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# TEACHING ISSUES

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## *Teacher Education in Changing Times: A Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) Perspective*

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■ Teachers' work is changing rapidly worldwide but is rarely a topic of sustained focus in the literature on teaching English as an additional language (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Despite this lack of robust scholarly attention, ESL, bilingual, and content specialists working in primary, secondary, and tertiary contexts contend with the demands of changing demographics and educational policies. For example, in the United States, No Child Left Behind legislation has highlighted the need to provide English language learners (ELLs) with access to content-based instruction and to make schools, especially those serving economically struggling communities, accountable for addressing the education of nondominant students. These goals, while on the surface laudatory, have been undercut by a lack of attention to teachers' professional development and commitment to quality native-language instruction (Darling Hammond, 1996; Lucas, 2010). Consequently, many teachers have had little or no preparation for providing the assistance that second language (L2) learners need to understand how academic language works in the types of texts they are routinely required to read and write in school (Hyland, 2003; Martin & Rose, 2003, 2008; Schleppegrell, 2004). This lack of attention to how academic English works in disciplinary texts has contributed to the persistent achievement gap between majority and minority students, a gap that only widens as students enter high school (Enright, this issue). In response, as Enright makes clear, there are calls for greater attention to academic language

development in literacy studies and teacher education. Therefore, this article describes how L2 literacy researchers and teacher educators in the United States are using Halliday's (1996, 2007) theory of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) to support ESL and content teachers in scaffolding disciplinary knowledge and explicitly teaching how academic English constructs disciplinary ways of knowing, doing, and being in school.

## SFL AND THE TEACHING OF ACADEMIC LITERACIES

SFL was first applied in education almost 30 years ago as a way of teaching academic literacies in Sydney, Australia. Educational linguists drew on Halliday's theories to support teachers in making the workings of school-based genres transparent for their students (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Martin & Rose, 2003, 2008). From an SFL perspective, teaching academic literacies involves critically apprenticing ELLs to using varieties of *school language*, or *registers*, by exploring how these registers (1) construct ideas (e.g., everyday versus disciplinary conceptions of phenomena and events); (2) manage and organize the flow of information depending on whether interactions take place orally, in writing, or through computer-mediated modes; and (3) enact relationships (e.g., differences of familiarity and status). These three functions, which Halliday calls *ideational*, *textual*, and *interpersonal*, operate simultaneously and offer teachers and students a contextual basis for critically analyzing how language varies in relation to who is communicating with whom, what they are communicating about, and the modes through which they are interacting (Halliday, 1996). In addition, SFL focuses on the range of linguistic choices available to students when they attempt to read and write genres they are likely to encounter only in school.

In operationalizing SFL into practice, educational linguists have developed the *curriculum cycle* (Macken-Horarik, 2002; Feez, 1998; Rothery, 1996). This cycle consists of three phases. The first phase, a deconstruction phase, involves developing learners' understanding of the subject matter, or field, and using the metalanguage of SFL to discuss explicitly how disciplinary meanings in selected texts are constructed and to establish familiarity with organizational and lexicogrammatical patterns typically found in disciplinary genres. In the second phase, a joint construction phase, the teacher leads a brainstorming session to choose a writing topic and then works with students to make genre/register knowledge visible. They work collaboratively to produce a text that further builds on students' developing understanding of both disciplinary knowledge and literacy

practices. This work includes, for example, comparing working outlines, noticing how texts build coherence, and debating aspects of tenor. The third phase is an independent phase in which students construct a text with less scaffolding. This phase also entails looking beyond the linguistic features of canonical texts and playing with unexpected ways of using language to construct novel meaning for particular purposes.

## **SFL IN TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

A number of applied linguists worldwide have taken up SFL-based pedagogy as a way of responding to the changing nature of teaching academic English and of supporting teachers in making disciplinary literacies more transparent and negotiable for students, especially ELLs (Derewianka, 1990; Feez, 1998; Gibbons, 2007; Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999; Knapp & Watkins, 2005; Macken-Horarik, 2009; Martin & Rose, 2003; 2008; Mohan, Leung, & Davison, 2001; Whittaker, O'Donnell, & McCabe, 2006). In the United States, there are three examples of inservice teacher education programs that drew on the scholarship of these educational linguists. First, Mary Schleppegrell and her colleagues collaborated with teachers in analyzing the academic language demands placed on students by state curricular frameworks and aligned exams in California. Collectively, they identified the genres teachers were required to teach and students were required to read and write in school. In addition, they made recommendations regarding how state frameworks could be revised and aligned to support all students, not just ELLs, in developing “pathways” to academic literacy across disciplines as they transitioned from elementary to secondary schools (Schleppegrell, 2003, p. 20). As part of this work, Schleppegrell and her colleagues developed the California History Project (CHP). This project introduced teachers to using SFL tools to deconstruct the meaning of history textbook passages and primary source documents. Achugar, Schleppegrell, and Oteíza (2007) report that CHP teachers planned lessons that incorporated SFL analyses and found that the approach enabled more in-depth discussion about and understanding of history, for language learners in particular. In summarizing the findings, they write that students whose teachers participated in CHP made significantly greater gains on the state exams than students whose teachers had not participated in the workshops, and ELLs were among those who showed the greatest benefits (Achugar, Schleppegrell, & Oteíza, 2007; see also Achugar & Schleppegrell, 2005; Aguirre-Muñoz, Park, Amabisca, & Boscardin, 2008; Fang, Schleppegrell, & Cox, 2006; Schleppegrell, &

