From [*grammar*] research to the classroom: Putting [*context-based*] theory into practice

VICTESOL

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Chapter 1: Introduction

WHAT'S THIS? RESEARCH FOR A MINOR THESIS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

"Using AI to bridge gaps in teacher grammar knowledge and support context-based grammar instruction in secondary English language arts education"

Me teaching grammar

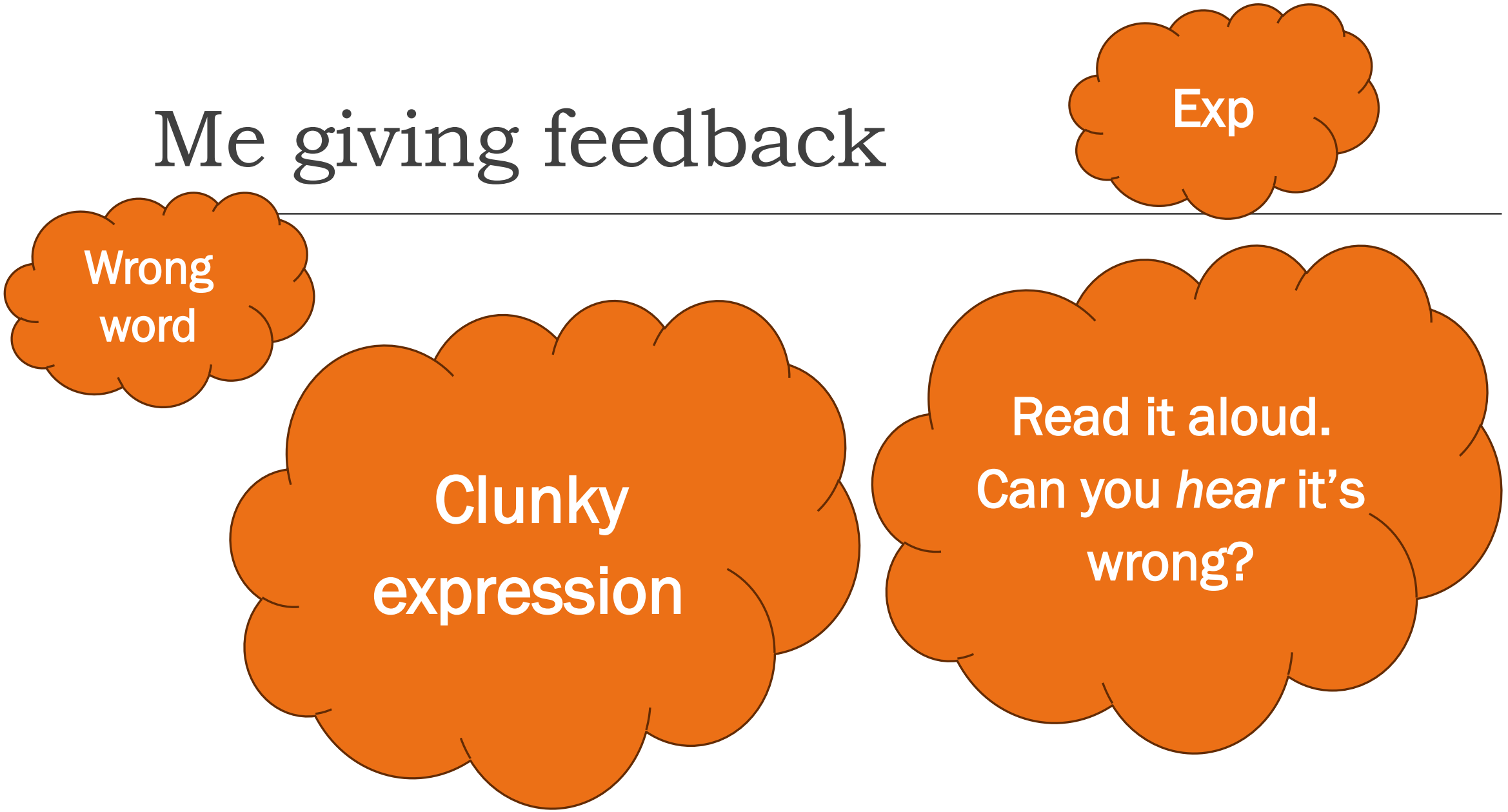
NAPLAN prep

It's boring

Highlight the adjectives in the following sentences

I've told them a thousand times, and they still get it wrong!

