Reading 2

Making connections in the classroom

Loredana Saracini-Palombo and Bronwyn Custance

This reading describes the work of Loredana Saracini-Palombo, a Year 6/7 teacher at St Mark's Lutheran Primary School in South Australia. In 2009, Loredana also took on a role of mentoring other teachers in the school in explicit, contextualised teaching of literacy. St Mark's Lutheran pedagogy is underpinned by a teaching and learning cycle.

Introduction

Early in the school year, through the vehicle of a focus genre (usually narrative because it draws on a wide range of clausal relationships), Loredana and her class revisit and work through the notion of what a clause is, its constituents and the various ways clauses can be combined. She does this because she believes it is a fundamental part of understanding written texts. She is aware of the need for students to have control over a range of linguistic resources for combining clauses in order to make the range of complex meanings demanded by the middle years curriculum. Therefore, she wants to ensure that her students have these understandings and resources and the accompanying metalanguage, which will allow her to readily refer back to these understandings and resources at every part of the teaching and learning cycle as she and the students work on this and other focus genres throughout the year.

Loredana has shared her explicit genre-based approach to teaching functional grammar and its metalanguage with a colleague, Matthew Vince, who teaches the other Year 6/7 class. After Loredana's initial support, such as occassionally combining the two classes so that she could model the teaching of a particular aspect of language, Matthew now employs much the same approach. Their approach is reaping rewards as there is a marked difference in their Year 7 national literacy test results, with their students strongly outperforming state and national averages. While the school's literacy results are above state and national averages in Years 3 and 5, the Year 7 results have further increased the lead and significantly outperform Year 9 state and national averages.

This is true in every aspect of the literacy tests. However, only figures for writing are included here in Table 1.

	Year 3	Year 5	Year 7	Year 9
National	414.2	486.4	533.7	573.1
State	415.9	481.4	538.6	569.3
School	430.1	509.5	611.8	

Table 1: National, state and school average scores in writing, by Year level

When one looks at the breakdown of student performance across the writing criteria, the difference in student achievement at the more complex higher levels in the rubric is stunning. A comparison of the school results for 'Writing criteria: Sentence structure' against state and national averages is included in Table 2.

Even more important than the strong performance in the National Assessment Plan for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLaN) tests, however, is the change in the students' perception and confidence in themselves as writers, and in the teachers' sense of making a difference for their students. Matthew continues to be impressed by the work his students now produce and felt a deep sense of satisfaction when several boys remarked to him that they had never thought they could write like that.

Category	Year 7
1: some correct sentences	100% St Mark's Lutheran **100% State average** 99% National average
2: simple sentences correct	100% **98%** 97%
3: simple and compound sentences correct	100% **85%** 83%
4: most complex sentences correct	70% **35%** 35%
5: variety in length, structure and beginnings	20% **6%** 6%
6: controlled and well developed	0% **0%** 0%

Table 2: Average scores for 'Writing criteria: Sentence structure'

In the various activities Loredana, and now Matthew, and their students undertake as they explore the different ways of combining clauses, there is always a two-pronged approach: firstly, expanding the meanings being made by adding another clause and, secondly, connecting those meanings.

In the remainder of the article, Loredana shares her views on the role of the teacher and explicit teaching and describes the work she does with her students.

Teaching in context

Hattie (2009) describes the best teachers as those who are 'activators'. The teacher who is considered an 'activator' creates a classroom environment where the teaching and learning is visible, where the teacher becomes the deliberate change agent, the director of learning.

Hattie's research also supports the notion that explicit teaching, plus modelling, in context equals effective teaching. Creating learning activities that allow students to see the patterns in text and to explore alternatives has allowed students to make the shift between the ordinary to the extraordinary and created a classroom environment where the learning is truly 'visible'.

The use of short stories by authors such as Paul Jennings provide a context in which sentence structure has been taught successfully. Rather than teach the various structures in isolation, we now have the opportunity to investigate how a writer manipulates language to create an engaging text. Providing students with a real purpose for learning creates a more effective teaching and learning environment.

