

Caroline Palmer: Session report

**Session Five : Teaching Grammar, Spelling and Punctuation** (nb this session took the place of session four.)

Grammar, spelling and punctuation must be taught to pupils, in order for them to become confident and effective writers. They must learn 'to write correctly, using different formats, layouts and ways of presenting their work.' [The English NC, 1999, p37]

This session began by looking at a poem: *What the Uneducated Old Woman Told Me* by Christopher Reid. We discussed, with the person sat next to us, what could be done with this poem and then fed back to the rest of the group. The poem is a list of phrases of what the old woman indirectly said and sentences made incomplete by the use of 'That' at the beginning of each one. Various ideas were then presented.

The first of these was that the poem could be simply rewritten in complete sentences, as prose, with the use of connectives. For example: The uneducated old woman told me that she was glad to sit down, because her legs hurt in spite of the medicine. The exercise could be developed to produce a more complex piece of prose, to incorporate direct speech, a change of tense, looking at noun phrases, subordinate clauses and conjunctions. The old woman is indeed being educated.

So this poem would be appropriate to use in a lesson for focusing on sentence level objectives. The pupils are reading and analysing at a grammatical level. 'Pupils should be taught to be fluent, accurate users of standard English vocabulary and grammar'. [En 1998 The Grammar Papers, p23] Grammar can be taught through interesting material, in this case, poetry. Starters activities can also be used to reinforce an objective and there are some examples of suitable sentence level activities, for the particular objectives focused on here, on the course website. These are quite easy to print off. (I have tried it!)

At this point in the session we referred to one of the documents handed out, which is a summary of grammar requirements for key stages 3 and 4 and realised we had, in fact, just addressed some of these:

Reading:

to consider features of the vocabulary and grammar of standard English that are found in different types of text.

Writing:

Pupils should be encouraged to broaden their understanding of the principles of sentence grammar and be taught to organise whole texts effectively. [En 1998, p23]

So, these requirements, so condensed in the National Curriculum, are generated and developed, to expand out into interesting and productive lessons. On p42 of this document we can see how we should be assessing pupils' use of grammatical knowledge, We need to be convincing our mentors of this, by being imaginative and creative and assessing through the use of interesting lessons. This unit of work, which teaches and assesses, will not be just one lesson, but part of a much bigger project or sequence of work. Grammar is taught at word level, sentence level and whole text level and if during a teaching sequence it is realised that pupils do not know or understand something at any of these levels, then a lesson or starter can be added to reinforce a concept.

We can see on p44 of the document how a history text, or such, can be used to add 'Englishy stuff' to. (Mr Rush!) Transcripts for this kind of thing can be found on the

internet. Grammar is fun, formal or informal, and can be done through speaking and listening, using interesting material and particular questions.

After break we looked at another poem, *Mushrooms* by Sylvia Plath. If you take away the title of this poem, you have a riddle that is on a feminist track. The riddle being, who/what is it about? There are many grammar lessons to be developed from this poem, for example: punctuation (lots of it), apposition, the same part of the sentence three times, a density of commas (generating and developing lessons on simple, compound and complex sentences), adverbs, phonemes, and assonance. The question, how do we know it's a riddle, leads to 1<sup>st</sup> person plural pronouns. Finally, to prove grammatical terms should not be reserved by their term, for example, 'an adjective is a describing word'. Although there are very few in this poem, the poem does manage to describe mushrooms as a metaphor for women. Both visual and sound nouns are used, alongside punctuation and repetition (So many of us! So many of us!), to create an effect and a riddle: It was asked at this point in the session, if *Mushrooms* would be enough of a model, it seems it would depend on the class being taught; there are many different levels to riddles. Nevertheless, what we have got here are not just formal grammar lessons, but grammar as part and parcel of the teaching of English. Furthermore, the lessons are all within the National Literacy Strategy of the NC.

We then moved on to the next document, *Not whether but how*. We turned to p8 to view the project findings of research into effective writing for GCSE at word, sentence and text level. The objectives discussed on this page must be addressed in our teaching to improve and develop pupils' writings to that which are required at GCSE level.

P27, examples of narrative and non-narrative texts, was then briefly looked at. This could be read in more detail when you have the time!

PP28 & 29 are about analysing texts and information, leading to pupils writing to fit the genre. The rules of the genre need to be followed to create the desired effect. I observed exactly this in school. From a sequence of information and many points of view about animal testing the children were then able to either write a discursive essay or newspaper report, depending on the class or ability, about this subject. This was at the end of a scheme of work. It is the words and order (subordinating conjunctions at the beginning?), which make the argument flow. So this scheme of work would incorporate in the teaching of grammar: word level; sentence flow and rhetorical questions; and whole text level including style, layout, language (persuasive and objective) and whether to write in 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> or third person narrative.

We also discussed in the session the use of modal verbs (can, will) and how this makes a text more emotive and persuasive.

The last few pages of the document show what the government are looking for at GCSE levels. You as a teacher must endeavour to teach towards this, developing and improving reading and writing. If you want to assess pupils in readiness for GCSE levels, ask them to analyse and write a commentary on their own piece of work, commenting on what techniques they have used and how this works.

These papers came from a larger documentation on the research carried out on GCSE English papers. This produced a method of coding to analyse, helping to investigate, analyse and so improve writing. English teachers are able to make judgments and so inform for teaching with this method that focuses closely on sentence structure, cohesion and lexical density of the whole text.

Knowing precisely what devices and linguistic techniques constitute a typical narrative, or the development of detail, or the expression of a coherent argument is a powerful

tool making for greater clarity in planning, marking and recognising standards. [QCA, Improving Writing at Key Stages 3 & 4, 1999]

The teaching of grammar within the guidelines laid out by the NLS framework helps to focus the pupils on not only what grammar is, but also how it works and more importantly how to use it to become effective writers. The research findings of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority have analysed pupils' writing, looking at what denotes a certain grade and why and where some pupils fail, creating a clear and effective methodology to inform for the teaching and planning within this framework.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Documents handed out in session 5:

1. National Curriculum, En1998, The Grammar Papers,
2. National Curriculum, En 1999, Not Whether but How

QCA, En Key Stages 3 and 4 1999 Improving writing at key stages 3 and 4