PAT: Punctuation and Grammar—a new resource to support literacy

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The New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) has published a new literacy assessment—PAT: Punctuation and Grammar. PAT: Punctuation and Grammar has seven tests, aimed at Year 4 to Year 10 students. The tests assess student ability to recognise and use the grammatical conventions of standard New Zealand English, including punctuation.

Why are punctuation and grammar important?

The American author Joan Didion (1976) once commented, "Grammar is a piano I play by ear ... All I know about grammar is its infinite power."

Many of us would agree with this sentiment. We know that correct grammar is an important and powerful element of writing. However, our knowledge about the patterns and structures of written English is often intuitive, rather than explicit. This intuitive knowledge allows us both to recognise when something sounds or looks wrong, and to manipulate language patterns and structures in ways that engage readers and communicate our ideas effectively.

Punctuation works alongside language structures and patterns to help us communicate effectively. It is another tool that writers use to help their writing achieve its purpose and to direct and engage their readers. As Lynne Truss, author of *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, wrote, "Without [punctuation] there is no reliable way of communicating meaning" (2003, p. 20).

The PAT: Punctuation and Grammar assessment is designed to support teachers as they work with students on these important elements of writing. Besides giving an overall indication of students' level of achievement, this assessment will help teachers to pinpoint specific aspects of punctuation and grammar for further teaching and learning.

How do punctuation and grammar fit into our curriculum?

The content of PAT: Punctuation and Grammar aligns with the English curriculum achievement

objectives described in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), particularly in the areas of language features and structure. These achievement objectives suggest that students should be encouraged to develop their understanding of:

- how language features can be used for effect within and across texts
- how the order and organisation of words, sentences, and paragraphs contribute to text meaning.

These curriculum-based understandings are further defined and exemplified across year levels in *The Literacy Learning Progressions* (Ministry of Education, 2010) and *The New Zealand Curriculum Reading and Writing Standards for Years 1–8* (Ministry of Education, 2009). By the end of Year 10, students are expected to use and understand a wide range of text conventions, including grammatical and punctuation conventions, "appropriately and with increasing accuracy" (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 20).

The New Zealand Curriculum places meaning at the heart of reading and writing. Reading involves *making meaning* from written text, and writing involves *creating meaning* through the production of written text. Grammatical conventions, including punctuation, play an important role in conveying the meaning of a written text. Effective readers understand how a writer's choice of language features and structures helps to construct meaning. Effective writers choose language features and structures deliberately, to communicate meaning that is appropriate for their purpose and intended audience.

PAT: Punctuation and Grammar focuses on grammar as "a meaning-making resource" (Myhill, 2010). It is based on a descriptive approach to grammar. Descriptive grammar acknowledges that language is a tool that can be used in an infinite variety of ways to express meaning. Teaching grammar in this way involves exploring how language features and structures create and enhance meaning and help a text achieve its communicative purpose. It is not about teaching or assessing a set of correct "rules" in isolation, or the prescriptive teaching of grammar that some of us might remember from our own schooldays.

Most questions in the PAT: Punctuation and Grammar tests ask students to explore and analyse language features in action, in the context of complete sentences. Wherever possible, the focus is on how particular grammatical features support meaning. For example, in the following question from PAT: Punctuation and Grammar, students identify how the writer has created a particular effect.

> **13** Which sentence below gives the reader permission to do something?
>
> **A** I would like a piece of cake.
> **B** You may have a piece of cake.
> **C** I shall have a large piece of cake.
> **D** You must eat your cake with a spoon.

The emphasis is on the way in which language is used to create meaning. Students don't need to know that "may" is a modal verb, but they do need to understand that a writer can use it as a way of expressing permission. Meaning is dynamic and is constructed "between the text, the writer/speaker and the reader/listener" (Myhill, 2011, p. 14).

How can PAT: Punctuation and Grammar help teachers and students?

Exploring grammatical patterns can help students reflect on how the English language works, understand how language structures affect meaning, and critically analyse texts (Derewianka, 1998). By having an assessment that highlights punctuation and grammar, teachers can see the extent to which their students are developing a body of knowledge about how language works. As they work with PAT: Punctuation and Grammar, teachers will have the opportunity to reflect on and build their own knowledge and confidence with punctuation and grammar.

Is terminology important?

PAT: Punctuation and Grammar focuses on how grammatical structures work within texts ("grammar in use") rather than on explicit knowledge about the names or features of these structures ("grammar knowledge"). However, the terminology associated with grammar provides a useful way of talking about language features. For this reason, PAT: Punctuation and Grammar includes a small number of questions that assess explicit grammar knowledge alongside those that assess students' ability to use and recognise grammatical patterns and conventions. For example, students might be asked to identify the noun in a sentence. Such questions signal the importance of a metalanguage of concepts and terminology to describe and discuss language (Ministry of Education, 1996). Punctuation and grammar "labels" (such as *preposition*, *pronoun*, *clause*, or *semicolon*), while not the object of learning, are useful tools to enable teachers and their students to discuss the features and patterns of language in use. Note that a definition of the

word group is usually given as part of the question. The common word groups, such as nouns and adjectives, are not defined in higher level tests.

How can PAT: Punctuation and Grammar help teacher knowledge?

Teaching and discussing grammar and punctuation in context, through a descriptive approach, can be challenging. It is important that teachers feel confident about their own knowledge of the conventions of punctuation and grammar when discussing language conventions with their students (Myhill, 2011). Across the PAT: Punctuation and Grammar tests, students meet increasingly complex punctuation and grammatical conventions. Teacher knowledge about these conventions is important in helping students understand and use them in increasingly sophisticated ways.

To build teacher knowledge about punctuation and grammar conventions in use, PAT: Punctuation and Grammar provides scale descriptions in the teacher manual. These descriptions outline the progression of questions from across the tests within a particular aspect of punctuation or grammar. The questions on the scales are ordered from easy to more difficult, as found in NZCER's national standardisation trial with New Zealand students. This information will be useful when deciding on the next steps for a particular student or group of students. For example, if a teacher has identified, from the PAT: Punctuation and Grammar individual student reports, that a group of students require support to develop their understanding of apostrophes, the scale descriptor for this aspect of punctuation will be helpful in determining a possible sequence of teaching steps (for example, apostrophes to indicate singular possession, then plural possession).

How can PAT: Punctuation and Grammar work with other resources?

PAT: Punctuation and Grammar can also support the work that teachers and students do with the e-asTTle writing rubric (Ministry of Education, 2012). For example, the information it provides relates to the e-asTTle elements of punctuation and sentence structure (grammar). In the e-asTTle writing rubric, all elements of writing are seen as equally important, rather than being classified as "surface" and "deep" features. A focus on how punctuation and grammar works in partnership with the other elements contributes to student understanding of effective writing.

A number of Assessment Resource Bank (ARB) resources (available at http://arb.nzcer.org.nz/) support teachers in their work with punctuation and grammar. At the time of writing, the authors are planning further ARB resources in these areas, to be available in an interactive, online format.

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