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**An investigation into how high-attaining Year 9 students'  
understanding of grammar is affected by  
contextualised grammar teaching**

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**Abstract**

*This paper explores an investigation, based on action research, into the impact of contextualised grammar teaching on a high-attaining Year 9 class's understanding of grammar. Prompted by previous findings that have shown traditional teaching of grammar as a set of rules to have little benefit for student writing, these lessons sought to present grammar as a tool to create effect in written work. The findings suggest that students are able to make use of grammatical concepts learned through contextualised grammar teaching, and that such teaching does not have any detrimental effect on enjoyment or confidence. This paper argues for the potential of contextualised grammar teaching as an answer to grammar's contested position in the National Curriculum for some classes, and as a way to engage students more meaningfully in the study of grammar.*

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## **Introduction**

The introduction for Year 6 students in England of statutory tests in spelling, grammar, and punctuation has signalled the Department for Education's (DfE) commitment to these three areas of the English curriculum from the early years of education. In particular, they focus on contextualised grammar teaching; the primary curriculum asserts that students not only "should be taught the correct use of grammar" (DfE, 2013a, p.11), but also "how [grammatical] choices can change and enhance meaning" (ibid., p.47). Children commencing secondary school are arriving theoretically able to use grammar as a tool to enhance their writing, though whether this is the reality remains debatable. The secondary curriculum states that Key Stage 3 students should be explicitly "extending and applying [their] grammatical knowledge" (DfE, 2013b, p.16) from primary school, again with the aim of "using these consciously in their writing and speech to achieve particular effects" (ibid.). There is a body of research to suggest that contextualised grammar teaching, where grammar is "integrated within teaching" (DfE, 2013a, p.15), can have a positive effect on students' writing. My experiences in both of my placement schools, however, have shown that a different kind of grammar instruction is predominant.

In both of my placement secondary schools, grammatical teaching (including my own) is often presented as the transmission of rules intended to help students to write 'correctly'. This teaching often focuses on punctuation, with the next most frequent terminology used relating to clauses (main, subordinate, simple, complex, compound). There is little to no discussion of how grammatical choices might be used to create a certain effect. This is the kind of grammar teaching (which I will define as 'traditional' grammar teaching) which has been shown repeatedly to have no, or a negligible, positive effect on student writing outcomes, and this was a concern shared in the English department of my second placement school; faculty members felt that the grammatical knowledge brought by Year 7 students to secondary school was being overlooked and left to be forgotten. Although Year 7 students

arrive with a comprehensive knowledge of grammatical terminology, this was seen as often underutilized at secondary school, where teaching could end up being less complex than at primary level. There was also a sense that students learned rules that were more complex than they needed, and that secondary teachers did not always feel confident addressing such concepts.

Having read about the ‘Grammar for Writing’ lesson schemes in the course of my Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) training, I chose to carry out my small-scale research project to explore how a more contextualised approach to grammar teaching might affect a top set Year 9 class’ understanding of the grammar they learn. The ‘Grammar for Writing’ schemes were devised by Myhill and address prose, poetry, and persuasive writing with a particular focus on using contextualised grammar teaching to improve students’ writing in these areas. The aim was to find an approach to teaching grammar to this class that would enable them to make the kind of informed choices described in the National Curriculum, which would not only benefit them as they move into Key Stage 4 and their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations, but also provide them with the tools for analysing and producing grammatical choices in any of the texts they encounter and produce.

In this paper, I will begin by outlining the complex history of grammar and its place in the English curriculum, moving to the argument around contextualised grammar teaching before focusing in particular on four studies which claim to have found significant evidence either in favour of or against this approach. Having explored existing research into this area, I will outline my own research questions and research practices for this investigation into contextualised grammar. Finally, I will discuss my findings and their significance for both my own teaching and for further research into this controversial area of English learning.

## **Literature review**

### **The history of the ‘grammar debate’**

Though grammar is now being championed in the National Curriculum and by the accompanying statutory tests, it occupies a vexed position in the history of English education. Myhill and Watson provide a clear outline of the changes in grammar teaching over the last fifty years, differentiating between shifts in the opinions of educators, policy-makers, and the general public. They identify the

1966 Dartmouth Conference as “a turning point in educational thinking about grammar in the curriculum”, which led attendees “to exclude formal grammar teaching from the English curriculum” (Myhill & Watson, 2014, p.42). In their view, this was a result of teachers’ and educators’ “growing dissatisfaction with classroom practice in grammar teaching”, which was of a nature that “to many education professionals had no educational relevance and no impact on language development” (ibid., p.42). They note, however, the persistence elsewhere of “a pervading view that lack of attention to grammar was causing falling standards in language”, leading to “an underlying sense of barely disguised outrage at [grammar’s] abandonment [that] has surfaced repeatedly over the years” (ibid., p.42). Crucially, they note that this outrage is “often from politicians or the general public” (ibid., p.42). This public view of grammar has allowed it to be politicised as what Myhill, Jones, Watson and Lines (2013) call “an antidote to all things bad” and “inexorably conflated with moral propriety” (p.104); it has thus become a matter of heated debate, a debate often “framed by polemic”, with “little coherent and developed articulation of the contribution” it might make to students’ writing or language knowledge (Myhill & Watson, 2014, p.45).