Simple sentences

Simple sentences comprise a single clause so, to begin with, students must have a sound understanding of what a clause is. The diagram in Figure 1 is one which students find useful.
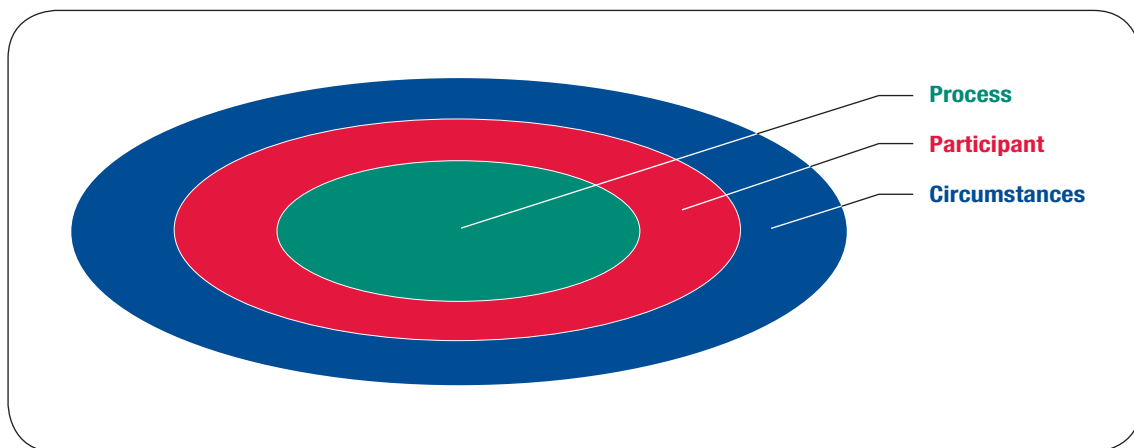

Figure 1: Diagram used with students

The concentric circle demonstrates that without the core (the process) a full clause cannot exist. We ask students to record sentences and to identify processes by shading over these with the colour green. We engage students in discussion: 'What do we notice about the length of sentences?', 'What do we notice about the number of processes within the sentence?', 'Are there any sentences that do not have a process?'. All of these questions encourage students to see sentence structure beyond a jumble of words and to identify that the process indeed has a crucial function.

We also explore the way experienced writers use sentences of varying length and complexity to make their texts easier to read and follow as they pack information tightly in some sections and combine them loosely with others. We discuss how variation in sentence length in a narrative can be exploited by the author to control the rhythm of the text as, for example, tension builds and is released. And so we begin to examine various types of sentences.

A simple sentence has one process and is often referred to as an independent clause. By providing students with samples of simple sentences and asking them to deconstruct these by shading over the process with green and over the participants with red, they are soon able to recognise a clause boundary. Examples are:

My grandma baked cookies .
Superman fell .
Run !

Allowing students to create their own simple sentences, analysing these and sharing them with peers reinforces learning. There are also opportunities to revise writing conventions (capitalisation, commas, full stops and exclamation marks) and we discuss the use of simple sentences in the texts we read and why an author may have chosen to use them in that particular context.

Compound sentences

Next, we provide students with samples of simple sentences or have students record their own simple sentences on strips of coloured paper. Students then write linking conjunctions on a different colour and use these to combine the clauses to form compound sentences.

We then ask, 'What do you notice about the structure of these compound sentences?' and have students identify that they are made up of two independent clauses. Students also identify the process in each clause.

As students become more confident with this structure, we provide students with a Paul Jennings piece and students read, analyse and discuss the use of compound sentences in his writing.

Complex sentences

The same process is then repeated to form complex sentences using binding conjunctions. This time, using an adhesive, students paste the binding conjunction to the clause it 'binds' to. Students are encouraged to experiment with the position of binding conjunctions in the sentence so that they are able to discuss patterns and create alternatives. Later, students record these and other examples in their books, using colour to highlight the conjunction (see Figure 2).

