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Talking grammatically: L1 adolescent metalinguistic reflection on writing

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the metalinguistic reflections of 12 students, aged 14–15 years, undertaking a unit of work focused on reading and writing non-fiction. The unit embedded contextualised grammar teaching into preparation for English Language examinations. Students were interviewed twice, with prompts to discuss a sample of argument text in interview one, and a sample of their own writing in interview two. The interviews and subsequent analysis drew on Gombert's taxonomy of metalinguistic understanding, focusing on metasemantic, metasyntactic and metatextual reflections, and probing students' ability to link these to metapragmatic concerns. Similarly to previous studies, the findings suggest that students struggle to articulate the impact of metasyntactic choices; however, here it is suggested that this may be a particular artefact of the need for a specialised metalanguage for discussing syntax. Results also indicate a tendency to reify form-function relationships, and signal the potential benefit of using students' own writing as a platform for exploring authorial choices. Finally, the study contributes to the theorisation of metalinguistic understanding by suggesting how declarative knowledge may emerge from procedural activity, with interviews scaffolding students' ability to articulate what had initially been tacit language choices.

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Introduction

This study focuses on adolescent students who are at a high-stakes point in their education, studying for a qualification which will determine many of their future opportunities in life. The General Certificate of Education (GCSE) qualification in English Language is a requirement for almost all further education in England, and is used as a key discriminator for employment. GCSE courses are subject-specific, linear, and usually designed to be studied over two years around the ages of 14–16 (academic years 10 and 11), with outcomes dependent on terminal examinations for most subjects (for further information, see Department for Education [DfE], 2013, 2014). In the summer of 2017, students sat new GCSE examinations which followed reforms intended to ensure that the 'gold standard' academic qualifications conferred are 'rigorous' (DfE, 2016, p. 20). One feature of the

revised qualification is increased emphasis on spelling, punctuation and grammar. Students are required to analyse how writers use language for effect, making use of relevant 'subject terminology', and their writing is assessed for range of sentence structures as well as use of 'grammatical features for effect' (DfE, 2013, p. 6). The metalinguistic understanding which these criteria presuppose is multi-layered: students need to be able to identify linguistic structures or devices using terminology, to explain how they create meaning and impact, and to make use of them effectively in their own writing.

Here, we investigate how students undertaking a GCSE course are able to articulate their understanding of language, drawing on these three dimensions: use of terminology, ability to discuss meaning and effect, and relationship of reading to writing. Theoretically, we conceptualise metalinguistic reflection as the process of explicitly addressing language as an object of study. This comprises consideration of both form and function: it can occur with or without the use of a specific body of terminology, and may be accompanied by an ability to relate linguistic features to authorial intention or impact on a reader.

Grammar and pedagogy

Arguments around the position of grammar in the English curriculum are well-rehearsed (Locke, 2009). Hudson and Walmsley have provided an overview of the twentieth century history of grammar (2005; see also Norman, 2010), noting the lack of evidence for any positive impact of grammar learning on writing development (e.g. Elley, Barham, Lamb, & Wylie, 1975) and the consequently diminished position of grammar in Anglophone countries from the 1970s to the end of the twentieth century. However, there remained a sense of untapped potential: a suggestion that developing students' thinking about language would help to unlock aspects of writing (and speaking) which remain otherwise tacit or implicit, giving students more confidence and self-awareness in their use of language (Carter, 1990). Advocates asserted the potential of grammar teaching for developing pupils' facility with language, exploring the relationship between explicit metalinguistic knowledge and the ability to consciously craft writing (Hudson, 2001; Kolln & Hancock, 2005; Myhill, 2011).

Following a renewed interest in grammar at the turn of the twenty-first century in both policy and research, there is now a growing body of evidence which indicates that learning about grammar in a contextualised, meaning-oriented manner can have a beneficial impact on students' writing development (Derewianka, 2012; Myhill, Jones, Lines, & Watson, 2012). In pedagogical terms, the recommended approaches place the relationship between grammar and socially constructed meaning at the heart of learning. Such a functionally orientated approach shares some principles with systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), and internationally there is a quest to formulate a pedagogical grammar which draws together the most useful dimensions of linguistic study in a way which will satisfy the needs of teachers and students (Derewianka & Jones, 2012; Giovanelli, 2016; Macken-Horarik, 2012).

Despite this accumulating evidence in support of explicit grammar instruction, issues still remain. Defining the concepts and terminology which might best support the development of students' metalinguistic understanding, exploring the relationship between declarative metalinguistic knowledge and procedural facility with language, and understanding the reciprocity between language analysis and writing development are all current concerns (Myhill & Jones, 2015).

