Rhetorical Grammar and the Grammar of Schooling:

Teaching "Powerful Verbs" in the English National Literacy Strategy

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Debates about grammar teaching have traditionally revolved around curricular content: Should grammar be taught explicitly and systematically? If so, which grammar? The outcomes of such debates are inscribed in curricular documents and related materials, typically as a set of topics, objectives and principles to guide teaching and assessment. Policy is further mediated by textbooks, instructional aids, professional development materials and activities, and – most crucially – by the teachers and pupils who translate these texts into classroom activities.

This article traces the trajectory of educational ideas about grammar through policy, curricula, instructional aids, and enactment in the classroom. Specifically, I examine current English policy regarding the teaching of grammar in primary schools, and its enactment in a Year 3 (8 year olds) literacy lesson. While the policy advances a broadly rhetorical approach to grammar and its instruction, the enacted lesson retained a number of features characteristic of the formal, rule-based grammar instruction that the policy sought to replace. I discuss possible explanations for this outcome, and implications for language education policy. Among other issues, I argue that rhetorical grammar teaching has been thwarted by the "grammars" of schooling (Tyack & Tobin, 1994) and educational accountability.

The article is organised as follows: First, I contrast two approaches to grammar teaching – rule-based vs. rhetorical – that help to frame current English policy and practice. Second, I

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review recent developments in English educational policy with regard to the teaching of grammar, and in particular the background to the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) adoption of a rhetorical approach to grammar teaching. Third, I analyse an NLS lesson on "powerful verbs", showing how the largely rhetorical grammar teaching materials were enacted in a way that promoted many rule-based grammar ideas and practices. Finally, I explore possible explanations for the lesson outcome, discussing, among other factors, teacher knowledge and skill, NLS structure, the accountability regime, and pedagogic culture.

1. Rule-based vs. Rhetorical Grammar Teaching

The term *grammar* is used in many different ways (cf. Hartwell, 1985), and there are numerous approaches both to grammatical analysis of the English language and to the teaching of grammar in schools. In this article, *grammar* is used in the broad sense of the study of language patterns and structure: not only morphology and syntax, but also elements of semantics and pragmatics.[1] I introduce and contrast two general pedagogical approaches to grammar: rule-based and rhetorical grammar teaching. This analytical division reflects the tensions between current policy and status quo classroom practice and, as such, is a useful heuristic for examining that policy's enactment.

The underlying premise of rule-based grammar teaching is nicely captured in the following introductory note "to the pupil" found at the beginning of the school textbook *Everyday Grammar* (Agar, 1980: p. 4):

> Most of the things that you learn to do need rules. When you play a game, you follow rules. You are allowed to do some things and you are not allowed to do other things. This gives order to the game and helps to make it more enjoyable. If everyone did as they liked, the game could not be played properly.

When you speak or write English, you also have to follow rules. You already know many of the rules from learning to talk and from listening to other people. You also learn the rules from reading books. The rules of English are called grammar.

According to this approach, language mastery – i.e. the ability to express oneself correctly and "clearly" – is a function of learning the rules of grammar. These rules are typically taught through teacher transmission, whole class recitation, and individual pupil practice on grammar exercises. Topics tend to focus on parts of speech and "common mistakes" related to them. The following passage, taken from a different school textbook, *Master Your English* (Davies, Dillon, Egerton-Chesney, 1981: p. 6), illustrates the sort of concerns motivating rule-based grammar teaching:

> **Singular or plural verb?**
> Mr Beak growled at Wilfred, "Where were you on Friday, boy?"
> Wilfred replied, "I were at the fair, Sir."
> "No, no, no, Wilfred," corrected Mr Beak, "I *was* at the fair, I *was* at the fair."
> "Oh, was you?" beamed Wilfred, "Great, wasn't it?"
>
> After Mr Beak's temper had cooled, he tried to explain to his pupil:
> Use singular verbs after singular nouns.
> *Like this*: Wilfred is a silly boy.
>   Mr. Beak goes to church.
>   The girl went on the beach.
> Use plural verbs after plural nouns.
> *Like this*: The boys are clever.
>   The teachers talk loudly.
>   Flags fly in the street.
> Singular verbs must follow these:
> each of   one of   neither of   each
> every   none of   nobody   either   neither

Throughout the textbook Wilfred speaks with grammatical "errors" and Mr. Beak corrects him.[2] Pupils are warned not to be like Wilfred, and given ample opportunities to practice "correct" grammatical expression in exercises involving e.g. cloze tasks, correcting sentences, etc. The texts used in these exercises are typically no longer than a sentence, and are not connected to any context other than the grammatical issue being explored.[3]

Rhetorical grammar teaching differs from rule-based grammar teaching with regard to its approach to language, pedagogy and aims. Rhetorical grammar treats grammatical conventions as resources to be exploited, rather than rules to be followed. So, whereas rule-based grammar divides language into two absolute categories – correct and incorrect – rhetorical grammar treats grammatical choice as, well, precisely that: a *choice* from among possibilities. These possibilities are judged as more or less effective, depending upon factors such as audience, purpose and context. Thus, while both rhetorical and rule-based grammar teaching share the same aim – the improvement of pupil expression – they diverge in their emphases vis-à-vis what counts as "good" expression: rule-based grammar teaching privileges "correctness" (i.e. adherence to Standard grammar norms), while rhetorical grammar teaching focuses on effectiveness. Since a central aim of schooling is initiation into academic and formal literacies, Standard grammar also receives a central place in the rhetorical grammar curriculum. However, rather than being treated as the one correct form, it is taught alongside other language varieties and registers, and in the context of examination of the relationships between communicative situation, language choices and rhetorical effects.

Pedagogically, rhetorical grammar teaching involves inductive explorations of texts, discussion of rhetorical and grammatical choices, and pupil application of grammatical knowledge in written communication tasks. Examples of discrete teaching and learning activities, taken from the *Grammar for Writing* handbook (DfEE, 2000),[4] include *Function*, in which pupils "investigate the function of a word class, sentence structure or punctuation mark" by examining and discussing repeated occurrences of that linguistic phenomenon in a text (p. 156); *Cloze*, in which some of the words in an existing text are obscured and pupils discuss possible choices, in order to "consider the effectiveness of a particular word within a sentence

and to practise using effective language to suit the audience and purpose of the text" (p. 157); and *Improve*, in which pupils focus on a particular grammatical issue in collectively editing a piece of writing, "considering the choices open to them and discussing the merits of alternative words and structures" (p. 161). While rule-based grammar teaching tends to distrust pupils' tacit linguistic knowledge (as a source of errors), rhetorical grammar teaching is respectful of pupil intuitions, and seeks to build upon them in developing explicit grammatical knowledge and pupil critical language awareness. Finally, while rule-based grammar teaching tends to use decontextualised exercises, rhetorical grammar teaching requires that grammar study be embedded in meaningful communicative contexts. These differences are summarised in table 1 below.

Table 1. Rule-based vs. rhetorical grammar teaching

	Rule-based grammar	**Rhetorical grammar**
Grammatical conventions are…	rules to be obeyed	resources to be exploited
Grammatical problems appear in the context of…	decontextualised grammar exercises	meaningful communication
Grammar problems tend to…	have one correct answer	have multiple possible answers
Solving grammar problems involves…	knowing the rule	exercising judgement
Learning grammar involves…	practice in applying the rules	awareness, reflection and deliberation
Tacit grammatical knowledge is…	a source of mistakes	a reliable source of knowledge
Standard grammar is…	the structure of proper English	one variety of English, particularly important in formal and academic communication

2. A Shift toward Rhetorical Grammar Teaching in English Primary Policy

Traditionally, explicit teaching of rule-based grammar was an integral part of the primary school curriculum in England.[5] School grammar study came under increasing criticism in the

1960s and 1970s. Modern linguistics challenged many of its assumptions, including the Latin-centred approach to English grammar, the alleged superiority of "proper" English, and even the idea that grammar needed to be taught. The Progressivist educational movement viewed grammar study as largely irrelevant, boring and a constraint on pupil expression. Moreover, the emphasis on proper English was criticised as alienating for working class children, who (like fictional Wilfred above) spoke in ways that deviated from Standard grammar conventions (e.g. Anderson & Butler, 1982). Finally, available research appeared to refute the assumption that formal grammar teaching improves pupils' writing (e.g. Braddock, 1963; Elley et. al., 1976).[6] In light of these and related criticisms, grammar teaching had largely fallen out of favour in the English educational establishment by the end of the 1960s.

Grammar's decline was not universally welcomed. Opponents pointed to alleged crises in literacy achievement as evidence of an urgent need to go "back to the basics" of "traditional" schooling, including the teaching of grammar. For many critics the issue was broader than questions of curriculum and pedagogy. "Traditional grammar" is a politically potent symbol, signifying a nostalgic time when the English language, national identity and social order seemed more certain and secure than they do in the current period of globalisation and "post-modern" doubt (Cameron & Bourne, 1989).

