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Teachers' knowledge about language: Issues of pedagogy and expertise



Pauline Jones & Honglin Chen

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Abstract

The new Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2012) has considerable implications for teachers' knowledge about language (KAL) and pedagogic practice. To successfully implement the functionally oriented model of grammar proposed by the Curriculum, many teachers will need to expand their expertise in grammar to understand 'the structures and functions of word- and sentence- level grammar and text patterns and the connections between them' (ACARA, 2009. p. 7). They will also need to apply that knowledge to enhance their students' learning outcomes. This paper describes a small-scale research project involving a group of primary and secondary teachers in a targeted professional learning program. The initial findings have implications for theory and practice. In terms of theory, the research provides one of the first studies of the implementation of the new Curriculum. The case study reported underscores the importance of the implementation phase for the Curriculum and of the need for appropriate professional learning programs. The paper argues that such programs must go beyond a 'train-the-trainer' or 'one size fits all' model. They must be nuanced enough to account for the range of teacher needs in terms of linguistic knowledge and the contexts in which they will enact the Curriculum.

Introduction

The new Australian Curriculum has turned the spotlight on a number of issues surrounding the disciplines such as Science, Mathematics, History and English and their recontextualisation as the subject specific domains of schooling. Nowhere is this more evident than in the curriculum domain of English where questions such as what is the nature of the subject English, what are the essential understandings that students require at each stage of schooling and how might these be sequenced have arisen. These questions are critical to the production of an *official* curriculum; equally critical are those questions that can be asked of an *enacted* curriculum (Luke, 2010). These include what substantive knowledge of English do teachers require in order to implement the curriculum and how they will fashion contexts for their students' acquisition of the necessary knowledge and skills. It is the Knowing

about Language Strand of The Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2012) that is the concern of this paper, because for the first time, all Australian teachers have been charged with the responsibility for teaching ‘about conventions of language and text patterns within their own learning area’ (ACARA, 2009, p. 14). Thus, grammar instruction comprises a major portion of the Knowledge about Language content. At a time when the systematic teaching of grammar has been absent from Australian classrooms for two or more generations, such a requirement has considerable ramifications for teachers’ own knowledge. The paper reports on a small-scale study to investigate teachers’ preparedness to teach The Australian Curriculum: English in terms of their knowledge of grammar and their related teaching practices; in other words, to better understand the nature of teacher expertise required. We are interested in how aspects of the Knowing about Language Strand of the English Curriculum might be enacted in classrooms and the nature of support teachers will require in order to do so. First the paper briefly explores the background to the vexed issue of grammar in English curricula before discussing the study in detail and making recommendations for the future. The paper will highlight important challenges in implementing the Knowledge about Language Strand of the Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2012). Throughout, our intention is to contribute to discussions around the nature of professional learning that will be required as the Curriculum is taken up in pedagogy.


Background

Australia is not alone in the resurgence of the explicit study of language in English curricula. Grammar teaching has also become a central part of English curriculum and literacy policy in the United Kingdom (Myhill, 2005, 2011). Such renewed interest in grammar instruction embraces a broader concept of grammar than in previous times. The emphasis on Knowledge about Language recognises the value of learners’ knowledge about language (KAL), the articulated, explicit and conscious understanding of the nature of language in learning (Derewianka, this Issue; Mitchell, Brumfit & Hooper, 1994; Myhill, 2005, 2011). The focus is on a ‘pedagogical conceptualisation of grammar’ (Myhill, 2005, p. 78), one which is marked by a shift from the traditional prescriptive and decontextualised approach to one which privileges the rhetorical power of grammar in enhancing meaning making and writing development (Macken-Horarik, Love & Unsworth, 2011; Myhill, 2005, 2011; Lefstein, 2009). Myhill (2011, p. 92), in her important work on grammar as a design tool for writing, aptly argues that ‘the potentiality of grammar lies not in crude applications of prescriptive rules to correct children’s writing but in opening up possibilities, making tacit patterns and ways of meaning making explicit’.

Drawing on a functional approach which recognises how language as a system has evolved within its contexts of use, KAL in The Australian

Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2012) is defined as ‘a coherent, dynamic and evolving body of knowledge about English language and how it works’. The Curriculum defines what constitutes explicit knowledge about language in English/literacy classrooms through such processes as those identified in the content descriptors from the KAL Strand (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Growth and development in understandings about the clause

Year 3	Year 5	Year 7	Year 9
Increasing technicality and complexity in KAL 			
Increasing explicitness of students' uptake of KAL			
Students will <i>understand</i> that a clause is a unit of meaning usually containing a subject and a verb and that these need to be in agreement	Students will <i>understand</i> the difference between main and subordinate clauses and how these can be combined to create complex sentences through subordinating conjunctions to develop and expand ideas	Students will <i>recognise</i> and <i>understand</i> that embedded clauses are a common feature of sentence structures and contribute additional information to a sentence	Students will <i>explain</i> how authors experiment with the structures of sentences and clauses to create particular effect

Source: The Australian Curriculum: English (version 3.0) (ACARA, 2012)

The table indicates the two significant effects of the KAL Strand: the development in technicality and complexity in the linguistic understandings expected of the students and the development with respect to how the students articulate this knowledge. With respect to the former, we see how understandings about the clause accumulate from subject-verb agreement through to clause patterning to expand ideas, to understanding something of rank through to analysing the effects of different structures of clauses and clause complexes. In terms of the latter, students will demonstrate their understanding in a range of ways including matching, labelling and sorting through to identifying, analysing and finally articulating the effects of different patterns. The Curriculum indicates that explicit knowledge about language by its definition involves conscious and articulated understanding of a cumulative body of knowledge. Enacting this Curriculum then will make substantial demands on teachers in terms of their subject matter knowledge and pedagogic knowledge (Carter, 1996; Myhill, 2005; Williams, 2005).

