

Grammatics for Teaching EFL Writing Skills: A Social Semiotic Systemic Functional Linguistics Approach

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Abstract: Writing is one of the most difficult skills for EFL learners. Students need to bring their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary to produce a piece of writing. More importantly, they should also consider meaning and social context. Recent approaches to teaching EFL writing views it as a process instead of being a product. Thus, following Halliday's model of functional grammar and its emphasis on grammatics, educators proposed a method for teaching writing that emphasizes form, meaning and social function. The purpose of this paper was to establish the superiority of Halliday's grammar in relation to other traditional and cognitive models. Additionally, it reviewed relevant literature to understand how Halliday's framework is operationalised in class. Further, it aimed at highlighting contributions of previous research and comparing them to the claims of functional grammar's advocates. Investigated research showed that adopting grammatics (or genre-specific grammar) is beneficial since it emphasizes the communicative aspect of language, provides holistic understanding of writing, encourages teaching grammar explicitly, enhances critical thinking and addresses students' needs.

Keywords: EFL, functional grammar, genre, grammatics, Halliday, writing.

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Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners report a number of difficulties that result mainly from viewing English grammar as an abstract entity with no reference to meaning or context. Emmaryana (2010) argues that as learners learn English they realize that the writing skill is the most complicated one. Further, DeKeyser and Sokalski (1996) state that grammatical rules are easy to comprehend but difficult to produce. More importantly, DeKeyser (2005) proposed that grammatical difficulty is mainly from three factors: problems pertaining to meaning, form and form-meaning mapping. Thus, complex rules are those where the relationship between form and meaning is obscure. In response to such difficulties that learners face as they try to understand grammar and use it communicatively, some practitioners report that Halliday's (1994) suggested model of systemic functional grammar (SFG) can be operationalised in class to draw students' attention to the interrelatedness of form and meaning and how this is determined by context. It is essential to draw one's attention that the word *grammar* used in this paper is not restricted to the grammar developed by traditional grammarians. It is more comprehensive and thus refers to knowledge of language or 'grammatics', a term initiated by Halliday (1994) who provides a comprehensive way of viewing language.

Grammatics

Halliday uses the term 'grammatics' to refer to the type of metalanguage one uses to talk about grammar in a fashion akin to *linguistics* which is concerned with knowledge of language (Halliday, 2002). Such knowledge can be perfectly described using Halliday's systemic functional approach to language which became known as Halliday's *Systemic Functional Linguistics* (SFL). The model was proposed by Halliday in 1978 and it is based on systemic linguistics (language is a set of choice systems).

Hallidays' SFL

As mentioned above, SFL helps one understand how texts go beyond the sentence level and reflect the choices of language users in relation to a specific context. Hence, SFL is a theory of language and a method for analyzing texts with reference to context. In his book, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Halliday (1994) emphasizes that his approach is functional instead of

being formal. It is functional in three different ways: (a) in its interpretation of texts, (b) of the system and (c) of the linguistic elements that make up the structure of the language system. In this way, SFG accounts for how language is used as a semiotic tool. Hence, every component in language is functional in nature. For Halliday, since language is a system designed to make meaning, there are thus two types of meanings: *ideational* (what a text is about) and *interpersonal* (how to make relationships using language) and how a piece of text represents an individual. The ideational meaning includes the experiential content and it aims at representing the world around us along with our experience of it (Halliday, 1993).

Related to these two meanings is a third one which is known as the *textual* meaning and it is defined as organizing information into coherent texts. According to Halliday, the three types of meanings are called 'metafunctions'. That is, any unit of language serves a function in relation to language as a whole. Each metafunction is realized through a different system of grammar. For example, the experiential metafunction is realized through the Transitivity system, whereas the second through the Mood patterns and finally the textual metafunction is achieved using Theme patterns (Eggins 1994).

Halliday (1993) proposed that as we grow older, we mature cognitively and physically and the cultural contexts we interact with expand and thus such metafunctions become syntagmatically and paradigmatically of diverse nature. According to Halliday (1999), any element of language should be interpreted in relation to two contexts: the cultural context (the broader one, known as *genre* by Halliday) where a system of language operates, the situational context (the immediate one, called register) in which language is realized in a specific context and the ideological context. To account for linguistic variation at the text level, Halliday suggested the consideration of *register variables* (field, tenor and mode). The above-mentioned metafunctions are associated with such variables. For example, the *field* of text realizes the ideational metafunction, whereas *tenor* is closely related to interpersonal meanings. *Mode*, on the other hand, is responsible of establishing textual meanings.

