene, Amelia and Katie are all early career teachers at Erskineville Public School who have been involved in developing classroom pedagogies for a functional approach to language. They have presented for teachers and academics at PETAA One Day Conferences in NSW.

Pauline Jones lectures in Language and Education at the University of Wollongong. Her research interests focus on classroom interaction, English curriculum and educational semiotics. She is currently working with a number of teachers in NSW schools as they enact recent English curriculum change in their classroom settings