Teachers' knowledge about grammar

While learners' knowledge about language is regarded as an important means of developing understanding of language and literacy repertoire, it is also

acknowledged that teachers' knowledge about language is closely related to their effectiveness in teaching (Andrews, 2007; Myhill, 2005). Yet there is a considerable body of research that attests to the inadequacy of teachers' grammatical knowledge (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 2001; Harper & Rennie, 2009; Myhill, 2005). This situation, it is argued, is a result of historical developments and trends in English curricula that saw grammar teaching become a subject of much debate in Australia and elsewhere (Christie, 2010). As a result of such debates, the systematic study of grammar has been absent in Australian schools for many years.

The emerging interest in KAL and language awareness has stimulated enquiry into the relationship between teachers' knowledge about language and learners' knowledge. It is generally agreed that teachers' knowledge is critical to their enactment of the KAL inclusive curriculum. Andrews (2007) argues that teachers' knowledge about language is an essential element of teachers' knowledge base. In a similar vein, Keen (1997) suggests that teachers' confidence to help children think reflectively about language rests on their broad knowledge base of language together with their ability to exploit their conscious knowledge in teaching.

Studies have shown that although teachers' knowledge about language is useful in shaping their conceptions of language, they are not always successful in translating their knowledge into effective pedagogic practice (e.g. Johnson, 2009; Myhill, 2005). This line of argument leads to the broader question of what constitutes expertise in teaching. Winch (2010, p. 2) points out that the relationship between propositional knowledge ('knowing what') and practical expertise ('knowing how') is complex and that to understand either kind of expertise, we need to understand each kind of knowledge and how each relates to the other.

A further complicating factor in the relationship between teachers' knowledge and their pedagogic actions is the fraught nature of what currently constitutes English grammar in school settings. Horan's 2003 study of 24 NSW schools found traditional grammar to be 'profoundly influential' despite the prevalence of references to functionally orientated grammar in official curriculum and in teacher-training materials. However, the links between traditional grammar and the study of rhetoric dating from Ancient Greece and Rome (Christie, 1993) have been long lost in current classrooms where traditional grammar is most obvious in the piecemeal study of parts of speech or word classes (e.g. nouns and verbs) and prescriptive rules (e.g. 'Never begin a sentence with "and"') (Gebhard & Martin, 2011). Referring to Australian classrooms, Snyder (2008) describes an array of practices in which elements of functional and traditional grammar are interwoven. Our experiences working with teachers in professional learning programs and in the study reported here suggest that many Australian teachers work with traditional and functional grammars but often in haphazard fashion. Similarly, Myhill (2000,

p. 156) has described UK curriculum as an ‘eclectic hotchpotch’ with the result that the metalanguage of grammar is itself a source of varied interpretations rather than shared understandings.

So far, only limited research has been undertaken into the relations between teachers’ linguistic knowledge and their practice. Bigelow and Ranney (2005) argued strongly for a need for more research on how teachers develop their knowledge about language and transfer their knowledge into pedagogic decisions. This paper reports on a small university- funded project which aimed to take up this challenge. It highlights some of the issues relating to the challenges of implementing the Knowledge about Language Strand of the Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2012). It should be noted that the study was conducted in the state of New South Wales (NSW) and we recognise that states and territories vary with respect to the place of grammar in curriculum and policy.

The study

The study involved a NSW secondary public school and one of its feeder primary schools and a four-person research team. It consisted of three phases:

Phase 1 was a contextual analysis focused on gathering baseline data in the form of a survey of teachers’ knowledge of, attitudes and experiences with grammar, their existing practices with respect to teaching about language and their response to the Knowing about Language strand of the curriculum. The 53 participants were introduced to the KAL strand at an initial workshop and asked to complete the survey. The survey included a quiz on selected grammatical terminology from The Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2012) (see Appendix). We also asked teachers to identify the nature of support they felt necessary to implement the curriculum. This phase involved 50 teachers including general primary teachers, secondary subject teachers, literacy/ learning specialists attached to the schools. Three local district consultants also participated. The length of participants’ teaching experience ranged from 6 months to 36 years. Table 2 describes the numbers of teachers by setting and specialisation in further detail. More secondary teachers than primary teachers participated in this phase because the initial workshop was hosted by the secondary school at a time usually allocated for staff meetings.

Phase 2 was interventionist in intent. It involved interviews with teachers to follow up their survey responses and to identify their current grammar teaching. Nine participants were interviewed: three primary and six secondary teachers. In addition, a series of six upskilling workshops intended to address gaps identified in Phase 1 were offered. The workshops were functionally orientated, covering recent developments in genre theory and introducing selected grammatical knowledge relevant to the Curriculum. Some 12–15 teachers from both schools attended these workshops.

Phase 3 focused on pedagogy with observations of participants’ grammar

Table 2: Survey respondents by sector and discipline background

	no.
Primary Teachers (from school total of 24)	5
Classroom teachers	4
Specialist literacy teachers	1
Secondary Teachers (from school total of 61)	45
English	4
HSIE	9
PDHPE	5
Science/Maths	14
TAS	4
Visual Arts	1
LOTE	1
Specialist literacy teachers (incl. ESL)	7
District Literacy Consultants	3
TOTAL RESPONDENTS	53

teaching practice before and during their participation in the upskilling workshops. Observations provided an opportune context for observing teachers' knowledge in use and for their transformation of this knowledge into classroom practice. Five teachers (3 primary and 2 secondary) participated in this phase that featured collaborative lesson planning and post-teaching reflections. Lessons were video-recorded, artefacts and work-samples collected to assist with analysis of the metalanguage that occurred during the lessons. Interviews with teachers were conducted immediately after each observed lesson where the teacher was asked to comment on their pedagogic decisions with regard to explicit teaching of knowledge about language.

Survey results

As discussed earlier, teachers' ability to effect change relies on their knowledge base. The survey provided an opportunity to identify teachers' needs with regard to the new Curriculum.

The quiz¹ required participants to indicate their familiarity with terms drawn from the KAL strand. These terms included word classes (*nouns, verbs, adjectives*, etc), general language constructs such as *dialect* and *register*, as well as 'pedagogic' labels for more technical concepts such as *sentence opener (Theme)* and *thinking verb (Mental Process)*. The results indicate there was considerable difference in teachers' knowledge of and confidence with the terms.

