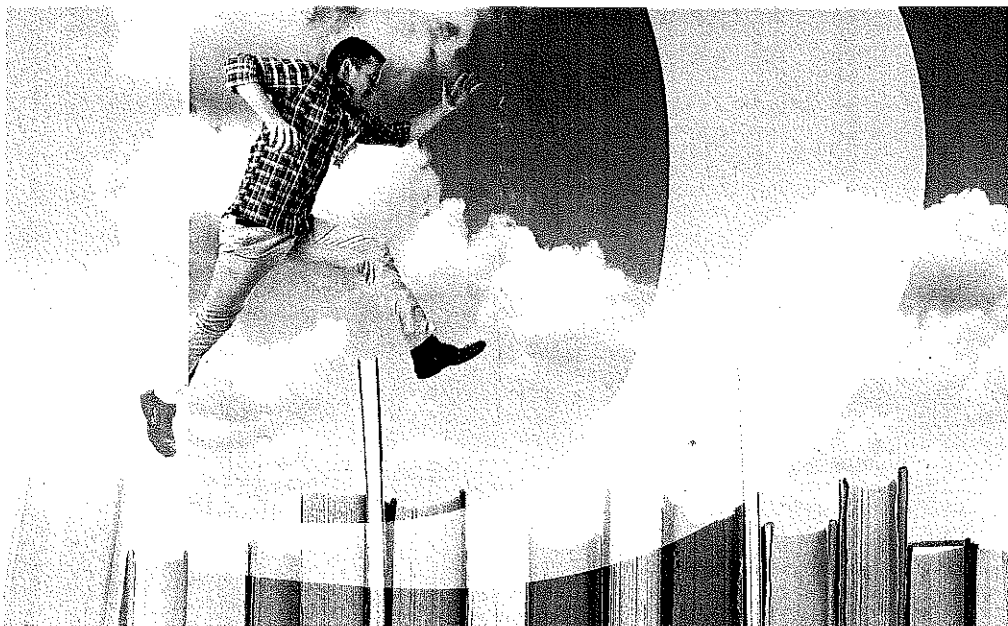


# The Department

## The 'How Language Works' Programme



### Paul Clayton reports on how Hamstead Hall Academy has developed students' language awareness to improve academic achievement at GCSE.

Hamstead Hall Academy serves the culturally and religiously diverse community of Handsworth and Handsworth Wood in Birmingham. It is the size of an average secondary, with 1100 students on roll, including sixth-formers, slightly more boys than girls. However, the school is well-above the national average (NA) if measured in terms of percentages of students with a statement of special education needs (SEN) and/or education, health and care (EHC) – 4.5% compared to the NA of 1.8%. Similarly, the percentage of students for whom English is not their first language is well above average – 52.3% compared to NA of 15%; and also the percentage of students in receipt of pupil premium funding – 41% compared to NA of 29.4%. The students' prior attainment is well below the national average.

#### Language and Learning at Hamstead

Given these circumstances, the Academy's performance compared to similar institutions is impressive. Last year for example, 65% achieved A\*-C in English and Maths, with 73% achieving a C or better grade in English, 71% making expected progress, and 41% above expected progress. Ofsted visited the Academy for a short Section 8 inspection in February this year and were pleased with what they saw, confirming that the school is 'good' overall and noting in particular 'an intelligent approach to language development to ensure sustainable, whole school improvement' as contributing to the Academy's successes. The news was particularly welcomed by Eileen Mawdsley, an Assistant Head at the Academy, responsible for 'Language and Learning'.

She helped to introduce the 'How Language Works' programme to the Academy in 2012, and the affirmation by Ofsted, along with the improved results, confirmed the effectiveness of the strategy.