Metalinguistic reflection

This study is founded on a theoretical conception of writing as a process of decision-making, in which the writer selects from a range of semiotic resources to shape a text with a particular communicative purpose. Writing is a quintessentially metalinguistic activity, requiring a degree of deliberation in the selection, retrieval and translation of language which sets it apart from speech (Chen & Myhill, 2016; Gombert, 1992; Myhill & Jones, 2015). It is notable that while spoken language is learned naturally (barring specific learning disabilities), writing must be taught (Gombert, 1992). Research into metalinguistic development has typically centred on oral language (e.g. Karmiloff-Smith, Grant, Sims, Jones, & Cuckle, 1996), reading comprehension (e.g. Zipke, 2007), word decoding and spelling (e.g. Nunes, Bryant, & Bindman, 2006), and bilingual learners (e.g. Bialystok, 2007; Cisero & Royer, 1995), with limited consideration of the more sophisticated features which we might see in first-language adolescent students. Given what Galloway, Stude, and Uccelli (2015) characterise as the ‘continuous expansion of language resources through schooling’ (p. 221), this presents a significant gap in the current field.

Definitions of ‘metalinguistic’ are complicated by its adjectival status, requiring a supplement such as ‘understanding’, ‘awareness’ ‘knowledge’ or ‘activity’, all of which have different connotations (see Myhill, 2011). They also vary by discipline. In linguistics, the focus is predominantly on text and metalanguage, using language reflexively to analyse language; in psychology, the focus is on cognition, how an individual thinks about language; in socio-cultural studies, drawing on a Hallidayan view of language, the focus is on understanding how meaning is generated in a social context (Myhill & Jones, 2015). However, there is agreement that what we term ‘metalinguistic’ is more than a singular concept, and not one ‘unique linguistic ability’ (Bialystok & Ryan, 1985, p. 230). Myhill and Jones (2015) provide a detailed analysis of the attempts to define the concept, noting the various binaries and taxonomies which have been proposed in attempts to clarify some of the ‘conceptual fuzziness’ which besets the term (p. 841). These often draw a distinction between knowledge about language and language in use, sometimes referred to as declarative and procedural knowledge (Myhill, 2000). This is the root of Bialystok and Ryan’s (1985) definitions of analysed knowledge (knowledge of linguistic structures) and control (ability to select and apply this knowledge in linguistic activities). A further distinction can be drawn between knowledge which is implicit and explicit or conscious and unconscious; for Gombert (1992), this was characterised as the difference between knowledge which is epilinguistic (tacit and unconscious knowledge about linguistic rules and structures) and metalinguistic (explicit and conscious knowledge), with the assumption that epilinguistic knowledge precedes metalinguistic. Camps and Milian (2000) offer a further distinction between verbalisable and non-verbalisable knowledge, arguing that non-verbalisable procedural knowledge may yet be explicit: young writers may struggle to verbally explain their authorial choices, while still having a conscious knowledge of how they are shaping their writing (see also Chen & Jones, 2013). Gombert (1992) further proposed a taxonomy of the content of metalinguistic understanding, dividing attention to metaphonological features (how sounds build words); metalexical or metasemantic features (word structures and meanings); metasyntactic features (syntax); metatextual features (text structure); and metapragmatic features (how to use language appropriately in social contexts).

Such distinctions can appear seductively straightforward. However, when we consider developmental trajectories it becomes apparent that they are not. Bialystok and Ryan (1985) note that activities which may initially require the explicit, conscious application of knowledge may become internalised with increased fluency in speech, reading or writing, observing that this has been variously conceptualised as a movement towards 'automaticity' or a shift 'from declarative to procedural' knowledge (p. 235). Similarly, Myhill and Jones (2015) note that Gombert's distinction between epilinguistic and metalinguistic was developed in relation to oral language, and the nature of writing (an activity of high metalinguistic demand, and a skill which requires teaching) may confound his suggestion that movement from epilinguistic to metalinguistic is unidirectional. They also query Gombert's category of metapragmatic understanding, noting that in their discussions with 12–13 year old writers, almost all metalinguistic reflections related to 'socially-determined audience and purpose' (p. 844), although this may reflect the questions and prompts which their interviewees were given. The interrelationship of all of these concepts, therefore, is a key area for further investigation.

Despite this conceptual uncertainty, Chen and Myhill (2016) argue for the role of metalinguistic understanding in developing students' ability to become confident language users, noting how this view builds on a Vygotskyian view of language as a prerequisite for abstract thought. In line with their work, this study adopts Myhill's (2011) interdisciplinary definition of metalinguistic understanding, incorporating both declarative and procedural dimensions: 'the explicit bringing into consciousness of language as an artifact, and the conscious monitoring and manipulation of language to create desired meanings grounded in socially shared understandings' (p. 250). The study also draws on Gombert's taxonomy of metalinguistic understanding, using his categories as an analytical framework for the interviews.

Grammar on whose terms?

