Grammatical Perspectives on Texts

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Different views of grammar

➢ Learning grammar rules;

➢ Correcting grammar errors;

➢ De-contextualised exercises;

➢ A focus on error and accuracy.

prescriptive grammar

OR

➢ Developing knowledge about language;

➢ Using metalanguage to talk about language;

➢ Making connections between grammar and writing;

➢ A focus on meaning and effects.

descriptive grammar

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Theorising Grammar

Prescriptivist/descriptivist distinction:

❑ A **prescriptivis**t theory of a grammar-writing relationship would argue for the importance of grammar in securing correctness in written expression;

❑ A **descriptivist** theory of a grammar-writing relationship would argue for the importance of grammar in illuminating how written text generates meaning in different contexts.

Accuracy in writing is necessary, but not sufficient to generate good writers.

Theorising Grammar

Hallidayian underpinning:

❑ *how* we write something as important as *what* we write

❑ learning how to mean; grammar as a resource for meaning-making; (Halliday 2003; 2004)

❑ *'Whereas traditional approaches conceive of grammar as a set of structures which can be assessed as correct or incorrect, Halliday sees language as a resource, a meaning-making system through which we interactively shape and interpret our world and ourselves'* (Derewianka and Jones 2010:9).

The Exeter Approach

- An integration of learning about reading, writing and grammar;

- It constantly makes links between reading and writing;

- It is not a course in grammar; it is a way of teaching knowledge about language;

- The attention to grammar is embedded within the teaching is explicit and sets out to help both the interpretation of text and greater expertise as writers

- It fosters metalinguistic understanding about text;

- It is underpinned by a set of pedagogical principles to guide how the grammar is used.

Our Research Context

❑ A cumulative series of studies on the teaching of grammar to support writing development: from randomised controlled trials to qualitative longitudinal studies, showing evidence of positive impact on student attainment;

❑ The goal is to develop explicit metalinguistic understanding about writing and being a writer: explicit knowledge which can be internalised

❑ The research also looks at implementation: how teachers adopt the pedagogical approach and the challenges they face.

Our Research Evidence

❑ Study 1: Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) with 12-13 year old students: significant positive effect;

❑ Study 2: Quasi-experimental study investigating the approach with 12-13 year old weak writers: positive effect

❑ Study 3: Quasi-experimental study, with 14-15 year olds, investigating the reading-writing link: positive effect

❑ Study 4: RCT with 9-10 year olds: small positive effect

❑ Study 5: RCT with 9-10 year olds: positive effect;

❑ Study 6: Longitudinal study over 3 years of how students develop metalinguistic understanding: conceptual development; application in writing; relationship between teaching and student learning

Four Key Teaching Principles

➢ **Make a link** between the grammar being introduced and how it works in the writing being taught:
 eg exploring how past and present tense are used in newspaper reports for recount and comment

➢ Explain the **grammar through examples**, not lengthy explanations:
 eg exploring how prepositional phrases can create foreshadowing in narrative through a card sort of prepositional phrases from 'The Lord of the Flies'.

➢ Build in **high-quality discussion** about grammar and its effects:
 eg discussing as a whole class the different grammatical choices in two students' drafts of the ending to an argument piece.

➢ Use examples from **authentic texts** to links writers to the broader community of writers:
 eg using World Wildlife Fund campaign material to explore the language choices in persuasive writing

CREATING CHARACTER

Introducing a Character

➢ Who is your audience?

➢ What kind of story is it? What do you want it to do/achieve?

➢ What impression of your character do you want to convey in this opening?

➢ How do you want to make your reader feel or think?

➢ Is there any key information you want to convey in this opening?

Noun Phrases to Establish Character

Zeljan Kurst was a large **man** with heavy, broad shoulders that formed a straight line on either side of an unnaturally thick neck. He was bald by choice. His **head** had been shaved and there was a dark grey **shadow** beneath the skin. His **eyes**, a muddy brown, showed little **intelligence** and he had the thick **lips** and small, squashed **nose** of a wrestler, or perhaps a bouncer at a shady nightclub. Many **people** had underestimated him and occasionally **Kurst** had found it necessary to correct them.
This usually involved killing them.

from *Scorpia Rising*: Anthony Horowitz

ESTABLISHING CHARACTER

Pip, and the reader's, first encounter with Magwitch:

A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped and shivered, and glared and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin.

Charles Dickens – Great Expectations

Look linguistically: what can you see?

