

The challenge of educational disadvantage: Taking action through language

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Abstract

The intersection of poverty with growing diversity creates one of the most significant challenges for literacy teachers in the 21st century. While students from economically disadvantaged communities may bring rich language and literacy resources from their homes and communities, they often do not have access to the Standard Australian English they need for successful learning at school. This paper examines how a cluster of schools with large numbers of students from both non-English speaking backgrounds, in particular Pacific Islander and Vietnamese populations, and homes where poverty is a significant issue have sought to make teaching more explicit. The functional grammar course, *Language & Literacy: Classroom application of functional grammar* (The State of South Australia, 2004) has provided the impetus for this project.

Background

Since 2000 the Queensland government has committed substantial funding towards improving student outcomes through a focus on literacy. The first major initiative was informed by the *Literate Futures: Report on the Literacy Review for Queensland State Schools* (Department of Education, 2000). This report identified student diversity, whole-school planning and community partnerships, the teaching of reading, and future literacies as priority areas for schools to target in order to provide students with the kind of learning considered necessary for success in the twenty-first century. In 2006 this was followed by the *Literacy the Key to Learning: Framework for Action 2006-2008* (Queensland Government, 2006) initiative. This new project builds on *Literate Futures*, and targets four challenges: literacy learning, literacy teaching, literacy in the curriculum, and literacy leadership.

Data informing this policy show that many of Queensland's state schools serve communities in low socio-economic areas and that large numbers of students come from families who speak dialects or languages other than English. Many students fall into both categories. Research published by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) confirms that lack of social and cultural capital places young adults at risk of social exclusion; unable to access the benefits and privileges of living in a first world country such as Australia (Daly, McNamara, Tanton, Harding, & Yap, 2006).

Teachers in schools in disadvantaged communities often observe the disparity that exists between students' ability to engage in conversations outside of the classroom (for example, in the playground) and their ability to meet the demands of the curriculum within the classroom. Teachers frequently feel frustrated because they do not understand the reasons for the disparity and do not have the tools to address it. The Functional Model of Language not only assists teachers to *understand* the reasons for the observed disparity in language and literacy practices, but also provides them with the tools to bridge the gap between what students *know* and what they *need to know* to be successful in school and beyond.

Theoretical Framework

Christie (2005) believes that the complexity of language use is best explained by Michael Halliday and his colleagues who proposed that the grammar of any natural language works in systematic ways to make meaning. These linguists suggest that the language we use performs three functions simultaneously. We choose words to discuss the field or content (experiential meaning), words that establish the roles and relationships between participants (interpersonal meaning), and words that organise the text (textual meaning). Within each of these metafunctions there are systems of choice. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) identifies the clause as the basic unit of meaning and shows how patterned our language is. Also, because SFL provides practices and an accessible metalanguage for discussing text, it is a powerful pedagogical tool.

Fairclough (2003, p.5) states that ‘SFL is profoundly concerned with the relationship between language and other elements and aspects of social life’. If we accept that language is learned within the context of everyday life and that it plays an important social role, we must then acknowledge that every lesson provides opportunities for students to learn more about language. This is core to improving literacy outcomes for all students. The register variables provide teachers with a way of understanding why students can engage effectively in conversational language but have great difficulty with some written texts; why they adopt the everyday language of their peers but have limited vocabulary in more specialised contexts; why they are at ease in informal situations but find the demands of the classroom complex. For teachers, this also provides understanding of ways of addressing the language needs of students within the context of their class.

The relationship between language and social practice is further explained through the notion of discourse. James Gee believes that children learn their first language with relative ease from exposure to the Discourses of their immediate family. Gee defines Discourse as ‘a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and acting, that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or network’ (Literate Futures CD-ROM 2.2.1. Education Queensland, 2004). When children from backgrounds that differ from the middle class orientation of our schools enter our classrooms it becomes necessary for them to master a secondary discourse. For these

students to succeed it is important that this difference is not perceived as a deficit, but that teachers consciously respond to this through explicit teaching that scaffolds learning in ways that make links to and builds on the knowledges students bring with them. The belief that *literacy is a social practice* remains central to literacy professional development in Queensland.

Aims and Objectives

In 2006 two clusters of schools serving communities in areas of social and cultural disadvantage in Brisbane's outer suburbs received funding to support literacy learning in the curriculum through a focus on grammar. Prior to this, the schools had adopted the South Australian *Language & Literacy: Classroom applications of functional grammar* course (2004). The funding was accompanied by a *Memorandum of Understanding* requiring the schools to provide information about processes implemented, issues confronted and results achieved so that guidelines could be developed to support other schools and clusters across Queensland as the implementation of the framework unfolds.