Numerous metalanguages co-occur in the writing classroom. Moore and Schleppegrell (2014) note the typical use of literary and traditional grammatical terminology, Chen and Myhill (2016) add the metalanguage of functional grammar, and Myhill and Jones (2015) also include metalanguages relating to genre and to the process of writing. Access to a metalanguage allows students to clarify and communicate their understandings with a level of abstraction, moving from the particular to the general and transferring understandings across texts and writing contexts. This benefits both students' ability to analyse texts, and their ability to reflect on their own writing. The former benefit is emphasised by Robinson's (2005) assertion that metalinguistic terminology helps students to refer to their own language use more explicitly, echoed in Myhill, Jones, and Wilson (2016) argument that terminology 'makes often covert decision making available for reflection and argument' (p. 38). The latter benefit is emphasised in the study by Moore and Schleppegrell (2014) which introduced the language of systemic functional linguistics to primary school students in order to help them understand and explain 'the choices authors have made' in writing texts (p. 93). One area of perennial debate, however, is which metalanguage or grammatical system is most useful. This is the ongoing focus of the quest for a 'good enough' grammatics by Macken-Horarik (2012): a pursuit which uses Halliday's distinction between 'grammar' as the system of implicit relationships through which linguistic

meaning is constructed, and ‘grammatics’ as the explicit systems constructed to describe and analyse language: the first underpinning instinctive language in use, the second capturing our attempts to formulate declarative knowledge about language.

Advocates of introducing systemic functional linguistics (SFL) to the L1 English classroom point to the integral meaning-orientation of the system, something which distinguishes it from more traditional grammatical and indeed literary terminology (Chen & Myhill, 2016; Macken-Horarik, 2012; Moore & Schleppegrell, 2014). It also transfers across modes of communication, making it suitable for use in a communicative landscape in which multimodality is increasingly the norm (Macken-Horarik, 2009). However, even the most ardent pioneers of SFL in schools see a role for more traditional grammatical terminology. Chen and Myhill emphasise its particular role in developing understanding of sentences and syntax (2016), and Macken-Horarik (2012) notes that traditional grammar is important for the study of ‘the formal structures underlying functional units of meaning’ (p. 184). A rather less limited role is advanced by Jones, Myhill, and Bailey (2013), reporting on a study which demonstrated how traditional grammatical terminology and concepts can be taught in a contextualised manner which emphasises the relationship between form and meaning, and which has a significantly positive impact on students’ writing. It is this body of terminology which is embedded in the current English curriculum.

In England, the curriculum is explicit about the concepts and terminology which students are required to learn, and this is tested at the age of 10–11 in a national ‘Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar’ (SPAG) test. The body of terminology still suffers from connotations which are bound up with traditional or prescriptivist conceptions of language. This is the case for teachers (Dean, 2016; Watson, 2012, 2015), and in the public sphere (Rosen, 2013), and the SPAG test has done little to dispel these associations, itself foregrounding a narrow conception of grammar which prioritises identification of features above exploration of meaning, and which promotes decontextualised pedagogies and memorisation of terms and definitions (Safford, 2016).

Despite this, the rhetoric of the national curriculum supports grammar for its meaning-making resources: students study the ‘effectiveness and impact’ of grammatical structures and draw on ‘grammatical constructions from their reading and listening... using these consciously in their writing and speech to achieve particular effects’ (DfE, 2014, p. 6). This study therefore framed grammar contextually, exploring the extent to which students are able to articulate metalinguistic understanding and considering the role of metalanguage in supporting their reflections. The research question asked: ‘What metalinguistic understandings can students express when reflecting at word, sentence and whole text level on writing, and what is the role of grammatical terminology in supporting their articulation of the relationship between grammar and meaning?’

Methodology

This qualitative investigation was conducted within the context of a quasi-experimental study which examined the impact of a contextualised grammar intervention on 14–15 year old students’ reading and writing development, as measured using GCSE examination materials (for further information, including full sampling details and statistical outcomes, see Watson, Myhill, & Newman, 2014). A total of twelve classes drawn from four schools participated in the study. All schools were medium-sized, mixed comprehensive

Table 1. The GCSE assessment objectives and individual lesson objectives of the unit of work.

