

## **Developing metalinguistic understandings through functional grammar: *a possible fast track to language learning***

**TasTESOL Conference Keynote**

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**Bronwyn Custance: [bcustance@icloud.com](mailto:bcustance@icloud.com)**

**[www.bronwyncustance.com](http://www.bronwyncustance.com)**

Thank you for your warm welcome and the opportunity to share with you today, taking up one angle of the conference theme: that Teaching Matters, that through teaching we can make a difference to our students' hearts and minds. As I look at the program I'm pleasantly surprised at the number of workshops addressing the heart and well-being of our students. My presentation, however, will more explicitly focus on developing minds as we develop students' metalinguistic understandings. But, hopefully, in ways that also sustain their hearts. So, I would like to begin by asking you to reflect a moment:

*If you were looking for ways of teaching grammar that were making a difference for students, what would you be looking for? Perhaps looking for differences in heart and mind  
What are your success criteria for best practice – good teaching & learning?*

*Enjoyment/engagement/empowerment – success/progress/achievement now that lays a foundation for further success – transferable knowledge – metalinguistic knowledge learning how to learn: and metacognition.*

The introduction of the Australian Curriculum: English, has put teaching grammar, and knowing about language back at the heart of teaching English, stating that students should develop 'a consistent way of understanding and talking about language so they can reflect on ... speaking and writing, and discuss these productively'. TESOL teachers have long known the value of developing knowledge about language, grammar and the ability to explicitly talk about the differences between everyday, spoken language and academic, written language.

This keynote will begin with a little history of mainstream teaching of English in Australia to bring us to the introduction of 'genre-theory', before then illustrating the ways in which teachers across a variety of settings are using this approach to develop their EAL students' understandings of sentence, clause and word level grammar, doing this within a functional model of language as they inquire into patterns and meanings in texts. It will explore the impact that such an approach has on learners. Does it help them to become independent learners? Does it have the potential to fast-track learning? We know that in any class students are at varied starting points and we are all too aware that, whilst our students bring much with them to the learning context, their limited English means that they have a lot of catching up to do. They are educationally disadvantaged.

Peter White, Giuseppe Mammone & David Caldwell in their 2015 paper argue that this genre-based approach has 'the potential to address linguistic and social inequality'.

So let's begin by briefly looking back at English teaching in Australia.

During the 40s and 50s we had the skills based approach where literacy was seen as important because one had to be literate to function in a democracy. Language and literacy was believed to be acquired through direct separate teaching of skills as building blocks in a lock-step approach. Typically, it involved decontextualised exercises working with random sentences, carefully constructed to illustrate the skill or grammar point. Changing unrelated sentences from active to passive, with never any thought or discussion as to when or why that might be a good thing to do.

In the 60s, literacy was for personal development and we were concerned with students being creative thinkers and writers. One of the strengths of this period was its focus on the heart: enjoyment, creativity and establishing interest and motivation, often with a focus on writing for a real-life purpose. It was believed that students would naturally 'acquire' language as long as we could ignite their desire and immerse them in language experiences. Grammar skills would develop through the experience of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. It was the 'process' that was all-important and so we had process writing

In this era, rather than teaching rules and correcting errors we asked questions such as 'Does that sound right?' 'Does that make sense?'

Many of us are the products of these whole-language approaches and have had to develop our understandings of grammar through studying another language; or as part of our TESOL training and probably in an on-going way as we work to support our students. We are well aware that the Whole Language approach of Does it sound right? Does it make sense? just doesn't cut it for students learning English as an additional language. We have had to dig much deeper to denaturalize language patterns so we understand for ourselves why it doesn't sound right and, therefore, are able to explain and teach this?

Throughout the 1980s, a shift in pedagogical approaches to language teaching began to take hold, though the whole-language approach has continued to have a strong hold in many classrooms. The shift in the 80s was to a socio-cultural model, drawing on the work of several key players. One key figure was Shirley Brice Heath, a linguistic anthropologist, who studied the home literacy practices of four groups of students, with the groups based on socio-economic status and ethnicity: white and black Americans from lower and middle-class families, so all 'English speaking'. She found that the literacy practices, that is the kinds of texts and the ways in which people engaged with and talked about texts, varied widely across three groups. The texts and practices in middle-class homes, regardless of ethnicity, tended to mirror or match the practices of the classroom. The children from these homes already understood the unspoken rules and expectations of the classroom when it came to story time and many other literacy activities. They were greatly advantaged over their peers who did not understand how they should participate, and so, were either lost, confused or getting into trouble. Success at school, Heath argued, was largely predetermined according to how closely one's home literacy practices matched those of the classroom. And so literacy was no longer seen as a set of skills, but rather, a set of social practices.

The work of Leo Vygotsky was also now being recognised. Vygotsky theorised that learning is not a solitary process, but rather, that we learn through interaction with a more knowledgeable other. This once again gave teachers a clear role in the learning process.

Rather than merely being facilitators under 'whole language approaches' who set up experiences and processes for students to engage in, we were to be the knowledgeable other who guided or 'scaffolded' our students into school literacy practices.

