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Introducing functional grammar in genre pedagogy

For a number of years South Australian teachers have been successfully developing their knowledge and understanding of genre theory to teach the *structures* of the genres that were being introduced and consolidated across primary and secondary schools. They soon came to the understanding that successful writing in a specific genre involved teaching the specific *language features* or *grammar* of the genre as well. Systemic functional grammar, as devised by M.A.K. Halliday (1994), became the vehicle for explicitly teaching grammar across the curriculum in order to improve students' literacy. Teachers' work has been influenced by the research and publications of academics in the field such as Beverly Derewianka (2009), Pauline Gibbons (2002) and Jennifer Hammond (2005). From these understandings practical ways to apply this knowledge in the classroom have been developed.

Among the many benefits of a functional grammar pedagogy are its ability to provide an explicitness of instruction so that students are left in no doubt as to how writing in different genres works, and its ability to provide a metalanguage (a language for talking about the patterns and conventions of language) that will enable students and educators alike to share understandings and communication about the language features of particular texts.

When we are introduced to new theories, pedagogies and methodologies our first impressions can seem overwhelming:

- Where do I start with functional grammar?
- I don't think I understand it all completely.
- How do I turn theory into classroom practice?

The aim of this article is to illustrate some starting points for introducing this pedagogy in very practical ways into the classroom. I don't believe it is necessary for teachers to wait until they have a thorough understanding of functional grammar before they can begin teaching it. In fact the best way to understand something is to teach it, and embark on a learning journey together with their students.

An understanding of functional grammar can impact positively on written and spoken language, both received and produced. Understanding how language works not only helps students compose written and spoken

texts, but it also assists their comprehension and access to texts they are expected to listen to and read. This paper will deal mainly with learning to write in a second language using functional grammar as a pedagogical tool.

I am writing from an English as a Second Language (ESL) educator's perspective, but because of the similarities in the way English language and Swedish language are structured, the following remarks and strategies could apply as easily to teaching Swedish as they do to teaching English.

Functional grammar basics

When a text is to be written there are a number of choices that need to be made: Firstly, what do we want the text to do? Is it to persuade? Entertain? Inform? We choose a genre that will address that purpose.

Then, the language choices we will make will be determined not only by the subject matter but by the roles and relationships between us as writers and our audience, whether we choose to write, speak or use a multimodal approach and finally the cultural environment in which we are operating. These options are illustrated in table 1:

Table 1. *Genre – Field – Tenor – Mode*

Genre	The <i>purpose & structure</i> of the text – the text type
Field	The content/information of the text – ' <i>What?</i> '
Tenor	The language expressing the relationship – ' <i>Who?</i> '
Mode	How the text is communicated, eg. written, spoken, visual – ' <i>How?</i> '

We can explain to the students that these are the things we need to know before we can produce a text, and that these things also help us a lot when we are reading texts, especially if we want to read critically.

How to begin

Some general suggestions:

- Teach grammar within the context of the genre you are teaching in a particular learning area. In other words integrate grammar lessons into the subject areas, do not present them as isolated lessons unrelated to other learning.

- Begin with what you are comfortable with. Start small and consider where the next step may take you.
- Start with identifying the **transitivity**¹ groupings.

Transitivity – introducing students to participants, processes and circumstances

Teaching students to identify the participants, processes and circumstances in written texts is a logical starting point for several reasons.

- In the early stages of learning a second language, with a minimum of basic vocabulary, understanding how these elements are put together to make students' first sentences provides them with patterns of sentences that they can take to other texts and then to other genres. This also gives incentive to building up a vocabulary bank that can be drawn on in order to compose new sentences.
- It is important for students who have moved out of intensive, or new arrivals, language classrooms to understand the choices that are available to them when writing particular genres. This enables them to have a greater degree of control over their writing which in turn enriches and improves their written texts.
- An understanding of how sentences 'work' in their new language enables students, with the support of their teachers, to analyse and compare the sentence structure of different genres and subsequently use this understanding in composing texts. This type of analysis allows teachers and students to focus on the various elements of sentences to teach and compare appropriate forms. For example, comparing the types of participants found in narrative texts with those found in information texts can assist students in making appropriate choices so that they might write about the koala's *little button nose* in a narrative and about its *dark leathery nose* in an information report.

