

# Systemic functional linguistics and English language teaching

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## **Systemic Functional Linguistics and English Language Teaching**

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## **SFL and English Language Teaching**

The articles in this special issue of the *TESOL International Journal* add to the increasingly rich repertoire of studies that demonstrate the usefulness of Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) descriptions of language for underpinning English Language Teaching (ELT), in foreign and second language contexts (hereafter referred to generally as L2 teaching/learning). Michael Halliday, the principal architect of SFL, from the start of his career in the 1940s as a teacher of Chinese, was “conscious of the need to provide explanations of problems faced by the learners, to try to develop some kind of coherent notion of a language, how it works, how it was learned, and so forth, in order simply to improve the quality of the language teaching” (Halliday and Hasan, 2006, p.16). Thus, SFL was conceived with language teaching firmly in mind. Given this focus, surprisingly, Hallidayan-inspired linguistics was not taken up in a significant way in communicative language teaching, the dominant paradigm in L2 teaching, in the latter part of the previous century and even in the first part of the present one (McCabe, forthcoming 2016). At the same time, the existing studies and applications, such as those included in this introductory article and in this issue, attest to a growing interest in the understandings of language and of language teaching that SFL offers to ELT.

Halliday has always been interested in an “applied linguistics”<sup>1</sup> (Halliday, 2002), as further made manifest from early articles such as ‘General linguistics and its application to language teaching’, written in the 1960s. There, Halliday highlights the notion that the linguist’s object of study, “the language” differs from the object of observation “the text”, thereby distinguishing the underlying language system from its instantiations through language choices in text. Indeed, choice is a central notion in SFL theory, with the paradigms of linguistic choices available in a given context holding a privileged position in the theory. This privileging of choice can be compared with theories that are more interested in the syntagmatic dimension of language, in describing the language structures. These theories have underpinned much of language teaching, often leading to a focus on accuracy in the L2 classroom and assessment. On the other hand, a communicative approach often focuses on sets of meanings and their expressions for specific interactive situations, with little principled focus on language structures. However, as Christian Matthiessen points out, learners have to learn language “trinocularly” (Matthiessen, 2006, p.37), not only ‘from below’ – as with traditional grammar – and ‘from above’ – as with much communicative language teaching – but also from ‘from within’ or ‘from round about’.

To understand what this means for L2 learners, it is important to note that SFL views language as stratified into four layers: context, (discourse-) semantics, lexicogrammar and phonology-graphology. Semantics and lexicogrammar are content strata, while phonology-phonetics (in the spoken mode) and graphology-graphetics (in the written mode) are expression strata. Language is stratified in that sounds (or, in the case of written text, graphological symbols) combine to form words which are organized into structures (lexicogrammar) which, in turn, construe meanings (semantics), ~~which~~. As they are expressed as ‘texts’, all meanings in turn construe and are construed by the social and cultural context. ~~And~~ Thus an understanding of language ‘from within’ means to learn the internal organization of both semantics and lexicogrammar as systems, in the structuralist sense, rather than as inventories (as they are often viewed in L2 teaching). Thus semantics and lexicogrammar are strategic resources for meaning-making in context (Matthiessen, 2006, p.37). In this sense, it is the functional nature of language that "determines the form taken by grammatical structure" (Halliday, 1970, p.324). SFL suggests that all languages carry out three basic metafunctions: the ideational (through language we construe our outside and inner experiences), the interpersonal (through language we enact social roles and relationships) and

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1 Many SFL practitioners prefer the form ‘applied’ to ‘aplicable’.

the textual (through language we order the first two metafunctions into coherent wholes). So, we could take the two examples:

- 1) *The kids ate pizza for dinner and they were all ill later that evening.*
- 2) *The consumption of pizza led to subsequent food poisoning.*

and note that they share meaning within the ideational metafunction, yet differ in the interpersonal metafunction, as they construe a different type of relationship between the speaker/writer and listener/reader through the use of abstraction in Example 2. There is also a difference in the textual metafunction, as Example 1 is ordered into two clauses, using a constant Theme pattern, ‘*they*’ referring back to ‘*the guests*’, while Example 2 consists of one clause. The metafunctional nature of text is captured through the notion of register (which Halliday, McIntosh and Stevens put forth as important for language teaching in 1964), with the variables of field (what the text is about), mode (the channel of communication) and tenor (the relationship between the interlocutors).

