What does language study and especially grammar have to do with appreciating quality literature and promoting enjoyment in reading? The Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2014) advocates the interweaving of language, literature and literacy, but some generations recall from their own school days that bringing grammar and literature together could sometimes spoil the pleasure of reading: an exercise in ‘death by parsing’ where the grammar study seemed to dilute rather than enhance the joy and appreciation of literature. This was not always the case but it is a reminder that when integrating grammar study with literature and literacy we need to retain our usual concerns for engaging students and helping them see the relevance and value of the pursuit. So – how can learning about grammar enhance student understanding of and pleasure in reading literature? Can grammar add anything tasty to the mix?

In this article I recount one sequence of integrated English lessons in which a Year Two class learned about ‘saying verbs’ and their meaningful relationship to the shaping of a narrative picture book. This class was a case study group in a wider study and their work has been reported separately in a more academically-oriented context (French, 2009). Here, I will focus mainly on the practical classroom activities of the teaching sequence.

Choice of text
The excellent and entertaining picture book Pumpkin Soup by Helen Cooper (1998) was the focus of this teaching–learning sequence. The book has been highly awarded and its quality is also borne out by the fact that children are generally very happy to reread it, noticing more detail in the illustrations and finding more to enjoy each time they revisit the text. This is the kind of text which ought to be chosen for grammar study; one that is so good that you’ll happily spend time with it over a few lessons and not exhaust its possibilities.

Prior learning: ‘action verbs’ and ‘saying verbs’
In this class the children’s prior learning about grammar was not extensive, but they knew about and could identify ‘action verbs’ in text. Their teacher and I used the colour green with them to signify verbs. We had also introduced them to ‘saying verbs’ (this is the Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2014) gloss for what in systemic functional grammar terminology is a ‘verbal process’: see Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, ch. 5), for which we used a green ‘lips’ shape to indicate this special kind of verb. Note that in the Australian Curriculum: English ‘saying verbs’ are first mentioned in the Year 3 content e.g. ACELA1482, but we found Year Two children were very quick to understand them.

We first identified ‘saying verbs’ in the context of reading news magazine reports about sportspeople, that contained quoted speech. The children then watched a video of an interview with a sportswoman and subsequently wrote their own news magazine-type reports, incorporating some quoted speech with quotation marks, and using ‘saying verbs’ and ‘sayers’ to indicate who was responsible for the quote (for ‘sayers’ we used the colour red). They circled quotation marks in orange and underlined, in orange, sections of quoted speech. They therefore knew about quoted speech and could manage with some success the punctuation of quotes and the inclusion of ‘saying verbs’ and ‘sayers’ in independent writing of short texts.

Reading Pumpkin Soup: reviewing and consolidating ‘saying verbs’ in a new context
We read the class Pumpkin Soup and the class teacher and I then revisited the children’s prior learning about ‘saying verbs’ by having them perform a section of the text as a kind of readers’ theatre. To do this we provided an enlarged copy of one page from the book which contained a decent amount of dialogue. In joint activity the children found the ‘saying verbs’, ‘sayers’, quotation marks and quoted speech; each of these we marked with our now-familiar colours and symbols (see example at Figure 1). The children then read the text aloud,
with different groups taking on character parts, in a shared reading of the dialogue which was essentially a choral readers’ theatre. They enjoyed this immensely. (It is worth noting, at this point, the high value literacy learning associated with this kind of activity where children reread a text and build fluency and oral reading expression.)

Next, the children were invited to see if they could spot all the ‘saying verbs’ in the story and, while I reread the book, the teacher scribbled the children’s suggestions onto green cards with ‘lips’ shapes (keeping our meaningful use of colours and symbols consistent). The children loved doing this, listening and looking carefully for ‘saying verbs’ and offering ideas with enthusiasm.

**Thinking about patterns: ‘saying verbs’ and narrative meaning**

Notwithstanding their obvious joy and interest, up to this point in the teaching–learning sequence the children had not done anything very different from the ‘underline the verb’ activities of the past – mere recognition activities which in general should not be an end in themselves. So the next step was to try to explore with the children the meaning-making work that the ‘saying verbs’ were doing. For this step I worked with small groups in turn, allowing for maximum participation from the children.

My way in was to ask the children to think about whether the ‘saying verbs’ formed any kind of pattern. (Incidentally, I love asking this question and I thank Aidan Chambers (1985, 1994) for suggesting it so eloquently). We used the green cards on which each of the ‘saying verbs’ from the story had earlier been scribed (for example, Figure 2).

