"Miss, nominalization is a nominalization:" English language learners' use of SFL metalanguage and their literacy practices

Meg Gebhard [a,*], I-An Chen [a], Lynne Britton [b]

[a] University of Massachusetts, 206 Furcolo Hall, Amherst, MA 01003, USA
[b] Springfield Public Schools, 1550 Main Street, Springfield, MA, USA

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how an elementary school teacher in the United States used systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and genre-based pedagogy to design and reflect on academic literacy instruction and how Spanish–English bilinguals took-up SFL metalanguage in learning to read and write historical and scientific explanations about culturally relevant topics. Based on a longitudinal analysis of changes in student writing samples and district and state test scores over an academic year, the findings indicate that instruction in SFL metalanguage helped students recognize and name linguistic patterns within and across disciplinary texts and expand their semiotic resources, especially as these resources relate to realizing meaning in print. The implications of this study relate to the strategic role SFL-based pedagogy can play in supporting teachers and bilinguals in critically navigating English-only mandates and the discourses of standardization and accountability in the United States.

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1. Introduction

At the end of the 2011 school year, Lynne, an elementary teacher and the third author of this study, was preparing a group of English language learners (ELLs) for a mandated exam in science. This exam is challenging for many students, but it is particularly difficult for ELLs because the language through which scientific knowledge is constructed is very different from everyday discourse (e.g., Lemke, 1988). Scientific discourse relies on technical terms and dense clause structures that pack meaning into a single sentence, often using the nominalization of verbs to make claims about abstract phenomena. To help students unpack how language is used in scientific texts, Lynne drew their attention to instances of nominalization, a skill they had been working on over the course of the year. During the discussion, a student said, "You know, Miss, nominalization is a nominalization!" While this ELL still struggled to pass this exam, his remark supports research that suggests providing students with a metalanguage for analyzing how academic discourse works and how it is different from every day discourse gives them some purchase on how disciplinary language constructs meaning in the kinds of texts they routinely encounter in school (e.g., Achugar, Schleppegrell, & Oteíza, 2007; Gebhard, Chen, Graham, & Gunawan, 2013; Macken-Horarik, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2009). To explore the potential of teachers and students using metalanguage to deconstruct, critique, and construct academic texts, this study explores how Lynne used Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and Martin's genre theory to design curriculum in an urban school in the United States and how her ELLs took-up the metalanguage associated with Halliday and Martin's theories in learning to read and write disciplinary texts over the course of an academic year.

This study builds on the work of educational linguists who have been using SFL to conceptualize, analyze, and make pedagogical recommendations regarding the teaching and learning of disciplinary literacies since the 1980s. In the inaugural

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: gebhard@educ.umass.edu (M. Gebhard), ichen@educ.umass.edu (I.-A. Chen), brittonl@sps.springfield.ma.us (L. Britton).

issue of *Linguistics and Education*, Lemke (1988) argues, "educators have begun to realize that the mastery of academic subjects *is* the mastery of their specialized patterns of language use" (p. 81). He adds, "If semantic patterns represent the heart of every academic subject, then we must learn how to describe them, how to embed them in the discourse of teaching and the language of the textbook, and how to identify them in discourse and text wherever they occur (p. 84)." Describing and identifying these semantic patterns necessitates teachers and students developing a metalanguage for noticing, naming, and critically manipulating the disciplinary linguistic patterns they encounter in school. Broadly defined, metalanguage is the use of language to talk about language (Berry, 2005). It is explicit knowledge about language that can be brought to conscious awareness, articulated, and used reflexively as a cognitive tool to construct knowledge about language (see Gánem-Gutiérrez & Roehr, 2011 for a discussion of the use of metalanguage from a Vygotskian perspective). SFL metalanguage provides categories for language analysis that is functional rather than formal or structural. These categories allow for analysis of how language functions to construct ideas or experiences; reflect and enact relationships between speakers and listeners or readers and writers; and manage the flow of information within a text and a communicative context. It is distinct from other kinds of metalanguage that focus on classes of words (e.g., nouns, verbs, prepositions, adverbs) in the absence of how these words construct meaning in context (Gebhard & Martin, 2011).

