

# Outcomes of a functional grammar-based pedagogy in an intensive English language school

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## PART 1: INTRODUCTION

This report provides a summary of the evaluation of the whole school implementation of an explicit language-based pedagogy in the Western English Language School (WELS) in Victoria, Australia. This pedagogy is based on a systemic functional linguistics (SFL) model of language (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014, Martin & Rose 2003). The vehicle for the implementation was a tutor trainer course titled How Language Works (HLW) (Custance, Dare & Polias 2017), developed and implemented by Lexis Education.

The objective of the evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of such a pedagogy in an intensive English language school by examining patterns in the students' grades and any changes in learning and teaching practices. Furthermore, the evaluation looked at factors that supported, or otherwise might have slowed down, the uptake of the new pedagogy within the whole school.

This report summarises both numerical and qualitative data, which showed significant improvement in students' results and many positive changes within the school's teaching and learning practices.

The evaluation of WELS was part of a bigger research project consisting of several schools in Victoria, Australia. The project has been assessing the whole school implementation of an explicit, language-based pedagogy grounded in SFL teachings. WELS was the only intensive English language school included in the research – the other schools being mainstream secondary schools.

## The research site: WELS

WELS is a government school for primary and secondary students newly arrived in Australia and with little or no English. Here, the students are given an opportunity to gain English language skills and learn about Australian culture before entering mainstream schooling. English language is taught through speaking and listening as well as reading and writing across all curriculum areas, including Mathematics, Science, Music, Art, Humanities and Technology. Students spend on average 6 to 12 months in the school with their length of stay dependent on years of previous education.

The school supports students from diverse backgrounds, including refugees and those whose education has been interrupted. Such students, regardless of their age, may struggle to write and read, even in their first language. At WELS, all students are given the opportunity to gain skills that will prepare them for mainstream schooling.

## The evaluation

The evaluation was conducted three years after the whole staff training began. And while the deepening of the knowledge and understanding among staff was, and is likely to remain, a great focus in the school, the data were collected at a point where many changes were already in place. In the preceding years, staff were trained, mentored and diligently supported in taking up the new pedagogy, and a large portfolio of materials and resources was created. At the time of evaluation, the new pedagogy had been taken up in classrooms and applied across the whole school.

To create a more rounded understanding about the process of implementation and help evaluate a range of factors, including but also going beyond numerical results, a range of data was collected. The qualitative and quantitative measures included:

- students' results collected by the school using the Language and Literacy Levels (DECD 2013)
- formal, open-ended interviews with staff and the principal
- informal conversations with staff and the consultant involved in the delivery of training and mentoring of staff
- perusal of documents pertaining to the implementation.

The numerical data have been examined and analysed and the interviews

have been transcribed to enable a content analysis. In addition, the informal data and implementation documents added to the understanding of time-lines and steps taken.

## PART 2: IMPLEMENTATION

### Discovery and planning

*I love when you get presented with something that just makes so much sense, and then my role is to just figure out how to make it happen.  
(Principal, interview)*

Any substantial change, like the one WELS has undertaken, is often motivated by a burning need to improve students' results or dissatisfaction with 'quick-fix' solutions offered to educators. Yet, while these factors were significant in other schools evaluated within this project (Pomagalska 2019), the reasons WELS took on this pedagogy were different. Here, individual staff's exposure and engagement with this pedagogy spiked the interest in 'what else was possible' and eventually led to a whole school pedagogical 'upgrade'.

A couple of years before the implementation began, several of the staff members attended comprehensive professional development (PD) that explored ways to engage with an explicit language-based pedagogy in science and mathematics. In the words of one of these early enthusiasts, the PD opened his mind to 'what is possible' and it was 'like a paradigm shift' to him. He reflected in the interview that, after applying what he learned in his own practice, the potential of this pedagogy became obvious to him. The students, he commented, 'loved having the otherwise hidden workings of language made explicit to them.'

The initial interest grew into an exploration of how this pedagogical approach could be taken up in a broader and more structured way by the whole school. Three members of the WELS leadership team went to South Australia to meet with their EAL program in the Department of Education, which had over many years been embedding an explicit language pedagogy based on SFL. The collaboration resulted in many of the WELS staff visiting South Australian schools later in the project, including the Adelaide Secondary School of English (ASSoE) and Pennington School R-7, where they were able to witness, firsthand, the impact the approach had on the teaching and learning practices. This visit proved to be a defining point and it prompted WELS to embrace the whole school makeover. The following words from the principal reflect on that.

*What we decided to do was so heavily based in really seeing the runs on the board already and the research that was there so that what we did made sense to people. ... [The staff] came back absolutely glowing. You know, it was working! ... and so that was really the basis for launching into it because we saw how it worked already. (Principal, interview)*

A number of discussions and decisions preceded the implementation,

including planning and scheduling of training and post-training support as well as allocation of resources. While these were accomplished quickly, the effort put into planning meant that the implementation's feasibility was carefully considered before it was placed firmly on the school's agenda. Later on, these early considerations helped to deal with challenges and to ensure that the implementation ran smoothly.

These early considerations also included discussions about the school's curriculum and the assessment tools that the school was using at that time. After discussing this with the South Australian EAL programs during their visits, WELS decided to prioritise rewriting the curriculum and developing a new assessment tool for assessing student's improvement (Jakić 2017). However, since most of the South Australian documents, with the exception of the Language and Literacy Levels materials, were not made available, WELS teachers spent time creating their own documents. As part of this process, WELS relied on the advice from the external consultants, Brian Dare (secondary) and Bronwyn Custance (primary).

## Training and upskilling

*I don't know how else you could go through a course in learning about functional grammar apart from doing it intensively. Over a period of weeks. ... and then ... you need that support, classroom support, you need collegiate support. I think the model is really good. (Principal, interview)*

Following the planning phase, the intensive training period began. During that time, a group of teachers was trained as tutors in HLW. This small group was then responsible for upskilling and supporting the remaining staff. Many of the tutors took on a leadership role, driving the implementation, advising the principal, mentoring colleagues and developing supportive structures for the project.

