

# **Teaching and Learning Functional Grammar in Junior Primary Classrooms**

by

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## Abstract

The teaching and learning of grammatics ('knowledge about grammar') with young school children is the focus of this study.

Historical literature on the teaching of grammar is widely believed to show that a knowledge of grammar is not effective for improving students' literacy outcomes, usually specified in terms of writing. Under-scrutinised in this research are two issues which bear strongly on questions of effectiveness: the affordances of the kind of grammatical description taught, and the quality of pedagogy deployed in the teaching of grammatics. The thesis explores both these issues. Specifically, it investigates the teaching and learning of aspects of systemic functional grammar (developed by M.A.K. Halliday) within a pedagogic framework based on socio-cultural constructivist theory (L.S. Vygotsky).

The data for the project are drawn from two case studies conducted in Year 2 classrooms. 'Slices' of the case study data are used to analyse and interpret: ways in which to begin the study of a functional grammatics with young novices; benefits from knowledge about verbal Processes for children's improvement in expressive oral reading and punctuation of direct speech; the application of grammatical and genre knowledge in developing a critical reading of a narrative; and early moves in using the grammatics of Theme in one specific aspect of writing. A significant contribution is the project's incorporation of transcribed classroom talk, which is used to illuminate situated practices in teaching and learning grammatics, including the ways in which teacher talk and class discussion mediate the learning of grammatical concepts. Evidence is provided for the accessibility and utility of a grammatics drawn from systemic functional grammar, with the grammar's orientation to *meaning* in language being central to its potential.

Attention to pedagogic design is also argued to be integral to the development of a productive grammatics for schools. The thesis recommends the principled design of forms of semiotic mediation used to teach grammatical concepts (including teacher talk), and the thoughtful and meaningful integration of grammatics with other dimensions of the English/literacy curriculum so that grammatics is taught 'in context' but also with a view to longer term development of a flexible, systematic understanding.

## Publications during candidature

- French, R. (2009). *Pumpkin soup* and grammatics: A critical literacy case study with Year 2. In T. Hays & R. Hussain (Eds.), *Bridging the gap between ideas and doing research – Proceedings of the 3rd Annual Postgraduate Research Conference, The Faculty of The Professions, University of New England, Armidale NSW* (pp. 69–84). Armidale, Australia: University of New England.
- French, R. (2010). Primary school children learning grammar: Rethinking the possibilities. In T. Locke (Ed.), *Beyond the grammar wars: A resource for teachers and students on developing language knowledge in the English / literacy classroom* (pp. 206–229). New York, NY: Routledge.
- French, R. (2010). Starting points in teaching grammatics: Children learning about verbs. In T. Hays (Ed.), *Bridging the gap between ideas and doing research – Proceedings of the 4th Annual Postgraduate Research Conference, Faculty of The Professions, University of New England, Armidale NSW* (pp. 79–106). Armidale, Australia: University of New England.
- French, R. (2012). Learning the grammatics of quoted speech: Benefits for punctuation and expressive reading. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 35(2), 206–222.

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