

Comments on the 'Grammar at the coalface' series

Words differently arranged have different meanings, and meanings differently arranged have a different effect.
Blaise Pascal, philosopher (1623-1662)

Dr Lenore Ferguson

The 'Grammar at the Coalface' series is now old business from a practitioner viewpoint.

It is unnecessary to post a detailed response to 'Errors in the Coalface Grammar'. Essentially, it presents, as errors:

- o numerous statements that do not exist in my articles
- o a great deal of additional material (more than half of its 40 pages) that is beyond their stated purpose, scope and capacity
- o 'errata' published in *Words'Worth* in 2008.

I do feel obliged, however, to make several comments.

Some colleagues apparently found parts of the 'Grammar at the coalface' series useful and several offered constructive comments. But most of us have moved on – as one might expect. Our journal articles are 'works-in-progress'. They propose, or report the effects of, ways to reframe and synthesise aspects of academic theories for classrooms. We need to continue to listen, read, reflect, talk with colleagues, and test ideas in classrooms – and value the opportunity to share our ideas and experiences respectfully through *Words'Worth*. Our journal allows us to share this workload as well as the diverse ideas and experiences of colleagues.

As English teachers, we regularly monitor a range of academic theories in literature, language, and literacy – including theories about, and descriptions of, grammar. The 'Grammar at the coalface' series suggested possible ways to reframe and use selected aspects of several grammars to support literacy teaching in schools. Using basic principles derived from functional rather than formal grammars, I built upon local literacy inservice programs, incorporated classroom practices that were recognised as effective, and addressed key questions that colleagues had raised.

My introduction to the series framed it as part of a functional (i.e. practical and meaningful) approach to improve students' abilities to read, write, and appreciate literature and other texts. In a *total of 33 pages*, my 4 articles provided brief explanations about, and examples of:

- (1) grammatical properties that enable words to function as different parts of speech
- (2) purposes and structures of functional elements in a clause – and their grammatical relationships
- (3) ways words and phrases can function as logical or persuasive discourse markers, and
- (4) ways words and phrases can function to express attitudes and be arranged to create verbal art for aesthetic purposes.

In addition, each article included a few learning activities to illustrate potential classroom applications.

I explicitly drew on several grammars to cater for the varied learning needs of students. An approach derived from a single theory cannot do this. There are numerous schools of academic grammars that differ in their purposes and perspectives. Academic grammars and grammars developed for schools also reflect their quite different purposes – one theoretical and one practical. To illustrate: as the grammatical properties of nouns and pronouns are identical¹, in my second article *Sam's* was included as an example under the heading 'possessive pronoun' as one kind of determiner in the widely-used table – pre-modifying structures of a noun group. That inclusion has prompted some teachers to usefully amend the heading in this table to 'possessive noun or pronoun'. I deliberately scoped my articles in focus, extent, and approach to address the needs of schools and students, and included widely-used classroom practices and resources to make links with teachers' current experiences.

'Errors in the Coalface Grammar' replaces my practical framing with a theoretical one and evaluates my articles from this superimposed perspective. It demands an extensive, pure grammar rather than my selection and combination of material and practices that are effective in developing literacy skills. My articles were clearly not presented as a theoretical 'short account of English grammar' as is claimed. Its renaming of 'Grammar at the coalface' to 'The Coalface Grammar', signals a repositioning from the practical to the theoretical. This change is confirmed by its exclusion of the framing introduction in my first article and of the

¹ See Huddleston, Rodney & Pullum, Geoffrey (2002) *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. In this grammar, pronouns are not given as a separate word class. They are said to be syntactically indistinguishable from nouns except that pronouns cannot take determiners as dependents. This distinction is arguable, however, as in the common expression 'This is my one', *one* is a pronoun and *my* its dependent determiner. Nevertheless, students need to consider more factors than just syntactic properties as they develop and refine their literacy skills. Thus it is desirable to keep nouns and pronouns as separate parts of speech in classroom activities, while acknowledging their common syntactic properties.

illustrative learning episodes and activities (not 'exercises', as asserted). As is stated, the 40-page critique focuses on 15½ pages from two of my articles, as did the 40-odd pages of critique published by ETAQ for the same author in March 2008.

The 'summary sample of errors' is said to prepare readers for the 'seriousness of the problem' revealed in the 'catalogue of errors' presented in §II (named §II. **Schedule of errors**). Any item in a list is, of necessity, out of its context. Thus there is the possibility of misrepresentation. Perhaps this is why about half the items in these lists state that I 'classified' words incorrectly. The word *classify* does not appear in my articles.

Teachers know from experience that classificatory grammar causes confusion for many students. By operating with the grammatical function of words, however, students can consider more easily how language structures contribute to meaning. I took the latter approach and clarified it early in my first article (pp. 35- 36 of *Words'Worth* Vol 40, No 1 2007). Specifically, I stated:

*Many words can belong to more than one word class. They are assigned a word class according to the grammatical role they play in each instance, e.g., **a round of drinks** (noun), **a round clock** (adjective), **round the edge** (verb), **go round** (adverb), **go round the corner** (preposition).*

Words were thus considered for their capacity to function grammatically in certain classes. I was explicitly concerned with function and not classification, e.g., 'porcelain' in 'porcelain figurine' functions as an adjective (*What kind?*), and therefore is an adjective in that context. Word classes were used as an organizer so that readers could compare easily the grammatical properties of words functioning as different parts of speech.

That this critique does not evaluate my articles on their own terms is quite unhelpful – a point made in my substantial, formal response to the author's first critical review in Nov-Dec 2007.

My professional career is not limited to the study of English grammar. It has involved:

- o teaching English (including grammar) in schools
- o developing English curriculum and providing teacher support in English curriculum and literacy
- o teaching English curriculum and literacy to preservice teachers in universities, and
- o teaching theoretical and applied functional grammar to post-graduate students.

Drawing on these experiences, I offered to colleagues some selected aspects of different grammars – carefully combined and reframed for practical school purposes.

A small handful of editing/proofing errors, principally among over 1200 examples in the series, reportedly did not cause confusion for teachers. Such errors are regrettable but almost inevitable – even in some commercial publications that have won awards.

Like all contributors to our journal, I have no reason to apologise for preparing, in good faith, articles that collegiate ETAQ members had the choice to read, ignore, use, modify, reject or comment on – as their time and professional judgment determined.