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Proper Nouns: Creating Character

Butcher Boy

Bloodbottler

MaidMasher

Gizzardgulper

Meatdripper

Childchewer

Manhugger

Bonecruncher

Fleshlumpeater

    from The BFG

Magwitch

Uriah Heap

Mr Quilp

Florence Dombey

Toodle

Pumblechook

Wackford Squeers

Fagin

  from Dickens

SENTENCE VARIETY
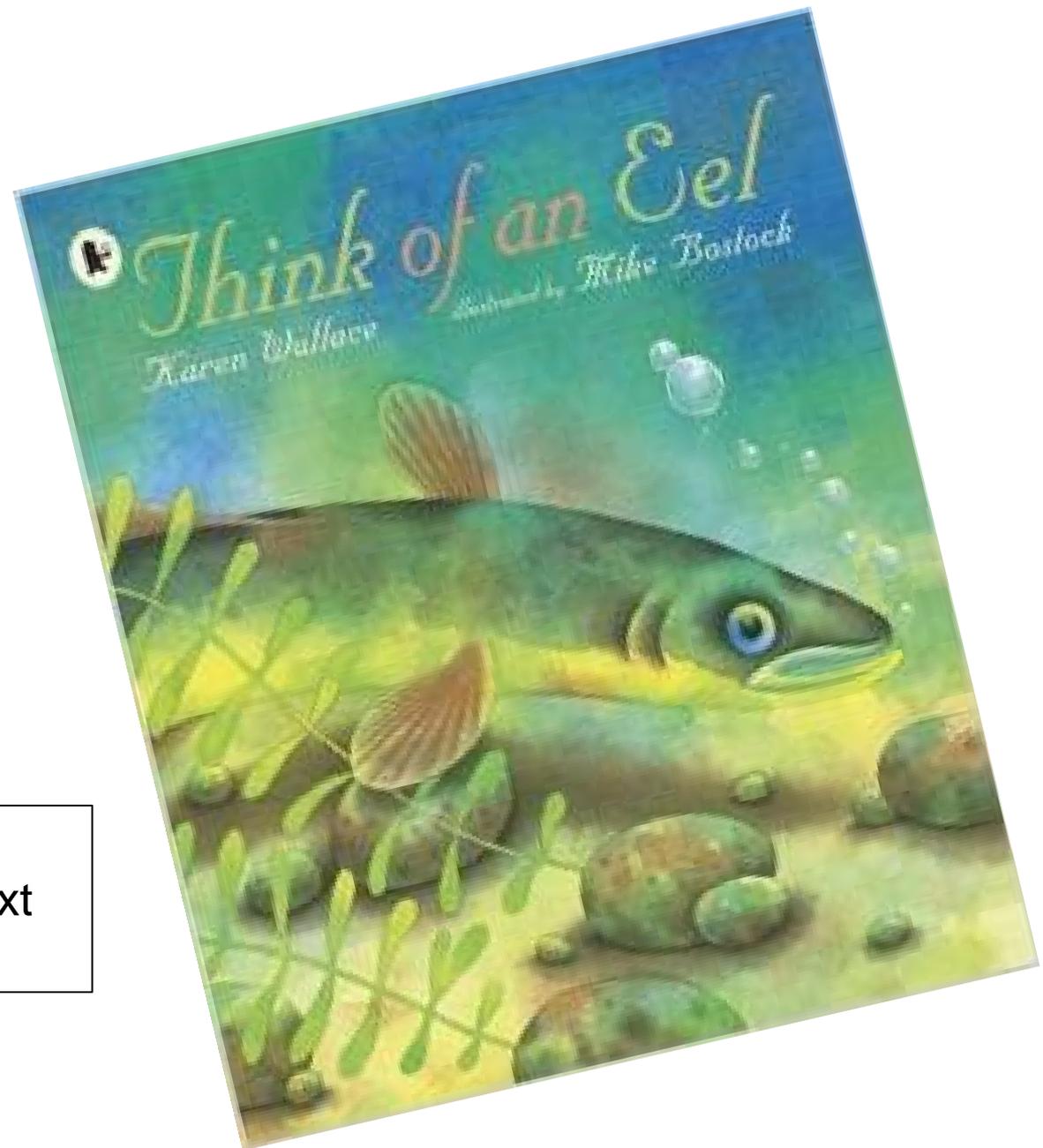
Dual text:
Science text
Poetic text

Around a drowned oak stump,

through twisting green weeds,

a mudhole is hidden.

