Review

Luciana C. de Oliveira and Mary J. Schleppegrell,

Focus on grammar and meaning

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Reviewed by

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A quiet reimagining of what it might mean to teach school students knowledge about grammar has been taking place for some time (at my reckoning, at least two decades), informed by a renewed focus on quality pedagogy and also on the kinds of grammatical knowledge which might be of most use to students. Substantial innovations in the area have been informed by systemic functional linguistics ('SFL'), and it is this 'different kind of grammar teaching' (p.1) which is the subject of Luciana C. de Oliveira and Mary J. Schleppegrell's book *Focus on grammar and meaning* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

The authors deliberately signal that theirs is a 'reconceptualization' of grammar teaching (p.1) because a wide readership is envisaged, inclusive especially of those for whom the functional grammar upon which the book's approach is based may well be entirely new. The book is a contribution to the series *Oxford Key Concepts for the Language Classroom*. This series is aimed at teachers of English to speakers of other languages, both in-service and pre-service teachers, and the book will certainly be of special interest to those whose students' L1 is not English. (It is worth noting here that while such students are commonly referred to as L2 learners of English, including in this book, English may of course be a third, fourth or more language (perhaps L2+ for greater clarity).

Focus on grammar and meaning is not, however, exclusively for the 'ESL' or 'TESOL' teacher. Teachers throughout schooling systems in English-speaking countries are routinely, and increasingly, expected to accommodate the needs of English language learners within mainstream

classes. For example, in Australia roughly 25-30% of school students have a language background other than English, and local demographics mean many schools are catering for populations where over 90% are L2(+) learners. This book is therefore likely to be of interest to *all* teachers who accept that their role involves supporting English language and literacy development across the curriculum for all students, and pages 16–19 of Chapter 1 provide a strong rationale along these lines. Certainly the book assumes no special 'ESL' knowledge, just as no 'SFL' knowledge is assumed. Novices of various kinds are likely to find the book accessible and its ideas and examples supportive of new learning. To that end, relevant and engaging learning activities aimed at the teacher-reader are built into each chapter, and these are followed by explanations which allow readers to check and develop their understandings.

For teachers keen to get to the parts of books which address classroom practice, *Grammar and meaning*'s first chapter is not one to be skipped. In the first few pages of the chapter, two examples of 'reconceptualised' grammar teaching are recounted and then unpacked. This unpacking includes discussing the language forms being taught (in one class, different 'speech functions' used to give commands; in the other, the expression of 'agency' in a high school History text), thus building reader familiarity with some of the book's metalanguage for the classroom. Also introduced in Chapter 1 through classroom examples are some aspects of the teaching–learning of grammar which will feature throughout the book, such as 'scaffolding', 'noticing' and 'putting the forms in focus in meaningful context'. The chapter thus orients readers to the informed *and* practical approach that will be taken throughout the book. Readers are also invited to consider their own beliefs about instruction in grammar using a self-reflection activity (p.8), with the authors promising to return to a discussion of these beliefs in the final chapter – a nicely managed way of engaging with the range of different views about teaching grammar likely to be held by the intended readership.

Chapter 2 provides the theoretical underpinnings of the authors' approach to teaching grammar and relates these to teaching and learning practice. Written in a straightforward style which will be welcomed by those for whom the theory is unfamiliar, this chapter's light touch belies the strong foundations which it builds for reconceptualising the role of grammar in literacy development for English language learners. Ideas in this chapter are consistently discussed in terms of their

relevance for teaching language, and as with all chapters in the book there are 'classroom snapshots' which exemplify key points.

Vygotskyan sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) informs the book's approach to teaching and learning grammar. A relevant strength of the theory for language learning is its capacity to connect the social and the cognitive: '[p]articipating in interaction provides opportunities for language use, and that participation enables learners to internalize new ways of using language' (p.29). Drawing also upon studies in second language acquisition, the authors argue that language learning optimally involves *both* meaningful use of language in contexts of social interaction (Krashen's 'comprehensible input') *and* 'explicit attention to language form' (p. 30). Crucially, the forms focused upon need to be connected to their role in realising meaning, or to think of it the other way around: 'interaction and negotiation of meaning can support a focus on form' (p. 36).

