

Learning the language of school history: the role of linguistics in mapping the writing demands of the secondary school curriculum

(Final Draft)

Dr. Caroline Coffin
Senior Lecturer
The Centre for Language and Communications
The Faculty of Education and Language Studies
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA
UK

Email: C.Coffin@open.ac.uk

Biographical Note

Caroline Coffin is a senior lecturer at the Centre for Language and Communications at the Open University, UK. Her area of specialisation is educational linguistics with a particular interest in the role of language in the secondary school curriculum, including history. Previously she was based at the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia.

Abstract:

This paper reports on a research study which used the tools of functional linguistics to illuminate the writing requirements of the history curriculum in the context of Australian secondary schools. It shows how the resulting linguistic description was integrated into a sequence of teaching and learning activities through collaboration between linguist specialists and content/pedagogic specialists. These activities were designed to facilitate students' writing skills whilst simultaneously developing their historical knowledge. An independent evaluation of the approach pointed to positive changes in teachers' attitudes and behaviours regarding the role of language in learning history. Equally, students' writing improved, particularly in terms of its organisation and structure.

Keywords

functional linguistics; language research; History instruction; writing across the curriculum; writing (composition); teacher collaboration.

Introduction

This paper proposes that, by making the language of school history an object of students' study, their skills in writing about the past improve. History is a subject area in which there has not been a strong research focus on student writing although there has been considerable work on 'reading' history (e.g. Wineberg 1991) and historical understanding (e.g. Lee and Ashby, 2000; Van Sledright, 2000). In the paper I show how linguistic analysis makes it possible to describe the kinds of written texts that are typically required by secondary school history curricula. The empirically based description provides a means for history teachers to develop materials which focus students' attention on the form and function of texts which they need to develop control of if they are to be successful. Such an approach to subject teaching which acknowledges the linguistic dimension of historical (or, indeed, any disciplinary) knowledge has its origins in a branch of educational linguistics known as systemic functional linguistics (Christie and Martin 1997; Hasan and Williams 1996) and has been particularly influential in Australian curriculum design (Martin 2000).

One of the fundamental premises of the functional linguistic model of language and learning is that, as part of any educational program, students need to be given access to, and control of, the written texts of mainstream education, for example a persuasive essay, a laboratory report or a critical review of an artwork or literary text. The approach aims to bring to consciousness (both for teachers and students) the way in which such texts are linguistically structured and shaped and the way in which writers draw on grammar and lexis (vocabulary) to create different communicative effects. Different subject areas, it is argued, have different purposes and therefore different types of text with distinct structures and grammatical patterns arise. The main aim of the approach therefore is to enable students to reflect systematically and critically on the social role, purpose and textual strategies of texts within any particular curriculum program. It is proposed that this process of consciousness raising and reflection is a crucial step in the development of students' written skills.

The research study reported on here applied a functional linguistic model of language and subject learning to the curriculum subject of history within an Australian secondary school context. In the following section 'Mapping the writing demands of school history', I show

how a linguistic analysis of students' writing was able to systematically 'map' the different kinds of texts that students need to produce at different points in the history curriculum. I then show how such a description informed the development of classroom materials and a pedagogic intervention in which subject specialists and linguistic specialists participated in fruitful collaboration of the type advocated by Seixas (1999). Finally, based on the results of an independent evaluation study of the intervention, I suggest that such an approach can have a positive effect on students' writing development.

The linguistic phase: mapping the writing demands of school history

The aim of the linguistic phase of the research study was to use the tools of functional linguistics to conduct a detailed analysis of the kinds of texts history students need to produce as they move through the secondary school history curriculum. This section provides details of the data collected, the analysis conducted and the findings emerging from the analysis. Where appropriate, explanation of the use of functional linguistics as an analytical tool, is also provided.