Me giving feedback



How many degrees does it take change a grammar approach?

Q: Where did I learn grammar?

- First language English
- Australian schooling – both public and private
- My Nan helped with writing homework
- Arts undergrad
- Grad Dip teaching
- Masters in EduIB
- Masters in Applied Linguistics



Research to practice

Problem:
I suck at grammar

I can't teach it if I don't understand it

There's a lot to understand

Innate grammar and spoken language

Solution:
???

How does one learn to make these explicit?

Linguistics; phonetics, morphology, lexicology and syntax ("lexcio-grammatical"); discourse and pragmatics

Chapter 2: Literature review

WHAT DO WE ALREADY KNOW?

What is grammar?

Think of grammar as a ***resource*** that students can draw on

Grammatical resource	Grammatical knowledge examples	Layer
Lexico-grammatical knowledge	Diction choice, word class, clause structure	Sentence level and below
Linguistic knowledge	Cohesion, register, genre	Text level
Contextual knowledge	Discourse, social processes, audience, purpose	Social level

Grammar as rules

Grammar as linguistics (the study of language patterns)

Grammar as etiquette – i.e. implicit norms that are socially governed

(Dobakhti & Panahi, 2024; and Marjokorpi, 2023)

The Australian Curriculum: English

https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/curriculum-information/understand-this-learning-area/english

THREE STRANDS

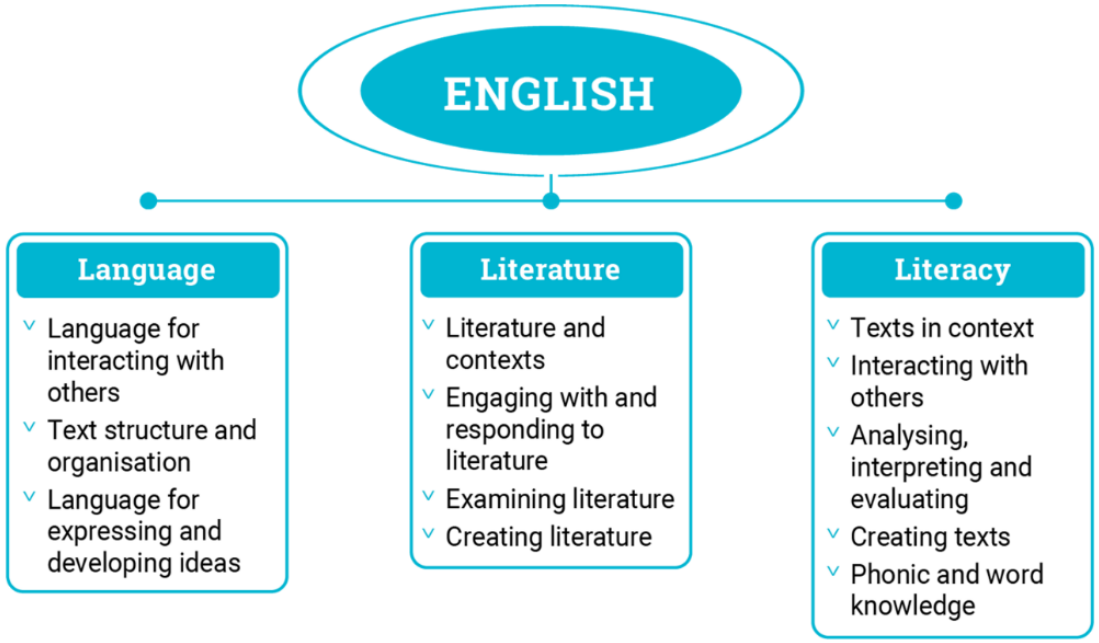


Figure 1: English content structure

LANGUAGE

"English language and how it works

Language operates within a contextual framework, in which choices vary according to topics, purpose and audience.

