

Grammar in the Brain: Literacy Knowledge for Middle Years Visual Arts Teachers

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Abstract:

This paper examines the literacy knowledge one teacher draws upon in a visual arts lesson on two-dimensional artefact appraisal with his middle years students. Video-taped extracts of the lesson are presented and analysed. The analysis focuses on the part of the lesson where the teacher, Mr Brandt Ember, scaffolds the students through the elements and principles of visual design (QSCC, 2004, p. 52-53) framework. Whilst not using a grammatical metalanguage with the students, he consciously draws on his own understandings to identify the linguistic and grammatical complexity of the introductory tasks. Mr Ember assists the students to de-nominalise the framework terms by highlighting their material processes, that is, their action, so the students can more easily identify with them. Mr Ember also enters into a phase of modelling and joint construction with the students to use the framework to build the types of nominal groups the students will need when they undertake the written description task. The students' responses to this phase of the lesson showcase the importance of teachers being highly skilled in appreciating, identifying and acting upon the unique linguistic demands of their subject areas and for having pedagogies for teaching such.

Curriculum Literacies: The Visual Arts

There is widespread acceptance in the teaching community that each field of knowledge has its own sets of knowing (content knowledge) and ways of representing knowing (literacies). Wyatt-Smith and Cumming (2003) refer to subject specific ways of representing knowing as curriculum literacies, deliberately drawing attention to the plural form - *literacies*. Their thesis is that there is no single literacy that can be spread homogenously across all curricula. 'Each subject, through the discipline/s and traditions on which it rests, presents an orientation to knowledge using particular written, spoken, and symbolic forms' (LoBianco & Freebody, 1997, p. 92). The Visual Arts is no exception; what counts as knowledge in the Visual Arts and how that knowledge should be presented for scholastic reward is distinctively different from subject English and its demands for literary content and presentation.

These differences do not simply consist of differences in specialist terminology... There are also generic and systematic differences in the functions that written texts serve for different subjects, differences in their authorised and approved ways of presenting, explaining and debating information and its implications (Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997, p. 92).

In the Queensland School Curriculum Council (QSCC) Years 1-10 Arts syllabus (2004) core content for visual arts includes students 'appraising two-dimensional forms' (p. 52-53). Key components for Level 4 learning outcomes (typically students in Year 6 & 7, that is, students aged between ten and thirteen years) include the development of elements and principles of visual art and design. More specifically, elements are listed as: colour; line; shape; and texture (QSCC, 2004, p. 52-53). They are introduced in Level One as outcomes, and developed through to Level Six outcomes. Principles of visual art and design are listed as: length; repetition; sequence; similarity and difference; size, and weight (introduced as Level One outcomes); categories; direction; movement; position; tone, and variation (introduced as Level Two outcomes); balance; contrast; pattern; and space (introduced as Level Three outcomes); and abstraction; composition; depth; non-representation; proportion;

representation; and symbolism (introduced as Level Four outcomes) (QSCC, 2004, p. 52-53). Level Four processes, that is, the assessable actions of the students include being able to 'analyse and deconstruct images' (QSCC, 2004, p. 53).

The syllabus offers the following rationale for such a focus: Students 'experience and come to understand both the collaborative and the self-managing aspects of arts practice. Students become aware of the socialising influence of the arts and are motivated to participate in and enjoy the arts as discerning practitioners and consumers' (QSCC, 2004, p. 1).

Further statements affirm the dialogical link between Arts education and literacy:

The Arts key learning area uses English literacy skills as well as contributing to the development of those skills. Students use their developing literacy skills to listen, speak, view, shape, read and write in arts activities. They use appropriate language conventions and learn arts specific vocabulary to interpret, communicate and explore their imaginative thinking, feelings and understandings. They learn to consider the purpose and audience of texts and how these affect their choices of form, structural elements and vocabulary. As students develop their critical literacy, they clarify ideas, justify opinions and decisions, seek and critically appraise information (QSCC, 2004, p. 4).