Generally speaking teachers were most comfortable with commonly used terms such as nouns, verbs and adjectives (see Figures 1 and 2).

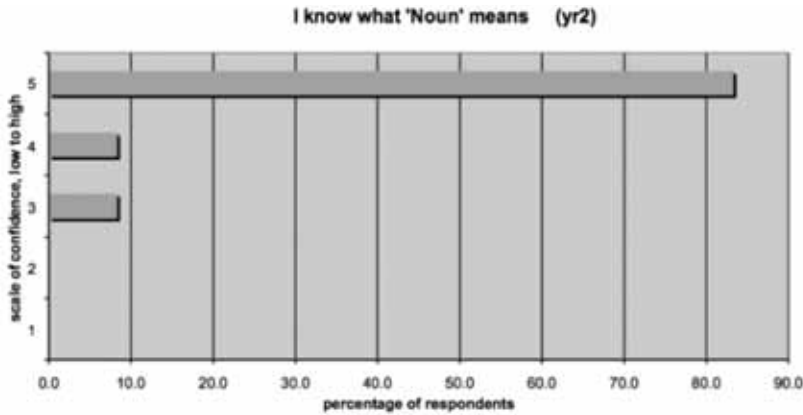


Figure 1: Respondents' familiarity with the term 'noun'

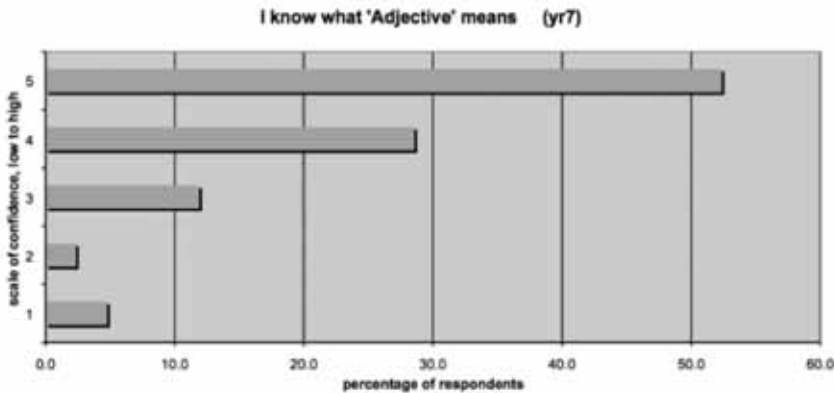


Figure 2: Respondents' familiarity with the term 'adjective'

Respondents were less familiar with more abstract and complex terms such as *nominalisation* and *embedded clauses* (see Figures 3 and 4). Teachers were similarly less familiar with *adverbials*, *ellipsis* and *cohesion*.

The number of such technical and abstract terms increases across the years of schooling in the KAL strand. Teachers who responded to the secondary section of the quiz reported a lack of familiarity more frequently. Those items that were particularly challenging included different types of clauses (*relative; independent/dependent; finite/non-finite; verbless, interrupting*); various types of conjunction (*subordinating, co-ordinating, concessive*); and extended verb groups (including *phrasal verbs*). Those terms in the primary years section of the quiz that respondents were less confident with include *intensifier, determiner, pre/post modifier, quantifier, nouns in apposition, prepositional phrase* and *subordinating conjunction*. Interestingly, several terms appear in content descriptions for both primary and secondary years of the Curriculum. These include *modality*,

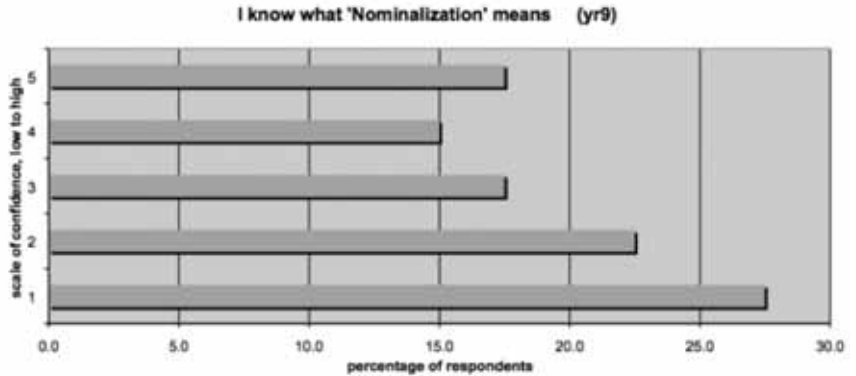


Figure 3: Respondents' familiarity with the term 'nominalisation'

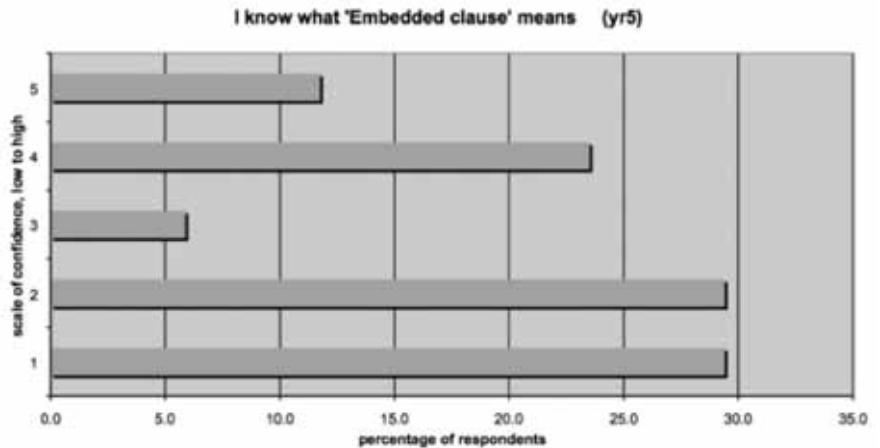


Figure 4: Respondents' familiarity with the term 'embedded clause'

aspects of cohesion, embedded clauses and adverbials. The term *modality*, appeared to be more familiar to the primary teachers who responded to the quiz than with secondary teachers (see Figure 5). The data was similar for the term *adverbial* and aspects of cohesion such as *substitution* and *ellipsis*.

