

**What, why and how—the policy, purpose and practice of  
grammatical terminology**

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# **What, Why and How - The Policy, Purpose and Practice of Grammatical Terminology**

## **Abstract**

This article critically examines the literature around grammar and grammatical terminology. It is essentially a critical consideration of the debates in England and Wales in four main parts. Part one considers debates in policy, the 'What', i.e. grammatical terminology from the perspective of national policy as defined by the English National Curriculum (DfE 2014) for Key Stages 1 and 2, and the Key Stage 2 'Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling test' (DfE 2013). Part two, debates in purpose, examines the 'Why' i.e. grammatical terminology through a more theoretical lens which considers the potential purpose and value of explicit grammatical terminology in the classroom. Part three touches upon debates in practice, the 'How', i.e. what else is already understood about the teaching of grammatical terminology in terms of: grammar pedagogy, language acquisition, and word learning. While each part has a distinct focus, the field is complex with overlap and inter-related issues. The final part looks briefly at teacher and pupil perspectives.

## **Introduction: Debates in Policy**

Shortly after the First World War, the UK government commissioned a report to suggest improvements for the teaching of English in England. Named after its chair, Sir Henry Newbolt, the report emphasised the importance of the teaching of literature. "Literature," it claimed, was "one of the chief temples of the human spirit in which all should worship" (Newbolt 1921). The report was a victory over those who wanted the subject to remain the study of the history of the language and laid the groundwork for the subject we recognise today (Eaglestone 2017). It recommended that students should perform drama and poetry, write their own plays and poems, and study local dialects. Rebuilding the nation after the devastation of war required a spiritual and almost religious devotion to which the teaching of grammar and "correct" language use were subordinate.

Although Newbolt was the first major government-sponsored report on the teaching of English in England, it can be said to mark the beginning of a century-long divergence between the aims of government and of the English teaching profession around the role of language in the building of the nation state. As Wright (2016) has argued, governments in recent history regard the national language as an important part of the nation building process:

It becomes the medium of communication which permits the nation to function efficiently in this political and economic life, particularly as democracy develops. The citizens of the nation state are trained in their national education systems to be able in the language and willing to assent to its spread; they possess the language because they are taught through the language, and it is hoped that self-interest will persuade them to accept dialect convergence or even language shift, since it is the means of social promotion and necessary for employment in the mainstream.

This divergence between the aims of government and those of the profession in the teaching of language and literature is articulated most obviously in the debates around the teaching of grammar and grammatical terminology that have continued for the last half-century (Myhill and Watson 2014: 41). These debates concern the conceptualisation of the word 'grammar'; its associated subject knowledge and perceived value; its putative benefits around language learning; and uncertainties regarding classroom practice. Locke (2010) uses the military metaphor of "the grammar wars" to encapsulate something of the strength of feeling behind the frequently opposing voices of English teachers, linguists, educationalists, politicians and the general public over the years. A lack of attention to grammar has at times been equated with a decline in standards, delinquent behaviour and social dissonance (Locke 2010). As Carter writes, for many "it is only one small step from splitting infinitives to splitting heads open on football terraces" (Carter 1990: 106). Such morally and politically charged views exist alongside the voices of linguists such as Hudson (2001), who argue for grammar and its associated metalanguage to be regarded as a worthy and relevant body of knowledge, of interest in its own intellectual and aesthetic right. Jones, Myhill and Bailey (2013), whose *Grammar for Writing* has brokered something of a compromise between opposing viewpoints, maintain that grammatical terminology in particular elicits concern. Is the teaching of it time consuming and of dubious merit, or does it provide linguistic structure and consistency in description? Derewianka and Jones (2010) suggest refuting the binary 'either/or' nature of these arguments in favour of asking what we want the model [of grammar] to do for our students' (2010: 7) and what learning it might afford 21<sup>st</sup> century students. Writing his paper has led us to the view that a pedagogy of grammar that focuses on terminology as a means of linguistic understanding offers a way forward.

## **The historical context**

Language teaching in the 1950s and 1960s was characterised by the explicit naming of parts, by drilling of 'correct' forms, through parsing and clause analysis. Carter (1990) cites a typical example from an O-level GCE paper (1961) to demonstrate the kind of explicit knowledge about language which was required:

Using a new line for each, select one example from the above passage of each of the following:

- (i) an infinitive used as the direct object of a verb
- (ii) an infinitive used in apposition to a pronoun
- (iii) a gerund
- (iv) a present participle
- (v) a past participle
- (vi) an adjective used predicatively (i.e. as a complement)
- (vii) a possessive adjective
- (viii) a demonstrative adjective...