Data collection

Two types of data were collected. One set of data comprised samples of writing representing the kinds of texts that secondary school history students are required to produce across Years 7-12 (approximately ages 11-17). These samples were collected over two years from 17 different schools in Sydney, Australia with the final corpus consisting of approximately 1000 texts. Whilst the texts that formed this corpus were collected for detailed linguistic analysis, a second set of data was collected to inform the linguistic analysis by providing an 'insider' perspective on the practices, expectations, conventions and language activities of school history. This ethnographic data consisted of a wide variety of documents, including:

- syllabus and curriculum documents (Board of Studies 1992, 1998)
- National profiles (Curriculum Corporation 1994a) and statements (Curriculum Corporation 1994b)
- school programs
- resource books
- text books
- units of work
- lesson plans
- assessment tasks

Semi structured interviews were also conducted as part of the ethnographic investigation. Interviewees included history teachers, heads of school history departments, academics (in both history and history education faculties) and members of the New South Wales History Syllabus Committee. In addition, I attended meetings and participated in a conference held by the Australian National Association of History Teachers. These various sources of information provided a firm basis from which to gain insight into the ways of 'doing' and 'being' which characterise the culture of history as practised within a secondary school environment. More importantly they provided a strong basis for identifying, interpreting and understanding student writing. For example, assessment comments and marks, alongside discussions with history teachers, made it possible to establish which types of student writing could be regarded as institutionally more and less successful.

In sum, the ethnographic orientation proved valuable in identifying the writing demands (both implicit and explicit) of the history curriculum and the kinds of texts which are regarded as successful within the secondary school environment. It also made it possible to select, from the larger corpus, a more manageable set of texts (approximately 100) which could be analysed in greater detail for their linguistic features. The texts selected were those which were regarded as successfully fulfilling the aims of the secondary school curriculum. There were several reasons for focusing on successful forms of writing:

- they represent typical discourse patterns and capture the key language resources for making historical meaning
- they represent successful learning of history
- the elucidation of their features (that address the requirements of secondary history curricula) was important for the teaching materials designed as an outcome of the linguistic analysis

Data analysis and findings

The corpus of texts was analysed in order to a) establish the main types of text or genres that students produce as part of the history curriculum and b) examine the key grammatical and lexical (vocabulary) patterns operating in such texts. In this section each form of analysis is explained and exemplified and key findings emerging from the analysis are discussed.

Genre analysis

Genre, in the functional linguistic tradition, refers to the way texts are structured in order to fulfil their overall purpose such as telling a story (a recount genre), giving instructions (a procedural genre), explaining past events (an explanation genre) etc. Different genres have distinct ‘beginnings’, ‘middles’ and ‘ends’ (Martin 1997: 413) and these structural elements or stages can be identified on the basis of shifts in lexical and grammatical patterning which correlate with different micro functions operating at different points in the text e.g. accounting for why events happened in a particular sequence followed by deducing the significance of the sequence of events.

In order to illustrate how a text can be analysed using the concept of genre, the following student essay taken from the history corpus shows the ‘beginning’, ‘middle’ and ‘end’ stages of what is referred to as the historical account genre. This genre is a type of historical narrative where the overall purpose is to provide a chronological account of past events whilst at the same time drawing out some of the causal connections between events. The events may then be assessed in terms of their historical significance.

The sample essay was written by a secondary school student in Year 10 (aged approximately 15 years) as part of a unit of work on Aboriginal and non Aboriginal contact and was regarded as a successful response to an open ended writing task in which students were given three photos as a stimulus to answer the question ‘What has happened to the Aborigines since the time of white settlement?’ The **emboldened** words and phrases in the account sequence stage show how causal relations are an important pattern in the body of the narrative whereas the underlined words and phrases in the deduction stage show a pattern of reasoning concerning the historical significance of the previous account sequence.

Sample Analysis: What has happened to the Aborigines since the time of white settlement?

Background

In the late 18th century, when the English colonised Australia, there were small tribes, or colonies of Aboriginal natives who had lived harmoniously and in tune with their surroundings for 40 000 years. However, there were no signs of agriculture or the Aborigines depending on the land. According to English law, this meant that they need not be recognised as rightful residents. The English immediately assumed that Australia was 'terra nullius', or uninhabited; to them it was an unsettled land which they did not have to conquer to gain power.