Interest in grammar teaching resurged in the 1980s and early 1990s as politicians and educators' attention turned to the constitution of a National Curriculum. English, including of course grammar, proved to be a particularly controversial subject, prompting then Secretary of State for Education Kenneth Baker to appoint a *Committee of Inquiry into the Teaching of the English Language*, or "Kingman Committee" (Great Britain, 1988). Upon launching the committee, Baker remarked, "I have been struck by a particular gap. Pupils need to know about

the workings of the English language if they are to use it effectively" (quoted in Sealey, 1994,

pp. 121-2). The *Kingman Report* opened with the following indictment of current (Progressivist)

"distractions" to effective teaching:

> …the belief that this capacity [to use language effectively] can and should be fostered only
> by exposure to varieties of English language; that conscious knowledge of the structure and
> working of the language is unnecessary for effective use of it; that attempting to teach such
> knowledge induces boredom, damages creativity and may yet be unsuccessful; and that the
> enterprise entails imposing an authoritarian view of a standard language which will be
> unacceptable to many communities in our society.

However, the *Report* did not call for a return to rule-based grammar teaching. Instead, it sought

to carve out a middle ground (Gannon, 1988), by emphasizing the importance of knowledge

about language (KAL) in learning, communication and understanding society. KAL became the

centre-piece for the development of a "New Grammar Teaching" (Carter, 1991), which included

the following principles (see also Cox, 1995, p. 20):

- Language study should be integrated into real communicative contexts (and not constitute

  a separate curriculum subject).

- Language study should build on pupils' experience, facilitating reflection on their tacit

  knowledge.

- Knowledge about language is important as a means of developing linguistic tolerance and

  understanding how power and values are communicated through language.

- Teachers' professional knowledge about language enables them to facilitate pupils'

  learning flexibly and effectively.

- Language is intrinsically interesting, and that alone is reason enough to warrant its study in

  school.

This "New Grammar" shares many aspects with rhetorical grammar as I outlined it above, though the emphasis is on understanding language (and, through it, society) as a goal in and of itself, rather than improving pupils' writing.[7]

Conservative politicians were not placated by KAL. Two projects were established to implement the *Kingman Report*: the *National Curriculum English Working Group*, chaired by Brian Cox (DES, 1989), and the *Language in the National Curriculum* (LINC) in-service professional development programme, directed by Ronald Carter. Both projects persisted with the *Kingman* model for language education, and both were subsequently undermined by the government. In justifying his decision to suppress the LINC materials, then Secretary of State for Education Tim Eggar (1991) wrote, "our central concern must be the business of teaching children how to use their language *correctly*… [The materials] could convey a number of wrong impressions – most dangerously that ungrammatical or badly presented work should be understood and condoned rather than corrected" (emphasis in the original).[8] A DES spokesman put it simply: "Ministers want to see more formal teaching of English grammar" (Abrams, 1991).

In 1998 the newly elected New Labour government established the "National Literacy Strategy" (NLS) for reform of primary literacy education in England. Major components of this programme include a dedicated daily "literacy hour", structured into 15 minutes of shared reading or writing, 15 minutes direct teaching of skills to the whole class, 20 minutes of individual study while the teacher engages a small group in guided reading or writing, and a 10 minute concluding plenary session with the whole class; detailed objectives, distributed in a term-by-term progression and divided into word, sentence and text levels; and numerous materials to support teaching and professional development.[9] The NLS was introduced against the backdrop of an accountability regime that critically shaped the way it was interpreted and

implemented. This regime included yearly standardised testing at ages 7 and 11, publication of

schools' test scores in league tables, performance management and high stakes, on-site

inspections every four years.

Among other aims, the NLS sought to reassert and support the explicit teaching of

grammar, though not the sort of rule-based grammar teaching that had been advocated by the

previous government:

> Some would argue that the study of grammar is worth teaching in its own right because it
> is intrinsically interesting – and so it is. This is not the primary aim here; our aim is to
> improve children's writing…
> It should be clear from this that the purpose of teaching grammar is not simply the naming
> of parts of speech, nor is it to provide arbitrary rules for 'correct' English. It is about
> making children aware of key grammatical principles and their effects, to increase the
> range of choices open to them when they write. (DfEE, 2000, p. 7)

In these brief extracts the anonymous authors attempt to position the NLS approach to grammar

in relation to what has come before. They acknowledge the Kingman justification for grammar

teaching (*worth teaching in its own right*), but distance themselves from it, adopting a more

instrumental approach (*to improve children's writing*). They also distance themselves from

traditional, rule-based grammar (*simply the naming of parts of speech*), with its standard

grammar emphasis (*arbitrary rules for 'correct' English*). The final sentence aligns the NLS

with rhetorical grammar teaching: the point of grammar study is to enable pupils to make choices

from among a range of linguistic resources, and to be aware of the effects of different choices on

the rhetorical power of their writing.

The NLS advanced this rhetorical grammar agenda through its termly objectives, training

modules and a collection of lesson plans and related guidance, entitled *Grammar for Writing*

(DfEE, 2000).[10] Examples of practical teaching and learning activities from *Grammar for

Writing* were mentioned above; these materials will be further elaborated and discussed below.

Grammar for Writing has been generally well-received by both teachers and linguists (Hudson &

Walmsley, 2005; Ofsted, 2001).[11] However, we know very little about how the text is actually used in classrooms. This article seeks to address that gap, by analysing in detail one class's enactment of a *Grammar for Writing* lesson on "powerful verbs", and by illustrating through this case the challenges posed by rhetorical grammar for both teachers and educational reformers.

3. Research Context and Method

The data discussed in this article are drawn from an extended case study (Burawoy, 1998; Mitchell, 1983) of the enactment of the National Literacy Strategy in one primary school conducted over the course of the 2003-2004 school year. This study's primary aim was to probe and extend theories about the role of curricular materials in teaching and its improvement. Data collection included participant observation in the school, formal and informal interviews, audio-recording of lessons, and individual and group feedback conversations. The theoretical frame, methodology and outcomes of the broader study are reported elsewhere (Lefstein, 2005; Lefstein, 2008; Street et al., 2007); here I elaborate methods directly relevant to the data and analyses discussed in this article.

3.1 Research Site and Case Selection

The research site, which I call "Low Tide Primary School", is a relatively large (almost 400 pupils) community primary school serving a village which has for all intents become a suburb of a Southern English city.[12] The majority of the pupils come from working class backgrounds, and the ethnic background of over three quarters of them is White British.

The school's confidential "PANDA" (performance and assessment) report issued by the Office of Standards in Education (OfSTED) at the beginning of the study portrayed a gloomy

picture of the school's achievement standards (according to national tests). Compared to similar

schools (with between 8-20% eligibility for free school meals), pupils' attainment was in the

bottom quartile for all subjects at both Key Stages, with the exception of Key Stage 2 English,

which was in the bottom 40 percent.[13] Moreover, whereas the five-year national trend reflected a

slight rise in scores, the school trend exhibited a downward trajectory. In January 2004 the

school received the (failing) inspection grade of "severe weaknesses".

The teacher in the lesson that is the focus of this article is Miss Millpond. Though at the

time of the study Miss Millpond was only in her fourth year of full-time teaching, she was highly

regarded by her colleagues and Headteacher. She was trained as a teacher after the inception of

the NLS, and her lessons were typically textbook exemplifications of NLS lesson structure and

pedagogical principles. Her classroom was also an interesting and genuinely pleasant place to

be. In official recognition of her ability, Miss Millpond was granted "Advanced Skills Teacher"

status, and at Low Tide Primary School was given responsibility for coordinating gifted and

talented programmes and made a member of the standards and assessment management team.

I have chosen to focus on this particular lesson for several reasons. First, how to make

writing more exciting by using "powerful" verbs is a rhetorical grammar topic *par excellence*: it

would make little sense in a rule-based grammar teaching system. Second, as I noted above,

Miss Millpond is a talented and conscientious teacher, who is considered exemplary in her

appropriation of the NLS. Third, Miss Millpond clearly struggled with some of the key issues

discussed in my analysis below, both during the lesson itself and also in our post-lesson feedback

conversation. The basic findings in this lesson – the subversion of rhetorical grammar and the

adherence to a procedural pedagogical model – are supported by the other lessons observed and

analysed in the study from which this lesson is excerpted. Though these lessons are not

necessarily representative of NLS grammar teaching more generally, their study highlights important theoretical and practical issues relating to the challenges of changing language teaching practice and the relationships between the grammar curriculum and the pedagogical and regulatory structures within which it is enacted.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Investigation of curricular enactment involved collection and analysis of data at three levels: national policy, school culture and classroom interaction. The historical development of national literacy policy was investigated through analysis of policy documents and secondary sources. At the school level, I participated in and observed life in the school two to three days a week for one year, including participation in teacher professional development sessions and staff meetings; teaching one lesson a week; conducting interviews and feedback conversations; and collecting policy and curricular documents. At the classroom level, lessons were observed in four Key Stage 2 classrooms (including 65 literacy lessons that were audio-recorded), teachers were interviewed on the basis of lesson transcripts, and artefacts were collected. A major aim of the data analysis was to integrate findings from these three levels, tracing the movement of ideas and forces between national policy, local implementation and classroom activity.

