An exploration of student teachers' perceptions and experience of teaching grammar.

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The Issue

The 'grammar question' is a perennial one, discussed and contested in every generation' (Myhill, 2011, p.13). It is clear that student teachers (and teachers) have polarised opinions and experiences around the teaching of grammar, depending which particular policy was in place at the time they were learning grammar at school; these prior beliefs and experiences cannot be ignored and inevitably have a profound influence on current attitudes to grammar.

In contrast to the absence of explicit grammar teaching in the NC over the last thirty years, the most recent version of the NC includes a detailed 'Vocabulary, Grammar and Punctuation Appendix' (DfE 2013) prescriptively outlining terminology and grammatical structures to be taught. This (and a new national test of grammar, spelling and punctuation) has once again brought grammar to the fore, prompted by a renewed emphasis on subject knowledge and teaching of grammar. Coupled with this ambiguity surrounding the teaching of grammar is a general lack of confidence amongst teachers and student teachers, who often avoid teaching grammar completely. Grammar teaching seems to be met with 'anxiety and apprehension' (Watson, 2012), as well as limited subject knowledge and 'patchy' planning (ibid. p. 35).

Moreover, Cremin's (2009) findings about student teachers' lack of knowledge when it came to children's literature reveal that many student teachers are not familiar with fairy tales and even less so with picture books. Therefore, it is important to educate teachers and change their perceptions of using children's literature.

The Study

The study explored the perceptions and experience of trainee teachers who participated in the Challenge and Support Punctuating Grammar intervention programme. The main aim of this programme was to improve the pedagogical content knowledge of Year 4 BA QTS trainee teachers, alongside developing creative approaches to teaching grammar. There were two elements to this study: what do good teachers look like and what do they do? This was explored from an English subject-specific point of view, reflecting on the pedagogical principles of teaching grammar, but also generic aspects which are applicable to any subject, such as using pedagogies of enactment; modelling and reflection; developing pedagogic content knowledge.

A key consideration was to encourage student teachers to reflect on and discuss the range of pedagogical practices, with activities being explicitly modelled by the teacher educator. A key theme of the programme was to view 'language as putty – it can be shaped, stretched, squeezed, manipulated in an infinite number of ways'. This also incorporated Clements (2017) 'sandwich model of grammar teaching: seeing a language feature used for effect, learning how it works and then using in own extended writing.' (p. 140).

In order to build a richer picture through descriptive data, a qualitative approach was chosen by combining short pre and post attitudinal surveys; interview responses about the trainees' perceptions of teaching a grammar intervention; thematic analysis; written reflections to explore perceptions and experience of teaching grammar. Qualitative research also provided rich insights and illuminating data about the teaching of grammar. In order to build student teachers' competence and confidence to

teach grammar, a cycle of enactment was used, whereby they were encouraged to reflect on their practice, both during the rehearsals and after each grammar intervention.

Findings

Overall, student teachers were receptive to new ideas and pedagogical approaches, for instance, using creative approaches to teaching grammar and linking it to picture books. As a result of explicit modelling, supported planning and rehearsal in school, the students gained confidence in teaching grammar. The view of Wheatley (2012) that doubt, reflection, learning and knowledge growth are intertwined, so a feeling of being less efficacious in a particular task makes teachers more open to new ideas and more willing to examine their own practices. This certainly seems to reflect the experiences of the student teachers who participated in the programme.

The study confirmed that in order for grammar to be taught effectively, a practical, hands on approach which involves manipulating language through playful activity is needed. However, it was apparent that student teachers need support to develop linguistic and pedagogical content knowledge in order to translate into successful classroom practice. This merely involves tackling the problematic beliefs about grammar that student teachers hold and equipping them with practical ideas. When supported in changing their practices and reflecting on their beliefs, student teachers can approach grammar with 'renewed enthusiasm and vigour' (Watson, 2016 p. 16).

There is a wealth of research related to 'grammar for writing', but links between grammar and reading comprehension have not been explored to the same extent. Certainly, linking grammar, children's literature and reading comprehension would be an interesting direction for my own further study by looking at 'Grammar for Reading'.

Implications

This study confirmed the pivotal role of the teacher educator in talking about texts and demonstrating a passion for children's literature, in order to create 'teachers who read and readers who teach' (Cremin, 2009, p. 15). As core subject knowledge, children's literature must be a requirement in teacher training and integral to teachers' continuous professional development. Primary teachers' knowledge of children's authors, poets and picture book creators is a crucial element of their professional repertoire; yet currently such knowledge is not a statutory requirement on any ITE courses.

In terms of course design, putting creativity at the heart of the Primary English curriculum will impact on teacher's enjoyment of teaching grammar and children's enjoyment of learning grammar by experimenting with language to appreciate 'the elasticity of language and the possibilities it affords' (Myhill, 2011, p.13). In order to teach grammar effectively, student teachers need to develop a middle approach which combines creativity and use of key terminology in context. It is important to start with quality literature with the end point of extended, purposeful writing, via some explicit grammatical concepts on the way.