



Using a functional linguistics metalanguage to support academic language development in the English Language Arts



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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a design-based research project that used grammatical metalanguage from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to support primary level English Language Learners' engagement with academic language in English Language Arts. Researchers and teachers developed lessons to support students' ability to interpret and evaluate characters' attitudes in literary texts through an explicit focus on language. An analysis of classroom conversations shows that SFL metalanguage has the potential to support students' content learning in the context of dialogic interaction during meaningful curricular activity supported by scaffolding artifacts. We show that the metalanguage supports elaboration and enactment of meaning and exploration of patterns in language and author's purpose in the texts students read. This results in extended discourse by students in which they also connect text meaning to their personal experiences. We suggest that this approach offers new affordances for supporting ELLs' engagement in challenging curricular tasks at the same time they develop academic language.

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1. Introduction

Academic language is the language through which learning in schools is accomplished, but to be a useful construct, it needs to be specified in relation to the goals of the curriculum across the school years. The forms and features of academic language vary by task, subject matter, and grade level, so those who want to support children's development of academic language need to situate that support in particular contexts of use and in the service of content area learning.

In this article we focus on the academic language of English language arts¹ (ELA) in the primary school, with a focus on meaning in the literature students read. Two major foci of the ELA curriculum are the study of language and the study of literature, making the ELA classroom unique in including in its subject matter an explicit focus on language. However, that focus is seldom linked meaningfully to other classroom activities, as explicit instruction about language is often realized as the teaching of isolated decoding skills or as labeling parts of speech. As a result, some of the most important and challenging goals of the curriculum, such as literary interpretation, remain a mystery to many students, leaving them ill-equipped to read and respond to literature in the analytical ways valued in later grades.

This is a particular problem for students learning English as an additional language. In the U.S. context, students classified as English Language Learners (ELLs) are more likely to achieve "adequate performance" on word-level reading and decoding than on measures of vocabulary, comprehension, and writing (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 633). Research suggests that these

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¹ English Language Arts is the term used in the United States for instruction in English language and literature; known in other contexts as subject English (Christie & Humphrey, 2008).

students need opportunities for explicit focus on language itself in the context of meaningful interaction about curricular topics (August & Shanahan, 2006; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006; Gersten et al., 2007). But outside of traditional literary terminology (metaphors, similes, and figurative language more generally), ELA teachers typically have few resources that support them in this endeavor.

In this article, we show how the functional linguistics metalanguage of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) offers tools for supporting the goals of ELA, providing explicit and concrete assistance to students in learning to interpret literature and evaluate characters in stories. We draw on data from an ongoing design-based research project that is using SFL theory to develop tools for talk about text across the elementary school years. In this work we take the perspective that dialog about texts and their meaning is the primary context through which learning is accomplished, and we offer evidence from classroom talk that shows how grammatical metalanguage and related artifacts can support ELLs in meaningful discussion that extends both their language and content knowledge.

2. Theoretical and research perspectives

2.1. Theory of language and grammar

Talk about the meaning of texts calls for *metalanguage*, language for referring to the choices authors have made in writing those texts. In the ELA classroom, teachers often draw on two metalanguages, each serving different purposes. When reading and discussing literature, teachers and students have a *literary metalanguage* (terms such as *symbol*, *metaphor* and *characterization*) to help make meaning of stories and discuss author's craft. When responding to writing, teachers often use the metalanguage of traditional grammar in service of improving the "correctness" or "mechanics" of student writing. These metalanguages serve very different purposes, but neither provides students with robust tools for making sense of how language choices contribute to the meanings made.

Systemic functional linguistics (e.g., Halliday, 1985) offers a *functional grammar metalanguage* that connects language forms to meanings in contexts of use. It offers a means of engaging students and teachers with the language of curricular texts, for it enables teachers to foreground meaning while also being explicit about language forms. Table 1 presents examples of the three metalanguages that offer resources for teaching ELA.

SFL represents *grammar* as "networks of interlocking options" (Halliday, 1985, p. xiv) rather than as rules to be followed. As speakers and writers, we make choices from grammatical systems that enable meaning-making about our experience and that enable us to enact relationships as we create coherent spoken and written texts. The SFL metalanguage provides a means of being explicit about the ways different meanings are realized in choices at multiple levels (word, clause, and text).

The SFL metalanguage provides teachers and students with a language for talking about language, to "show how, and why, the text means what it does" (Halliday, 1985, p. xv). Guided by a focus on *how* meaning is expressed, close attention to language supports a linguistic awareness that can deepen and refine students' understanding of the meanings made in literary texts. At the same time, use of the metalanguage positions readers to evaluate texts, to "say why the text is, or is not, an effective text for its own purposes" (p. xv), providing students with tools not only to better understand the knowledge constructed in the text, but also to evaluate it, participate in the disciplinary discourses evoked by the text, and ultimately contribute to shaping the knowledge and discourses.

A subject matter focus is needed in considering the challenges of academic language for ELLs, as students encounter academic language in patterns that vary in response to differences in the content knowledge, interpersonal relationships being enacted, and modes of discourse relevant to the different subject areas and task expectations of schooling (Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Schleppegrell, 2004). Vygotsky's notion of "everyday" and "scientific" concepts resonates with this perspective, as SFL metalanguage embedded in and supportive of disciplinary learning in ELA needs to enable students to focus on the scientific concepts (in the Vygotskian sense of systematically organized) to be developed in the study of literature. For Vygotsky, learning scientific concepts requires conscious focus and attention, different from everyday concepts learned through personal experience without conscious attention. We see the need, then, to bring together metalanguages from the disciplinary context with SFL metalanguage in a pedagogy that supports students' use of everyday language and concepts as resources for meaning-making.

2.2. Theory of learning

Our theory of learning is situated at the intersection of socio-cultural and socio-linguistic perspectives, as articulated in Wells' (1994, 1999) synthesis of Vygotsky's and Halliday's contributions to a theory of language and learning. Wells

Table 1
Metalanguages of ELA.

| Type of metalanguage | Examples |
|-------------------------|---|
| literary | simile, symbol, characterization, dialogue |
| traditional grammatical | noun, noun phrase, adjective, verb, predicate |
| functional grammatical | process, participant, polarity (positive/negative), amplify (turn up), soften (turn down) |

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