(Carter 1990: 104)

Hudson and Walmsley (2005) argue that this ossified approach reflected the lack of grammar related research in universities in the years following the Second World War. Teacher discontent with this approach to grammar and language teaching was famously articulated in the 1966 Dartmouth Conference in the USA, where grammar teaching, as characterised by exercises in naming syntactical elements, was effectively labelled 'a waste of time' (Muller 1967: 68). The dominant British and North American view emerging from Dartmouth seemed to be that 'most children cannot learn grammar and...even to those who can, it is of little value' (Thompson 1969). By the mid-1980s, the rote learning of rules and definitions was largely rejected, although some key documents, such as the HMI report *English from 5-16* (1984), retained a commitment to teaching terminology on the grounds that pupils who learn about language:

(should) have a vocabulary for discussing it, so that they can use it with greater awareness and because it is interesting.

HMI (1984) also rejected 'the belief that knowing how to use terminology in which to speak of language is undesirable.'

The 1988 Kingman committee and the subsequent Cox committee recommended explicit teaching about language but not a return to an old-style conception of grammar. The Kingman *Report into the teaching of the English language* (DES 1988) suggested that Carter's (1990) concept of "knowledge about language" (KAL) was the key to raising standards in reading and writing; while the Cox Report *English for ages 5 to 16* (DES 1989) underlined the cognitive and social benefits of making implicit language use explicit through a process of sustained reflection. It was a model of language adopted by LINC (*Language in the National Curriculum*), a three-year project funded by the Department of Education and Science and local education authorities in England and Wales (DES 1990), which was intended to produce materials for use in the classroom, focusing on descriptive and functional approaches to language in light of Kingman (DES 1988) and Cox (DES 1989). Directed by Ron Carter, a linguist who had strong links with the teaching profession (Carter 1990), this project had an enormous impact through its policy of involving hundreds of teachers through an extended consultation, (Hudson 2013) According to Dean (2003: 25), many classroom teachers' perspectives of grammar and its potential in their work were completely transformed by the sorts of activity sponsored and encouraged by the project. However, final publication of the LINC materials was halted (the government refused to grant Crown copyright), amid criticism that they paid insufficient attention to the rules of Standard English' (Carter 1996). In a House of Commons debate, George Walden MP lambasted the "fanciful theories" of the authors of the report. 'People in Lambeth [a London borough],' he claimed 'will not be able to write or get a job' (Hansard 1991).

Hudson (2016) has pointed out the importance of in-service training (which LINC provided) in preparing teachers for teaching grammar, and the gap that LINC opened up between linguists and government – which has never been bridged. Instead, in 1991 the government established national testing in primary schools, and in 1998 the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) was implemented, Its *Framework for Teaching* (DfEE, 1998) included an official glossary, comprising about 200 technical terms, of grammatical terminology (Hudson 2013). It stated that, by the time pupils leave year 6 (aged 11), they should have developed 'a suitable technical vocabulary through which to understand and discuss their reading and writing' (DfEE 1998: 3). A 'Technical Vocabulary List' at word, sentence and text levels recommended that 5-year-old children should understand terms such as 'grapheme', 'rime' and 'recount', and that 11-year-olds should know terms such as

'assonance', 'passive voice' and 'word derivation' (DfEE,1998: 69-72). The subsequent DfEE document *Grammar for Writing* asserted that its purpose was to make children:

. . . aware of key grammatical principles and their effects, to increase the range of choices open to them when they write' (DfEE 2000:7).

It emphasised that 'the point of [these teaching activities] is to improve children's writing'

(DfEE 2000:19).