The new statutory grammar tests at the end of Key Stage 2 in England are a realisation of this public belief, but do not mark a change of viewpoint within the profession itself; in 2017, the House of Commons Education Committee reported that they were “not convinced that [the new test] leads directly to improved writing” and urged the government to “make spelling, punctuation and grammar tests non-statutory at Key Stage 2” (House of Commons Education Committee, 2017, p.3). Research supports this point of view. Wyse and Torgerson (2017) state that “[t]he majority of the evidence suggests that [...] grammar teaching is not effective for improving pupils’ writing” (p.1027); Jones, Myhill, and Bailey observe that “there is no evidence that teaching grammar is of benefit in supporting writing development” (Jones, Myhill, & Bailey, 2013, p.1242); and Elley, Barham, Lamb, and Wyllie (1976) provide a conclusive statement on the long history of grammar teaching interventions, writing that “sixty years of empirical studies on the practical value of teaching grammar have failed to demonstrate any consistent measurable effects on students’ writing skills” (Elley et al., 1976, p.5). Thus, as the researchers note in the conclusion to their own study on grammar interventions, education professionals are faced with the conclusion “that English grammar [...] has virtually no influence on the language growth of typical secondary school students” (ibid., p.18), leading many to the conclusion that there is, then, no place for grammar on the secondary English curriculum.

### **The argument against grammar teaching, traditional and contextualised**

The study conducted by Elley et al. (1976) presents a strong case for the inefficacy of grammar teaching as a strategy to improve writing. The study involved three different groups of students studying three different grammar courses: the Oregon Curriculum with a transformational grammar strand; the Oregon Curriculum without a transformational grammar strand; and a conventional English course based on P.R. Smart's *Let's Learn English* textbook series (traditional grammar teaching). The researchers' methodology is rigorous, and avoids many of the potential shortcomings of such a study. Classes were matched into groups "on the basis of their scores" on pre-treatment tests, as well as on "ethnic group, sex, contributing school, and subject options" (Elley et al., 1976, p.8), minimising the likelihood of results being unduly influenced by external factors. Researchers also took into account the effects of "teacher attitudes", arranging the study so that "each English teacher taught each course, and [...] in the course of the project, each class was taught for a year by each of the teachers" (ibid., p.7). The researchers also note that previous studies have been limited by their duration, arguing that it is "unrealistic to expect a course of one or two terms [...] to have dramatic effects on [students'] writing" (ibid., p.6); their own study takes place over three years. A potential limitation of the study, however, is that it was "conducted entirely in one large, co-educational high school, on the outskirts of Auckland city" (ibid., p.7). The researchers state that students' test scores and "the distribution of fathers' occupations showed that the experimental sample constituted a representative group of New Zealand urban third-form pupils" (ibid., p.8), but the sample nevertheless remains limited to pupils and teachers in the same city and same school.

The researchers assessed both the students' writing and their attitudes towards English and writing at the end of each of the three years of the study. The results of the assessment of students' writing showed no difference between the three types of instruction. In an analysis of the third-form results, it was found that "on none of the twelve variables did any English program show a significant superiority" (Elley et al., 1976, p.12). By fifth form, the researchers observed that "[i]n [...] not even the three-hour School Certificate Examination, did any group show any advantage over the others" (ibid., p.14). While there is an argument that the pupils at least showed no negative impact from any grammar teaching, the analysis of student surveys about their attitudes to English provide a more alarming set of results. As early as the third-form surveys, pupils in the transformational grammar group "liked writing less than the other groups" (ibid., p.12), and went on to state that they "found English more difficult than the other groups, and stated that they read less than they used to" (ibid.,

p.13). At the end of fifth form, they found the subject “more 'repetitive' and 'useless' than the other groups”, and “showed predominantly negative attitudes, especially on such dimensions as ‘useless’, ‘unimaginative’, ‘repetitive’, ‘passive’, ‘complicated’, and ‘unpleasant’” (ibid., p.16). These surveys demonstrate that while there may be no direct educational impact arising from these alternative forms of grammar teaching, there is nevertheless a danger that grammar can put students off the subject as a whole and impact their engagement with English. The outcomes of this study make a strong case for dropping grammar teaching from the curriculum, including alternative techniques such as transformational grammar, which have been shown in this case to be no more effective than traditional grammar teaching.

### **The small-scale argument for contextualised grammar teaching**

Since the publication of Elley et al.’s research in 1976, however, there have been further studies which present a more optimistic view of the possibilities of grammar teaching. One such small-scale study involved the comparison of “[t]hree instructional approaches [...] for their effectiveness in strengthening BEV [Black English Vernacular]-speaking elementary school students’ written syntactic competence with SE [Standard English] forms” (Fogel & Ehri, 2000, p.215). Having identified six grammatical features which students frequently wrote in Black English Vernacular (BEV) rather than Standard English (SE) forms, the researchers carried out two treatment sessions with three different groups, accompanied by a pre-test, a post-test, and self-efficacy ratings throughout. Their aim was to assess the efficacy of the three different approaches in teaching children to write in SE rather than BEV forms. The first two approaches, dubbed E (exposure to text) and ES (exposure to text plus explicit instruction in Standard English strategies) “were selected to depict forms of instruction typically adopted by teachers” (Fogel & Ehri, 2000, p.215), while the third, ESP (exposure to text, SE strategy instruction, and guided practice with feedback) aimed to go beyond the E and ES methods. The results of the post-treatment writing test found that “students in the ESP condition made significantly greater gains from pretest to posttest [...] than students in the ES and E conditions, which did not differ from each other” (ibid., p.222), suggesting the value of the additional practice and feedback opportunities offered to the ESP group students. It is worth noting, however, that the study did still uncover issues with the ESP treatment, as “ESP students showed a drop in self-efficacy ratings following their participation in the experimental treatment” while “E and ES students showed a consistent increase in self-efficacy ratings” (ibid., p.227). The researchers theorise that “providing ESP students with an opportunity to practise and monitor their use of SE forms [...]

resulted in a more realistic, albeit decreased” self-efficacy rating, or that “negative feedback revealing the presence of writing ‘errors’ during the practice period eroded students’ self-confidence” (ibid., p.227). This echoes Elley et al.’s findings that less traditional grammar instruction can have a harmful effect on student attitude and outlook. There also remains the fact that the treatment in this study was “a very limited intervention package lasting about 45 min” and carried out in only one school (Fogel & Ehri, 2000, p.227), allowing only limited conclusions to be drawn from its findings. These findings do, however, challenge Elley et al.’s conclusions that the benefits of grammar teaching are negligible, though they find a similar effect on attitude.

