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English Language Teacher Education in Changing Times: A Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) Perspective

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Abstract

There is a dramatic change in English language teacher education caused by the process of globalization, linguistic diversity, educational policies as a result of accountability, and the renewed focus on academic literacy. English language teachers are likely to assist the learners acquire the expertise of handling complicated disciplinary texts, but they do not necessarily receive clear instruction in the way language creates sense in educational situations. Based on the work of Halliday in his Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach, this paper presents the position that language knowledge of teachers would be a core tenet of teacher preparation. The SFL views language as a means of meaning-making and offers analytical resources - ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunction- that can help teachers open up the linguistic requirements of academic texts and render them instructable. The paper incorporates a qualitative, SFL informed design to examine how English language teachers can be equipped to analyze and teach academic language based on the SFL principles. Investigating teacher learning activities and providing examples of classroom textual work, the research proves that SFL-based pedagogy has the advantage of raising the awareness of teachers about the role grammar, discourse, and genre play in the classroom. The results indicate that the inclusion of SFL in teacher education enables teachers to facilitate access of learners to academic English more efficiently, facilitates reflective teaching practices, and equitable education. The article is concluded with implications of SFL-informed teacher education to curriculum design, professional development, and research in English language education in the future.

Keywords: English language teacher education; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Halliday; academic literacy; teacher professional development

1. Introduction

The English language teacher education is placed in the context of the fast paced global, social and pedagogical environment (Johnson 2016). Other processes which include globalization, transnational mobility and the spread of English as a global lingua franca have significantly transformed classrooms across the world. The modern teachers of English language find themselves more and more operating in multi-linguistic and multi-cultural settings where students arrive with a wide variety of linguistic repertoires, educational experiences and sociocultural identities (Colliander and Bilingualism 2020). Meanwhile, education systems throughout the world have put an increased focus on academic success, standardized testing and accountability. Such advances have greatly changed the role of English language teachers and heightened the language requirements on the teachers and learners. English language teachers in most educational settings can no longer be charged with the responsibility of building communicative competence in the learners in normal or conversational English (Celce- Murcia and learning 2007). Instead, they are becoming more and more likely to assist in the involvement of the learners in the academically valued types of language in the school subjects, such as science, history, and mathematics. Studying success goes hand-in-hand with the skills of learners to perceive and write complex texts, engage in discipline-based discourses, as well as show the knowledge based on linguistic challenging tasks like essays, reports, and exams. Therefore, the English language teaching has gone beyond the communicative fluency and has incorporated teaching academic literacy and disciplinary language practices (Ross and Ziemke 2016).

This has raised a dire gap in teacher education. Although most teacher preparation programs train in general pedagogy, classroom management, and assessment practices, they tend to have little support in shaping the explicit knowledge that teachers have on how academic English lingo works (Bunch 2013). The teachers are often put in a position to deliver the academic language without having been trained with the theoretical instruments that they will need to analyze the texts, demonstrate the language patterns, or support the meaning-making processes of learners. Consequently, the academic language is normally perceived as tacit knowledge, which is assumed and not an explicit object of training. This has become especially problematic to students with linguistic diversity backgrounds, such as English language learners and students representing minoritized linguistic groups, to which schooling practices may not be available in the dominant language.

The orthodox forms of English language teaching have been inclined towards the teaching of skills, comprising of; reading comprehension skills, vocabulary building, or grammatical correctness at sentence level (Aslam 2006). These approaches may be pedagogically valuable; however, they often do not deal with the issue of how language works to make meaning in context, especially in an academic and disciplinary context. Students can be taught to respond to questions of understanding or recognize grammatical forms without knowing how texts construct knowledge, locate readers and achieve certain social aims (Pardo 2004). As a result, learners can find it difficult to arrive at the meanings that are present in the academic texts as well as to write texts that meet the expectation of the institution. To meet these demands, applied linguistic and language education scholars have increasingly resorted to the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

developed by Halliday as a theoretical and pedagogical approach that could meet the language demands of schooling (Gebhard 2010). SFL is a concept which was developed by M.A.K. Halliday and it views language as a dynamic resource of meaning-making, and it is influenced by the social context. Language selections are functional (at least in an SFL sense) given that speakers and writers have the desire to have a meaning in whichever situation. This perspective is closely related to the educational aims, which focus on a deeper meaning, communication, and social involvement, as opposed to decontextualized forms of language.