Three sets of lessons with a grammar focus were transcribed and subjected to detailed analysis. These lessons were interrogated with regard to academic task requirements (cf. Doyle & Carter, 1984) and the resources and guidance provided to them. I used micro-analytic techniques to investigate particularly intriguing events, asking at each turn, e.g., "What is the speaker doing?" "Why that, now?" "What else might have been done here, but wasn't?" (Rampton, 2006). Lesson activity was contrasted with policy and curricular materials, in

particular with regard to approaches to grammar teaching. I examined both the affordances embedded in the curricular materials, and the enacted curriculum – i.e. what pupils were required to do and know, what resources were provided to support them, and what explicit and implicit lessons about language were communicated.

4. Rhetorical Grammar in Action

In the three sets of grammar lessons examined in detail I observed partial and problematic enactment of rhetorical grammar teaching principles and practices, which were embedded in the curricular materials, and in their stead rule-based grammar teaching practices. This general tendency was manifested in teachers' selections and adaptations of curricular materials, and in the way these materials were then enacted in their classrooms. In the following section I demonstrate this process in the analysis of a "powerful verbs" lesson. First I discuss the relevant curricular materials used in this lesson and then their enactment by Miss Millpond and her Year 3 pupils (8 year-olds).

4.1 Grammar for Writing*: Powerful Verbs*

The lesson analysed in this article was devoted to achieving sentence level targets that had been identified as weaknesses in a review of pupils' writing conducted by Miss Millpond and the other Year 3 teacher. Among the issues targeted by the teachers was pupils' overuse of common and general verbs, such as "say", "eat" and "walk". This assessment was aligned with – and indeed probably influenced by – NLS guidance regarding writing targets (NLS, 2000). The Year 3 targets include "use interesting vocabulary; vary use of adjectives and verbs for impact," and Year 4 targets include "use powerful verbs to show character or add impact."

The teachers turned to the NLS *Grammar for Writing* handbook to address these issues. The idea of "powerful verbs" is elaborated in the "Principles and explanation" section of Unit 22:

> A 'powerful' verb is one which conveys not just the bald or basic action but elements of character, atmosphere and mood. We tend to think of adjectives and adverbs as the 'describing words' in texts, but verbs are often vividly descriptive words. When trying to improve a dull text, substituting powerful verbs for weak ones can be more effective than lacing it with adjectives and adverbs.

This explanation contains both a definition – i.e. a powerful verb conveys elements of character, atmosphere and mood – and a statement about the context in which powerful verbs should be used: the improvement of dull texts. Which type of texts? Though not specified here, the answer can be inferred from the subsequent activities, most of which involve using powerful verbs to describe a character's mood in stories. For example, in the "Changing verbs" activity pupils look at sentences with "weak" verbs (e.g. "The king *went* across the room"), discuss what the verb tells us about the king's character, role play different ways of performing the action, and invent appropriate powerful verbs to describe the different ways of crossing the room.

Miss Millpond relied primarily upon Unit 1 in planning her lesson. Unit 1 addresses two NLS objectives (both from Year 3, Term 1):

> Pupils should be taught:
> **S3** the function of verbs in sentences through: noticing that sentences cannot make sense without them; collecting and classifying examples of verbs from reading and own knowledge, eg *run, chase, sprint; eat, consume, gobble; said, whispered, shrieked;* experimenting with changing simple verbs in sentences and discussing their impact on meaning;
> **S5** to use the term 'verb' appropriately;

Though the term "powerful verb" is not mentioned here, it is implied in the reference to changing *simple* verbs and in the exemplary lists of verbs to be collected (each set involves a "simple" verb followed by two more powerful alternatives).

The teaching unit's "Principles and explanation" section consists of four bullet points:

- A verb is a word (or words) that expresses an action, a happening, a process or a state. It can be thought of as a 'doing' word, eg *shouts, has played, is skating, gives*, or a 'being' word, eg *am, is, were, will be, has been, liked living, knows, will feel*.
- Verbs often occur in chains, eg *was living; were playing; have been working*.
- Every sentence needs a verb.
- There are often many verbs connected with a particular action or state of being, and it is important to choose the right one for meaning and impact.

The first three points relate to various aspects of verbs as a linguistic category or part of speech. They are presented as factual knowledge about language, and do not call upon the reader to take a particular course of action. In the case of the fourth bullet point, the factual knowledge presented (i.e. "there are often many verbs connected with a particular action or state of being") is the basis for rhetorical guidance: "it is important to choose the right one for meaning and impact".

Seven different activities are suggested in the teaching unit: two involve investigating the function of verbs or playing with parts of speech ("Function" and "Quickmake"), one is to search for powerful verbs in the thesaurus ("Look up"), and four involve examinations of meaning and rhetoric ("Action verbs", "Cloze", "More cloze" and "Shared writing"). In what follows I describe these activities, highlighting their pedagogical affordances and the ideas about grammar and its instruction they embody.

In "Function" pupils are instructed to investigate a text (the first paragraph of which is reproduced below) in which all the verbs are underlined, in addition to one word toward the end of the text that is not a verb.

> Tim <u>ran</u>. He <u>ran</u> so fast that his feet <u>seemed</u> disconnected to the rest of him. But it <u>would</u> <u>be</u> no good – not with Mitch Morgan behind him. Mitch Morgan <u>was</u> taller and faster than everyone else in their class. Tim <u>hurtled</u> down the alley, the sound of feet <u>pounding</u> after him. His lungs <u>ached</u> and his feet <u>jarred</u> against the ground.

Pupils are supposed to discuss the functions performed by the underlined verbs in their respective sentences. After ascertaining verbs' functions they then look for the one underlined

word that does not belong to the studied word class. In terms of the approaches to grammar teaching discussed in the preceding section, this activity is typical of the Knowledge about Language approach: the purpose is to teach about how language works, through an inductive process that builds upon pupils' tacit grammatical knowledge. It is also noteworthy that this activity employs a paragraph-long text (rather than a set of unrelated sentences).

"Quickmake" is an oral sentence manipulation game, in which pupils are provided with a sentence – "It swirled and fluttered to the floor" – and take turns replacing words: a hypothetical example might be: "*What* swirled and fluttered to the floor", "What *soared* and fluttered to the floor", "What soared *then* fluttered to the floor", "What soared then *plummeted* to the floor", etc. Though the authors do not explain the pedagogical rationale for this activity (the stated aim is "to give children oral practice in sentence construction"), their intention appears to be to give pupils an opportunity to experiment with word classes and sentence structure, attending to which words can and cannot be inserted in the available slots. Such experimentation again recalls KAL principles, though the sentence is not embedded in a meaningful context that would afford exploration of the relative merits of various word choices.

In "Action verbs" pupils are requested to perform an activity in various ways (e.g. different ways of going across the room) and to think of appropriate verbs to describe their different actions. Such an activity directs attention to nuances in meaning, and the different rhetorical effects of different lexical choices.

The two cloze activities involve concealing the verb chains in a text, inventing possible alternatives, and comparing them to each other and the original. Teachers are instructed to "reread the text to see whether the meaning has been changed or whether the altered verbs really do add impact". The point of these activities is to explore rhetorical effectiveness: "to consider

the effectiveness of a particular word within a sentence and to practise using effective language

to suit the audience and purpose of the text" (p. 157). However, the communicative context of

the one provided text is not specified (it appears to be a fragment from a short story).

Similarly, the suggested activity for shared writing involves thinking about appropriate

verbs while composing a poem:

> The children's choice of verbs may be somewhat lacklustre. Help them select unusual and
> specific verbs. Pause at each verb, giving children a moment to write their suggestion on
> their dry-wipe boards. They should hold up their suggestions and you choose, giving
> reasons for your choice. (p. 35)

Interestingly, the terms "simple" and "powerful" verbs are not used here, rather the authors

contrast "lacklustre" with "unusual" and "specific" verbs. Why, for example, an unusual verb is

necessarily preferable to an ordinary one is neither explained nor justified.

Finally, in "Look up" the teacher is directed to "provide a list of basic verbs and use

thesaurus to find alternative, more powerful possibilities". Unlike the preceding four activities,

this activity does not involve reflection or deliberation about rhetorical choices.

What approaches to grammar teaching are promoted by these activities? What affordances

are embedded within them? For the most part, the activities lend themselves to rhetorical

grammar teaching. With the exceptions of "Look up" and "Quickmake", the activities explore

verbs and verb choices with the context of a coherent text that is communicating some idea (a

scene, part of a story or a poem). With the exception of "Function", none of the activities

requires pupils to arrive at the one correct answer, and many of them (Cloze, More cloze, Action

verbs and Shared writing) involve deliberation in order to arrive at a judgement about which of

the many possible answers is most appropriate, powerful or effective. "Function" and

"Quickmake" build upon pupils' tacit grammatical knowledge, as do of course the activities that

require judgement about the effectiveness of verb choices. However, as noted above,

communicative contexts are not made explicit, nor are criteria for appropriateness and effectiveness discussed.

Of course these activities can be used in multiple ways, both in terms of the combinations employed and the way they're enacted in the classroom. In the following section I describe how Miss Millpond and her pupils enacted this lesson.

4.2 Powerful Verbs Enacted

The lesson proceeded through the following stages, divided into categories according to Miss Millpond's lesson plan:

1. Presentation of the lesson objectives: "to understand verbs, and to be able to change simple verbs in sentences for more powerful verbs". (approximately 5 minutes)

Word/sentence level – reading & writing

2. Focused sentence-level work: Miss Millpond demonstrates replacing the "simple" verb *eat* with more powerful verbs in the sentence *Please may I eat ice cream?* Discusses also synonyms, the use of a thesaurus, and the difference between a thesaurus and a dictionary. (8 minutes, 30 seconds)

3. The class read in unison a section from *Tertius and the Horrible Hunt* by Ann Jungman. (8 minutes, 40 seconds).

4. The class identify and underline all the verbs in the story. This investigation leads to an impromptu discussion of auxiliary verbs (6 minutes).

Group tasks

5. Explanation of tasks for independent work (differentiated by groups), including tips for using the thesaurus. (6 minutes, 45 seconds).

6. Pupils work individually on tasks, while Miss Millpond conducts a guided writing session

with one group.[14] The tasks involve identifying verbs in a given text and replacing simple verbs

with more powerful alternatives. One group uses the "Function" text from *Grammar for*

Writing, another listens to a story on a tape and writes down the verbs, a third performs a

computer-based cloze exercise, and a fourth uses a commercial textbook worksheet with cloze

sentences and a set of possible verbs (e.g. "A farmer _____ on a farm"; sails, climbs, works,

mends, types or flies).[15] (20 minutes)

     Plenary

7. Each group receives a large sheet of paper with a verb in the middle (e.g. to close, to keep, to

sleep) and is instructed to list more powerful verbs (the "Look up" activity from *Grammar for*

Writing). (6 minutes, 30 seconds)

     8. Concluding discussion: Miss Millpond surveys the groups' lists of verbs and

     provides feedback. She concludes the lesson as follows: "Children, if I said to you,

     do you understand a bit more about how you can choose more powerful verbs and,

     sometimes, instead of 'to run,' you can think of a better one. Do you understand?

     Put your hand up if you think, 'Miss Millpond, you know, I've got to think

     carefully about the verbs that I use in my writing now.' Oh, I hope that's a lot of

     you, we'll just have to see now, in your writing. Brilliant." (4 minutes, 20

     seconds)

What were pupils required to know or do in this lesson? They were called upon to identify

verbs in a text, find synonyms (e.g. in a thesaurus), and replace simple verbs with "more

powerful" alternatives. These three activities can be (and often were) performed mechanically,

with little attention to meaning or context. For example, in section 6, one pupil worked on

replacing simple with powerful verbs in the following sentence (the verbs were underlined in the

original exercise, the "Function" activity described above): "He <u>ran</u> so fast that his feet <u>seemed</u>

disconnected to the rest of him." She looked up "seemed" in the thesaurus and was faced with

two alternatives – "appeared" and "sounded". She chose the latter, so that the "strengthened"

sentence now read: "He <u>ran</u> so fast that his feet <u>sounded</u> disconnected to the rest of him."

In the following analysis, which focuses primarily on the whole class discussions (sections

2, 5 and 8), I examine how and why pupils developed this mechanical orientation to the problem

of "empowering" verbs, and how Miss Millpond dealt with the issue. In particular I inquire into

the bases for judging a verb's power. I identify three implicit theories regarding what makes a

verb powerful: essentialism, meaning, and context and purpose.

In extract 1, Miss Millpond demonstrates the procedure for replacing verbs:

```
Extract 1. (section 2, 3:05 minutes)¹⁶
1   M. Millpond:  Kelvin (.) could you give me a sentence please
2                 with the ve::erb (1) eat
3   Kelvin:       I eat
4   M. Millpond:  do we say I eat?
5   Kelvin:       I (3) ate
6   M. Millpond:  OK (.) I'm going to stop you there (.)
7                 because you're right (.) good boy (.)
8                 but I want you to use the word (.) eat
9                 so think of a word (1) a sentence with eat in
10                (3) plea:se can I:I
11  Kelvin:       eat (2) ice cream
12  M. Millpond:  >please can I eat ice cream< (.) brilliant
13                now (.) that's a good sentence
14                that was a question
15                please can I eat ice cream
16                but (.) that verb eat (2)
17                it-it's good (.) I like eat but (.)
18                could we think of perhaps a bit more of an (.)
19                exciting (.) or a more powerful verb
20                because that's what we're trying to do today
21                isn't it (.)
22                remember when you told me (.)
23                that we want to try and find more powerful verbs
24                so (.)
25                who thinks they can give me the same sentence
26                but perhaps (.) change that verb
27                for a bit more of a powerful verb (2)
28                Dorothy?
29  Dorothy:      ate
```