Halliday's model interprets any discourse in terms of meaning and function (purposeful behavior). Semantically, various language units (phrase, clause, sentence, text, etc.) contribute layers of meaning simultaneously.

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SFL is a tristratal model where the *clause* is the basic unit of analysis. Since language functions to represent one's experience (ideational meaning), a clause is thus a *representation* unit. Further, as advanced above, language can serve another function which is establishing relationships (or making interpersonal meanings) and as a result a clause is an *exchange*. For the last metafunction, using language to make textual meanings, a clause is viewed as a *message* (Eggins, 1994).

Traditional Grammar, Formal Grammar and Functional Grammar

Instead of treating grammar in terms of word classes or generative rules, Halliday's Approach to grammar is revolutionary taking into account lexical and grammatical rules of combination with reference to context. Thus, the superiority of SFG to other approaches (such as those of traditional grammar and formal grammar) is well-acknowledged in literature.

To start with, there are two definitions for traditional grammar: the narrow one (a type of grammar based on Greek or Latin (Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics) and abroad one (a model of grammar originated at the end of the 19th century and focused on the study of language from a comparative point of view). Traditional grammar is set to teach the six classes of words: noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction and so on (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). Criticizing this approach to teaching language, Christie (1981) states that traditional grammar forces teachers to teach grammar without the least consideration of context.

In the 1950s, Chomsky suggested another form of grammar known as formal grammar in which classes of words as well as phrases are analyzed using a set of abstract algebra-like rules (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). For Chomsky, rules may allow certain structures but not others. Additionally, they were proposed to explore the limitations in language which are neurological in nature. Advocates of this approach were more interested in finding the link between language and the human brain.

On the other hand, the Hallidayan framework shifted the focus in grammar from emphasizing some morphosyntactic features at the clausal level to viewing language as a system of interrelated choices resulting in texts typical of any situational or cultural context. More importantly, each text is capable of achieving the three metafunctions simultaneously (Eggins,

1994). Further, Martin, Matthiessen and Painter (1997) posit that functional grammar is another way of looking at grammar in terms of how it is used in terms of cultural and social contexts or the link between form and function. Such foundational principles prompt educators to implement it in class to expand learners' understanding of how language functions in a specific context.

Grammatics and Language Teaching

L2 emerges as learners engage in authentic interaction for the purpose of making meaning and their acquisition of language is enhanced through explicit focus on language and how form is closely related to meaning and social context (Schleppegrell, 2013). Further, Pennycook (2000) points out that, "the classroom functions as a kind of microcosm of boarder social order" (p.93). Hence, learners are encouraged to use the various meaning-making resources available in their environment to accomplish different social goals (Christie & Martin, 1997; Martin & Rose, 2008). Such resources include gestures, images, texts, spoken interaction, etc. The careful use of such semiotic tools signify meaning related to social distance and power, the mode through which meaning travels (e.g., online, face to face, print) and the type of ideas shared including those that are discipline-specific or general (Halliday, 1993; Martin, 2009; Martin & Rose, 2008).

However, Feng (2013) reported that SFG is still new to many EFL teachers. If there are published articles, SFG is more commonly applied to speaking and writing because it gives EFL students the ability to use language communicatively. Macken-Horarik, Love and Unsworth (2011) note that there are a number of challenges that teachers face as they try to apply grammatics in school. First, many English instructors lack the essential knowledge of language as a means of making meaning. Some teachers (especially pre-service ones) reported that there is a gap in their knowledge of two areas: grammar and phonics (Louden et al., 2005; Hudson & Walmsley, 2005; Harper & Rennie, 2009). Secondly, students find it difficult to make use of their knowledge about language in their writing. Further, multimodal texts require a new way of analysis since they also contribute meaning.

Writing and the EFL Teacher

Writing is a consolidating process and it has been viewed as a product resulting from a social interaction between one and their surrounding environment. Writing reflects how people think and it also shapes our thinking (Clark et al., 2003). However, instructors ignore the process

to focus on the product (Lestari, 2008). Even worse, some students focus on form and thus try to avoid errors as much as they can and their resultant writing becomes hence incomprehensible (Ariyanti, 2016). Moreover, what complicates writing for students is that teachers ask students to start and finish writing about a topic in one setting in their effort to simulate a test experience and prepare students very well for exams (Leki, 1994). This type of practice is known as “the traditional one-off writing task” where there is no consideration of the writing process that includes searching a specific topic, outlining, drafting, revising, etc. (Gibbons, 2002). Such activities improve students' critical thinking ability. However, focusing on the process of writing is sometimes time-consuming especially in case of big classes (Hsien, 2009). Because of the problems advanced above, many scholars suggest that writing should be viewed as an integrated, socially-situated skill and that it is made of an array of other component skills including literacy critical thinking skills (Deane et al., 2008). Further, equal emphasis should be on form and meaning as well as text's appropriateness to social context (Ariyanti, 2016).