Account sequence

As a result of their belief in 'terra nullius', from 1788 onwards, the English began to occupy sacred land and use Aboriginal hunting and fishing grounds.

This abuse by the new British government soon **led to** Aborigines becoming involved in a physical struggle for power. The first main period of Aboriginal resistance was from 1794 to 1816 when the Eora people, under the leadership of Pemulwuy, resisted the Europeans **through guerrilla warfare**.

This Aboriginal resistance **resulted in** the colonisers using different methods of control. In the 19th century Protection stations were set up where Aborigines were encouraged to replace their traditional lifestyles with European ones. Many Aborigines resisted, however, and **as a result** were shot or poisoned.

In 1909, the continuation of Aboriginal resistance **led to** the NSW Aborigines Protection Act which gave the Aborigines Protection Board the power to remove Aboriginal children from their own families and place them into white families, often as cheap labour.

In response to these injustices the Aboriginal community began to fight for their rights. In 1967, they won the right to vote and in 1983 their struggle **resulted in** the creation of the NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act. Their fight for land rights continues to-day. The Mabo case is a recent example of their success.

Deduction

The events of European settlement show the extent of Aboriginal losses. They also show the resistance of the Aboriginal people and some of the gains that they have made. This is an indication that their struggle will continue and more gains will be made. In this way the enormous losses that Aboriginal people have undergone **as a result of European colonisation** might, to some extent, be compensated for.

As a result of the genre analysis, it was found that the types of writing required by the history curriculum can be seen as having three main purposes – 'recording', 'explaining' and 'arguing'. In addition, as figure 1 shows, each of these different purposes tends to correlate with different stages in the secondary school history curriculum. Thus, whereas recording genres are more likely to be written in Years 7 and 8 (approximately ages 11 to 13) and explaining genres in Years 9-10 (approximately ages 14-16), arguing genres are the valued texts in Year 10 onwards (approximately age 16 and above).

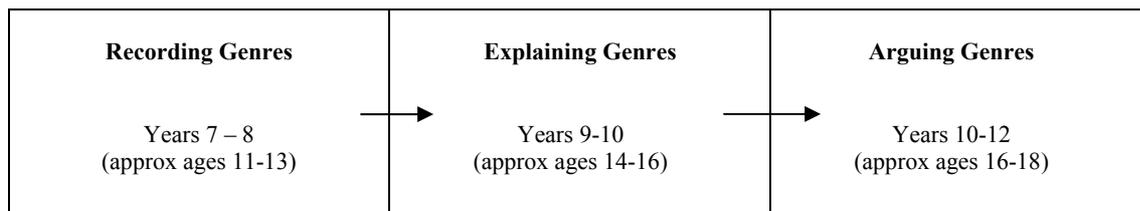


Figure 1 Key history genres: purposes and relationship to secondary school curriculum

The three overarching genre ‘families’ of the recording, explaining and arguing genres can be further subdivided into a set of ‘sub genres’ as displayed in figure 2. Figure 2 also shows how each sub genre has a distinct text structure (i.e. a distinct beginning, development and conclusion stage) in line with its overall purpose.

Genre family	Genre	Overall Purpose	Structure (stages)
Recording	Autobiographical Recount	to retell the events of your own life	Orientation Record of Events (Reorientation)
	Biographical Recount	to retell the events of a persons life	Orientation Record of Events (Evaluation of Person)
	Historical Recount	to retell events in the past	Background Record of Events (Deduction)
	Historical Account	to account for why events happened in a particular sequence	Background Account of events (Deduction)
Explaining	Factorial Explanation	to explain the reasons or factors that contribute to a particular outcome	Outcome Factors Reinforcement of Factors
	Consequential Explanation	to explain the effects or consequences of a situation	Input Consequences Reinforcement of Consequences
Arguing	Exposition	to put forward a point of view or argument	(Background) Thesis Arguments Reinforcement of Thesis
	Discussion	to argue the case for two or more points of view about an issue	(Background) Issue Arguments/ Perspectives Position
	Challenge	to argue against a view	(Background) Position Challenged Arguments Anti-thesis

Figure 2: Key history genres: overall purposes and structure

Grammatical and lexical analysis

As stated earlier, genres are distinct one from another not only because of their different text structures but because of the different ways in which they draw on grammatical structures and lexis (vocabulary). Thus the linguistic analysis showed that, in tandem with shifts in genre, successful history students change their use of grammar and lexis as they progress through secondary schooling. Most significantly, the analysis showed that as they move through the curriculum they construct increasingly generalised and abstract interpretations of the past and develop a specialised set of terms for referring to historical events and processes. In addition, they learn to judge and appraise events and processes in ways that are historically valued. This development can be explained as a move away from more concrete, story like

representations of the past (in which the focus is named individuals and sequences of specific events) to more abstract interpretations (where the focus is generalised participants and historical causal processes). Such a shift is exemplified in the following two texts (Texts A and B). Text A illustrates how in a biographical recount (a genre that history students generally learn to write in the earlier years) the focus is on named individuals (Greenway, Macquarie) and on specific events which are chronologically ordered. Text B, in contrast to Text A, shows how in an Exposition (a genre that students tend to write at a later point in the history curriculum) many of the participants are non human and abstract referring, for example, to evidence based reasoning and deduction (e.g. Evidence of Germany's good will was first displayed) and to specialised legal and political processes (e.g. The Kellog-Brand Pact also supports the notion that...).

Text A – Biographical Recount (abridged)

The life of Francis Greenway

Orientation	Francis Greenway was a famous convict who was born in England in 1777. His family were builders, stonemasons and architects.
Record of Events	<p>In 1809 Greenway became bankrupt and so he decided to forge a contract. As a result of this crime he was sentenced to transportation to New South Wales for 14 years. This was in 1812. ...</p> <p>In March 1816 Greenway was appointed to the position of Civil Architect and Assistant Engineer by Governor Macquarie. For his work he received a salary of 3 shillings (30c) per day.</p> <p>For six years Greenway designed and supervised the construction of many buildings which have since become part of Australia's colonial heritage. ...</p> <p>Before long, Greenway's health began to fail and he fell into poverty. After his wife's death he was tricked out of his property and, in 1837, at the age of sixty he died so poor that his grave did not have a headstone.</p>
Evaluation of Person	Greenway has been described as stubborn, arrogant, temperamental and egotistical. Some even argue that his designs are mere copies and too extravagant. However, Greenway was also a man of great ability, imagination and energy and he is remembered by many people as Australia's first architect. Most of his buildings are now part of Australia's valued colonial heritage.

Text B – Exposition (abridged)

To what extent was the 1920s a decade of Hope?

Background	During the early 1920s the entire world was in shock over the horrific loss of life that occurred during the Great War of 1915 - 1918. Millions of soldiers and civilians on both sides were killed. However people thought of the war as "the war to end all wars" and the treaty of Versailles was seen as an attempt at fairness and justice to both sides. New borders were drawn up, creating a number of new countries, like Yugoslavia, Poland and Czechoslovakia. It can be argued, therefore, that despite the many warnings of darkness to come, the 1920s was, to a large extent, a decade of hope. Indeed there is a range of evidence that shows that, even by the end of the war, a period of hope had begun. It also shows that this hope was sustained throughout most of the twenties. This evidence includes Germany's display of good will through the signing of various treaties and pacts, antiwar feeling in the general public and widespread prosperity.
Thesis	

Argument For	Evidence of Germany's good will was first displayed in 1925 when a treaty, called the Treaty of Locarno, was signed voluntarily by Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy and Belgium. In this treaty Germany agreed to accept her western frontiers, as laid down in the Treaty of Versailles, which previously she had not agreed to. This was a good sign, because, although it could not prevent Germany from invading another country, it meant that she could not do so without breaking laws.
Concession	
Argument For	Further evidence of Germany's good will was provided in 1926 when she joined the League of Nations. ...
Argument For	The Kellog-Briand Pact of 1928 also supports the notion that the 1920s was a period of hope. ...
Argument For	The hope for a peaceful future was particularly well demonstrated in public reaction to the publication of Remarque's anti-war novel 'All quiet on the Western Front' in 1929.
Concession	
Argument For	Finally, although it can be argued that there was evidence in the 1920s to suggest an imminent collapse of the payback system in which the European economies depended on the American economy, there was at the same time a significant increase in production, trade and personal incomes. Thus, despite some anticipation of an impending Depression, the overall result of the economic boom was an increase in optimism.
Reinforcement of Thesis	Although there was certainly evidence to show that the 1920s heralded a period of economic doom, it is clear from the analysis above that, to a large extent, the 1920s can be seen as a decade of hope. General economic prosperity and a belief by the public in future peace, based on the signing of various pacts, are strong evidence of this.

Texts A and B illustrate how a text produced in the earlier years of schooling is markedly different from that required in later years. From a linguistic perspective, this difference can be explained in terms of an increase in generalised, abstract nouns and specialised lexis. In addition, there is a greater use of nominalisation, a diminished reliance on chronology as an organising principle and differences in the use of evaluative lexis. Each of these linguistic features or language 'resources' is discussed in turn below.

Nominalisation is a process whereby events typically expressed as verbs (e.g. attempted, prevent, collapse) and logical relations typically expressed as logical connectors (e.g. so, because) are 'packaged' as nouns. For example in sentence a) below was involved and changed are verbs and so is a logical connector:

a) Australia was involved in the Second World War for six years and so things changed economically, politically and socially.

In sentence b) was involved, changed and so are repackaged as the nouns, involvement, changes and reason:

b) The reason for economic, political and social changes was Australia's six years of involvement in the Second World War.

In sentence b), one important communicative effect of the grammatical changes is that by packaging a causal connection (so) as a noun (The reason) cause is given a more prominent

place in sentence initial position. Thus, the more highly nominalised, abstract representation of events (sentence b) gives greater emphasis to the causal dimension of past events. Linguistic analysis showed that this was a particularly common technique in the explaining genres. In Text B (and arguing genres generally) nominalisation covers a wide range of phenomena (in addition to causal processes). For example, the overall result, public reaction, collapse, increase, analysis.

Another key shift in writing as students work through the history curriculum is a movement from organising events along a chronological sequence (akin to story telling) to embedding events as part of an argument. In Text A, for example, time expressions are commonly used in paragraph or clause initial position to frame the ensuing text. For example, In 1809, In March 1816, For six years, After his wife's death. In Text B, in contrast, although events are temporally located, time is not the starting point or main device for organising the text. Rather it is pieces of historical evidence which serve to build the overall argument which are placed in prominent textual positions (i.e. in initial position in the introductory or 'topic sentences' for each of the paragraphs). For example, Evidence of Germany's good will..., Further evidence...

A third key shift in the writing development of history students is their increasing use of evaluative lexis as a means of passing judgement on, and giving value to, historical processes. Linguistic analysis showed that in autobiographical recounts, a genre which is produced early in secondary schooling, students' use of evaluative lexis is primarily concerned with the emotional or affective impact of an event. For example:

One of my earliest memories was the death of my grandmother when I was four years old. This was a sad time for me. (negative affect)

In 1961 I started school and enjoyed myself. (positive affect)

In biographical recounts, in contrast, students begin to evaluate the past in terms of the worthiness (or otherwise) of key historical figures. Thus their appraisal is directed at individual human participants and focuses on their competence and resolve (or the opposite). For example:

Greenway was also a man of great ability, imagination and energy... (positive judgement: competence)

In historical recounts and successive genres, students begin to assess the behaviour of groups of people, often in terms of an ethical framework. For example:

They were treated inhumanly by the white settlers (negative judgement: ethics).

