



The United Kingdom Literacy Association

UKLA statement on teaching grammar

In UKLA's statements of principle on curriculum change, available on the UKLA website at: http://www.ukla.org/news/ukla_statements_of_principle_on_curriculum_change we state that language study is a vitally important aspect of learning in English, and that grammar is an important strand of language study, for its own intrinsic interest and for its contribution to communication and the making of meaning. However, if grammatical knowledge, spelling and punctuation are to make positive contributions to children's writing, they need to be taught and assessed in the context of writing meaningful texts, not as sets of 'facts' or 'rules'.

Children come to school with an extensive implicit knowledge of grammar – shown in the range of structures they use in their speech. This implicit knowledge will continue to develop, throughout their school education and beyond, as they engage in making sense of what others say and write and give form to complex meanings of their own. The function of teaching grammar in school is to transform some of this implicit knowledge to conscious awareness and thereby make it more subject to conscious control. Yet repeated studies show no evidence that formal teaching of grammar out of context has any beneficial effect on either reading or writing (Hillocks, 1986; Andrews *et al.*, 2006).

However, more recent studies have involved integrating the study of relevant grammatical knowledge into the act of writing. Working with children aged 6 to 10 in Scotland, Hunt (2001) has shown that introducing key terms such as 'synonym', 'verb', 'noun', 'sentence' and 'noun phrase' in the context of shared writing can clarify the options available and so help children consider alternative wordings and make appropriate choices.

In addition, a large-scale RCT study by Myhill *et al.* (2012) in secondary schools found significant positive effects from teaching that included explicit attention to relevant grammatical constructions within the context of pupils' writing of particular genres. But the authors note that not all pupils benefited equally, finding "a more marked positive effect on able writers" (Myhill *et al.* 2012 p.151).

Spelling and punctuation need to be learned explicitly. But as with grammar, this learning is best achieved in the context of writing for purposes that matter to young writers, to audiences who are interested in what they have to say and who pay attention to this, as well as to their use of these important technical conventions (Knapp *et al.*, 1995; Medwell *et al.*, 1998); Loudon *et al.*, 2010)

Children do need explicit help in these areas. In spelling they need to be trained to attend to both the sounds of words and their visual configurations (O'Sullivan and Thomas, 2000). Rather than rote learning unrelated words, they need to learn to see patterns in spelling, Encouraging phonics-based invented spellings in the early stages helps children get their own words down on the page. But to progress, visual approaches are necessary as well.

A command of punctuation appears to result from a combination of meaningful reading and writing activities, talk about punctuation emphasising the effect it produces, encouragement of an experimental approach and a well punctuated classroom environment (Hall, 2001).

UKLA maintains that an appropriate literacy curriculum is one that gives pupils extensive experience of meaningful writing, fed by a rich diet of reading, since the research evidence suggests that this leads to higher attainment (Medwell et al., 1998; Loudon et al., 2010). To this end, the interrelatedness of composition and transcription should constantly be clearly articulated. Discussion is fundamental in encouraging critical conversations about such aspects of language and their effects and ensuring that pupils retain knowledge about the language features being identified. Thus a combination of reading writing, speaking and listening consolidate the learning of grammar, spelling and punctuation in a way that makes it more fully understood and retained.

UKLA firmly maintains that learning to write is about much more than grammar and the conventions of transcription. Grammatical knowledge should be neither taught nor tested outside the context of purposeful writing. The experience of reading and writing a wide range of texts for different purposes, audiences and pleasures must remain central to the English curriculum and its assessment (Barrs & Cork, 2001; Cremin & Myhill, 2011).

UKLA views on summative accountability end of KS2 literacy tests.

“The first step is to measure what can be easily measured. This is OK as far as it goes. The second step is to disregard that which can't easily be measured or to give it up to arbitrary quantitative value. This is artificial and misleading. The third step is to presume that what can't be measured easily really isn't important. This is blindness. The fourth step is to say that what can't be easily measured really doesn't exist. This is suicide.” (Handy, 1994:219)

UKLA has serious concerns about high stakes testing, and the impact that this has on narrowing the curriculum. We are not against summative testing *per se*, but would strongly argue that tests should provide valid data, and not just measure what can most easily be measured (Handy, 1994). Children's intellectual and creative achievements in language cannot adequately be tested by short, summative tests. Teachers' formative assessments give a much more rounded picture of pupils' achievements. Teacher assessment has always informed good practice and Harlen's research (2004a, 2004b) clearly shows that, despite the UK climate of lack of confidence in teachers, they are more than able to produce summative assessment that can equal or even exceed external tests in terms of reliability and validity.

However, UKLA is also aware that teacher assessment tends to favour particular groups (e.g. Murphy and Ivinson, 2005).

UKLA firmly maintains that it is timely to rethink the current summative assessment system, which is used to hold institutions accountable and has a “stranglehold on what is taught and how it is taught” (Harlen, 2004b:1). A testing programme more closely aligned to the curriculum in English, combined with teacher assessment would offer an opportunity to escape the cycle in current summative assessment where only those aspects of learning which are easily measured are regarded as important (William, 2000).

UKLA maintains that the proposed KS2 Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPAG) test militates against productive literacy learning as shown by numerous research studies (e.g. Medwell et al. 1998; Louden et al., 2010). The Association is opposed to these particular tests because of the nature of the tests themselves, because such decontextualized examination of technical items will not provide useful evidence about children’s writing abilities, but is likely to have a negative impact on KS2 literacy teaching. The high stakes nature of these tests means that there is a strong possibility that schools will feel under pressure to teach to the test. Data gathered in the recent UKLA survey on the Phonics Check in KS1 indicated that although most professionals found that the test outcomes did not reflect the children’s abilities, they had extensively prepared children for the test. This included children being given non-word spelling lists to learn (http://www.ukla.org/news/phonics_screening_check_fails_a_generation_of_able_readers)

However, it is important to state that UKLA’s opposition to the tests is not because we think the subject matter is not important or relevant to a primary literacy curriculum, nor do we consider that it is all such matters are best left to KS3 and beyond. Children do need a solid grounding in linguistic terminology in order to have the metalanguage they need to talk about and improve their work.

To conclude, UKLA asserts that research into the teaching of writing reveals that grammar, spelling, and punctuation are taught most effectively in the context of purposeful writing, fed by a rich diet of reading and experienced through lively classroom interaction. UKLA maintains that grammatical knowledge taught out of context in the classroom will not support or encourage writers to become more effective, and that any decontextualised teaching to the intended test of grammar, spelling and punctuation is certain to be counter-productive.

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