These are strong and welcomed statements indeed for they rightly centralise the place and role of literacy in Arts education. While the syllabus provides a specific language for the arts analysis (such as the elements and principles of visual design), it lacks the tools of the trade for producing the written appraisals. Put another way, while it has a content language for elements and principles of design, it lacks a metalanguage for putting the appraisal of such into a written form, for example, into the report genre of a written description. This omission is concerning, especially considering the linguistic and lexical complexity of written descriptions about appearances and qualities, such as visual art critique. The text type of written description is more complex than the text type of written observation. The former is more technical and abstract in that it describes how visual art communicates with its viewer. In other words it is a written abstraction of the experience of viewing visual art. The linguistic complexity arises out of the increased use of relational processes (Knapp & Watkins, 2005, p. 98), that is, the processes that link information, such as 'is', 'have' and 'are'. As relational processes do not represent action, speaking, thoughts or feelings, they are often more difficult for students to identify and identify with. The lexical complexity arises out of the use of technical language and extended nominal (noun) groups (Knapp & Watkins, 2005, p.99).

Added to this complexity is the finding that middle school students are often characterised as apathetic readers who feel alienated from the academic demands of subjects (Lemke, 2001). Unsworth (1997) suggests the feeling of alienation could be linked to their lack of familiarity with factual texts, augmented by the over-emphasis of literary texts in the elementary grades, and these factual texts being much less like the conversational language of their life worlds. Recent research into the 'middle year slump' has highlighted students' continuing difficulties with literacy (Lingard et al, 2001; Carrington, 2002) and the sometimes ad hoc approach to literacy instruction in key learning areas (Luke et al, 2002).

The next section of this article introduces one teacher, Mr Brandt Ember (pseudonym), and recounts his own exposure to a range of grammars and visual arts content throughout his schooling years, initial teacher training, teaching experience and subsequent post-graduate studies. His narrative is important on two counts: his reflection on disparate forms of grammar instruction; and the importance of teachers seeking to be long-life learners themselves. In the section that follows, extracts of a visual arts lesson undertaken with his

middle years co-educational multi-age class at Bushland State School (pseudonym) are introduced and theorised. This introductory part of the lesson is remarkable for the way Brandt draws upon his own understanding of grammar to identify the linguistic complexity of content terminology and of the written task. He responds with two teacher-directed phases of instruction that scaffold the students through de-nominalising the framework terminology and using this to build nominal groups in preparation for the written response.

Brandt Ember: From Prescription to Meaning Making

In an interview with Brandt prior to the taping of his lesson, he recounted being taught traditional grammar in his upper primary years in a small rural school in northern Queensland in the 1970s.

Brandt: *'Nouns, adjectives, different types of phrases, adverbs, and all the parts of speech, and really it was the identification of those things. Can you find the adjectival clause?, How do you know that's an adverbial clause? What tells you that? What question do you need to ask? They were all in isolation. I don't remember being shown how to actually use that to enliven my writing, to improve my writing in any way...'*

Brandt's formative experiences of identifying parts of speech and prescriptive lessons to learn so-called 'correct' grammar are not atypical for the time or place. In hindsight, the flaws of focusing exclusively on this content and its pedagogical accompaniment are twofold. Firstly, 'the rules it prescribes are based on the language of a very small group of middle-class English speakers' (Gerot & Wignell, 2001, p. 5) and as such de-legitimate other versions of communication, which in itself is discriminatory. Secondly, the rules only deal with one of a multitude of aspects of spoken and written language. Following the rules in no way guarantees that 'communication will be effective, for the rules say nothing about purpose or intended audiences...' (Gerot & Wignell, 2001, p. 5).

When recounting his experiences in Year Eight in the early 1980s in a northern Queensland secondary school Brandt describes himself as 'not being an avid reader'. He also talks about the English classes in Years Nine and Ten, the final years of compulsory schooling, as being a 'little dry'. His experiences in the final years of Years 11 and 12 at the same school provide a stark contrast. He spoke about two teachers who both had a 'love of English' and helped him to 'create a love of expressing things just a little bit differently...it really made a lot of sense to me and I could appreciate that a lot more'. What is salient in Brandt's talk is the focus on what he calls 'made a lot of sense', or following Luke and Freebody (1999) and their work on the Four Resource Model, what could be called 'meaning making and text user' roles. Here, the focus of language teaching was not solely on what students had to know about the rules for 'correct' sentence construction (i.e. how individual words are related in a sentence); rather the focus was broadened to include sense making and doing something with language (i.e. language as meaning making). In theoretical terms, the traditional grammar that focused on rules of syntax, word usage and written conventions was complemented with further examination of the purposes and uses of language. It is significant to note that in the 1980s some Queensland teachers were already focusing on the choices language users have in interaction, and in doing so, assisted in transforming a 'non-avid reader' such as Brandt into a student who had 'a love for expressing things just a little differently'.