The comprehensive training, focusing on the functional model of language, was developed for teachers across all learning areas. The course aimed at developing teachers' understandings of language and literacy as well as helping them to implement language-based activities in their classrooms. The two major constructs underpinning the course were the functional model of language and the Teaching and Learning Cycle (TLC) (Custance, Dare & Polias 2017). The following comments, collected by the school, reflect the response of the teachers to the HLW course.

*I truly find the course very useful and my understanding and knowledge has definitely expanded. It's well organized and presented. The course, though intense, has certainly challenged me to consider how much of functional grammar can be incorporated into the syllabus at the Beginner and Literacy level, without completely replacing other approaches such as the Topic and Situational using traditional grammar. I'm excited to see its implementation in the coming years. (Teacher's written comment, post-course survey)*

*I found the course very stimulating and challenging in an exciting way. I am eager to put the theory into practice this term with my team teaching*

*to consolidate what I learned in the course. Thanks to all involved in delivering the course. (Teacher's written comment, post-course survey)*

Being an intensive English language school, there was a significant focus among WELS teachers on developing the language resources of students across all learning areas. While the appreciation of linguistic complexity may not always be present in mainstream teachers, every teacher in this school was considered to be a language teacher even before a functional language-based pedagogy had been adopted. Accordingly, there was already fertile ground for learning about the functional model and adopting it as a key element in the pedagogical framework.

During that time of intense upskilling of staff, the involvement of the external consultants was largely with training and providing mentoring when needed, to assure the fidelity of the model. They also supported teachers in applying the new pedagogy across different subjects, including Mathematics, Science, History and Geography. It is important to note that the goal of this close involvement was to pass on the expertise to the staff, in particular the faculty and school leaders, in order to minimise the need for external expertise in the future. In the interviews, the principal commented on this particular aspect of the implementation: 'We very rarely now have anyone coming in [because] there is an enormous amount of expertise in the school.'

## Resourcing

Significant changes can be resisted by employees in any organisation, and schools are no different. There may be many reasons why teachers are resistant to change in their teaching practices. For some, such significant change may seem unnecessary as they are already achieving good results, while others may lack confidence or be fearful of embracing challenges. This is why training alone does not guarantee a smooth uptake of the new skills.

Furthermore, training alone may not assure consistency of what is being taught in different classrooms. As with any organisational change, the implementation of new pedagogy yields best results when done across all faculties, all classrooms and all subjects. Accordingly, a consistent uptake of the pedagogy by all was a clear priority at WELS. To help this, the school leaders created a suite of materials that would guide teachers in embracing the tools and knowledge they were given in training. The excerpt below indicates how important resourcing was to teachers who had undergone the training and support schemes.

*The genre map, HLW teachings and functional grammar are great bases from which to start the backwards planning and teaching/learning cycle processes :-)* It will be great to eventually have a bank of model texts and units to consult. Thanks! (Teacher's written comment, post peer-to-peer support)

Many documents were created at that time to support consistency and help staff transition to the new pedagogy. Most importantly, a new, detailed curriculum was developed for the whole school. The year 7-12 teachers

created what was called a Genre Unit Starter Pack for each genre and student level combination on the new genre map. The primary teachers created model units of work (MUW) appropriate for each year level group.

## A new curriculum

Writing a new curriculum was inspired by the visits to ASSoE, where a comprehensive, genre-driven curriculum outlined in detail the guidance for the teachers as to what and how to teach. In WELS, two groups of six teachers formed curriculum teams, primary and secondary, designing and overseeing the development of the new curriculum, based on an explicit, genre and language-based pedagogy.

The teams mapped out the three-layer syllabus, with the first layer defining 'who and what we are'. This layer was to set out a framework for the whole of the curriculum and outline the pedagogical principles that underpin the work in the school.

The second layer detailed what was to be taught in the form of a genre map. Here, the genre and subject continua were explained; for example, what genres were to be taught, when and in what subjects. This made the teaching consistent across all areas and levels. In secondary, particular attention was paid to choosing genres and topics based on those that students would eventually go on to learning when they transitioned to mainstream schools.

As one example, it was identified that the Australian Curriculum includes teaching of acids and bases at year levels 9 and 10 and one of the key ways in which students would be expected to engage with this topic was through the macro-genre, the Laboratory Report. As a result, this topic and genre were added to the genre map for an appropriate student language level. This process was done for all subject areas, ensuring that the work done in the language school prepared students as best as possible for their transition pathway.

The third layer outlined further resources available that teachers could draw on, including WELS developed resources (i.e. model texts or model units of work) as well as a range of external resources.

The new curriculum that was being developed was not only much more detailed than the one previously used but it also enabled a very structured and coherent flow of activities in the school. It was a source of guidance for teachers, with clearly defined expectations, teaching parameters and much more.

*[Before,] people were still doing great things in the classroom but it was very teacher-interest and teacher-capability driven. Compared to now, where we have a lot of guidance on what to teach through our genre maps. (Secondary teacher, interview)*

While the curriculum teams were responsible for the development of the outlines, many teachers were involved in creating model units or



model texts. Developing the curriculum and units of work, trialling them in classrooms and improving the initial versions was a painstaking process. The feedback and involvement of all staff was not tokenistic. All teachers were actively engaged in developing the resources, in trialling the model units of work or model texts, and in improving them over time. Many commented, in the interviews, that this helped teachers to better understand and truly engage with the new pedagogy and, importantly, to gain confidence in applying new skills in classrooms. In the long run, the curriculum helped to set up a clear and explicit benchmark of what was expected of teachers.