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30  M. Millpond:  does that make sense?
31                please can I ate (.) ice cream?  (.)
32                what you've done is change the verb
33                to a different tense (.)
34                what I'm asking you to do (.)
35                is think of a different verb (.)
36                so it's not going to be eat
37  Pupil:        (I think it's      )
38  M. Millpond:  but would make it sound a more powerful verb
39                OK (.) do you want to have another go?   (1)
40                what's another word that you could use
41                instead of eat do you think (.)
42                that's also a verb (8)
43                no? not sure?
44                have a go (.)
45                >it doesn't matter if you're wrong< (.)
46                what can you say (that eat)
47  Pupil:        gobble
48  M. Millpond:  brilliant (.) you can have gobble to gobble
49                (1) OK please can I °gobble ice cream°
50                or >gobble up< you might have (1)
51                Diane
52  Diane:        please can I taste some ice cream
53  M. Millpond:  please can I taste ice crea:m (.) Chris
54  Chris:        please can I consume
55  M. Millpond:  consume ice cream (2)
56                Seth (5)
57                (think of another one)
58  Seth:         please can I (2) munch? [ice cream]
59  M. Millpond:                          [munch ice cream]
60                another one (1)  Keith?
61  Keith:        please may I demolish some ice cream?
62  M. Millpond:  please may I?
63  Keith:        demolish
64  M. Millpond:  demolish
65                Ooh I quite like that
66                can I demolish
67                I like that
68                what does the word demolish (.) the verb demolish
69                give you the impression Keith
70                if you're asking to demolish the ice cream
71                what-what do-what does that give the impression of
72                what would I see (.)
73                that's what I'm trying to say
74  Keith:        (              )
75  M. Millpond:  if you were going to demolish it
76                how would you eat it?
77  Keith:        just –
78  M. Millpond:  go on explain that action
79                I can see you going
80                ((pantomimes shovelling food into mouth))
81  Keith:        just stuff it in
82  M. Millpond:  yeah (    ) you just stuff it in
83                if you're demolishing it
84                get rid of it really quick
85                demolishing it that's it
86                there's nothing going to be left is there?
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87                  good boy a merit
88                  I really like that verb
89                  to demolish something
90                  OK the idea how you're eating that ice cream
91                  OK, put your hands down
```
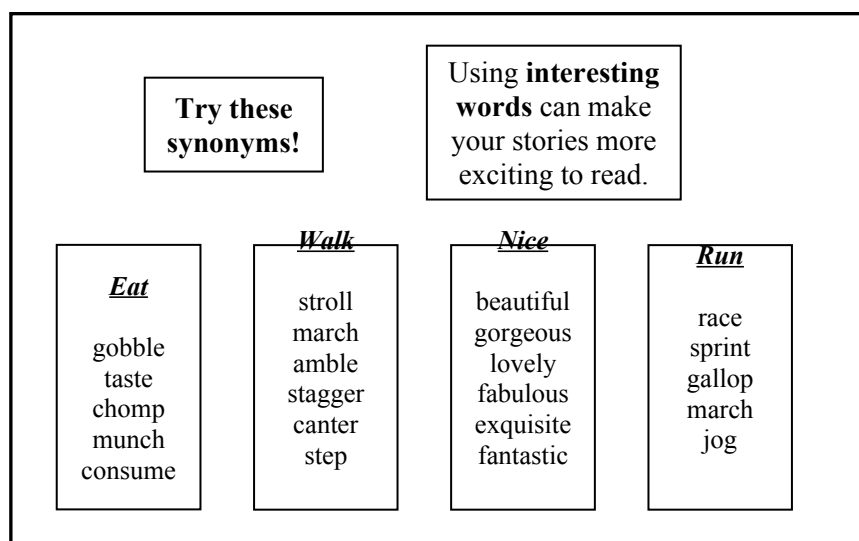
There are three major stages in this segment. In the first (lines 1-15), Miss Millpond seeks to create – together with Kelvin – a simple sentence with which to experiment. Kelvin's suggested sentence, "I eat", was of course an accurate and succinct response to her request, "give me a sentence, please, with the verb eat". Miss Millpond was probably dissatisfied with the sentence because it lacked the detail necessary for demonstrating the different meanings and effects of alternative verbs. Consider, for example, how important the context of a young boy eating ice cream is for making "I demolish" a meaningful substitute for "I eat". Furthermore, by using "eat" in intransitive form, Kelvin sentence severely limited the range of possible replacements. But Miss Millpond's prompt, "Do we say, 'I eat'?" does not inform Kelvin what he is doing wrong. His next response, "I ate", is also a legitimate sentence, but again not what Miss Millpond had in mind. What is Kelvin thinking? The form of the question – "Do we say…?" – is typically used by teachers in this school as a prompt for children to correct ungrammatical expressions. So perhaps he thought he needed to change the verb in some way, and guessed that Miss Millpond was looking for past tense (Dorothy similarly proposed "ate" instead of "eat" in line 29).

Miss Millpond insists that she wants him to use the word, "eat". Then, after a brief pause, she resolves the misunderstanding by providing for him the first half of the sentence – "Please can I…" – which he readily completes, "…eat ice cream."

In the second stage (lines 16-67) Miss Millpond seeks to generate possible (more powerful) alternatives to the verb "eat". She asks the children to think of "a bit more of an exciting or a more powerful verb" in place of "eat", "because that's what we're trying to do today".   After a

bit more confusion involving "ate", the synonyms spill out in rapid succession: gobble, taste, consume, munch and demolish. This is a strange collection, which includes some awkward expressions, for instance, the combinations of "please" and "gobble", or "munch" and "ice cream". This awkwardness is likely attributable to the fact that most of the children weren't attending to the sentence, but were focusing on the word "Eat", and the list of synonyms appearing under it on a display posted overhead (reproduced in figure 1). Shortly after the interaction reproduced in extract 1, Miss Millpond praised the children for looking at the display for ideas, thereby also reminding the other pupils of the poster and its utility. But, she continued, "it's not always going to be on display", as an introduction to using the thesaurus.

Figure 1. "Try these synonyms!" poster in Miss Millpond's classroom

Try these synonyms!	Using **interesting words** can make your stories more exciting to read.		
Eat gobble taste chomp munch consume	***Walk*** stroll march amble stagger canter step	***Nice*** beautiful gorgeous lovely fabulous exquisite fantastic	***Run*** race sprint gallop march jog

Throughout these first two stages, the procedure for replacing simple verbs has been entirely mechanical: identify the verb and search (the display or thesaurus) for synonyms to replace it. No attention has been given to what might make one verb better or worse than another. Indeed, no attention has yet been given to differences in meaning. Based on the display of "interesting words", and on the way pupils chose more powerful verbs in their independent

work, one can construct an implicit theory of powerful verbs according to which power is predetermined, a function of the word's obscurity, specificity and/or length. This theory of powerful verbs, which I term *essentialism*, posits a hierarchy of synonymous words, each possessing a different essential value or power (though they are equivalent in terms of their referential meaning). Note that one unfortunate effect of this equation of obscurity and power is to encourage pupils to select for use relatively unfamiliar words.

In the third stage (lines 68-91), Miss Millpond briefly touches on another possible factor in distinguishing simple from powerful verbs as she inquires into what impression is created by the word "demolish". However, this line of inquiry is not taken up again until the plenary at the end of the lesson (section 8), which I describe below. Throughout the bulk of the lesson – the group work and preparation for the plenary – many pupils appear to have operated according to the essentialist theory of powerful verbs, and did not entertain any other means of assessing power.

Miss Millpond confronted this issue in a post-lesson feedback conversation (conducted a month later on the basis of excerpts of the lesson transcript).

> RESEARCHER: It didn't seem to me that [the pupils I observed during independent work] made a distinction between, 'hurtled,' 'pounding,' 'ached' and 'jarred,' 'ran,' 'seemed,' 'yelled' – they changed all of them. And one of the things that I think is most challenging about powerful verbs is how you discern what's powerful and what's not powerful. What are your thoughts about that? How do you try to deal with that?
> MISS MILLPOND: Initially, I was concerned, "Oh gosh, they're not going to really think about changing them into a powerful verb, they're just going to look in the thesaurus," but, as I looked around and assessed what they were doing, a lot of children, like, 'ran' they changed, and 'seemed.' 'Pounding' and 'hurtled,' they actually looked them up in the thesaurus and they were doing alternatives which were just as powerful, which I was happy with. If they'd gone for something that was a simple verb, I think I would have panicked and gone, "Oh, my God, the opposite," and I'd have to try and bring in, "Oh, look what you've done, you've found the opposite to a powerful verb." And I think I did – I don't remember – I think I stressed to some of them that, actually, these are very powerful verbs, anyway, and actually looking at alternatives that you could use (   ) impression would you give? If I could do it again, or I could do something on from this, as an extension, I'd like to think that they thought more about what the words meant, the meaning of the words, because a lot of them will use them in a context that they won't understand. So, it's

making sure that actually although they're using the powerful verbs and introduce new vocabulary, they understand in what context they'd be used. I would change it.

The concern articulated by Miss Millpond – that pupils might replace "powerful" verbs for "simple" ones – captures nicely the absurdity of the activity in which many pupils were engaged: replacing all verbs with alternatives gathered from the thesaurus. Miss Millpond recognizes that many of them were recording words without knowing their meanings. Two comments are in order here: First, although Miss Millpond expresses dissatisfaction at pupils' relative inattention to the verbs' meanings, she was content with the result: creating "alternatives which were just as powerful".

Second, from Miss Millpond's comments an implicit theory of powerful verbs emerges, according to which a word's power is primarily a function of its meaning. However, while meaning clearly has a role to play in determining power, it is insufficient: participants, purpose and context must also be considered (and meaning is partially determined by them). To further clarify my point here, consider a young child petitioning his parents for ice cream. In my family, he would be more successful asking, "Please may I eat some ice cream?" than "Please may I demolish/devour/devastate some ice cream?" The latter constructions are likely to have achieved a response along the lines of "if you're that hungry, you should eat something nutritious". This third possibility, that power is a function of audience, purpose and context, emerges once, during the concluding plenary of the lesson (section 8), which I discuss below.

Shortly after the brief explanation of powerful verbs in extract 1, the class looks at the thesaurus, which is identified as a key tool for identifying possible powerful verbs in the independent tasks. Miss Millpond asks, "What's one of those? What happens in a thesaurus?" She gives them 20 seconds to discuss the issue with their partners, after which extract 2 begins.

Extract 2. (section 2, 1:36)