Primary teachers' familiarity is not surprising given that these terms are used in the functionally-based approach adopted in the NSW English Curriculum (NSW Board of Studies, 1998) and associated support material. In contrast, more structurally orientated terms such as *embedded clause* and *prepositional phrase* were relatively unfamiliar to most teachers who responded to the survey irrespective of their teaching setting.

The quiz confirms the literature reviewed with respect to the piecemeal

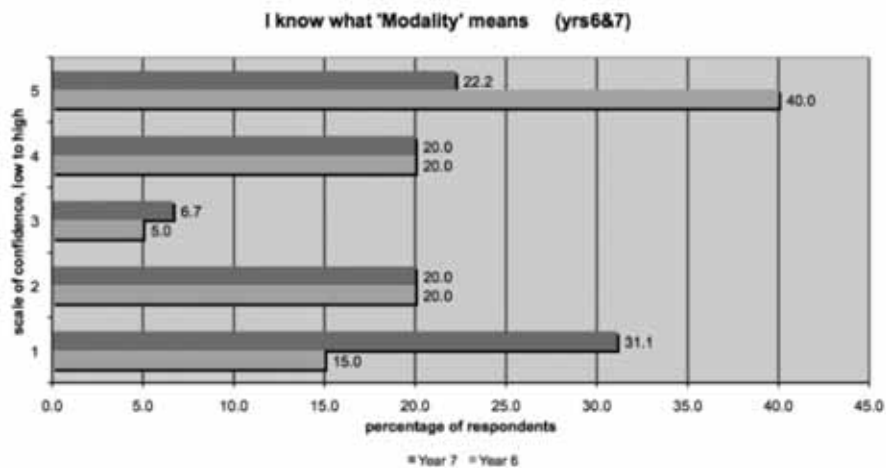


Figure 5: Differences in primary and secondary teacher-respondents' confidence with the term 'modality'

nature of teachers' knowledge about language. Many of the respondents recognised traditional word class labels that have passed into commonsense knowledge. They also have knowledge of some functional labels, most particularly those commonly associated with genre-based approaches to literacy (e.g. modality). However, the 'gaps' in understanding across the years of schooling identified in the quiz provides further evidence of teachers' lack of a coherent body of knowledge. We suggest that this has considerable ramifications for teachers' ability to develop cumulative understandings of language as mandated by the new Curriculum.

*Professional learning about grammar*²

The findings further suggested that teachers' lack of competence with regard to knowledge about language was exacerbated by few opportunities to develop linguistic knowledge. With respect to previous professional learning, teachers' experiences were varied. Twenty-four teachers who responded to the survey indicated they had done some training. Of these, 5 teachers had completed Accelerated Literacy³ courses. These teachers wrote of the confi-

² Appendix, Part 1 (b)

³ Accelerated Literacy (see Cowey, 2005) and Reading to Learn (Rose, 2010) are scaffolded approaches to literacy. A key feature of both programs is the explicit teaching about text and written language. Teachers using the approaches undertake sustained professional learning that emphasises teachers' KAL.

dence this had given them. Two teachers indicated they had studied grammar in their preservice education but noted this was not successful because it was difficult to apply to their discipline areas of Maths/Science and History. Two teachers had engaged with KAL as part of their TESOL training and one teacher noted that her previous experience teaching in South West Sydney had provided access to some professional learning in literacy. One teacher mentioned the History teachers' professional association as a source of KAL training, in particular the opportunities provided by the association for examining students' extended responses. A couple of more experienced teachers wrote of past projects involving KAL without nominating specific sources, commenting that this 'no longer happens' and 'as usual, died of natural causes'. However, more than half the teachers surveyed indicated they had not engaged in any systematic learning with respect to grammar or knowledge about language. One younger teacher commented that the only explicit teaching about grammar she had experienced was through feedback on her university essays. For such teachers, little seems to have changed in the intervening period since Hammond and Macken-Horarik's 2001 study. The overall picture is one of ineffective and scattered professional learning opportunities with access seemingly dependent on the contexts in which teachers found themselves studying or teaching and the vagaries of project funding.

*The significance of KAL in teachers' work*⁴

Despite their limited knowledge about language, all but one of the participants reported that teaching about language was a significant part of their work. The explicitness with which they did so varied. When asked about grammar teaching methods, primary teachers described language generally as *permeating everything they did* and *as part of every literacy session*. However, their descriptions were rather general. There were few specific comments about how they direct students' attention to the features of language and how they support students' development of cumulative knowledge in their teaching.

Secondary English teachers who responded to the survey similarly reported teaching language in general contextual terms such as in *literary studies*, and *reading and writing* as a core part of their subject teaching. In contrast, the school-based literacy specialists tended to describe their teaching about language more specifically at word, sentence and text level; for example, teaching students *how to understand task requirements, looking for key words, teaching them how to use higher-order vocabulary, explaining verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs*. Secondary teachers of subjects other than English wrote quite detailed descriptions of the elements of language they taught students. These included subject specific vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and sentence

structure as well as text types. Not all the teachers referred to the strategies through which they taught the aspects above. Of those who did, modelling was frequently mentioned as was correction of written work. One Science teacher identified games and cloze passages as the key means through which the teaching takes place. Such responses point to the difficulty some teachers face in disentangling students' explicit knowledge about language from more general literacy competencies such as spelling, punctuation and word recognition, and suggest there are various interpretations of what it means to teach KAL. These insights suggest that both linguistic knowledge and pedagogic knowledge should be placed at the centre of any professional training programs in order to expand teachers' ability to effect change.

