

The power of knowledge about language in understanding the power of Shelley's Frankenstein

By Kate Gibbs

In 2017, the Year 12 Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) English study design changed considerably and one of the challenging aspects of the new course was the requirement that, as part of their assessment, students produce a 'sustained creative response' to one of the texts outlined in the syllabus. While our school's decision to use Mary Shelley's Frankenstein as the set text presented its own challenges in terms of structure, narration, and heavily nominalised Romantic and dramatic language, I felt that it also lent itself to the explicit teaching of language in the classroom. Despite this being the first time I had taught English at this level, I was particularly keen to see how my understandings of functional grammar could be applied in this context in order to improve my students' writing.

The concept of the creative response meant that clear connections to the canon text needed to be illustrated by students. The suggested Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) rubric, states that for a student to achieve highly, they require a 'Sophisticated and complex understanding of the original text...', 'Sustained development of voice and style...', 'must be able to adapt language ... with insightful consideration of the original text' and utilise 'language that employs ... appropriate conventions for stylistic effect.' While the task does not require students to replicate the work of the composer, any effective response to the canon text would require the students to make language choices that clearly reflected the genre and register of their particular response text.

My Year 12 class was not particularly strong academically; at the conclusion of the internal school assessed coursework (SACs), my top student had scored 165 marks out of a possible 200. The students' work was never reviewed in discussions about the top end and students in this class never featured in conversations about rank. However, what they possessed was a desire to improve, a willingness to try new things and the courage to ask for help and to persist when challenged. With students who found Shelley's text conceptually difficult, building in an explicit focus on language seemed like a possible pathway to success.

Shelley's use of language

From a functional grammar perspective, the way that Shelley used language is interesting; she wrote primarily in the passive voice and nominalised often, and she played with theme and rheme in order to detail character complexities and nuances. My rationale, therefore, was that if I could teach students to replicate Shelley's language to some extent, to transfer this to their own creation, and to combine this with other writing strategies, they would meet the requirements of the task and experience success.

The language focus thus centred on the use of functional grammar to improve the abstraction and sophistication of students' writing. This included revision of grammatical components including verbs, nouns, adjectives, conjunctions and prepositions, as well as awareness of sentence structure and the register continuum, nominalisation and expansion of the nominal group, and theme and rheme and its exploitation. The Teaching and Learning Cycle was utilised throughout this unit of work to structure my teaching practice.

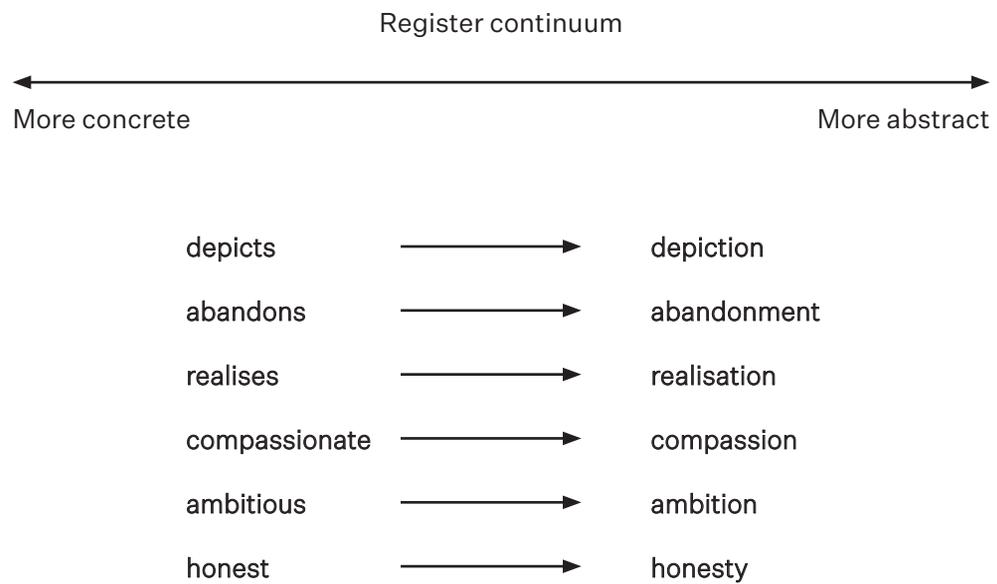
Starting off

Early in the year, we began with revision of basic grammar such as verbs, adjectives, concrete and abstract nouns, conjunctions and prepositions before teaching students about clauses. As a way of developing understanding of clauses and how they linked together in chains of meaning, students moved around strips of paper with the clauses on white strips and the conjunctions on coloured strips. Such a hands-on approach also allowed students to realise the benefits of using binding conjunctions to expand sentence structure, to understand that various sentence patterns were available to them, and that by rearranging their conjunctions and clauses, could develop complex ideas within a sentence. In particular, students were encouraged to begin their sentences with binding conjunctions such as 'while' and 'although' in order to increase the sophistication of their writing.

