

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Exeter		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 23 Education		
Title of case study: Changing professional understanding and pedagogical practice in the teaching of writing		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: Between 2008 and 2016		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Debra Myhill	Professor of Education	1995 to date
Susan Jones	Senior Lecturer in Education	2006 to 2020 (now retired)
Helen Lines	Research Fellow	2007 to 2019 (now retired)
Annabel Watson	Senior Lecturer in Education	2012 to date
Ruth Newman	Senior Lecturer in Education	2014 to date
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? Y		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Proficient writing is foundational for academic success, employability and social engagement, yet many children still struggle to meet national standards in writing. Since 2014, grammar has been given particularly high status in the National Curriculum as a means to improve writing, despite substantial previous evidence that teaching grammar has no benefit on writing proficiency. In contrast, our research has led to a new pedagogy, linking grammatical choice with shaping meaning in text, with positive outcomes on students' writing proficiency. This has generated impact, both nationally and internationally (e.g. in Australia, Scandinavia and Singapore), through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> changing professional understanding of the role of grammar in writing pedagogy; <input type="checkbox"/> changing teachers' pedagogical practices in the teaching of writing; <input type="checkbox"/> shaping the design of commercial and non-commercial training and teaching materials for large education publishers and service providers (e.g. Pearson and Babcock LDP) as well as local authorities, non-profit organisations and literary consultants. 		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Our research has focussed on the relationship between grammatical knowledge and writing proficiency, fostering understanding of how grammatical choices in writing can construct different meanings and effects in written texts. We have developed, and refined through subsequent studies, an innovative teaching approach that links grammar to the crafting of meaning in writing, and have demonstrated that this can improve students' attainment in writing. This body of work stands in direct contrast to previous studies which investigated the potential benefits of drilling children to name and identify grammatical terms, and found no impact on writing attainment.</p> <p>This new teaching approach is based on a sustained, cumulative body of research supported by more than ten externally-funded grants, which include, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Development in Metalinguistic Understanding</i> (ESRC 2012-16): a longitudinal cross-phase study, tracking metalinguistic development in writing. <input type="checkbox"/> <i>The effect of explicit grammar teaching on Writing at GCSE</i> (Pearson 2013): a quasi-experimental study investigating the effect of the pedagogy with GCSE-aged students <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Choice and Control: Contextualising Grammar within Writing</i> (EEF 2013): an RCT and qualitative study, investigating impact of the pedagogy on primary-aged students <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Supporting Weaker Writers through Linguistically-Informed Teaching</i> (Pearson 2012): a quasi-experimental study, investigating the impact of the pedagogy on less proficient writers in year 8. <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Follow-on Fund: Grammar for Writing?</i> (ESRC 2011-12): an impact development project, working with teachers, developing expertise in using the pedagogy. <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Grammar for writing? The impact of Contextualised Grammar Teaching</i> (ESRC 2008-11): an RCT and qualitative study in secondary schools, investigating the impact of teaching grammar in context. 		

These studies are methodologically varied: we have sought not to generate simplistic conclusions about efficacy and ‘what works’, but nuanced understanding of children’s learning and teachers’ practices which take account of the complexity of classroom contexts. In other words, we are as interested in *why* and *how* the pedagogical approach works, as we are in *whether* it works.

Our key insights to date are that:

- Making meaningful links between grammar choices and their rhetorical effects in writing can have significant positive effects on children’s writing proficiency (3.1; 3.5);
- Key mediating factors on the strength of this positive effect are:
 - teachers’ grammatical subject knowledge (3.2), and
 - teachers’ capacity to lead dialogic metalinguistic talk about writing (3.4).
- The goal of teaching grammar is developing students’ metalinguistic understanding about writing (3.2; 3.3; 3.4)
- The teaching of grammar for national grammar tests is leading both to grammatical misconceptions and to misunderstandings about what makes writing effective (3.2; 3.4);
- Teaching needs to link reading and writing through the use of authentic texts as models, showing how writers make grammatical choices for rhetorical purposes (3.6);

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

3.1: Myhill, D.A. Jones, S.M., Lines, H. and Watson A. (2012) Re-Thinking Grammar: the Impact of Embedded Grammar Teaching on Students’ Writing and Students’ Metalinguistic Understanding. *Research Papers in Education* 27 (2) 139-166.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2011.637640>