Halliday’s functional linguistic theory is often cited as a cornerstone for Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p.159-160; Melrose, 1995, p. 3; Brumfit and Johnson, 1979). As we have seen, Halliday’s functional, meaning-based approach showed that one could eschew a traditional focus on correctness of linguistic form and embrace appropriateness of linguistic choices in context. However, Widdowson (2009) points out that the “defining feature” of CLT became “how language functions externally in context” (Widdowson, 2009, p.202), with Halliday’s functional motivations of the language system left aside. Thus, in mainstream ELT, with some exceptions, such as the notions of ‘coherence / cohesion’ and Theme-Rheme / Given-New structures (Alonso Belmonte and McCabe, 2004), SFL descriptions have been virtually absent. At the same time, from the mid-1960s onwards, Halliday’s own writings became more involved in mother tongue English (L1) education, moving away from L2 teaching.

Halliday perceived that problems in L1 educational achievement were often linked to social class, in that class differences were likely to result in differences in the literacy experiences of children, i.e. in differences with the functional uses of language (Halliday, 1978). This focus was taken up in Australia, during the 1980s, where researchers applied the tenets of SFL to notions of genre in the creation of genre-based pedagogy (Christie and Unsworth, 2005; Martin, 2006; Veal, 2006), which was introduced in Australia during the 1980s to advance literacy needs in English at school and the workplace, especially of learners whose backgrounds do not provide rich literacy opportunities. The pedagogy employs SFL-based descriptions of the genres of schooling and the workplace, along with a teaching-

learning cycle designed to scaffold learners into reading and writing the genres (Rothery, 1994). In addition to mother tongue education, genre-based pedagogy has been adapted for ESL teaching in a number of contexts, allowing SFL a way into ELT. For example, in Australia, through SFL-based descriptions, the ESL scope and scales (Polias, 2003; Polias and Dare, 2006) set out the scope of the language needs of English L2 learners in schooling contexts, with different scales marking the developmental needs at different ages. Numerous teacher practitioners have applied SFL to ESL teaching (for example, Burns and de Silva Joyce, 2007; Marshall, 2006; Gibbons, 1996, 2001, 2002; Burns, 2001; Jones, Gollin, Drury and Economou, 1989). And space precludes us developing more fully And it is important to mention that the genre-based approach has played a key role in the parallel development over many years of the 'learner corpus' as an advanced resource for genre-based language teaching teaching English and other languages (Gledhill, 1998).

Genre-based pedagogy has also been taken up by education practitioners for L2 speakers in school settings in other English-dominated contexts as well. In North America, there are more and more professional development opportunities incorporating systemic functional linguistic approaches for teaching across content areas for L2 learners in schools (for example, de Oliveira and Iddings, 2014; Bunch and Willett, 2013; Schleppegrell, 2013; Brisk, 2012; Brisk and Zisselsberger, 2011; Gebhard and Harman, 2011; Gebhard, 2010; Slater and Mohan, 2010; Gebhard, Harman and Seger, 2007). The WIDA (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment) consortium, a group of 33 U.S. state departments of education, designs and implements English language proficiency standards and assessment for linguistically diverse school learners. WIDA draws on SFL as its underlying linguistic theory to explicate features of academic language within its sociocultural contexts. The features can be specified for different content areas and levels, and the focus of instruction is placed on what learners are able to do with the language in terms of the appropriate register, genres and text types related to the subject matter, with increasing complexity in the ability to use language as the level of proficiency rises.