We discuss the relationship between the clauses, seeing that one clause is now dependent on another. For example, in Figure 2, 'Because the texta was red' is the dependent clause because it is giving us more information about the main clause, in this case, more information about why 'I threw it out'. We ask questions such as 'Does the binding conjunction always go in the middle?' and 'What happens when you move the dependent clause to the beginning of the sentence?'. Students say that the writing sounds more like that of an author.
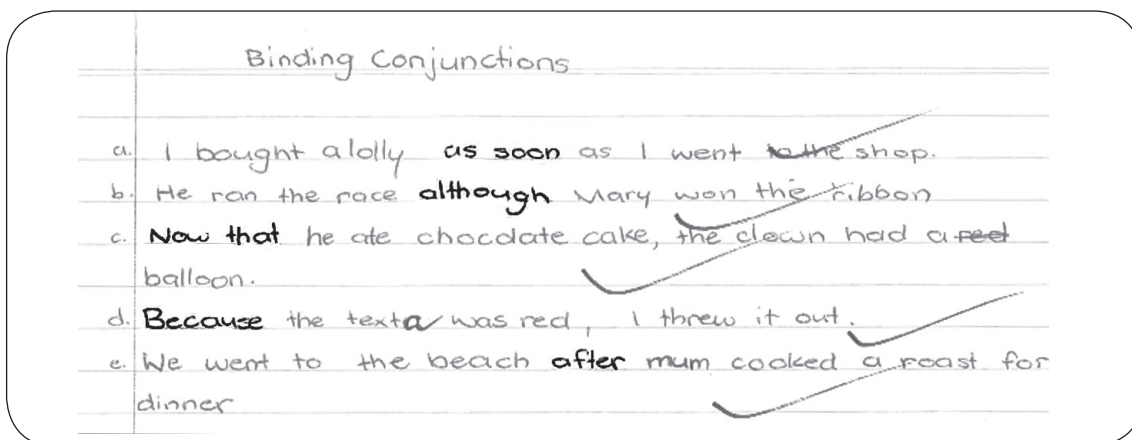

Figure 2: Constructing sentences using binding conjunctions

It's always handy to create charts of binding conjunctions or any other new aspects of language and display these within the classroom to support students in taking up these resources.

Projected clauses

Once students have a sound understanding of the concept of processes and the different types, we can explore how an author might choose from across this range and what effect this might have. The following activity allows students to recognise the benefit of alternating the form of processes they use when writing a narrative text. The text, 'Harrison', was written in order to be able to return to it often in our exploration of sentence structure in narratives.

HARRISON

He <u>ran</u> through the forest. His heart <u>beat</u> frantically. Suddenly, he <u>fell</u> to the ground hard. His tired legs <u>could carry</u> him no longer.

He <u>lay</u> there <u>listening</u> desperately for the violent squeals <u>echoed</u> by the dangerous predator.

Harrison <u>was</u> no stranger to this dark creature. He <u>had seen</u> him countless times before.

The process choices in this text are typical of those used by young writers. However, encouraging students to make use of a variety of processes allows them to create an engaging narrative. We ask focus questions such as, 'How might Harrison feel?', 'What is he thinking?', 'What might Harrison's voice sound like?' or 'Which saying processes might we include in the text?'. A teacher-led construction of a re-written text, incorporating a variety of processes suggested by learners, allows students to see how they might be included. The following is an example of how the first paragraph has been altered by including suggestions made by students.

HARRISON

He ran through the forest. His mind was racing as his heart beat frantically. "I have to get out of here," he murmured to himself. Suddenly he fell to the ground, fear washing over his body. His tired legs could carry him no longer. "Who is it?" he wondered. "What does this creature want from me?" Harrison whispered …

Students should be provided with several opportunities to repeat this activity. Once again, students enjoy manipulating Paul Jennings' work because of the action in his writing. Allowing learners to work in small groups, share their ideas and draw upon previous jointly constructed charts will see even reluctant writers produce more interesting and well-structured texts. Encouraging students to use saying processes also allows teachers to contextualise the teaching of direct speech and its associated punctuation.