Students are also increasingly expected to give value to processes in relation to their historical impact and significance. For example they are expected to be able to grade causal processes as having a major or minor impact:

Another major outcome of Rock and Roll was a change in youth attitudes. (valuation: effect/outcome assessed as 'major')

Equally evidence itself may be weighted. In Text B there are several illustrations of this. For example:

The hope for a peaceful future was particularly well demonstrated...(positive valuation)

General economic prosperity.... are strong evidence of this. (positive valuation)

In sum, linguistic analysis showed that texts produced in the later years of schooling require the use of different grammatical and lexical resources from those produced in the earlier years. It also showed that grammatical and lexical shifts correlate with shifts in genre. Figure 3 below summarises these key shifts and patterns (see Coffin 1996; 2004; 2006, for further detail). This figure shows in particular how resources for expressing the key historical concepts of time and cause become increasingly abstract as nominalisation emerges as a common feature in the arguing genres. It also shows how reactions to the past become progressively more institutionalised as students move away from expressing personal responses to events and begin to interpret behaviour and processes within an institutionalised framework of ethics and valuation (Coffin 2002, 2003).

The Changing Genres	Recording Genres				Explaining Genres	Arguing Genres
	Autobiographical Recount	Biographical Recount	Historical Recount	Historical Account		
Changing participants	commonsense field					specialised field
	more concrete (e.g. specific, human participants - <u>I, my grandmother, Francis Greenway</u>)				→	more abstract (e.g. nominalisations - <u>collapse, increase</u>) more specialised terms (e.g. <u>pacts, treaties</u> etc.)
Changing causal resources	Cause as logical connector e.g. <u>they were shot or poisoned because they rebelled.</u>					Cause as nominalisation e.g. Execution was <u>the overall result of rebellion</u>
Changing temporal resources	Events sequenced in time. Time phrases in initial position e.g. <u>after I got married, In 1909, Greenway...</u>				→	Time nominalised e.g. <u>period, era.</u> Evidence and arguments, rather than time, in initial position e.g. <u>Evidence of Germany's goodwill...</u>
Changing patterns of affect, judgement and valuation	affect				→	judgement and valuation

Figure 3: The changing patterns of genre, grammar and lexis in school history

Developing students' writing skills: applying linguistic findings to the history classroom

In the previous section I reported on the linguistic analysis of student writing in secondary school history. The purpose for producing this linguistic description was to provide an empirical basis for creating teaching materials designed to develop students' writing skills at the same time as expanding their historical knowledge and understanding. In this section I discuss the collaborative process of linguists and teachers jointly developing classroom materials as well as the overall pedagogic strategy guiding the implementation of the materials.

Linguists and teachers: a collaborative approach

In order to adapt the linguistic findings for classroom use and develop effective strategies for bringing to students' consciousness the way in which history writing is linguistically structured and shaped, a partnership between educational linguists, literacy consultants and history teachers proved pivotal. In total, 17 history teachers attended intensive professional development sessions (a total of six days) in order to explore the role of language in constructing historical meaning – both at the text and grammatical level.

The professional development sessions also provided a forum for drawing on the expertise of subject specialists (the history teachers) and language specialists (the linguistic researchers) in order to make collaborative decisions as to how to integrate the teaching of history genres across the history curriculum for years 7-10. Teachers were given time to use the findings of the linguistic analysis to collectively design and develop units of work and classroom materials which had explicit learning outcomes relating to both writing development and the history curriculum. The aim here was to ensure that students would be given practice in reading and constructing the entire range of key history genres so that in Years 7 and 8 they would become competent in writing recording genres whereas in Years 9 -10 they would develop control of the explaining genres and then be in a position to draw on the language resources of these genres in order to construct more complex argument genres. Decisions were made as to which areas of historical investigation would best lend themselves to working with a particular genre and how to adapt linguistic terms to be 'student friendly'. The materials were then trialled as part of a co-operative process with teachers and myself, as educational linguist and literacy consultant, team teaching alongside each other. The support of a specialist in linguistics and literacy proved particularly important in assisting the teachers come to terms with the grammatical level. The overall pedagogic framework informing the implementation is elaborated below.