This functional view differed from the notion advocated by the Kingman Report (DES 1988) that knowledge about language (KAL) was of value in its own right. However, the metalanguage of the NLS was contentious and criticised. For Frater (2004), *Grammar for Writing* actually contradicted its introduction, violating rather than embracing Halliday's principle that language is 'meaningful, contextualised and in the broadest sense social' (Halliday 1973: 20). There was also disagreement about how useful it was to share any linguistic terms and concepts with pupils (Keen 1997). Richmond (1990) had argued that such use should be carefully limited to specific purposes, including helping pupils to reflect more effectively on language use, and reinforced that such metalanguage should be within reasonable reach of pupils' conceptual frameworks and stages of development. In a similar vein, Carter (1990) outlined the way in which metalinguistic knowledge could provide pupils with a pathway to acquiring 'conscious control and conscious choice over language' (1990: 71). This was supported by Kolln (1996: 29), who described it as 'a tool that enables the writer to make effective choices'. Generally, commentators (e.g. Cajkler 2004; Lefstein 2009; Myhill 2005) argued that the National Strategies failed to properly understand the theoretical complexities of teaching grammar, and demonstrated a limited understanding of how language actually works.

Despite this large-scale national intervention in England and Wales, writing attainment remained stubbornly low in terms of National Curriculum Key Stage 2 results and the 2006 OECD PISA survey. Therefore, in June 2011, Lord Bew was charged with reviewing Key Stage 2 assessment. Bew's *Independent Review of Key Stage 2 testing, assessment and accountability* (2011) emphasised the role of testing not only in gauging the progress and achievement of pupils but also in establishing external school accountability. The report cites Dylan William's view that 'high-stakes accountability systems are probably the most

cost-effective method for raising achievement yet developed' (Bew, 2011: 50). This being so, it declares, summative teacher assessment, even if moderated, may not be a reliable indicator of school-level accountability. It then seizes upon 'spelling, grammar, punctuation, vocabulary' as elements of writing 'where there are clear 'right' and 'wrong' answers, which lend themselves to externally-marked testing' (Bew, 2011: 60), and thus, according to Bew, an indicator of a school's success or failure.

Undertaken for the first time by year 6 pupils in May 2013, the new test included questions such as:

**Question:** Circle all the adverbs in the sentences below.

Excitedly, Dan opened the heavy lid. He paused briefly and looked at the treasure.

**Answers:** excitedly; briefly

**Question:** A prefix is a letter or a group of letters added to the beginning of a word to make a new word. For example: unhappy. Put a prefix at the beginning of each word to make it mean the opposite.

\_\_behave

\_\_correct

\_\_possible

**Answers:** misbehave; incorrect; impossible

Statements from national professional bodies levelled criticisms about artificiality and lack of context. The United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA, 2013), for instance, expressed concern about high-stakes testing, and its impact on the curriculum. Richards (2011: 2) similarly pointed out that 'a "secretarial" test of spelling, grammar, punctuation and vocabulary is eminently suited to excessive test preparation'. Graham and Perin (2007) highlighted the adverse effects of 'explicit and systematic teaching of the parts of speech and structure of sentences' (2007 21), reinforcing Keen's conclusion that: 'Crash courses in parts of speech and clause analysis and a focus on the identification and correction of grammatical errors may offer a censorious framework for showing up pupils' mistakes' (Keen 1997).

In 2013, a new National Curriculum was published, with the explicit aim of raising standards. The new materials made much mention of grammatical terminology throughout the Programme of Study, asserting that year 5 pupils: 'should learn to recognise and use *relative clause, modal verb, relative pronoun, parenthesis, bracket, dash, determiner, cohesion, ambiguity.*' (DfE 2013)

While earlier versions of the National Curriculum (1998; 1996; 2006) could be said to have adopted something of a KAL approach – albeit also with a focus on Standard English – the 2013 version represented something of an ideological shift within British national policy, presenting a more traditional approach to grammar teaching and terminology. This was in turn supported by a grammar annex (DfE 2013) that stated:

The grammatical terms that pupils should learn are labelled as 'terminology for pupils'. They should learn to recognise and use the terminology through discussion and practice. All terms in bold should be understood with the meanings set out in the Glossary.

Phrases such as 'should learn' and 'should be understood' and 'the meanings set out' suggested a much more traditional rule-based approach than the more conciliatory messages of the National Literacy Strategy. There was also a shift in expectations within the programme of study, use of the subordinate clause (for example) now being assigned to Key Stage 1 rather than Key Stage 2.

To further compound the situation, a national test in 'English, grammar, punctuation and spelling' was introduced in June 2016 to assess the new Key Stage 1 curriculum. Although controversial at the time, its status is now 'optional' (following the mistaken publication of the 2016 test answers on the government website prior to the test period). Nevertheless, the messages are clear: a traditional approach with a focus on identification and labelling. The example questions below are from the 2017 test paper:

Q5 Circle the noun in the sentence below.