GCSE reading assessment objectives	Lesson objectives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● AO2ii Develop and sustain interpretations of writers' ideas and perspectives. ● AO2iii explain and evaluate how writers use linguistic, grammatical, structural and presentational features to achieve effects and engage and influence the reader. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Understand the typical underlying structure of news headlines and why it is effective. ● Explore how effective headlines are created through unusual, striking, visual and dramatic combinations of words and images. ● Explore how adjectives, nouns and verbs are used to create effective description in a newspaper article. ● Explore the effectiveness of expanded noun phrases. ● Analyse the style of viral emails, including presentational features, punctuation and narrative. ● Explore how topic sentences are used to create cohesion and appeal to a reader. ● Explore the linguistic and grammatical features of scientific non-fiction.
<p>GCSE Writing assessment objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● AO3i write clearly, effectively and imaginatively, using and adapting forms and selecting vocabulary appropriate to task and purpose in ways that engage the reader. ● AO3ii organise information and ideas into structured and sequenced sentences, paragraphs and whole texts, using a variety of linguistic and structural features to support cohesion and overall coherence. ● AO3iii use a range of sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate punctuation and spelling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Explore how adjectives, nouns and verbs are used to create effective description in a newspaper article. ● Use expanded noun phrases to add detail to a description. ● Understand how to imitate the style of viral emails effectively in your own writing, focusing on presentational features, punctuation and narrative. ● Explore how topic sentences are used to create cohesion and appeal to a reader. ● Explore the use of sentence patterns to create effects: parentheses, parallel structures and minor sentences. ● Use the grammatical and linguistic conventions of scientific non-fiction to shape your own writing effectively.

state schools on the South coast of England. The student participants for this qualitative strand of the study were drawn from the intervention groups: one boy and one girl from each of six intervention classes became a 'focus student' for this investigation. During their normal timetabled English lessons, the intervention groups studied a three week unit of work which focused on reading and writing non-fiction texts, with attention to relevant aspects of grammar embedded throughout. Table 1 contains the grammar focuses and the key objectives for the unit, drawn from the GCSE assessment objectives (DfE, 2013). The participants were aged 14–15 years, in the first year of studying the two-year programme in English Language which leads to the GCSE. The sample covered a range of attainment, with students predicted to attain from below-average (D) to above average (A) grades, with a majority predicted the national average grade (C). The breakdown of predicted grades was: 2x A, 1x B, 7x C, 2x D. Extended quotations presented in the findings are attributed to individual participants, with their gender and predicted grade given as F/M (female/male) and pred (predicted).

The unit employed a contextualised grammar pedagogy, as outlined in Myhill et al. (2012). Attention to grammar was embedded in the context of examining the choices made by authors in a range of non-fiction texts, with a reciprocal reading-writing relationship in which students also experimented with grammatical features and structures in their own writing. Talk – both teacher-student and between student peers – was fundamental to developing students' understanding of the impact of language choices. Grammar was introduced where it was relevant to understanding how texts are crafted (e.g. how noun phrases are used for description in newspaper reports) and attention to grammar was interwoven with attention to rhetorical and literary devices as students explored the features and effects of authentic examples of non-fiction genres.

Each focus student was interviewed twice during the process. Both interviews closely followed a lesson from the unit, and started by asking the students what they thought they had been learning about. The first interview was conducted during the first week of the unit. Students were presented with a sample of student writing (an argument text) taken from the exemplar materials from a GCSE examination board. They were asked to discuss their opinion of the text in linguistic terms, with specific prompts to evaluate its text level, sentence level and word level features, and to discuss each of these in terms of the ‘effectiveness’ of the writing. The second interview was conducted during the final week of the unit: they discussed a sample of their own writing created during the scheme of work, with the same prompts. These samples varied depending on the point in the scheme at which the students were interviewed but included a magazine article introducing a new invention, a recount of a ghostly encounter, and a list of instructions for surviving a zombie apocalypse.

Student interviews were coded in NVIVO, with top level codes predetermined according to the theoretical framework. Reflections were initially categorised according to Gombert’s categories of metasemantic, metasyntactic and metatextual, with metapragmatic concerns pervasive across each category. The metaphonological category was not relevant for this study. Lower level codes were assigned inductively using the constant comparison method then rationalised in an axial stage. The coding was conducted by a single researcher and checked by a colleague for consistency and interpretive rigour, in line with Pring’s (2000) assertion that ‘social reality... is constituted and maintained by the agreements in interpretation of the members of society and of the groups within it’ (p. 118). The codes are presented in tables in the findings section. These indicate the number of participants who made comments which were coded under each theme, the number of source interviews in which comments occurred, and the overall number of individual comments made.

Findings

Metasemantic reflection: discussion of word choice

All students were able to comment on linguistic choices at word level, and to make some attempt to relate choices to authorial intention or impact on the reader (see Table 2). It is notable that the vast majority of responses did not make use of metalinguistic terminology in their discussion, but rather selected specific words and commented on their effect. The degree of specificity and elaboration in responses was very varied, ranging from simplistic comments such as noting that a word is ‘posh’, to comments which demonstrated a much more nuanced and contextualised interpretation of word choice:

Table 2. Metasemantic comments.