Students discover the patterns and purposes of English usage, including spelling, grammar and punctuation at the levels of the word, sentence and extended text.

understanding and talking about language, language in use and language as a system."

What do Australians need to know about English?

Interpreting the curriculum

EAL TEACHER, NOT A LINGUIST

AC9E9LA01

recognise how language empowers relationships and roles



EAL TEACHER AND LINGUIST

social distance

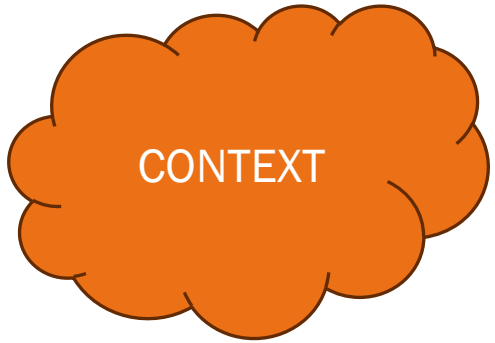
power dynamics

tenor

speaker roles

register

genre



Systemic Functional **Linguistics**

Systemic Functional **Linguistics** underpins the Language strand of the AC:E

Systemic Functional Linguistics is a linguistic theory from the functional school of thought

Language – a communicative tool, an identity builder and interpreter, a means by which to perceive the world, a conduit of knowledge, a way we realise our social-animal instincts

Linguistics – the scientific study of language and language use

Linguistic theory – theories used to describe language and language use

Formal linguistic theory – a set of formal systems that consider structure, rules and universality

Functional linguistic theory – socially-derived theories of language use where language is a resource

SFL – a functional theory of language developed by M. A. K. Halliday in the 1980s. Language has *meaning potential*; it is a system that humans draw upon to achieve their communicative ends i.e. to function.

Formal vs functional

What's the grammatical difference between "she gave me a book" and "she gave a book to me"

SHE GAVE ME A BOOK

Formally, this is a sentence made up of:

Subject + Predicate + Indirect Object + Direct Object

Functionally, this sentence answers the question, *What did Nilantha give to you?* (Focus on the book)

SHE GAVE A BOOK TO ME

Formally, this is a sentence made up of:

Subject + Predicate + Direct Object + Indirect Object

Functionally, this sentence answers the question, *Did she give a book to Eli?* (Focus on the recipient)

SLF

Language is a meaning making system (Matthiessen & Teruya, 2023)