Case Study

The cluster of schools discussed in this paper consists of one secondary school (est. 2001) and two primary schools (est. in 1994 and 1999). The schools are situated in a 1000 hectare residential master planned community which was initially commenced back in 1990 by Delfin Lend Lease. The suburb, in Brisbane's south west, is approximately 20 km from the Brisbane CBD. Like many new housing estates, it offers modern rental property at affordable rates, and so attracts many low to middle income families. According to the 2001 Census there were 14,084 people living in the area with a median age of 29. The median individual income was between \$400 and \$499 per week. Of all occupied private dwellings 57% were either fully owned or being purchased; 39% were being rented. In recent years the area has grown rapidly and is now home to 22,000 people, many of whom have come from overseas.

The schools involved cater for over 3500 students from approximately 50 nationalities. All schools continually face the difficult challenge of developing programs appropriate for their growing numbers of educationally disadvantaged students through an extended period of extensive reform in education. The strength of this project is that it has brought the school

communities together to participate in professional learning that is strongly focussed on classroom practice.

The following sections are the perspectives of four of the leaders of the project.

The Secondary Principal's Story

The Functional Grammar Project (*Language and Literacy: Classroom Applications for Functional Grammar*) is important for a number of reasons:

- it provides an opportunity for teachers from the three schools involved to access quality professional development and subsequently work collaboratively to improve teacher practice
- it provides a framework for literacy improvement within individual schools
- it provides a vehicle for improving individual students' literacy capabilities and therefore their access to the broader curriculum and subsequent life opportunities in the secondary school.

The first cohort of year 12 students completed their secondary schooling in 2005 with scores on the Queensland Core Skills (QCS) test well below state averages. This, combined with data from other sources, highlighted the need for the school to provide a range of strategies to improve student outcomes. Given the diversity of students enrolled, literacy was identified as the primary factor impacting on student results. In targeting QCS results, it was decided that a long term, strategic approach be adopted as opposed to a quick fix. A number of initiatives were implemented. These included:

- a focus on literacy across the curriculum
- the development and implementation of specific, targeted literacy development and improvement programs in the middle school
- the opportunity to access *Language and Literacy: Classroom Applications of Functional Grammar* professional development.

Having completed the program, it is my personal belief that functional grammar is a powerful vehicle for addressing many of the literacy needs of students, especially those whose first language is not English. At the high school the project has made a significant

difference for students who are fortunate enough to be in a class taught by a teacher committed to using the techniques and the metalanguage from the functional grammar course. Teachers really do make the difference!

Every project needs a champion. Our Student Coordinator (Middle School) and project cluster manager is that champion. She has inspired other secondary teachers to engage with functional grammar, and has taken risks in changing her practice to make a real difference for students, regardless of their background. As principal, I am extremely proud of the efforts of all staff who have “dipped their toes in the water”.

It is too early for quantitative results as this is a long term project. Anecdotal reports from teachers and students are very positive. For our teachers, it is the journey that is important; not the destination. For our students, the program is adding to the repertoire of skills that will improve their opportunities for success in and beyond school.

The Student Coordinator’s (Middle School) Story

The Functional Grammar Project was established primarily to enhance students understanding of language.

The aims of the project for the cluster include:

- building students’ understanding of language and how it is constructed. This applies to all year levels, from Prep to Yr 12
- establishing a common metalanguage for talking about written and multi modal text
- equipping students with skills to deal with a complex range of text
- improving students’ writing outcomes
- extending teachers’ knowledge of functional grammar
- sharing of teachers’ practice within the school and across the cluster.

The diversity of the student population at the secondary school is a source of enormous challenge for staff and administration. Apart from the Australians, there are two other dominant cultural groups; the Polynesians (largely Samoan, Maori and Tongan) and the Vietnamese. Although many of these students use English as a second language, they are

ineligible for ESL support. Considerable demands on school resources come from the number of students who reside in low rental properties in neighbouring suburbs that fall into the school's catchment area. Another significant demand comes from numbers of students from interstate and overseas who have substantial gaps in their learning because of transient lifestyles. Middle school literacy testing indicates that slightly more than a third of the students score less than 20% on the MYAT test.

