Teaching to mean, writing to mean: SFL, L2 literacy, and teacher education

Meg Gebhard *, I-An Chen, Holly Graham, Wawan Gunawan

University of Massachusetts, School of Education, Amherst, Massachusetts, United States

Abstract

This study analyzes how ten linguistically and culturally diverse candidates in a TESOL master's degree program used systemic functional linguistics and genre-based pedagogy to design curriculum and instruction. Using case study methods, the findings indicate that participants' conceptualizations of grammar shifted from a traditional sentence-level, form-focused perspective to a more functional understanding operating in interconnected ways across lexicogrammatical and discourse semantic features of texts. However, participants' constructions of what SFL is and how they might use genre-based pedagogy in the future were highly influenced by their previous schooling experiences and the contexts in which they taught or envisioned teaching. The implications of this study relate to reconceptualizing grammar in the knowledge base of language education.
© 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Academic language; Genre; Grammar instruction; Halliday; L2 writing; Metalanguage; Systemic functional linguistics; Teacher education

Introduction

Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (SFL) is a theory of learning to mean (Halliday, 1993). It explains how learners use the meaning-making resources available to them in the immediate and broader cultural contexts in which they participate to accomplish social, cognitive, and political work in and out of school (e.g., Christie & Martin, 1997; Martin & Rose, 2008; New London Group, 1996). These semiotic resources include the use of talk, gestures, images, and print to realize meanings that construct social dynamics (e.g., social distance and power), the mode through which interactions take place (e.g., face to face, online, in print), and the nature of the ideas being constructed (e.g., everyday topics or more discipline-specific ones; Halliday, 1993; Martin, 2009; Martin & Rose, 2008).

As a number of scholars have documented, second language (L2) learners typically develop the semiotic resources required to construct everyday meanings in a second language, but many struggle to construct discipline-specific meanings despite years of schooling (e.g., Cummins, 2008). Explanations for why L2 learners have trouble learning disciplinary discourses have focused on a number of issues, ranging from the nature of sociolinguistic interactions in which they participate; the quality of institutional supports schools provide; and race-, class-, and gender-based inequities reproduced in schools (e.g., Harklau, 1994; Olsen, 1997). However, we argue that one largely unexplored

reason L2 learners have trouble learning to use disciplinary discourses, especially in print, is that teachers often have not developed an explicit understanding of how language works in the texts they routinely require students to read and write in school. As a result, despite having developed other domains of professional knowledge (Freeman & Johnson, 1998), teachers often are not prepared to provide L2 learners with an apprenticeship in how language and other semiotic systems make disciplinary meanings, especially as students transition from reading and writing about everyday topics to exploring increasingly discipline-specific ones in the upper elementary grades, secondary school, college, and the workplace (Martin & Rose, 2008; New London Group, 1996; Schleppegrell, 2004).

To respond to the need for a meaning-making orientation to teaching and learning disciplinary literacies, this study calls for a reconceptualization of grammar and the role of grammar coursework in teacher education programs. This reconceptualization requires a departure from a traditional perspective of grammar, which defines grammar as a set of sentence-level, decontextualized rules for correct usage and focuses on the study of parts of speech. These parts of speech are often learned through sentence-parsing exercises that teach teachers and students a metalanguage for describing classes of words that are subsequently used in edicts such as, ''Don't end a sentence with a preposition.'' While developing a metalanguage to talk about language has been demonstrated to be of value to teachers (Borg, 2006), these prescriptive rules for correctness have given grammar a bad name in composition studies because they: shift attention away from meaning; focus on sentence-level grammatical structures without attention to how sentence-level grammar meaningfully supports the organization, purpose, and audience of a text; impose arbitrary rules that experts do not necessarily follow; and discriminate against social or regional dialects (Gebhard & Martin, 2011, p. 297).

In contrast, an SFL perspective of grammar focuses on the relationship between form and function and conceives of grammar as a resource for making meaning in context. Halliday writes:

> Grammar is what brings about the distinctively human construction of reality; and by the same token, grammar makes it possible for us to reflect on this construction. (Halliday, 2002, p. 370)

Drawing on this broad understanding of grammar and applying it to literacy pedagogy, the New London Group (1996) argues that learning to read and write should not be conceptualized behaviorally and taught authoritatively as the act of coding and decoding a stable print-based system that progresses neatly from the study of sounds and words to paragraphs and eventually longer texts. Rather, the act of producing, and interpreting, a text is increasingly a process in which people use multiple languages, print, and images to communicate, drawing on their resources as members of diverse and often hybrid linguistic and cultural communities. As a result, the authors call for teachers to develop a deeper understanding of how texts are constructed or ''designed'' so they can support students in ''redesigning'' texts based on ''available designs'' (New London Group, 1996). The authors use the word ''design'' to refer to how language is used to make meaning because it is ''free of the negative associations'' of the word grammar (p. 73) and argue that all teachers and students, not just L2 teachers and learners, need a metalanguage for critically analyzing how texts are ''designed'' to identify ''differences between texts, and relate these to the contexts of culture and situation in which they seem to work'' (p. 77).

Research regarding the benefits of using SFL as the basis for a metalanguage that can support teachers' professional development and L2 students' academic literacy development across content areas has been encouraging (e.g., Achugar, Schleppegrell, & Oteíza, 2007; Aguirre-Muñoz, Park, Amabisca, & Boscardin, 2008; Brisk & Zisselsberger, 2010; Gebhard, Chen, & Britton, 2003). While a comprehensive review of these studies is beyond the scope of this paper, the findings from these studies suggest that the use of SFL metalanguage in designing curriculum and instruction supports ESL teachers in developing a deeper understanding of both disciplinary knowledge and how language constructs this knowledge. In addition, teachers who have participated in SFL-based teacher professional development initiatives report feeling more confident about their abilities to teach ELLs to read and write disciplinary texts and to design instruction that links an analysis of the kinds of texts students are asked to read with an analysis of the kinds of texts they are asked to write, thus creating more synergistic links between L2 reading and writing activities. Last, these studies suggest that ESL teachers gained confidence in providing students with targeted, meaning-based feedback on their writing rather than attending exclusively to spelling and traditional grammatical errors.

Despite these positive findings, critics argue that SFL metalanguage is jargon that is ''too complex'' to be ''pedagogically relevant'' (Bourke, 2005, pp. 93–94). This response is not unexpected given the degree to which SFL is indeed a complex theory that places new demands on teachers and teacher educators. However, drawing on nearly