



Enriching short stories through processes – A functional approach

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to use a genre-based functional grammar approach to examine how grammar instruction can help improve Hong Kong English learners' story writing performance. Four classes of Secondary 1 (Grade 7) students participated in the study, with one class being the control group. The experimental groups received instructions in a research lesson that highlighted the impact of their choice of process types on story writing, while the control group did not receive any functional grammar instruction. A comparison of the writing performance of the experimental groups in the pre- and post-lesson tests revealed significant improvement, while no progress was found with the control group. The test results were triangulated with the students' class writing and homework, and nine selected students' pre- and post-lesson interview data. The findings revealed students' heightened awareness of the impact of the choice of various processes on writing. The study also found that lower achievers gained substantial benefits from the explicit writing instruction. This study provides insights to ESL/EFL teachers about how to use functional grammar as a pedagogical tool to enhance learners' story writing skills.

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1. Introduction

Writing is difficult for students, who often struggle to express themselves, and for teachers, who often struggle to give helpful feedback (Ahn, 2012; Birketveit & Rimmereide, 2003; Dunn & Finley, 2010; Schleppegrell & Go, 2007). Many learners are exposed to isolated bits and pieces of language without looking at whole texts, and therefore fail to understand how a text is woven together to create meaning (Ho, 2009). Given that writing is a significant skill that is of fundamental importance in assessments and in contributing to one's school and future occupational success, it is important to find ways to help learners write in more effective ways. One way suggested by the advocates of genre-based teaching is to heighten writers' awareness of the linguistic features of different text types (Ahn, 2012; Hyland, 2003, 2007; Paltridge, 2001; Rose & Martin, 2012). It is argued that the writing outcomes will be improved if learners are made aware of the specific linguistic features of the target genre.

In this article, I will discuss how a group of Hong Kong teachers learnt to use the tools provided by systemic functional grammar to help their students identify the language features found in the story genre and to help them link meaning and structure in order to master those features in story writing. The article discusses the extent to which progress was made in students' post-instruction writing in terms of the range of processes (realized by verb groups) included based on the theoretical framework of systemic functional linguistics.

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2. Genre-based teaching and story writing in the classroom

Genre is defined as “abstract, socially recognised ways of using language” (Hyland, 2007, p. 149), which is based on the idea that the texts belonging to the same genre share a number of linguistic similarities, and people can draw on their previous experiences with such texts to read, understand and write them relatively easily. This is partly explained by the fact that writing is based on expectations (Hyland, 2007). In other words, both writers and readers share a schema of prior knowledge, and it is this schema that allows the writer to anticipate readers' expectations of a certain genre and the readers to interpret the writer's purpose relatively easily.

Story is a typology comprising a range of generic sub-types that all have the common purpose of entertainment, and include events that are exciting, terrifying, funny, etc. (Rothery & Stenglin, 1997). The social purpose of the sub-types – which include recount, narrative, exemplum, anecdote and observation (Martin & Plum, 1997; Rothery & Stenglin, 1997) – is achieved through the functional staging of the genre.

Despite some previous discussions about using various strategies to improve the quality of story writing (e.g., Crealock, 1993; Graves & Hauge, 1993; Jacobsen, 1981/82; Johannessen, 1995; Leavell & Ioannides, 1993), not many English language teachers are aware of how to teach writing skills effectively. What constitutes success in writing is often taken for granted by some school teachers (Christie & Dreyfus, 2007). Without enough guidance on how to develop interesting ideas and how to express meanings through grammatical choices, students can hardly write stories that appeal to readers. It has been suggested that teachers should bring the forms and patterns of language use to students' awareness; otherwise many writing conventions will remain opaque for learners (e.g., Hyland, 2004, 2007; Paltridge, 2007; Rose & Martin, 2012).

In Hong Kong classrooms, writing instruction is often under-emphasised. Writing is often carried out in a conventional way, which is product- and examination-oriented, with teachers assigning topics and requiring students to complete the writing within a set time limit (Carless, 2011; Lee, 2012; Lo & Hyland, 2007). Writing instruction is rather minimal, mainly focusing on the grammar structures and vocabulary specific to the writing topic (Lee, 2010, 2012). Without appropriate instruction about the target genre, it is not surprising that learners' written outputs are often far from satisfactory.

Learning how to write good stories is especially important for Hong Kong students, as the story genre is commonly assessed in school examinations. In the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, a former public examination for Secondary 5 students,¹ story writing with picture cues given was a genre commonly assessed. The assessment criteria included the four domains of content, accuracy, organisation and genre (HKEAA, 2007). The major weaknesses shown by the average and weaker candidates included not only problems with the language forms, but also failure to elaborate and to integrate narration with dialogues (HKEAA, 2003, 2007). The following is a comment excerpted from an examination report:

Weaker candidates were unable to elaborate on most of the picture cues and the majority ended their narratives in very simple ways, like “David saw Amy. They were happy.” Some were unable to give a logical development to their story and some even missed out the ending. On the whole, the weaker examples illustrated ineffective communication of ideas. (HKEAA, 2007, p. 129)

Mastering the story genre is not less important under the new senior secondary curriculum (Curriculum Development Council and HKEAA, 2007). “Learning English through Short Stories” is one of the elective modules open to students and is assessed in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination. The aim of the module is to introduce learners to the world of short stories, and to encourage them to read, write and tell them. Learners will be engaged in different activities, such as writing their own stories or developing story outlines. To write effective stories, learners are strongly advised to pay attention to content, style and structure, such as the Beginning/Setting, Reaction to what the characters felt and did, Outcome and Evaluation/Coda (HKEAA, 2003, 2005). Genre-based teaching, which offers teachers principled ways of providing their students with relevant and targeted instruction incorporating knowledge about how language is structured to achieve social purposes in particular contexts, has been recommended by the authorities to be a means to help Hong Kong learners become more proficient writers (Lee, 2012).

While genre-based teaching is widely adopted in Australia and in North America, with the former based on the systemic functional linguistic framework and the latter following the New Rhetoric Genre theory (Ahn, 2012; Paltridge, 2007), the notion of genre and the idea of using the functional grammar approach to teach writing are relatively new to many teachers in Hong Kong. The present paper seeks to investigate how a group of Hong Kong secondary school teachers exploited systemic functional grammar and genre-based teaching to strengthen their instruction, and to help their students enhance story writing skills with heightened awareness of the different meanings created through different process types. It also aims to provide ESL/EFL teachers with insights about how to adopt a functional grammar approach to boost students' confidence and encourage a positive attitude towards story writing. In the following section we will discuss the role of functional grammar in genre-based teaching.

¹ With the introduction of the three years' junior secondary, three years' senior secondary and four years' tertiary (3–3–4) education system, the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination for Secondary 5 students has been replaced by the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education for Secondary 6 students since 2012.

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