Because of the large number of students requiring support, the secondary school administration made improving literacy through a functional grammar approach a focus in all learning areas. All heads of departments and learning support staff participated in the first round of grammar training. It was their responsibility to identify how the grammar could be embedded in units of work and explicitly taught in context so that students could develop skills that would maximise outcomes in their particular Key Learning Areas. Each of the primary schools also sent representatives to this initial training. Thirty staff members from across the cluster undertook this training.

The next step involved having members of staff from each of the schools trained as tutors. Because six members of staff from the cluster are now trained tutors, the sustainability of the program is ensured to some degree. This group includes representatives from the Polynesian and the Vietnamese communities who offer an in-depth understanding of the specific needs of their own cultural groups.

A further forty four teachers from across the three schools have also completed the training. This has been an enormous undertaking as the course is both time and cost intensive. There is an expectation that participants complete course readings and between module activities, trial some lessons during the week and share experiences with others at the next meeting. The current preferred model of delivery provides participants with two TRS days to complete five modules. The other four modules are conducted after school.

The training of staff in itself does not guarantee practice will change; it is necessary to provide teachers with time to plan collaboratively and discuss their work. At the high school, teachers are expected to identify the explicit grammar focus in each unit of work and document how they are going to teach it. Teachers are given time to work in small teams to do this. In addition, teachers are encouraged to share successful lessons at Key Learning Area

meetings and to post their lesson plans and results on the school intranet for other staff to access.

The grammar project continues to gain momentum. The number of teachers trained is now significant and teachers are becoming increasingly confident with using the metalanguage and practices in class. Further benefits have resulted from discussions between teachers about student work and the shared focus has improved relationships among the schools. In the short term we are hoping to see improved scores as students develop better understandings of how language works. In the long term our goal is to provide all students with the skills and language to better understand the complex array of text that they will have to deal with in the 21st century.

The English Head of Department's Story

With the literacy challenges facing English teachers today, the grammar project has been a very welcome professional development opportunity. Teachers from the English department have been very keen to be involved in the training; quite willing to add the large time commitment (9 x 3 hour sessions) to their busy agendas. In this school many of our teachers are young graduates with limited grammar, who realise that this deficit makes it difficult for them to discuss work with students in any detail. Because the middle school curriculum is based around thematic units of work that are not supported with textbooks, teachers prepare all resources. Preparing focused and explicit learning activities is an essential skill for all of our English teachers.

Grammar Course

The course was focused on demonstrating how the structures could be applied in a wide range of classroom settings. As participants engaged with their students in the weekly 'homework' tasks, the sharing of practice proved highly beneficial. The strengths of the course include:

- the simple method of demonstrating how the language patterns work; much like 'mathematical formulae'
- the use of colour and the simple language patterns making the systems highly accessible
- user-friendly terminology

- transitivity analyses that ensure students understand and can discuss previously vague concepts.

Professional conversations around grammar within the school

Once a core of staff trained in the course, the next step was to work to embed practices within the whole department. Towards the end of the first year of the course a group of English teachers, some trained and some not trained in the course, worked together in planning sessions. That group created posters for all classrooms, offering a basic version of the transitivity analysis with simple examples. Some other aspects which had been trialled in the classroom, such as building the complexity of nominal groups in creative writing, were also included to make them more accessible to a wider range of teachers. In English/SOSE department meetings, classroom activities were shared with all English/SOSE staff on a regular basis. Activities trialled successfully with classes have also been shared with Regional Literacy Managers, as well as other HOD groups.

Future challenges

Time remains the biggest barrier to getting the most out of the training. There continues to be a need to meet regularly to share practice and embed this in daily/weekly planning of units. For those who came into the course without much specific grammar training, the development of new activities is still somewhat challenging. Without sufficient support, some staff find it easier to shelve their new learning and fall back on old patterns of grammar (in whatever textbooks are around). However, when they are working cooperatively with others on the project, they are keen to make the functional grammar activities work and try out the strategies.

I strongly believe that students are very keen to take on a new set of rules and vocabulary if they can see that these strategies make it easier for them to write and to read. When it works, they are happy to learn yet another formula. The adults completing the course seemed more resistant than the students to taking on the new sets of rules within the course. Formulae are the daily bread of life for senior students and if English has formulae which help do the job, students will take them on.

Lastly, the first students within the class to embrace the new formulae and to start answering the transitivity questions with massive enthusiasm have been the ESL background and struggling C level students. For them, the course offers a pattern where they previously could perceive none. It is as if the light goes on and they are realising – ‘So that’s how it works!’

