Using the Language strand in the primary classroom
Sean Box and Louise Stewart

The Australian Curriculum: English (AC-E) includes content descriptions organised into three strands; Language, Literature and Literacy. In the AusVELS\(^1\), these content descriptions from across the three strands are organised into the language modes of Reading and viewing, Writing, and Speaking and listening. The Language strand includes an explicit, common metalanguage for describing the features and functions of language, with some terms drawn from functional grammar. While the metalanguage is explained in a comprehensive hyperlinked glossary, the Language strand may present a range of new concepts and terms for teachers.

One useful approach to the Language strand focuses on the language choices we make based on the subject matter (field), the roles and relationships between speakers and listeners, writers and readers, creators and viewers (tenor), and how language is organised to communicate (mode). This set of choices is referred to as the register continua\(^2\), and aligns to three of the sub-strands of the Language strand. This alignment is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: The register continua and the Language strand**

This focus on choices emphasises grammar in context, that is, how language works in texts dependent on the field, tenor and mode, assisting students to read, view or listen to texts, but also to speak or write them. ‘Grammar worksheets’ which merely drill a decontextualised rule are unlikely to meet the goals of the curriculum.

In this article, we have taken a sample written text response for a student working at Level 5, and have provided some activities, based on grammar resources from the Language strand, that would support this student to improve their writing.

The student responded to the question:

**How do the Brothers Grimm use the characters in Little Red Riding Hood to represent innocence and evil in order to teach a lesson?**

Their initial response to this question is shown in Figure 2.

While this article draws out resources within the Language strand for the purposes of explanation, elements of both the Literature and Literacy strands would also support students with this task. Additionally, while our student is working at Level 5, we hope to highlight the developmental nature of the curriculum. The AusVELS framework is structured by Levels and supports the notion that students will build on skills they have developed previously and the interrelated nature of the skills and knowledge they will acquire. In practical terms, this is useful as it will support teachers to better cater for the range of abilities that may be present in their class.

**Noun groups—building meaning**

Noun groups (also known as nominal groups or phrases) are one of the most powerful tools for improving student writing, both in English and across the disciplines, due to their ability to carry and build meaning related to the field or subject matter. In this task, students need to develop a picture of each character as a representation of innocence or evil that supports their response to the question.

Students work with noun groups from Level 2. Students:

- Understand how nouns represent people, places, things and ideas and can be, for example, common, proper, concrete or abstract, and that noun groups/phrases can be expanded using articles and adjectives.\(^3\)

The rules governing the order and ways words can add meaning to head nouns are shown in Figure 3. Many students from highly literate, English-speaking homes will instinctively know these rules. The ability to unlock these rules for other students, for whom they are not second nature, is powerful. Equally, an explicit knowledge of these rules allows high-achieving students to make more conscious decisions about their writing.

**Figure 2—Initial student response**

Through the characters of Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf the Brothers Grimm version of this story exploits representations of innocence and evil in order to teach the reader a lesson.

Little Red Riding Hood is an innocent character. This is shown as she is a child. Little Red Riding Hood’s innocence is seen when she is approached by the wolf in the wood and he asks her lots of questions. This shows his plan to eat her. The authors make Little Red Riding Hood respond honestly to the wolf’s questions. This shows her innocently helping the wolf to plot her death. The Brothers Grimm show Little Red Riding Hood being overwhelmed by the beauty of the forest and collecting flowers for her grandmother. This shows her purity and innocence.

The lesson of this story is shown when Little Red Riding Hood pays the price for her naivety. This is shown when Little Red Riding Hood is eaten by the wolf. This is a fairly tale. Her innocence means she will be saved. The woodcutter comes and cuts open the wolf and Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother are freed. Little Red Riding Hood learns her lesson about trusting strangers and is not as innocent.

**Activity 1**

The purpose of this activity is to analyse patterns in, and to improve the use of, noun groups used by students in their own writing. This activity can be completed individually or as a class.