Teachers' responses to the Knowing about Language strand of The Australian Curriculum: English⁵

Whilst teachers revealed limited experience and knowledge of teaching KAL, about half of the teachers responded positively to the Knowing about Language Strand, reporting *feeling relieved* at recognising some of the terminology, *familiar* with and *relatively comfortable* with the content. These teachers tended to be primary and secondary English teachers. Others however reported feeling *anxious*, *overwhelmed* and *confused*. Specific concerns related to how to fit grammar teaching into already overcrowded courses, unfamiliar terminology, the complexity of the document itself and the explanations.

Despite the prevalence of negative reactions to the KAL Strand, most teachers who responded to the survey saw the grammar content as relevant to their students' literacy learning needs. However, in order to implement the Strand, they recognised the need for considerable support to do so.⁶ Professional development courses which addressed general understandings about grammar as well as those specific to particular curriculum domains were identified by a number of respondents (15). Teaching resources that included lesson plans, demonstration lessons and examples of teaching, together with resources for particular curriculum areas, were recommended by several respondents (17). A few teachers who responded (3) nominated a detailed syllabus with activities 'set out' as important. Several participants (7) stressed the importance of time: time for collaborative planning and classroom time to devote to KAL. Another participant commented that implementation of the KAL Strand required a sustained program for all teachers (rather than 'just a few 1 day inservices').

Interview data

The interview data complement the survey data as the interviews provided

5 Appendix, Part 2 (a) and (b)

6 Appendix, Part 2 (c)

opportunities for some teachers to talk further about their grammar teaching. The 9 teachers interviewed were in the main those most comfortable with teaching grammar. In identifying what grammar is, most interviewees tied grammar to students' writing and to accuracy. Describing grammar variously as *how to put words together in a sentence or a paragraph to make it an effective communication; the technical aspects of writing; grammar gives you your construction of your sentence; and the rules of writing correctly*. However, when asked about the reasons for teaching grammar, teachers offered reasons related to the teaching of reading; for example, *getting students to understand how authors put words together to make the impact that they do*.

Teachers interviewed tended to describe their practices with respect to teaching grammar as *in context* and *at the point of need*. The three primary teachers spoke of teaching grammar in the context of the detailed reading and rewriting of texts with students as part of their literacy programs. The six secondary teachers described teaching grammar in the context of *responding to students' writing, teaching punctuation and teaching technical terminology*. While few would argue with the importance of intervening to support students when need arises or with teaching about grammatical choices in terms of their impact on meaning, neither will necessarily ensure the cumulative acquisition of grammatical knowledge such as that described in the *Australian Curriculum: English*.

In summary, the survey and interview data suggested that while most participants were convinced of the importance of grammar in teaching literacy and will welcome support to enhance their abilities to do so, teachers are differently positioned with respect to the implementation of the KAL Strand of the new Curriculum because of their own knowledge and previous education and training. The data provided valuable insights into the kind of professional training programs necessary to enable teachers to develop and extend their expertise for implementing the Curriculum.

In the following section we present classroom observation data. Observing the grammar lessons assisted us to better understand the nature of the teachers' expertise. We focus on one such episode here so that we can make several points about teachers' expertise and the professional learning required. Of the 5 participants in the final phase, Debbie was the most confident and experienced teacher with respect to teaching grammar. She regularly trialled aspects of the grammar in her classroom between workshops and reported back to the group. When asked about her approach to teaching grammar, Debbie replied her first step is to ask 'What is it I want to teach the kids? What do I want the kids to know' and then to ask 'What texts will I use now to do this?'. This view of grammar teaching represents Debbie's professional view of what is valuable and important to learners' needs, which departs from a deficit model of grammar teaching that focuses on accuracy and error correction (Myhill, 2005).

A pedagogic context for teaching KAL

Debbie⁷ has a good deal of experience teaching English curricula in primary classrooms. In her executive role, she is heavily involved with professional experience programs for pre-service and in supporting new teachers. She joined the project to find out more about the new Curriculum and to identify ways to assist her colleagues in its implementation. Debbie’s linguistic knowledge appears to have been acquired through individual perseverance and circumstance. In her interview, she described that she learned about the grammar requirements of the current English Curriculum by constantly ‘looking it up’, showing us well-worn copies of curriculum materials that included glossaries and explanations of grammatical terms. She also identified the Accelerated Literacy training undertaken while at another school as a source of learning about grammar and how to teach it.

The lesson we describe took place in the morning literacy session with a Year 3/4 class. The general objective of the lesson was to extend the children’s capacities to read and write literary descriptions; in particular, to explore how events and happenings are represented in ‘wordings’. The lesson took place after a workshop introducing the clause elements and their functional labels of Processes, Participants and Circumstances, aspects of the Transitivity in functional grammar. These understandings are recontextualised in the ‘expressing and developing ideas’ sub-strand of the curriculum at Year 3 in Table 2.

Table 3: Learning about the clause in Year 3

Content description	Elaborations
Understand that a clause is a unit of meaning usually containing a subject and a verb and that these need to be in agreement	Knowing that a clause is a group of words that contains a verb
	Knowing that, in terms of meaning, a basic clause represents: what is happening, who or what is participating, and the surrounding circumstances

Source: The Australian Curriculum: English (version 3.0) (ACARA, 2012, p. 43)

Like many primary literacy sessions in NSW schools, the lesson contains phases of explicit teaching about language (in the form of grammar and spelling) as well as other phases where the emphasis is on text interpretation and text production. Our focus here is on the explicit teaching of grammar and the lesson phases immediately before and after. It should be noted that Debbie also taught writing in other timetabled sessions, usually in relation to more extended units of work in other curriculum domains.