*We were talking yesterday about our own units that we tried writing right at the start, as model units of work and how bad they were. Because people who have built on them have just improved them so much. When we go back and contrast them, ours were very minimal, they didn't have many resources to go with them. That's how things developed, built on the shoulders of others. (Secondary teacher, interview)*

## Genre Unit Starter Packs

Genre Unit Starter Packs were the newest addition to the wealth of documents created at WELS. It was a resource created by all secondary teachers across all subjects and levels. Teachers were given time to create a unit of work, in a genre and topic allocated, based on personal preference and experience. They had to prepare a model unit of work and share it with the WELS staff. Those units of work have been created for each section of the WELS genre map. This exercise consolidated all the training and learning done by the staff and added to resources in a systematic and thorough way.

*And in secondary, we did the Genre Unit Starter Pack support and that was really key because it brought together all the learnings that people have done over the last two years. ... [and] it was an opportunity for them to show how much they had learned and also contribute to resourcing. (Secondary teacher, interview)*

## Model units of work

MUWs were created by a number of primary level teachers who were early and enthusiastic adopters of the new curriculum approaches. As a part of this pack, units appropriate for each year level group were created. These units were also genre-based, focusing on a single genre per term. A wide range of quality resources were also created for each MUW, including professional-quality published texts in a variety of genres. The MUWs were created in a way that enabled teachers to formulate their planning for individual classes that may have had a considerable range of student capacities. This flexibility to modify the units is important in primary as the classes are organised according to age rather than English language level, so there may be a wide variety of language levels within each class. There is also a wide variation in student backgrounds between the five primary sites.

## New assessment tool

*[since using the new assessment tool] we have been able to, for the first time, to actually capture true progress, which we haven't been able to do before. And the fact that the progress ended up being quite good is fantastic. (Secondary teacher, interview)*

Unlike mainstream schools, intensive English language schools are not subject to national or state testing. This is understandable, considering the students are new to English. However, like all educational institutions, these schools need a way of assessing progress in students, to ascertain the effectiveness of all teaching and learning activities.

Prior to the implementation, the school relied on their own assessment tool called the WELS Assessment Tool (WAT), informed by the state of Victoria's EAL continuum. Early in the planning phase, the school identified the continuum as assessing broad stages of language development. However, with the increase in teacher understanding about language, it became possible and necessary to assess in a more fine-grained way in order to capture the iterative complexity present between the stages.

The resource adopted was the Language and Literacy Levels (DECD 2013). Incorporating aspects of the Language and Literacy Levels into the school's assessment has allowed teachers to capture detailed information on student progress in each of the language features contained within the new pedagogical model. WELS turned to this resource early in the implementation and have used it since then in addition to the WAT. The Writing section of the WAT is now in the process of being re-written so that both documents are more aligned with each other.

## Support and engagement

*[The teachers] had extraordinary amounts of support. No one has had to go into this on their own. (Principal, interview)*

An important part of the implementation was creating a support system for all teachers and providing an opportunity for all staff to give feedback. This helped all the teachers to transition into the new pedagogy and ensure the consistent uptake across the school. Today, secondary teachers use many of the aspects of functional grammar in all subjects. In primary, the approach is being used to enhance and inform teachers' instruction with MUWs being taught across all subjects. This was structured in a way that provided optimal levels of support over an extended period of time.

## Three-term model

*The model for implementing functional grammar (the course, mentor-mentee, peer-peer, on-site tutors, and curriculum sessions) worked extremely well (Teacher's written comment, post peer-to-peer support)*



A three-term model of support was developed early in the project to directly apply the TLC — a core tenet of the HLW — to actual teacher professional development. A term of intensive coaching and mentoring was provided after staff completed the first term of the three-term support model. During this term, teachers received mentor-mentee support, where teachers were led ‘by the hand’ so they could trial the new pedagogical tools in the classrooms. This period reflected the modelling & deconstruction stage of the TLC and was the most intensive learning period for each of the teachers.

*I found that the mentor-mentee co-teaching was very useful. I was able to observe how to introduce the topic/genre as well as how to teach language features in a specific way that relates to the topic while building on students’ previous knowledge and lessons. It was a more focused way of teaching. I was able to learn new strategies and the relevant language features for this genre/topic (Teacher’s written comment, post mentor-mentee support survey)*

This was followed by peer-to-peer support, which involved the original participants of the HLW course being paired up in order to put the professional development into practice in the classroom with a greater degree of autonomy. This term reflected the joint construction stage of the TLC. Here, teachers supported each other, sharing resources wherever possible.

*The peer-to-peer observations enabled me to view how FG, within the teaching and learning cycle, was implemented from other perspectives. I was also given the opportunity to observe more senior colleagues in similar and lower year level classes. Through this, I was able to reflect on the different methods and styles of teaching FG. (Teacher’s written comment, post peer-to-peer support survey)*

*Teaching EAL using the functional grammar approach is very exciting. Great work guys, well done. (Teacher’s written comment, post peer-to-peer support survey)*

Such a close and well-structured support model provided a generous cushioning to teachers who might otherwise have been hesitant to embrace the new pedagogy. More importantly, the extensive coaching, mentoring and teacher-to-teacher collaborations helped to establish consistency across what was being taught. It deepened the understandings of the new pedagogy, tools and resources.

*Four years ago, people would come to this job with all different kinds of experience and they still do. But with the three-term support model, ... we gave everybody the same level of knowledge, the same pedagogical understandings. So basically now we are all on the same page, we all have that baseline knowledge, which is amazing! (Principal, interview)*

## Feedback and engagement

Getting everyone on board doesn’t come without challenges. One of the

challenges here was making teachers 'own' the project and feel they could have input in all aspects of its unfolding. In primary, opportunities for feedback were provided during staff meetings and through curriculum leaders based at each primary site. Teachers were also encouraged to provide feedback to the curriculum team on an individual basis via email or in person.

