TILTM 2022
Topical Issues of Linguistics and Teaching Methods in Business and Professional Communication

THE ROLE OF SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS IN PEDAGOGY: A CASE STUDY

Wayne Rimmer (a)*
*Corresponding author

(a) RUDN University, Moscow, Russia, wrimmer15@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to show how SFL principles, understood in a Hallidayean sense of how language creates meaning in context, can be applied to EAP. The tenet is that SFL has potential for EAP but it is under-applied. The qualitative methodology was a case-study of EAP postgraduate learners (n=12) in a UK university and the intervention method involved materials design; specifically adopting the existing materials to incorporate an SFL approach that was more sensitive to the participants' needs and context. The results, as indicated by participants' feedback and lesson observation, showed that the adapted material was received more positively and was more efficacious in terms of meeting learning outcomes. While SFL consists of much more than materials design, it is posited that this small-scale study signals support for a fuller incorporation of SFL within EAP. There are also implications for general ELT given that learners' needs should drive the curriculum.

Keywords: Functional, linguistics, systemic

1. Introduction

It is a truism that there is a mismatch between theory and practice in second language instruction. Even those fields of linguistics seemingly most pertinent to classroom instruction such as second language acquisition (SLA) often have little connection to the teaching process. Linguists tend to be removed from the realities of the classroom while teachers have little time or motivation to follow the research.

As argued in this paper, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) represents an exception. SFL, which is primarily associated with the work of Michael Halliday and neo-Praguean linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), has been influential on pedagogy, particularly English for Specific Purposes and its offshoots English for Academic Purposes and English for Occupational Purposes (Blok et al., 2020; Bond, 2020). This paper will explore the reasons and implications for this.

The following definition of SFL makes explicit the link to SLA:

A Systemic Functional approach looks at how language functions to make meaning in context of situation . . . A functional approach to the study of language offers insight into how language is learnt and how language eventually evolves into the adult language system (Webster, 2019, p. 35).

There are many aspects of this definition to unpack, chief among them 'meaning', which is understood rather differently from generative linguistics, the main paradigm before SFL. Essentially, meaning is not fixed but it is constructed in situ during the speech act (Malyuga & Orlova, 2018; Peluso, 2021; Rimmer, 2019).

Language becomes meaning making, a process that is recycled and refined each time there is a language interaction (Malyuga & Rimmer, 2021).

To illustrate, consider this exchange from professional English. The context is a business traveller checking into a hotel.

Receptionist: Will you be making a reservation in our restaurant this evening?

Guest: Maybe.

Analysed purely structurally, this is a question-answer routine with the answer left indeterminate. SFL analyses the language use in context in order to interpret the meaning. An important tenet in SFL is that a change in form is a change in meaning, so language choices are revealing. Note here that the receptionist uses the future continuous Will you be making...? rather than simple future, Will you make...? Why? Possibly, the more complex form is less direct and hence more polite. Also, this form often denotes future as a matter of course, as if there is an expectation the guest will dine at the restaurant, which amounts to gentle coercion. Note the guest's minimal response, Maybe. This does not suggest acceptance, especially if said with a fall-rise tone associated with non-commitment. This demonstrates how SFL supplies a richer, if fallible, exploration of speaker intention. As an example from written professional English, consider this excerpt from the website of Vimto, a soft fruit drink popular in the UK and elsewhere:

Vimto[1] has been doing things differently since 1908. And since then, our deliciously refreshing taste has been quenching thirsts in 73 countries worldwide. But where did it all start? And what happened along the way? Let's take a look.

In terms of register, this can be analysed from an SFL perspective as follows:

Field: It is an advertisement for a soft drink.

Tenor: The audience is the general public.

Mode: This is an online written text to persuade consumers.

Distinctive features of register include hyperbole (deliciously refreshing), pleonasm (countries worldwide) and the colloquial language (Let's take a look). None of this is random as advertising language is carefully crafted to target the consumer. The SFL stance is that all language is engineered to effect meaning. The role of the reader/listener goes beyond understanding the lexicogrammatical properties of the text; it requires relating the language to the context and making sense of it from this top-down perspective.

Halliday appreciates the significance of SFL to SLA but it has been left to other commentators to draw out the pedagogic implications. For example, Ellis (2016) shows how SFL principles can be mapped on to a lesson. Learners need to be guided through an approach that sees language as a system of choices which can be exploited for communicative purpose. It is important to know the rules but this is only a prerequisite for the real task of understanding how to draw on the language resource in real time communication. Probably the main difference between expert users of the language and non-expert users is that the former have a higher degree of automaticity in how they recognize and apply the manipulation of language.