This lesson can be seen as a meeting between the official curriculum and the enacted and thus provides insights into the developing nature of one

7 Pseudonyms are used to refer to the teacher and students throughout.

teacher’s expertise and how the grammar requirements of the new curriculum will interact with her existing pedagogy. An overview of the lesson is provided initially (see Figure 6) before each of the three major⁸ lesson phases is described in further detail below.⁹

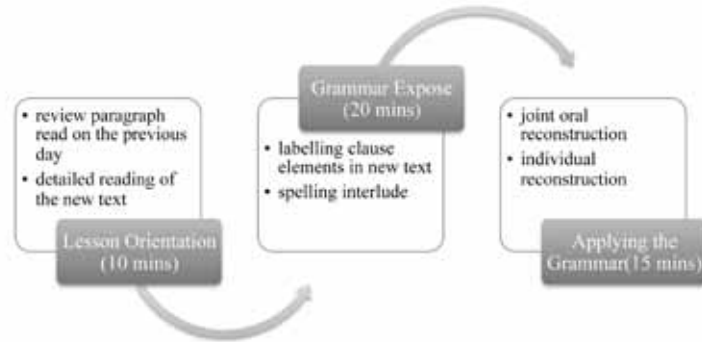


Figure 6: Debbie’s Transitivity Lesson

Debbie began the lesson by reading a section of description from the narrative text, *Moving House* (Maloney, 2001). The text was displayed on the electronic whiteboard and the children were seated at their desks with individual photocopied versions. Debbie then drew the children’s attention to a new paragraph and together she and the children read the text in detail, exploring the general meaning of the paragraph before highlighting and discussing key vocabulary and punctuation (see Figure 7). Wray, Medwell, Fox & Poulson’s 2000 study found that most effective teachers of literacy were those who were able to make meaningful connections between linguistic points at word and sentence level, and engagement with whole texts. Debbie’s work in the lesson orientation seemed to provide a context through which learners can make meaningful connections between the target grammar and writing.

In the *Grammar Expose* lesson phase, the children moved to sit on the floor in front of the whiteboard on which was displayed: THAT WAS JUST THE START. BRIAN’S FEET SEEMED FROZEN ON THE GRASS AS THE GIANT CAME CLOSER. Debbie focused on these two sentences that were by then very familiar to the children. Together, she and the children identified the clause elements by moving the labels Processes, Participants and Circumstances on the touch sensitive screen of the whiteboard (see Figure 8). For these young learners, noticing the clause elements through which meanings are realised is an important

⁸ For reasons of length, our analysis has omitted a brief spelling phase

⁹ Note that while we have borrowed some terminology from functional approaches to classroom discourse analysis (after Christie, 2002; Jones, 2010), our intent here is illustrative rather than analytic. Space here prevents a functional analysis of the lesson.

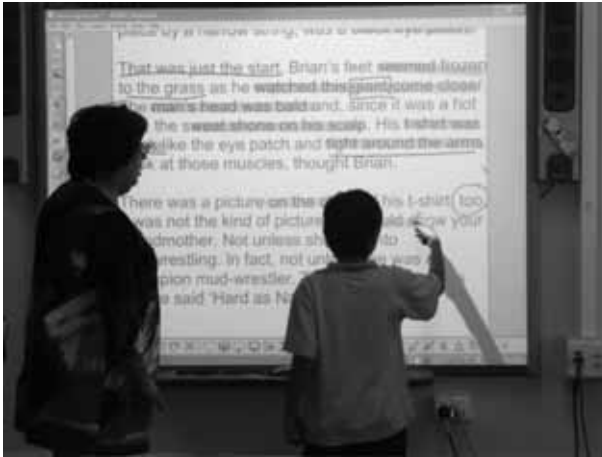


Figure 7: Lesson Orientation: detailed reading of the paragraph

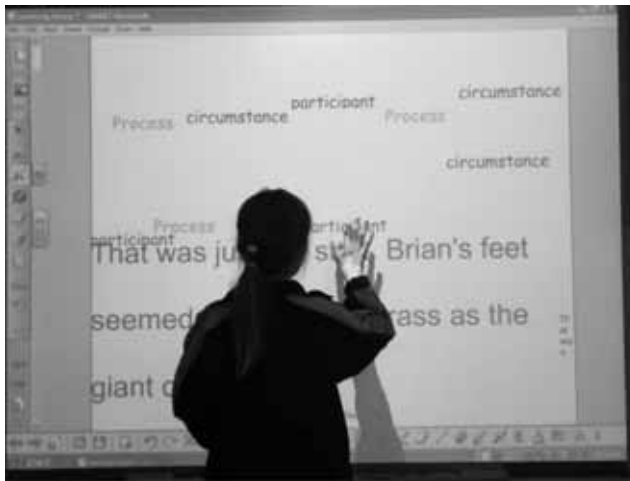


Figure 8: Grammar Expose: Labelling elements of the clause

step toward the more complex analysis assumed in the KAL strand of the Curriculum in later years.

As this phase represented the crux of the lesson, we will now focus on some of the talk that occurred in order to demonstrate how Debbie mediated the students' learning of the new grammatical terminology. The following text represents an extract from the classroom talk during this activity¹⁰.

¹⁰ Transcription conventions are as follows: S or Ss indicates unknown student/s; UPPERCASE indicates text is being read; turns are numbered.

- 1 Teacher: All right, we're going to look at two sentences today. Hopefully. Right you need to come forward ... You should be at the front.
- 2 NV *[sounds of compliance]*
- 3 Teacher: Ok. There are two sentences there. Can you read the first one for me Kiyam?
- 4 K: THERE WAS ...
- 5 Teacher: Careful, careful.
- 6 K: THAT WAS JUST THE START
- 7 Teacher: Good boy. And you read the second sentence for me, Jayden.
- 8 J: BRIAN'S FEET SEEMED FROZEN ON THE GRASS AS THE GIANT CAME CLOSER
- 9 Teacher: Right, let's look back at the first sentence. THAT WAS JUST THE START. We have to think about the Process that's happening. What verb is used in that first sentence?
- 10 Ss: Oh! Oh!
- 11 Teacher: A couple of people think that they might know ... Have a look. Sometimes it helps if you think about 'Who' is doing the action* first, or the Participant ...
- 12 S: Oh!
- 13 Teacher: Alright, Arok?
- 14 A: WAS?
- 15 Teacher: Good boy! do it with your whole finger darl ... Is it not doing it. is it being stubborn? *[referring to whiteboard]*
- 16 Alright. If that is the Process, what is the Participant? Who's the Participant? What is it?
- 16 S: Oh
- 17 Teacher: We're missing the sentence before, but what is it? James?
- 18 J: I think it's 'THAT'?
- 19 Teacher: I think you're right! See if you can move Participant down *[referring to whiteboard again]* Good boy
- 20 S: You were pressing too hard, that's why ...
- 21 Teacher: Excellent ... So 'THAT WAS ...' So we've got the noun and we've got 'WAS'. Now we've got JUST THE START. Now how ... I need you to think this time ...
- 22 Ss: Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!
- 21 Teacher: Hang on ... Hang on ... This is another one of James Maloney's tricky sentences. Because there's another Participant.
- 22 Ss: Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!
- 23 Teacher: In that sentence. Amy, what do you think?
- 24 A: Um, START?
- 25 Teacher: Start, good girl
- 26 S: Oh I was going to say that!