Achugar, 2003; Schleppegrell, Achugar & Oteíza, 2004; Schleppegrell & de Oliveira, 2006).

A second SFL-based teacher education program is based in Massachusetts. This program, called the ACCELA Alliance (Access to Critical Content and English Language Acquisition), is a district/university partnership guided by the broad goal of providing sustained and reciprocal professional development to in-service teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and researchers by engaging in collaborative research regarding the academic literacy development of nondominant students attending urban schools. Participants use SFL tools to design curricular interventions aligned with state standards and student investments and to collect and analyze case study data (Gebhard, Willett, Jimenez, & Piedra, 2010). For example, second graders created a class blog to share and respond to each other's texts; third graders analyzed the genre of *show your thinking* in math as a way of preparing for the state exam; fourth graders analyzed the genre and register features in Puerto Rican children's literature to create their own narratives; and fifth graders researched the benefits of recess to make an argument for reinstating recess in letters to their principal (Gebhard, Habana Hafner, & Wright, 2004; Gebhard, Harman, & Seger, 2007; Shin, Gebhard, & Seger, 2010). Similar to the findings of Schleppegrell and her colleagues, ACCELA case studies suggest that participants developed a deeper understanding of disciplinary knowledge and associated language practices, both of which are essential components of teachers' knowledge base. The data also indicate that SFL-based pedagogy supported emergent ELL writers in analyzing and producing more coherent texts reflective of written as opposed to oral discourse (Gebhard & Martin, 2010; Gebhard et al., 2010).

A third program, also in Massachusetts, has produced similar findings (Brisk & Zisselsberger, 2010). Brisk and Zisselsberger (2010) report 11 teachers in Boston made gains in their ability to teach writing to bilingual students. These teachers volunteered to take part in the study after the group participated in a summer institute that introduced them to key SFL concepts as well as strategies for teaching specific genres, such as recounts, narratives, and explanations. Brisk and Zisselsberger (2010) report that the teachers developed greater confidence in teaching a variety of genres and ability to plan, enact, and revise writing lessons with specific text organization and language features in mind. However, they also note that teachers needed "constant reminders... [that] genres cannot be presented as a set of fixed rules... [because] context matters" and influences the language choices students make in producing a more expert text for an identified audience and purpose (p. 123).

## CRITIQUES OF SFL-BASED TEACHER EDUCATION

Critics of SFL-based pedagogy have raised a number of important issues, three of which are central to this discussion. The first is that SFL is too technical of be a viable framework for teacher education. For example, Bourke (2005) writes that SFL “seems to be ideally suited to language teaching and learning... [because] learners can take it out of the classroom and use in the ordinary situations of their daily lives...[However] many teachers find it is a veritable maze, very messy and complex” (p. 93). The second critique is that SFL pedagogy can lead to the static reproduction of text types rather than a critical analysis of disciplinary discourse (Luke, 1996). Last, as Hyland (2007) states, genre proponents have had to defend themselves against “the charge that genre instruction inhibits writers’ self expression and straightjackets creativity” (p. 152). In countering these critiques, a review of the literature suggests there is nothing inherently prescriptive, uncritical, or prosaic about an SFL-based theory of academic literacy development (Hyland, 2007; New London Group, 1996). However, what is increasingly becoming prescriptive, uncritical, and prosaic are package approaches to teachers’ professional development that do not support teachers in developing a knowledge of the language practices that construct their discipline and an ability to apprentice students to using these language practices critically as they transition from home to school and eventually to a rapidly changing and linguistically and culturally diverse labor market (McCarthy, 2008). This observation suggests the need for more a robust research agenda regarding how SFL as a comprehensive theory of language, learning, and context can be used to analyze the connections among sustained investments in teacher learning, changes in students’ use of academic literacy practices over time, and issues of equity in schooling.

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