Identifying processes

The first element students need to learn in order to understand transitivity is the **process**. This is the part of the clause that demonstrates the actions, sensings, sayings, beings or havings, and it is worth spending some time clarifying this with students (DECS Module 3 2004 and Christie 2005). Following are several activities that can be used.

Introducing the notion that there are four types of processes:

- action – which express actions and doing things (*walk, throw, drink*)

1. In functional grammar transitivity describes the clause in terms of the process, participant/s and circumstance/s.

- mental – which express thinking (*understand*), feeling (*like*) and perceiving (*hear*)
- saying – which express verbal action (*tell, shout, demand*)
- relational – which express being and having (*be, represent, have, own*)

Help students to become familiar with them through brainstorming lists of processes (or verbs) and categorizing them, as well as identifying them in sentences and longer texts.

Activity 1

Students arrange 12 cards, each containing one process, onto a table which has the four process types as headings:

Action	Mental	Saying	Relational

Select processes to do with the topic being studied. For example, if 'Sharks' are being studied in Science, the list of processes might include:

action – swim, will attack, breathe, eats

mental – senses (as in '*a shark senses danger*'), are feared by, enjoy, dislike

saying – demand, growl, can't talk, remarked

relational – is, has, belongs, lives

Activity 2

This activity helps develop an appreciation of how the choice of processes can enhance students' writing. By expanding the students' vocabulary we enable them to make more precise and effective choices in their writing. To illustrate how this works, get students to brainstorm alternative choices to *went* (i.e. to go on foot) and instruct them to write each process on a separate post-it-note. Then ask them to arrange the words along clines. For example order the words from slowest to fastest, or from quietest to loudest. They can share their lists with others as there is no one correct answer to this task.

You could also have the students match the ways of 'going' to feelings: What processes would you use if you were happy? or sad? or scared? or

excited? With older students you could match them to character types: How would a shy person 'go'? or an angry person?

Once students have an understanding of processes they are ready to consider sentence structure and transitivity. These elements of functional grammar sit in the *Field* area of Table 1.

The *field* deals with the vocabulary and grammar that we need to talk about the goings on in the world and can be summarized as:

- events and relationships, which are expressed through the processes
- the people and things involved, which are expressed through the participants
- and when, where, how and why they occur, which are expressed through the circumstances

Put another way, the processes answer the question of 'what is happening?', participants answer the question of 'who?' or 'what?' and circumstances answer the questions of 'when?', 'where?', 'why?', 'how?'

These form the basis of transitivity analysis, as they form the basis of the clause, which is the basic grammatical unit. Once students understand the grammatical structure of the clause they can then learn how clauses can combine to make compound and complex sentences. The convention most often used for transitivity analysis is to highlight or underline the processes in green, the participants in red and the circumstances in blue. It is important to maintain uniformity in the colour use as the colour coding is an important factor in helping students understand how these groupings work. They have been used successfully with students as young as 5 years.

Activity 3

Take students through the process of analysing a text in terms of processes, participants and circumstances. Arrange the text so that each clause is on a new line, making the three elements easier to identify, and if necessary, simplify the text so that 'tricky' clauses are avoided at this early stage. The following is an example that was used in a junior secondary class. It was adapted from *The Shark Net* by Robert Drewe.

We moved into a house in the dunes.

Everyone lived in the dunes.

From King's Park, on top of the highest dune, you could look down and see the whole city.

Something strange happened in the south in the late afternoon.

It became a gloomy storybook place.

Step 1 Process (Green)

For each line ask, “*What happened?*”

Step 2 Participant (Red)

For each line ask, “*Who or what did the action?*”

Step 3 Participant (Red)

For each line ask “*who or what received the action*”

Step 4 Circumstances (Blue)

For each line find information about where, when, how, why, with whom or what the action happened.

Note: When working with students remember to mark the 3 elements (process, participant and circumstance) using the colours green, red and blue.

Answers:

We moved into a house in the dunes.

Everyone lived in the dunes.

From King’s Park, on top of the highest dune, you could look down and see the whole city.

Something strange happened in the south in the late afternoon.