The shoes were shiny.

Q7 Circle the adjective in the sentence below.

Take a blue crayon from the box to colour in the sky.

Q10 Write one adverb to complete the sentence below.

We cut out the shapes.



Q12 Tick the noun phrase below. Tick one.

- the tiny insect
- so quickly
- had been eating
- very colourful.

Q13 Circle all the verbs in the sentence below.

Anna washed the grapes and shared them with her friends.

Q18 Which sentence is written in the present tense? Tick one.

- Mum took Ella breakfast in bed.
- Mum makes Ella a hot drink.
- Mum gave Ella a book.
- Mum told Ella a story.

The present writers' examination of the test framework for test developers (DfE 2016) suggests that a large proportion of questions are at a lower cognitive level. It seems likely that this will lead to decontextualised teaching and tick-box worksheet resources, and threaten further to displace the time for developing the practice of these early writers. Research is required to investigate this.

These criticisms all concern the effect of the tests on the curriculum. It is worth pointing out, though, that students may find interest and value in understanding the role of prefixes, suffixes, word function, tense and other grammatical features in shaping meaning. Moreover, the key stage 3/4 curriculum states that students should "[know] how language, including figurative language, vocabulary choice, grammar, text structure and organisational features presents meaning" (DfE 2013: 4). Cushing (2018) and Giovanelli (2016) argue that the new grammar curriculum does offer teachers and students the chance to engage in meaningful, stylistically based grammar work.

### **Debates in purpose: Grammatical terminology and pupils as language learners**

The National Curriculum does not present its list of grammatical concepts or terminology in the context of a theoretical framework, or through staged models of development).

Nowhere is there an adequate theoretical discussion of Norman's four broad areas of 'grammar':

- (i) Word form and their morphology;
- (ii) word function and their terminology;
- (iii) sentence structure and its syntax;
- (iv) discourse structures (Norman, 2010: 40)

nor an account of other influential approaches, such as Halliday's (1985) functional linguistics – although his work does underpin the grammar for writing pedagogy of Myhill et al (2014). These differences and difficulties are acknowledged briefly only to be dismissed:

It is recognised that there are different schools of thought on grammar, but the terms defined here clarify those being used in the programmes of study. (DfE, 2013: 1)

The National Curriculum does, however, present a tentative teaching sequence of terminology, with recognition of its limitations and the need to 'revisit in subsequent years' in order to 'consolidate knowledge and build on pupils' understanding':

The table shows when concepts should be introduced first, not necessarily when they should be completely understood. It is very important, therefore, that the content in earlier years be revisited in subsequent years to consolidate knowledge and build on pupils' understanding. Teachers should also go beyond the content set out here if they feel it is appropriate. (DfE, 2013)

However, in specifying a regime when 'concepts should be introduced', any variation between individuals and groups is potentially undermined. There is no acknowledgement given to the 'highly variable experiences of different people and different communities' within stages of language learning (Hudson, 2010: 206).

Richmond (2015) identifies a fundamental problem of 'imagining that prior analytical instruction in the primary years will produce 11-year-olds who can use correct grammar in their speech and writing'. Essentially, he argues, the way children learn to do things is 'not the way that adults, already competent in these things, find most enlightening - to analyse them abstractly'. As he explains:

The simple principle here is that competence is prior (both in the chronological and the intellectual sense) to analysis, not the other way round (Richmond, 2015: 3)

Richmond (2015) calls for a 'much more modest collection of grammatical concepts and terminology' which could then be extended beyond the primary years. It is notable that, at present, the grammatical content at Key Stages 3 and 4 in English secondary schools is very modest in comparison with the requirements at Key Stages 1 and 2. In view of Richmond's argument that competence precedes analysis, this seems the wrong way round. This point is elaborated in the discussion below of Bialystock (1994).

While traditional approaches conceive of grammar as a set of structures which can be assessed as correct or incorrect, theoretical perspectives often see language through a more fluid, socially constructed lens with roots in socio-cultural and socio-linguistic domains. The seminal work of Michael Halliday (1985) presents language as a resource, as 'a meaning-making system through which we interactively shape our world and ourselves' (Derewianka and Jones 2010: 9). Halliday's theoretical frame of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is chiefly concerned with how language operates, as ascertained by the study of texts within social parameters. The emphasis is upon the making of choices and the power of language to shape our experience, thereby empowering pupils in their understanding of language and in their ability to manipulate it. This is in direct contrast to the traditional view of grammar as established knowledge of accurate use that can be used to fix 'weak writing' (Micciche 2004: 716). According to Hudson (2010: 103), 'prescriptive linguistics claims to find faults in language and tries to fix them, whereas descriptive linguistics, as its name suggests, tries to 'describe' language as it really is'.