After completing secondary school, Brandt completed a Diploma teaching qualification at a regional College of Advanced Education (CAE) in North Queensland, majoring in visual arts, physical education and mathematics. In relation to literacy practices, he recalls conference writing, spelling and reading instruction being the focus of instruction. As a beginning teacher

in a small rural mining town in the later half of the 1980s Brandt said he had started to introduce writing strategies with his multi-age upper primary class and even ‘reverted back’ to what he was taught in primary school in a bid to improve the writing standards of the students whom he described as ‘two years behind’ the state curriculum. Brandt completed his Bachelor’s qualification, majoring in mathematics education. From there he taught at a succession of schools, ranging in size and clientele, including a mid-size school on the outskirts of a large regional centre that catered for a diverse clientele, including transient mainland and islander Indigenous students. It was during this time Brandt commenced a Masters in Applied Linguistics at a North Queensland tertiary institution. His aim was to travel abroad and teach ESL, however he turned his focus for teaching ESL to his current students, who were also ESL learners. He explains:

Brandt: *[The Indigenous student] had the phonics but didn’t really know how to use [Standard Australian English], the intonation, the right words to use for the right occasion or the correct way to address people. That’s where I became very aware of audience, probably where people need to be very aware who they are writing for, speaking for, register, tone, field, mode, all those. I was introduced to [these terms] back then. I found [the framework of register] absolutely fascinating.*

What is important is Brandt’s acknowledgement of the limitation of a purely traditional focus and the need to extend this to connection between context and text. This social view of language, in particular that all meaning is situated in a context of culture and a context of situation, is based on the theories from sociology and linguistics, especially contributions from systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Halliday, 1985).

In the early 1990s Brandt moved to Bushland State School (pseudonym), a small co-educational multi-age departmental school located in an inner-city working-class suburb of Brisbane. He continued to undertake short term professional development courses and the Department of Education’s 1994 English Syllabus inservice training which focused, among other things, on genre theory and critical literacy. Core to this syllabus was the explication of social purpose and social context for each literary and factual genre (Department of Education, 1994) document. Also notable were the listings for the variables of register for each, that is, subject matter, roles and relationships, and mode and medium (Department of Education, 1994). Overlooked by the mass of teachers who have been heard to exclaim ‘There is a new grammar in the draft English syllabus!’ (QSA, 2005) is that the 1994 publication clearly described the grammar of each genre in terms of its participants, processes and circumstances. In other words, functional representations were always part of the 1994 English syllabus in Queensland.

In the latter half of 2006 Brandt undertook the nine module Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS, 2004) *Language and Literacy: Classroom Applications of Functional Grammar* course with his local council of ALEA (Australian Literacy Educators’ Association). According to his interview account, participation in this course served to validate and refine his earlier understandings. This recount shows that Brandt’s understanding of the strengths and limitations of different forms of grammar and the pedagogies for teaching such have developed over some three plus decades. The recount also affirms the depth of the field and the time and effort required for a level of mastery. In the following section, excerpts of Brandt’s lesson on two-dimensional artefact appraisal with his middle years students are introduced and analysed for the contribution his understanding of linguistics makes to his pedagogic practice as an art educator. The purpose of this analysis is to foreground the importance of teachers identifying and scaffolding their students through the linguistic demands unique to their content area.

The Lesson: Written Description of *Sydney Sun* by John Olsen

During the lesson under examination, Mr Ember and his Year 7/6 student produced a written description of the 1965 painting by Australian artist, John Olson, *Sydney Sun*. As the picture below indicates *Sydney Sun* is a large scale oil on canvass painting consuming three panels. In 2000, the National Gallery of Australia paid \$550 000 for the large triptych for their Centenary of Federation exhibition.



