

Literature review

PVPG intent and implementation: a literature review

Strong communication skills are important for children's future success. Research indicates that early language development provides a foundation for learning, thinking and literacy, and is associated with later educational attainment and wider life outcomes (Shuey & Kankaraš, 2018). The Education Endowment Foundation (2020) similarly identifies this as a key foundation for literacy and academic success.

One important aspect of language development is children's growing understanding of how language is structured and used. Children develop grammatical understanding most effectively when they are actively engaged in discussion about language (Myhill et al., 2010). Opportunities to explain their thinking help children develop a more thorough understanding of how language works (Chen & Myhill, 2016). Furthermore, revisiting learning over time is known to strengthen retention and understanding (Cattrall, 2024; Dunlosky et al., 2013).

Halliday (2002) describes grammar as "a tool to think with". He argues that grammatical understanding empowers children to think about language as a system, helping them become more thoughtful and independent communicators.

Effective grammar teaching therefore involves more than learning terminology: it requires children to actively explore language, discuss grammatical concepts and revisit their knowledge over time.

The Place Value of Punctuation and Grammar unit is built around this philosophy and is taught as a recurring unit at the beginning of each academic year. The approach is informed by research suggesting that children need to understand how English works in order to write purposefully and deliberately (Chen & Myhill, 2016). The PVPG unit aims to help children develop a flexible understanding of grammatical concepts that they can later draw upon in their writing, reading and discussion.

What does it actually mean for a child to "understand grammar"?

Metalinguistic awareness is the ability to notice, reflect on and talk about language. Children can use language long before they can analyse or discuss it, but research suggests that explicit grammatical understanding can support more deliberate and effective language choices in writing (Chen & Myhill, 2016).

Ellen Bialystok describes metalinguistic understanding through two key processes: analysis of knowledge and control of processes (Bialystok, 2001). Analysis refers to the ability to consciously understand language and recognise linguistic patterns. Children notice recurring structures within language, identify grammatical concepts and discuss how different features work within sentences or texts. Through this process, grammar becomes something children can think about, talk about and reflect upon, rather than imitate.

Control refers to the ability to deliberately discuss and apply this knowledge. In writing, this means that children begin intentionally choosing linguistic features to create effects. Grammatical understanding involves both of these processes: knowing terminology and using grammatical knowledge purposefully in communication and composition (Halliday, 2002).

Building on these ideas, Honglin Chen and Debra Myhill (2016) identify four key metalinguistic processes that support grammatical learning within writing classrooms: identification, elaboration, extension and application.

- Identification – locating or naming grammatical features, such as recognising nouns, verbs or conjunctions
- Elaboration – explaining or showing how a grammatical feature works
- Extension – connecting grammatical understanding to meaning and the effect on the reader, for example, discussing how a short sentence may create tension or emphasis
- Application – independently drawing on their grammatical understanding in their own writing

In many classrooms, grammar teaching can become heavily focused on helping children identify grammatical features. However, this research by Chen and Myhill suggests that a stronger understanding of grammar develops when children engage in all four metalinguistic processes. Supporting children through these processes requires teachers to possess secure grammatical subject knowledge.

Teacher confidence and grammatical subject knowledge

Developing this kind of grammatical understanding requires knowledgeable teaching. Research suggests that many primary teachers lack confidence in aspects of grammatical subject knowledge (Myhill et al., 2010). Where this is the case, teachers may simplify explanations, avoid discussing more complex grammatical concepts or rely on procedural approaches to grammar teaching. This can make it difficult to respond to children's questions or to support deeper discussion about language.

Macken-Horarik et al. (2011) argue that teachers need sufficient understanding of grammatical concepts to explain patterns, discuss alternatives and help children connect ideas across different aspects of language.

For this reason, PVPG is supported by dedicated professional development. Training is designed to develop teachers' grammatical subject knowledge and confidence, enabling them to model standard English, explain grammatical concepts clearly and support children's developing understanding of language.

Supporting children's grammatical understanding through PVPG

Developing grammatical understanding is a gradual process. Children begin developing grammatical knowledge long before they receive formal grammar lessons (Bialystok, 2001). Through listening, speaking, reading and writing, they gradually build an implicit understanding of how language works and develop increasingly sophisticated control over linguistic structures (Halliday, 2002).

The purpose of grammar teaching, therefore, is to help children make this knowledge explicit by noticing patterns, discussing concepts and organising their understanding of language (Bialystok, 2001).

PVPG is built around this principle. Lessons begin with the language children already use and slowly introduce the terminology and concepts needed to discuss it. This allows children to connect new grammatical knowledge to existing, intrinsic understanding.

The sequence of grammatical concepts

While statutory curricula often specify which grammatical concepts should be taught in particular year groups, there is currently limited research evidence supporting a definitive sequence for grammar teaching.

The sequence within PVPG is informed by linguistic theory and the relationships among grammatical concepts. Functional approaches to grammar identify the clause as a fundamental unit of meaning (Halliday, 2002). PVPG begins by exploring nouns and verbs before introducing subject–verb agreement. These concepts provide the foundations needed to construct complete clauses and understand sentence structure. Once children understand how clauses are formed, they can begin to examine how grammatical elements such as subjects, verbs, objects, complements and adverbials work together to create meaning (Kolln et al., 2016). Later learning builds upon this understanding, allowing children to examine punctuation, phrase structure and increasingly sophisticated grammatical choices.