Prior to 2012, the Academy's leadership team, of which Eileen was part, had noticed that the hard work of their students and staff was not always reflected in the exam grades that the learners attained. In particular, the students did not appear to be achieving the very highest grades, the As and A's, even when the depth and range of their subject knowledge appeared to make them worthy candidates. They concluded that the problem resided not so much in what the learners knew, but in how they expressed what they knew; and they recognised too that this was an issue right across the curriculum. Familiar with many of the previous attempts and strategies to improve literacy across the curriculum, and the shortfalls of such attempts, Eileen looked for something new. The 'How Language Works' programme, developed originally in Australia, seemed to offer what the Hamstead Hall students needed.

#### 'How Language Works'

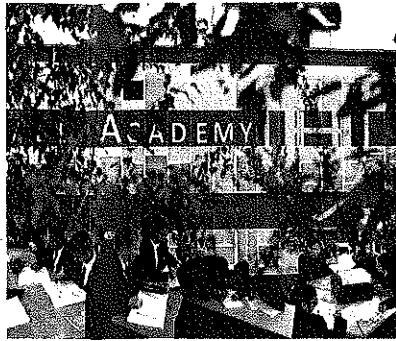
Informed by the work of linguists such as Michael Halliday, and by 'genre pedagogy', 'How Language Works' is designed to extend teachers' understanding of language and literacy. Halliday is often credited as being one of the key theorists behind Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). SFL regards language as a social semiotic system in which meaning is not simply that conveyed by the dictionary definitions of words used, and the formal grammatical structures in which they are positioned. It considers meaning as a complex, multi-dimensional affair; very much more than simply a matter of giving or receiving information. SFL sees expression as incorporating a range of functions operating together, such as establishing interpersonal relationships between the agent of an utterance and the receiver of it.

'How Language Works' takes some of the ideas around SFL and places them in the academic and educational environment. Working through a carefully structured course of CPD modules, teachers are methodically introduced to various ways in which word and grammatical choices create meaning for different purposes in diverse contexts. Consequently, the training equips teachers to heighten the awareness of the impact of such language choices in their students. In this way, teachers can help their students to read, write and speak more effectively, exercising more conscious choice in how they express what they wish to communicate, mindful of purpose and context.

#### Language across the curriculum

There is a good example of how the technique looks in action in a short film made by the Open University. Forming part of their 'Grammar Matters' open-learning short-course, the film is free to view to anyone signing up (at no cost) to enrol on this brief but informative introduction to grammar. (Anyone interested, should visit [www.open.edu/openlearn/languages/grammar-matters/content-section-7.1](http://www.open.edu/openlearn/languages/grammar-matters/content-section-7.1))

Hamstead Hall P.E teacher Mark Rayner explains the need to teach explicitly the academic language required for success in his subject, pointing out that



it could not be assumed that the students would automatically encounter such language, or indeed, assimilate it and feel confident in using it unless time was spent in lessons to make such language and its use visible to the students. His colleague, Lee James is then shown teaching a lesson about somatotypes. He solicits from his students a simple description or definition of the term, accepting 'a type of body shape'. He then asks the students to consider the different kinds of body shape that there are, and places this knowledge in the context of an answer in their GCSE exam. The students consider the different parts of an answer, using such terms as 'macrotheme' and 'hyperthemes', thereby combining their knowledge of the technical/academic language pertinent to the subject of P.E., (in this case, 'endomorph', 'mesomorph' and 'ectomorph'), with that relevant more generally across subjects in considering the structure of written explanation.

#### Modelling, deconstructing, constructing

The students are equipped to discuss the structure of written texts in this way, having analysed 'model' answers beforehand. It is this process that helps them to see how appropriate expression enhances subject knowledge. As Mark explains it in the video: *'Once we have the end product, we work backwards ... I can then investigate, deconstruct the language and see what pupils will need to understand in terms of language features to be able to produce that ... because you can't disconnect the language and the subject content.'*

The video provides an interesting illustration of this process by showing the students comparing two paragraphs about the somatotypes of sumo wrestlers. The students highlight differences between them, and identify some key features of the more academic-sounding text. They quickly spot, for example, that appropriate use of technical language establishes the authority of the writer. They also notice the higher incidence of nominalisation in the academic text, not only defining the term and explaining its use - *'it helps us to pack information into smaller parts'* - but also recognising that the technique applies particularly to verbs and adjectives. The students move from deconstruction to collaborative construction of text with similar features before engaging in independent writing, the final stage of the process.