3.2: Myhill, D.A. Jones, S and Watson, A. (2013) Grammar Matters: How Teachers’ Grammatical Subject Knowledge Impacts on the Teaching of Writing Teaching *and Teacher Education* 36:77-91. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2013.07.005>

3.3: Myhill, D.A. and Jones, S.M. (2015) Conceptualising Metalinguistic Understanding in Writing. *Culture and Education* 27 (4): 839-867.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/11356405.2015.1089387>

3.4: Myhill, D.A. and Newman, R. (2016) Metatalk: Enabling Metalinguistic Discussion about Writing *International Journal of Education Research*. 80, (177-187).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2016.07.007>

3.5: Myhill, D, Jones, S and Lines, H. (2018) Supporting less-proficient writers through linguistically-aware teaching. *Language and Education* 32:4, 333-349.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2018.1438468>

3.6: Myhill, D.A., Lines, H., & Jones, S. M. (2018). Texts that teach: Examining the efficacy of using texts as models. *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature*, 18, 1-24

<https://doi.org/10.17239/L1ESLL-2018.18.03.07>

4. Details of the impact

This ICS is a continuation of one submitted to the previous REF, and in 2014, the research team won the ESRC Award for *Outstanding Impact in Society*. Since then, there have been new research projects, represented in publications 3.3 - 3.6, which deepen the theoretical and empirical understanding of the topic. This has led to sustained and increased scale of previous impact, and new impact, particularly internationally, as outlined below:

4.1 Changing professional understanding of the role of grammar in writing pedagogy;

4.2 Changing teachers’ pedagogical practices in the teaching of writing;

4.3 Shaping the design of commercial and non-commercial training and teaching materials.

4.1 Changing professional understanding of the role of grammar in writing pedagogy:

Our research has **contributed to professional development** in the teaching of writing, changing understanding of how teaching grammar can lead to better student writing. In 2015, the ESRC’s 2013/14 *Research Performance and Economic Impact Report* noted the ‘*impact on developing teachers’ understanding and practice ...through 60 professional development workshops*’ (p8). Since then, we have led a further 160 professional development workshops for

teachers and teacher educators in England, involving approximately 10,000 participants. The impact of these workshops is exemplified by responses such as this from one participant: *'the grammar strand has been the one which I believe has had the most direct, day to day impact on my own teaching and hopefully through the work I have done, and am still doing, on the classroom practice of other teachers in my school'* (5.1) These professional development workshops have included deeper, sustained working - through bespoke training programmes - with individual schools/organisations, such as *Park Hall Junior Academy, Walsall*; and with federations or academy chains, such as *Gypsy Hill Federation* (7 Primary schools) and *Harris Federation* (which includes 55 London academies). Between 2018-2020, we led a strand of an East Sussex Strategic School Improvement Funding project, involving sustained CPD over 18 months, which led to *'improved understanding for individual teachers'* from more than 60 schools (5.2). Subsequently, participating teachers developed their own presentations exemplifying the pedagogy, which were shared with the DfE as part of their evaluation. In addition, an online training module has been developed by the advisory team with free access for 180 schools in East Sussex. We were also partners with the **National Literacy Trust's Language for Life** programme, running more than 20 training workshops for over 200 teachers in socially-disadvantaged schools. They noted this had been *'instrumental to our work in developing pupils' ability to write like a subject expert across the curriculum. The approach has resulted in positive system change in the schools with schools reporting improved attitudes to literacy in both staff and pupils over the course of the programme'*. The National Literacy Trust have also developed a teaching 'premium resource' which draws entirely on our research (5.3). The research is also adopted in initial teacher education, for example, as a year-long project with *Sussex University* and a cluster of its partnership primary schools, and in professional training materials used by *University of Cambridge Primary Training School* (5.1).