One of the major contributions of SFL is its theory of metafunctions, which describes how language can and does do many functions at once (Martin 2016). Ideational metafunction helps the users of language to structure experience, describe processes and actors and build logical connections. The interpersonal metafunction enables speakers and writers to perform social relations, articulate feelings, and bargain with the readers or listeners. The textual metafunction uses meanings to categorize the messages into coherent and cohesive meaning that fits the specific context and genres. All of these metafunctions can be used to offer a holistic theory of the way that academic texts operate and the construction of meaning in educational discourse (Hoang 2021).

In the educational field, SFL has been extensively used in the study of academic literacy, genre based pedagogy and classroom discourse (Brisk 2022). It has been shown that explicit instruction based on SFL can facilitate knowledge of disciplinary text among the learner and improve their capacity of writing academically valued texts. Notably, the SFL-based pedagogy focuses on bringing language to view and teachability to help confront the notion of deficit in the learners and enhance equitable access to the powerful forms of knowledge. Nevertheless, the systematic integration of SFL in the education of English language teachers is not evenly reflected, despite the abundance of collected pedagogical advantages of this tool on learners (Yasuda 2017).

SFL in teacher education provides a conceptual method towards acquisition of language awareness and pedagogical competency in teachers (Troyan, Herazo et al. 2022). Studying how to analyze texts using an SFL perspective allows teachers to gain more insight into the ways in which grammatical decisions help achieve particular meanings and how these meanings are different in different genres, fields, and social set-ups. This kind of knowledge allows teachers to be past intuitive or implicit explanations of language and be able to present meaningful guidance to learners in an explicit way. In addition, SFL provides teachers with a common metalanguage that mediates theory and practice, facilitating reflective teaching and making an informed pedagogical choice (Accurso, Gebhard et al. 2021).

It is based on the earlier works that suggest the importance of SFL-based pedagogy, but examines in this article the application of the Systemic Functional Linguistics and its applicability to English language teacher education in shifting eras (Gebhard 2010). The main purpose of the research is to show how SFL can be logically implemented in teacher education courses to increase the ability of the teachers to teach academic English in an explicit, critical, and equitable manner.

2. Literature Review

The studies on EFL teaching practice have always reiterated that it is important to educate teachers to be able to react appropriately to the ever-growing variety of learners (Poblete 2019). The multi-

lingual classrooms are the result of the globalization and mass immigration where learners have different levels of English proficiency and various levels of experience of academic discourse (Lankiewicz 2024). In this context, researchers hold that teacher education programs should prepare English language teachers with knowledge and skills that they need to facilitate the linguistic and academic growth of the learners in both aspects. Nevertheless, even with this acknowledgment, there is significant amount of literature which suggests that the issue of language itself is implicitly addressed in the course of teacher education where the premise is that teachers already have adequate levels of linguistic knowledge to facilitate the interaction of learners with academic texts (Freeman and Johnson 1998). This assumption has been heavily criticized especially in situations where English is the second or foreign language. Research has revealed that several educators believe that they are not ready to teach about how academic English works on the discourse, genre, and grammar levels. Rather, educators tend to make guesses or use prescriptive guidelines that might be insufficient to meet the demands of making sense in academics. Consequently, students will not have the chance to grasp how language options play a role in producing meaning in various disciplinary settings, which confirms educational disparities and restricts access to communication forms that are respected in academia.

Systemic Functional Linguistics has optimally developed as a powerful theoretical reaction to these dilemmas (Fontaine, Bartlett et al. 2013). Halliday developed SFL to rethink the idea of language as a social semiotic system and the functional relationship of the meaning, language and context. In contrast with structural or generative approaches, SFL puts more emphasis on the uses of language and the social interactions that language achieves (Troyan, Herazo et al. 2022). This school of thought has led to SFL becoming especially prominent in the field of educational linguistics, where the role of language in creating knowledge is the key to teaching and learning. Since the groundwork of the applied linguist is begun by Halliday, various educational texts such as classroom talk, textbooks, and student writing can be analyzed with the help of SFL. Studies under this school of thought have indicated that the academic texts of all disciplines are marked by repetitive patterns of meaning achieved through the use of definite grammatical and discourse decisions (Groom 2005). To illustrate, scientific literature tends to be based on technical nominal groupings and relational processes, whereas historical literature tends to be based on grammatical metaphor and evaluative language to build an interpretation of past events. SFL offers a methodological account of the identification of these patterns and the explanation of their roles that makes academic language be visible and teachable (Coffin and Donohue 2012).

