

The Exeter “Grammar for Writing”
Project: Summary Report
December 2010

This research project involved 32 teachers and 855 Year 8 pupils from schools in the South West of England and the Midlands in the academic year 2008-09. Teachers were randomly allocated to intervention and comparison groups and all taught three short schemes of work, written by the project team, on fictional narrative, argument and poetry. Those in **the comparison group** followed a general outline, making their own lesson-by-lesson teaching decisions, while the **intervention teachers** followed detailed lesson plans and resources which embedded explicit attention to grammar, relevant to the writing being taught. For example, when teaching argument, one focus was the use of modal verbs to create different levels of assertion; the poetry scheme included specific attention to how punctuation creates meaning and emphasis.

Why was the focus on grammar? The aim of the study was to investigate whether explicit teaching of grammar in the context of writing impacts upon the quality of students’ writing. Previous studies have focused mainly on de-contextualised grammar teaching so that this project is unique in investigating systematically whether making connections between particular linguistic structures and particular writing tasks supports the development of students’ writing.

What has the research told us? The headline finding from the **quantitative data** is that effectively embedded grammar teaching can have a significant impact on student writing performance. **The intervention group improved their writing scores by 20% over the year, while the comparison group improved by 11%.** Improvement was measured through analysis of the writing samples produced by pupils under controlled conditions at the beginning and end of the year, scored by a specially-trained team of markers from Cambridge Assessment. However, the benefit was experienced differentially: the most able writers benefited most, with evidence of some negative effects for weaker writers.

The **qualitative data** (analysis of pupils’ within-year writing samples; lesson observation notes and transcripts of interviews with teachers and pupils) indicates:

- **The significance of teacher subject knowledge** of grammar on the effect of the teaching. The relationship is complex, but one finding is that teachers in the study who felt insecure about their knowledge of grammar were more likely to adapt the plans they were given, for example to minimize or generalise the teaching of grammar and its associated terminology.
- **The beneficial effect of the explicitness of the teaching schemes**, manifested in different ways: for example, intervention pupils’ writing showed more examples of explicitly-taught language features being used independently and effectively; intervention teachers commented on ways in which their teaching of sentence grammar had become more focused.
- **The benefits of opportunities for discussion and experimentation with effect** which were provided in the schemes where the emphasis was on ‘playing’ with language and grammatical structures and on evaluating their effect on the reader, rather than on ‘correct’ use of rules.
- **The development of metalinguistic awareness in the intervention group** which was evident above and beyond the use of terminology. In interviews, intervention pupils used more terminology, more accurately, but even when they struggled with definitions, they spoke at greater length and with more precise detail about how to improve writing.

You can find much more detail about the research and its findings on the project website, which will be updated with the results of ongoing analysis. Weblink: <http://education.exeter.ac.uk/projects.php?id=410>

What are the implications of the research findings for the classroom?

The research provides evidence for the first time of a positive benefit of teaching grammar when the **grammar is contextualised** - linked meaningfully to the writing being taught. In the project schemes of work, the grammar point taught was always introduced in a way which was relevant and meaningful to the learning of writing. So, for example, in the narrative fiction scheme, first and third person were taught in the context of manipulating narrative voice and viewpoint; in the argument scheme, subordinating connectives (while, despite, although) were taught in the context of developing a counter argument.

■ The research suggests that teachers should **embed grammar in the teaching of writing**, making connections for writers between a particular grammar feature and its possible effect in writing. Attention to grammar should be explicit, clearly explained and linked to meaning and effect, not the naming or identification of grammatical features. Interestingly, able students in the comparison group barely improved their writing scores over the year, whereas able students in the intervention group made significant gains; attention to grammar may have provided the stretch these able writers needed.

Underpinning the teaching approaches in each scheme was the concept of **writing as design**: students were encouraged to **experiment with language** and to craft their writing for a specific purpose and effect. Evidence from interviews and lesson observations suggests that many students are strongly motivated by language play and by feedback from peers on the effectiveness of their writing choices. When talking about improving writing, they showed a high degree of understanding about language choices and effects, irrespective of whether they used grammatical terminology to express it.

■ The research suggests that teachers should encourage **discussion about writing choices** and the different effects of different grammatical choices. Incorporation of grammar into writing lessons should foster **awareness of a repertoire of possibilities**, not a formulaic approach to writing.

What are the implications of the research findings for teachers' CPD?

This research is important in acknowledging the multi-faceted nature of learning about writing: the teacher's **beliefs about grammar**, the teacher's **pedagogic practices** and the teacher's **linguistic subject knowledge** are important variables which have not been considered in previous research. The data we are analysing suggests a complex relationship between these variables which might account for the intervention working more effectively for some classes than for others. All the intervention teachers were provided with detailed notes and resources to support their teaching of grammar for writing, but evidence from interviews and lesson observations shows variance in how these were used. Sometimes, teachers' lack of confidence in a grammar point meant they glossed over it or avoided teaching it.

■ The research suggests that **teacher subject knowledge of grammar** is fundamental to the successful use of contextualized grammar. The teachers in the study differed in the extent of their own understanding of grammar for writing, in their experience of teaching it and in their evaluation of its importance. Support to enhance teachers' subject knowledge of grammar is indicated.

■ The research also suggests that support for teachers' **applied linguistic knowledge** is equally important. More resources and CPD provision are needed to develop teachers' confidence in studying language in context.

Thank you to all the teachers and students who took part in this research project. We are currently seeking 'follow-up' funding which will enable us to pursue effective ways of providing 'grammar for writing' CPD for teachers.

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