Linguistic research highlights the importance of teachers and pupils' developing a shared understanding of meaning (Edwards and Mercer 1987). Bold (2012) argues that there is no need for teachers to be intimidated by terminology as long as they are satisfied that it will help children to reflect more effectively on language in use. However, classroom work on language needs to be carefully managed. In attempting to provide a context in which a shared understanding of meaning could be developed through dialogue, Bold concluded that:

Whole class discussions rarely provide opportunity for children to construct a shared understanding of meaning through dialogue. There are too many participants and too many opportunities for misunderstandings to arise (2012: 65)

Bialystock (1994) examined the cognitive processes involved in the acquisition and use of a second language. Her work sets out a framework built around two cognitive components:

the process of analysis and the process of control. In the process of analysis, the child moves towards representations of knowledge which in turn lead to greater symbolisation and a greater level of organisation in mental representations. The implicit becomes explicit, and the structure and organisation of mental representations become formalised, and, with that, knowledge becomes more connected and ultimately more accessible (Bialystock 1994: 159).

Bialystock presents this process as having three distinct stages: the conceptual, the formal and the symbolic, with the symbolic arising out of the conceptual and formal stages. This would seem to be a reversal of the pedagogic approach being suggested by the National Curriculum, which advocates starting with learning an abstract and symbolic concept and label. This may also suggest that the Key Stage 1 expectations for teaching (and assessment as per the optional Key Stage 1 SPAG test) are unrealistic and unreasonable. These, after all, are our youngest children with the least amount of life and language experience, and so the least likely to be able to use intuitive judgement to reflect upon grammatical concepts or terms and, therefore, the least able to attempt to generalise to a rule or formal explanation based upon organisation in mental categories (Hartwell 1985). Within the stated purpose of the National Curriculum, there is only a brief reference to grammatical terminology. The view reflected seems to be one of functional language and literacy skills located within a rationale of, and a repeated commitment to, the development of Standard English. Thus, the overarching aim of the prescriptive teaching of grammatical terminology seems to be one of ensuring that pupils are prepared for their role in society as educated citizens. This makes Hartwell's (1985) criticisms that 'the common school grammars' are 'unconnected with anything remotely resembling literate adult behaviour' all the more worrying (Hartwell 1985: 120). Hartwell (1985) suggests the real purpose of such an extensive list of 'important' grammatical terminology: 'At no point in the English curriculum is the question of power more blatantly posed than in the teaching of formal grammar' (1985: 127).

Myhill and Watson (2014) maintain that the differing perspectives on the value of grammar are 'at the heart of the debate...for the language learner and opposing views of what educational benefits learning grammar may or may not accrue' (2014 p41). Hartwell (1985) argues that agreeing a common purpose for teaching grammatical terminology is essential before effective practice can be discussed and decided. We need to agree what it is we are

trying to achieve before considering how this might be accomplished most effectively in the form of classroom practice. It could be argued that grammatical terminology – and the way in which it seems to be a manifestation of the binary ‘either/or’ arguments of prescription versus description – is truly ‘at the heart of the debate’. This makes the phenomenon of teaching grammatical terminology important. Therefore, when Myhill and Watson (2014 p41) call for the need for a ‘fully-theorised conceptualisation of grammar in the curriculum’; the call for a fully-theorised conceptualisation of *grammatical terminology* would seem to be even more urgent.

### **Debates in practice: teacher knowledge of 'grammar' and implications for national policy**

When considered in the historical and current contexts of the English education system, the implications for the classroom of these ongoing policy changes and curricular debates would seem to be highly problematic, especially with key challenges existing around perceived weaknesses in teachers’ subject knowledge, gaps in pedagogical understanding and a lack of knowledge of stages of pupil development. In 1998, a Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) survey of teachers in the period following the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy concluded that there was a ‘significant gap ... in teachers’ knowledge and confidence in sentence grammar’ (QCA 1998, 35). Fisher et al (2000) found that, while some teachers used metalanguage to good effect, others presented information in a ‘confused or unhelpful way’ (2000: 11). Although, as Beard (2000) pointed out, a high level of subject knowledge could not be expected of teachers who ‘had not been taught it at school themselves’, concerns that teachers’ subject knowledge is weak are neither new nor restricted to the UK (Myhill et al 2012: 142).