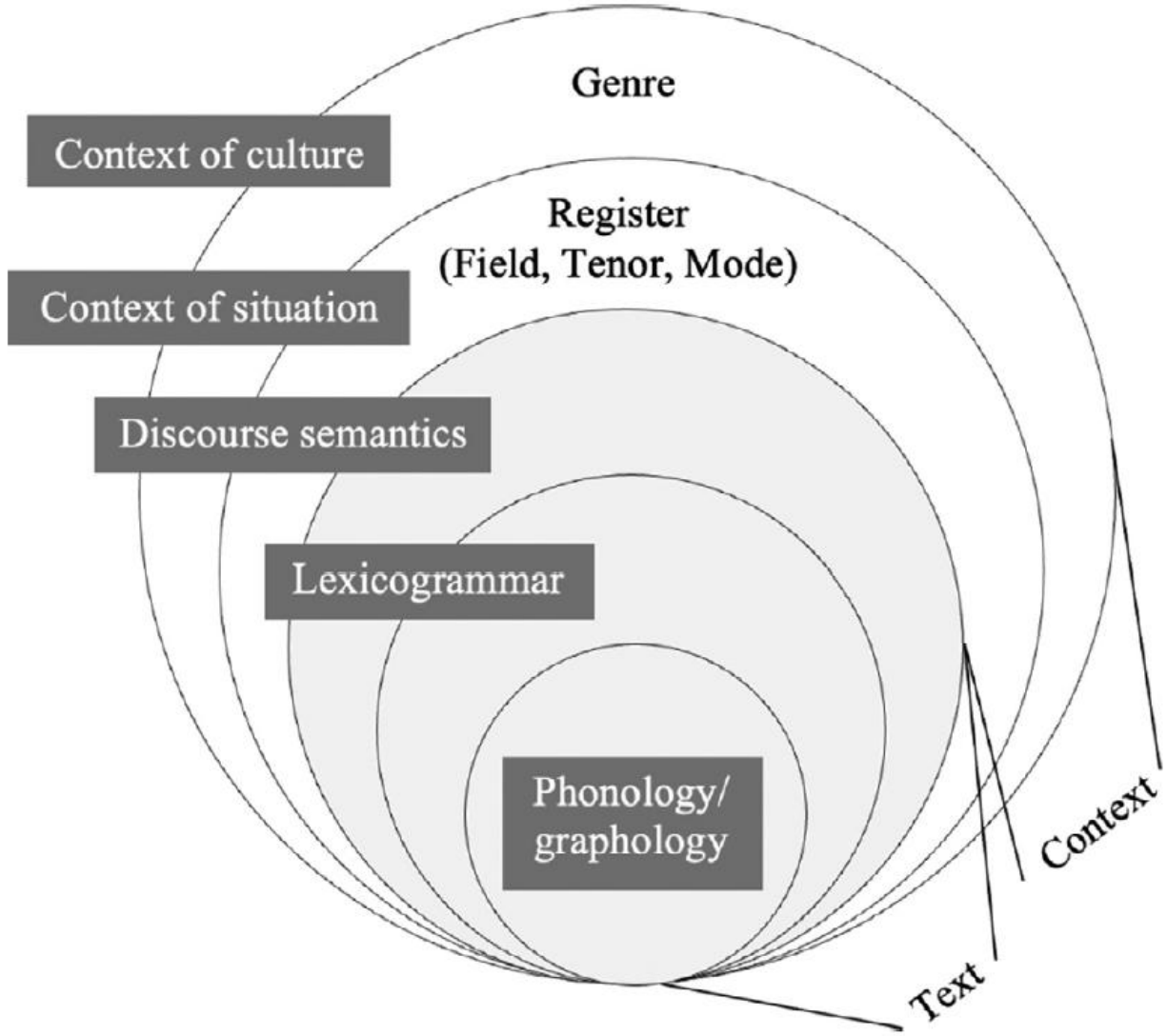


Fig. 2. The SFL model of language.

(Thomas, 2022, p3)

Linguistic theory worth teaching



The genre

these are based on social norms

purpose/s of the text

the conventions of a particular text type



The situation

register (formality, style)

field (message, content)

tenor (audience, participant relationship)

mode (spoken, written)



The language

making language choices from the available patterns that suit the genre and situation

lexical-grammatical structures and functions

Context is three times a queen



Cultural context



Situational context



Learning context

Chapter 3: Methodology

HOW DO WE DO THIS?

Pedagogical framework

Apply at the point of need

1. Discuss the context (social norms, audience and purpose, genre conventions, register, field, tenor, mode) – link grammar and function
2. Use real texts and model the grammatical forms – no lengthy explanations
3. Play with the grammatical forms (whole class, small group, individually) – discuss the choices and their effects

METATALK = talking about grammar

Adapted from Myhill et al. 2020

Pedagogical framework

Step 1 Context

What is a text response essay trying to do?

Why use embedded clauses for this genre, audience and purpose?

The blue flag, which flies in the background whenever the leader speaks, symbolises her honest engagement with the people.

Pedagogical framework

The blue flag, which flies in the background whenever the leader speaks, symbolises her honest engagement with the people.

STEP 2 Modelling

Consider examples of embedded clauses in essays.

