



Grammar matters: How teachers' grammatical knowledge impacts on the teaching of writing



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers' grammatical knowledge influences what students learn about writing.
- Limitations in teachers' grammatical content knowledge can generate student misconceptions.
- Teachers' 'applied' knowledge is more significant than declarative knowledge.

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ABSTRACT

Teaching grammar has been mandated in statutory curriculum documents in England since 1988. Yet despite this, research evidence continues to suggest that metalinguistic knowledge is an area of challenge for many teachers. Drawing on data from a larger study, this paper considers the role of teachers' grammatical knowledge, both content and pedagogical content knowledge, in mediating learning about writing in the classroom. It also illustrates how students' learning about writing is influenced by teachers' metalinguistic knowledge. The study highlights that grammatical pedagogical content knowledge is more significant than grammatical content knowledge in supporting meaningful teaching and learning about writing.

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1. Introduction: framing the problem

The importance of subject knowledge in teachers' professional development has been the focus for a substantive body of research in teacher education. Shulman's (1987) seminal work on theorising subject knowledge is important in its endeavour to categorise the nature of knowledge required in the complex act of teaching. He distinguishes between subject content knowledge (knowledge of an academic domain), pedagogical content knowledge (knowledge of how to teach that academic domain) and pedagogical knowledge (knowledge of how to teach): this signals that 'knowing how' is as significant as 'knowing that'. In other words, teacher subject knowledge is not simply domain knowledge, but crucially involves knowing how to transform that knowledge purposefully to enable learners to master it. Stimulated by the work of Shulman (1987),

successive studies have considered teacher subject knowledge in specific domains, such as Maths (eg Rowland, Huckstep, & Thwaites, 2005) or Science (eg Loughran, Mulhall, & Berry, 2008); in terms of how it relates to beliefs and experiences (eg Wilson, & Myhill, 2012; Brownlee, Schraw, & Berthelsen, 2011); or through offering new conceptualisations of subject knowledge (Ball, Thames, & Phelps, 2008; Goulding, Rowland, & Barber, 2002; Park & Oliver, 2008). Core to all of this work is the inter-relationship between content and pedagogy, between academic knowledge and classroom knowledge, and the need for teachers to be able to transform their content knowledge into pedagogical content knowledge of learning activities which address learners' needs. The concept of pedagogical content knowledge has been substantially researched (see for example, Ball, 2000; Cochran, DeRuiter, & King, 1993; Park & Oliver, 2008) and particularly in relation to the teaching of mathematics (An, Kulm, & Wu, 2004; Kahan, Cooper, & Bethea, 2003; Langrall, Thornton, Jones, & Malone, 1996; Rowland & Ruthven, 2011). In the context of the language classroom, teachers' metalinguistic knowledge is significant in shaping their professional capacity to plan for and respond to learners' language needs.

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Taking Shulman's taxonomy, this metalinguistic knowledge can be considered in terms of teachers' metalinguistic content knowledge (the academic domain of knowledge about language, which includes explicit grammatical knowledge) and metalinguistic pedagogical content knowledge (their knowledge of how to teach and develop students' metalinguistic understanding). However, empirical investigations of first language teaching and understanding of the subtle inter-relationships between pedagogical content knowledge, classroom practice and student learning about language are more limited, especially in relation to metalinguistic and grammatical knowledge.

At the same time, expectations of students' grammatical knowledge in curricular in different Anglophone national jurisdictions are becoming increasingly specific. In the United States, the Common Core State Standards for Language Arts include a set of anchor Language Standards (CCSSI, 2010: 25) which require students to be able to use Standard English correctly and to acquire Knowledge about Language (which is undefined). The detailed year by year standards which follow are heavily focused on grammatical constructions which students are expected to master. In England, since 1988, there has been a statutory role for grammar in the National Curriculum for English, although it has been expressed slightly differently in each of its many versions (DCSF, 2007; DES, 1990; DfE, 1995; DfEE, 1999). So, for example, in the 1995 version, very specific aspects of grammar were delineated, including discourse structure, syntactical structures such as main and subordinate clauses, and a list of word classes which should be taught. In contrast, the 2007 version adopted more generalised descriptions of a variety of sentence structures and writing in Standard English. However, it was the non-statutory National Strategies guidance (DfEE, 1998; DfES 2001) which had more impact on teachers' practices in the teaching of grammar and writing because of the very detailed setting out of teaching objectives for each year of schooling from Year 1 to Year 9 (ages 5–14). These curricular expectations in the US and England place considerable demands on teachers' grammatical content knowledge. Similar expectations in other Anglophone countries are posing similar challenges. Gordon (2005), in New Zealand, describes the problems faced in trying to implement an innovative syllabus with a strong grammar focus, concluding that major barriers were experienced because of teachers' 'lack of knowledge about language' (Gordon, 2005: 63). In Australia at the current time, a new National Curriculum is being developed which includes a strand on Knowledge about Language which aims to foster 'a coherent, dynamic, and evolving body of knowledge about the English language and how it works' (ACARA, 2009: 1). As in England, there is concern in Australia that 'many subject teachers (particularly in secondary school settings) have no formal study of language and draw upon partially remembered folklore about language and grammar' (Derewianka & Jones, 2010: 14) and therefore may feel ill-equipped to cope with these curricular demands.