In secondary, school leaders interviewed all staff to collect feedback about what, in their opinion, worked or didn't work and how things could be improved. While painstaking and resource demanding, the process enabled everyone to have a say, even if at times it was simply 'getting things off their chest.' All feedback was included in final considerations.

The results were collated, grouped into similar responses and all the comments were made publicly available to all the staff. The feedback was further analysed for common threads that later informed changes and additions to the curriculum. This was considered to be an invaluable activity because it allowed leaders to identify and justify the next steps in the curriculum journey.

*This opened up the opportunity for people to say what they did and didn't like and it made them feel a lot more valued and respected ... because we don't want people to think that we are just going forward and just making up our own decisions. You know, here is what everybody thinks and from that now and going forward whatever we are doing is like here is the feedback that you gave and here is why we are doing what we are doing. (Secondary teacher, interview)*

*[There was] lots of capacity for them to give feedback all the way through. The feedback I think was excellent. (Principal, interview)*

Collecting feedback from all the staff was not always a smooth process but it opened the door to another important conversation and further work on interpersonal protocols.

*We also have done some work on protocols of how we speak to each other and how we give feedback, because there are rude ways of giving feedback and there are constructive and even positive ways to say exactly the same thing but without causing offence to people. And it is not just about what feedback they give to us but how they talk to each other in meetings. [Because of the body language of a few people], we really felt like we had to address those sorts of issues so everybody can be open. You can be openly positive, you can be openly negative but you say it in a way that is appropriate and backed up by evidence. You don't just say, I don't like this. You say, could we change it to this? (Primary teacher, interview)*

## Challenges

Any innovation can be quite disruptive to an educational organisation. Adjustment to change that touches the very core of the school's practices and culture brings some discomfort. To manage such change effectively,

close attention must be given to mitigating the impact of the change on the organisation as a whole and the individuals involved.

It has been clear that most decisions and activities pertaining to the implementation of the new pedagogy were also geared to dealing with challenges that arose. Strong leadership combined with a willingness to engage, listen and remain flexible did a lot to ease the discomfort or help to mitigate resistance.

One of the greatest difficulties for this school was that it operates on six different campuses and the time of operating differs between the campuses as well. Managing so many locations while upskilling all staff was not an easy task but the results demonstrated that a complex structure should not be a barrier to profound changes in schools.

*... so we are looking at different start times, different finish times, people coming from six campuses at six different sites. I think it all wouldn't have been as hard if we were all on one site [but] anything is doable if you want to do it. (Principal, interview)*

WELS is a very dynamic school with new cohorts of students entering and leaving in a period of 6 to 12 months. The school has a changing number of staff as a result of fluctuating student numbers that are determined by migration patterns. Training and inducting new staff into a complex structure of curriculum and pedagogy is therefore of high importance. The induction has become more time consuming as most teachers entering the school must catch up on the pedagogy and receive support necessary for the transition.

*Another challenge we have is the induction of new teachers. Because now that we developed and we know what we know, we still have new teachers coming in and they have to hit the ground running. (Primary teacher, interview)*

Although induction has been a challenge for both primary and secondary teachers, the school meets the challenge by running a course and the whole support scheme for whenever a critical mass of new staff arrive to the school. So far, five new groups have been inducted this way. The model has shown its merit and the school continues to assign significant resources to the model because of its effectiveness.

In primary, the resources given to new teachers have been expanded. Today, in addition to providing HLW and the three-term support model for new teachers, the school has doubled the amount of time new teachers receive one-to-one induction because the extensive resources, the curriculum documentation and the knowledge that the staff now holds all demand more time.

Apart from the induction of new staff, assessing the progress of students proved to be one of the major challenges since the school is not included in national testing. Because the children spend only 6 to 12 months in the school, the best way to assess their progress was by pre- and post-testing. These tests are then compared using an assessment tool developed as a

part of implementation. However, the assessment of foundation students proved to be time consuming since it had to be conducted through a series of individual interviews with students.

*The data collection ... is very time consuming, and we need to have staff who can do something with the data, which is also time consuming, particularly for students who are not yet writing independently. The data collection takes a long time, to sit with a student and test their oral language, because it is one to one. (Primary teacher, interview)*

Applying the pedagogy at a foundation level, or with students who have missed out on schooling, posed a particular challenge for primary teachers. With the youngest students, the new pedagogy needed to focus not only on writing but on spoken language as well. While visits to South Australian schools provided some inspiration, there was a great amount of work done by foundation teachers of WELS in developing and trialing units and reflecting on students' responses. For example, in the early stages, model units were designed for levels F-2, focussing on longer texts. However, after some consideration, the work with these students become more focused on learning to write single sentences or a series of short, repetitive sentences rather than producing a longer example of a genre.

*This term they were doing Personal Recounts and talking about their weekends, so [teachers] decided to stick to just two processes, 'played' and 'went'. And just making sentences with these two, like 'I played with cars' or 'I went to the park.' And that's as far as they would go. ... Even if you are only working on a single sentence at a time, that can still be building that grammatical knowledge. (Primary teacher, interview)*

The final challenge was that the great amount of support given to the staff meant that some of the best teachers were taken out of the classrooms in order to fill the roles of curriculum developers and leaders. This created a peculiar dilemma where the long-term benefits for the school took precedence over an individual classroom.

## PART 3: STUDENT IMPROVEMENT

One of the challenges that WELS has faced is how to measure the improvement in literacy outcomes in their students. Since the students' stay is limited in time, long-term improvement cannot be measured. Similarly, the school is not subject to the national standardised test, the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy. In the past, WELS teachers relied solely on WAT but now also use the Language and Literacy Levels to identify measurable improvements in literacy outcomes over time.

The Language and Literacy Levels, developed in South Australia, is used for assessing, monitoring and reporting the language and literacy development. Based on the ESL Scope and Scales (Polias 2003), it was designed for the context of newly arrived students because of the inadequacies and inaccuracies of other language assessment tools. As a comprehensive tool based on the functional model of language, the levels

require some professional development to apply to the learning contexts. However, the effort is rewarded in that the levels can be applied to the language development of all students aged from 5 to 16 years, with each level representing the growth expected in one year of schooling.