Sydney Sun by John Olsen (1965)

Source: <http://www.nga.gov.au/press/sydneySun.cfm> [accessed 1 December, 2006].

During the lesson, Mr Ember adopts the syllabus' 'learner-centred approach' whereby learning is viewed as the 'active construction of meaning' and teaching as 'the act of guiding, scaffolding and facilitating learning. This approach considers knowledge as constantly changing and built on prior experience' (QSCC, 2004, p. 10).

The introduction to the lesson included discussion about the students' initial reaction to the painting, what they knew about Sydney as a city, and the listing of the elements and principles of design. At all stages of the lesson Mr Ember scribed the students' responses on the butchers' paper on the easel. This produced an archive of their responses, which proved to be useful in subsequent stages of the lesson as students drew on previously discussed frameworks and vocabulary and the transposition of word forms. The visual representation of the words assisted in this latter task as students could more easily see the 'root word' that needed to be retained as they attempted de/nominalisations. This practice also affirmed students' contributions. The students nominated tone (shading), line, shape, colour and space as elements and radiation, dominance, contrast, harmony, repetition and balance as principles of design. The students provided these nominations with ease, however, when Mr Ember asked them to analyse the art by considering which principles were used with which elements, it became obvious there was some confusion about the students' understanding of the terms.

Extract One, below, highlights Mr Ember’s realisation that some of the nominalised word forms may have confused the students and the pedagogical scaffolding he offered to remediate their misunderstandings.

Extract One:

1	Mr Ember	<i>What sort of colour has been used here?</i>
2	Student	<i>Radiation and um [</i>
3	Student	<i>[Dominance</i>
4	Student	<i>[Radiant colour and repetitious</i>
5	Mr Ember	<i>OK, there is a dominance of colour there. Now a dominance of what type of colour?</i>
6	Student	<i>Radiant.</i>
7	Mr Ember	<i>Uh er there could be. We might have to revise some of these though. Does anyone remember what radiation is?</i>
8	Student	<i>Going out.</i>
9	Mr Ember	<i>Yeah, going out (teacher moves fingers and hands in outward motion). And our balance is whether it is?</i>
10	Student	<i>[Centred</i>
11	Student	<i>[Symmetrical</i>
12	Mr Ember	<i>Centred, symmetrical (teacher separates hands, cups them and moves them up and down to resemble a balance scale), that’s right. Dominance?</i>
13	Students (chorus)	<i>Stands out.</i>
14	Mr Ember	<i>That’s right. Contrast?</i>
15	Students (chorus)	<i>Opposites, mix.</i>
16	Mr Ember	<i>Yes. Harmony?</i>
17	Students (chorus)	<i>So it blends in.</i>
18	Mr Ember	<i>Yes, so it blends in. And repetition?</i>
19	Students (chorus)	<i>Repeating itself.</i>
20	Mr Ember	<i>Yeah, repeating itself (teacher’s hands follow each other in a small circle).</i>

The list of descriptors for elements and principles of design was complex in that they were presented as nominalised word forms, that is as nouns that had been formed from words of other classes. For example, five of the elements are presented as nouns formed from verbs: ‘radiation’ comes from ‘radiate’, ‘dominance’ comes from ‘dominate’, ‘harmony’ comes from ‘harmonise’, and ‘repetition’ comes from ‘repeat’. Two of the elements have their noun form the same as their verb form, ‘balance’ and ‘contrast’. While nominalisations make a text more compact and ‘written’ like it also makes text ‘dense and abstract’ (Derewianka, 2002, p. 21-11). Many students thus need assistance in learning how to unpack this type of language. Mr Ember realised this and scaffolded the students in de-nominalising the elements through linguistic and sometimes gestural expression. The students’ ease with this process indicated its worth and thus contributed to the success of the next phase, detailed as Extract Two, below.