```
1    M. Millpond:   RIGHT
2                   OK
3                   FIVE FOUR THREE TWO ONE (2.6)
4                   u:h (.) Danny
5    Danny:         another word for it
6    M. Millpond:   another word for it
7                   Brilliant
8                   OK we did have a discussion down here
9                   at the front
10                  we said it gives you a different word
11                  you've got to be careful
12                  it gives you a different word which has a what
13   Keith:         the same meaning –
14   M. Millpond:   go on Keith
15                  good the same or similar meaning
16                  I just looked up
17                  for example café
18                  and if by it it said bus [2]
19                  that wouldn't be right would it (.)
20                  because it's not
21                  it's a different wo:rd
22                  but it's not the same meaning (.)
23                  café and bus
24                  OK
25                  so the café
26                  I looked at café and it said (.)
27                  a tea room
28                  a cafeteria
29                  a canteen
30                  a bar
31                  buffet (.)
32                  they're all very similar to a café
33                  they're alternative words (.)
34                  so if we were looking up in verbs in here (.)
35                  so if we looked at the verb to run
36                  if we looked up run
37                  it would also give you alternatives
38                  and some of those
39                  I'm not saying all of them
40                  some of them would be more powerful verbs
41                  they would be a bette:r alternative (.)
42                  depending on your sentence
43                  OK
44                  so what you're going to get the opportunity to do
45                  girls OK
46                  is to use a thesaurus
47                  one between two
48                  and you will be changing
49                  looking up verbs and having a choice
50                  of a more powerful verb
51                  that you think might be there
52                  now what you might think is powerful
53                  might not be what I think is powerful
54                  or I might think it's powerful
55                  and you might think oh no Miss Millpond (.)
56                  so it is choice
57                  but you have to think of the sentence
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58              that it's in Edward (.)
59              OK
```

Two problems emerge in this extract. First, the slippery nature of synonyms. On the one hand, a synonym is a different word which, as Keith puts it, "has the same meaning" (line 13). But, on the other hand, as Miss Millpond warns in this extract, it's more complicated than that. A synonym is a different word with the same *or similar* meaning.[17] Indeed, it's partly on account of the differences in meaning that one word may be seen as more powerful than another. And, because of these differences, words deemed synonymous by the thesaurus are not interchangeable in the same way that 1/2 and 5/10 can replace one another in a mathematical equation. Miss Millpond is aware of this problem, and attempts to demonstrate it with the example of "café" and "bus" (lines 16-23).

The second problem that arises in this extract is the subjective nature of a word's relative power (lines 48-55). Miss Millpond explains that some of the words in the thesaurus will be more powerful than the word they are intended to replace, but some will not. How can pupils decide? It depends on the sentence, and it depends on individual judgement: "What you might think is powerful might not be what I think is powerful, or I might think it's powerful and you might think, 'Oh no, Miss Millpond.'" Note Miss Millpond's rhetorical grammar emphases: there's no one correct answer, it's a choice, and it depends on the sentence. However, without explication of the criteria according to which that choice should be made, and without clarification of the relationship between verb choice and host sentence, the concept remains a mystery to many of the pupils.

During the concluding plenary (section 8) the third theory of powerful verbs briefly emerges, according to which power is a function of audience, purpose and context. The plenary is a discussion of a final task ("Look up"), in which each group was given a large sheet of paper

with a verb in the middle, and was instructed to list more powerful alternatives. Note that this

task, like some of the independent tasks, requires that judgements of a word's relative power be

made outside the context of a meaningful sentence. Representatives from each group stand

before the class with the lists of synonyms they've compiled (the first term is the given,

presumably simple verb – the other words are the pupils' suggestions):

> to sleep: to doze
> to lift: liftting, carry, hoist
> to eat: to feed, chew, bite, munch, chomp, gobble
> to close: shut, slam, block
> create: compose, read, trouble, beautiful
> keep: say, retained, have, to put away

Extract 3 documents the beginning of this concluding discussion:

```
Extract 3. (section 8 – 2:52)
1   M. Millpond: OK so to sleep we've got a good one °to doze°
2                I like that word (1)
3                if I'm asleep and I shouldn't be
4                I'm sat on the sofa at Christmas time
5                and I've eaten too much (.) and I've fallen asleep
6                I don't say that I've been asleep
7                someone says (.) OH (.) Miss Millpond
8                they don't say Miss Millpond
9                they say Meredith (.) have you been asleep?
10               I go (.) no no no I'm just having a little doze
11               it doesn't sound quite so bad then
12               you've sort of got away with it
13               so--so the verb doze
14               I think that's a lovely one isn't it? (.)
15               does that seem a bit more powerful to you than
16               just sleep?
17  Many:        yeah
18  M. Millpond: OK you've got to think about
19               what your sentence is
20               which we're going on to tomorrow (.)
21               OK (.) so we've got to lift
22               I'm not sure what that one is
23  Pupil:       lifting
24  M. Millpond: is that a different word to lift (2)
25               that's the same word isn't it?
26               lifting (.) you've just put ing on it haven't you?
27  Pupil:       (and we've added) another T
28  M. Millpond: (Are you allowed to though?)
29               lifting is L I F̲ T
30               hold it up for me there (Irene) please
31               OK you've got another one here to carry (1)
32               and I like this one
33               I think this one is a powerful verb (1) to hoist
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34              to lift if you hoist something up OK
35              another idea another word for lifting
36              just Chris just hold it still sweetheart
37              otherwise I can get somebody else out (.)
38              OK well done Purple Group you've got lots
39              to eat they've got
40              to chew to feed to gobble to chomp to munch to bite
41              (.) now it does depend on the sentence
42              but just by having the verbs out
43              which one do you think is the most powerful verb?
44              Stephan which one would you choose
45              as a powerful verb do you think? (.)
46              Tom please put your feet down (2)
47 Stephan:     to munch
48 M. Millpond: I quite liked to munch as well
49              Seth which one would you choose?
50 Seth:        to gobble?
51 M. Millpond: I like the idea of gobble
52              it depends how you were doing it
53              what idea you wanted to get across
54              because what did Keith
55              what word did Keith use earlier
56              do you remember? (1)
57              beginning with D (.) to (1)
58              it was to do with the ice cream (.)
59              Gemma
60 Gemma:       demolish
61 M. Millpond: good to demolish the ice cream
62              that was a very powerful verb (.) brilliant
63              Green Group (.) or (.) Green-Yellow table
64              you've got to close to shut to slam to block (.)
65              oh I like to block (1)
66              that's a different kind of word isn't it? (2)
67              OK (.) so I like to slam t-
68              so instead of closing the door (.)
69              in your story the character could be (.)
70              slamming the door (.)
71              what does that give the impression of please?
72              if your character is slamming the door
73              what does that tell the reader?
74              Margaret
75 Margaret:    he's angry?
76 M. Millpond: good the character might be angry (.)
77              so (.) next time you go to write to close the door
78              oh ((inhales sharply as if suddenly has an idea))
79              brilliant your character can slam the door
80              and you're telling the reader
81              that this character's probably very angry
```

Here, for the first time in the whole class discussions, Miss Millpond invites deliberation about which of the various alternatives is most powerful (lines 43-62). She prefaces this discussion with the caveat that "it does depend on the sentence" but proceeds to survey the

children about their preferences without reference to possible contexts or justification. Each answer is affirmed, though again with the hedge that "it depends how you were doing it, what idea you wanted to get across". Since no such purpose is established, all answers are equally justifiable, and a plurality of preferences is maintained – although all candidates are by definition seen as more powerful than the original.

At two points in this extract Miss Millpond demonstrates possible contexts in which a verb might be powerful – or, more precisely, contexts in which the choice of a different verb might be used for powerful effect. First, she recalls the embarrassment of falling asleep after Christmas dinner, and how saying, "I'm just having a little doze," (instead of simply "I've been asleep") might enable her to "sort of [get] away with it" (lines 5-7). Second, at the end of the extract (lines 68-81), she discusses the impression created by writing that a character has "slammed" a door (instead of simply "closing" it).

These two brief instances are the only cases in which rhetorical context is explored throughout this lesson. They demonstrate how verbs become more or less powerful in relation to specific communicative contexts and purposes. What happens in the rest of the lesson? It would be misleading to claim that in these instances choices of verbs were not guided by context. As Minow and Spelman (1991) remind, "We are always in some context, as are the texts that we read, their authors and readers, our problems, and our efforts to achieve solutions" (p. 248). So what is the context in which pupils select verbs throughout most of the lesson? It is the lesson objective, and the need to provide evidence of achieving that objective for Miss Millpond when she goes to mark their books. Miss Millpond reminds them of this expectation immediately before the class breaks off for independent tasks (reproduced in extract 4).

