



A functional approach to language

It is often said that children, as they use language, are constantly:

- learning language
- learning through language, and
- learning about language.

We never stop learning language – from the babbling of babies to the voracious preschool years, from our early encounters with print and our first attempts at writing through to the secondary textbooks and essays, and then beyond to the new demands of adulthood, where we still continue to learn and refine the language needed in every new situation we find ourselves.

And it is now widely recognised that we learn through language – that language is absolutely central in the learning process. Our perception of the world is constructed through language, and it is through language that we are able to interact with others in our world. In schools, we could virtually say that ‘language is the curriculum’.

But what of learning **about** language? As we use language, we develop a relatively implicit understanding of how it works. A functional approach to language attempts to make these understandings explicit. Once they have been brought out into the open, we have a shared way of talking about language with our students.

What is a functional approach to language?

A functional approach looks at how language enables us to do things: to share information, to enquire, to express attitudes, to entertain, to argue, to get our needs met, to reflect, to construct ideas, to order our experiences and make sense of the world. It is concerned with how people use real language for real purposes. At the heart of a functional model of language is an emphasis on meaning and on how language is involved in the construction of meaning. It sees language as a resource for making meaning.

A functional approach to language is not concerned with a set of rules which prescribe correct and incorrect usage taught through decontextualised exercises. Rather, understandings about language are developed in the context of authentic tasks across all areas of the curriculum.

What are the advantages of a functional approach to language?

- Language is concerned above all with the creation of meaning, and because meaning is found within a text as a whole, a functional model of language describes how language operates at the text level, not at the level of individual words and sentences in isolation.
- A functional approach to language stresses how meanings are made in interaction with other people. This strongly supports the small group work and conferencing practices of today's classrooms.
- A functional approach to language is concerned with real language used by real people – not schoolbook exercises contrived purely to teach some point of grammar, or reading texts devised to teach some aspect of reading.
- In primary classrooms today, there is an emphasis on writing for specific purposes. A functional approach to language aims to show how texts can most effectively achieve these purposes.
- Children today are also encouraged to write with a particular audience in mind. A functional model describes how texts will vary according to the audience being addressed and how distant that audience is.
- Perhaps most importantly, the knowledge of language provided by a functional model helps us to identify what children's strengths are and to make clear and positive suggestions about how they might make their texts more effective – instead of vague, superficial comments or mere corrections of spelling and punctuation.
- If children have an explicit knowledge of which language resources are characteristic of a particular context, they are in a better position to make informed choices when developing texts of their own.

How might you use a functional approach to language in the classroom?

A functional approach to language does not advocate teaching about language by handing down prescriptive recipes. Rather it is concerned with supporting students in composing effective texts for particular purposes and providing feedback at the point of need within the context. A functional model of language can be drawn on whenever children are engaged in the construction of texts and opportunities are created for explicit discussion of these texts. Such opportunities might occur, for example, during the modelling of a text, during a shared book activity, during the construction of a class text, or during a conferencing session. Sometimes these opportunities can be programmed, sometimes they may be spontaneous. They can occur at the whole class, small group or individual level.

Many teachers have found it useful to develop in the class 'a language for talking about language'. These shared understandings about text, reflected in the shared terminology used by the class, allow for a more productive use of time. They can be built up through group reflection on the language as it is used, starting with questions like these:

What do you think we might use this sort of a text for? What could we call it?

Remember when we were writing Explanations? Why is this text different from an Explanation?

Look at the beginning of the text. What do you think the writer is doing here? What does the beginning of this text tell the reader?

Is it the same as the beginning of a Report?

What name could we give this sort of a beginning? What about a term such as 'orientation' to remind us that it is setting the scene?

Which words link up the text and show us when the actions took place? We could call these 'linking words'.

Thus the children are guided towards making explicit the knowledge they already have about texts. This shared knowledge and terminology, combined with new insights contributed by the teacher, then becomes a resource they can draw on in their subsequent discussions of texts.

The teachers you will meet in the chapters of this book decided to trial a variety of activities which would allow for the growth of shared understandings about texts. In particular, they drew on the teaching and learning cycle outlined in the support resources in each state. The activities they developed, described in the following pages, provided a context for language exploration while the children were using language for real purposes in a variety of curriculum areas.

A teaching and learning cycle

The teaching and learning cycle moves from initial understandings of the topic and task through to gaining independent control over the genre. The elements of the cycle are represented in Figure 1.1, but this is not intended as a linear sequence – you should be moving flexibly in and out of the stages in response to the demands of the task and student needs.

Preparation

- Identify the major understandings and abilities to be developed in the unit of work you are preparing (for example, finding and organising information about transport, putting forward an argument on conservation, telling a horror story).
- Decide which genre (or genres) would be appropriate in achieving the purpose of the unit (for example, Report, Argument, Narrative). This becomes the language focus of the unit.
- Identify a ‘culminating task’ that the class will be working towards (for example, a Narrative as a class big book; a multimedia production about Australian mammals) and break it down into a number of smaller contributing activities that build towards the culminating task.
- Plan a number of activities to familiarise the children with the subject matter and the genre, ranging from hands-on, exploratory, oral activities through to more reflective, written activities.
- Locate sample texts in the chosen genre to use for immersion and modelling. Read them carefully beforehand and annotate them so that you can draw students’ attention to relevant features. Then have a go at writing your own model text – it’s very revealing to realise what you are expecting your students to achieve.