- Students write (or you can write for them) noun groups from their writing into a table like the one provided in Figure 3.1.
- In pairs, as a class or individually, examine the patterns in the noun groups. The noun groups from the beginning of paragraph one of our student’s writing on Little Red Riding Hood are shown in Figure 3.2. An analysis shows that the student has a basic control of noun groups, using pointers, some different types of adjectives (although this is limited), and only one qualifier. The student has a good handle on using pronoun referents (e.g. this) to pack together previous information. Many of the head nouns are the characters, but pleasingly, some head nouns are abstract concepts related to the topic, for example, beauty, purity and innocence. Note that we will treat ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ as a head noun.

- Students can now experiment with different types of words to add meaning to the head noun or replace the head noun altogether. Use a pencil so that students can offer alternative suggestions and consider the effect of these choices. Students may need support with their vocabulary to undertake this experimentation. Completed on a Word document, students could access the thesaurus (Shift+F7) but this should not be a substitute for discussion about what word communicates most effectively what they want to say about the noun. A conventional thesaurus can work just as well. Word walls\(^5\) of vocabulary relevant to a text or topic for study can be equally useful and should be built on as students come up with new words. Also see Activity 2.

- Our student’s experimentation is provided in Figure 3.2. In each case, the changes to the noun group reflect a growing attempt to represent the head nouns in certain ways in response to the assessment question. Consider the selection of ‘awfully devious plan’ as opposed to ‘very mean plan’ or in fact ‘very devilish plan’.

- Improved noun groups can be added back into student writing. Students will need to re-read their work though as the improved noun groups may change the overall meaning of a sentence.

It is important to see the link between the type of words chosen to add meaning to the noun groups and the purpose. For example, if we were writing a factual report on the behaviour of wolves, words like ‘evil’ and ‘bad’ would be inappropriate to describe the wolf, as would figurative noun groups like ‘a dark shadow’.

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5. Words relevant to a text or topic for study are written on pieces of cardboard and placed in a prominent position in the classroom.
### Figure 3.1—A basic understanding of noun groups

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pointer (which?)</th>
<th>Numerative (how many?)</th>
<th>Intensifier (to what degree?)</th>
<th>Descriptor (what like?)</th>
<th>Classifier (what type?)</th>
<th>Noun (who or what?)</th>
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### Figure 3.2—Improving noun groups

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Building the field through vocabulary

Building student knowledge of the meanings of words, including everyday and specialist meanings, and how words take their meaning from the context of the text, is a focus area for the Language strand. Vocabulary has a key role in students' ability to read texts, and also to express and develop ideas. Students need direct instruction of vocabulary relevant to specific texts or tasks. Students begin to make conscious choices about their vocabulary at Level 2:

Understand the use of vocabulary about familiar and new topics and experiment with and begin to make conscious choices of vocabulary to suit audience and purpose.

At Level 3, students begin to consider technical vocabulary and then for our student at Level 5, this develops further. Students:

Understand the use of vocabulary to express greater precision of meaning, and know that words can have different meanings in different contexts.

Building vocabulary will obviously have an impact on students' ability to utilise other resources from the Language strand, for example noun groups.

Activity 2

The purpose of this activity is to build and refine vocabulary related to key concepts in a text. The new vocabulary can then be used to improve student writing.

- Now ask students to suggest words that are similar to 'innocent' or 'innocence', for example 'goodness'. Write the first word that is suggested on a piece of cardboard and give it to a student volunteer, asking them to sit in the circle. Give the student holding 'innocent/innocence' one end of a piece of string, and the other end to the student holding 'goodness', indicating that there is a relationship between the two words.

- Nouns and adjectives can be categorised by writing a 'N' or 'A' on the card.

- For each subsequent word suggested, write on a piece of card and give it to a student volunteer. However, the class must additionally discuss the new word's relationship to 'innocence' or 'innocent' and the other words suggested. For example, if 'virtue' was suggested, this student could sit with 'goodness', indicating that they are similar words that have a relationship to 'innocence'. If 'guillible' was suggested, a new piece of string would be required to show the relationship to 'innocent', but that it is different to 'goodness' and 'virtue'. 'Naive' would sit with 'guillible'.