Vygotsky's theory had also put language back on centre stage, seeing it as playing a pivotal role in all learning. This new focus on language brings us to a third influential figure, Michael Halliday.

Halliday had developed what he termed systemic functional linguistics. The term functional here is derived from Halliday's premise that language has evolved to allow us to simultaneously perform three major functions: to interact with others; to express our ideas and experiences; and to structure and organize our ideas and interactions into cohesive and coherent texts. He also saw that we drew on different parts of the language system, or different grammatical elements to achieve these three over-riding functions and he developed systems to describe these choices. This is where the systemic comes in. There are a number of language systems from which we make choices, according to our purpose and context.

Halliday's model of language has several key differences to models of the past. Firstly, it allows us to examine language patterns at three levels: the level of sounds and letters; the level of the sentence or clause, where we can consider individual word choices and the ways in which groups of words are arranged; and the level of meanings, or whole text level.

The second key difference is its emphasis on the relationship between language patterns and the contexts or registers within which a text is created. Rather than focus on rules of right and wrong, it considers how appropriate and effective choices are for a particular context.

Halliday identified three variables, which in any given situation, combine to form the register: field, tenor and mode. These variables can be considered along a continuum, where the field moves from the everyday, through to the specialized and on to the technical and abstract; the tenor moves from the language of the novice, and the informal and personal, to language that is formal, impersonal and that of an expert; and in the mode, we move from spoken language expressing meanings relating to actions in the here and now context, to recounting and describing events and on to the critical reflection and density of written language. As the examples provided indicate, the three variables are closely interconnected and a shift in one will often result in a corresponding shift in the other variables.

The three register variables also have a close relationship to the three over-riding functions, where the language we use to express our ideas is connected to the field; the language we use to interact with others is connected to the tenor and the language we use to make coherent and cohesive texts is related to the mode.

This social view of language is the theory that underpins the Australian Curriculum: literacy Capability and English: Its elements are evident in the AEC Language strand, where we see Language Variation relating to contextual understandings; three of the remaining sub-

strands reflecting the three major functions; and the final sub-strand relating to the smallest level of language.

It is Halliday's model of language, further developed by Jim Martin and Frances Christie that was drawn on to describe the predictable structures and language patterns of schooling-genres and led to the genre-based approach which began to take hold in the 1980s. Out of this grew what has been called the 'Sydney school', where under various Disadvantaged Schools Programs – work was aimed at addressing the needs of the linguistically disadvantaged, whether that be students who were speakers of other languages or those from lower socio economic backgrounds, who were not prepared for school literacy practices.

Since genres were seen as predictable and patterned ways of achieving a social purpose: predictable, both in their structure and language patterns, we could explicitly teach them, 'apprenticing' students into the cultural and literacy practices of schooling and the world of work. A teaching and learning cycle was developed (and continues to be developed).

This genre-based approach to teaching Halliday's functional linguistics was taken up and championed by those who worked with educationally disadvantaged students, particularly TESOL teachers and programs. In South Australia, John Polias and Brian Dare took the aspects of Halliday and Martin's functional grammar that were most pertinent to schooling contexts and developed a 10 module, 30 hr Professional Learning Course for teachers and an accompanying tutor training program: Initially, the Language and Literacy Course and later redeveloped as How Language Works, these courses and tutor programs have been taken up across Australia and internationally. Such a course was deemed necessary in SA and beyond so that teachers could develop their own explicit knowledge of the language systems and the patterns of various genres and registers. Teachers needed to have well-developed metalinguistic understandings and a shared metalanguage – a language to talk explicitly about language and to apply this knowledge to assessment and programming.

South Australia has long used a needs-based funding model for ESL and in 2003, Polias developed for the education department, the *ESL Scope and Scales*, a reporting and tracking tool that described the development of schooling language and literacy according to Genre, Field, Tenor and Mode. It described the language and literacy a student would need to achieve the various curriculum standards at each year level. In 2012, this was then redeveloped to align with the Australian Curriculum Literacy Capability and became the *Language and Literacy Levels*. All SA primary and secondary students who identify as speakers of other languages have their literacy level assessed against these scales/levels. This allows teachers, schools and systems to determine levels of need. Based on the gap the student has to bridge.

Beyond tracking and reporting the Language and Literacy Levels are also used diagnostically with teachers often – pre-testing a students' performance level in a target genre and then determining key teaching points/learning goals to be achieved through a Teaching and Learning cycle.

Analysis of pre-testing narrative examples might typically show that students' written texts contain short and simple sentences and are more on the spoken end of the continuum with students lacking the resources to clearly express and develop their ideas.

Teachers then design learning to enable students to inquire into genre patterns; to investigate author craft and build the necessary linguistic resources.

So, let's begin at the clause level and look at some of the ways various teachers are doing this.

Halliday's functional grammar allows us to look at the building blocks: those that carry the happenings, those that tell us who or what is participating in those events and those that give us the circumstances of the events. In this way we look at functional groupings rather than isolated words.