This approach reflects the principle that grammatical understanding develops most effectively when concepts are taught as part of an interconnected system rather than as isolated features. By establishing a secure understanding of clause construction first, PVPG aims to provide children with a foundation upon which more complex grammatical knowledge can be built.

Making grammatical patterns explicit

Children develop grammatical understanding by becoming increasingly aware of patterns within language (Bialystok, 2001). At sentence level, Kolln and Gray (2016) identify seven common sentence patterns built around the interaction between subjects, verbs, objects, complements and adverbials.

Through PVPG's explicit exploration of these and other recurring relationships within words, phrases and sentence structures, children begin to see grammar as a connected system that supports their wider use of language.

Discussion and reasoning

Developing grammatical understanding involves more than recognising grammatical features. Research by Chen and Myhill (2016) suggests that children develop greater understanding when they are given opportunities to discuss language, explain their thinking and justify their ideas. This is consistent with work on exploratory talk, which underscores the function of discussion, reasoning and justification in supporting learning and understanding (Mercer & Hodgkinson, 2008).

For this reason, discussion and reasoning are important parts of the PVPG approach. Children are encouraged to explain grammatical patterns, compare examples, justify their decisions and evaluate alternative possibilities through both spoken and written activities. These opportunities to reason about language help make children's thinking visible, allow misconceptions to be addressed and support deeper understanding of how grammatical structures work.

Understanding develops through application and revisiting

Bruner's (1966) concept of the spiral curriculum suggests that learners benefit from revisiting key ideas over time, deepening and extending their understanding every time they encounter concepts again. Research on retrieval practice suggests that recalling previously taught content can strengthen retention and support future learning (Dunlosky et al., 2013). The value of revisiting important concepts over time is familiar to primary teachers. In mathematics, for example, place value is often revisited at the beginning of the academic year because it forms the foundation of later learning. Similarly, grammatical understanding is strengthened when children repeatedly review and apply the concepts which underpin later language development.

PVPG reflects this cumulative view of learning. Key concepts are revisited each year and are deliberately connected to later learning.

Following the initial teaching sequence, application units provide opportunities for children to apply grammatical concepts in purposeful contexts, helping them consolidate their understanding and connect new learning to reading, writing and discussion. By revisiting the principles of grammar and sentence construction at the beginning of each academic year, PVPG provides children with the linguistic foundations needed to engage confidently with the wider English curriculum.

Editing and improving writing

Halliday (2002) describes grammar as “a tool to think with”, suggesting that grammatical understanding enables children to reflect upon and shape meaning through language. This tool is particularly important during the editing process, where writers evaluate the effectiveness of their choices and review alternative possibilities.

Revision skills are often some of the later writing processes to emerge during development (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). Research suggests that many children revise their work infrequently and without clear understanding (Thompson, 2024).

PVPG supports editing by providing children with a clear grammatical framework for evaluating their writing. Reviewing sentence by sentence, the approach helps them check whether each clause contains an appropriate subject and verb and whether subject–verb agreement is maintained. They can then consider whether punctuation accurately marks independent clauses before examining noun phrases, verb phrases and other grammatical choices to evaluate precision and effectiveness.

This process helps transform editing into a methodical process of grammatical decision-making. As children discuss, justify and improve their choices, they develop greater control over written language.

Implementing PVPG

Before starting PVPG

Before children begin PVPG, it is important that they are secure in the foundational transcription and reading skills that allow them to engage with grammatical concepts. Research indicates that early writers must coordinate multiple processes simultaneously, including handwriting, spelling, sentence construction and idea generation (Berninger, 1999). When transcription skills are not yet sufficiently secure, children need to devote more of their attention to letter formation, spelling and decoding. Engaging with grammatical concepts without control of these other processes causes an unnecessary cognitive load (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020).

In Year One, this typically means children are secure in Phase Three phonics and can write simple words and phrases with increasing independence. Our transcription and oral retelling units provide opportunities for children to develop these fundamental skills. Consequently, many Year One classes begin PVPG later in the year once these core skills are sufficiently secure.

Establishing PVPG within your English curriculum

PVPG is designed to be taught at the beginning of each academic year, with the principles and techniques revisited throughout the year to keep children and staff in a "PVPG mindset".

Sentence Pattern Building units offer a link between explicit grammar teaching and extended writing. They provide opportunities for children to explore, manipulate and rehearse sentence structures before applying them in extended writing. Research suggests that structured sentence-level activities of this kind can help children develop greater control over sentence construction and improve the quality of their writing (Saddler & Graham, 2005).

In Year One, Sentence Pattern Building units are typically taught following PVPG and before extended writing units. In Years Two to Six, they are taught alongside writing units, providing ongoing opportunities for children to revisit and apply grammatical concepts within meaningful contexts. In this way, Sentence Pattern Building helps children move from explicit grammatical instruction towards increasingly independent use of grammar as a resource for meaning-making in reading, writing and discussion (Halliday, 2002).

Ultimately, the goal of PVPG is to develop children's understanding of how language works. Through discussion, reasoning, application and revisiting, children develop increasingly explicit and flexible grammatical knowledge that can be drawn upon in reading, writing and discussion. This provides the foundations needed for effective writing and supports children in becoming increasingly confident and capable writers.

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