It is the connection between form and meaning which drives the authors' adoption of systemic-functional linguistics (for example, Halliday, 1978; 1994: Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014) as the theory of language informing their grammar teaching. The authors follow Halliday in viewing language and language learning as inherently social and oriented to meaning-making. The value of SFL is also seen by the authors to extend to furnishing grammatical descriptions for use in the classroom. Several of these functional grammar descriptions (drawn from, for example, Halliday, 1994) are introduced in Chapter 2, including: participant, process and circumstance as elements for 'presenting ideas'; speech functions and modality as aspects of 'enacting relationship'; and connectors and reference devices as part of the grammar of 'constructing a cohesive message'. As readers familiar with SFL would realise, this metalanguage reworks some terms and ideas for pedagogical purposes, but the integrity of original concepts is retained. A glossary at the back of the book supports readers who are new to the terminology.

A further foundation is laid in this chapter in terms of ESL pedagogy, with Pauline Gibbons' work (2006) in particular supplying helpful ways to describe 'pedagogic moves' in the classroom snapshots of ensuing chapters.

Chapters 3 and 4 are companion pieces which describe classroom-based research: the former focuses on younger learners up to 12 years of age; the latter on adolescents. The starting point taken is to look at the kinds of reading and writing expected of students in these respective phases of schooling, and then to consider ways in which the teaching of relevant aspects of grammar might support students in successfully comprehending and composing these texts.

The classroom 'snapshots' and classroom research 'spotlights' featured in these chapters cover a range of content areas, such as history, science, mathematics and language arts. In each case, real examples are reflected upon and strategic pedagogic moves taken by teachers are pointed out. These moves include 'recasting' student contributions in order to support the development of discourse-specific language features, and 'talking about language, using meaningful metalanguage'. Indeed, rich talk about authentic texts is integral to the approach, as are other teacher-guided collaborative activities such as shared deconstruction of texts being read in class and joint construction of writing. Carefully interwoven with the classroom examples are discussions of relevant whole-text (genre) and finer-grained (grammatical) language features of the texts being studied, so that teachers reading the book are provided with analytical tools with which they might begin similar discussions in their own classrooms. A chief reason offered for using metalanguage with students is that it helps to make knowledge about form–meaning connections 'portable': 'The role of the metalanguage is to provide a means of abstracting from the actual wording to the larger categories of meaning that form the grammatical systems of the language' (p.97). The point is not merely to provide support for students in dealing with the particular texts of specific lessons, but rather to provide ways of thinking about patterns in language which students can then apply to various 'scientific', 'historical' and other texts they need to read and write.

The final chapter returns readers to the beliefs about grammar teaching which were the subject of a personal reflection activity in Chapter 1, discussing and evaluating each belief in turn. These ten beliefs effectively summarise the approach to the teaching of grammar which has been developed in the book. The authors also make several recommendations, one of which captures for me the essence of the book, namely that 'grammar ... [should] be *infused into the curriculum* across activities involving all language skills' (p.114, emphasis added). For those whose appetite for this

different, 'infused' kind of grammar teaching has been whetted, the end matter includes a list of recommended further readings.

Focus on grammar and meaning by Luciana C. de Oliveira and Mary J. Schleppegrell is a book which shares in very practical and soundly theorised ways many examples of 'form + meaning focussed' grammar lessons, taught using authentic texts and without simplifying but rather enhancing the curriculum for L2 learners. Its goal is not merely for L2 learners to be more literate in some generic sense, but rather to equip L2 learners to succeed in all content areas in the curriculum because they understand the different ways knowledge is constructed using language in different academic discourses.

The book's dedication acknowledges two valued sources of inspiration. The first – the teachers and students with whom the writers have worked over many years in developing their approach to the teaching of grammar, whose voices are heard in the multiple classroom vignettes throughout the book and whose documented successes (humbly under-played by the authors) should give teachers great confidence in what the book has to offer. The second – Michael Halliday, the linguist whose work has energised and equipped many educators similarly interested in language in schooling, literacy learning across the curriculum and equity. This book is an accessible and well-articulated contribution to the pursuit of that equity.

References

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