Extract Two is focused on the two lists: elements and principles of visual design. Mr Ember scaffolds the building of nominal groups needed for constructing simple sentences that describe the work under examination, *Sydney Sun* by John Olsen. Nominal groups, as the name implies, is a group of words that allows for the expansion of meaning. Nominal groups are made up of a head word (which is referred to in linguistic terms as a ‘thing’ (Gerot & Wignell, 2001, p. 141)) and some additional information related to it, referred to as a ‘modifier’. In narratives modifiers tend to be descriptive, whereas in factual texts they ‘focus on being precise through classifying and quantifying’ (DECS, 2004, p. 134). Thus nominal

groups are an important grammatical resource for the production of written descriptions in the visual arts. Mr Ember knows this and the following interaction with his students ensues.

Extract Two:

1	Mr Ember	<i>So what is the dominant colour?</i>
2	Students (chorus)	<i>Orange (laughs).</i>
3	Mr Ember	<i>Orange. OK. What else have we got there that we could link up? Some elements and principles that we could link up?</i>
4	Student	<i>Repetitious colour.</i>
5	Mr Ember	<i>Repetitious colour as well. Where have we got it? (teacher draws line between 'repetition' and 'colour'). So you're talking about repetition of colour?</i>
6	Student	<i>Yeah.....</i>
7	Mr Ember	<i>Any other tones we could talk about?</i>
8	Student	<i>Radiant lines.</i>
9	Mr Ember	<i>Yeah we do, we have radiating lines (teacher draws line between 'radiation' and 'lines') from this [</i>
10	Student	<i>[And they're repetitious lines as well [</i>
11	Mr Ember	<i>[Radiating and repetitious lines (teacher scribes and draws line between two terms). Yes?</i>
12	Student	<i>Balance of shape</i>
13	Mr Ember	<i>Yeah we do, we do have balance of shape. How do we have balance of shape?</i>
14	Student	<i>Because of the the middle bit () also centered</i>
15	Mr Ember	<i>Yep. Is there something up there that is pretty obvious there that we haven't mentioned?</i>
16	Student	<i>Dominance of shape</i>
17	Mr Ember	<i>Dominance of shape (teacher scribes and draws line between two terms)</i>
18	Student	<i>Repetition of shape</i>
19	Mr Ember	<i>Repetition of shape (teacher scribes and draws line between two terms). OK we do have repetition. We've actually got a lot here that we can actually speak about. What we're going to do now is just talk about, put some of this into very simple sentences. OK. Just any of those thoughts. So we're linking line, if you like you can use some of this paper here, if you just wanted to practise writing something yourself before you give me one.</i>
20	Student	<i>Harmony of colour [</i>
21	Mr Ember	<i>Harmony of colour (scribing)</i>
22	Students (chorus)	<i>[has been used.</i>
23	Mr Ember	<i>OK. Now we're going to [</i>
24	Student	<i>[it's a bit messy (laughs)</i>
25	Mr Ember	<i>[Oh, it's not too bad (laughs). Give me a break (laughs).</i>
26	Students	<i>(laughs)</i>
27	Mr Ember	<i>OK, so HARMONY OF COLOUR HAS BEEN USED. So what have we done here? We've just made a small [</i>
28	Student	<i>[simple sentence.</i>
29	Mr Ember	<i>We have.</i>

Again, Mr Ember's consciousness of the linguistic demands of the written task has provided his focus for carefully scaffolding the students' use of nominal groups in their written descriptions. The students' responses show the worth of this careful and purposefully planned scaffolding. They quickly build the nominal group list and collaboratively construct simple sentences. His work here differs substantially from the building of nominal groups for narratives that are taught through instruction in subject English. Thus there are two points to be made here: the currency of literacy instruction in disparate subject areas; and the need for teachers to be skilled at providing this instruction.

Conclusion

Mr Ember has provided scaffolding for the complex linguistic (Extract One) and grammatical (Extract Two) demands of Visual Arts instruction without overlaying or burdening this introductory part of the lesson with a grammatical metalanguage. He has effectively supported his students with building their understanding of the field (Extract One), that is the terminology of visual arts analysis, and then modelled and jointly constructed the building of nominal groups that allow meaning and precision to be packed into simple sentences (Extract Two). The success of this introductory part of the lesson has been built from Mr Ember's conscious awareness of the need to appreciate, identify and scaffold the linguistic and grammatical demands of this analysis and written response task. It thus highlights the importance of teachers having a deep knowledge of the literacy demands unique to their subject area.

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