The Teaching-Learning cycle as a pedagogic strategy

The overall pedagogic strategy which was designed to encourage conscious reflection on how language functions to create historical meaning is referred to as the Teaching-Learning cycle. It is largely an extension of a model which was developed by Callaghan and Rothery (1988) for teaching literacy in primary school and is underpinned by the work of Vygotsky (1934/1978) and Bruner (1968, 1986), as well as being influenced by research in child language studies (e.g. Halliday 1975; Painter, 1999). Fundamentally, it is a recognition of the socio-cultural and discursive bases of knowledge and learning and emphasises the way in which thought, reasoning and text can be dialogically constructed (Mercer et al. 1999). Teachers use guidance and scaffolding techniques to enable students to take on, and

participate in, new forms of discourse. These techniques resemble the roles documented in Halliday and Painter's research whereby adult caretakers assist the language development of pre-school children.

An important premise of the Teaching-Learning cycle is that it aims to teach control of, and critical orientation towards, both historical discourse and historical content. Thus, in the initial phase of the cycle - referred to as the deconstruction phase - students are introduced to model texts representing the target genre (such as a historical recount). Significantly these also serve to build historical knowledge relevant to the unit of work. In this way, the focus on language and writing is not seen as an 'add on', and therefore a distraction to historical content. Through a range of activities and teacher input there is analysis and critical reflection on the texts. Typically, questions are posed in relation to the purpose of the target genre and the kinds of historical meanings it can build as well as constrain. In addition, the use and communicative effect of grammar and lexis may be explored by students, as in the sample activity below which focuses on nominalisation. The activity which was developed as part of the study reported on here is taken from a unit of work on early British and Aboriginal contact:

Sample Activity: Changing Actions to Things

When writing about history, **action words** often become **things** or events.

e.g. The European settlers arrived in 1788. Two years after their arrival, conflict between blacks and whites began.

Change each underlined action word to complete the next sentence.

1. In 1788 the Europeans invaded the Aborigines' land. This _____ destroyed the Aboriginal way of life.
2. The Aborigines resisted the Europeans. The black _____ lasted until 1816.
3. In 1794 the Eora people attacked the settlement of Brickfield. During this _____ 36 British and fourteen Eora were killed.

In the second, joint construction phase of the Teaching Learning cycle, students continue to build up historical knowledge (concerning the topic under study) through various reading and research activities. The information is then used to construct a written text representing the target genre. The shaping, organising and constructing of the text is jointly negotiated between the teacher and students and publicly written up (ideally using an overhead projector or computer) and by this point, due to the work done in the deconstruction phase, both teacher and students have a shared language for talking about the genre's staging and key grammatical patterning. In this phase the teacher takes, at times, a lead role - he/she both guides and scaffolds the students by, for example, rewording the students' contributions.

The independent construction phase involves information gathering by students that they then rework into the target genre. This may be done individually or in small groups.

Evaluating the approach

In order to evaluate the materials and teaching-learning techniques exemplified in the previous sections and which were trialled as part of a co-operative process involving 17 teachers and an educational linguist, an independent evaluation study was carried out. The

methodology for the evaluation study primarily comprised a case study approach involving interviews with teachers and students, classroom observations and detailed analyses of selected students' texts written before and during the implementation of the approach. The overall aim was to establish the degree to which there were changes in teacher attitudes and understandings of the role played by language in the history curriculum alongside improvements in student writing.

The main finding from the study was that, although some teachers felt they needed more time to 'digest' the implications of the linguistic analysis and further support to implement it, the combined impact of the professional development sessions and in class collaboration was to convince teachers of the worth of the new approach. Thus, whereas initially many teachers were concerned that valuable time needed for teaching content would be lost, there was an increased recognition, as the project developed, that an attention to language and writing is integral to learning and attaining the objectives of the history curriculum. Classroom observations showed, for example, that teachers had generally developed a good understanding of the relationship between language, genre and learning in history. In particular, a significant shift in teacher use of language was observed with a much higher level of explicitness in reference to the language system itself. There was evidence that teachers were beginning to attend much more directly and specifically to the previously invisible aspects of text as seen in their structure and in their lexical and grammatical choices.