SFL is also found applicable to EFL school situations, in contexts where English is not the mother tongue, such as the bilingual schools project in Spain, which uses a Content-and-Language-Integrated-Learning (CLIL) approach; through SFL, teachers can provide learners with a focus on the language of the specific subjects in a meaningful way (Whittaker and McCabe, forthcoming 2015; Llinares, 2013; Llinares, Morton and Whittaker, 2012; Llinares, Whittaker and McCabe, 2011). Herazo Rivera (2012) also provides applications of genre-based pedagogy to EFL teaching in Colombia. Likewise, genre-based literacy pedagogy has

been applied to English for school settings in Hong Kong (Maxwell-Reid, 2014; Firkins, Forey and Sengupta, 2007; Firkins and Forey, 2006) as well as to bilingual education (Walker 2010). Lin (2003) explains how the Singapore national school syllabus for English language learning moved away from a norm-oriented, accuracy-based syllabus to one which focuses on the ability to use language purposefully in a given context, drawing on an SFL genre-based approach.

The next generation of genre-based pedagogy, Reading to Learn, (Rose and Martin, 2012; Acevedo and Rose, 2007), which, as its name implies, is focused more fully on reading, is designed to “improve student learning outcomes, particularly for those who are educationally disadvantaged, including second language learners” (<http://tel4ele.eu/>). It is being used in several European-funded projects, such as *European Core Curriculum for Inclusive Academic Language Teaching* (<http://www.eucim-te.eu/32340>) which centers on the needs of migrant and minority students in the EU, *the Teacher Learning for European Literacy Education* (<http://tel4ele.eu/>) project and the *Stockholm Education Administration Reading to Learn* literacy project (Acevedo, 2010). Beyond these school settings, SFL has also provided understandings of language in context for numerous English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching settings around the globe, especially English for Academic Purposes (EAP), such as thesis, dissertation and article writing, in both ESL and EFL environments (Coffin and Donahue, 2012; Gardner, 2012).

The above applications of SFL to ELT show its strong capability to map for learners the typical semantic and lexicogrammatical patterns of language for academic and other specific purposes. At the same time, SFL is making inroads into other contexts of language teaching beyond these specific purposes, in order to provide for learners of English a meaningful focus on grammar. The tenets of genre-based teaching have been adapted specifically for TESOL environments as text-based language teaching (Burns, 2012; Feez, 1998, 1999). In text-based language teaching, the text is the starting point for the pedagogy, which draws on descriptions provided by SFL more specifically, and discourse analysis more broadly (Burns, 2012). SFL is put forth as beneficial to general EFL (Cirocki, 2012) and to EAL (English as an Additional Language) teaching/learning (Coffin, 2010). For example, it has been applied to general EFL teaching English in Thailand (Chappell, 2010; Kongpetch, 2006). Teacher education programs also incorporate SFL (Cirocki, 2012; Gehbard, 2010; Burns and Knox, 2005), and it also provides the linguistic underpinning for studies in second language development (Llinares, 2013; Praxedes Filho 2013; Perrett, 2000).

## Furthering the Applications

All of the papers presented in this special issue of *TESOL International* were first presented at the 25th European Systemic Functional Conference / Workshop (10-12 July 2014, Université Paris Diderot, Paris – France). The conference theme ‘Change, Mutation, Transformation’ was chosen in order to generate more interest among practitioners of SFL in diachronic studies (i.e. studies which use longitudinal data, or focus on changes in discourse over time, or even within the space of a single interaction). Although diachronic studies are usually thought of in terms of ‘the past’, the following papers all deal with change and diachronicity in a variety of ways, and all in terms of ‘the present’. As mentioned above, each of these papers represents several key strands of research activity which are particularly prevalent in SFL at the moment, namely 1) using SFL and new technologies for language learning and research on learning, 2) exploring how learners construct meaning through ideational resources such as grammatical metaphor, 3) exploring how learners use interpersonal resources such as appraisal, 4) looking at teaching and learning through multimodality and the interface between verbal and non-verbal interaction. This special issue of the *TESOL International Journal* thus hopes to augment the literature [on](#) these applications of SFL to ELT.

In the first paper, [“The Contribution of Systemic Functional Grammar to the Error Analysis Framework”](#), Clive Hamilton uses UAM CorpusTool (O'Donnell, 2010) to compare traditional sentence-level errors in French EFL academic writing with discrepancies analysed from an SFL perspective, namely: 1) errors in the expression of process, participant or circumstance, and 2) errors in theme / rheme selection. Hamilton's findings, expressed in terms of progress across two semesters of work, suggest that there is considerable value in the traditional grammatical approach to error, but that this needs to be complemented by an approach that looks at discrepancies from the top-down, i.e. the level of discourse and the text.