STEP 3 Joint/individual composition

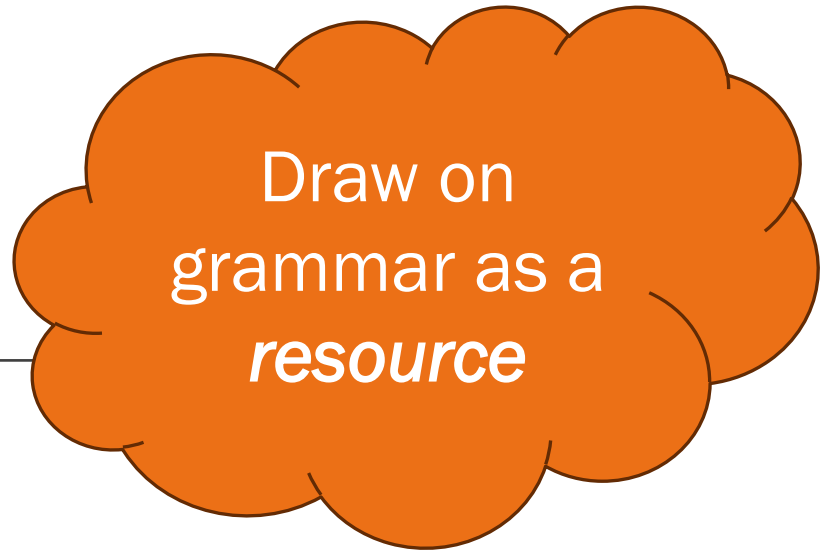
Write sentences with embedded clauses

Use embedded clauses in essay paragraph construction

Metatalk:

- Embedded clauses give parenthetical information.
- Why is the information parenthetical?
- What would happen if we left it out?
- What if we made it its own sentence?
- Explore the effect of the writers' choices on meaning.
- Try modifying the grammar and discuss readability, impact, clarity.

Metatalk



Metatalk considers language ***choices:***

What is "the relationship between a writer's authorial **intention**,

the linguistic **choices** which realise that intention,

and the intended **effect** on the reader";

Verbalise the choices to open up exploration and language possibilities.

(Myhill et al. 2020, p13)

Metatalk

She used the sharp pencil nib to *tear* the page as she listened to the lecture.

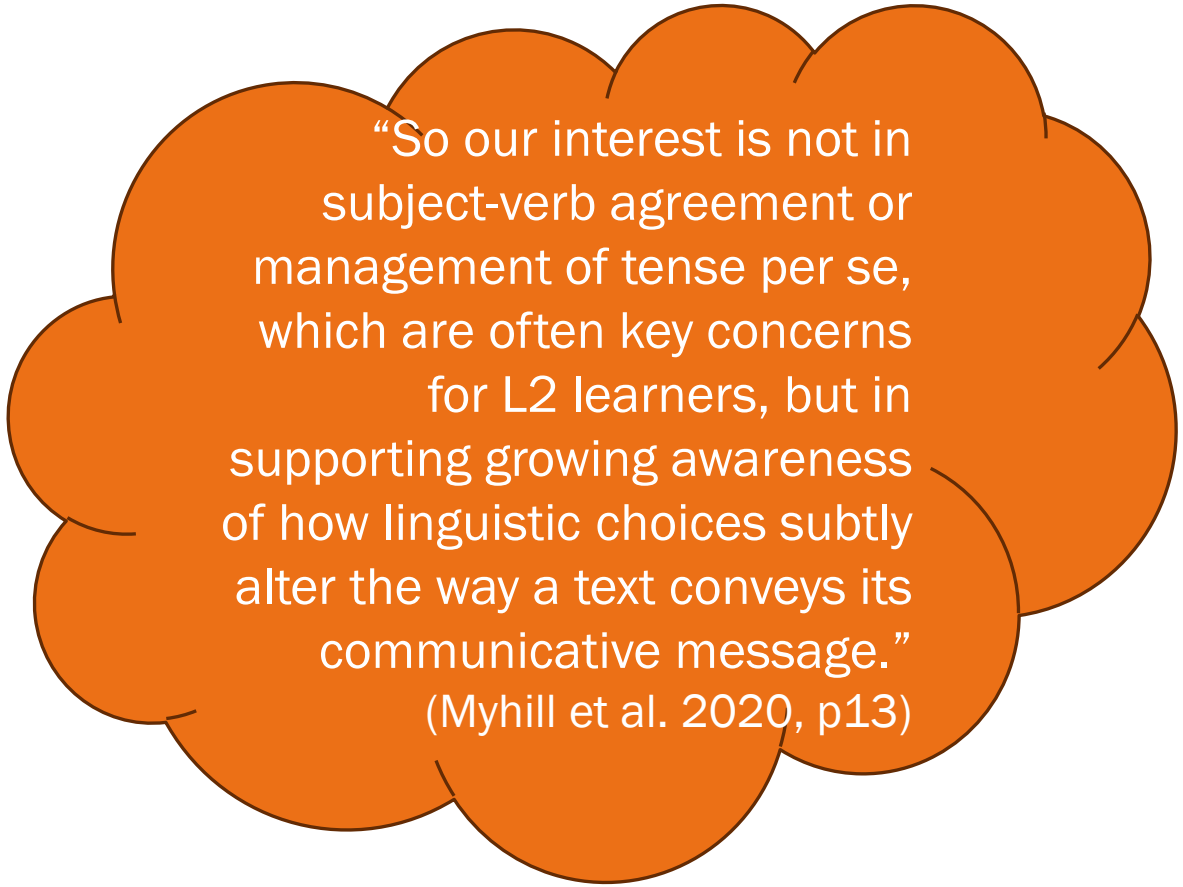
Metalinguistic / grammatical talk means teachers can:

1. identify the grammatical element ('this is a *verb*')
2. explain its function ('this is describing the character's behaviour')
3. consider its relevance and meaning ('this action gives us insight into the protagonist's mind and allows the reader to infer her feelings' *She is angry.*)

Or: (1) this is a subordinating clause; (2) it gives us information about the source of her concern; (3) it enables the reader to evaluate the necessity of her concern; offers imaginative practice at empathy. *She is angry that the lecturer got the job instead of her*.

Feedback: from correction to exploration

Correction	Exploration
subject-verb agreement issue	What will the reader understand about when this is happening?
weird word choice	How does this word alter the message?
missing apostrophes	How is trust built with the reader?



Example of curious feedback

Both Shelley and Euripides present obsession as the failure of the awareness of the induvial exemplifying how the pursuit of personal desire or power overwhelms virtue and leads to irreversible destruction. In Medea, Euripides employs hamartia through Medea's self awareness, as she admits, "I understand what evil I am about to do but my wrath is stronger even than my thoughts," revealing that her tragedy is her surrenderring to passion rather than being ignorant to it as their self recognition which intensifies the audience's sense of horror as medea knowingly prioritises ego and vengeance over her responsibilities. Likewise Shelley also frames Victor's obsession as a transgression through his own will rather than an innocent pursuit of knowledge, as his warning, "You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did may not be a serpent to sting you," as this quote alludes to Adam and Eve positioning Victor as a figure who knowingly repeats humanity's original sin of hubristic ambition and through this shelley uses this bliblical intertextuality to suggests that Victor understands the cost of overreaching but chooses his ambition regardless. Thus, both texts argue that the destruction arises from their personal choices as their obsession does not blind their protagonists but instead exposes the fatal dominance of ego over their conscience.

Your first sentence has a lot of ideas packed in and this makes it hard to read. Can you use less nominalisation (fewer passive constructions) and possibly break the sentence into two, to improve clarity?

Instead of 'quote', can you use another literary device, or use the noun form of the device you identify?

Well argued. You could maybe use a secondary piece of evidence for both examples, to add nuance to your ideas.

Note – nothing on spelling, missing capitals. When the student knows the appropriate grammar, a whole class mini-lesson on building ethos with an examiner would help more.

Chapter 4: Results

WHAT COMES OUT OF ALL THIS?

AI prompts – YOUR point of need

She used the sharp pencil nib to tear the page as she listened to the lecture. What part of speech is tear in this sentence?

In your sentence:

> **She used the sharp pencil nib to tear the page as she listened to the lecture.**

The word **“tear”** is a **verb**.

More specifically, it is a **base-form verb (bare infinitive)** used in an **infinitive phrase**.