Mudholes, burrows and cracks in the river bed are all homes for eels.

Eel knows without thinking

it's what he's been seeking.

He slips through the ooze.

This hole is his home.

Poetic text: main clause delayed with two foregrounded prepositional phrases; descriptive detail

Scientific text: Subject start to sentence = more direct; shorter sense; precise detail – 'burrows', 'cracks'; prepositional phrase specifies 'in the river bed'

There's eel-tomb and eel-cradle
in the weedy Sargasso.
After eighty days' swimming,
not eating, not sleeping,
eel's long, winding body
is worn out and wasted.
He spills the new life
carried deep in his belly,
then sinks through the sea
like a used silver wrapper.

The male eel's sperm fertilizes the female's eggs in the water.

Poetic text: long sentences; use of metaphor and simile; expanded noun phrases; emotive engagement with subject 'worn out'. More indirect communication – inference needed.

Scientific text: shorter sentence; subject start; expanded noun phrase provides scientific detail; use of scientific vocabulary. More direct communication – no inference

Sentence variety in *Think of an Eel*

Into the river he swims like a mad thing. He wriggles up rapids, climbs rocks around waterfalls. River banks guide him. Nothing will stop him.

After eighty days' swimming, not eating, not sleeping, eel's long, winding body is worn out and wasted. He spills the new life carried deep in his belly, then sinks through the sea like a used silver wrapper.

Student Talk Task: discuss sentence variety in this extract

Think about:

- Sentence length or shortness

- Syntax

- Literary devices

Transforming Texts: *Think of an Eel*

After eighty days' swimming, not eating, not sleeping, eel's long, winding body is worn out and wasted. He spills the new life carried deep in his belly, then sinks through the sea like a used silver wrapper.

Student Writing Task: Rewrite this paragraph as a science text.

After eighty days' swimming, without food or sleep, the eel's long body is exhausted. The male fertilizes the female' s eggs, and then dies.

Student Talk Task:

- What transformations are made to alter the lyrical description into a scientific description?
- Could any other changes be made?

A LINGUISTIC LENS ON POETRY

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace

Behind the wagon that we flung him in,

And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,

His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood

Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: Dulce et Decorum est

Pro patria mori.

from *Dulce et Decorum est*: Wilfred Owen

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace

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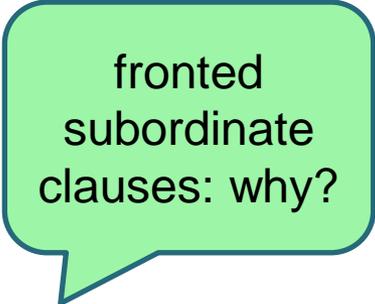
fronted subordinate clauses: why?

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace

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delayed main clause: why?

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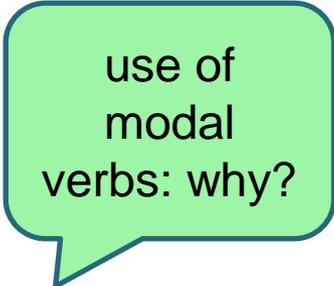
use of modal verbs: why?

PLENARY

Using this approach

Three key pre-requisites:

❑ Strong grammar knowledge

❑ An ability to notice how texts are 'working'

❑ The ability to plan purposefully, integrating an attention to grammar within teaching units.

Task:

- Consider the types of writing and the texts you will be using with your classes this term

- Consider the children you will be teaching and what they need to learn about their writing
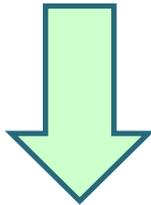
- What grammar might be embedded into your teaching units to support this learning?

Understanding the Author's Craft

- Writing is fundamentally about making choices and decisions.

- These choices can be *explicit* or *implicit* choices: as we become more expert at writing, more and more choices become implicit and internalised, but equally other choices become the focus of explicit attention.

- Novice writers need support in understanding the choices that are available to them in terms of content and ideas, text structures, sentence and phrase structures and vocabulary.

- Focused engagement with reading texts can be converted in more 'writerly' engagement with written texts.

- To help students understand the author's craft requires explicit teaching.

- The goal is to open up *a repertoire of infinite possibilities,* not to impose formulaic ways of writing.

The Romantic view!

Every line, every phrase, may pass the ordeal of deliberation and deliberate choice.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge