

**Article**

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**Teaching Grammar as Meaning-Making in the Writing Class: An Inclusive Approach**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article addresses the question of how teachers can adopt an inclusive approach to the teaching of grammar that attends to the diverse language learning abilities of students in an English Language (EL) writing class. This article suggests that teaching grammar as a meaning-making resource in an EL writing class empowers students of various language learning abilities to make meaningful grammatical choices in their writing. Teaching grammar as a meaning-making resource entails adopting a descriptive view of grammar. This is as opposed to adopting a prescriptive view of grammar where the avoidance or remediation of errors in writing is the emphasis. Two primary school EL teachers engaged in an action research project in a primary school in Singapore on teaching grammar as a meaning-making resource within writing in the EL classroom were interviewed. Three strategies on how to teach grammar as a meaning-making resource in writing were identified. The three strategies are a) visualisation of links between grammar and writing, b) discussion of grammatical choices in writing and c) provision of clear feedback on grammar in writing. In teaching grammar this way, students of varying language learning abilities are empowered to make grammatical choices in creating meaning in writing.

**KEYWORDS:** grammar as meaning-making, writing, diverse learning abilities, inclusive approach

**Introduction**

There is increasingly a focus on inclusivity in developed schools, where teachers are expected to meet the diverse learning needs of students in their classes, calling to attention, then the need to adapt pedagogical approaches to attend to these various learning needs (Westwood, 2018). This article addresses the question of how teachers can adopt an inclusive approach to the teaching of grammar that attends to the diverse language learning abilities of students in an English Language (EL) classroom, specifically in the writing class. This article suggests that teaching grammar as a meaning-making resource in an EL writing class empowers students of various language learning

abilities to make meaningful grammatical choices in the EL writing class, thus, improving their writing development, and in turn then, their literacy development. Two primary school EL teachers engaged in an action research project in a primary school in Singapore on teaching grammar as a meaning-making resource within writing in the EL classroom were interviewed. The purpose of the interviews was to identify the strategies used by these teachers in teaching grammar as a meaning-making resource to attend to the diverse learning abilities of students. The strategies identified were a) visualisation of links between grammar and writing, b) discussion of grammatical choices in writing and c) provision of clear feedback on grammar in writing. Before these strategies are shared, it is useful, first, to review perspectives of grammar in relation to writing, and second, to understand the purpose and process of the action research project.

### **Perspectives of Grammar in Relation to Writing**

Grammar has traditionally been viewed as either being prescriptive or descriptive (see for example, Carter and McCarthy, 2006; Jones et al., 2013; Locke, 2009; Myhill, 2021). The differences between these two views have implications for the role of grammar in writing – whether grammar and writing should be taught distinctly or in an integrated manner.

The prescriptive view of grammar focuses on the rules of grammar, to develop learners' explicit knowledge about grammar for its own sake. The attention is on the correctness and accuracy of grammatical structures and as such, the teaching of grammar will emphasize grammar rules, errors, and grammar drills. When such a prescriptive view of grammar is adopted in the EL classroom, grammar and writing will largely be taught distinctly.

The descriptive view of grammar, on the other hand, focuses on how language is used in different contexts. The attention here is on grammatical choice, the linguistic possibilities. This view of grammar is interested in how different grammatical choices construct different meanings in different contexts. Grammar is thus seen as a meaning-making resource for literacy development, as in writing development, where writers can make grammatical choices in creating meaning.

Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the role of grammar instruction in writing development. Studies which have concluded that grammar instruction minimally benefits writing development (for example, Andrews et al., 2006; Wyse, 2001; Wyse & Torgerson, 2017) are largely those which have studied the teaching of grammar and the teaching of writing separately and sought to make links between these areas (Jones et al., 2013). The view of grammar adopted in such studies is usually that of the prescriptive view of grammar.

Myhill et al. (2012b) argued that teaching grammar in isolation, that is, decontextualised grammar teaching will unlikely enhance writing development. This is because there are no explicit links made between grammar and writing. Large-scale research carried out by Debra Myhill and her team, investigating contextualised grammar teaching within writing (see for example, Myhill et al., 2012a; Jones et al., 2013), demonstrated that when grammar is explicitly and meaningfully taught within the context of writing lessons, that is, as a meaning-making resource, there is a positive influence on students' writing development and skills (Myhill et al., 2013). Other studies and research which have adopted a view of contextualised grammar teaching have also discussed the benefits of teaching grammar for writing development (see for example, Fearn & Farnan, 2007;

Williams, 2011; Chatterjee & Halder, 2023). The descriptive view of grammar is adopted in such an approach to grammar teaching.

It is to be noted though that the findings from Jones et. al. (2013)'s study on the effects of contextualised grammar teaching on students' writing suggests that such teaching benefits writers who are able, more than writers who are weak. In response to this, the researchers, Jones et. al. (2012) did acknowledge that the intervention of contextualised grammar teaching might not have been as impactful on less able writers because there was a mismatch between the grammatical features addressed in the teaching materials and their learning needs as writers. In fact, Myhill et. al (2018) conducted another study later to investigate whether the functionally oriented approach to teaching grammar in the context of writing might support less able writers, and it was found that identifying the grammar points according to the learning needs of the students and the needs of the writing tasks resulted in better learning outcomes for less able writers. The findings from the AR project discussed in this article too suggest that teaching grammar as a meaning-making resource within writing can attend to the diverse language learning abilities of students in the writing class.

## **The Action Research Project**

### *Context*

The action research (AR) project was conducted in a primary school in Singapore, where the medium of instruction is the English language. In the Ministry of Education's (MOE) EL syllabuses (2010 and 2020), a guiding principle is to value language as a "a means of making and generating meaning, and of communication that entails an integration of skills" (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2020, p. 13). It is also emphasized in the syllabuses that teachers will "focus on grammar and vocabulary both explicitly and in the context of language use" (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2020, p. 17). Although the MOE seems to encourage contextualised grammar teaching, most Singapore primary schools still teach grammar and writing separately during different lessons, as practised by the participating primary school in this action project.

The two Primary 5 classes (10-11-year-olds) that participated in this AR project were categorized as middle-progress classes based on the students' results in the main subjects of EL, Mathematics and Science. However, it is to be noted that within these middle-progress classes, there are students with varying learning abilities in the English language.

In this school, EL lessons involve teaching a thematic unit over 30 periods of 30 minutes each. These units facilitate the teaching of grammar, vocabulary, comprehension and skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing during different periods. The writing lesson(s) are conducted last to conclude the thematic unit. In teaching these writing lessons, the EL teachers usually use the school's writing instructional materials (IMs) comprising teaching slides and activities as teaching guides.

### *Participants*

Concerned that while their students did reasonably well during distinct grammar lessons and tasks, but struggled somewhat in using grammar effectively during writing lessons and tasks, a core team

of five experienced EL teachers in this primary school collaborated with an EL academic specializing in pedagogical grammar from a local university (who is also the author of this article) to find ways to guide students to meaningfully and purposefully use grammar in writing. Inspired by Myhill et al. (2012b)'s idea that "a writing curriculum which draws attention to the grammar of writing in an embedded and purposeful way ... is a more positive way forward" (p. 30), the AR project team decided, as a pilot endeavour, to revise a specific existing writing unit within the school's Primary 5 writing IMs by embedding explicit, contextualised grammar components as meaning-making resources for writing. The two EL teachers of the participating Primary 5 classes, Delia and Nora, also joined the AR project after the revision of the writing unit. These two EL teachers were involved in teaching the revised writing unit to their classes. This article draws on these two teachers' voices, through interviews, to share three strategies on how to teach grammar as a meaning-making resource in writing, considering students' diverse language learning abilities.

### *Procedure*

The action research project comprised three main phases. These phases involved the project team members 1) reviewing their grammar content knowledge, 2) revising a writing unit in the instructional materials and 3) teaching the revised writing unit. These phases are elaborated below:

#### *1) Reviewing grammar content knowledge*

The core team of five teachers attended 12 hours of professional development (PD) sessions on grammar as meaning-making conducted by the EL academic where there was a review of grammar content both as structure and choice. For this project, the core project team decided to focus on the structures of noun phrases, sentence types and adverbials.

#### *2) Revising a writing unit in the IMs*

Drawing on their enhanced grammar content knowledge of grammar as choice (that is, grammar as meaning-making), the team reviewed an existing writing unit on the theme 'friendship' in the IMs. The review revealed that there were useful writing strategies in the existing writing IMs, like 'show, not tell' and 'add adjectives, adverbs and clauses to expand sentences', suggested to help students develop their writing. Examples of 'show, not tell', expanded sentences were also provided, for example:

- a. The girl slipped on the grass. →
- b. The **little** girl slipped on the **wet** grass. →
- c. The **little girl in two braids** slipped on the **slippery, wet grass which had been drenched by the rain**.

There was, however, no explicit guidance on how to get from a) to b) to c). While these model or sample expanded sentences might act as examples for students to imitate, not all students will be able to emulate and produce such expanded sentences without clear guidance. The team decided that purposeful spaces in the original writing unit (and subsequently in the other writing units in the IMs) had to be created for the teaching of explicit grammatical structures that would act as scaffolding for students to make grammatical choices to expand sentences purposefully.

As an example of the revision, with specific reference to noun phrases, the team decided to include grammar content knowledge and teaching strategies on the use of noun phrases as a meaning-making resource in this writing unit. Teaching slides and activities on noun phrases were integrated into the revised writing unit. For example, the noun phrase table was introduced.

*Table 1: The Noun Phrase Table*

Premodifiers			Head Noun	Postmodifiers
Det	Adj	Noun		
The	Little		Girl	in two braids *(starting with a preposition)
The	slippery, wet		grass	which had been drenched by the rain *(starting with a relative pronoun)
A		School	friend	being helpful *(starting with a non-finite verb)
			someone	Kind *(starting with a postpositive adjective)

This noun phrase table introduced the students to the structure of the English noun phrase. The possible premodifiers and postmodifiers to the head noun were taught. The use of grammatical terminology depended on the ability level of students. For example, instead of introducing the postmodifiers as preposition phrases or relative clauses, the teachers introduced these as ‘the modifier after the head noun starting with a preposition’ or ‘the modifier after the head noun starting with a relative pronoun’ respectively. The students were also taught that not all the slots in the noun phrase table needed to be filled. The only obligatory slot was the head noun, and possibly the determiner slot depending on the nature of the head noun. The rest of the slots were optional and depended on the meanings the students wanted to convey, considering the purpose and context of their written text. This revision aimed to create an understanding of the grammatical structure of noun phrases, enabling students to make grammatical choices within the noun phrase structure, using the noun phrase table as a scaffolding, to express meaning in writing.

### 3) *Teaching the revised writing unit*

After revisions were done to the writing unit, the two EL teachers of the selected classes, Delia and Nora taught the revised writing unit to their respective Primary 5 classes. Before teaching though, they attended 1) a PD session led by the EL academic that reviewed the relevant grammar content knowledge on noun phrases, sentences and adverbials needed to teach these grammatical structures as meaning-making resources within the revised writing unit, and 2) a sharing session, by the core project team, on the revised teaching materials within this revised unit.

### 4) *Interviewing the two EL teacher participants, Delia and Nora*

After the revised writing unit was taught to their respective Primary 5 classes, the two teachers, Delia and Nora, were interviewed by the EL academic on their experience of teaching grammar as a meaning-making resource within writing. Interviews that were about an hour long, each were

recorded, and the content was qualitatively coded and analysed, according to themes of teaching strategies. Three broad themes of teaching strategies were identified.

### **Inclusive Grammar as Meaning-Making Teaching Strategies in the Writing Class**

Both teachers realized that prior to teaching the revised writing unit embedding contextualised grammar, their students “compartmentalize[d]” the learning of grammar and writing and did not see the relationship between these two areas. The teachers reflected that it is the role of teachers to make explicit, for students, the connections between grammar and writing. Three strategies to make explicit, these links between grammar and writing were shared by the teachers so that students of varying language learning abilities are empowered to make meaningful grammatical choices in the writing class.

#### *Visualisation of links between grammar and writing*

Delia shared that visualizing the links between grammatical structure and content in writing is important for students, especially the weaker-ability students who may be more visual learners. For the teaching of noun phrase structures as a meaning-making resource in writing, Delia found that pinning a large sheet of paper with the noun phrase table (as in Table 1) at the back of the classroom to be “visually present all the time” helped students to refer to the structure of the noun phrase and be mindful of it. Students could also refer to the various examples included in the table as a guide to their own creation of noun phrases. They were reminded visually of the choices they could make within the noun phrase table to expand on their own noun phrases.

Delia also observed one of the activities suggested in the revised writing unit to be particularly useful for the students. Students were asked to draw out their characters as represented by the noun phrases they initially created. Delia shared that initially most students only drew stick figures as their characters were merely referred to as ‘a boy’ or ‘a girl’ (det + head noun). When the students were asked to use the noun phrase table to guide them in expanding their noun phrases, and then subsequently draw out these expanded noun phrases, there were more interesting visuals created. For example, a student developed his noun phrase to “a cheerful boy with curly hair”. His new drawing was not a stick figure anymore but a character with a smile and curly hair. Delia said at the interview excitedly, “Woah, you can see that suddenly this [character] has eyes ... flesh and curly hair...”. Delia shared that she then went on to explicitly make the links between developing noun phrase structures and content development in writing, specifically in this instance, character development. She said to the students, “You know your [character] in your mind but when you write it out as a ‘a boy sat on a bench’, this is exactly what the reader gets. This stick figure on the bench. There’s no character, there’s nothing to it.” However, the expansion of the noun phrase then adds more detail to the character. She added that the students then saw that “it [referring to the expansion of a noun phrase] was important”.

Delia’s observation and experience is similar to that of Myhill et al. (2018)’s observation in their 2018 study that less able writers struggled with character description. These students had limited knowledge of how to expand noun phrases. The grammar teaching in Myhill et al. (2018)’s study,

then focused on the choice of adjectives for precise physical descriptions and the addition of character detail through post modification to show not tell.

As such, the activity conducted by Delia allowed students to visually experience the effects of developing their noun phrase structures and this was impactful, empowering and memorable to students of varying language learning abilities.

### *Discussion of grammatical choices in writing*

Whole-class collaborative writing is the process where the teacher and students co-construct a piece of text. Such a process is ideal for the contextualised teaching of grammar as the process creates opportunities for the teachers and the students to discuss appropriate grammatical choices to use in writing a piece of text. For example, Nora shared that the teaching of the noun phrase structure in the context of writing not only allowed her to teach about premodifiers and their structured order (det<adj<noun), but there were also opportunities to discuss the appropriate adjectives to choose to use within noun phrases in the context of a sentence or even the larger piece of writing, according to the purpose, audience and context of the text. Nora elaborated on the latter point saying, “It is important that you tell them [referring to students] that in writing, you got to look at the idea again. What is important? Is it necessary to mention [for example] the size? Does it help to describe the character? Then you include it [in the premodifier]. You don’t just add it in for the sake of it.”

Nora added that in the teaching of sentence types within collaborative writing, there were opportunities “to let the kids discover” by “goi[ing] through the experience together” in deciding the most appropriate sentence types to create a purpose-driven text. Students become aware that every sentence type has its role to play to create such texts, and that a complex sentence is not necessarily better than a simple sentence.

Not only is such an experience of co-constructing a piece of writing and discussing the appropriate grammatical choices to make for impactful writing empowering for all students, but it is also especially encouraging for weaker-ability students to know that simpler grammatical structures like simple noun phrases and simple sentences have a purposeful place in writing. Nora added that telling the students “there’s nothing wrong with a simple sentence ... it has its place” provides some reassurance to weaker-ability students that the simple sentences they are able to create are “not like all wrong” but these sentences have a place within the larger context of writing. Such a collaborative writing activity is also an opportunity for teaching sentence-combining to weaker-ability students. Sentence-combining is a practical technique used in contextualized learning that involves “the manipulation of ideas by the writer through rewriting and transforming basic ... sentences” (Saddler et. al., 2008, p. 80). Sentence-combining has been found to bring about more positive effects on sentence development and writing complexity in students with writing difficulties (Saddler et. al., 2008).

Such discussions of appropriate grammatical choices lead to the creation of knowledge and awareness in students of the “repertoire of infinite possibilities” (Myhill et al. 2012b, p. 30) in the use of grammatical structures to create various meanings in texts. The kind of discussion here on the grammatical choices in writing may be considered metatalk, which is “the verbalisation of metalinguistic thinking about linguistic choices and how they realise the writer’s authorial

intention and intended effect on the reader” (Myhill et al., 2020, p. 7). In this way, metatalk is also “a pedagogical resource, which allows teachers to open up shared discussion about language choices, and to determine levels of understanding across the class” (Myhill et al., 2020, p. 7). This, in turn, is empowering students with the awareness of the grammatical choices that they have as writers. Nora interestingly noted that when students are aware of various grammatical structures and choices that they have, this “gives them a pause” – they pause to think before writing, having more control over their writing. She added that the students were “excited” and “enthusiastic” about the lessons as they “could see the why” behind making appropriate grammatical choices.

### *Provision of clear feedback on grammar in writing*

Delia highlighted the importance of giving clear and explicit feedback to students on their writing drafts, rather than giving general feedback like, “please elaborate” or “describe the character more”. This is supported by various studies which suggested that when teachers gave general comments instead of specific ones, “students did not know what to do with the feedback, resulting in either incorrect interpretations or frustration with (p. 86) comments .... When feedback is not specific, students find that it is not very helpful, or just useless (p. 87)” (Underwood & Trigidgo, 2006). Clear and explicit feedback to improve writing development in relation to the purpose, audience and context of the writing task could include prompts like, “can we include a postmodifier to further define this head noun to describe the character?” or “can we use a connector here to link the ideas here?” or “could we add an adverbial to elaborate on this idea?”. When giving such feedback, it is critical to consider the varying language learning abilities of students – for example, for weaker-ability students, the teacher could prompt the appropriate use of premodifiers for certain noun phrases and for higher-ability students, the teacher could prompt the appropriate use of postmodifiers of varying structures for selected noun phrases. Such scaffolded feedback would empower students in developing their writing - as Nora added, “we tell the kids you’ve got to be detailed in your writing. You’ve got to expand, elaborate. But how? We don’t prepare them with the strategy .... We say ... you’ve got to cut the apple. But you don’t give them a knife.” Studies have shown that feedback that focuses on both form and content is most effective for writing development such that “feedback should be meaningful for students” (Biber et al., 2011, p. 41).

## **Conclusion**

Through the voices of Delia and Nora, this article has suggested how teaching grammar as a meaning-making resource in the writing class can be an inclusive, empowering approach that can attend to the diverse learning abilities of students in the EL classroom. Grammar is viewed as a “liberating force” (Widdowson, 1990, p. 86), empowering students to make appropriate grammatical choices to create meaning in texts, according to their language learning abilities. To give further weight to these suggestions on inclusive grammar as meaning-making teaching strategies in the writing class as ways to attend to the diverse learning abilities of students in the EL classroom, future research could investigate empirically, through the monitoring of students’ writing development over a period of time, if such grammar teaching strategies can indeed attend to the diverse learning abilities of students in the EL classroom. Positive empirical findings may motivate and encourage teachers to adopt such strategies in their EL writing classrooms to advance students of diverse learning abilities.



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