Many primary school teachers do not have a linguistic background, and even those who are English Literature graduates are unlikely to have focused on grammar (Myhill et al 2012: 90). Their gap in subject knowledge therefore may extend beyond specific knowledge of grammatical terminology to an uncertainty around the broader conceptualisation of ‘grammar’ itself and the scope of grammar as an academic discipline. UK and US-based research has reported that teachers struggle to define grammar, noting confusion between grammatical rules and usage or linguistic etiquette (Petruzella 1996; Vavra 1996; QCA 1998, Watson 2015). Watson (2015) found that some teachers could articulate grammar only in vague ways; when they gave definitions, their responses predominantly reflected

traditional and prescriptive grammar associations such as 'putting labels on things'. (Watson 2015: 6-7). However, it is debatable whether this demonstrates a lack of 'grammatical' understanding, or merely an inability to offer a definitive description' (Chapman 2000: 36). The issue, however, is not simply about navigating differences and disagreements in grammar definitions. It is also about a more fundamental principle to do with language, concepts and terminology.

According to Watson (2015), it is well documented that teachers' beliefs can affect their pedagogical practice (Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Poulson, Avramidid, Fox, Medwell & Wray 2001; Findlay 2010). The influence of these beliefs seems particularly strong when teachers are faced with 'ill-defined situations' (Nespor 1987: 324). Given the debates so far, it could be argued that current national policy is responsible for presenting such an 'ill-defined situation' and that 'in the absence of uncontested conclusions about what constitutes good practice, teachers base instructional decisions on their own practical theories' (Borg and Burns, 2008: 458). Phipps and Borg (2009: 3) recognise the significance of this, maintaining that beliefs about teaching and learning can be 'deep-rooted and resistant to change'. Whether these are influenced by their own experience as learners (Holt Reynolds, 1992; Lortie, 1975), or as a result of teacher education (Kagan, 1992; Richardson, 1996), beliefs have a 'powerful effect on teachers' pedagogical decisions (Johnson, 1994).

In the absence of a secure theoretical basis provided by the literature or detailed pedagogical guidance in the National Curriculum, individual teachers' practical theories about teaching grammatical terminology have the potential to impact significantly on pupil experience. Although Rokeach (1968) underlines the importance of the 'degree of congruence' between the policy and their own beliefs (Rokeach 1968), there seems to be a great number of negative associations surrounding the teaching of grammar and grammatical terminology. A QCA survey (1998) found that 'there was a strong association of explicit grammar teaching with prescriptivism and old-fashioned teaching methods such as decontextualised 'exercises' and 'drilling' (1998: 26). Findlay (2010) found that although grammar as seen as 'a legitimate aspect of the subject', the teachers who were interviewed did 'not enjoy teaching it' and regarded it 'as a chore' (2010: 4). Crystal (2006) also reports on what seems to be a profound suspicion of linguistic terminology, amounting at times to a real fear of the terms (as opposed to the concepts) which other academic domains do not

seem to share. As Miccoche (2004: 716) maintains, 'Grammar makes people anxious, even—perhaps especially—writing teachers.' This potentially reveals a barrier which may be due to lack of confidence or a lack of subject knowledge, even before teaching has begun.

Pomphrey and Moger (1999: 232) report, however, on inconsistencies within teachers' own beliefs even when they are willing and able to discuss the topic. Their research found that, while some teachers expressed a 'preference for descriptive grammar', the language used in open comments 'was the language of prescriptive rather than descriptive grammar' which 'suggests they have not always internalised a complete understanding of descriptive grammar even though it may superficially seem a more palatable alternative to a prescriptive view' (1999: 232). This suggests that some teachers may not have internalised the distinction between prescriptive and descriptive grammar, or they felt that they might be less open to criticism or correction by employing the former.