While Hamilton's contribution provides insight into understandings of language from both the ideational and textual metafunctions, Cassi Liardet's article, “Academic literacy and grammatical metaphor: mapping development” takes an in-depth look at the use of grammatical metaphor, which refers to a kind of inter-stratal tension that can be created through language within the ideational metafunction. Grammatical metaphor is explained through the system of transitivity of the clause, which refers to configurations of processes

and their attendant participants and circumstances. Our earlier examples help to illustrate grammatical metaphor:

- 1) *The kids ate pizza for dinner and they were ill later that evening.*
- 2) *The consumption of pizza led to subsequent food poisoning.*

In Example 1, there are two clauses which involve participants (expressed as nouns *the kids, pizza, they*); *the kids* carry out a material process (expressed through the verb *ate*) and then are involved in a relational process (*were*) with an adjective *ill* functioning as an attribute; all of this takes place under certain circumstances which are expressed through prepositional phrases or adverbs (*for dinner, later that evening*); ~~and~~ the logico-semantic relationship between the eating of the pizza and the becoming ill is expressed through a coordinator *and*. In Example 2, the participants have been effectively removed, the process of *eating* has been nominalized into *consumption*, the attribute of *ill* has also been nominalized into *food poisoning*; references to time have been abstracted (*later that evening* > *subsequent*), and the logico-semantic relationship between the eating of the pizza and the becoming ill is now expressed through the verb *led to*. Liardet joins the small but growing number of researchers and educators focusing the spotlight on this ubiquitous feature of academic writing for L2 learners (Schleppegrell, 2004), by providing an in-depth view of Chinese learners' use of grammatical metaphor across four years of writing at university level. Her study sketches out a developmental path in the ability to use this resource, and thus provides ways in which teachers can focus student attention on the variations in packaging experiential meanings through the nominal group (Musgrave and Parkinson, 2014; McCabe and Gallagher, 2008).

Sally Humphrey, in "Building a Critical Stance in Academic and Civic Discourse: Burnishing and Tarnishing", joins an increasing number of SFL analysts who explore Appraisal as a resource for expressing interpersonal meaning in text. For example, researchers (Liu, 2013; Liu and Thompson, 2009; Swain, 2007) have examined how English learners position their claims in argumentative essays through the use of resources within the three APPRAISAL systems of ATTITUDE (expressions related to feelings, judgements of behaviours, and appreciations of events), ENGAGEMENT (use of language to indicate subjectivities and to incorporate other voices), and GRADUATION (linguistic resources used to raise/lower the volume or blur/sharpen different types of evaluation). Humphrey demonstrates how young people can effectively align themselves in favour of or against stances by the kinds of Appraisal choices they make. Eric Cheung, in "Legitimising The Knower's Multiple Voices in Applied Linguistics Postgraduate Written Discourse", also contributes to understandings within the interpersonal metafunction, specifically



demonstrating how a graduate student successfully creates an authorial voice through the choices made from within the system of ENGAGEMENT. He draws on the exciting synergy between SFL and Legitimation Code Theory, which takes Bernsteinian perspectives further into understandings of the construction of disciplinary knowledge (Maton, Hood and Shay, 2014; Martin and Maton, 2013; Martin, 2011), adding to the literature by focusing specifically on an English L2 academic writer. The linguistic choices the student makes serve also as indicators of how she effectively positions herself with respect to knowledge of her disciplinary field. The findings of these researchers point to ways in which teachers can raise second language learners' awareness of the kinds of lexico-grammatical choices which can more effectively interact with their readers, and thus convey their meanings and intentions in academic writing in English (see also Ngo, Unsworth and Feez, 2012).