A second study presents a difference between the impact of grammar teaching on grammatical knowledge and on writing performance. Their research sought to identify “*a way to teach grammatical structures that will satisfy high-stakes tests and teachers’ needs, and at the same time, positively affect writing performance*” (Fearn & Farnan, 2007, p.64), aiming to move away from routine approaches to grammar teaching which aim to “identify, describe, define” (ibid., p.65), and instead “to feature *prescriptive* rather than *descriptive* instruction” (ibid., p.66). This was another small-scale study which took place in one high school with average student scores in the lowest 10% of all high school students in the state. Two treatment classes received intentional teaching of grammar in writing, followed by review and directed writing practice, with “instructional emphases [on] function and writing” (Fearn & Farnan, 2007, p.69); a control group received traditional grammar instruction. Analysis of the data found that “the treatment groups demonstrated enhanced writing performance”, but that all three groups “showed no difference in their knowledge of grammatical elements in the testing situation” (ibid., p.72). The researchers draw two key conclusions from this data. Firstly, traditional grammar instruction “did not produce significantly superior grammar test performance” (ibid., p.76), suggesting that students who are not explicitly taught to define and identify nevertheless “learn to define and identify as well as do students who study define-and-identify in isolation” and that there is no cost to learning of moving from a traditional to a contextualised approach to grammar teaching (ibid., p.77). Secondly, the difference in performance arises “from *directed writing*, where students’ attention is focused on using grammar to think about writing” (ibid., p.73), and it is key that “grammar and writing share one instructional context” if we wish the former to influence the latter (ibid., p.78). The key in this study is that grammar and writing must share the same context; their results suggest, at least in their small-scale study, that such teaching leads to improved writing performance with no detrimental effect upon grammar knowledge.

## Large-scale replication of results

Myhill et al. (2012) demonstrate that these findings can be replicated in a larger study when the focus remains on contextualised grammar teaching for writing. Their sample consisted of 744 students with 31 teachers from randomly selected schools, with a comparison group and an intervention group (who received explicit grammar instruction) randomly assigned. The researchers focused on a grammar of choice intended to be used in writing, stating they aimed “to help writers to recognise how making grammatical choices could shape their texts for communicative purposes” (Myhill et al., 2012, p.1248), echoing the aims of the National Curriculum. The researchers note the “naturalistic context” of their study (ibid., p.1248), which means that “although each teacher in the intervention had the same training and the same set of materials, it was neither possible nor ethical to attempt to achieve identical implementation” (ibid., p.1250). The researchers claim that “there was a high level of commitment to the project”, but also note that “some of the adaptations [made by teachers] were altering or omitting the focus on grammar at the heart of the research study because it was felt to be too difficult”, as teachers were not informed of the focus of the study (ibid., p.1250). Despite these potential deviations from the training and materials provided, the researchers conclude that “it is reasonable, as far as is possible within a naturalistic context, to conclude that any differences in writing performance are attributable to the intervention” (ibid., p.1248). I believe their randomisation and stratification of the classes allow us to draw conclusions from their research, though it is important to bear in mind this naturalistic context and potential divergence.

The study found that “embedded teaching of grammar relevant to the writing being studied had an overall beneficial effect on students’ achievement in writing” (Myhill et al., 2012, p.1252), with the most significant improvement “in composition and effect” (ibid., p.1253). There are, however, a number of caveats to this finding. Firstly, they observed that “it is only those students who were above average in writing at baseline who benefitted strongly from the intervention” (ibid., p.1254). This shows that contextualised grammar teaching is clearly not effective for all learners, and may in fact widen the gap between higher- and lower-attaining students. The researchers also found a significant link between student writing outcomes and “[t]he length of the teacher’s experience and the quality of the teacher’s subject knowledge of grammar” (ibid., pp. 1254-55), so that the results may have been influenced by the specific teachers involved. The researchers stress that their study “cannot provide evidence which translates directly into classroom practice or policy” (ibid, p.1257), noting the limitations of their research and findings. This study remains insightful, however, for its



suggestion that contextualised grammar teaching can have some effect on student writing performance, even if that is contingent upon the factors discussed above.

## **Research questions**

Informed by this reading, I decided to explore whether contextualised grammar teaching for writing would be beneficial to my Year 9 class, who were able to ‘define-and-identify’ well but not to use these techniques in their writing. This was a class of 35 students with potential grades between 7 and 9 at a co-educational comprehensive 11-16 school located in Cambridgeshire. There were 7 students with English as an additional language, though all had been in the country for a number of years, and 1 pupil premium student, as well as 7 students identified as having either a specific learning difficulty or social, emotional, and mental health needs.

I also wanted to investigate how this would impact their enjoyment of English and confidence in using grammar, and their understanding of whether grammar is a series of rules, or a set of tools to be chosen from. This led to the emergence of the following research questions and accompanying data collection methods:

- 1: How do students and teachers understand grammar and its role already? (*student questionnaire, teacher interview*)
- 2: How do students respond to contextualised grammar teaching in lessons? (*lesson observations of my teaching sequence*)
- 3: How do students understand grammar and its role after contextualised grammar teaching? (*follow-up student questionnaire, student interviews*)
- 4: Are students able to make use of concepts learned through contextualised grammar teaching? (*analysis of student work*)

## **Methodology**

I chose to draw on action research approaches in my research, based on the suitability for my study of what Denscombe defines as “the four defining characteristics of action research” (Denscombe,

2007, p.123). He describes action research as “[p]ractical”, “aimed at dealing with real-world problems and issues” (ibid., p.123). This seemed appropriate for addressing a problem identified in my school’s department concerning the utilisation and application of students’ grammatical knowledge. Furthermore, he states that action research sees change “as an integral part of research” (ibid., p.123). This reflected my desire to move away from traditional methods of grammar teaching to see if this could combat the problem of this teaching have little effect on student performance.