Moving from the concrete to the abstract

Nominalisation was next introduced, with students working together to transfer lists of key vocabulary across the register continuum so that

they possessed a collection of abstractions that would be useful in their writing. This involved transforming a series of adjectives and verbs into nouns, and understanding how language could be ‘moved back the other way’ depending on the desired effect and the intended audience. It also prepared them for the kind of abstraction to be found in Shelley’s writing.



Relating to the text

As we can see from the following excerpt from the opening paragraph of Chapter 2, Shelley made extensive use of abstraction in her writing.

We were brought up together; trying to there was not quite a year **difference** in our ages. I need not say that we were strangers to any species of **disunion** or **dispute**. **Harmony** was the soul of our **companionship**, and the **diversity** and **contrast** that subsisted in our characters drew us nearer together. Elizabeth was of a calmer and more concentrated **disposition**; but, with all my **ardour**, I was capable of a more intense **application**, and was more deeply smitten with the **thirst** for knowledge. She busied herself with following the aerial **creations** of the poets; and in the majestic and wondrous scenes which surrounded our Swiss home—the sublime shapes of the mountains, the **changes** of the seasons, **tempest** and **calm**, the **silence** of winter, and the **life** and **turbulence** of our Alpine summers—she found ample **scope** for **admiration** and **delight**. While my companion contemplated with a serious and satisfied spirit the magnificent **appearances** of things, I delighted in investigating their **causes**.

Much of the abstraction can be identified as nominalisations (in bold), which gave us ample opportunity to unpack by shifting back to the more spoken end of the Register continuum. We can see in the above passage how Shelley draws on these more abstract forms to contrast the main protagonist, Victor Frankenstein’s assessment of his own and Elizabeth’s character. Students looked at such nominalisations, in particularly around

character descriptions, and practised writing their own with a similar mode. They were first tasked with developing brief sentences about characters in a more concrete form before nominalising these to increase sophistication; thus also learning the value of shunting, whereby language can be moved across the register continuum for variance and a desired effect.

This focus on abstraction was enhanced through the teaching of literary devices including metaphor, simile, personification, imagery, alliteration and repetition, with students locating samples in the set text and later creating their own.

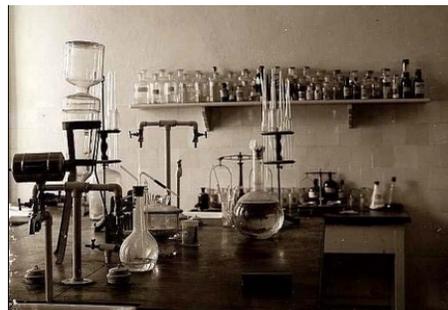
Building the capacity to describe through the Nominal Group

In order to make their writing more detailed and descriptive, students learned to expand the nominal group, a process that saw them use images for inspiration to build upon a common noun with both pre and post-modification. This process is shown in two different examples below.

Example 1



Example 2



| FUNCTION | Pointer Which one? | Quantifier How many? | Describer(s) What's it like? | Classifier(s) What type? | Thing What are we talking about? | Qualifier Tell me more! |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>GRAMMATICAL FORM</i> | <i>determiner</i> | <i>number word</i> | <i>adjective</i> | <i>noun</i> | <i>head noun</i> | <i>additional information</i> |
| Own Nominal Group | | | | | moon | |
| Own Nominal Group | | | | | lab | |

Exploring theme/rheme

The explicit teaching of theme and rheme was highly important in this process in order to give students a greater array of sentence patterns and to mimic the voice of Shelley. The following passage sets up an interesting pattern of theme development.

Henry Clerval was the son of a merchant of Geneva. He was a boy of singular talent and fancy. He loved enterprise, hardship and even danger for its own sake. He composed heroic songs, and began to write many a tale of enchantment and nightly adventure. He tried to make us act plays and to enter into masquerades, in which the characters were drawn from the heroes of Roncesvalles, of the Round Table of King Arthur, and the chivalrous train who shed their blood to redeem the holy sepulchre from the hands of infidels.

In this passage, we see a long succession of clauses taking up 'Henry Clerval' or the reference item 'he' as Theme. There is a shift in the last clause where we now have a marked theme 'in which the characters' signalling a shift to abstraction, which is then elaborated on in the lengthy rheme 'were drawn from the heroes of Roncesvalles, of the Round Table of King Arthur, and the chivalrous train who shed their blood to redeem the holy sepulchre from the hands of infidels'. Further examples, such as the extract below which details the awakening of the creature, were used to show the effect of making different choices in Theme position. In contrast to the previous extract, here, we see the Theme shift from the narrator to the parts of the parts of his own body and then to the wild behaviour of the monster itself, captured as part of the very marked theme in the last clause complex.