As shown above, Lock (1996) posits that grammarians of the SFG model are not interested in distinguishing between grammatical and ungrammatical forms. They instead focus on the appropriateness of any lexico-grammatical unit for a specific communicative function and a particular social context. The purpose of the paper is thus: (1) to theoretically examine how SFG is different from other traditional and sociocognitive models suggested for teaching writing, (2) to describe how the model is operationalised in class, and (3) to report results of previous research on the efficiency of the Hallidayan framework for teaching writing.

Objective of the Paper

Based on previous research, the present paper aimed at investigating the efficiency of the SFG model (known among EFL practitioners as genre-based pedagogy) as tool for teaching writing. Further, the researcher wanted to understand how the genre-based approach is operationalised in EFL writing classes. Also, the investigation included findings from several studies that compared the SFG model to others models suggested for teaching writing in EFL classes.

Methodology

This paper followed a descriptive method of reviewing existing literature on writing and the SFG model. The purpose of this review was to provide a new interpretation to old and new research's findings with the goal of establishing the efficiency of grammatics to EFL writing classes (King & He, 2005). As part of analyzing research descriptively, a classification procedure was followed in which research papers tackling the same issue are reviewed with respect to their claims and findings. Papers on grammatics, SFG and genre-pedagogy were collected using research databases such as ERIC, EBSCO, Proquest, etc. and specialized research network sites including Academia and ResearchGate. All investigated research is either reported in books or found in articles published in peer-reviewed journals. Using the above advanced databases, a comprehensive list of relevant works was prepared in advance in which each individual study is treated as a data record. Resources used are as old as 1980 (foundational works) and as new as 2017 (reporting findings on to application of the SFG framework in an EFL writing class).

SFG and other Models to Writing

Previous research showed that SFG significantly differs from other models suggested for teaching writing. In the 60s, instructors used the 'Traditional Paradigm' to teach writing to high school and university students. The approach is product-oriented in relation to a limited number of genres such as those of narration, exposition, description and argument. In an EFL class, instruction is mainly on producing a piece of composition which will be developed into an essay of five paragraphs. In most cases, students are given a model of 'good writing' that they should emulate. Much attention is drawn to component skills, structures and rules necessary for production. Clarity, originality and correctness are important parameters for evaluation. This type of instruction is still in use and thus became popular as the 'current-traditional' approach to writing (Breeze, 2012).

Rejecting the traditional approach to writing gave rise to a number of other approaches such as that of process writing which views writing as a psychological process. Proponents of this model (popular in the 1970s) are influenced by cognitive psychology and hence attention is drawn to the inner workings of the human mind. Thus the focus is no more on the produced text but the process that the learner should go through to produce a piece of writing. Core to this approach is the view that writing is of five recursive stages: pre-writing, drafting, revision, editing and publishing. Much contribution to the cognitive approach to writing is by Flower and Hayes (1980) who treat writing as a problem solving activity and that thinking-aloud procedures should be emphasized in class.

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Flower and Hayes (1980) also raise practitioners' awareness to the importance of developing learners' writing strategies. Their work paved the way to explicit strategy instruction initiated by Grabe and Kaplan (1996).

The last approach emerged in the 1970s and embraced important principles of previous approaches and added to them the relevance of any text to social context. Advocates of the genre school were influenced by social approaches in linguistics such as Halliday's SFL and discourse analysis. This approach prompts instructors to analyze target texts to identify what students should write about. Each type of writing serves a social function and different writings thus belong to specific genres. Because of Halliday's influence, genres are rhetorically classified as narratives, procedures, descriptions, reports, explanations, recounts, arguments and expositions (Breeze, 2012). These are sometimes referred to as element genres and they together form macro genres (Martin, 1992). As an example, newspaper writing as a macro genre is made of exposition, discussion and rebuttal.