Note:

It’s important to know how well children can already use the genre. If you are uncertain, you may find it helpful to ask them to write a text ‘cold’ very early in the unit, using the genre in question, so that strengths and weaknesses become apparent and they can observe how their texts improve as they progress through the unit. You might ask the students to keep an ‘evolving draft’, which they constantly revise as they develop new understandings about the topic, the genre or certain language features.

Your assessment of the children’s proficiency in the genre at this stage may well influence subsequent phases of the unit, for instance:

- if the genre is relatively unfamiliar to most of the children, the class may need to develop common basic understandings about it as a whole group
- if the class has worked previously with the genre, it may help to look at specific aspects (for example, how to write an effective beginning)



Figure 1.1 Teaching and learning cycle adapted from Rothery (1994)

- if the children demonstrate quite different levels of proficiency, it may be a good idea to work with groups on different aspects
- if the children are still building knowledge of the topic or content (the field), a variety of activities and interactions (discussions, interviews, hands-on activities, excursions, videos) may help to develop their understanding.

Before writing, we will need to make sure we have something to write about. We often need to gather information from print, multimodal or digital texts. At this stage, you may find it necessary to work with the class on researching skills (for example, use of the library or internet, locating relevant information in a book or online, making notes using a graphic organiser). Students will generally need support in how to read increasingly complex academic texts through activities such as modelled, shared, guided and independent reading.

Modelling the genre

If children are to write in a particular genre, they first need to become familiar with its purpose and features through immersion in the genre, and by exploring sample texts.

- Introduce a model of the genre to the class (for example, using the smartboard or a hovercam). Choose or compose a text which is similar to the one to be written later as a joint construction by the class.
- Discuss the purposes for which we use this type of text in our society (for example, the purpose of a Recount is to tell what happened).
- With the class, identify how the text is structured. Each genre has a distinctive set of stages which helps it to achieve its purpose. These stages make up its schematic structure. (The **schematic structure** of a Recount, for example, consists of an orientation which sets the scene, followed by a series of events which tell what happened.) It's a good idea to give the students a photocopy of the model text so they can annotate its stages and features for later reference.
- Discuss the function of each stage. (For instance, the function of the orientation of a Recount is to let the reader know who was involved, when and where the events took place, and any other information necessary to understand the events which follow.)

Note:

- Some teachers might introduce the features of a text directly to the children, while others might prefer, through careful guidance and questioning, to help the children discover the features themselves (in which case the class may need to examine several examples of the same genre).
- During the modelling phase you may wish to compare a successful text with one that has not achieved its purpose, asking the children to work out why.
- It may also be interesting to compare the structure and stages of this genre with one previously examined.
- Model texts can be commercially published pieces of writing, texts written previously by students, or texts written by the teacher at the level of a high-performing student.
- In the modelling phase, you can also refer to language features other than the structure of the text, but it's probably most helpful to start with an overview of the text as a whole, introducing selected language features later on.

Joint construction

Before children write independent texts, it's useful for them to participate in collaborative writing in the chosen genre. A text may be jointly constructed by the whole class, by a small group, or by a teacher and child during conferencing.

- *Revising structure.* It may be helpful at this stage to revise the schematic structure of the genre (for example, by referring to model texts).
- *Jointly constructing a text.* Invite the children to contribute the information and ideas from their notes while you act as a guide, asking questions and making suggestions about the structuring of the text. Scribe the text yourself on the whiteboard or smartboard, so that the children can concentrate on the meanings they are creating. When it's complete, give them each a copy as a further model. With longer texts, you might jointly construct only parts of the text at a time (for example, composing the introduction to an Argument together, then having groups of students work on supporting arguments before coming back, pooling their arguments and jointly constructing the conclusion).
- *Assessing the children's progress.* Some children may be keen to try an independent text, while others may feel they need further modelling. At this stage flexibility may be needed, with different groups working on different tasks.

Independent construction

Having read and examined specimen texts in the chosen genre, and having had the experience of jointly constructing a similar text, students are now in a position to write their own text independently.

- All students will be using the same genre, but their choice of topic might vary slightly from the jointly constructed text or the model text. For instance, if you've already modelled a text on 'How to care for your dog', a child might choose to write a similar text on caring for cats, goldfish or tortoises.
- The children write their drafts, referring to models.
- Each child consults with you and/or peers, receiving comments on what he or she has achieved (in the light of built-up, shared knowledge about the genre) and suggestions for changes to help the text achieve its purpose more effectively.
- You may find that conferencing about drafts reveals a need for more modelling, joint construction or attention to selected language features.
- Before publishing and sharing their texts, students might need support with editing their texts for clarity of meaning, and proofreading them for accuracy (for example, checking spelling and punctuation).

Public conferencing of some of the children's texts (in a constructive way and with each writer's permission) can encourage discussion of more detailed language features, just as shared reading of children's texts can give further opportunities for modelling the genre.

Children eventually reach the point where they can undertake writing the genre quite independently. Indeed, they may choose to do so in free-choice writing sessions, when writing for a similar purpose in other tasks and in other curriculum areas. When they have gained control of the basic features, they may move on to exploit the genre more creatively.