- It may be that a word sits comfortably in two groups, as well as having a relationship to the central word. These relationships can also be shown with a piece of string.

- An example of a word map is provided in Figure 4. Students should be invited to discuss the relationship of any new word to the existing words and there will undoubtedly be disagreement. Students should be encouraged to justify their opinions.

- The final word map should be transferred to a wall of the classroom for student reference as they review and edit their own writing, making choices about vocabulary which best expresses their intended meaning.

After completing this activity, students can see that there are many different ways to understand the concept of 'innocence', and that they will need to make careful decisions about the synonyms they use in their writing to build a particular picture of how Little Red Riding Hood represents innocence.

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6 National Reading Technical Assistance Center, A Review of the Current Research on Vocabulary Instruction, 2010
Figure 6 — Improved student response
Through the characters of Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf in the Brothers Grimm version of this story explores representations of innocence and evil in order to teach the reader a lesson.

Little Red Riding Hood is represented as an innocent and wholesome character as she is a young child. Little Red Riding Hood's goodness is also represented when she is approached by the wolf in the woods. He asks her pointed questions as part of his awfully devious plan to eat her. The authors make Little Red Riding Hood respond honestly to all of his cunning questions because she is naively helping the evil wolf to plot her own unfortunate death. The Brothers Grimm then show Little Red Riding Hood being overwhelmed by the beauty of the forest and collecting flowers for her sick grandmother in order to show her purity and innocence.

The lesson of this story is finally shown when Little Red Riding Hood is eaten by the wolf. However, because this is a fairy-tale, her unquestionable innocence means she will be saved. The woodcutter comes and cuts open the wolf and Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother are saved. Little Red Riding Hood learns her lesson about trusting strangers and is no longer so innocent.

Making connections between ideas—subordinating conjunctions
As students move through school, their ability to reason and build logical relationships in writing becomes increasingly important. In the early years, students' expression of ideas in writing is characterised by adding ideas to each other using compound sentences joined with coordinating conjunctions such as 'and' and 'then'. At Level 5, students are introduced to the concept of complex sentences in their writing by using subordinating conjunctions such as 'because' and 'as'. Students: Understand the difference between main and subordinate clauses and that a complex sentence involves at least one subordinate clause.9

By explicitly teaching students how to use subordinating conjunctions to combine clauses, students begin to develop more sophisticated ways of expressing these logical connections in their writing.

Activity 3
This activity allows you to model combining clauses to make complex sentences and enhance students' ability to link statements and reasons.
- Analyse the student work, or other piece of writing, and select sentences that can be combined using subordinating conjunctions. In this instance we want to support the writer to connect statements about Little Red Riding Hood and her innocence to reasons and evidence from the text. Pairs of sentences from our sample are provided in Figure 5.
- Develop a list of possible subordinating conjunctions which will connect the two clauses. A list to match our sentences is provided in Figure 5.1; each matches a pair of sentences.
- Jointly with the student, read each pair of sentences and select the appropriate conjunction to show the connection.
- Ask the student to combine the sentences to create a complex sentence, using the selected conjunction.
- Repeat for each pair. Our new complex sentences are provided in Figure 5.2.
- New complex sentences can be added back into the student's text. Students will need to re-read their work, as the new complex sentences may change the overall meaning of the paragraph.

Conclusion
All of these activities combine to support the student to develop a complex response to the assessment task, by supporting them to arrive at a final thesis about the way representations of innocence and evil teach the reader of fairy tales a lesson. The student's improved writing is provided in Figure 6.

These activities represent a snapshot of the grammar resources available to you in the Language strand. Hopefully, they will start you on a journey of discovering the power of grammar to support student success. However, there is a plethora of resources available which provide both theoretical and practical approaches to help you along your journey.

Bibliography

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