Genre-based pedagogy is closely related to SFL and has extensively been used in the educational field to help learners to develop academic literacy (Lo, Jeong et al. 2018). Genre based instructions focus on the direct instruction of text types, their social uses, and their language features. Studies have continued to show that genre based instruction based on SFL can help learners in both reading comprehension and writing proficiency especially among learners with linguistically diverse backgrounds. Notably, these strategies dispute deficit views by placing students in the role of ones who can master the field of academic discourse with proper scaffolding. In the area of teacher education, SFL-informed practices were proven to have a significant positive impact on the knowledge of the teachers regarding academic language and it was

also capable of reshaping the pedagogical practices of the teachers. Research indicates that working with the fundamental SFL principles such as transitivity, mood, modality, appraisal, and thematic structure, teachers gain a more subtle insight into how texts go about constructing experience, in the process of, and how they arrange information. Such awareness of language helps teachers to get out of the surface-level instruction and to create lessons that clearly help learners to engage in the meaning-making processes. Additionally, SFL is closely correlated with the equity-based educational objectives. SFL de-institutionalizes the linguistic practices of institutional authority and educational performance by giving teachers and learners a common metalanguage to use to discuss the language. Instead of considering academic language as a silent practice that can be only followed by particular learners, SFL-based learning approach makes these practices clear and open to everyone. It has been proposed that this explicitness is especially helpful with learners who have traditionally been pushed to the periphery of the educational system, such as second language learners and low socio-economic students (Lin 2007).

Although the research on the use of SFL as a source of informed pedagogy is increasingly emphasized, its adoption in the mainstream English language teacher education is uneven. Other teacher education courses present the concepts of SFL in a superficial manner and do not offer possibilities of getting involved in it or practicing it. Otherwise SFL can be seen as being too technical or linguistically complicated and therefore is resisted by teacher educators and trainees (Gebhard 2010). These issues bring to the fore the necessity of the research that will prove how SFL can be integrated into teacher education in a systematic and pedagogical manner that will be comprehensible, meaningful, and directly applicable to classroom practice. To address these gaps, this study aims at filling in the literature by demonstrating how the study of Systemic Functional Linguistics proposed by Halliday could be systematically integrated into the teaching of the English language. The article illustrates the ways in which teacher education can go beyond the implicit approach to language and provide teachers with both theoretical and instructional resources that enable them to meet the linguistic requirements of modern classrooms by emphasizing the practical application of SFL to teaching English (Troyan, Herazo et al. 2022).

3. Methodology

The research design employed in this study is a qualitative, interpretive study that is based on the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) of Halliday (Fernandez 2018). The qualitative method is suitable when analyzing the evolving knowledge of teachers about language and pedagogy because it gives the opportunity to investigate the experiences, thoughts, and processes of meaning-making of the participants in-depth. Based on SFL, the methodology will be used to explore how teachers of English language interact with linguistic concepts and how linguistic interactions influence their academic language consciousness and pedagogical choices in teacher education (Andrews 2001).

3.1 Research Context and Participants

The research falls within a tertiary degree English language teacher education program that incorporates academic literacy and language awareness professional development course. The members include pre-service and in-service English language teachers who were enrolled in the course voluntarily. This heterogeneous population makes it possible to study the SFL involvement in the context of different levels of teaching

experience. The participants are a reflection of the multilingual realities of the contemporary English language teaching environments, as they are representatives of various educational, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. This kind of diversity offers a diverse context through which the researcher can explore teacher conceptualization and application of academic language knowledge within various instructional contexts.

3.2 Data Collection

The different qualitative sources were used to collect data in order to get depth and triangulation. These sources will consist of course materials that are aimed to familiarize with the concepts of SFL, reflective journals that have been written by teachers who participated, transcripts of discussions at workshops, and selected scholarly books that were used in teacher training courses. Reflective journals can give understanding on how teachers change their understanding of SFL and their concept of the pedagogical relevance of SFL, whereas workshop discussion can record their collaborative meaning-making and professional dialogues. The presence of sample academic texts allows analyzing the application of SFL tools to the real educational materials by teachers. To achieve the developmental change in the language awareness of teachers, the data were gathered throughout the course.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis of data is done based on major constructs of the Systemic functional linguistics as developed by Halliday and special focus is given to the three meta functions of language namely, ideational, interpersonal and textual. The reflective and textual analysis of the teachers are considered to determine the understanding of the experiential, interpersonal, and textual meanings of them as a participant, processes, and text, respectively. This meta functional framework allows systematic analysis of the ways in which teachers learn to decode and implement there concepts of SFL in pedagogical situations. The theoretical background of SFL and the subject of the study, teaching language to teachers, the analytical approach is in good accordance with the fact that the analytical approach entailed foregrounding meaning and not isolated forms.