I started from my sleep in horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed: when, by the dim light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch – the miserable monster whom I had created.

Theme (in bold)

I started from my sleep in horror;

a cold dew covered my forehead,

my teeth chattered,

and every limb became convulsed:

when, by the dim light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch – the miserable monster whom I had created.

These shifting Theme patterns were a constant source of discussion when reading the text with the students. Students were taught to manipulate Theme and Rheme for desired effect, whether that be to begin sentences in the same way in a paragraph for emphasis, to vary their sentence structure widely or to begin with abstract nouns as found often in the canon text.

Preparing for the text response essay

During this time, students were also prepared for a text response essay, for which *Frankenstein* was an option to write about in the November exam. Students were provided with lists of metalanguage and conjunctions, sentence starters, quote samples and model texts written by top students and by myself. The Teaching and Learning Cycle was followed as students gained knowledge of the world of the text and the required genre, deconstructed exemplars, jointly constructed body paragraphs and topic sentences together as a class, and then completed multiple practice pieces in timed conditions. The process of students writing paragraphs or topic sentences together and then sharing with group worked particularly well as a means to jointly construct their writing. Furthermore, it was the conversations that took place whilst sharing and unpacking different examples that lead to a clearer understanding of the expectations of the writing and language.

A description of literacy outcomes for the students

For the remainder of the year, I continued to implement explicit functional grammar wherever possible in my Year 12 classroom. Not only did these strategies improve the sophistication of students' writing, there was also a clear increase in engagement and buy-in from weaker students. With an increased understanding of functional grammar, the students were able to select from a range of sentence structures when writing, make informed choices about language and verbalise their questions with greater specificity. They took time to consider their vocabulary options and began to identify language patterns in other texts. Additionally, the feedback that I offered could be more precise and better interpreted when using the functional grammar metalanguage.

The improvement of student understandings, skills and outcomes from the explicit use of functional grammar can best be seen through the results that followed. The subsequent data from the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority indicated that this class performed well above what was predicted. The lowest increase in achievement according to the data was an additional 1.445 study score points above the predicted study score, whilst the greatest improvement was an additional 4.728 study score points above the predicted study score. Interestingly, seventy-five percent of students in this class achieved a score higher than the predicted median and ten percent of students in the class achieved a score higher than the predicted top study score.

This movement, in my opinion, can be attributed to the Teaching and Learning Cycle and the explicit use of a functional grammar pedagogy that was embedded not only into the teaching of *Frankenstein* but throughout the year. All staff in this particular Year 12 teaching team were competent and organised, set high expectations for students and held them accountable, and incorporated adequate practice writing throughout the course. My group was smaller but so were several others; the only reliable point of difference was the teaching of functional grammar as part of an explicit pedagogy.

A reflection on the pedagogical outcomes for the teacher

This unit of work was the product of several years of teacher literacy training and the classroom application of a functional grammar pedagogy, and resulted in a marked increase in student writing outcomes and overall results. I still routinely integrate these literacy strategies into the English classroom but I do so now with increasing confidence and ability and in a more organic and less structured way. I now look for moments of opportunity within a wider Teaching and Learning Cycle to workshop functional grammar with students and often find myself stopping a lesson and diverting to functional grammar before returning to my intended course of learning.

My own capacity to provide targeted and explicit feedback is something that has improved because of my growing confidence with a functional grammar pedagogy. With a developed literacy knowledge, I am better able to identify specific writing issues and communicate to students why or how their writing is incorrect, and explain how they need to rectify this. I have become more conscious of using expert language while in the classroom, in order to model the vocabulary and language that I want students to employ.

There are several factors that seem to be foundational to improve student writing. Exemplar texts, although arduous to create, especially if teaching a new unit, are imperative in order to provide students with an aspirational model for their work. Often, it is joint construction within the Teaching and Learning Cycle that is missing from teachers' toolboxes. While many of my colleagues competently develop textual knowledge and model set texts, not everyone understands the importance of co-constructing writing with students. Indeed, even if teachers appreciate the need, the execution of joint construction is difficult, as this can be a lengthy process that requires patience, the ability to question and good class control. These factors combined with teaching students about the register continuum, nominalisation, and theme and rheme thus seem to form the basis for improved outcomes.

References

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2015, 'English and English as an Additional Language: Advice for Teachers', VCAA, Melbourne, p.42.