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Grammar: before you cringe, hear me out!

The mere mention of the topic of grammar often brings painful sighs from friends and foes alike. Many of them have suffered through text book directed lessons where they were expected to master the rules for producing 'correct' English, that is the Queen's English, by parsing sentences all for the purpose of achieving a school report card rating. In this way, assessment of grammar was both the purpose and end of learning.

Such practices had nothing to do with the modes of meaning-making they were using in their everyday lives or the topics of learning that interested them. Others who sigh long and hard about grammar in schools are the proponents of 'modern' literacy studies, who erroneously believe that this supposedly out-dated content has no place in our multi-medium learner-centred pedagogies.

I argue differently. I believe in the virtues of transformative curricula¹ whereby teachers begin learning episodes by finding out about students' known experiences and need for particular new experiences so that the teaching orientation is supportive and connected to students' interests. Making a place for students to conceptualise, analyse and apply grammar is an important part of this cycle. It's their only mechanism for learning how texts are structured (so they can 'read'), and how texts can be effectively constructed to achieve particular purposes in particular contexts.

The following conversation overheard between a Year 9 student and his geography teacher exemplifies what happens when teachers and students are not provided with a common metalanguage for talking about text.²

The student was asking the teacher why he had received a low mark for his project. The teacher responded that the work 'just didn't hang together'. The boy asked, 'But how do I make it hang together?' The teacher responded by suggesting that the student make the work coherent.

This extract gives us something to think about... wouldn't the student have made the text 'hang together' in the first place if he knew how? Could the teacher have given a more useful response if he/she had known more about how texts, especially geography texts, worked?

Traditional grammar, the Latinised grammar that offers us names for parts of speech (nouns, verbs, prepositions, adverbs and adjectives) of written and spoken text, should be an important area of study for students. How else can teachers and students talk about past, present and future tense, complex noun and verb groups and complex sentences?

Like other living phenomena, grammar is continually being reformed. We now have access to a functional grammar, developed by M A K Halliday in the 1960s. Functional grammar describes language in use and, unlike traditional grammar, can also be applied to visual, audio, gestural and spatial text. Functional grammar helps students to 'identify a point of view; examine how language can be manipulated to achieve certain effects and position the reader in a particular way; know how language can be used to construct a particular identity or a particular way of viewing the world.'³

Although Halliday's focus on language as a resource for meaning-making was taken up in some state mandated curricula as early as 1994, teacher professional upskilling was not systematically undertaken nor were effective applications for pedagogic practice widely explored. Consequently, its true potential as a complement to traditional grammar

within a transformative curricula remained unrealised. Thanks to renewed efforts by some state education departments and some highly devoted individuals who undertook their own professional development, traditional and functional grammars are a part of transformative teaching and learning episodes in many of the discipline areas.

The more opportunities students have to talk about the form and function of a discipline specific language, the more they will comprehend and be able to give back to the discipline.

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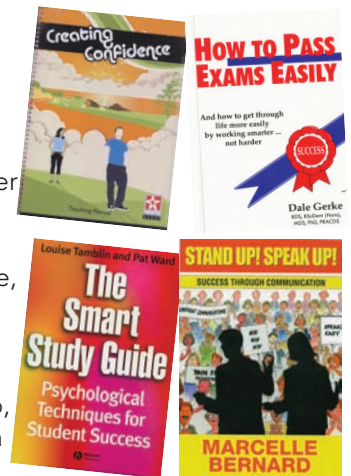
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