This impact on professional development has also had international reach. We have had considerable impact in **Australia** (5.4). In 2019 and again in 2020, Myhill ran professional development workshops for literacy leaders, and was engaged as a consultant with the Department of Education for **South Australia**. The Executive Leader of the Learning Improvement Division noted the influence of our work on *'the development of our both our policy position on literacy and literacy resources for leaders and teachers in Department for Education schools'*. Both the states of South Australia and Victoria **have used our research to define best practice**. Our research is multiply-cited in South Australia's *Literacy Guidebooks* and *Best Advice on Writing* documents. In 2017, the Department of Education in **Victoria** commissioned a video clip on metalinguistic understanding with Myhill, which was featured as an Expert Literacy Video on their teachers' *Literacy Toolkit* website, and they cite our research seven times in five Guidance documents, in their advice to teachers on effective teaching of writing. The *Primary English Teaching Association Australia* (PETAA) commissioned us in August 2020 to develop an online course, informed by our research, which will be available nationally to teachers across Australia. There are further examples of uptake by teacher educators in Australia. For example, the Curriculum Advisor for the Department of Education and Training in New South Wales, has used our research *'with teachers who are writing a grammar course for schools together'*. The Education Officer for Sydney Catholic Schools notes our book *'Essential Primary Grammar'* *'has been a really useful reference for the professional learning I design in working with primary teachers in Sydney'*. The Senior Leader for Learning Improvement in South Australia, is using our teaching resources in professional development work with teachers.

We also have strong uptake in **Scandinavia** (5.5). Keynote presentations or workshops have been given in Roros, Norway; Copenhagen; Uppsala; Karlstad; Orebro, Stockholm; and Trondheim. Evaluation feedback from the Karlstad presentation (2016) included this comment: *'We listened and later on we discussed your findings with interest. Who are "we"? Well, teachers at the university of Gävle where we educate teachers students in reading and writing. Our purpose during this spring is to read your work to become better in teaching grammar your way'*. In 2017, Myhill visited Linnaeus University (Sweden) for a week to develop materials with teacher educators there, and to run a training session for teachers. The Course Leader reported in 2020 that participants had changed *'their way of thinking about grammar and writing'*; and that their *'approach regarding grammar has changed. We are now drawing on functional theories,*

influenced by the Exeter research on grammar and writing in combination with systemic functional grammar. Not only has the course content changed, but also our way of teaching, in line with a functional perspective on teaching and learning grammar and writing' (5.5). A workshop for the Education Administration in Stockholm, led to providing professional training for the National Centre for Swedish as a Second Language for c30 teachers in 2018. Tampere University (Finland) uses our teaching materials in their teacher education courses and the Course Leader reported witnessing the students applying their learning when on school practice. These visits have led to eight commissioned publications for Scandinavian teachers, outlining our research and pedagogy to support ongoing professional development, and one translation of an article into Danish (5.6). The translator, a Danish teacher educator, did so because it would help his students 'gain insight into how your principles of grammar teaching can be developed in the classroom' (5.5).

More widely internationally, we have worked with the National Institute of Education in Singapore to incorporate our findings into their teacher education programmes; run teacher development workshops in Paris in 2016 for the European Language Schools Association; and given professionally-oriented keynotes in Germany: Fribourg 2015, Ludwigsburg 2016, and Braunschweig, 2017 - attended by over 300 practitioners.

4.2 Changing teachers' pedagogical practices in the teaching of writing:

This sustained programme of professional development, and its accompanying professional support through our website and professional publications, has **changed professional methods and practices** in the teaching of grammar and writing. For example, the Literacy Adviser for the London Borough of Wandsworth (5.7) informed us that feedback following a professional development day revealed '*a positive impact on teachers' subject knowledge of grammar and how this can be embedded in daily teaching*'. The English Adviser from the Buckingham Learning Trust (5.1) wrote, '*The research from Exeter has definitely enabled me in my job to better articulate what I feel is a positive direction to help primary teachers to navigate the detailed grammar content in NC14. Without it, I may have thrown my hands up in despair and walked away in protest about 'prevailing nonsense,' many times over.*'

Our impact now extends beyond our direct involvement, with a ripple effect from our professional development workshops, or involvement in research projects, leading to teachers and advisers using our research to inform their own training of schools. A teacher from one of our EEF projects told us that in 2017 '*our school was moderated for Y6 writing yesterday and the lead moderator ... from Lewisham, was so impressed with the quality of our writing and the whole grammar for writing ethos we have implemented, that she has invited us to give a presentation at the next Year 6 conference in the borough*' (5.1). In 2018, three Swedish teachers, from Alleskolan High School, Orebro, visited us for professional development training and school visits to see the pedagogy in action. For a year, they have been leading a group of teachers in their school '*focusing on grammar for writing*' and using the '*basic concepts of your research in our teaching practice*' (5.8).