While SFL is of wide relevance to ESL, the focus in this paper is EAP. This is motivated both by my personal experience as an EAP practitioner and also the status of the field. EAP has become mainstream with the internationalisation of education (Bruce, 2021) but it still maintains a relatively low profile in terms of research activity and curriculum innocation. In particular, there has not been enough discussion of methodology within EAP, leading to a variety of approaches. It is posited here that SFL offers a set of principles for EAP to maximise the learning experience.

2. Problem Statement

i. SFL is under-represented within EAP but has the potential to make pedagogy more effective.

3. Research Questions

ii. To what extent can SFL inform teaching EAP?

---

[1] https://www.vimto.co.uk/our-heritage/

4. Purpose of the Study

The pedagogical focus of this study is the teaching of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and how SFL can apply to this context.

5. Research Methods

The methodology was a case study of how materials could be adapted following broad principles of SFL. I first adapted the materials and then taught them to the class online (the research was carried out during the pandemic.)

The research participants consisted of 12 postgraduate students (6 female, 6 male; 6 Kazakhs, 6 Saudis) studying English for Academic Purposes (EAP) online at a UK university. Their aim was to increase their language proficiency to meet the requirements to enter a range of MA programmes at the university. The course length was 150 real hours over 10 weeks and, in line with the assessment, the programme was academic-skills based. An online coursebook, Oxford EAP (De Chazal & McCarter, 2012) determined the core language and skills syllabus. Learners' entrance level was B1 and they needed to meet B2 criteria on the four skills to progress. Writing was their weakest skill and on a macro-level they found it challenging to structure text according to an academic genre. Specifically, they produced introductory paragraphs which were under-developed in terms of content and coherence. They were motivated to write in class because they preferred detailed feedback on their writing as this was tailored to their individual needs.

The method was an intervention, specifically modifying the course materials in line with SFL and then teaching the material myself in class. The existing material aimed to scaffold learners' writing of the introduction to an academic essay. The approach was heavily based on genre analysis, i.e., the classification of text types by their communicative function and shared characteristics (Swales, 1990). Here, the genre was academic introduction and the method was to provide a model text to be analysed by students and subsequently used as a reference for their own writing in a later lesson. There was a three-step procedure moving from analysis of paragraph structure as a whole to focus on an individual element (the thesis statement) to consideration of content (main ideas). The first two activities constituted top-down analysis of the genre as they matched rhetorical function, e.g., definition, to the input. The third activity involved predicting the direction of the whole essay based on the content of the introduction.

The aim was judged appropriate for the participants because they would be expected to write academic introductions in their MAs and a scaffolded approach, in line with a cognitive epistemology of how language is mentally organised (Croft & Cruse, 2004), supported their preference for learning activities to be highly structured. Also, the reading into writing method is widely adopted in EAP courses, e.g., the classic Jordan (2001) textbook, and was familiar to them.

However, the material as it stood contained two flaws, which could be addressed through closer adherence to SFL principles. The first was that the task lacked context, with students immediately expected to read and engage with a topic that has not been introduced. Context is a term used widely but often imprecisely (Malmkjær & Williams, 1998) so here it is understood in Roth's (2010, p. 3) sense of 'background understanding and shared meaning', which can be pedagogically realized by making the

topic explicit to my learners at the pre-task stage. Context is absolutely key within SFL and should be explicit if meaningful language is to emerge. The second issue was that the material is couched in terms of individual activity. The participants had different capabilities and profiles so collaboration promoted the shared learning experience advocated in social-constructivism (Secore, 2017) that facilitates peer learning and a differentiated teaching approach, fully conducive with SFL.

The original material made no use of technologies other than populating the answer fields so digital tools were incorporated with the dual purpose of setting the context and encouraging collaboration. There is a danger (Kirkwood & Price, 2014) that technology is included for its own sake rather than to enhance learning but there are copious empirical studies of effective applications, for example in pronunciation teaching (O'Brien et al., 2018). Also, the participants were comfortable with technology and enjoyed its classroom use. Thus, the lesson began by sharing a photograph of ancient Rome.