Phipps and Borg (2009: 2) also found tensions between teachers' stated beliefs and their classroom practices, describing these in such terms as 'incongruence, mismatch, inconsistency, and discrepancy'. However, Phipps and Borg (2009) found that these tensions could have positive implications for both research and teacher development, and potentially be a powerful and positive source of teacher learning (2009: 14). Golombek and Johnson (2004) also identified 'a recognition of contradictions in the teaching context' as a 'driving force' in teachers' professional development (2004: 323-324). Recent studies in which linguists have worked closely with teachers in developing grammatical knowledge (see, for example, Giovanelli 2015) demonstrate radical shifts in how teachers think and talk about grammar. The final part of this paper examines what those in school make of policy, purpose and practice.

### **Teachers' perspectives on national policy**

Grammatical terminology has its own agenda, but, in England, it is currently situated within the National Curriculum's narrow and prescriptive conception of writing. Unlike the Programmes of Study for reading, which emphasise the importance of developing a 'love of literature' (DfE 2014: 13), feeding 'pupils' imagination' and opening up 'a treasure-house of wonder and joy for curious young minds' (DfE 2013: 14), the phrases which detail the writing content are more concerned with developing stamina and skills, for example 'to write

at length, with accurate spelling and punctuation.’ There are no equivalent references to developing a love, enjoyment or interest in writing or to grammar being an important tool for meaning-making (Carter, 1990; Halliday, 1973).

Instead, the Programmes of Study for English at both Key Stages are separated into three sections:

- Writing – Transcription (spelling and handwriting)
- Writing – Composition
- Writing – Vocabulary, grammar and punctuation

– and in that order, suggesting that, hierarchically, transcriptional skills are the most important of all. Interestingly, there are other messages here about the decontextualised nature of the Programmes of Study, for, although grammar is included within the section on writing composition, the separation of ‘Vocabulary, grammar and punctuation’ does present this area both visually and verbally as decontextualised. The fact that ‘Grammar should be taught explicitly’ (DfE 2014: 40) is instrumental to the Writing Programme of study, and reinforces a traditional view of grammatical terminology for teachers.

Current research presents a picture which includes variability in effective practice and inconsistencies and uncertainties in teachers’ and pupils’ understanding. How do teachers interpret the current grammar curriculum? Norman found that developing children’s ability to use specialist terminology alongside the acquisition of new concepts is a lengthy and complex process (Norman 1992), and, although Keen (1997) argues for getting to grips with children’s ‘natural’ metalanguage before attempting to give them more formal linguistic terms, it is unclear what this might look like or how this might be done. Graham and Perin’s (2007) meta-analysis describes the negative effect of the ‘explicit and systematic teaching of the parts of speech and structure of sentences’, and Phipps and Borg (2009) criticised decontextualized gap-filling exercises being used as a behaviour management technique (2009: 9). A more positive view comes from Myhill and Watson’s (2014: 43) research into the value of grammar teaching in the context of writing, while Andrews et al. concludes that ‘sentence-combining suggests a pedagogy of applied knowledge – at its best, applied in situations of contextualised learning; at its worst, drilling’



(2006: 52). The issue would seem therefore to be teacher interpretation of what should be happening in the classroom - which reinforces the significance of professional development.

Lefstein's (2009) classroom study found that lessons reflected 'a mixture of elements of rhetorical grammar, rule-based grammar and other practices, not directly related to grammar teaching (2009: 395). However, this is not necessarily a wholly negative phenomenon as it could well be that a multifaceted approach is best, and Watson (2015: 12) suggests aiming for policy and professional delivery of multiple 'grammars' or 'grammar pedagogies' which relate to the teaching of English (e.g. 'rhetorical grammar' and 'contextualised grammar teaching'). This needs though to be recognised, understood and implemented in a way which engages children. *The English Appendix 2: Vocabulary, Grammar and Punctuation* states:

Once pupils are familiar with a grammatical concept [for example 'modal verb'], they should be encouraged to apply and explore this concept in the grammar of their own speech and writing and to note where it is used by others. (DfE, 2014: 74)

This maintains a rigid top-down approach, however, and Hudson (2010) maintains that a better approach would be to focus on examples and encourage the children to establish the properties themselves, thereby harnessing children's capacity for creating concepts. The teacher then offers the word 'noun' and the discovery of more and more properties continues. The approach described above by the National Curriculum would seem to represent a 'less effective, old-fashioned' approach in which: 'rests on theoretical sand and goes nowhere' (Hudson 2010)