In carrying out my study I complied with the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines (BERA), and before embarking on any of my lessons or completing the initial survey, I informed the students of the purpose and content of my research and sought their informed consent. Subsequently, both copies of the survey informed students of their right to withdraw, as well as assuring the anonymity of their responses. In my three formally observed lessons, I reminded students of their right not to be mentioned in observations, and gave them the option to withdraw. I also followed the Faculty of Education’s ethical guidelines, and prior to conducting my research I completed a Faculty Ethics Form with my subject lecturer and school mentor.

## **Teaching sequence**

As Year 9 were studying “Rhetorical Communication” this half-term, I felt it was appropriate to teach grammar for persuasive writing, as this complemented the aims of the existing scheme of work. This seemed the most ethically appropriate response, as I could ensure I was not disadvantaging my class by incorporating grammar into their lessons; this was done in addition to the usual scheme of work, rather than in its place.

As I was responsible for ten of the eleven Year 9 lessons this half-term, I decided to include some grammar teaching in most of the lessons; this was because I felt it was genuinely beneficial for the students to learn these techniques in this scheme of work. I selected three lessons with the clearest grammatical focus to make up my formal sequence for observation, and for the purposes of data analysis considered these three lessons to be my sequence. A brief outline of the whole scheme, with the formal sequence in bold (Week 3 Lesson 1 and Week 4 Lessons 1 & 2), can be seen in Table 1 (next page). My aim was to teach a grammar of choice, encouraging students to explore the potential effects of different grammatical techniques themselves and discuss how and when these effects might be used. I also introduced them to the relevant metalanguage in each lesson.

Lesson	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
1	Issued survey Introduced topic; students created charities and mission statements	Analysing and producing persuasive speeches Grammar: abstract nouns noun phrases	<b>Producing persuasive letters</b> <b>Grammar: pronouns determiners imperative verbs modal verbs</b>	<b>Analysing and producing charity TV appeals</b> <b>Grammar: anaphora antithesis</b>	(School closed) Analysing and producing persuasive articles
2	Analysing and producing charity billboards and slogans Grammar: adjectives and adverbs; past and present tenses	Feedback on previous assessment Analysing persuasive letters	Formative assessment Group debate	<b>(School closed)</b> <b>Analysing Aristotle’s rhetorical techniques and social media campaigns.</b> <b>Grammar: three one-word sentences; imperative opening sentence with pathos</b>	(School closed) Summative assessment

**Table 1: Outline of scheme with teaching sequence in bold**

## Data collection methods

### Student questionnaires

I issued an initial student questionnaire (Appendix 1) to find out how students already understood grammar and its role before my teaching sequence. I chose to leave all ten questions optional, enabling the questionnaire to be anonymous, for two reasons. Firstly, there is the risk that respondents will not complete the survey, and thus Denscombe advises making it “as brief as possible” (Denscombe, 2007, p.162). I was aware that ten questions might seem a large number, and did not want the students to be deterred from answering the survey as a whole if they did not wish to answer one of the questions. This also allowed me to ensure I had their informed consent for each question, rather than the survey as a whole. Secondly, I wanted to create a “climate [...] open enough to allow full and honest answers” (Denscombe, 2007, p.156), and felt that allowing students to choose whether to give their names would help them feel able to respond with honesty.

I aimed in my questionnaire to get a general picture of what students considered grammar to be, and what it might be used for. I chose to make all of the questions addressing these aspects (Questions 1,

8, and 9) open questions, to avoid as much as possible the danger of “‘leading’ the respondent into a line of answering” by providing options (Denscombe, 2007, p.160). As I was interested in any and all definitions of grammar, I chose open questions due to their ability “to reflect the full richness and complexity of views held by the respondent” (ibid., p.166), allowing me to get as full a picture as possible of the existing attitude towards grammar. These answers were qualitatively coded for analysis. I noted down each individual answer to Question 1 and then grouped together any answers which expressed the same idea, leaving as separate any answers which did not seem to share common themes with any others. This resulted in 8 broad categories, and 5 standalone answers, which are discussed in more detail below. I coded the responses to Question 8 based on whether they agreed that there is a right and wrong in grammar, or whether they felt there was room for choice. Some answers expressed both ideas and so were coded in both categories. Two answers expressed completely different ideas, so were counted entirely separately. Answers to Question 9 were initially coded based on whether they stated/implies grammar was or was not important, and then further coded by reason following the same process as Question 1; this led to 6 broad categories and 2 standalone responses.

Additionally, I wanted to find out how much students enjoyed grammar learning, and how confident they felt in using grammar. I used a combination of open and closed questions for these areas (Questions 4, 5, 6, and 7), asking students to rate their confidence on a numbered scale, to avoid giving me “‘raw’” data which “require a lot of time-consuming analysis before they can be used” (Denscombe, 2007, p.166). These open answers were similarly qualitatively coded. Question 4 was coded following the same process as Question 8, initially divided into positive and negative response and then divided again by reason. Questions 6 and 7 were coded using the same process as Questions 1 and 9, resulting in Question 6 in 6 broad categories and 2 standalone answers, and in Question 7 in 10 broad categories and 13 standalone answers, making this the question with the most variation.

I planned to issue a second questionnaire (Appendix 2) in the final lesson of half-term, but by this time the school had closed due to the coronavirus pandemic of March 2020, though I was still able to send the questionnaire out via an online learning platform.