It became a gloomy storybook place.

Activity 4

Analyse texts from different genres with your students and lead students to compare the patterns of participants, processes and circumstances across the genres.

It is also possible to compare the types of processes, participants and circumstances found in different genres. For example there will be more action processes in a narrative text than in an information report, which will contain a large number of relational processes. The circumstances found in a procedure text will tend to be predominantly of manner (telling ‘how’) and location (telling ‘where’), while in a recount there is likely to be a greater number of circumstances of time (telling ‘when’).

Activity 5

Make coloured cards of texts appropriate to your year level and topic being studied for students to manipulate and construct their own sentences. Encourage your students to talk about the word groups in terms of their functional labels: participant, process and circumstance.

a shark I we my sister

(these words should be red, as they are 'participants')

saw was playing were playing
was splashing were splashing
was swimming were swimming

(these words should be green, as they are 'processes')

happily yesterday with our boats
in the water to the beach

(these words should be blue, as they are 'circumstances')

These are some of the sentences that could be constructed. They are very simple at the early stage of introducing the PPC (Process – Participant – Circumstance) concept.

yesterday my sister was splashing happily in the water

we were playing with our boats

we were playing on the beach

I saw a shark in the water

A shark was swimming in the water

Activity 6

Students might be ready now to attempt a transitivity analysis of a text that has been arranged in clauses. This is an example of a narrative text that could be used in an upper primary (11–12 year old) or lower secondary class (12–14 years old). It has been adapted from: *Danger on the Guayas River* by Christina Ashton, http://highlightskids.com/Stories/Fiction/F0196_guayasRiver.asp

Note: Remember to ask the same questions as in Activity 3.

A few feet from the sandbar, the dark dorsal fin of a shark
cut through the water like the bow of a speedboat.
The boys huddled together
and watched in horror
as several more fins appeared
and began to circle the sandbar.
The sand shifted under their feet,
and the water swirled up to their knees.
Just then one of the sharks surfaced
and glided toward them.
Before either boy could think,
Juan swung the oar like a baseball bat
and slammed it against the creature's nose.
Startled, the shark turned on its side,
veered away from them,
and sank beneath the water.

Answers:

A few feet from the sandbar, the dark dorsal fin of a shark
cut through the water like the bow of a speedboat.
The boys huddled together
and watched in horror
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Startled the shark turned on its side,
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Note: Words that are not marked and included in the transitivity analysis are conjunctions and text connectives whose job is to organize the text and make it flow.

Where to next?

After the students have been introduced to and worked with Participants, Processes and Circumstances the next step is to examine how these three components work together in different sentences and different genres. Each element can also be dealt with separately to enhance and increase the amount of information contained in a sentence.

Clauses and sentences

The clause is the basic grammatical unit in English. Once students understand the grammatical structure of the clause they can then learn how clauses can combine to make compound and complex sentences. Understanding the structure of a clause is a key step in understanding sentences. A simple sentence is a clause. Clauses can be combined to create compound and complex sentences.

Noun groups

Once students can identify and create participants and circumstances in clauses they can begin to consider the noun groups that can be found in both participants and circumstances. They can explore ways to expand the noun group (the nominal group) (Butt et al 2000), in order to be more precise and/or descriptive in their writing.

Nominalisation

Nominalisation is the process of creating nouns out of other parts of speech, e.g. describers (adjectives) and processes (verbs):

The Year 1's were very **excited** when Coco the Clown came to **perform** at school.

There was a lot of **excitement** in the Year 2 class about Coco the Clown's **performance**.

Nominalisation is a feature of written language rather than spoken language, and once an action or adjective is turned into a noun it can then be treated like other nouns in that it can be expanded in the nominal group. It can be described, classified, quantified and qualified.

Conclusion

This article has just scratched the surface of the functional grammar pedagogy. It has addressed some of the elements of functional grammar found in the area concerned with the *field*, the element of functional grammar that deals with the experiential meanings of a text. This is just one element, but it can provide us with an accessible starting point to introduce some of the principles and features of functional grammar to students. The article attempts to describe some entry points to an exploration of an explicit grammar pedagogy that has the potential to make second language learning a systematic and accessible experience for students.

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