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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. Transcriptions of video-taped extracts of the lesson's introductory phase 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 Visual Arts teachers being highly skilled in appreciating, identifying and acting upon the unique linguistic demands of their subject area and for having pedagogies for teaching such.

Curriculum Literacies: The Visual Arts

Generally speaking, all school curricula is defined by its content knowledge and ways of representing this knowledge. Taking up the arguments advanced by Wyatt-Smith and Cumming (2003), there exists no single set of literacy skills that will ensure successful engagement with all school curricula; rather particular curricula are represented in specific ways. This specificity is referred to as curriculum literacies (Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 2003). LoBianco and Freebody (1997, p. 92) support this notion, explaining that 'each subject, through the discipline/s and traditions on which it rests, presents an orientation to

knowledge using particular written, spoken, and symbolic forms'. Visual Arts curriculum is no exception. The content knowledge that is valued and how it is presented for learning and assessment is distinctive to the Visual Arts key learning area.

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).

Pedagogically speaking, the syllabus advocates for the adoption of a '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 syllabus offers the following rationale for the aforementioned terminology focus and its articulation of the 'learner-centred' pedagogical 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). 'Nominal groups tend to condense information while at the same time abstracting it' (Knobel, cited in Gerot & Wignell, 2001, p. 155).

Added to this complexity is the finding from two significant research projects that middle years students' literacy performances 'stagnate' or 'fade' over time (Lingard et al, 2001; Carrington, 2002). Recent research into this dilemma offers a number of possible reasons. Lemke (2001) suggests the academic demands of middle years subjects confound students. Unsworth (1997) draws attention to the disproportion amount of time early years teachers spend on the exploration and scaffolding of literary texts vis-à-vis factual texts. Luke et al's (2002) DEST report on the literacy development of middle years students critiqued the ad hoc approach to literacy instruction across middle years content in a number of sites under investigation. Thus these notable research findings suggest the need for carefully theorised and articulated scaffolding of literacy instruction within each middle years key learning area.

The next section of this article introduces one teacher, Mr Brandt Ember (pseudonym) and his multi-age Year 7/6 class at Bushland State School (pseudonym). Bushland State School is a small multi-age school located in an inner-city working class suburb of Brisbane. Mr Ember has been teaching in Queensland schools for approximately two decades and has undertaken postgraduate studies in Visual Arts education and in linguistics. The students participating in this lesson had only just begun a unit of study where the aim was to [1] build students' awareness and appreciation of the elements and principles of design, and [2] encourage students to consider the elements and principles of design in their own art productions and artist statements. The lesson under investigation focused on joint and independent construction of written descriptions of a two-dimensional art work. This paper analyses the introduction to this lesson. Commentary on the remainder of the lesson will be provided in a follow-on paper to be published at a later date. The introductory part of this lesson is remarkable for the way Mr Ember draws upon his own understandings to identify the linguistic complexity of content terminology and the grammatical complexity of the written task. He responds with two teacher-directed phases of instruction that scaffolds the students through de-nominalising the framework terminology and using this to build a particular type of nominal groups in preparation for the main phase of the lesson.

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

During the lesson under examination, Mr Ember worked with his Year 7/6 multi-aged class to produce 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. This artwork was selected by Mr Ember on three accounts: the school had a large laminated print of the painting that allowed all students to view it with ease; its abstract form allowed for multiple interpretations; and all students in this class were familiar with the subject matter of a busy and sprawling Sydney.



Sydney Sun by John Olsen (1965)

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

The introduction to the lesson took place in three phases. The first phase included discussion about the students' initial reaction to the painting. Students offered a range of suggestions: 'a pumping heart', 'a map of chaos', 'spreading ooze', and 'insect drawings'. In the second phase, the students discussed what they knew about Sydney the city. The students described Sydney as 'busy', 'bustling' and 'hectic'. Notions of life in a busy cosmopolitan city were not foreign to these students given that they were all long-term residents of an inner-city suburb of Brisbane. The third phase of the introduction focused on 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 the 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 scribing practice also served to affirm 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 the moments when Mr Ember recognised the

students' confusion 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 (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 (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 (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'. This transference of meaning is referred to by Halliday (1985) as grammatical metaphor. Technically speaking, the congruent realisation of verbs has been transferred to the metaphorical realisation of nouns. While nominalisations make a text more compact and 'written-like' it also makes the text 'dense and abstract' (Derewianka, 2002, p. 21-11). This is because nominalisations make more places for

adding experiential information. Halliday (1985) argues even not so young children cannot understand grammatical metaphors. Many students thus need assistance in unpacking the grammatical resource of nominalisation. Mr Ember realised this and scaffolded the students in de-nominalising the elements through linguistic and sometimes gestural expression (identified in brackets in the extract above). As a result, the students were better able to show their understanding of the elements and principles of design. The students' responses indicated its worth and as demonstrated in Extract Two, below, contributed to the success of the next part of the lesson's introduction.

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. A nominal group, 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' or 'qualifier'. In narratives modifiers/qualifiers tend to be descriptive, whereas in factual texts they 'focus on being precise through classifying and quantifying' (DECS, 2004, p. 134). This often means that classifiers come from a finite set of options (Gerot & Wignell, 2001, p. 144). Thus nominal groups which include precise classifiers 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? (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 (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 (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 (scribes and draws line between two terms)</i>
18	Student	<i>Repetition of shape</i>
19	Mr Ember	<i>Repetition of shape (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 that will follow later in the lesson has led to his focus on a more delicate 'ranking' of grammar than the clause. He has focused on an element of 'group' rank, in this case, nominal groups. While nominal groups can include a range of possible pre- and post-modifications/qualifications, Mr Ember limits the focus to its logical structure of classifiers attached to technical head nouns/things. The function of the classifier is to provide information about 'what type' or 'what kind' of head noun (Gerot & Wignell, 2001, p. 144). The purpose of focusing on objective classifiers is two fold: to build the nominal group by adding the grammatical resource that is closest to the head noun; and to hone in on the grammatical resource that separates nominal groups in technical subjects (such as the Visual Arts) from the more descriptive nominal groups that are typically found in narratives. Packing information into one grammatical unit such as a nominal group assists students in producing work that is more 'written-like' and thus serves as a useful introduction to the main part of the lesson where written descriptions will be jointly and independently constructed. The students' responses to this phase of the introduction showcase the worth of this careful scaffolding.

Conclusion

This paper makes two significant points about the role and place of literacy knowledge for Visual Arts teachers: the currency of literacy instruction in disparate subject areas such as Visual Arts curriculum; and the need for the Visual Arts teacher to be skilled at providing this instruction. In short, Mr Ember has provided scaffolding for the complex linguistic (Extract One) and grammatical (Extract Two) demands of Visual Arts analysis without overlaying or burdening this introductory part of the lesson with a grammatical metalanguage. He effectively supports his students with denominalising technical Visual Arts terms (Extract One) and then scaffolded the building of the types of nominal groups that allow meaning and precision to be packed into simple sentences in Visual Arts written descriptions (Extract Two). Specifically, Extract Two focused on adding technical classifiers to the head noun. The success of this introductory part of the lesson is due in no small part to Mr Ember's appreciation, identification and scaffolding of the linguistic and grammatical demands of this analysis and written task. The analysis highlights the importance of each teacher having a deep knowledge of the literacy demands unique to their subject area and being skilled at the pedagogies of making it accessible and meaningful to students.

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