### **Teacher and student interviews**

To understand how the class had previously been taught grammar and what kind of teacher attitudes might be influencing their understanding of grammar, I interviewed the class teacher about her

understanding of grammar and its role in the classroom. This also enabled me to achieve the collaborative potential of action research by including another teacher's voice in my study.

I also wanted to find out how confident the class teacher felt in her instruction of grammar, given that a link has been found between teacher grammatical subject knowledge and student progress (Jones, Myhill, & Bailey, 2013, p.1255). I chose an interview to collect this data as I was interested entirely in open-style questions based on attitudes and opinions, which "need to be explored in depth and in detail rather than simply reported" (Denscombe, 2007, p.175). The interview was semi-structured, so that the teacher could "develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised" (ibid., p.175). I compared the results from this interview with the categories identified in my coding of the student surveys to see where there was overlap and where there was divergence.

I had planned to carry out student interviews after my sequence of three lessons, in order to have data directly from the students which could be compared with the teacher's lesson observations. These would have been semi-structured interviews designed to find out how the students had responded to the grammar teaching in the three lessons. Unfortunately, I was not able to conduct these interviews due to the school closure.

### **Lesson observations**

In order to gain a sense of how students were responding to contextualised grammar teaching during lessons, not just in the context of an assessment, I asked the class teacher to record formal observations of three of my lessons. In considering students' response, I asked the teacher to include observations on technical understanding of, confidence with, and enjoyment of grammar learning. These are, of course, subjective outputs, and so there is some reliance on the teacher's understanding of the class and their behaviour, but I hope to have minimised this in providing clear guidelines for the teacher regarding what I was looking for, and in the breadth of the observations she recorded. These were organised under subheadings of technical understanding, confidence, and enjoyment, and include comments on student behaviour as well as transcriptions of student remarks.

Due to the school closure, I was unable to obtain observations on the final of my three lessons, which was delivered via an online platform.

## **Analysis of student work**

The class completed their planned summative assessment via an online platform after the school closure. The assessment asked the students first to analyse a letter from the RSCPA to identify persuasive language techniques. I identified which techniques were present in this letter, and then recorded the number of times students mentioned them, differentiating between those that used metalanguage and those that did not. I also recorded mentions of techniques which were not present in the letter.

The second task required students to write a persuasive article about their own charity. As these examples of writing did not mention techniques by name, the analysis of this task became more subjective. I counted an example of a technique where I judged it was being used for effect as we had discussed in class. For example, I did not count any use of a pronoun as an example of “pronouns”; instead, I counted a use which seemed intended to make the reader feel personally responsible, as we had discussed in class. I acknowledge that this is subjective analysis and deviates from the “clear” and “repeatable” methodological aims of content analysis of documents (Denscombe, 2007, p.238). I have aimed to make my analysis as accurate as possible by analysing each sample more than once to ensure I was counting each use consistently across analyses. There were only a few cases where I counted something I previously had not (or vice versa), and this was where the analysis became most subjective, as I then had to decide whether there was evidence of the student using the technique for effect or not. This is certainly a limitation of my analysis, but I believe that there was a significant number of uses that showed clear authorial intent. In each assessment I counted a technique only once, regardless of how many times it appeared.

## **Findings and discussion**

### **How do students and teachers understand grammar and its role already?**

Student attitudes towards grammar before my teaching sequence were explored through asking what grammar means to them. After qualitative coding, the most common views of what grammar means emerged as (from 33 responses): a way of making sense (6 responses); the rules of English (10 responses); how sentences are structured (11 responses); and punctuation (13 responses). Other responses which emerged more than once were: spelling (6 responses); word order (4 responses);

boredom and repetition (4 responses); and the correct way to write (3 responses). This tended towards a view of prescriptive grammar in the mention of “rules” and a “correct” way to write, though “making sense” and forming sentences do not necessarily preclude a grammar of choice. When asked whether grammar has a right and wrong, the responses were mixed; 25 responses mentioned a notion of right and wrong, while 22 mentioned that rules could sometimes be broken for creativity. 10 responses also showed an awareness of context affecting the rigidity of grammar. This surprised me, as I was expecting a much clearer idea of right and wrong based on primary school testing and the prevailing style of grammar teaching. My interview with the class teacher helped explain this trend to some extent. She had similarly mixed views on grammar, describing it as the “nuts and bolts of communication” and “underpinned by accuracy”, but also about using it “to be more expressive” and “enhance what you’re saying”. She described that a top set like this one are mainly taught grammar by “looking at a text and flagging up punctuation as it’s encountered”, as she wants the students to “see it in action and pick up on it through reading if they can”. She described her aim as “analysing the impact of sentence types and punctuation rather than just learning rules about using them”, which is closer to a contextualised teaching of grammar and perhaps explains why so many in the class already had this view of grammar being used for creativity. Despite this, she also predicted that they would view grammar as “about rules and spelling tests, measured as right or wrong, and something to be marked or assessed”, echoing their narrower views of grammar as punctuation, spelling, and “rules”. Overall, this questionnaire and interview showed that the students already had a more open appreciation of grammar than I had anticipated, likely due in part to the quite contextual nature of the grammar teaching they had already received, but that they retained some of the limited ideas of grammar instilled by statutory testing and traditional teaching.

My questionnaire also explored enjoyment. The majority of answers to the question “Do you like learning about grammar?” were mixed, but the most common reason given was that grammar is boring (15 responses). Other answers which occurred often were that grammar is: important (10 responses), difficult (6 responses), and repetitive (5 responses). This gave a largely negative image of attitudes towards grammar learning, mirrored in the association noted above between grammar and boredom or repetition. The class teacher also stated she is not interested in grammar and does not enjoy teaching it, and that she “struggle[s] to find ways to make it engaging and interesting as a teacher”. It would be unfair to suggest that this is the direct cause of the students’ responses, but it is interesting to note the similarity between student and teacher opinions. She also, however, described how the students “don’t like the idea of grammar when you present it to them as ‘we’re going to do

grammar””, but do enjoy it “when they don’t know they’re doing it”. This suggests that some of the negative responses to grammar are linked with the idea of grammar itself, rather than actual lesson content. On the whole, however, the students’ own descriptions of their enjoyment were largely negative.