Since Lemke's call for a more functional approach to developing academic literacy practices, *Linguistics and Education* has published a number of studies that have explored the relationship between learning academic subjects and developing academic language in three general ways. The first centers on documenting how language and other semiotic systems construct knowledge in the disciplines of science, math, social studies, and subject English in schools (e.g., Arkoudis, 2005; Achugar & Schleppegrell, 2005; Davison, 2005; Haneda, 1999; Hood, 2008; O'Halloran, 2000; Schleppegrell, 2001; Unsworth, 1998; see also Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Mohan, Leung, & Davison, 2001; Martin & Rose, 2008). The second centers on tracing changes in students' literacy practices over time as students initially develop the grammatical resources needed to realize meaning in print in the primary grades, and then in the upper grades expand and further develop these resources as they learn to read and write increasingly challenging texts, which are realized by increasingly complex and discipline-specific grammatical patterns (e.g., Christie's 2012 analysis of subject matter English). Last, the third line centers on providing educators with a pedagogical model of literacy development to support the design, implementation, and analysis of literacy instruction in schools (e.g., Rose & Martin, 2012 for a review of the development of an SFL-based approach to academic literacy instruction). This model provides teachers, teacher educators, and literacy researchers with a functional metalanguage for understanding how language and other semiotic systems (e.g., graphs, images, formulas) work to make disciplinary meanings and how students and teachers can use this metalanguage explicitly and critically to support the development of academic literacy practices in schools in ways that are responsive to changing demographics and issues of equity (e.g., New London Group, 1996; Rose & Martin, 2012).

However, to date, fewer studies have explored how teachers use SFL metalanguage with students in classroom interactions and how students take up this metalanguage while participating in literacy events. To address the need for analyses of how teachers introduce SFL metalanguage to students, how students make sense of SFL metalanguage, and the implications of using SFL metalanguage as a tool to support students' academic literacy development over time, this study poses three questions: (1) How did Lynne use SFL metalanguage in designing disciplinary literacy instruction? (2) How did Lynne's students use SFL metalanguage (or not) while engaging in reading and writing activities? (3) How was the use of SFL metalanguage implicated in ELLs' literacy gains over the course of an academic year, if at all?

To explore these questions, we begin by articulating the conceptual framework informing this study. We briefly outline Halliday's SFL, Martin's genre-based pedagogy, and Macken-Horarik's call for the use of SFL metalanguage in literacy instruction. Next, we provide a brief description of the context for a case study of how ELLs used SFL metalanguage in learning to read and write historical and scientific explanations in Lynne's third-grade ESL class over an academic year. The findings suggest that instruction in SFL metalanguage provided students with concrete tools for deconstructing and constructing disciplinary texts in ways that supported their ability to write longer, more coherent texts and to read increasingly challenging texts over the course of the study. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of this study for ELLs' literacy development and teachers' professional development.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Halliday's systemic functional linguistics

Halliday's SFL attempts to explain how humans learn to exploit the semiotic resources available to them in the immediate and broader cultural contexts in which they participate. In articulating "a language based theory of learning," Halliday (1993) maintains that as children learn to use language orally in the home and then in print in elementary and secondary school, they are "learning language," "learning through language" and "learning about language" in ways that expand the system of semiotic resources available to them (Halliday, 1993, p. 113). He explains how the meaning potential of this system increases through three *metafunctions* that work simultaneously to construct meanings sensitive to the contexts in which they are used. The ideational metafunction represents experience; the interpersonal metafunction enacts self/other dynamics; and the textual metafunction manages the flow of information to make discourse coherent. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) explain this trinocular conception of meaning making by stating, "every message is both about something and addressing