* Debbie is well aware that 'was' is a relational Process. The phrase 'doing the action' was used to assist the students (who are very familiar with action verbs) to locate the Process element.

In the opening exchanges (turns 1–8), Debbie drew the children’s attention to the local textual environment for the activity – the two sentences – by asking individuals to read them. In this way, having established the context (and co-text) for the work by reading the description in some detail, she zoomed in on the clauses that were to be the focus for the grammar work.

Using probes such as ‘What is happening?’ and ‘Who is involved?’¹¹ (Turns 9–18), she then asked the students to identify the Process and initial Participant. They accomplished this quickly and accurately. With respect to the initial Participant ‘that’, such summarising items are often challenging for young learners. The functional labelling may have made identification easier here because once the Process was identified, students were able to locate the initial Participant with relative ease. Throughout the lesson, Debbie seemed to be able to comfortably access knowledge discussed in the upskilling workshop bringing new terminology into her pedagogic practice although albeit not without some challenges.

Debbie asked the children to identify the second Participant in the clause (turns 21–26). Amy’s contribution of ‘start’ was accepted and affirmed ignoring the fact that the Participant element extends to ‘just the start’. Although the error did not interfere with the unfolding of the lesson, it does highlight some of the difficulties of conflating class items with functional labels. Many of the instances of Participants and Processes in the extracts read during the lesson were represented by groups or phrases rather than words. For example:

THE MAN’S HEAD	WAS	BALD
Participant	Process	Participant
Noun group	Verb group	Adjective

Other Participants are realised as embedded clauses; for example:

BUT	THAT	WAS NOT	[[WHAT MADE BRIAN STOP DEAD IN HIS TRACKS]]
	Participant	Process	Participant
	Pronoun	Verb group	Embedded clause

In the lesson Debbie linked the functional terminology with what students already knew (nouns and verbs), the noun has been offered as an alternative to the Participant. No doubt this contributed to the considerable confidence and enthusiasm displayed by the children. The more semantically-orientated labels and their associated probes enabled the students to see the various functions of those familiar elements. However they will need to recognise that

11 The probes for Transitivity elements – What is happening? Who or what is involved? Is there any extra information? – were used in the upskilling workshops.

functional elements may also be realised by other grammatical forms.

In the final lesson phase focusing on applying the grammar, the functional elements became 'hooks' for the children to use to reconstruct and innovate on the short description of action. Debbie begins by explaining the purpose for learning about these elements as follows: 'We are using ... part of the text that James Maloney wrote about Patch, and we're using it because it did such a good description of the character Patch and how Brian reacted to him'.

The students were provided with a different paragraph that had some words removed and replaced with the functional labels. The students' task was to rewrite the original text substituting their own wordings in place of the labels. The following texts exemplify the students' writing; the items contributed by the students are underscored:

At that moment, the cage opened and a lion walked out. It had orange and black stripes. But that was not what made him stop in his tracks.

At that moment, the window opened and a man crept in the window. Steve could feel that someone came into the window. Steve started to get the goosebumps. The man had a black cote and dirty black boots and a black hat. But that was not what made Steve stop in his goosey tracks.

Although some educators argue that strongly framed writing activities such as these may inhibit students' opportunities to express themselves in writing, scaffolded approaches to literacy recognise that the production of derivative texts mark an important point in young writers' apprenticeship; that is, their uptake of the language patterns of a mature writer. The nature of the children's contributions varied in field and in the grammatical choices to complete the text. The latter included an adjectival group ('blue with sparkling strip(e)s') as a Participant and a verbal group complex ('started to get') as a Process. The children approached the writing task with a good deal of enthusiasm and the majority successfully completed it in the relatively short space of time available.

Discussion

Debbie was pleased with the lesson. She commented that students were able to locate the elements of the clause much more quickly with the functional labels than with traditional class labels, 'If you ask them to find the noun or the verb, it can take them forever'. The lesson was relatively brief, fast-paced, covering the content in a short space of time. Throughout, the children were very engaged, eagerly nominating to identify the elements and confidently doing so, enthusiastically undertaking their text innovations. Indeed there is a good deal to recommend this lesson as it reflects Debbie's pedagogic expertise; not the least of which is the accomplished way in which she integrates the three Strands of The Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2012), simultaneously addressing content from Literature, Literacy and Language.

Substantive knowledge about language

The lesson also throws into relief something of the challenges in implementing the Curriculum. The teaching of the grammar will be in the hands of Debbie and her colleagues, many of whom are familiar with the underlying philosophy of functional grammar, comfortable with explicit teaching about language associated with genre-based approaches and teaching grammar in the service of literacy. However alongside these beliefs, as previous studies have reported (Horan, 2003; Gebhard & Martin, 2011), terms from traditional grammar (e.g. nouns, verbs, adverbs) and folklore surrounding these (e.g. verbs are doing words') abound. As we have seen, the resulting mix of terminology impacts upon the explanations and scaffolding provided students. With respect to questions about how much substantive knowledge of language teachers need, our modest project suggests that there is some fundamental knowledge of the relationship between function and grammatical form that elude even our most experienced teachers. Recognition of the rank scale of English so that the elements of clause, phrase and word can be kept in sight when analysing texts with students would also be useful. Such conscious knowledge 'of the structures and functions of word- and sentence-level grammar and text patterns and the connections between them' (ACARA, 2009, p. 7) will assist teachers like Debbie to demonstrate and explain to learner-writers how to gain more control over their writing. Such demonstrations and explanations might include 'packaging' events, causes and qualities into noun groups; deploying descriptive resources via a range of clause elements; and manipulating information patterns in clause elements.