Student levels of confidence in grammar were generally high, with over half of the class rating themselves an eight (12 responses) or nine (7 responses) out of ten. When asked to explain why, 26 responses explained that they understand how grammar works, language which could suggest a more rule-based version of grammar. 15 students stated that they can make mistakes, again falling back on a “right or wrong” idea of grammar. These responses generally mentioned accuracy and correctness in grammar more, although two students described not knowing how to use grammar for effect, returning to a grammar of choice. Their class teacher felt that “lots of them would probably over-rate their confidence”, explaining that “some are very confident and then either don’t get it right or don’t make full use of it”. She described a “gap between thinking they know it and not putting it into practice”. She also made a link between the contextualised grammar teaching they had already received and their high levels of confidence, explaining that as “they’ve intuitively picked it up rather than being taught”, this might give them “a stronger sense of confidence because they don’t have a sense of rules”. This reflects previous findings that explaining rules and errors might lead to lower self-efficacy ratings (Fogel & Ehri, 2000, p.227). Overall, the students showed high levels of initial confidence, perhaps influenced by teaching that did not emphasise rules and correctness.

### **How do students respond to contextualised grammar teaching in lessons?**

The initial response whenever a “grammar break” was introduced mirrored what the class teacher had identified as a negative reaction to explicit grammar teaching, often met with an audible groan. I felt it was nevertheless important to draw attention to the teaching of grammar, to see whether and how this impacted students’ understanding of grammar. In the first of my formally observed lessons (the fifth in the overall scheme [Table 1]), the class teacher noted that there was a much smaller groan than previously, suggesting that perhaps students were becoming less antagonistic towards grammar teaching. This trend was mirrored in the lesson itself, which moved through a series of grammatical concepts. The teacher noted that “more and more [students] are beginning to share ideas” by the final concept, again suggesting an increased level of interest in the topics over time. The teacher also observed that the students were “focused” and “quieter” in this section of the lesson, which she felt



“shows the students’ enjoyment of the grammar focus; they enjoy unpicking their own work and examining how effective it is”. This draws a link between enjoyment and contextualising grammatical techniques within students’ own writing, rather than an abstract, decontextualised example. This mirrors previous findings that “the use of authentic examples from authentic texts” is crucial for engaging students in grammar teaching (Myhill et al., 2013, p.105). The teacher also identified a beneficial impact on student confidence, observing that “there is a sense of ambition and pride in discovering where they have already made use of grammar techniques without even realising that they had done so”; exploring their own work establishes students as confident users of unfamiliar techniques. This confidence was displayed again in the second lesson, where quieter students were volunteering commentary on how a charity might use anaphora and antithesis. There was a notable difference between questions which asked students to define a grammatical term and asking the students to explore the effect of the same technique; while only “[t]hree students volunteer an answer for defining imperative verbs” in the first lesson, “all students are focused when identifying imperative verbs in their own writing”. The definition questions, which are closer to traditional grammar teaching which focuses on identification and definition of terms, seemed less accessible to many students than the contextualised questions. This suggests there is a link between contextualised grammar teaching and participation in these activities, which might be attributable to increased confidence and enjoyment when focusing on effect rather than definitions.

These lessons also demonstrated the effect of contextualised grammar teaching on students’ technical understanding of grammar. The difference between answers to definition questions and explorative questions suggests that placing grammar in context led to improved understanding, as many more students were able to discuss grammar when locating it in specific examples. This can be seen very clearly in the class teacher’s record of students’ comments, where students demonstrated the strongest grammatical understanding when discussing specific examples from their own work. She notes two students who discuss “with clarity and perception the impact” of changes they experimented with in their letters, and also observes that both students who had included imperative verbs in their work and those who had not were “able to justify the reasons for these”, often with “insightful comments about the impact these verbs have on the tone of their letter and the suitability for their target audience”. Crucially, one student was able to assist her neighbour’s learning by drawing on examples from their group work, explaining the potential of pronouns by “focus[ing] on the impact of the pronoun ‘we’ in their charity slogan”. These examples demonstrate the learning benefits of contextualised grammar teaching, allowing students to understand techniques by identifying them in

authentic examples, and often in their own work, thereby demystifying the concepts. I found this was more successful, however, when identifying techniques in work that had already been produced, rather than exploring a technique and then attempting to produce work containing it. In the first lesson, students wrote a letter and then analysed their use of grammatical techniques within it. In the second lesson, we discussed the possible uses of anaphora and antithesis and the students then had to create a TV advert for their charity, with a challenge task to include some of the techniques we had discussed. None of the groups chose to include these techniques, suggesting less of a focus on grammar once we had left the “grammar break” section. This may, however, be attributed to the general excitement of making a TV advert rather than the order of work, as the class teacher noted in lesson one that “during the final writing task [...] the opening lines [of most students’ work] contained at least one pronoun, imperative or modal verb (and in some cases all three!)”, indicating that it is possible to carry out a more directed grammar task. Nevertheless, the overall response to contextualised grammar teaching in these lessons seemed to be successful learning accompanied by increased confidence when compared with traditional grammar teaching, as well as a possible increase in enjoyment over the course of each lesson and the sequence as a whole.

### **How do students understand grammar and its role after contextualised grammar teaching?**

Although I only received 18 responses to this final student questionnaire and was unable to carry out student interviews due to school closure, I was still able to gain some insight into how students viewed grammar after my teaching sequence.