Traditional grammar allows us to classify words. This is still important and functional grammar still uses these class labels but it goes beyond them to look at the function of a word or group of words in particular instance. It encourages us to look at meanings and patterns in texts rather than isolated sentences.

Often teachers introduce these patterns through procedure genre: what's happening, what's the action to be taken; followed by what action is to be done to and then extra details about when, where, how to do this.

**Notes only re activities shown through slides.**

Question prompts are used to unpack meanings and patterns in text.

Patterns of various genres are compared. Explicit vs Inquiry models

### ***Verbs expressing 4 types of processes***

White et al:

Studied schools in Western Adelaide region – low-socio-economic, high EALD – with EALD teachers using this approach – here comparing pre- and post teaching narrative samples.

### ***Circumstances***

Rather than simply have students identify the adverbials, we could explore their use in to further discussions we have had with students such as, in a story we don't just want to know the events and who was involved in those events, but want to know the circumstances of the events. By including these details, through the use of adverbials, the author paints a picture and builds an atmosphere for us and helps us to visualise and feel what is happening and takes us into the story. In this passage, the author begins telling us that a phone call came and then uses adverbials to give us the details of the source of the phone-call and the setting in a specific time. The television was then turned off and we are told the manner or speed with which that was done. A deep hush then settled and now we are given the setting

in place. Now that we are in the lounge-room, we are introduced to the characters present in the lounge-room and what they are doing. Mrs Deegan is folding towels and we are told the manner in which she is folding them – in slow motion.

Knowing about the building blocks, and the choices we can make about putting them together, for example whether we will put the circumstances at the beginning or end of a clause allows us to consider author craft. The author could have written: 'One Wednesday evening, at nine o'clock a phone call came from Mr Lemsky.' How would that have changed the effect? What is the effect of beginning with the phone-call? And, he could have written, the television was turned off instantly. Why did he choose to foreground instantly?

And why say a deep hush settled over the lounge-room? Why not 'There was a deep hush in the lounge-room.' He has created an image through the use of settled. We see and feel the hush coming down and spreading out over the room. It adds to the atmosphere.

And why tell us that Ms Deegan is folding the towels in slow motion? Why would she be doing that in slow motion?

As we engage our students in this kind of analysis of language choices and their effects, we are developing and employing their knowledge about language in service of the other two strands.

### ***Noun groups***

So, did you see any evidence of your success criteria?

I see evidence of students engaged, enjoying their learning and feeling empowered by it. I see students being developing knowledge and tools with which to enquire into the patterns of text and language and to extend their own and others' thinking. Knowledge and tools that are transferrable to new learning contexts and so, enabling them to become more independent learners.

But what about the data? Is there evidence of a potential to fast-track learning?

The Pines

Data - NAPLAN comparison from White et al  
*Yellow – Richmond Primary one of four whole-school genre-based approach. Results of two of the others were similar. – Compared with*  
*“(1) schools ‘Western Adelaide’: 28 government schools region typically at least some students who speak at home a language other than English and significant numbers of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. In all these schools, there was some EALD (ESL) teaching and, accordingly, some use of the SFL genre pedagogy, even if only in a limited number of classes.*

(2) 'DECS': All South Australian government schools, hence combining 'high' and 'low' socio-economic schools, and significant numbers of students who received EALD support and schools with few or no EALD students.

(3) 'STATE': All schools in South Australia, i.e. combining government and fee-charging independent or 'private'-sector schools. In private-sector schools, students are typically from higher socio-economic backgrounds with significantly lower numbers of students who speak a language other than English at home.

(4) 'National': All schools across Australia combining both government and fee-charging 'private-sector' schools.

*What is noteworthy here is the fact that this lower socio-economic school (the leftmost column) with large numbers of EALD (ESL) students consistently scored better in these tests than groupings which included higher socio-economic schools and schools with few EALD (ESL) students."*

Nazareth

None went backwards or stagnated. % of level growth

8 At risk in Yr 8 – down to only 1 in Yr 10 and even that student has narrowed the gap, achieving 3 yrs growth in 2 yrs

16 significantly behind down to 8

From 0 students at or within range of expected standard to 10 students

Demonstrates what I hear many teachers saying – this approach works for all students, it allows for differentiation and enables students at all levels to develop

*"The data here, of course, are not such as to permit a conclusion of necessary cause and effect. There are multiple other factors which might potentially be influential here, such as differences in the specific make-up of student cohorts, relative teacher capacity and so on. Nevertheless, the results are suggestive and point to a strong likelihood that the genre-based pedagogy had at least some role to play in the above-average literacy results for this school and for the other studies which indicate similar results." White et al*

The data indicates that this approach has the potential to redress linguistic disadvantage – to fast-track learning enabling these students to close the gap, and achieve educational success today and into the future.

And finally a quote from a teacher Priyanka

- *Apart from excellent progress made by students over a period of eight weeks, the most satisfying part is that, through functional grammar, we have all been able to develop a metalanguage which assists students in not only constructing their own texts but also in deconstructing, critically analysing and comprehending other texts.*