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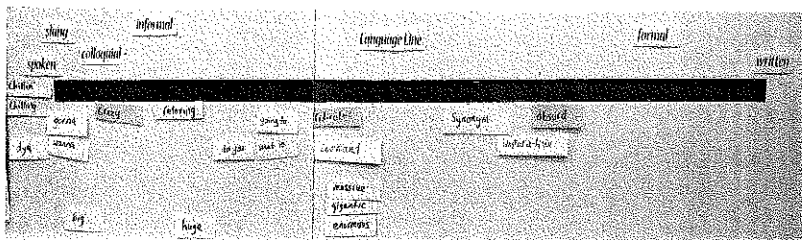
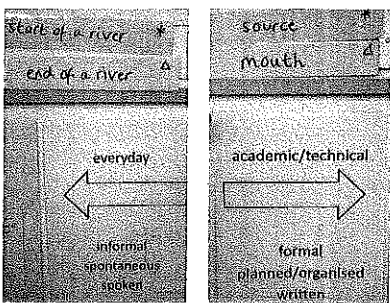
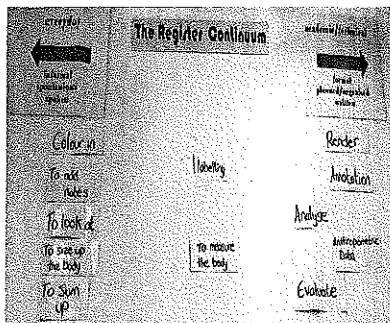
### The Register Continuum

One key conceptual tool in the programme, is the 'register continuum'. This can be seen in classrooms around the Academy represented as a line showing the changes that occur in language as it moves from speech to writing. Both staff and students frequently refer to the register continuum in explaining the appropriateness of language for particular purposes, audiences and contexts. Often words encountered during a lesson are written out and physically placed on the continuum, highlighting the differences between 'everyday' vocabulary (words that may be characterised as 'informal, spontaneous, spoken'), and that which is 'academic/technical' ('formal, planned/organised, written').

The purpose of this is not to proscribe particular language, dismissing it in favour of more sophisticated forms; nor to privilege the 'academic/technical' over the 'everyday'. It is simply to raise awareness of the variety of language and its uses and by so doing empower the students. As Eileen Mawdsley puts it:

*'As we've worked with this approach to language we've discovered that one of the most powerful outcomes is the children are able to take control of the language they're using. This, for us, was one of the drawbacks of the previous approach to literacy that we'd had, using things like 'writing frames' and sentence structures, which have their place, but can also be quite limiting. We wanted our students to be independent, to be autonomous, so they have a whole repertoire of language skills, and whatever context they're in, they are able to select language appropriately.'*

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### Developing independent communicators

For Eileen and the rest of the staff at the Academy, this is not simply about securing good exam grades. Results have improved and more students are securing top grades than before. But of even more importance than that is the greater confidence that the students now have as communicators, and the skills that they have acquired that will help them as adults to secure employment and to develop and sustain relationships. As Eileen says: 'Now they've got the tools, and this whole range of language, ideas and skills that they can call upon whenever they wish, in whatever way they want. So in all kinds of ways, they're more independent.'

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If you would like to find out more about the 'How Language Works' programme, contact either Eileen Mawdsley ([mawdsleye@hamsteadhall.com](mailto:mawdsleye@hamsteadhall.com)) or Rachel Parnell ([parnellr@hamsteadhall.com](mailto:parnellr@hamsteadhall.com)) at Hamstead Hall Academy, Birmingham.