There was a slight shift in student views of what grammar means from the first survey, as “punctuation” (the most common response in the first survey) appeared only 3 times in this survey. There were fewer clear “most common” responses in this questionnaire, likely because the reduced number of overall responses led to a more even spread. This led to a bunching of six most popular responses, which were: making language more varied or interesting (3 responses); punctuation (3 responses); sentence types (3 responses); making sense (4 responses); rules (5 responses); and structure (7 responses). This shows that a higher percentage of overall responses mentioned structure than rules, a reversal of the pattern in the first questionnaire. The idea of varying language did not appear at all in the first questionnaire, suggesting that contextualised grammar teaching may have opened up the students’ understanding of the potential of grammar. There was also much greater variety in technical aspects mentioned; rather than the monopoly of punctuation, responses this time

included punctuation, vocabulary, sentence types, paragraphs, word order, and spelling, again suggesting a wider view of grammar this time. When asked what grammar might be used for, the most common response was to make sentences more interesting (5 responses), with rhetoric (3 responses), varying stories (2 responses) and creating effect (2 responses) also receiving more than one mention. No responses mentioned rules or correctness, again potentially suggesting a more effect-based approach to grammar, though as this question was not asked directly in the first survey it is difficult to say with certainty that this is a result of the contextualised grammar teaching. All respondents said they think grammar is important, with the most common reasons being that it helps to make sense (8 responses) and makes texts interesting (5 responses), again showing a tendency to think about sense and effect rather than accuracy or rules. This time, a higher percentage of overall responses felt that there was a choice in grammar (10 responses) than those who felt there is always a right and wrong (5 responses), showing a slight shift towards a grammar of choice in the class thinking. Given the smaller number of overall responses in this survey, and the small difference between the two surveys, it is difficult to determine how much of this change comes from the contextualised teaching; however, it is clear that this teaching has not reinforced any idea of rules, and may have led to an effect-based approach.

Students' enjoyment of grammar remained mixed in this questionnaire. There were no mentions of boredom or repetition being associated with grammar this time, and in fact one response mentioned curiosity, giving a much more positive view of grammar overall - though, of course, this could be because the 4 respondents who mentioned boredom last time might not have responded this time. When asked whether they have enjoyed the 'grammar breaks', 8 responses described them as useful, and some respondents described enjoying learning new things and preferring the "break" format to entire lessons. 6 respondents, however, described them as boring or as covering old material, giving an overall mixed picture of enjoyment. One response in particular demonstrated the rather stubborn conception of grammar being inherently boring, stating: "No it was grammar which is not very exciting". This shows that there is still a link being drawn between the idea of grammar and being bored, regardless of content. Confidence, however, remained high, with over half of respondents once again rating themselves an eight (6 responses) or nine (5 responses) out of ten. Explanations for why remained very similar to the first questionnaire, with most respondents once again describing that they know a lot but can still make mistakes. One student who gave himself a low mark in the first questionnaire due to his persistently "low SPaG [spelling, punctuation, and grammar] grades on tests" gave the same reason in this questionnaire, suggesting that contextualised teaching had not widened

his concept of grammar beyond SPaG and given him more confidence; based on his engagement in our “grammar breaks”, I would have given him a much higher rating if asked. The longstanding association of grammar with the rules of SPaG are therefore still having an impact on this student. These findings, at least, do not correlate with earlier findings that contextualised grammar teaching can have a negative impact on student enjoyment and confidence, but they also do not suggest it has any significant positive impact on them.

### **Are students able to make use of concepts learned through contextualised grammar teaching?**

I received 25 summative assessments from the class, providing me with a reasonably broad though not complete set of data to analyse which is presented in Table 2.

<b>Technique</b>	<b>Analysis</b>	<b>Writing</b>
Pronouns	14	23
Determiners	0	14
Imperative verbs	N/A: 3	14
Modal verbs	2	19
Anaphora	N/A	9
Antithesis	0	1
Three one-word sentences (online)	N/A	3
Imperative opening sentence (online)	N/A	3

**Table 2: Student use of techniques in summative assessment**

The RSPCA letter analysed in the first task contained examples of pronouns, determiners, modal verbs, and antithesis being used to achieve effects we had discussed in class. 14 students identified the use of pronouns; 12 mentioned “pronouns” by name, while 2 discussed the effect without directly mentioning “pronouns”. 2 students identified modal verbs by name. No students identified determiners or antithesis. 3 students also mentioned “imperative verbs”, but either gave no quotation to show where this had come from, or quoted a word which was not an imperative verb. I do not believe that no students identifying determiners or antithesis means that they did not know what these were, as the lessons we spent on them showed that they did understand the concepts; rather, there were a large number of techniques used in the letter beyond our grammar studies, and many students wrote about these instead. The frequent discussion of pronouns shows that students were able to understand these concepts in a way that enabled them to identify them in analysis, though the incorrect identification of imperative verbs shows that this learning was not entirely successful. Further

research into the impact of metalanguage on this would be worthwhile, as the students who quoted a different linguistic feature nevertheless provided insightful analysis of their quotations; the only error was their choice of metalanguage. Myhill et al. have noted that “terminology could become a barrier to learning” (Myhill et al., 2013, p.105), and the 2 students who discussed pronouns without using the term “pronouns” have demonstrated that metalanguage is not necessary for analysis, leaving the role of metalanguage in grammar learning still uncertain.