## Improvement in primary school literacy outcomes

Once the teachers began adding the Language and Literacy Levels to their existing assessment practices, they could assess the impact of the new pedagogy more directly and precisely. Students in years 3 to 6 (8-11 years old) across various classes were taught a Procedure (a recipe) with a pre- and post-assessment using the levels. Figure 1 shows the results of these assessments, focusing on the students' capacity to control various structural and linguistic features of simple Procedures. For this cohort of students, across all these features, the improvement was significant. By the end of the first term of the school year, they were moving towards Level 4, which is the expected level of a five-year-old student in English in a mainstream school.

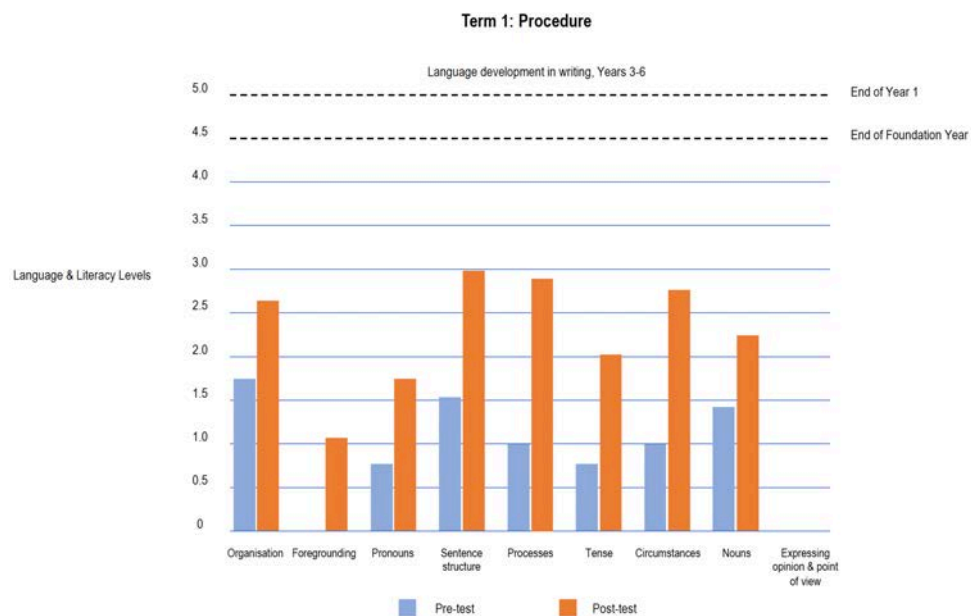


Figure 1: Pre- and post-testing for a Procedure

Figure 2 outlines the progress made in Term 2, where the focus genre was a Description. It shows that, at the start of the new term, the students may regress on the features indicated. For example, in processes<sup>1</sup>, the students reached level 2.8 at the end of Term 1 but, at the beginning of the second term, they had slipped back to 2.3. The teachers put this down to a lack of familiarity with the content knowledge or with the genre being introduced. Despite this, we can see outstanding progress being made over the full second term as students improved nearly two levels for each feature. This is significant since, under normal conditions, we would expect students

1 This is a measure of the scope, nature and frequency of the verbs used by the students.

to progress approximately 1 level per year, yet by the end of their second term at WELS, the students were fast approaching the equivalent of a mainstream student at the end of their first year of schooling.

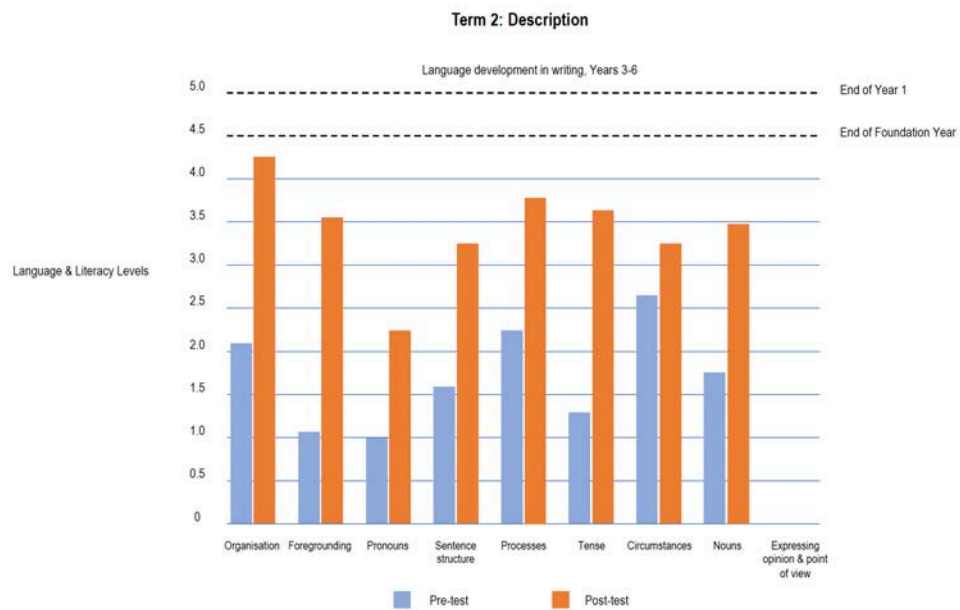


Figure 2: Pre- and post-testing for a Description

Figure 3 outlines the progress made by students in the third term at WELS. This time the focus genre was a Procedural Recount and the pre- and post-testing indicates continuing strong progress across all the features.

