



Exploring changes in FL writers' meaning-making choices in summary writing: A systemic functional approach

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Abstract

Based on the framework of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), this study investigates the changes in foreign language (FL) writers' genre awareness and meaning-making choices when instantiating the genre of summary over a semester-long course. The participants were 30 undergraduate students at different proficiency levels. The students' developmental changes were analyzed using an in-depth qualitative analysis of their reflective comments in conjunction with their performances on pre- and post-instructional summary writing tasks. The findings indicate that as the students engaged in the SFL-informed genre analysis tasks, they began to explore not only ideational but also interpersonal and textual meanings, which are required to fulfill the rhetorical demands of summary writing. In addition, their lexicogrammatical choices also shifted toward more genre appropriate ones. However, proficiency effects were markedly observed in terms of how and to what degree the students were able to grammatically elaborate sophisticated expressions that help realize the genre. These findings highlight the importance of a SFL approach to teaching summary writing to FL writers. That is, although the degree to which students benefit from the tasks differs according to their proficiency levels, genre-specific language learning can be pushed by a SFL framework that enhances writers' awareness of the tripartite interconnectedness among ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings in specific FL instances, in this case, summary. This paper concludes that SFL can provide a renewed understanding of FL writers' development and help writing-to-learn and learning-to-write fruitfully cross-pollinate to enhance the FL development of students.

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Introduction

As indicated in a recent collection edited by Manchón (2011a), writing in a foreign language (FL) involves learning the language (writing-to-learn) and writing skills (learning-to-write), and that in many contexts they are inseparable from one another (Byrnes, 2011). However, the simultaneous development of language and writing abilities is often challenging for novice student writers and this has become a dilemma for many instructors in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. As reported by Lefkowitz (2009), many EFL instructors, if not all of them, are not sufficiently trained in writing instruction, and their goals for writing assignments often include

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highlighting grammatical correctness at the expense of the communicative content. Furthermore, the heavy emphasis on correct usage of grammar has been pushed by the influence from entrance exams on compulsory education (Reichelt, Lefkowitz, Rinnert, & Schultz, 2012; Yasuda, *in press*). Consequently, since writing and language instruction remain separated, the students' language knowledge may not effectively transfer to a functional use of writing despite their ability to complete grammar exercises correctly as a discrete practice (Bazerman, 2009).

To overcome these challenges of EFL writing instruction, Liamkina and Ryshina-Pankova (2012, p. 270) have proposed that it “requires a change in our conception of grammar as a collection of structural rules and of grammar learning as a mastery of a static body of knowledge.” Along the lines of previous work by Byrnes (2011, 2012), this paper argues that the use of a functional theory of language – a functional perspective that sees grammar as a set of meaning-making resources in a rich variety of text types and genres – can create new opportunities for addressing the intricate relationship between writing-to-learn and learning-to-write in an instructional environment. To operationalize writing pedagogy that explores learners' language use in a variety of social contexts, the most appropriate theory that EFL instructors can utilize is systemic functional linguistics (SFL), as developed by Michael Halliday and his followers (e.g., Christie, 2002; Halliday, 1994, 1996, 1998; Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999, 2004; Martin, 2009; Martin & Rose, 2008).

From a SFL perspective, writing-to-learn and learning-to-write are seen as acquiring the ability to make appropriate meaning-making *choices* to achieve a specific rhetorical goal. In other words, writing-to-learn and learning-to-write can be enhanced by “mak(ing) learners aware of the kinds of choices that exist at various strata of the language system and the contexts of situation and culture” (Caffarel, 2006, p. 205). In this case, the most important assumption is that advanced FL writers have various linguistic resources for organizing their meaning and selecting particular words that are maximally appropriate to the context “by relating them to other meaning and wording choices that could, perhaps even should, have been made in a particular composition” (Byrnes, 2011, p. 135, italics in original). Conceptualizing language development as the expansion of meaning-making choices, SFL indicates that such development is reflected in the novice writers' trajectory from reliance on congruent (prototypical) forms of grammar to their increasingly competent command of more incongruent (metaphorical) forms (Christie, 2002; Halliday, 1994; Schleppegrell, 2004b). Ultimately, as expert writers, they gain the ability to reconcile these two methods when creating meaning in accordance with situated choices (Byrnes, 2009; Byrnes, Maxim, & Norris, 2010). The concept of genre is then treated as a key factor in promoting this development since genre functions as a vehicle of exploring language use in various social spheres ranging from primary, informal, and congruent communicative situations to secondary, formal, and incongruent ones, by making explicit learners intricate interactions between ideational (content), interpersonal (reader–writer relationship), and textual (language) meanings in certain communicative situations.

In light of the SFL framework and reference to Byrnes (2005, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2012), I developed a four-semester sequence of genre-based EFL courses for undergraduate biology majors at a Japanese science university. Within the four-level curricular progression, Level 1 focused on primary discourses used in everyday oral situations while in Level 2, the target genre shifted to secondary discourses used in the written mode primarily through expository essays such as description, comparison and contrast, and argumentation. Level 3 introduced students to email writing as a *blurred genre* in which the oral and written modes were combined to enable students to experience a wide range of modalities and consider the audience and the overall purpose (Yasuda, 2011). Finally, Level 4 expanded language use in the written mode from general to academic (objectified and scientific) by focusing on discipline-specific texts. Utilizing the data from Level 4, this paper presents a descriptive study on the development of Level 4 students as writers and language learners who learn the genre of *summary* in the content-based reading and writing integrated course. This paper particularly focuses on describing: (1) how writers at different proficiency levels attempt to instantiate the genre of summary and what types of lexicogrammatical resources they choose to reconstruct the original meanings conveyed in the source text, and (2) how their meaning-making choices changed over time as they completed SFL-informed tasks that accentuated genre awareness. Finally, this paper demonstrates how writing-to-learn and learning-to-write can be mediated by genre learning within a SFL framework.

The next section presents a review of the relevant literature with a focus on the relationship between the genre of summary, its conceptual challenges for learners, and the lexicogrammatical features that are necessary for instantiating the genre.

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