AI with SFL in the prompt

GRAMMAR ONLY IN THE PROMPT

Nominalization (turning actions into concepts)

The passage frequently converts verbs into nouns, which is typical of formal analysis:

“observance,” “development,” “rejection,” “consciousness,” “self-consciousness”

Nominalization allows the writer to discuss processes abstractly, helping ideas build upon one another conceptually.

SFL IN THE PROMPT

1. Nominalisation and grammatical metaphor (ideational metafunction)

The passage relies heavily on **nominalised abstractions**, which is a hallmark of academic and analytical prose.

Examples: *“implied agnosticism”, “subjective development”*

Processes (thinking, developing, becoming aware) are turned into **things**. This allows:

- Dense packaging of meaning
- Ideas to be compared, expanded, and causally linked
- The argument to sound objective and theoretical rather than narrative

This grammatical metaphor shifts the text away from storytelling and into **conceptual reasoning**, which strengthens its analytical authority.

AI and reading

using systemic functional linguistics theory + considering language choices + drawing on grammar as a resource.
what is the relationhsip between a writer's authorial intention, the linguistic choices which realise that intention and the intended effect on the reading.
"Out past the shallows, past the sandy-bottomed bays,
comes the dark water - black and cold and roaring.
Rolling out an invisible path, a new line for them to follow.
To somewhere warm. To somewhere new."

The value of your expertise

Using **Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)** (M. A. K. Halliday), writing as a series of **meaningful choices** within a meaning-mak not a set of rules to follow, but a **resource for making meaning.**

In SFL terms, the relationship works like this:

Authorial intention → Linguistic choices (lexicogrammar) → meanings → Reader effect

Let's unpack that using your example:

"Out past the shallows, past the sandy-bottomed bays, come black and cold and roaring. Rolling out an invisible path, a ne To somewhere warm. To somewhere new."

---

1. Authorial Intention

The writer appears to intend to:

- Create a sense of **movement and transition**
- Build **tension or foreboding**
- Suggest a journey from danger to hope
- Position the reader emotionally within that movement

In SFL, intention is realised through choices across three metafu

- **Ideational** (what is happening? what experience is being rep
- **Interpersonal** (what stance or mood is adopted?)
- **Textual** (how is information organised to guide the reader?)

2. Linguistic Choices That Realise That Intentio

A. Ideational Meaning (Representation of Experience)

Material process: ***"comes the dark water"***

- The verb **comes** is dynamic and material.
- The water is personified as an active force.
- Agency is shifted — water becomes actor.

Effect: Nature feels powerful and inevitable.

Circumstantial foregrounding:

"Out past the shallows, past the sandy-bottomed bays..."

The clause begins with **location**, not subject.

In SFL terms:

- The **Theme** is a circumstantial element.
- The Subject ("the dark water") is delayed.

Effect:

- Creates suspense.
- Mimics physical movement outward.
- The reader journeys before the water arrives.

Grammar here is a pacing device.

Nominal group expansion:

"the dark water – black and cold and roaring"

The post-modifying string:

- Accumulation of adjectives
- Paratactic listing
- Sensory qualities (visual, tactile, auditory)

Effect:

- Intensifies threat.
- Builds experiential density.
- Overwhelms the reader with sensation.

The repeated **and** creates rhythmic force — a tidal effect.

B. Textual Meaning (Information Flow)

Fragmentation:

"Rolling out an invisible path, a new line for them to follow.
To somewhere warm.
To somewhere new."

These are **minor clauses** and non-finite constructions.

In SFL terms:

- Elliptical structures
- Thematic compression
- Marked textual choices

Effect:

- Slows pacing.
- Creates breath-like pauses.
- Suggests hope tentatively, al

The fragments isolate "warm" and

Grammar is shaping attention.

C. Interpersonal Meaning (Po

There are:

- No modal verbs
- No explicit judgement
- No personal pronouns (until "them")

The tone is observational yet evocative.

Effect:

- The reader is not told what to feel.
- The writer positions the reader to *experience* rather than be i
- The stance is poetic rather than directive.