This phenomenon of less secure, or absent, grammatical content knowledge is an historical phenomenon, arising principally from two different, though probably related, causes. Firstly, following the Dartmouth Conference in the USA in 1966, and the widespread view of professionals and educationalists that the formal teaching of grammar had no beneficial impact on students' competences as speakers, readers or writers, grammar teaching was subsequently largely abandoned in Anglophone countries. A consequence of this is that current cohorts of English teachers were themselves not taught grammar at school, a point also noted in the US context by Kolln and Hancock (2005:106). Borg (2003: 97) reports a study which showed that native speakers of English performed less well than non-native speakers in a grammatical content knowledge test, an outcome which he attributes to the different educational

backgrounds of native English and non-native English speakers, with non-native speakers typically receiving higher levels of grammar teaching. A second reason for the lower levels of grammatical content knowledge in England may be that at the point of entry to postgraduate teacher education courses, there appears to be a distinct preference for teachers who have come through the literature degree route, at the same time as there is a shortage of applicants from a linguistics route (Blake & Shortis, 2010).

Curriculum expectations that students will have explicit knowledge of grammar combined with the tendency towards an absence of grammatical content knowledge in the academic experiences of English teachers generate very specific challenges for pedagogical practice and student learning. At the same time, grammatical content knowledge is only one element of the broader set of metalinguistic content knowledge required to be a language teacher. This paper, therefore, sets out to explore the complex inter-relationships between teachers' metalinguistic content knowledge, specifically their grammatical content knowledge, and their use of that knowledge in the teaching of writing.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theories of metalinguistic knowledge

Defining metalinguistic knowledge is not as straightforward as it might initially appear. The term is used differently in psychology and linguistics (Gombert, 1992: 13; Myhill, 2011: 249): in general, psychologists are interested in the thinking processes which accompany text production, whereas linguists are more concerned with language as an artefact. A further ambivalence concerns the place of metalanguage, especially grammatical terminology, within metalinguistic knowledge and the tendency in different studies to use 'metalinguistic' either as synonymous with grammatical knowledge, or as an over-arching knowledge set, of which grammatical knowledge is a subset. Indeed, Andrews prefers to talk of Teacher Language Awareness because of the 'potential ambiguity of the phrase *'metalinguistic awareness'* (awareness that is *meta-linguistic*, or *awareness of metalanguage*)' (2003: 86). For the purposes of our study, drawing on Camps and Milian's definition of metalinguistic knowledge as the ability 'to take language as the object of observation and the referent of discourse' (1999: 6), but also mindful of the interdisciplinary framework in which we were working, we defined metalinguistic knowledge as the 'explicit bringing into consciousness of an attention to language as an artefact, and the conscious monitoring and manipulation of language to create desired meanings grounded in socially-shared understandings' (Myhill, 2011: 250). From the perspective of teachers' content and pedagogical content knowledge in the language classroom, metalinguistic content knowledge might include the teacher's knowledge of how emotive language can be a persuasive technique in an argument, how newspaper editors use straplines to signpost key information for readers, or how expanded noun phrases can convey effective character descriptions. We see grammatical content knowledge as just one part of this metalinguistic content knowledge: it is that part which draws specifically on explicit knowledge of grammar in terms of morphology and syntax, rather than on broader knowledge about language and how texts work as socially-constructed artefacts. So in the classroom examples given above, the knowledge of how noun phrases convey character description is grammatical content knowledge. It is teachers' grammatical content and pedagogical content knowledge which is the particular focus of this article.

Theoretical thinking about grammatical content knowledge has tended to address three themes: what teachers need to know about grammar; explicit and implicit grammatical knowledge; and

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