We discuss the way in which a sentence using projection is made up of two clauses. The independent projecting clause includes a *mental* or *saying* process and the projected clause states what has been thought and said. In reported speech or thought, the projected clause is a dependent clause and usually begins with a that (which may be ellipsed).

A teacher-led deconstruction of many sentences that include projected clauses allows students once again to locate patterns. The following is a list of examples used successfully in the senior classes.

1. Sammy thought that she would never be able to walk again after her accident.
2. Timothy swore that he would never drive on the wrong side of the road again.
3. He muttered non-stop that he would find his shoe after his mother shouted at him for not putting his belongings away after school.
4. The teacher thought that it might be wise that all students wore a rain jacket for the walk.

We asked students to underline all independent (projecting) clauses (ie *Sammy thought, Timothy swore, He muttered non-stop* and *The teacher thought*) and then to look beyond the independent clause and identify patterns. The projected part of the clause generally begins with the word 'that' and expresses what is thought or said.

Then students were given ample opportunities to experiment when they were asked to record their own projected clauses.

Students can also extend and develop characterisation by using extracts from a range of texts and include what characters are thinking or saying through projected clauses.

Projection in arguments and discussions

Later in the year, when our focus genre was a discussion, we revisited the notion of projected clauses. Here, we focused on the important role they play in allowing us to include, through quoting or reporting, the views of others. We revised the use of quoted and reported speech and highlighted examples in model texts, noting the variety of saying and sensing processes used in arguments and discussions.

The following activity provided students with further practice in understanding and using the linguistic resource of projection. The class read and discussed the text entitled 'Shoplifting', reproduced in Figure 3, before answering comprehension questions.

Shoplifting

The Australian Bureau of Statistics recorded a 21 per cent increase in shoplifting in 2002–03. In contrast, most other crimes decreased. According to the Australian Retailers Association, shoplifting costs businesses nearly $4 billion every year.

Research shows that young people between 14 and 25 years of age are more likely to be offered stolen goods than any other age group. Teenage boys are twice as likely as girls to be offered the merchandise. Items most likely to be stolen from retail stores are cosmetics, CDs and DVDs, mobile phones and computer parts.

Dale Evans, a member of a panel investigating the problem of shoplifting, offered the following opinion: 'I blame the media for telling kids they must have all these material things … now! Teenagers lack the patience to save up money, and can't see anything wrong with shoplifting.'

Mr Evans then offered advice to parents of young people caught shoplifting: 'I strongly believe it's wise to look carefully at your own behaviour. If you're always buying expensive things on credit, that can send the wrong message to your kids. They need to understand that money and material possessions aren't everything in life. Family holidays provide an excellent opportunity to demonstrate this. For example, camping can teach the value of being patient and making do.'

Mary Marks disagreed: 'I think most young people steal for kicks. For example, kids with wealthy parents could ask for anything and get it, but that doesn't stop them from shoplifting. However, a few do it because they want to be more popular and make money at the same time. They steal items such as mobile phones and CDs for friends at school.'

Another panel member, Constable Ian Roberts, had a different view: 'Teenagers decide to shoplift on the spur of the moment. They are too immature to think ahead about the consequences of being arrested and going to court. They don't take into account the disappointment and anger their family members will feel. In addition, they don't realise that shoplifting results in higher prices for goods or loss of income for the shopkeeper. In other words, other people suffer for their thoughtless actions. It's our role to spell all that out.'

Constable Roberts concluded by describing how police handle the problem: 'Police officers often have an informal chat with parents of shoplifters who are first offenders. We also attend schools and youth groups to talk with groups of kids. Our main objective is to make them realise that shoplifting is definitely not cool.'

(Sonya Stoneman, Alison Rucco *Essential English Skills Year 7: A multi-level approach,* 2005, copyright Cambridge University Press, p 126. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.)

Figure 3: Text used in comprehension activity

The comprehension questions which accompanied the text were structured so that students were required to paraphrase, summarise, interpret and draw comparisons between the quoted views presented in the article. Figure 4 provides an example of the answers given by a student.