All eight techniques studied in grammar breaks were used by students in their written task, including the two studied via an online lesson after school closure. This demonstrates that techniques learned through contextualised grammar learning can be deployed for effect in a piece of writing. There was, however, a large variation in the frequency of use, as can be seen in Table 2. There may be several reasons for this. Firstly, techniques such as pronouns, determiners, and modal verbs were more challenging to analyse, as there is less distinction between a general use of them and their use in the contexts we studied. This may have led to them being identified more frequently. Secondly, these are the techniques which concern individual words, while the others relate to wider structures. This may suggest that students were more confident working with word-specific techniques rather than structural techniques. There is also some difficulty in determining whether the students would have used some of these techniques anyway, as their general familiarity with charity appeals may have equipped them with an unconscious knowledge of language features such as imperative verbs and pronouns. While this is worth taking into account, their use of the more complex and specific techniques suggests that at least some of this usage came as a result of their learning. These results also suggested that students applied their grammar learning much more readily in their writing than in their analysis, though the first task was limited by the number of techniques contained in the original letter.

### **Summary of findings**

My research has shown that students are able to identify and use techniques learned through contextualised grammar teaching, demonstrating understanding both in lessons and in their summative assessments. This echoes Fearn and Farnan’s findings that traditional grammar teaching does not lead to “significantly superior” grammatical knowledge (Fearn & Farnan, 2007, p.76), as students were still able to identify features when required. It is difficult to conclude from this study whether contextualised teaching has had “an overall beneficial effect” on students’ writing as in one

previous study (Myhill et al., 2012, p.1252), as I am unable to determine whether students would have included all these techniques in their writing without my teaching; their use of some of the more complex techniques suggests at least some usage is coming from our study, and that contextualised teaching may have had some beneficial effect on their writing. Crucially, my data suggests that the contextualised teaching may have led to some shift in student attitudes towards grammar and helped them move from a prescriptive view of grammar to a grammar of choice, and it is also important to note that, unlike in the studies of Elley et al. and Fogel and Ehri, my students did not lower in enjoyment or confidence over the course of our study. It would have been useful to be able to carry out student interviews to get a fuller picture of how they had responded to the contextualised teaching, as well as a full set of data from the final questionnaire and assessment, in order to see how significant certain trends were and be able to draw more confident conclusions from this data.

## Conclusion

This research has shown that contextualised grammar teaching can lead to successful learning outcomes without any diminishment of confidence or enjoyment for a high-attaining Year 9 group. Undertaking this study has introduced me to a different kind of grammar teaching than that which I was previously carrying out, enabling me in future to make a choice between a variety of different approaches. These results have shown that one of the key barriers to such contextualised teaching, concerns about student confidence and enjoyment, can be removed in certain classroom contexts, so that teachers who wish to explore the learning benefits for their classes can do so without these concerns being a guaranteed outcome. Such teaching also presents the possibility of changing students' understanding of grammar to focus more on effect than rules, which may be desirable in some classroom environments. While it is difficult to establish from this study whether contextualised grammar teaching is *more* effective than traditional grammar teaching, it is evident that the teaching is effective and leads to successful assessment performances, so that I and other teachers can adopt such an approach with confidence that a class will not be disadvantaged through this method of teaching. As a result, I intend to make use of contextualised grammar approaches in future schemes of work with high-attaining groups, and am particularly keen to explore Myhill's other suggested uses for these strategies (for use in creative prose writing and poetry analysis). For groups that already possess a strong knowledge of when basic grammar should be used, I believe a contextualised exploration of *how* grammar can be used can only enrich both their writing and analytical skills.

However, I would be reluctant to adopt these strategies with a low-attaining group without further evidence of their efficacy for such a group.

There are several areas of this topic that would benefit from further research. Firstly, my study concerned a top set, reflecting Myhill et al.'s (2013) finding that higher-attaining students benefit most from such an intervention. It would be useful to study the impact of this teaching style on lower-attaining students, or to study more generally which types of intervention are most effective for lower-attaining students' grammar learning. Secondly, in order to gain a comparison between traditional and contextualised grammar teaching, researchers may wish to carry out this investigation with a comparison group. Finally, my study involved only one class, and over a very short period of time. Though I began to see some potential change in student attitudes, this would benefit from a much longer intervention to see whether student opinions change more significantly, or in a different way entirely, when exposed to a longer teaching period. Research of this type would allow a more thorough investigation into both the efficacy of the teaching for learning, and the effect of the teaching on student views.

Overall, this study has shown me the potential of contextualised grammar teaching for certain classes, and going forward I will incorporate some of these techniques into my grammar teaching, if not use these techniques entirely. I feel better able, as a result of this research, to make choices about which type of grammar teaching is most appropriate for different techniques and classes, allowing me to extend my practice in this area.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Initial Student Questionnaire**

*Question 1:* What do you think ‘grammar’ is? What do you associate with grammar?

*Question 2:* When did you start learning about grammar in school?

Year 4 or younger

Year 5

Year 6

Year 7 or older

*Question 3:* Do you have lessons, or parts of lessons, that specifically teach you grammar? Or do you learn grammar as you go along?

Lessons/parts of lessons

Learn as we go along

Other

*Question 4:* Do you like learning about grammar? Why or why not?

*Question 5:* On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is not confident at all and 10 is very confident, how confident are you about using grammar?

*Question 6:* Explain why you gave yourself this rating.

*Question 7:* What areas of grammar do you feel most and least confident about?

*Question 8:* Do you think there is a right and wrong in grammar, or can there ever be a choice?

*Question 9:* Do you think grammar is important? Why or why not?

## Appendix 2

### Second (Follow-up) Student Questionnaire

*Question 1:* What do you think 'grammar' is? What do you associate with grammar?

*Question 2:* On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is not useful at all and 10 is very useful, how useful have you found the 'grammar break' sections of lessons?

*Question 3:* Explain why you gave this rating.

*Question 4:* Have you enjoyed the 'grammar break' sections in lessons?

*Question 5:* On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is not confident at all and 10 is very confident, how confident are you about using grammar?

*Question 6:* Explain why you gave yourself this rating.

*Question 7:* What do you think grammar can be used for?

*Question 8:* Do you think grammar is important? Why or why not?

*Question 9:* Do you think there is a right and wrong in grammar, or can there ever be a choice?