![Whispered](image)

**Figure 2. ‘Saying verb displayed on green ‘lips’ symbol’**

As I reread the story we set out the ‘saying verb’ cards in story order, left to right on the mat, placing any from the same page beneath one another. The result looked something like Table 1.

The idea of looking for patterns in literature was a new one to these Year Two children and at first, they looked for patterns they knew about from other contexts, such as counting the numbers of letters and checking for alphabetical order. I had suspected my ‘patterns’ question would be a challenge for them but, as a researcher, I wanted to observe how they approached this new problem before I provided any additional scaffolding. My next and final step proved to be a highly significant one. Indeed, without it the children would have got no further than counting words or looking for letter patterns.

The children already knew that simple narratives tend to follow the stages of Orientation, Complication and Resolution – see the Australian Curriculum: English, Year 2 content descriptor ACELA1463 (ACARA, 2014). I asked them to recall this whole-text knowledge. As we looked again at the picture book we decided which parts fitted each of the stages and put labels above the ‘saying verbs’ on the floor to indicate where they fitted into the narrative. We made up our own label for the twist at the end. The display on the mat now looked like Table 2.

The challenge of looking for a pattern was now re-presented as one in which the narrative labels provided a clue; the children could see that the display was inviting them to relate the ‘saying verbs’ (from the ‘sentence level’) to the narrative staging (‘whole text level’).

The children were now able to begin making links between choices of words and the shaping of the whole text. Matthew, for example, noted the absence of ‘saying verbs’ in the Orientation and pointed out that this might be intended (or deliberate), as to introduce dialogue without context or setting would be confusing for the reader:

Matthew: … there’s no um saying verbs at the start, um, because it’s telling, ‘cause it’s telling you the orientation, ‘cause it –. Say if it said, ‘The duck said, “In the morning”’ you wouldn’t know where it is and stuff.

More significantly, the children also noticed how the ‘saying verbs’ have a non-coincidental relationship to the shaping of the narrative: the patterns in the grammar help to construct the stages of the story. In the Complication, the ‘saying verbs’ escalate into anger as the characters have an argument and are followed by sad-type ‘saying verbs’ when one character runs away and is

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<th>‘Saying verbs’ from Pumpkin Soup, displayed in story order</th>
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<td>murmured</td>
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<th>murmured</th>
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<th>squeaked</th>
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<th>stormed</th>
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<th>muttered</th>
<th>sniffed</th>
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<th>whispered</th>
<th>yelped</th>
<th>shrieked</th>
<th>didn’t say</th>
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Table 1: ‘Saying verbs’ from Pumpkin Soup, displayed in story order
thought to be lost; in the Resolution the ‘shriek’ is, appropriately, one of happiness. For reasons of space I’ll give just one example (more can be found in French, 2009):

Deborah: They’re um, like, see there’s a complication? All the saying words are a bit like, like, say if they’re crying or something. Like there’s wept and wailed and some of them, like –

Researcher: And why would there be words like that in the complication, Deborah?

Deborah: Um because something’s gone wrong. And then in the resolution there’s ‘shrieked’ like they’re excited, or ‘didn’t say’.

Reflection

These seven and eight year olds show that a little bit of grammatical knowledge can take you a long way when it is introduced, explored and discussed using carefully designed pedagogy and quality literature that is itself worth exploring. Knowing about grammar and its patterning can be a powerful way to lead students into new understandings about how texts are made and towards using what in Luke and Freebody’s terms (1999) are ‘text critic’ tools for readers to analyse the ‘constructedness’ of story. If grammatical patterns are considered in light of the purpose and design of whole texts, students will be learning to understand and use grammar as a meaning-making resource. Learning about grammar in the context of reading literature can also be great fun, as these Year Two children showed me by their sustained attention and animated discussions.

At the end of our work on Pumpkin Soup, the children still loved the story, perhaps even more so for their fascination with finding a pattern in it, which was not immediately obvious and required some grammar sleuthing to uncover. Teachers might note that, even though we had looked in depth at some of the book’s grammar, we had really only looked at one type of verb. We hadn’t tried to do too much with one book.

In the story, the pumpkin soup is described as ‘the best you ever tasted’, and for us, our grammar work had only made it all the more interesting and delicious.

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References


Also available from: https://www.academia.edu/4287011/Pumpkin_Soup_and_grammatics_A_critical_literacy_case_study_with_Year_2


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