Moving on to the textual metafunction, in her article, "Secondary School Students' Use of Discourse Strategies in Two Languages: The Role of Hypertheme in Argumentative Writing", Corinne Maxwell-Reid shows the effects on the writing in Spanish of secondary school students from Spain who are learning English and school subjects through a CLIL approach. Similar to Liu and Furneaux (2015) for English and Chinese, Maxwell-Reid draws on SFL in carrying out a contrastive rhetoric analysis of English and Spanish discourse structures, demonstrating the ways in which the adolescent writers have adapted features of English into their writing in Spanish. She considers issues related to English as a global language, leading her to argue for explicit teaching of discourse structures in the L2 classroom, empowering student writers in their linguistic choices to make the kinds of meanings at the discourse level that they wish to make. In Peter Fries' contribution "Managing Information to Relate Sentences within a Text: Houston we Have a Problem", the author sets out a simple yet powerful model for the analysis of information gaps in text. For Fries, an 'information gap' sets out a term or some proposition which is underspecified and thus "begs a question" to which a following element in the text (the 'grounding') provides a specific response. As well as providing a typology of information gaps, Fries discusses the potential problems encountered by learners, who sometimes have to negotiate their way through "a complex pattern of claim, denial, counter-claim in text." Fries' contribution is reminiscent of classic papers in discourse analysis by such authors as Eugene Winter, John Sinclair, and Gill Francis, all of whom present a simple linguistic idea which is at the same time immensely rich, and of immediate importance to teaching / learning language.

In addition to the metafunctional focus which SFL provides to teachers and learners, a further advantage of SFL descriptions for L2 teaching is its applicability to other modes of

meaning-making (Bezerra, 2011; Macken-Horarik, Love and Unsworth, 2011; Heberle, 2010; Unsworth, 2006, 2001; Royce, 2007); for example, Forey and Polias (forthcoming) use SFL-inspired concepts to describe a range of meaning-making resources, including images and gestures, for teaching subjects such as science in English; these resources can take on additional weight of meaning-making when the linguistic resources of an L2 are not fully available to the participants. The final three papers in this volume all examine ~~the problem of~~ how to analyse ways of analysing multimodal and / or non-verbal interaction. First, Anne Thwaite, in “Using the “Multimodal Analysis Video” Program for Register Analysis: A Case Study” demonstrates a tool which allows for exploration with students of the contributions to understandings which are created through language as well as through paralinguistic features, such as intonation and gaze, in high-stakes communicative situations, such as a visit to the doctor. Mei-Ya Liang, in “Multiple Modes of Meaning in Expository Discourse” provides an analysis of university student oral presentations, highlighting the interplay between the linguistic and non-linguistic forms which students use to make their points, providing useful insights into differences between writing and speaking modes of academic presentation. Finally, in “New Media and English Language Teaching in China: A Case Study Based on Multiliteracies Pedagogy”, Yu-Jie Qi, Yan San and De-Zheng Feng draw on SFL and other current approaches to literacy teaching/learning practices (Coffin and Donahue, 2012) in their analysis of the teaching of a unit involving a video, reframing the notion of authenticity in language teaching through the SFL concepts of genre and register, thus providing for novel ways of focusing on meaning using new technologies in the primary English language classroom.

### **Going Beyond to New Applications**

It is our hope that readers of this special edition of the *TESOL International Journal* are inspired by these applications of SFL to ELT. At the same time, it is important to highlight that SFL is not without its drawbacks; it is a complex theory matching the complexities of language (McCabe, forthcoming 20165), and its terminology can seem daunting (Bourke, 2005; Burns and Knox, 2005). Thus, in addition to the references cited throughout the journal, below we provide some introductory texts and websites for those who would like to know more about SFL and join those who have found satisfaction in its pedagogical applications to their own language teaching.

## SFL Introductory Texts

- Bloor, T. & Bloor, M. (2013). *The Functional Analysis of English*. London: Routledge.
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- Thompson, G. (2013). *Introducing Functional Grammar (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition)*, London: Routledge.

## Resourceful Websites

- Alan Hess: [Stories4Learning](#): explanations of SFL, genre-pedagogy, Reading to Learn; applications and examples, and links to further resources.
- Brett Laybutt: [EFL Func](#): explanations of SFL; experiences of applications to EFL classes.
- Educational Semiotics: <https://educationalsemiotics.wordpress.com>.
- Leong Ping Alvin: [SFL site](#): accessible SF grammar explanations with examples and quizzes.

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