### **Pupils' Perspectives**

Whilst teachers' perspectives do seem to be evident in the research literature, pupils' voices have been most noticeably absent from recent research, despite a wealth of literature on strategies for raising achievement which indicate that pupils' views can make a difference. Rudduck (1999) calls for the literacy curriculum, as experienced and perceived by pupils, to be given the attention it deserves as they are 'expert witnesses' in the process of school improvement. Berry writes: 'it is rare to find a focus on learner knowledge of terminology.' (Berry 2008). Calderhead (1987) concludes that 'some thinking may not be verbalisable' (1987 p185). Nevertheless, Carter's question is of fundamental importance and a key driver in the development of this research study. He asks:

Do we take for granted assumptions about young children's problems with and perceptions of language? Perhaps more explicit interchange with the children would enlighten both parties. (1990: 51)

Bell (2016) quotes teachers who report that their primary pupils "love grammar"

I think it's down to the teacher's enthusiasm – and I am enthusiastic about it. A little girl said to me the other day: "this is a present continuous", and I said: "is it?". I'll be honest, I had to look it up. She said: "I looked it up," and she must have learned it that way.... I will stop the lesson if there is a particularly good sentence. "Stop! Listen to this, listen to this!" You big it up, and the pleasure the children get from that is just remarkable. Then, once you've grabbed them, they will start producing really good sentences.

Bell comments that passion and intensity can fire enthusiasm in any subject, but this type of comment is an informative contrast to the idea that teachers find grammar inherently uninteresting (c.f. Comments by "Grace" cited in Watson 2015: 9-10). Most teachers in Bell's (2016) study had a largely positive perspective on, and some expressed genuine enthusiasm for, understanding and teaching grammar.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has critically explored the phenomenon of grammatical terminology over time and the debates around its teaching and learning. Given the limits of specific terminology research, these discussions have sometimes been within the wider context of grammar teaching. In doing so, it has explored the incongruence and uncertainty within and between policy, purpose and practice. The paper has traced the intricacies of the fifty year-long grammar debate (Locke 2009) and the subsequent battle for control between politicians, educationalists and practitioners. It has detailed how this 'battle' has manifested itself in the frequent changes in political ideology and UK government policy documentation, resulting in what might be such an 'ill-defined situation' today. This was further exacerbated in 2013 by the increase in expectations for the teaching of grammatical terminology in the new National Curriculum for primary English and the introduction of the 'SPAG' test. In the absence of professional training and support materials to accompany this, the teaching of

grammatical terminology has been left to the interpretation – and to the anxieties and uncertainties, surrounding the confidence and competencies - of individual teachers. As a result, teachers may well be without a suitable repertoire of pedagogical approaches at a time when accountability, high stakes assessment and curricular expectations are at their highest.

This paper has also examined the phenomenon of grammatical terminology to demonstrate something of its inherent complexity. This is domain- specific, taught knowledge which has a level of abstraction quite unlike anything else in the primary curriculum. Yet, despite this, teachers are now required to teach this to pupils in Key Stage 2 and, most recently, to 6 and 7-year-olds in Key Stage 1. Reviewing the history, there would seem to be a need to look at grammatical terminology differently rather than retreat into rehearsed arguments regarding prescription versus description and their associated classroom approaches. This paper has attempted to begin to do that, by looking at the very essence of grammatical terminology from the perspective of word learning.

Myhill and Watson maintain that the differing perspectives on the value of grammar are ‘at the heart of the debate...’ (2014: 41) and call for a ‘meaning oriented theorisation of grammar.’ This paper suggests that it may well be grammatical terminology that is ‘at the heart of the debate’ instead. This makes the phenomenon of grammatical terminology and the extensive table of terms and glossary that teachers are required to teach and on which pupils are assessed significant, so much so that *a meaning-oriented theorisation of grammatical terminology* could be an appropriate call. Bell (2016) illustrates the difficulties in teacher-student discussion caused by lack of metalanguage, and shows that, for both teacher and child, develop control of metalanguage can help crystallise nascent insights into how language works and our understanding of it.

This paper also raises many questions. We need to know more about the perspectives of pupils and their teachers, and the relationship between these perspectives. Where are the tensions in competing perspectives: between pupils and their teachers, between pupils, teachers and national policy, between pupils’ and teachers’ stated beliefs and observed behaviour or actual practice? Furthermore, ultimately, what does an investigation in the perspectives of pupils and their teachers in the context of current policy predict about the purpose and value of metalinguistic terminology and the most effective pedagogical approaches? These remain considerations for further research.

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