Figure 4: Responses to comprehension questions

Non-finite clauses

Students are taught that a non-finite clause has no subject and no tense. To teach sentence structure with non-finite clauses, we provide students with many examples so they are able to identify patterns. Examples include the following:

> Working together, we are able to build the model quickly.
> Deprived of water, the plant died after a short time.
> Running through the forest, he heard the sounds of Sebastian's laughter echoing from afar.
> To stay healthy, students should exercise regularly.

Students are invited to record the above sentences and underline the independent clause (eg 'the plant died after a short time') and to highlight the non-finite clause (eg 'Deprived of water'). There is also an opportunity to discuss the use of the comma to separate clauses. The text entitled 'Harrison' allows for further explanation and consolidation. Since the original text has only finite clauses, it is possible to point out that each clause is located in past time.

> HARRISON
>
> He <u>ran</u> through the forest. His heart <u>beat</u> frantically. Suddenly, he <u>fell</u> to the ground hard. His tired legs <u>could carry</u> him no longer. He <u>wanted to call</u> for help but if he <u>screamed</u>, he <u>might draw</u> his predator closer.

Using the text, students are shown how, by deleting the subject from the clause and changing the process to one of the non-finite forms that are possible, a non-finite clause is formed. Non-finite forms include:

> *Falling to the ground*, Harrison tried to remain calm.
> *To hide from his pursuers*, Harrison hid behind a rock.
> *Hammered by the waves crashing on him*, Harrison tried to crawl further up the beach.

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Since a non-finite clause is dependent on another clause, it is clear in the previous examples that the non-finite clause needs to be joined in a clause complex.

Providing students with the opportunity to recognise the patterns in this form of sentence structure allows them to produce alternatives. They are able to shift sentence structure from the simple to the more complex, as shown in Figure 5.
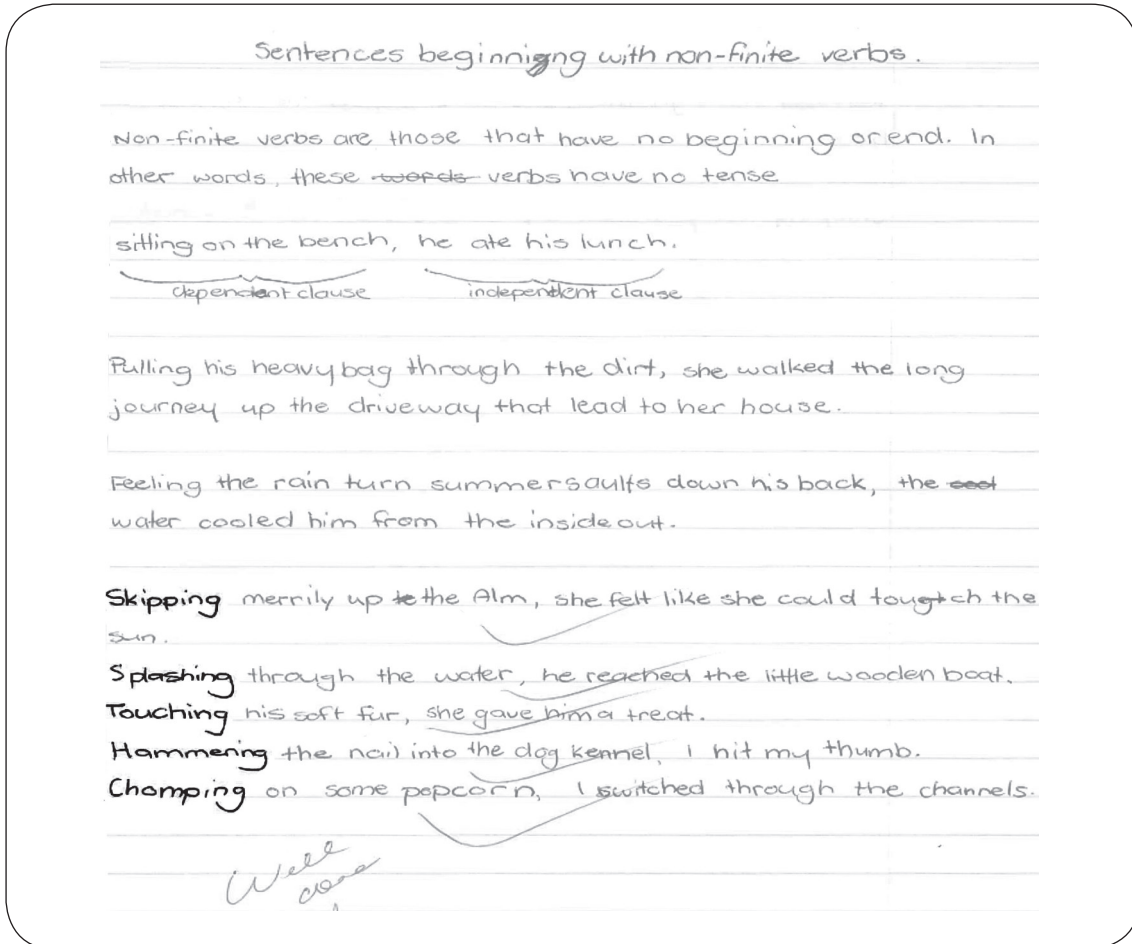