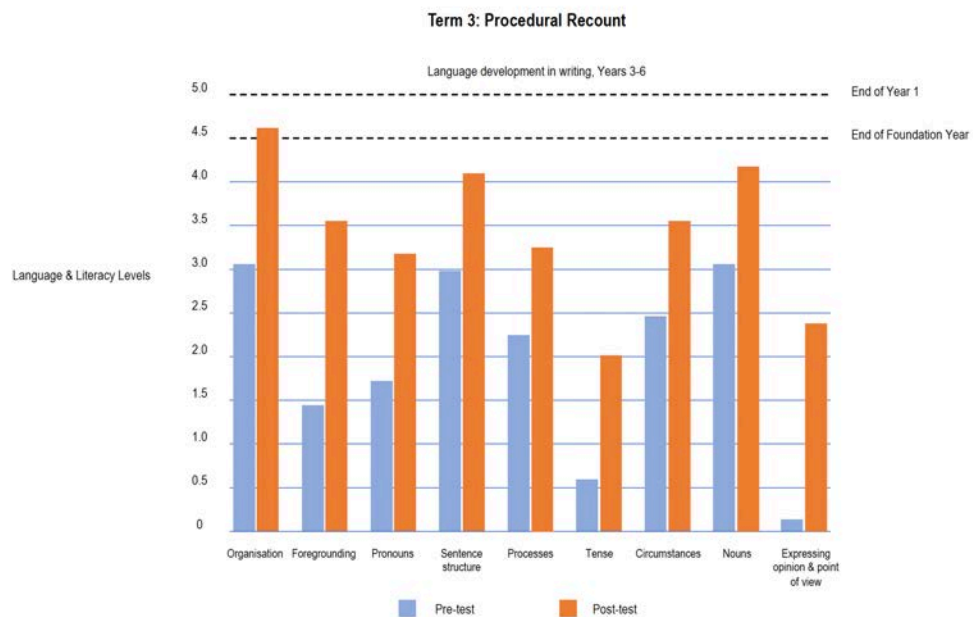


Figure 3: Pre- and post-testing for a Procedural Recount

It is helpful to see the cumulative progress, as summarised in Figure 4, which averages out the achievement in literacy outcomes for writing across two terms (6 months) of schooling. This demonstrates that the primary



school students are consistently gaining nearly two levels in that time and are fast approaching the end of foundation level (6 years of age).

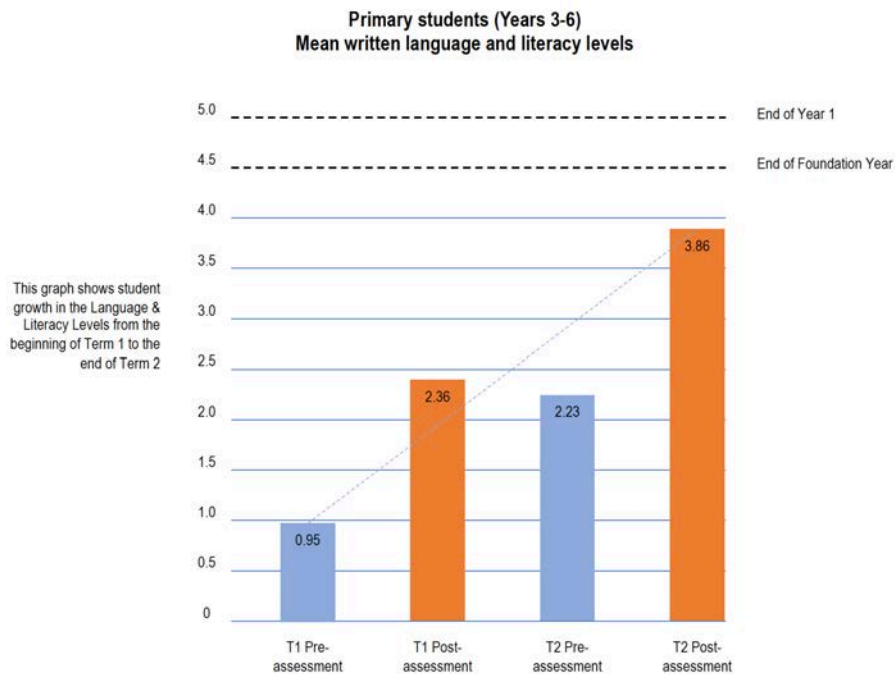


Figure 4: Mean level growth over two terms for primary school students

## Improvement in secondary school literacy outcomes

Using the same assessment tool, some very encouraging data emerged following the whole-school implementation of the HLW course. Figure 5 maps out the average growth for secondary students<sup>2</sup> in Terms 2, 3 and 4 for 2017 and Terms 1 and 2 for 2018. Each term's results are based on around 50 student samples of work<sup>3</sup> that were analysed and assigned a level.

<sup>2</sup> The primary students' growth data show a very similar pattern.

<sup>3</sup> Because of the constantly changing population, it is not possible to link the data from one term to the next.