3. Relationship Between Intention, Choice and Effect

In SFL terms:

Authorial intention is not separate from language —
it is realised *through* patterned linguistic choices.

The writer wants to:

- Create movement → so they use circumstantial Themes and dynamic processes.
- Create danger → so they build dense nominal groups and sensory descriptors.
- Create h → so th sitiv lds in short, rhythmic fragments.
- and theme position.
- es from:

while suppressing others.
ices pattern together.
system to guide interpretation.

hrough lexicogrammatical choices across the
metafun atterned choices position the reader to experience
particular meanings, emotions, and alignments.

Grammar is not decorative — it is functional and ideological.

Follow up prompts:

Model how to teach this concept explicitly to senior students.

Explain the key ideas for a 14 year old.

The value of your expertise

Material process: *"comes the dark water"*

- The verb **comes** is dynamic and material.
- The water is personified as an active force.
- Agency is shifted — water becomes actor.

Effect: Nature feels powerful and inevitable.



"took bits of information and use[d] that for [her] own annotations so then when [she] was discussing excerpts with the kids, it was more purposeful".



SFL metalanguage "material process": "difficult" and unhelpful.



Discuss the verb, the personification and the effect of water having agency conferred through the grammar.

Knowing what to ask

Genres have common grammatical forms

AI prompt: What sort of grammatical patterns are common in character building?

AI prompt: The character is not effectively developed in this writing sample. Which grammatical constructions might help improve it?

Students have trends in how they use language

AI prompt: Using systemic functional linguistics, explain what is problematic about the analytical phrase "which attracts the audience's attention" "located in the audience, not the text"

AI prompt: Considering this sample of writing, what grammatical constructions is the writer struggling to apply?

Be aware of the limitations

It can be hard to know what to ask AI

It is hard to parse the AI response into the wilds of metatalk, or anticipate the needs of the metatalk

The AI response might be inaccurate, and we might not be able to recognise this

I don’t have answers. Just stay curious, stay dubious, use it on the fly. AI *might* help. Sometimes.

Chapter 5: Discussion

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Decolonising language

Grammar as moral purity and symbol of educational effectiveness

Descriptivism and prescriptivism

Descriptivism	Prescriptivism
Describes the multitude of ways language is used	There is a correct and prescribed way that language should be used
Researchers and linguists	Teachers and education
Creative language play	Standardisation and correction

The problem is correct grammar is "predicated on white English-monolingual … norms – as an objective set of linguistic forms …

To challenge such views, teachers at all career stages must be equipped with awareness of the complex relationship between language, culture, and power, as well as specific strategies which will enable them to **convey and foster the potential they see in students' writing**."

Chang-Bacon & Pedersen, 2023, p11

EAL and cultural hegemony

PROBLEM

A prescriptive approach disenables curiosity and play in all emerging young writers (Myhill et al., 2020) and maintains cultural hegemony for additional language English speakers.

School leaving exams, AI-written job applications, obsession with NAPLAN results – all say society expects teachers to address correct grammar.

Divorcing grammar from error in teachers' minds is contrary to their values regarding the cultural capital it confers.

SOLUTION

Taking teachers' prescriptive views and *adding* to this the notion of descriptive grammar, context and choice, opens the door to addressing the cultural hegemony.

It enables teachers to run interference.

They can become a bridge between artificial moral rectitude and the realities of the multitudinous and creative ways language can achieve users' functions.

Where are you in the descriptive/prescriptive debate?

"...the tension between wanting to help students write "correctly" and taking students seriously as writers. Many participants wrote about the value of ascribing intentionality to students' language choices, rather than treating them as errors, and considered specific instances of language difference with curiosity instead of judgment."

Chang-Bacon & Pedersen, 2023, p11

Chapter 6: Conclusion Limitations and future directions

THESIS RESEARCH

AI ate my head

Ethics – students' IP, the environment, technocratic rule, the end of humanity etc.

Outsourced thinking, perpetuation of language norms, confident inaccuracy etc.

I sent a PhD proposal expanding on my research to a potential supervisor.

Response? Nix the AI.

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