Operationalizing the SFG Model in Class

The method of writing suggested by Halliday's followers is mainly 'writing in genre' where nonlinearity of text types is highlighted to learners. Functional writing belongs to some frequent, specific genres where each genre is marked by a conventionalized type of discourse (Kress, 1988). Proponents of this approach shift the attention back to product (besides process) and concentrate on academic and professional texts (Candlin & Hyland, 1999). Later developments within the genre school led educators to reject the old practice of close textual analysis and shift attention to how language works in society.

In class, according to Widodo (2006), EFL teachers should make students understand why they are writing (purpose), who they are writing to (the target audience) and how they should organize the text. Genre-based pedagogy places a lot of importance on scaffolding (teacher-supported learning) and learner collaboration (Hyland, 2007). Thus, Hyland proposed a 'genre cycle' which is mainly of teaching and learning (the Teaching Learning Cycle or LERN). The cycle is of five stages: constructing the context (the purpose and the setting of a specific genre), modeling the text (drawing students' attention to the textual features of each genre), collaborative

construction of the text (using teacher-guided activities to emphasize text's features) and individual construction of the text (teachers monitor student writing as they write their texts) and linking related texts (to compare features of a certain genre to those of similar genres) (Hyland, 2007).

Genre writing classes are organized around real-life activities in which people do things through writing. Themes such as technology, education, work, health, etc. can be emphasized in a writing class. Thus, students are required to describe (how to place an order in Amazon), narrate (their first day in school), argue (in favor of capital punishment) and explain (how policy makers distribute resources) and in each case they make use of an elemental genre (Hyland, 2007). More often texts related to various contexts are utilized in class. It is better, however, to think of genres related to a specific context as forming a 'genre subset' (Devitt, 1991) that can be sequenced chronologically. Figure 1 below is illustrative.

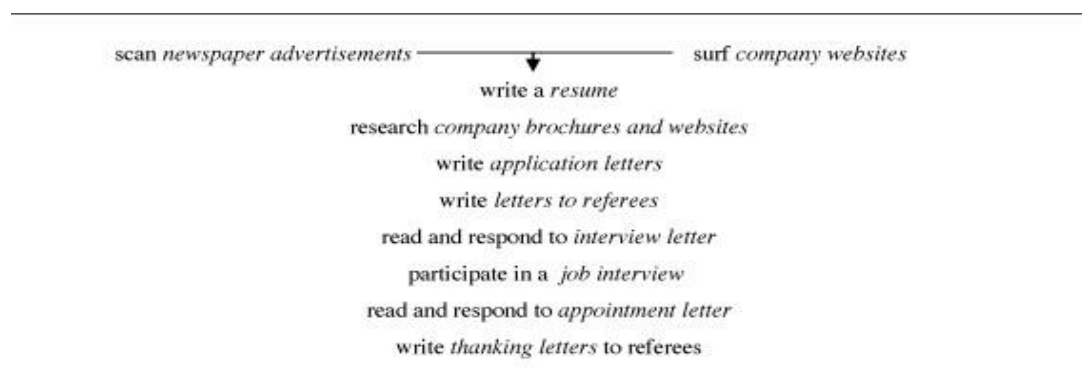


Figure 1. A linear sequence of genres for job seeking (Hyland, 2007).

Contributions of Grammatics to EFL Writing

The SFG proves to be useful as a tool for analyzing students' argumentative writing in a private university in Indonesia. Aunurrahman, Abdul Hamied and Emilia (2017) worked with thirty-six first-year tertiary EFL students and found that students have little control over the linguistic features of argumentative writing besides some limitations in their critical thinking and academic writing skills. Researchers suggested that explicit teaching of grammar is essential to improve student writing. They further argued that the genre-based approach is efficient because it exposes students to different types of texts including the argumentative type.

In a similar study, Emilia and Abdul Hamied (2015) explored the effectiveness of the systemic functional linguistic genre pedagogy (SFL GP) in student writing. The intervention lasted

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for one semester and conducted with 19 EFL Indonesian university students. They were taking a course on argumentative writing. The variety of texts used was of the following types: Exposition, Discussion and Response to Literary Works. The writers used a qualitative case study research design to collect data (students' writing collected from 16 meetings) and a questionnaire given in the last week of the treatment. Results showed that the intervention group outperformed the control group on the post-test.