Fashioning contexts for teaching grammar

The Curriculum will enter schools with existing routines and resources; teachers like Debbie will fold its content into these so that much grammar teaching will take place in brief timetabled 'bursts' alongside skills such as punctuation and spelling. It is easy to see how teaching grammatical knowledge might become isolated, rule-based lessons with little relevance to literacy and literature. In Debbie's hands, grammar teaching took place in the context with some immediate 'pay-off' in terms of the students' writing. Indeed, most lessons observed in the project have been teacher-centred, whole class lessons that aim to 'tool up' students in preparation for a reading or writing task. While Debbie's students' preparedness to attend closely to text is evident, in our work to date we have seen few demonstrations of students applying their grammatical knowledge to discuss texts in extended ways.

Teaching materials are an important feature of the pedagogic context. The teachers who responded to the survey have identified the need for resources to support their implementation of the Curriculum. The use of authentic quality texts such as that used by Debbie is widespread and promising although, as many educators know, their analysis places considerable demands on

teachers' KAL. Yet, time-consuming as it is, accurate analysis can provide an important scaffold for the explanations teachers provide to students. We suggest that teachers will, at least initially, require expert assistance with such analysis. Likewise the adapting and developing of resources such as software programs, worksheets and wall charts will be necessary.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that successful implementation of The Australian Curriculum: English rests on teacher expertise; their agency is critical to the attempt to build a cumulative and useful body of knowledge about language for Australian students. As they enact the Curriculum, teachers like Debbie will be exploring ways to mediate the content of the KAL Strand for their students; identifying grammatical concepts, creating learning contexts and selecting the terminology they will use. In doing so, they will be guided by their linguistic knowledge as well as their knowledge of their students and resources available. We present Debbie's experiences as an individual case study, recognising that there will be considerable ways that teachers take up the notion of the explicit grammar of the Curriculum in their contexts. This is the point at which the complexity of teachers' pedagogic knowledge becomes most apparent because as Luke (2010, p. 42) argues 'In short, there is no direct 'hypodermic' effect between the official curriculum and the enacted curriculum'. The official curriculum specifies content, which is brought to life by teachers with varying knowledge, and resources working in particular school classrooms. There is considerable work to be done in understanding how teachers will transform their KAL into pedagogy in various settings.

The Australian Curriculum implementation will require a sustained professional learning program that includes extending teachers' grammatical knowledge at the same time as they are redesigning their teaching to incorporate the more complex grammar content of the curriculum. It will also need to address the variations in teachers' knowledge and pedagogic practice. There is also no doubt that this will be a challenging time for teachers, teacher educators and curriculum and policy personnel. As we have demonstrated, there is an urgent need for comprehensive programs that extend teachers' existing linguistic knowledge, recognise and build on their pedagogic expertise and yet are nuanced enough for their diverse needs and teaching contexts. The teachers who work with us have certainly demonstrated their willingness to engage in such programs.

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Appendix

TEACHERS AND GRAMMAR SURVEY

Instruction: The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather information about your knowledge about and experience in teaching grammar, and your initial reaction to the Knowledge about Language strand of the National Curriculum: English.

Part 1

(a) Current teaching role and subject area:

(b) Years of teaching experience:

(c) In your previous experience of teacher training courses and professional development workshops, was there a component focusing on knowledge about language? What impact, if any, did it have on your knowledge and your confidence?

(d) In your own teaching, to what extent do you teach students about language?

Part 2

(a) Please comment on your initial response to the Knowledge about Language strand of the NEC (e.g. degree of anxiety; relief; approval; curiosity; disappointment):

(b) i. How relevant is the content of the Knowledge about Language strand to your current teaching?

ii. If relevant, what difficulties do you anticipate in implementing the Knowledge about Language strand?

(c) What kind of support would be useful for you in relation to the Knowledge about Language strand (PD, teaching resources, working with peers, collaborative planning and/teaching, demonstration lessons, academic partners etc)?

Part 3
National English Curriculum: Knowledge about Language

Teaching level: () K-3; () 4-6; () 7-10

KLA/s (if relevant):

Please indicate your level of familiarity with the following terms from the National Curriculum:

1 = I've never heard of it; 2 = I've heard of it but don't know what it means; 3 = I think I know what it means; 4 = The term is quite familiar; 5 = I feel confident I know what it is.

	Year 1	1	2	3	4	5
Question						
Statement						
Command						
Word						
Sentence						
Text						

	1	2	3	4	5
Year 2					

- Closed question
- Open question
- Action verbs
- Noun
- Noun group
- Adverbial

	1	2	3	4	5
Year 3					

- Turn-taking patterns
- Spoken mode
- Written mode
- Paragraph
- Topic sentence

	Year 4	1	2	3	4	5
Positive statement						
Negative statement						
Intensifier						
Clause						
Possessive						
Classifiers						
Action verbs						
Saying verbs						
Thinking verbs						
Feeling verbs						

	1	2	3	4	5
Year 5					

- Idiomatic expressions
- Simple sentence
- Compound sentence
- Personal pronouns
- Relating verbs
- Adjective group
- Cohesion
- Determiner
- Article
- Demonstrative

	1	2	3	4	5
Year 6					

- Rhetorical devices
- Modality
- Complex sentence
- Direct speech
- Indirect speech
- Substitution
- Ellipsis
- Sentence opener
- Subordinating conjunction
- Nouns in apposition