Figure 5: Non-finite clauses

Conclusion

This reading has presented only part of the work carried out with this class on connecting clauses. What we can see through Loredana's work is that explicit teaching allows teachers and students to generate a language to talk about language, a metalanguage. This not only helps in teaching but also benefits assessment processes. In assessment of learning there is no longer a need to tell students that their piece of writing was 'good' or 'excellent'. We can be far more explicit, referring to the use of processes, sentence complexity, lexical choices and so on. We are also able to use assessment as learning with students who are able to identify areas for improvement because they have been provided with the necessary tools to do so. As a guide for independent construction and self-assessment, a rubric similar to Table 3 is provided to students at St Mark's Lutheran Primary School. With a deeper understanding of genre and register, a richer rubric can be developed with students.

Narrative genre assessment rubric			
	Excellent	Satisfactory	Not Attempted
Structure			
Orientation Events Resolution	Has all of the components of a narrative.	Has some of the components of a narrative.	Has little or no components of a narrative.
Language features			
Simple sentences (single verb)	All simple sentences are correctly written.	Most simple sentences are written correctly.	No evidence of simple sentences.
Compound sentences (two verbs linked by *and, but, so* …)	All compound sentences are written correctly.	Most compound sentences are written correctly.	No evidence of compound sentences.
Complex sentences with binding conjunctions (*because, when, although*)	Five sentences with correct use of binding conjunctions with at least two examples of dependent clause first.	Two sentences with correct use of binding conjunctions.	No evidence of correct use of or attempt to use binding conjunctions.
Complex sentences with relative pronouns (*which, where, who, that*)	Five sentences with correct use of relative pronouns.	Two sentences with correct use of relative pronouns.	No evidence of correct use of or attempt to use relative pronouns.
Complex sentences with non-finite clauses (*-ing, -ed/en* or *to* form)	Five sentences with correct use of non-finite with at least two examples of dependent clause first.	Two sentences with correct use of non-finites.	No evidence of correct use of or attempt to use non-finites.
Projection with saying and sensing processes to reveal character's thoughts and feelings	Five sentences with correct and effective use of projection.	Two sentences with correct use of projection.	No evidence of correct use of or attempt to use projection.

Table 3: Rubric for independent construction and self-assessment of narratives

There are some students whose writing inspires us from the outset. However, there are many who find the whole writing experience a challenge and often fail to grasp what it is that makes a talented writer. The explicit teaching of sentence structure, where students are invited to explore, deconstruct, discuss and provide alternatives, allows all students to make a shift in their writing. There is nothing that delights us more than to hear students utter the words, 'I never thought I'd be able to write like this!'.

References

Hattie J (2009) *Visible learning—A synthesis of 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. New York, Routledge.

Stoneman S & Rucco A (2005) *Essential English skills Year 7: A multi-level approach*. Port Melbourne, Victoria, Cambridge University Press.