```
    Extract 4. (section 5, 55 seconds)
 1  M. Millpond:  tell me what you have to do Chris
 2  Chris:        you have to go to each one
```

```
 3                    (and) look it up in the thesaurus
 4                    (             )
 5   M. Millpond:     right (.)
 6                    and what are we trying to do?
 7                    what is the objective?
 8                    what evidence do I want to see?
 9                    anybody (.)
10                    what
11                    when I'm taking your books
12                    or I'm taking the sheet (.)
13                    what is going to be the criteria that
14                    I'm going to mark against
15                    to say (.)
16                    this child has done it
17                    has succeeded
18                    has succeeded
19                    has succeeded
20                    and I'm going to highlight it (.)
21                    what do I need to see in your books?
22                    you tell me what you need to do for me (.)
23                    only three people can tell me that (.)
24                    what do I need you to do? (.)
25                    what's it going to look like? (1)
26                    u:::hm (.)
27                    more people (.) good
28                    Edward  (.)
29   Edward:          it's li:ke (.)
30                    it's going to be like (2.3)
31   M. Millpond:     what am I looking for? (1.4)
32   Edward:          more powerful verbs
33   M. Millpond:     excellent
34                    that you have chosen more powerful verbs (.)
35                    that's what I'm looking for
36                    everybody understand what your task is please?
37   Many:            yeah (.)
38   M. Millpond:     right
39                    go and sit down please
```

In this segment Miss Millpond conjures up an image of herself poring over the pupils'

workbooks with a highlighting marker. She encounters an example of pupil learning, as defined

by the marking criteria – in this case, a powerful verb. She joyfully highlights this "evidence" of

learning, exclaiming, "This child has done it! Has succeeded! Has succeeded! Has succeeded!"

Miss Millpond not only focuses the children on the learning objective but also evokes the need,

created by the inspection regime, to produce evidence of success. The relationship between

learning objective and communicative purpose is complicated here. On the one hand, the

learning objective dominates the lesson, eclipsing potential rhetorical purposes. On the other

hand, since the objective involves "choosing more powerful verbs", and relative power is necessarily a function of rhetorical context and purpose, the objective is itself obscured.

In summary, this discussion has revolved primarily around the question of what makes a verb more or less powerful. It appears that many pupils treated this issue mechanically, without attention to the purpose of the sentence or even the candidate verbs' meanings. They identified verbs (unless they were pre-determined for them), searched for alternatives in the thesaurus (or on a poster) and replaced the given verbs with one of the synonyms they found. Their choices suggest that they preferred obscure, specific and longer words over more common, general or shorter synonyms. This approach was facilitated by the structure of the tasks, in which sentences were considered out of meaningful contexts (and, in some cases, verbs out of the context of sentences), and to a certain extent by the content of classroom discourse. Their implicit theory of powerful verbs, according to which power is an essential quality of the verb, is of course logically flawed, since a word's effectiveness depends on the context of its use, including text, audience and purpose.

5. Discussion

In the preceding sections I showed how national policy was translated into curricular materials, and how those materials were in turn enacted in the classroom. The policy sought to advance a broadly rhetorical approach to grammar teaching, and indeed a number of key rhetorical grammar principles were reflected in the curricular materials: e.g. grammatical problems were explored within meaningful contexts, no one correct answer was expected, and pupils' tacit knowledge was treated as a reliable resource. However, I illustrated how in the powerful verbs lesson many of these principles were undermined in the process of curricular

enactment. Most of the activities and/or related classroom discourse severed verb choice from potentially meaningful contexts, and an essentialist theory of powerful verbs dominated the lesson.

It is important to note that, although many rhetorical grammar principles were thwarted, the lesson does not reflect a reversion to rule-based grammar in all respects. For example, Miss Millpond was open to a number of possible answers to the question of which verb was most powerful. Likewise, she in no way endorsed the essentialist rule implicitly guiding many pupils' determinations of verbs' power. Neither standard grammar nor correct expression were emphasised, nor did the class focus on the correction of common errors. Finally, Miss Millpond encouraged pupils to exercise independent judgment (e.g. in extract 2). It appears that the lesson reflects a mixture of elements of rhetorical grammar, rule-based grammar and other practices, not directly related to grammar teaching, which I explore below.

How can this outcome be explained? I address this question in terms of both local factors – i.e. Why did essentialism emerge as the dominant theory of powerful verbs in this lesson? – and broader conditions: i.e. What are the factors that made this particular lesson possible or even likely? I highlight four issues: the lack of an alternative explanation for powerful verbs, which I relate to teacher knowledge about language and the curricular materials; task structure, rooted in the literacy hour structure; the application of a procedural pedagogical model, part of the "grammar" of contemporary schooling; and the focus on evidence, related to the accountability regime.

5.1 Explanatory Vacuum, Teacher Knowledge about Language and the Curricular Materials

Essentialism emerged in an explanatory vacuum, created by the absence of coherent

guidance about how to distinguish powerful from simple verbs. Indeed, not only did Miss

Millpond eschew positive explanations of the matter, she also further mystified it by emphasising

its subjective and context-dependent nature (see extract 2). So the main clues pupils had to rely

upon were (a) the given verbs, presumed to be simple, which tended to be common, mono-

syllabic words (e.g. eat, run, close, sleep), and (b) the examples of powerful verbs highlighted by

Miss Millpond, which tended to be more obscure, more specific and/or longer than their simple

counterparts (see e.g. figure 1).

Miss Millpond struggled with this issue in the lesson and in the post-lesson interview with

me. While she was troubled by the way in which pupils were selecting verbs – specifically, by

their inattention to meaning – she did not appear to have appreciated or understood the rhetorical

approach to grammar teaching underlying the *Grammar for Writing* materials. Unfortunately,

Miss Millpond and other teachers have had few opportunities to learn about this approach to

grammar, despite general agreement that teachers are anxious and insecure about their

grammatical subject knowledge, and that provision for knowledge about language in initial

teacher education is inadequate (e.g. Cajkler & Hislam, 2002; Hudson & Walmsley, 2005;

Myhill, 2003). NLS professional development was based largely on a demonstration and

imitation model, in which the teachers observed live or video demonstrations, which they were

then expected to emulate. The *Grammar for Writing* materials did little to rectify this situation:

the "Principles and explanation" bullet points (see section 4.1) provided insufficient background

or guidance, especially on the fundamental issues of the salient contexts and criteria for judging a

verb's effectiveness. Indeed, the issue of context was further obscured in the suggested

exercises, which provided textual fragments without specifying intended audiences, purposes or communicative situations.

5.2 Task Structure and Literacy Hour Structure

The structure of most of the tasks, in both whole class discussions and independent work, presented the question of verb choice in relatively meaningless contexts: e.g. an isolated sentence such as "Please can I eat ice cream?" or even a decontextualised word as in the final group tasks. As I noted above, such isolation of problem from meaningful context made a rhetorical theory of verb choice unlikely and unworkable.

This task structure was facilitated by mixed messages in NLS materials and structure. First, *Grammar for Writing* presents a broad range of possible activities, which lend themselves to various types of grammar teaching. Though the majority of these activities reflected rhetorical grammar teaching principles, some did not. Indeed, it is worth noting that the only activity Miss Millpond used more or less as prescribed, "Look up", is also the only one that presents verbs without any context whatsoever.

Second, and most crucially, is the literacy hour structure, which allots discrete units of time to word, sentence and text levels, each with a corresponding set of learning objectives. Such an organisation poses both practical and conceptual problems. Practically, weaving together the various objectives into coherent lessons is a complicated and onerous task (though this task is facilitated by NLS "planning exemplifications" for some units of work). It is much simpler to treat each of the different segments of the Literacy Hour as independent units, which is indeed the path taken by most teachers at Low Tide Primary School (and in the commercial textbook

most frequently used in the school). Conceptually, the fragmentation of grammatical and textual

study promotes a "building blocks" model of language, succinctly critiqued by Sealey (1999):

> [I]t would be convenient for the strategy if language could be seen as neatly distributed
> within the metaphorical 'structure' imagined in the NLS *Framework*, a static edifice
> comprised of sounds, words and sentences. If texts were simply collections of sentences
> put together from these building blocks, and if meanings were inherent in words… But
> the 'building-blocks' model fails to capture the power of language as meaning potential, a
> network of options. (p. 21)

So, while the introductory sections and many of the activities in *Grammar for Writing* advance a

rhetorical approach to grammar teaching, the Strategy structure is based upon and projects a

contrary theory of language.

5.3 Procedural Pedagogy and the Grammar of Schooling

The primary activity in this lesson – replacing simple verbs with more powerful

alternatives – was not foreign to the *Grammar for Writing* powerful verbs lesson plan. A

number of the given activities involved such a process (e.g. the Cloze activities, Action verbs),

but the emphasis was placed on examination of the rhetorical effects of different choices, and

deliberation about which choice was best for the given context. A crucial difference between the

prescribed and enacted activities was that whereas in the former the replacement task was used