As stated earlier, I was the instructor of the class and after I showed the photo, students were asked to identify the city (Rome) and civilization (the Roman Empire) and give reasons why this once dominant force subsided, leading into the topic of power-shifting on the international stage. As attested by the classic resource Wright (1989), images are extensively used in general EFL for a variety of purposes, including setting the context. The application of images to EAP is less pronounced, possibly because the content is drier, but the participants shared a visual learning style and frequently distributed their own photographs.

Next followed a poll gauging whether students agreed or disagreed with the essay title ('The world order is changing rapidly…'). After reflecting on the essay title and voting individually, participants then viewed the results and compared/discussed their responses in breakout rooms. There is debate (Davies et al., 2020) as to the quality of communication in breakout rooms as compared to group work in face-to-face classes, where the instructor can observe all interaction simultaneously, but these participants used breakout rooms actively. In managing the plenary discussion, I was conscious of cultural considerations, Kazakhs and Saudis have worldviews which may not coincide with the assumptions of western coursebooks, as topics with political overtones can be sensitive. Questions such as 'Which countries are used as examples of colonial powers?' were inserted into the chatbox for students to answer. The rationale behind the chatbox was that this medium encourages more interaction and more spontaneous learning (Jenks, 2014). For example, students can ask follow-up questions either in general or private chat. Certainly, these participants used the chat function extensively and generally find it a powerful resource to assess understanding.

To assess the efficacy of the revised material, two mechanisms were used: a feedback instrument and observation of my lesson by a third party. The questionnaire consisted of statements on a Likert scales and examples were 'I understand the purpose of this material' and 'I was able to interact with other students'. A trained observer also saw the lesson live and provided oral and written feedback post-lesson.

6. Findings

Evidence from the coursebook material, a feedback instrument, the lesson observation of my class and the learners' subsequent performance in the coursebook exercises, suggest that the lesson was more effective through the application of SFL principles. Feedback from students and the observer was positive

and connected to a deeper level of learning and more engagement generally. For example, the question 'The material and activities gave me a better understanding of the reading paragraph in the coursebook' achieved a mean of 4.2 and a mode of 4 (from 5). Participants felt better prepared for the lesson because the context was fuller.

The key findings are presented below:

Participants felt more empowered if the aims of the lesson were explained beforehand (a context for learning).

They needed an appropriate level of challenge. Too easy and they turned off; too difficult and they were frustrated.

Participants enjoyed interacting with other students and considered this to make learning more effective.

There was a feeling that 'learning by doing', as one participant phrased it, was preferable to 'learning by seeing'.

They found it easier to assimilate new vocabulary when there was a fuller context.

The notion of grammar as a system of meaning needs some inculcation.

Students felt EAP to be rather a dry field so attempts to personalise were appreciated.

Participants were critical of the existing materials and welcomed their adaptation.

The materials were not seen as primary in the learning process. The role of the teacher was more important.

Space does not permit full commentary on each of these findings but, to reiterate, the findings suggest SFL principles as realised through the adapted materials were positively received. However, SFL is not an instant solution. For example, there is resistance to the notion of grammar as a system of meaning, possibly because there is such a long tradition of teaching grammar proscriptively and didactically.

As additional commentary, less related to SFL but still of interest to pedagogy, success in negotiating the reading seems to have been less dependent on critical thinking. Indeed, one response '?' in the feedback suggests learners' confusion over what constitutes critical thinking; an uncertainty echoed in commentators' wariness of the nebulousness of the concept (Ding & Bruce, 2017). As a teacher, I was disappointed in the criticality evidenced in the breakout room discussions, for instance, one group spent much of the allocated time discussing the location of the image rather than tackling the deeper conceptual issues. In retrospect, I needed to pose guided questions to structure the discussion so that it became dialogic in Freire's (1970) sense of building meaning through interaction. This would also prepare learners for the turn-taking skills assessed in their end-of-course seminar speaking exam.

The evidence also indicates only a moderate connection experienced between the material and learner's future MA study. The mean rating on this criterion was 3, with one learner commenting 'I'm doing IT so no'. The problem in EAP of addressing students with multiple disciplines, as in this class, is typically addressed through providing generic academic skills applicable to any field (Blok et al., 2020). In future lessons I needed to make this skills-based approach more explicit to learners, for example, by beginning each lesson with a presentation of the aims and learning outcomes.