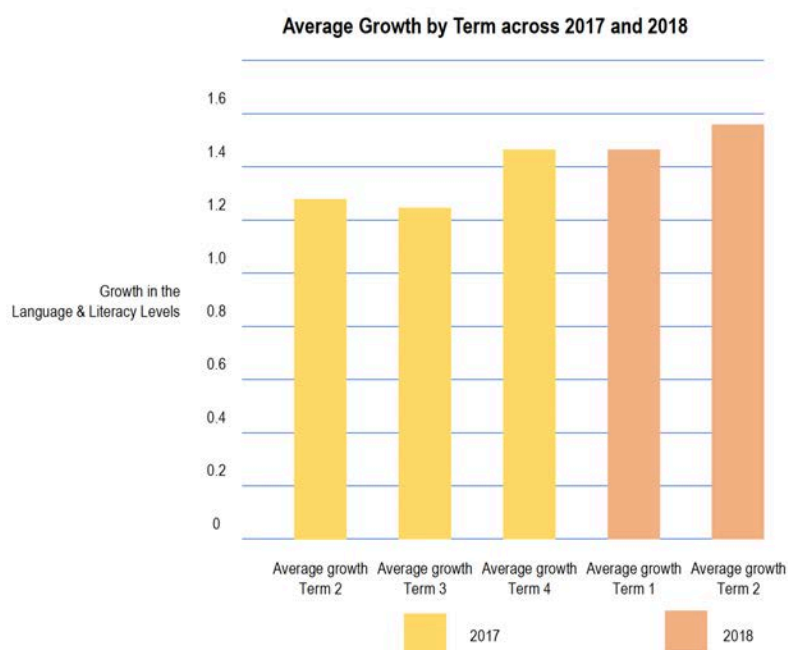


Figure 5: WELS average growth data 2017 and 2018

As measured by this tool, mainstream students would be expected to advance one level per year. The first two columns of Figure 5 indicate that students at WELS were able to show growth just over 1.2 in a single term. Extrapolated over the whole year, this means that, on average, students were improving around 5 levels per year in 2017, and more than 6 levels for the last cohort measured in 2018, as the pedagogy took hold. We can concede that students beginning English tend to make quicker progress through the lower levels, but it is still a remarkable outcome.

*The students, within the genres that they are being taught, gaining one language and literacy level or more on average and that's in that genre, in particular ... maybe not necessarily getting one language and literacy level every single term overall, but it is getting pretty close to it and some are exceeding that. And when you put that into perspective, in the mainstream, an average student would progress from one language and literacy level to the next in a course of a year, and we are talking here in the course of a term, so it is quite big. (Secondary teacher, interview)*

## PART 4: IMPACT ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

*HLW was a great experience. It has really assisted my teaching and I feel that the students respond really well to the functional approach (Teachers' written comment, post peer-to-peer support)*

While numerical data attest to the measurable improvement in students' learning, it says very little about the impact the new pedagogical framework might have had on the school. Such in-depth understandings of the way teaching and learning practices changed comes from the data collected via open-ended interviews, informal conversations and examinations of documents. This is where qualitative, in-depth data, such

as personal reflections and first-hand accounts, highlight the contextual complexity of the project and the depth of the change.

What follows in this section is a summary of the qualitative findings, which show that the vast improvement the students are now experiencing in WELS happened as a result of meaningful changes in teaching and learning practices in the school. These changes, in turn, followed the intensive period of whole-school pedagogical upgrade.

## Teaching practice

*People, in general, really appreciate the professional learning that they have been given. Some may object to it on a theoretical level in some instances but I think overall with all the successes that people have seen, as time goes on, I think people understand it more and I would go so far as to say that in secondary the majority of people are for [what] we have done. (Secondary teacher, interview)*

The quote above reflects on the state of things at the time of the evaluation; in a relatively short time, the intense transformation has been accepted and appreciated by a majority of staff. No doubt, the positive results students achieve helped to remove some of the residual resistance and further grow confidence in the project. Furthermore, as teachers saw the results that they and their colleagues were able to achieve and document, their enthusiasm for contributing to the new curriculum continued to grow. As the same teacher later commented, the very positive results coupled with genuinely taking onboard the staff's feedback to inform the next steps in honing the curriculum indicate that the future at WELS is exciting.

The striking results that are created by changes in the teaching practices and the tools offered by the new pedagogy were a solid foundation for this change. The teachers were not just taught the theory but were given practical tools to set clear objectives and to guide students towards achieving them. In the interviews, many teachers commented on the clarity they experienced when teaching students; the clarity about expectations and outcomes, and clarity about the steps they needed to take in their classrooms.

*Before I was just doing things, but now I am doing things with a purpose, I really know why I am doing the things that I am doing. And how to do them. ... I have looked at some of my old stuff, before I did any work on functional grammar, when I looked at some of my worksheets, I was like 'What was I doing?', you know, like 'What was the point of this activity?' There wasn't any organising structure to it, there was sort of, I was just doing things because I thought that they needed to be done. And a lot of it, now I think, it was too advanced for the level that I was trying to pitch it at ... When I plan now it is like, okay, I am going to figure out where do I need to go, what the success looks like for me, in terms of that genre, and then I am going to figure out where are my students, look at curriculum documents and I can plan a pathway that I am quite sure is going to get them to where they need to be. (Secondary teacher, interview)*

*I notice things about [students'] language that I wouldn't have noticed before, because I am tuned into it, so my mind thinks 'Oh, you used the circumstance'. (Primary teacher, interview)*

The explicit teaching practice provided the clarity and structure, while the functional model of language shifted the focus in teaching from a content-driven approach to a language-driven one. According to the interviewees, the students were now learning skills that were more transferable, which equipped them to attend to tasks in more structured ways.

*... prior to all of this, four years ago, it was ... topic driven. ... But you know, you can teach all the content you want but at the end of the day it is the grammar of the language, that's what is going to be the most transferable thing. Whether they do it in History or Science or whatever. The content doesn't matter as much, it is the language that's going to have the most impact on the overall learning. (Secondary teacher, interview)*

Yet, it wasn't just the individual teachers' practice that changed. They commented on the more encompassing sense of transformation that happened across the school. One of the biggest signs of this was the increased collaboration among teachers, which was a deliberately planned part of the implementation but was also a result of shared understanding and shared metalanguage. The teachers were given a structure and framework from which to work but they were also provided with many resources they co-created and shared.

*We are building this common core of vocabulary and teaching practice that we can all pull from and that enables us to have a lot more targeted discussions about not only the teaching but also the learning, how are the students learning everything that we are teaching them. (Secondary teacher)*

*So basically now we are all on the same page, we all have that baseline knowledge, which is amazing! And it led to the most interesting conversations, you know, like when you go to the staff room now and you hear people talking, you know exactly what they are talking about and you could potentially just jump into that conversation straight away, because we have that joint metalanguage. (Secondary teacher, interview)*

With a more structured and resourced way to teach, teachers' confidence flourished. The initial uncertainty was now replaced with a sense of improved control over the processes involved in teaching and learning. Feeling more masterful, teachers seemed more secure in their skills and ability to improve their students' outcomes.