Personal Learnings

In my own writing, I have realized that I now have a range of new tools. I relish the more sophisticated understanding of how to compress my writing more easily (very helpful when writing a job application!). When editing my own work, I now have a clearer understanding of how to quickly achieve cohesion. The ‘natural’ linking I had relied upon in the past has been replaced by a clearer recognition of how I can use ‘theme’ and ‘rheme’ patterns to quickly ensure strong linking. It makes re-linking a text which has been ‘chopped and changed’ a much quicker and more transparent process.

The main advantage to my own teaching is the ability to discuss easily with students how sentences work. Subject verb agreement is difficult to demonstrate to senior students who are working to build complex nominal groups to improve their writing. The sentence structure in any literary texts, is such that there can be many words between a subject and its verb. By referring to the ‘mathematical formulae’ of how nominal groups work, I can easily assist students to find the ‘thing’ within the nominal group and to check subject/verb agreement. When creating long sentences with multiple clauses to mimic the style of 19th century fiction, the tracking of clauses (through firstly identifying processes) makes the process immeasurably easier.

The grammar journey has just begun. There is much to do still to ensure a wider range of techniques are used effectively. However, grammar is much higher on the radar than ever before, with many more teachers ready to share their personal practice.

The Primary Deputy Principal’s Story

To date 13 classroom teachers have participated in the Functional Grammar Project 2006 – 6 class teachers from Years 3,4,5,6 & 7 as well as the HOC and a Deputy Principal.

2006 – Tutor trained

2006 – 3 Support teachers

2007 – 6 Year 7 teachers and HOC

2007 – 11 Year 3 & Year 5 teachers (Current course)

Implementation 2006

In 2006 teachers trialled the implementation of functional grammar in their own classrooms, introducing the terminology and concepts through whole class and small focussed groups activities. Students developed their knowledge of *participants, process, circumstances, nominal groups and theme position* and applied these ideas to their writing. Teachers also used the ideas from the course to provide greater scaffolding for students investigating the structure of different texts and the language features associated with the specific texts being used in the classroom.

A Year 3 teacher developed small booklets that were part of the class program. Most teachers tried to implement the ideas within their class program but some initially found that specific literacy lessons using material from the course helped them to introduce the terminology, ideas and concepts.

A Functional Grammar Scope and Sequence was developed to be trialled in 2007.

Advantages

The grammar provided a metalanguage that teachers used to explicitly scaffold the writing process.

- Teachers and students shared the same language to discuss the texts they had written or were reading.
- The grammar enabled teachers to use explicit common language to support more complex sentence structure.
- Teachers found that student writing improved and they could look critically at their own texts and improve these.

Disadvantages

- The terminology was unfamiliar to teachers. Some teachers were uncomfortable about their lack of knowledge but found that, through using the ideas with students, they became more comfortable.
- Because working in isolation from other teachers in the year level did not give many opportunities for professional dialogue, the initial impetus for implementing decreased.
- There is a lack of resources to support implementation.

2007

During 1st term, teachers from Years 7 and 8 participated in the training, developing a shared understanding of the needs of all teachers and students across the campuses. The six Year 7 teachers then worked together to develop a program and trial the Scope and Sequence to make decisions about its use in classrooms and across the school. This trial is continuing. The Year 7 teachers found that students quickly understood the ideas and used the ideas about nominal groups and choice of processes to improve their writing.

Part of the 2007 Literacy agenda includes training teachers in Years 3, 5 and 7. Currently eleven teachers from Years 3 and 5 are participating in the course and implementing aspects of functional grammar in their classrooms. One of the Year 3 teachers who completed the training last year is supporting these teachers. They are familiarising students with the terminology, then using the terms constructively to enhance student writing through developing nominal groups and using theme position. Overall, teachers have found students very receptive to this approach.

Evaluation

This paper provides a snapshot of what happens when schools work together with a shared purpose that has derived from knowledge of the complex community in which they are situated. The project has identified significant issues faced by those leading change - time, cost, understanding of the issues, teacher commitment; but also is showing how progress is best achieved when teachers are involved in collaborative site-based professional development that targets the work they do on a daily basis in their classrooms. In communities where disadvantage stems from multiple intersecting factors, effective literacy reform requires all teachers to hold understandings about diversity that are based on an

appreciation of difference; not deficit. It has been found that when teachers hold notions of disadvantage as deficit, it influences their expectations of students and consequently, the ways in which they teach those students (Australian Government, forthcoming; Elmore, 2006; Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006; Lingard, Hayes, Mills, & Christie, 2003; Timperley & Robinson, 2000, 2001). Such assumptions must be confronted if high expectations for all students are to be achieved.

This is the start of a long journey.

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