Code	Participants	Sources	References
Metasemantic reflection	12	24	114
<i>Without metalanguage</i>	12	22	63
<i>With grammatical metalanguage</i>	8	10	14
<i>With other metalanguage</i>	6	10	13
<i>Struggling to explain</i>	9	16	32

Student 11 (F, predA): The word 'disrupted' is used quite a lot here, or it's implied a lot as well... they've really emphasised the fact that primitive people exist is a really beautiful thing, it's really nice that there are parts of the world that are untainted by all the futuristic things that we have.

Students thus demonstrated that word level analysis of specific texts is not necessarily hindered by a lack of metalinguistic terminology. Indeed, there were instances where students showed that they had access to relevant metalanguage but did not need to use it to express their interpretations:

Student 8 (M, predC): I highlighted the 'sick' group and the 'barbaric' because it shows the scary side to it, to inject fear into the reader.

Interviewer: What type of words are those?

Student: They're harsh words. I'm trying to think what they are... adjectives.

However, there were also examples which suggest that metalanguage may have helped students to articulate their ideas more precisely, providing quick access to a grammatical concept which would support their explanation. It is interesting, for example, to consider how the concept of an 'imperative' may have supported the following student's interpretation:

Student 7 (F, predC): It says 'just switch on'.

Interviewer: What's interesting about that?

Student: He's saying, 'just do it'.

Similarly, in the following example, the identification of the focus words as 'verbs' may have helped the student to explain the linguistic thread which they've noticed in a newspaper article:

Student 11 (F, predA): By using the words the article used like stalk, and prowling and preying and the way the article described it, howled, it was very clever, very captivating.

This view is supported by the smaller number of comments, arising from eight of the students, which did use grammatical terminology when discussing lexical features. Half (7) of the comments used the term 'imperative', 'imperative verb' or 'commanding verb' to discuss impact on a reader, while other terms included adjective, abstract noun, preposition and connective. The concept of an 'imperative' (one of the grammatical focuses of the unit of work) seemed to be readily assimilated by the students who used it, perhaps due to its very overt purpose. Comments about particular examples explained that the imperatives were 'like an order', 'controlling' and 'put the pressure on the reader.' Comments using other grammatical terms were often less secure, although there was some evidence that metalinguistic terminology can help to develop understanding of lexical impact as well as sharpening articulation. The response below shows the student grappling with the role of a pre-modifying noun. It is in his articulation of the noun as acting like an 'adjective' that he is able to begin to formulate an understanding of its purpose:

Student 6 (M, predC): Yeah, like alien hedgehog. I didn't really know what they meant by alien hedgehog_ I didn't know whether they meant alien as alien on the moon or stuff or like, you know what I mean... being used like adjectives so it was kind of like hidden.

The comments which used non-grammatical metalanguage included the concepts of direct address, emotive language and colloquial language. Again, the clarity of expression varied, and the overt purpose of direct address meant that students exhibited most confidence in articulating the effect of that feature:

Student 6 (M, predC): It's like direct speech, like they're actually speaking to me and I would engage... you feel like the message is to you.

Responses where students struggled to explain their ideas included both the inability to identify the effect of a word ('it just sounds better'; 'I'm not sure I just thought it was really good') and difficulty in articulating an effect that a student has started to identify. In the latter case, there were again examples which indicated that metalanguage might have been a valuable aid. For example, the concept of modality would have been useful in clarifying the impact that this student was trying to express:

Student 5 (F, predC): The way they said, the way they pointed out things like 'is', it 'is' this and it 'is' that and what will happen 'is' as if they know because they have done it and they have been in that position if you know what I mean.

In summary, while use of metalanguage did not in itself guarantee understanding or clarity of expression, nor was it necessary for explanation of the impact of word choice, there is evidence that in some cases it may provide access to concepts which help students to analyse semantic choices, even if they struggle to articulate the meanings and effects which they are starting to notice.

Metasyntactic reflection: discussion of syntax and sentences

The number of overall comments relating to sentence level features is similar to the number of comments about word choice: this is perhaps to be expected due to the fact that the interviews sought to probe student thinking about both equally (see Table 3). However, the pattern of metalanguage use is very different. When students attempted to comment on syntactic features without using any terminology, they invariably struggled to articulate the patterns they noticed and the impact on the reader. For example, the significance of word order and modality are alluded to in the following exchange, but the student is unable to pin down the concepts to articulate his emergent understanding:

Student 12 (M, predA): 'This could not be more wrong' rather than say this might be wrong, it's much more effective.

Interviewer: So what's having the effect?

Student: It doesn't leave the reader to argue against the point.

Table 3. Metasyntactic comments.

Code	Participants	Sources	References
Metasyntactic reflection	12	24	111
<i>Without metalanguage</i>	5	5	5
<i>Sentence length</i>	9	12	19
<i>Sentence variety</i>	4	4	5
<i>With grammatical metalanguage</i>	8	11	25
<i>Rhetorical questions</i>	8	12	15
<i>Misunderstanding or partial understanding</i>	9	11	18
• <i>Comma confusion</i>	5	6	8

Interviewer. When you read it out you placed emphasis on the word 'not'... rather than saying this might be... is there something about that choice of phrasing?

