

Language and grammar are tools for making meaning

Language and grammar

Key questions

- What is grammar?
- What do students need to know about language and grammar?
- Why is it important for students to learn about language and grammar?

Language is a system of choices made within cultural contexts. Language choices in texts are largely predictable as they function to achieve particular purposes within contexts. When looking at language, grammar can be a powerful tool for students to describe and analyse the language choices made by others and those in their own texts. Attention to grammatical accuracy is important, but it should always be seen in a context of meaning making.

An important part of this is metalanguage; language to talk about language. Students use it to describe, analyse and evaluate their own language choices and the choices of others. Metalanguage includes the terms usually associated with 'traditional' approaches to grammar, such as noun, verb, article etc. However, PETAA supports an approach to language which goes beyond labelling the form to understanding the role or functions different language features play in a text to make meaning. This functional approach includes descriptions of language, such as noun groups, which represent participants, and verb groups, which represent processes.

Students from literate, text-rich backgrounds may be unconsciously aware that language has patterns and be able to apply them to their own texts. However, they do not necessarily understand how the language is working and why. Some students will not have implicitly developed these skills. EAL/D students benefit from explicit instruction in the structures and features of texts as it gives them access to the texts valued in schooling.

It is for this reason that grammar must be taught explicitly; to give students the key to unlocking language. To do this, teachers need to have a rich and deep knowledge about language and how to teach it.

Key points

- A deep knowledge about language and how it works supports effective English and literacy teaching.
- Students need a language to talk about language, using terms from traditional and functional approaches to language.
- Grammar must be taught explicitly in context of meaning making across a range of modes.

Further information

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Resources to support teachers can be found on the PETAA website www.petaa.edu.au