*I feel so confident with just about every aspect of my teaching, you know, which you can't compare to what it was before. ... When I am looking in terms of lesson by lesson, I know exactly why I am doing this here and what effects this is going to have, what knowledge ... I can build on in the following lesson. And I am able to choose the language features that I want to focus on, not just because I happen to know them or they are in this genre but because I know the characteristics of that genre. It is just so much more honed ... (Secondary teacher, interview)*

## Students' learning and engagement

Students' improved results cannot happen without comprehensive changes in students' engagement in the classroom and their behaviour.

While the evaluation didn't involve students directly, teachers reflected on the impact the new pedagogy and new teaching practices had on students. The new pedagogical framework created greater stimulation and increased challenge, while providing adequate and explicit support. As a result, students were more engaged, confident they could understand the topics and deliver what was expected of them.

*You can see that [the students] are absolutely engaged with what is going on, and [name of a teacher] is being quite technical with her explanations and they are just eating it up. The more challenging it is the more they eat it up. (Principal, interview)*

*It made [the language] come alive to [the students]. It helped them to understand and the engagement increased so much more because they were starting to understand — not just reproduce what you are teaching them and trying to get it right — but understand why it is that way, which is a much deeper understanding in my view. (Secondary teacher, interview)*

Teachers engaged students through unpacking linguistic layers of a single text. Far from being bored, students were positively engrossed by the depths of the explorations and the complexity of linguistic resources.

*Having that model text ... carefully curated and [it] has these sort of language features at a specific level for the student. And you know some teachers were initially saying like, 'Oh, but they are going to get bored of it. How can you go back to the same sort of text, time and time again. They are going to get bored.' But in fact it is the exact opposite, because what you do, every time you go back to that model text, and you look at it for example from the lens of the processes or the next time from the lens of the noun group, you uncover a new aspect of it that the students didn't understand, so basically every time you go back to it, they get more from it, and they are like 'Oh, ... I understand that and I understand that bit'. (Secondary teacher, interview)*

The explicit teaching and the deep understanding of linguistic complexity provided a solid framework for future studies and for expanding the knowledge of the language. The students were now equipped with skills to talk about language and to understand the structure of it, using the metalanguage with confidence.

*When kids go to mainstream schools and they go into a Science class or they're going to a writing class and teachers can see that these kids can actually approach the task with [a language] scheme in their head... because that was always what was missing. English is made out to be such a mysterious language they can't possibly negotiate if you are from another language background. And actually they can. You just have to give them the tools to do it, don't you? ... These kids were just so articulate and*

*talking about linguistic concepts that it's just quite extraordinary and they are doing it with such confidence. And they are using technical language. (Principal, interview)*

## PART 5: PATHWAY TO SUCCESS

Well designed, comprehensive training that is based on an effective pedagogy is a basic necessity for such a success. However, many other factors play a role in ensuring the smooth uptake of the new pedagogy or relatively unproblematic unfolding of the implementation. In the process of evaluation, the following factors have been identified as important in the overall success.

First, the role of the leaders cannot be underestimated. In WELS, as in other schools evaluated, the principal was enthusiastically leading the project, being involved in many aspects of the implementation, including undertaking the HLW course and the mentor-mentee support. One of the crucial decisions that the principal of WELS and other successful schools made was making the implementation central (rather than a mere add-on) to all of the school's activities. This was reflected in allocating adequate resources, providing multi-level support to staff and personally participating in as many activities as was practical.

In WELS as well as other successful schools, the positive change was driven by a group of enthusiastic teachers who found value in the pedagogy right from the start. In the WELS context, a couple of staff members motivated the principal and other teachers, taking on leading roles in planning, and in the upskilling and resourcing of the school. The input of these individuals was valuable in driving the project forward and initiating many effective ideas and activities.

Second, the principal's decision to do all training and support, all resourcing and the creation of new materials in school hours was crucial. This had two broad outcomes: it sent a message to staff of its importance, and helped teachers implement the new skills and knowledge. The project was central to the activities and future of the school.

While intensive training might have seemed challenging to some teachers, the post-training support, coaching and mentoring given to all teachers was generous. The support had been structured in a way that enabled teachers to rely most heavily on the coaches in the terms that immediately followed the training. Later, this reliance was replaced by peer-to-peer support and continuous engagement with others in creating resources and materials for the school.

All staff were involved in the project's planning and delivery, if only by sharing their thoughts and giving feedback. The feedback was genuinely considered and was a valuable part of the project, ensuring that the ownership and responsibility for what was happening was shared by all.



As staff gained confidence in their ability to apply the pedagogical skills, they were encouraged to contribute to resourcing and mentoring others. Within a relatively short time, a sense of collaboration and a closely shared sense of purpose deepened within the school, creating an even greater sense of community and partnership among staff. This engagement was not a mere ripple effect of the implementation but a result of deliberate efforts to engage every single teacher and ensure they took the new pedagogy into the classroom with confidence.

## Final comments – where to from now

A huge amount of work has been done in the school over the last three or four years. Credit needs to go to those leading the project for their dedication and enthusiasm, and for committing to the many hours of training, mentoring, planning and documenting, and designing the new structures. The momentum of this project, so painstakingly planned and built in the early stages, continues.

This final quote expresses it well. The principal is talking about interviewing a teacher for a position in the school, a teacher who brings from another school a much longer experience in the explicit, language-based pedagogy and listening to her talk about this pedagogy and the ways she used it in her work reflected a great joy.

*I would love for our staff to, I mean all of them, to get from that, emerging to proficient, where all the stuff that they're finding a bit gruelling is just like water off a duck's back. So I think we have to take the school from that level to proficient. (Principal, interview)*

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