Using interviews and class observation, AlHamdany (n.d.) interviewed and observed two teachers: an ESL teacher and a cockery teacher. The two teachers were instructed to apply the principles of the SFG model in class. Results showed that SFG was effective in improving students' communicative skills. In another study, Fearn and Farnan (2007) compared the performance of two groups instructed differently. With one group the SFG framework was used in class, whereas the other group was taught writing using the Identification, Description and Definition method (IDD). The intervention took five weeks and post-test results indicated that the SFG group's writing ability was improved using holistic writing rating.

A similar study by Wang (2013) aimed at comparing genre-based pedagogy to traditional approaches to writing. The researcher worked with 64 students and utilized a needs analysis to identify target genres such as business letters, cover letters, resumes, personal introductions, etc. To evaluate students' writing, Wang (2013) used holistic (structure, grammar and content) and analytic scores (cohesion, organization and task achievement and appropriacy). Post-test results showed that the genre-oriented group achieved better scores compared to the control group.

Using the genre-based pedagogy, Wu and Dong (2009) suggested a model for teaching narrative writing that starts with some analysis of narrative texts (orientation, complication, evaluation and resolution). After that, an authentic text was introduced as a model and to be discussed in class. Criteria suggested for choosing the model text were its generic structure, cohesion level and its lexico-grammatical features. In step 1, using a model text, the instructor asked students to answer the following questions: (1) Who are involved in the text? (2) What happened to them? (3) How did they solve the problem? and (4) What is the author's attitude towards them? The first two questions are related to orientation, whereas the other two are to

complication. Step 2 focuses on lexical and grammatical features (exercises emphasizing time expressions and the past tense) of the model text. The third and the fourth steps, on the other hand, are of writing (involves brain storming and peer discussion) and assessment. It is important to note that other similar studies were conducted to explore the efficiency of SFL in teaching other types of genres such as exposition (Fajriah, 2015) and discussion texts (Syarifah, 2016).

Discussion

One problem faces writing EFL instructors is that students do not know how their writing should reflect 'disciplinary knowledge' (Bartholomae, 1996). However, conducting a needs analysis to emphasize knowledge of specific genres using the genre-based approach proves to be beneficial to students (Wang, 2013). Further, as reported by previous research, many EFL writing teachers pay too much attention to grammatical mistakes when they correct students' writing with no consideration of content and social context (Sukandi, 2013). On the other hand, proponents of SFG attempt to relate form to function and social context (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). As a result, SFG can be employed in class to raise students' awareness of form, content and social function and to evaluate writing holistically (Wang, 2009; Fearn & Farnan, 2007). Moreover, utilizing SFG in class helps EFL teachers go beyond emphasizing students' knowledge of grammatical rules to applying such rules in a meaningful way to interact with others in different contexts (Feng, 2013; AlHamdany, n.d.). Additionally, many argue that instructors should understand that writing includes activities of practicing, receiving guidance and feedback from teachers. The last step (providing feedback) is extremely essential for any writing class (Graham, 2003). Thus, Hyland's (2007) 'genre cycle' includes all the essential activities suggested by Graham (2003).

Hyland (2007) further added that future studies will yield similar results because SFG in class proves to be explicit (making clear what should be learnt), systematic (a coherent approach focusing on both language and context), needs-based (course objectives are derived from students needs analysis), supportive (teachers play a supportive role), empowering (exposing students to the various patterns marking valued genre-specific texts), critical (providing students with the tools that help them challenge valued texts) and consciousness-raising (raising instructors' awareness of texts so they can confidently correct student writing).

Conclusion

Teaching grammar in an abstract way without any reference to social context and function may result in a 'deficit model' of grammar teaching (Myhill, 2005). As a consequence, many adopted SFG metalanguage model (grammatics) to teach L2 learners (Achugar, Schleppegrell, & Oter'za, 2007; Aguirre-Mun'oz, Park, Amabisca, & Boscardin, 2008; Brisk & Zisselsberger, 2010; Gebhard, Chen, & Britton, 2003). In other words, considering Halliday's (1999) register variables (field, tenor and mode) helps EFL educators analyze model authentic texts in terms of who did what to whom, in what circumstances, which new information is derived from the text, what social distance is noted between the interlocutors, etc. Such analysis is only one step in Hyland's (2007) genre cycle which is proposed for teaching writing.

Speaking of its advantages, Macken-Horarik (2008) argues that using SFG in a writing class encourages instructors as well as students to participate in various meaningful practices besides using SFG as a diagnostic tool to identify students' weaknesses and strengths. Results of a number of studies mentioned above showed that by emphasizing grammatics (genre-specific grammar) in class EFL instructors go beyond form to function or meaning.

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