

Book review

Derewianka, B. & Jones, P. (2012). *Teaching language in context*.

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The recent publication of *Teaching language in context* (2012) by Derewianka and Jones is timely, not only for pre-service teachers, but also those teachers in the field who will be beginning to implement the new *Australian Curriculum: English* into their classrooms, recently released by ACARA (2012).

The authors' aim is to introduce pre-service and novice teachers to the varied, and at times complex, language contexts that their students will encounter when learning to communicate in different subject areas by making visible the challenges that students face when learning to use language in different genres. It also aims to help guide teachers in being able to support their students in meeting the many challenges of learning how to critically read and compose texts through understanding how language works in a range of contexts.

The approach the authors take to language is clearly set out and defined. Their explicit inspiration is a functional model of language that draws upon the work of the linguist, M. A. K. Halliday (1975; 2009), and those who have extended his work in systemic functional linguistics, including Martin (1985), Christie (2005) and Macken (1996). This approach to language also arguably underpins the new national English curriculum itself, and will be familiar to many teachers in states where the "functional grammar" of Halliday has had significant impact upon curriculum design, such as in New South Wales. The authors clearly state the differences between traditional grammar, and the functional approach for teaching and learning about language. The functional approach has been popular in Australian education because it allows the teacher to teach students how language choices are made in the context of different purposes and audiences. Thus, the functional approach provides the basis for teachers to instruct their students in appropriate shared language conventions; supports students in learning how simple language choices made in response to the demands of different situations; results in the production of a range of genres that have goals such as recounting an event, persuading others, or involve interacting in different ways both verbally and non-verbally that suits the different situations they will participate in throughout their lives.

The authors have broken the book into two distinct parts: the first three chapters give an introduction to the theoretical underpinnings of a functional approach to language, followed by the second part of the book which goes into depth about the language

conventions of each genre and register. The first 2 chapters address mainly the general principles underlying the theoretical approach of the functional model of language, including topics such as field, tenor, mode and their parallel expressive (ideational), interactive (interpersonal), and structuring (textual) components. Those unfamiliar with functional grammar will find this section provides a concise introduction to its key ideas, complete with useful diagrams that offer important visual clarification of the concepts. Chapter 3 introduces a teaching and learning cycle that can be used for planning and implementing the writing components of the new national English curriculum in the classroom. This cycle is structured in four stages consisting of: building the field, modelling the genre, joint construction, and independent construction (see fig. 3.1, p.45). Many teachers will undoubtedly be familiar with a version of this cycle, given there have been well-established state variations in practice for well-over a decade (for example: in the Victorian curriculum the cycle takes the form of joint deconstruction, joint construction, followed by individual construction; while the NSW model follows closely the model used in the book). Regardless of the readers' familiarity with the literacy learning cycle, they will find this book provides some practical examples, and grounds the discussion in the experiences of a case-study teacher, which all help to make the cycle clear for the novice and pre-service teacher.

The second part of the book goes into detail about how language is used in each genre. At various points it explicitly links these genres and their variations to the broad stages covered by the *Australian Curriculum: English* (ACARA, 2013) from Kindergarten through to Year 10 (see for example, Table 6.11 on page 157). From Chapter 4 onwards the authors devote time to how each genre can be deconstructed, and (re)constructed in the classroom. It is important to note that many language features in genres can overlap with other genres and the authors make this point throughout the book. They also demonstrate how some language features are common to multiple genres and texts. For example, the concept of theme and rheme is described in a general way, at the paragraph, sentence and word level in chapter 2, then elaborated upon in the context of the varied ways of reporting (describing and observing the world) in Chapter 7, and how language is used to persuade and argue a point of view in Chapter 9. This will assist readers to grasp how the functional model of language helps make clear the ways in which language users make selections from a pool of common grammatical resources when forming the different genres they produce as writers and speakers.

One area in which the book could be enhanced is in its treatment of multimodality. There is mounting evidence and argument that contemporary students prefer visual communication over the written text (see for example: Prain & Tytler, 2012; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Prensky, 2007). Certainly, today's students are bombarded by visual media in their everyday lives, and encounter visual media across a range of subject areas. For example, science education demands engagement with graphs and tables, while society and environment education frequently involves examining photographs or the exploration of documentary or historical films. While the authors touch on multimodal texts and meaning construction in a couple of places in the book, they attend to this important topic briefly, focusing mainly on the connections between images and language use. Importantly, the focus on multimodality is mostly limited to chapter 7, where the focus is

on the reporting genre, where tables, graphs and images are undoubtedly important. This exploration occurs logically in the context of science education and concentrates on reporting the results of experiments using visual tools like graphs, flow charts and diagrams. The image-text connection is touched upon in other areas, such as the discussion of literature (pictures for the younger grades) curriculum. However, it is of course possible to use images to enhance the written text in any genre, depending on context and audience. Therefore, if there is a future offering of this book, hopefully there will be an in-depth chapter dedicated to the composing and reading of multimodal texts beyond the somewhat limited focus of chapter 7.

Given the new *Australian Curriculum: English* (ACARA, 2012) divides instruction into the study of language, literature, and literacy, readers who expect the same of this book may be disappointed that its focus is more exclusively on the construction of texts. However, the emergence of new literacy standards for beginning teachers that demand a good understanding of how language is used in different contexts for different purposes and audiences makes this text very timely. With this context undoubtedly in mind, the authors have broken down the functional model of language in an attempt to make the book accessible, not only for teachers in the field, but also for pre-service teachers learning about how to teach English to their future students. This understanding is also assisted by the section at the end of each chapter where the authors invite readers to “have a go” and “think about it”, encouraging readers, as part of a group or individually, to consolidate the main language concepts that have been discussed.

In summary this book will assist beginning and pre-service teachers who want to support their students with the complexity of language use in multiple content areas, contexts and audiences. It will provide insight and clarity into how to teach the various genre required by the new *Australian Curriculum: English*; and its “have a go” and “think about it” sections at the end of chapter will make the book useful for teacher educators in their pre-service teacher English method or literacy courses by providing them with questions for focusing their trainee teachers’ attention on the key ideas of each chapter. Given the push for all future teachers to attain high literacy standards before they can be registered with accrediting authorities, this book may also be useful to the pre-service teacher in refining their own literacy capacities.

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