Student: It's formal so definitely, so definitely not trying to make it like this couldn't be more wrong ...

Comments relating to sentence variety or length tended to reify effects and remain largely superficial. Variety or 'range' of sentences was associated with 'effective' writing. Short sentences were associated with being 'snappy' and, contradictorily, either used to slow and 'pause' the text or to make it 'quicker.' Long sentences were associated with 'detail.' However, there were also hints that some students might be beginning to understand the relationship of sentence length to emphasis, particularly when discussing their own writing:

Student 3 (M, predD): They use short and long sentence to get... I don't know how to explain... to show the importance of the other thing.

...

Interviewer: So why have a short sentence there? [discussing students' own writing]

Student: Give it more of an effect and importance.

A large number of comments related to the use of rhetorical questions, all of which demonstrated an ease with identifying this device and an ability to suggest a generic function: 'to get people thinking.' Like imperatives and direct address, this feature readily associates with a particular impact, and just as direct address can be identified simply by finding the words 'you' or 'we', rhetorical questions are immediately apparent from their punctuation. However, students tended to stick with a simplistic metapragmatic reflection on any rhetorical question: six students said that a question was used to make the reader 'think', one to make them 'read on' and one to make you feel as if the writer is 'speaking to you.' Only three students attempted to explain the effect in a contextualised manner, one of which was heavily prompted by the interviewer. The most in-depth example related to a student's own writing:

Student 9 (F, predC): I used a rhetorical question in the introduction to get you like hooked on it so make people think, yeah, I do want to learn a different language, I have wondered how to get straight As in every exam. ... I did it so that they would read it and get a personal view so that they could go on, 'cause everyone wants like good grades in the exam or maybe they do want to learn different languages so then they'd think, yeah, that's me then they'd carry on reading about it.

In contrast, when students used grammatical metalanguage to identify syntactic features, they were often able to articulate effects with far more precision. The concept of parentheses was particularly readily assimilated by students, and used with intent in their own writing:

Student 6 (M, predC): Parentheses... it's like a personal message to the reader. It's like a little whisper saying like I played football in my day, and brackets I wasn't that good, it's like a message to the reader.

Student 10 (M, predB): Here I've used expanded noun phrases for detail... 'The revolutionary machine, appealing and futuristic, is said to be able to manipulate time itself'... it starts off with a noun but then you add a little bit of information which describes the noun, then you add a little bit more explanation through parentheses which explains the noun further, then you add a little more explanation afterwards which explains what the noun is doing.

Not all concepts were used with precision or understanding, however. The concept of a minor sentence was confused with 'short' sentences by some students, and the concepts of

Table 4. Metatextual comments.

Code	Participants	Sources	References
Metatextual reflection	11	19	54
Paragraphing	9	14	21
Opening 'hook'	11	15	24
Conclusions	4	4	5
With grammatical metalanguage	3	4	5

simple and complex sentences (mentioned in some interviews despite not being included in the unit of work) were particularly confused. Five students exhibited confusion about the role of commas and their relationship to syntax, identifying complex sentences as something that 'has a comma in', or suggesting that commas can be distributed at will without regard for their syntactic functions, 'I'd been using far too many commas in a sentence.'

Metatextual reflection: discussion of textual shaping

Student reflections on overall text structure and organisation were dominated by discussion of paragraphing and opening 'hooks' (see Table 4). Comments relating to paragraphing were often vague and, for the lower-attaining writers, focused on the visual aspects of paragraphing:

Student 1 (M, predC): I think this could split into at least two paragraphs, not just one big one, make it look more neater.

Comments frequently alluded to paragraph length, and particularly to the use of short paragraphs to engage the reader, to 'prevent people from losing interest in the subject' and to avoid the fact that 'if you have ... too many big paragraphs, it goes over your head' or can 'drag on too long.' Responses varied in sophistication, with a few students able to articulate more specific, contextualised effects, as in this example of a student talking about paragraphing in terms of the balance of information and opinion in their scientific magazine article:

Student 10 (M, predB): I started off with the information then I went into the personal opinion which probably should have only been a short paragraph and then went on to a bigger, more informational paragraph.

In terms of metapragmatic reflection, students were most comfortable in discussing the importance of 'hooking' the reader or 'grabbing attention' at the start of any piece of writing, and this was often combined with discussion of the rhetorical question at the start of the argument text used in interview one. Other techniques noted as ways to 'grab attention' included direct address ('it starts straight at you'), keeping introductions short, using 'contrast' and including something 'odd' or 'funny.' Only four students commented on endings or conclusions, noting the importance of having something that 'wraps everything up' or having 'a really sharp kicker at the end.'