In terms of changes in student attitudes and writing, outcomes were most evident in students' control of text organisation. That is, texts written during the trialling of the materials demonstrated a more purposeful overall organisation and a clearer text structure than before the intervention. Below are extracts from two drafts of an autobiographical recount collected as pre and post intervention data (Texts 1 and 2 respectively) which illustrate this shift. They were written by a Year 7, 11 year old girl, Venetia. The first (pre intervention) draft, Text 1, shows how Venetia makes very little use of time to organise events chronologically. Rather, she repeatedly uses memory, albeit mediated, to project from the present into the past. In Text 2 (produced at the end of the literacy intervention), in contrast, Venetia uses the framing device of time (often in paragraph initial position) to organise events.

Text 1

I was born in a hospital in Burma. I was born at 9.00 am on Wednesday. I remember when all of my relatives were all crowding around me when my parents brought me home. they were saying how cute I was. I remember when my sister was born I use to always fight with her. I also remember my first birthday. I remember when I was 5 and I had to come to Australia. I was crying because I didn't want to leave my relatives. I also remembered that I had a big brother and sister but they had both died. My brother died when he was 7 because he had a car crash and my sister died when she was just born. I also remember when I started kindergarten I was so excited I was jumping up and down.

Text 2

My Life by Venetia A.

My Name is Venetia A. I was born in Burma **at 9.00 am on Wednesday 9th April 1980**. The following recount is about the most important events that happened in my life.

My Earliest memory was the death of my brother and my older sister. My brother died when he was seven in an car accident. My sister died when she was just born. **In 1985** it was a sad time for me because I left my relatives behind and came to Australia. I remember when they were all crying when we were at the airport. When we got on the plane I waved to them and started crying.

One year later I started kindergarten at Glebe Primary school. I was excited and was jumping up and down.

Another important finding was that in the pre-trial tests, despite extensive work on subject matter, students were only able to copy work with little ability to recontextualise the copied information in any meaningful way. Post trial, however, following class-work on genre, grammar and lexis, students' ability in this area improved markedly. Nevertheless, the overall finding was that the majority of gains in terms of student writing were at the level of whole text organisation with improvement at the grammatical level not so evident. A possible explanation for this finding arises out of the duration of the evaluation (one school term). It is likely that students would need to move through the cycle several times to develop greater control of the grammatical patterning (in addition to text structure) of a particular genre. It is also likely that teachers themselves felt more confident in working at the level of text structure since many had been educated at a time when grammar was 'unfashionable' or had been schooled in structural rather than functional approaches. This suggests that, whilst the educational linguist's classroom support (in which they team taught approximately eight lessons with the classroom teacher) is likely to have assisted the teachers in developing some understanding of the grammatical level, further support may be necessary to allow further development and consolidation (either in the form of classroom support or additional professional development sessions).

Conclusion

In conclusion, as evidenced by the evaluation study, applying linguistic findings to the history classroom appears to be a worthwhile exercise. In particular, it seems that history teachers are receptive to exploring the disciplinary role of language and recognise the usefulness of explicitly teaching students how to construct the range of key history genres. The focus on text and language is not, it seems, incompatible with teaching historical content. Rather the two dimensions of subject learning and writing development can be productively integrated. Most significantly, there is empirical evidence that by raising students' consciousness of the form and function of different history genres, they produce more clearly structured texts.

Another key finding emerging from the study is that the exchange of subject and linguistic expertise proved to be a crucial element. The particular model of partnership in terms of collaborative syllabus and materials design and in class team teaching is undoubtedly a rather 'extravagant' model and might not be practical in all educational contexts. Nevertheless, if curriculum innovations are to be successful and professional development to have long term impact in changing teachers' attitudes and classroom behaviour it may well be necessary.

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