as a catalyst for critical discussion, in the latter replacement was in and of itself the goal of the

lesson – there was almost no consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of alternative

verb choices.

One possible explanation for this difference is that the curricular enactment was guided by

a procedural pedagogical model, which is shared by Miss Millpond and her pupils, and is

prevalent in English education more generally. In this pedagogical model content knowledge is

broken down into discrete skills, converted into a set of procedures, which are demonstrated by

the teacher and then repeatedly practiced by the pupils. In the case of this lesson, replacing

simple with powerful verbs was presented as a component skill of effective writing. The skill

was further divided into a four-stage procedure that includes identifying verbs, searching for

synonyms, assessing verbs' power, and replacing simple verbs with more powerful alternatives.

Miss Millpond demonstrated the process to the pupils (e.g. extract 1) and assigned to them

exercises for practicing the procedure and/or its individual stages.

This procedural pedagogical model is commensurate with NLS structure and indeed was

evident throughout the school and across subject areas. It appears to be deeply embedded in

schooling practices and culture beyond Low Tide Primary School. For example, a major thrust

of mathematics education reforms in the past two decades has been moving from an emphasis on

"computational" or "procedural" understanding – i.e. how to use given algorithms to compute

solutions to given problems – to an emphasis on conceptual or principled understanding – i.e. a

grasp of the mathematical principles upon which the procedures are based (e.g. Lampert, 1986).

This distinction resonates with the differences between curricular enactment and prescription in

the powerful verbs lesson, suggesting that perhaps the critical axis for making sense of the lesson

is not rhetorical vs. rules-based grammar teaching, but rather rhetorical grammar vs. procedural

pedagogy.

I have borrowed from Tyack and Tobin (1994) the term "grammar of schooling" to

describe the influence of this pedagogical model:

> Practices… structure schools in a manner analogous to the way grammar organizes
> meaning in language. Neither the grammar of schooling nor the grammar of speech needs
> to be consciously understood to operate smoothly. Indeed, much of the grammar of
> schooling has become so well established that it is typically taken for granted as just the
> way schools are. (p. 454)

Though they examine practices at a different level of analysis (curricular organisation, division of time and space), their analogy is helpful as a way of thinking about how procedural pedagogical practices may shape the enactment of NLS policy. In the case of the lesson analysed here, Miss Millpond and the pupils interpreted and enacted the problem of powerful verbs within the frame provided by the procedural pedagogical model, discarding or transforming those aspects of rhetorical grammar that were incommensurate with their habitual classroom roles and practices (Lefstein, 2008).

5.4 Focus on Evidence and the Accountability Regime

The procedural pedagogical orientation discussed in the previous section is reinforced in practice by teachers' need to produce – for accountability purposes – evidence of pupil learning. As I noted in section 4.2, Miss Millpond was oriented toward the production of such evidence and similarly focused the class on learning products – i.e. getting the work done – rather than the learning process – i.e. reasoning about verb choice. What counted in this lesson was completion of the worksheets such that they included evidence of verbs that could be considered as powerful or more powerful than the verbs they replaced. Such a focus is arguably a direct result of the accountability regime, in which inspectors check lesson plans and objectives against pupil workbooks. Teachers' concerns with creating evidence of compliance with NLS prescriptions, and these concerns' impact on the conduct of lessons, was palpable throughout the school, in much less subtle ways than observed in this lesson (Lefstein, 2008; see also Moss, 2004).

6. Conclusion

This article has traced the trajectory of a rhetorical grammar initiative from policy through curricular materials and into the classroom. I have shown how the NLS rhetorical approach to grammar teaching, which is outlined in policy documents and manifested in curricular materials, was thwarted in its enactment in one lesson. Though this lesson should not be viewed as representative of NLS grammar teaching in general, there are good reasons to assume that many of the issues identified here pose problems for the enactment of rhetorical grammar teaching elsewhere. First, similar enactment processes were observed in other classrooms in the school. Second, Miss Millpond was an Advanced Skills Teacher, highly regarded by her colleagues and considered exemplary in her implementation of the NLS. "Powerful verbs" is a quintessentially rhetorical grammar topic of study. If rhetorical grammar principles were subverted in these conditions, they are likely to be subverted in less favourable circumstances. Third, all four of the contributing factors identified – explanatory vacuum, task structure, focus on evidence, and procedural pedagogical model – appear to be related to broader processes: teacher knowledge about language and related support, the NLS literacy hour structure, the accountability regime and the grammar of schooling.

I opened this article by noting that debates about grammar teaching tend to revolve around curricular content: Should grammar be taught? And, if so, which grammar? However, this article has shown that a shift to rhetorical grammar has implications for the way that curriculum is structured, the pedagogical models used, teacher knowledge about language, and educational governance. Would-be reformers of language education must not only address language grammar and its instruction, but also the grammar of schooling and its transformation.

Appendix - Transcription notations

te::xt   Stretched sounds

<u>text</u>   Emphasised relative to surrounding talk

>text<   Speeded up relative to surrounding talk

°text°   Slowed down relative to surrounding talk

[Overlapping talk or action

t-   Word cut off

?   Rising intonation, as in a question

(   )   Transcription uncertainty (including blank space in parentheses for

inaudible utterances)

(.)   Brief pause (under one second)

(1)   Longer pause (the number indicates length in seconds)

((text))   Description of prosody or non-verbal activity

pupil: An unidentified pupil speaker

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Endnotes

 In adopting such an expansive approach to "grammar" I follow the lead of the educational materials I am investigating.

[2] It is worth noting that in this example the lesson topic (singular vs. plural verbs) and Mr. Beak's explanation are irrelevant to Wilfred's "errors" in the opening dialogue, which relate to the differences between first and second person singular past tense forms of the verb *to be*.

[3] Paul Valéry (1941) comments on the "meaning" of school grammar texts: "*Quia nominor Leo* does not mean *For my name is Lion* but: I am an example of grammar" (quoted in Bourdieu, 1990, p. 32).

[4] See below for more details about this textbook and the policy background against which it was introduced.

[5] Discussions of the history of grammar teaching in England, upon which the following brief and partial summary is based, may be found in Beverton (2001), Carter (1991), Cox (1995), Crowley (2003), Green (1998), Hudson & Walmsley (2005), Poulson (1998), QCA (1998: paper 1), Richmond (1991) and Wardhaugh (1999).

[6] See Hillocks (1984) for an influential meta-analysis and Wyse (2001) and Andrews et al. (2004a, 2004b) for recent UK-oriented reviews. For dissenting views see Hudson (2001), Kolln (1981) and Tomlinson (1994).

[7] Carter (1991), while hopeful that pupil explicit knowledge about language might enhance writing performance, was cautious on this point, asserting only that "such a connection is plausible" (p. 16).

[8] Eggar also took exception to the LINC indirect enactment model, which concentrated on teacher professional development as a means for changing classroom practice. He favoured a more direct model, in which government provided teachers with materials to be used with pupils (i.e. the National Literacy Strategy model).

[9] See Stannard & Huxford (2007) for descriptions of the NLS and a first-hand account of its development. See Fisher (2002), Earl and colleagues (2003), Moss (2004) and Ofsted (2002) for studies of its implementation. For critiques of the NLS treatment of grammar education see Sealey (1999) and Cajkler (2004). Most NLS materials are available on-line, at http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/literacy/.

[10] My characterisation of the NLS as advancing a rhetorical grammar agenda needs to be qualified: First, the NLS materials are not monolithic in their approach. As policy documents, they contain numerous compromises between competing interests and perspectives; although most of the objectives and lesson plans reflect a shift toward rhetorical grammar principles (relative to what came before), some are more closely aligned with rule-based grammar. Second, as I will argue in the conclusion, the rhetorical grammar aspects are undermined by the literacy hour structure and other elements of the Strategy.

[11] See also Cajkler (2004) for inaccuracies in NLS texts, and Rubba (2002) for a generally favourable review of *Grammar for Writing*, which also criticises the text for its "minimalist approach", for "missed opportunities to connect sentence-level grammar to text structure", for "features of traditional, prescriptive grammar that survive in the program", and for "occasional sexist examples".

[12] Names used for the teacher, school and pupils are pseudonyms.

[13] The English National Curriculum divides compulsory schooling into four "key stages": Years 1-2 (5-7 years old) are Key Stage 1 (KS1); Years 3-6 (7-11 years old) are KS2; Years 7-9 (11-14 years old) are KS3; and Years 10-11 (14-16 years old) are KS4. At the time of this research, national standardised tests were administered at the end of each key stage (the mandatory KS3 tests were cancelled in 2008).

[14] Note that I have not analysed the guided writing session, since my record of that activity is very partial (I primarily observed and worked with pupils engaging in independent work).

[15] It is worth noting that this last cloze exercise, which with its one correct answer most closely resembles more traditional, rule-based tasks, was assigned to the "lowest" ability group in the class, suggesting that the distribution of ideas about grammar teaching may be stratified according to perceived ability groups, with rhetorical grammar targeted to "more able" pupils.

[16] See appendix for transcription notations.

[17] It's more complicated than that of course. Hudson and Barton (2002) distinguish between three types of synonyms: exact synonyms (e.g. lorry/truck), general/specific pairs (e.g. tree/oak), and contrasting pairs (e.g. rain/drizzle). Their conclusion is particularly apt here: "So the one thing not to tell the children is that they should use a thesaurus to avoid repetition. A thesaurus is a very crude tool indeed except in the hands of an expert."