In the few cases where grammatical metalanguage beyond the word 'paragraph' was used, students commented with relative precision on tense used to 'make the reader feel like they're in the moment' and use of the first person 'to see how one person's actually experienced this.'

Scaffolding reflection: emerging understandings

While students found it particularly difficult to articulate metasyntactic reflections, there were exchanges which strongly demonstrated how discussion can support their developing understanding. Here, the interviewer both supplies a metalinguistic concept (minor sentence) and models the articulation of effect. This combination allows the student to develop their own understanding and expression of the impact of the feature:

Interviewer: What's the effect of having that as a minor sentence?

Student 3 (M, predD): I don't know.

Interviewer: 'There it was, shining bright. Not possible.' To me, it sounds like you're inside the person's head. Because you don't think in full sentences, it's like his thoughts.

Student: Like a quick bang, a quick thing to continue between one sentence and the other, like a flash between two sentences... not possible.

Interviewer: Yeah, a flash.

Student: Of his mind or something.

The writing conversation interview approach is designed to allow interviewers to probe the full extent of student understanding through discussion of particular writing samples, and in doing this the conversations did sometimes take on a pedagogical turn. As well as modelling how to talk about effect as in the example above, interviewers also used questioning to draw out students' ability to explain the impact of linguistic choices, with strings of 'what' and 'why' questions used to focus students on particular features and provoke more fully elaborated explanations. This was also driven by an ethical concern to ensure that students' felt empowered by the conversation which pushed them to the limits of their ability to discuss language. This scaffolded talk appeared to have a significant impact on some students' ability to analyse or explain:

Interviewer: [Reading] 'I went into the room on the left. Empty. So I got back and went to the room on the right. Nothing.' So you have those single words, nothing, empty. Did you do that deliberately?

Student 3 (M, predD): Yes, I did.

Interviewer: What were you doing there? What were you trying to create?

Student: I can't remember what I was trying to create.

Interviewer: What do you think the effect of it is? Think about it... why say that instead of saying...?

Student: Again, I cannot find a word.

Interviewer: Don't worry.

Student: I'm rubbish.

Interviewer: Not at all. I think that's brilliant, I'm just wondering what the effect is. I would call that a parallel structure. You've got the repeated pattern. But why does that sound effective?

Student: It makes it more_ like makes it more scary and mysterious.

Interviewer: Scary, mysterious...

Student: Tense? Stressful? It's something to do with the short, single word.

Interviewer: And you've got something similar towards the end. You've got shining bright... not possible. Tell me about that not possible.

Student: Meant to sound like something that could never happen, never see something like that before, not possible to happen.

While coding the interviews, it also became apparent that students were better able to discuss effect and impact in relation to their own work than the text sample used in interview one. For example, the following student (predicted a below average grade at GCSE) struggled to attribute any effects to language in the first interview:

Student 4 (F, predD): Inconsiderate. That's a good use of a word. I'm not sure I just thought it was really good.

Interviewer: Can you say anything about how it's using sentences?

Student: I don't know, I don't think so. I don't think they use a range of sentences but that's all I can say. ...

Interviewer: Is there any advice you could give to improve their sentences at all?

Student: No, I think it's good and they use good variety in it.

Interviewer: What do you mean by good variety?

Student: It's like saying things in a good range _like writing words kind of

In contrast, the student's discussion of her own writing revealed a considerable ability to articulate authorial intent in relation to both word and sentence choice (despite the misunderstanding of 'minor sentence'):

Interviewer: I'm interested in the fact that you changed a word there, from monster...then later you'd written creature, then changed it to demon. Why did you change it to demon? ...

Student: I thought it's more effective saying demon than creature, cause creature could be anything, could be just like a spider, that creature. The demon is more of a devil and you can get more scared of the devil, than you are scared of like a little thing.

...

Student: I've got two minor sentences.

Interviewer: So the two minor sentences are the demon started to growl and a chill swept up my spine. Why are they minor sentences?

Student: Because they're shorter ...

Interviewer: Ok, ...first of all, do you think that there's an effect from those sentences being short?

Student: I thought the demon started to growl would put an effect on the reader because the reader would start to get chills, like goose bumps and they'd want to read on to see what this demon going to do, or going to do to the girl.

In some cases, this difference may be because students found the text sample difficult to understand, or it may reflect the short period of development when students were exposed to the intervention between interviews, but it is also possible that the direct access to the authorial intention of their own writing makes it easier for students to reflect metapragmatically. In the sample above, the student is able to clearly recall and express her deliberate writing choices, and articulate with some precision what her reader might be expected to imagine.