Moreover, this is leading to improved outcomes in writing: for example, the Teaching and Learning Adviser for the London Borough of Merton (5.7) reported that the 2015-16 performance data results show a clear improvement in student outcomes in writing; an Education Consultant (5.1) reports significant progress by children using her materials informed by our approach; the Senior Standards and Learning Manager for East Sussex reported that the East Sussex data shows '*that the greater depth in writing in our LA has increased by 1.9%, from 15.2% in 2017/18 to 17.1% in 2018/19*'. In 2020, when Covid-19 disrupted usual assessments, monitoring visits indicated '*a positive impact on both teacher expertise and pupil achievement*' (5.2). The Headteacher of Weston-on-Trent Primary School (5.1) reported that '*After a really enjoyable year of using fantastic texts and films with my Year 6 class, we were really excited when they achieved an average SPAG scaled score of 111 [i.e. in the top quartile of national results] and every child achieved at least 'Expected'. The embedded approach to teaching grammar really works and allows lessons to be lively and engaging. Reading and writing outcomes were way above National too because the children understand, and can articulate, how writing is crafted.*'

4.3 Shaping the design of commercial and non-commercial teaching materials:

Commercial educational publishers and consultants **have used our research in conducting their work**. Pearson's Secondary English Learning Services team has adopted our research 'as its main pedagogical method for improving literacy standards' (5.8). At the end of 2013, they published the *Skills for Writing* series, for which we were consultant developers; and in 2014, we worked with Pearson to develop exemplar materials for the GCSE specifications which were available free on their website. In 2015, Pearson cited our research as part of their **authoritative guidance** (5.8) about the new GCSE English examinations. The Qualifications Division of Pearson (Edexcel) has also drawn heavily on our research and expertise to inform decisions about how writing might be best assessed at KS4 and KS5 through examination questions and assessments, and supporting resources. Pearson state that working with us has '*not only changed how we think about literacy, but also our entire strategy for how we can best help learners progress*' (5.8). **Babcock Learning Development Partnership** (5.9) have adopted our approach for all of their training on grammar teaching, saying that we have been '*enormously influential on our cpd and publication. The secure research base you have established for the impact of explicit grammar teaching on writing has enabled us to have confidence in this approach and build on it in practical terms with schools and teachers. We draw on your research base in all of our training in grammar teaching*'. This has had economic impact too, in terms of **sales of services and products**, and sales of Babcock's book published in 2016, *No-Nonsense Grammar*, exceeds £350,000.

To maximise public access and visibility, we have created a *Resources for Teachers* section on our Centre for Research in Writing website, with free guidance and resources for teachers. This received 26982 views in 2019, accounting for 47% of all views on the Graduate School of Education's research websites. As a consequence of the high visibility of our research: Sussex University Partnership created their own resource, *Putting Grammar in its Place*, which acknowledges the influence of our work, and is now available as a free teachers' resource on the UKLA website (5.10) and the research "*fundamentally informed*" a literary consultant's three publications for teachers, one of which is now adopted as a recommended course book by UCL, London Metropolitan and Greenwich Universities, and informs his consultancy work with 20 primary schools in Tower Hamlets (5.7).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1 Email evidence from teachers and teacher educators.
- 5.2 Letter from Senior Manager: Support and Intervention (Primary Programmes), East Sussex County Council.
- 5.3 Letter from School Improvement Project Manager, National Literacy Trust.
- 5.4 Evidence from Australia: including a letter from the Executive Leader, Learning Improvement Division, Department for Education, South Australia; their Literacy Guidebook which cites our research in five areas of guidance; and links to citations in the Victoria Department for Education Literacy Toolkit and the Literacy Expert Video
- 5.5 Evidence from Europe: including letters from teacher educator programme leaders at Linnaeus University, Sweden, and Tampere, Finland.
- 5.6 List of Professional Publications specially commissioned for teachers in Scandinavia.
- 5.7 Letters from Literacy Advisors for London Boroughs of Merton and Wandsworth; and former Principal Advisor for Dagenham and Redbridge (and past-President of UKLA)
- 5.8 Letter from Pearson, testifying that Myhill's research was adopted as the main pedagogical method for improving literacy standards as well as its influence on Edexcel's examination questions and assessments.
- 5.9 Letter from Primary English Adviser, Babcock LDP
- 5.10 Non-commercial teaching materials:
https://web.archive.org/web/20201208160051/https://ukla.org/wp-content/uploads/Grammar_in_its_place.pdf