7. Conclusion

To summarise, this small-scale study aimed to show how SFL principles, understood in a Hallidayean sense of as how language creates meaning in context, can be applied to EAP. The tenet is that SFL has potential for EAP but it is under-applied. Using a case-study of EAP postgraduate learners (n=12) in a UK university, the intervention method involved materials design; specifically adopting the existing materials to incorporate an SFL approach that was more sensitive to the participants' needs and context. The results, as indicated by participants' feedback and lesson observation, showed that the adapted material was received more positively and was more efficacious in terms of meeting learning outcomes. While SFL consists of much more than materials design, it is posited that this small-scale study signals support for a fuller incorporation of SFL within EAP. There are also implications for general ELT given that learners' needs should drive the curriculum. Indeed, the main message of this paper is that SFL is empowering to learners and hence justifies consideration in the selection of materials and the task cycle. The good news for practitioners is that SFL often requires a tweaking of your approach rather than a complete departure.

Acknowledgments

References

Blok, S., Lockwood, R. B., & Frendo, E. (2020). *The 6 principles for exemplary teaching of English learners: Academic and other specific purposes*. TESOL International Association.

Bond, B. (2020). *Making language visible in the university*. Multilingual Matters.

Bruce, I. (2021). Towards an EAP without borders: Developing knowledge, practitioners, and communities. *International Journal of English for Academic Purposes: Research and Practice, 2021*, 23–36.

Croft, W., & Cruse, D. A. (2004). *Cognitive linguistics*. Cambridge University Press.

Davies, J. A., Davies, L. J., Conlon, B., Emerson, J., Hainsworth, H., & McDonough, H.G. (2020). Responding to COVID-19 in EAP contexts: a comparison of courses at four Sino-foreign universities. *International Journal of TESOL Studies, 2020*(2). TESOLUNION.ORG

De Chazal, E., & McCarter, S. (2012). *Oxford EAP: Upper-intermediate/B2*. Oxford University Press.

Ding, A., & Bruce, I. (2017). *The English for academic purposes practitioner: Operating on the edge of academia*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Ellis, R. (2016). Language teaching materials as workplans: an SFL perspective. In Tomlinson, B. (ed.) *SLA research and materials development for language learning*. Routledge.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2014). *Halliday's introduction to functional grammar* (4th ed.). Routledge.

Jenks, C. (2014). *Social Interaction in Second Language Chat Rooms*. Edinburgh University Press.

Jordan, R. (2001). *Academic Writing Course*. Collins ELT.

Kirkwood, A., & Price, L. (2014). Technology-enhanced learning and teaching in higher education: what is "enhanced" and how do we know? A critical literature review. *Learning, Media and Technology*, *39*(1). 6–36.

Malmkjær, K., & Williams, J. (1998). *Context in language learning and language understanding*. Cambridge University Press.

Malyuga, E. N., & Rimmer, W. (2021). Making sense of "buzzword" as a term through co-occurrences analysis. *Heliyon, 7*(6), e07208. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07208

Malyuga, E. N., & Orlova, S. N. (2018). *Linguistic pragmatics of intercultural professional and business communication*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-68744-5

O'Brien, M. Derwing, T., Cucchiarini, C., Hardison, D., Mixdorff, H., Thomson, R., Strik, H., Levis, J., Munro, M., Foote, J., & Levis, G. (2018). Directions for the future of technology in pronunciation research and teaching. *Journal of Second Language Pronunciation*, *4*(2), 182–207.

Peluso, M. (2021). The functional approach, semiotics and professional discourse. *Training, Language and Culture, 5*(2), 62-72. https://doi.org/10.22363/2521-442X-2021-5-2-62-72

Rimmer, W. (2019). Questioning practice in the EFL classroom. *Training, Language and Culture, 3*(1), 53-72. https://doi.org/10.29366/2019tlc.3.1.4

Roth, W.-M. (2010). *Language, learning, context: Talking the talk.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203853177

Secore, S. (2017). Social constructivism in online learning: Andragogical influence and the effectual educator. *e-mentor, 3*(70), 4–9. http://doi.org/10.15219/em70.1300

Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge University Press.

Webster, J. (2019). Key Terms in the SFL Model. In G. Thompson, W. Bowcher, L. Fontaine, & D. Schönthal (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Systemic Functional Linguistics* (Cambridge Handbooks in Language and Linguistics) (pp. 35-54). Cambridge University Press.

Wright, A. (1989). *Pictures for language learning*. Cambridge University Press.