Discussion

These interviews provide important insight into the ability of adolescent students to reflect metalinguistically on texts, and the role of grammatical metalanguage in supporting this. The findings echo those of Chen and Myhill (2016) and Galloway et al. (2015) in

indicating that students are better able to reflect on word level choices than syntactic features; however, here we suggest that this may be a particular artefact of the need for a specialised metalanguage for discussing syntax. While students could discuss the impact of individual words without recourse to terminology, the ability to identify and articulate syntactic patterns, and then to relate these to effect on the reader, was clearly supported by the use of terms such as 'noun phrase' or 'parentheses'. Here, it is possible to see the importance of metalanguage as a mediator in the development of new knowledge (Chen & Myhill, 2016). The level of abstraction required to be able to see and discuss the relationships between words presents a far greater cognitive challenge than a focus on individual word choices, and knowledge of terminology scaffolds this by providing abstract mental representations of syntactic patterns which can be looked for when analysing new texts. This reflects Gombert's assertion that metasyntactic understanding must be learned through explicit teaching (1992), and lends evidence to Myhill and Jones' (2015) suggestion that it is harder to discuss metasyntactic features without grammatical terminology.

Clearly, students find it easiest to reflect on the effect of features which are more readily associated with a particular purpose (e.g. imperatives, rhetorical questions), although interpretation which remains at this generalised level is usually relatively superficial. Conversely, the more 'open' the concept (e.g. complex sentence), the more difficult it appears to be for students to use their knowledge of form to develop metapragmatic interpretations. This may reflect an unarticulated expectation that the relationship between form and function is static; that is, a tendency to attribute a single 'effect' to a grammatical form. What this research signals is particularly difficult for students, then, is to develop an understanding of the context-dependent nature of the relationship between form and function. This is not unique to grammatical features, but may equally apply to literary and rhetorical forms.

The interviews further suggest that students' own writing is an effective platform for developing their reading and analysis, supporting metalinguistic thinking. When discussing their own writing, students were more confident in applying metalinguistic terms and commenting on the effect they intended to create. Where students were less confident, the interviewer was often able to prompt the student to an articulation of the effects they created unconsciously. The interview process highlights the potential of writing *for* reading, that grounding discussion of effect in students' own writing supports their understanding of linguistic and grammatical choice, perhaps because those choices originate with them. Equally, like Galloway et al. (2015), the interviews provide evidence of how effective talk can scaffold students' metalinguistic reflection, drawing out and clarifying their emergent understandings through probing questioning – a finding with pedagogical resonance (e.g. see Myhill et al., 2016).

Theoretically, the study indicates the interrelatedness of aspects of metalinguistic reflection which, while important to separate conceptually, are closely bound together in the process of writing and analysing writing. The interviews show how unconscious linguistic choices can be brought to consciousness and articulated through discussion, lending support to Myhill and Jones' (2015) suggestion that 'the process of verbalizing may support emerging metalinguistic understanding' (p. 847). The ability to reflect metapragmatically on sentence-level features is also strongly related to declarative metasyntactic knowledge. The fact that students were better able to analyse their own texts suggests

that it would be interesting to further probe the relationship between procedural and declarative knowledge: to what extent is declarative knowledge reinforced or expanded when students translate it into procedural activity? Can explicit declarative knowledge emerge from reflection on implicit procedural knowledge – or, to use the terminology of Bialystok and Ryan (1985), can analysis emerge from control?

Conclusion

The prominent place of grammar in the English curriculum undoubtedly presents significant challenges for teachers and pupils; however, this study indicates that there is value in introducing young writers to traditional grammatical terminology. Verbalisable understanding of the impact of syntactic features, in particular, is improved when students have access to terminology which helps them to identify and articulate patterns more precisely. This has important implications for teachers, given the fact that knowledge of grammar, and particularly syntax, is often an area of deficit for many who were themselves educated at a time when explicit grammar was only taught infrequently (Dean, 2016; Myhill, Jones, & Watson, 2013; Watson, 2012). The study also indicates that grammatical terminology *can* be used effectively in a contextualised, meaning-orientated fashion which, like systemic functional linguistics, centres on communicative impact.

This study is particularly significant in indicating the value of using students' own writing as a platform for developing emergent declarative knowledge about grammar, indicating the reciprocity of declarative and procedural knowledge. Knowledge which is activated procedurally through writing activities can be elicited in declarative form through careful questioning which prompts and scaffolds students' attempts to articulate their authorial choices. Asking students about how they designed their writing can develop their sensitivity to the range of intentions that authors can have, helping them to a deeper, more contextualised appreciation of meaning and effect and, hopefully, avoiding the reification of form-function relationships which more superficial analysis of the linguistic features of texts can engender. If the aim of language teaching is to empower students to understand, explore and manipulate language – developing both analysis and control – then we conclude that the contextualised teaching of grammatical terminology can have an important function in supporting that goal.

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