4. Analysis and Discussion

It is observed in the analysis that the long-term practice of using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) contributes greatly to the awareness of English language teachers on how academic English constructs meaning in the learning texts. In data sources, the participants developed an increased capacity to go beyond the superficial aspects of the language and to address the texts as resources of meaning making influenced by the disciplinary and social contexts. The change in this aspect could be traced in the reflection of teachers, discussions at workshops, and analyses of texts, which altogether reflect how SFL encourages the transition to skills-based teaching and a more explicit and meaning-focused type of pedagogy. On the ideational level, teachers gained a more accurate vision of the way the academic texts construct the experience in patterns of processes, participants, and circumstances. Value Participants were taught to recognize how varieties of processes of representation of knowledge about discipline in terms of material processes, relational processes, and mental processes. To illustrate this point, in the study of scientific and historical texts, educators found that in order to develop abstract and generalized knowledge, relational processes and nominalization were widely used. Such concepts as

industrialization, globalization or economic growth were known to be grammatical metaphors, which reduce complicated processes, to nominal ones. According to teachers, before working with SFL, they used to be aware of such features intuitively but could not describe them in a systematic way to learners. With the help of SFL, these linguistic patterns could be seen and learned, which allows the teachers to scaffold the understanding of the dense academic texts in learners more effectively.

On an interpersonal level, the teachers showed greater sensitivity to the positions of the academic texts in placing the readers and building specific relations between writers and audiences. Their modality, evaluative language, and authorial stance analysis showed that academic texts are not an unbiased reflection of facts but are influenced by the decisions of the writers who convey to a certain extent the level of assurance, compulsion, and assessment. The respondents observed that knowing interpersonal meanings enabled them to assist the learners in critically reading texts through recognizing the way a claim is fortified, withheld or conformed to disciplinary democracies. This consciousness has become an important element of pedagogical transformation in that teachers started to shift beyond their requests to students to find information to their requests to engage in critical reading and interpretation. These results are consistent with the focus of SFL on language as a tool of performing social relationships and help to create critical academic literacy. The textual metafunction also helped the teachers to know how they can reach the coherence and cohesion in academic writing. By studying thematic structure and flow of information, the participants were taught how writers arrange meanings in order to direct the reader through complicated arguments. Teachers found out patterns of thematic development in academic texts, where themes tend to refer to already presented information to provide coherence. This knowledge helped the teachers to give clear instructions of how to structure written documents especially to learners who have problems with structuring long academic documents. The participants said that they felt more confident when it comes to teaching writing because SFL gave them tangible means to explain abstract concepts like coherence and flow.

In all three metafunctions, one of the main results of the analysis is the contribution of SFL to the provision of a common metalanguage that teachers use to talk about language and pedagogy. This metalanguage helped to reconcile the differences between the linguistic theory and the practice in the classroom to enable teachers to make pedagogical choices more effectively and be able to look critically at their teaching methods. Instead of using intuition or prescriptive rules, teachers used SFL ideas to defend their teaching practices and fit teaching to the needs of learners. This is an indication of a greater shift in professional identity as teachers also took themselves as not only instructors of language but also language analysts, and arbiter of academic language. In general, the results indicate that teacher education that is informed with SFL facilitates the repositioning of English language teaching towards the explicit teaching of meaning-making. This is in line with the equity-based pedagogy advocacy because exposing academic language increases accessibility to powerful discourse among learners. The review has shown that SFL is not a pure linguistic theory, but rather an effective pedagogic model that can change the education of English language teachers in the evolving era.

5. Conclusion

This paper has presented the argument that the English language teacher education should be responsive to the new educational demands by anticipating explicit knowledge about academic language that the teachers maintain. With the growing number of multilingual classrooms and academic expectations, English language teachers must facilitate the use of complex disciplinary texts by the learners. The Systemic Functional Linguistics developed by Halliday proposes a thorough theory and pedagogical concept of overcoming these issues by formulating the notion of language as a source of meaning-making and provides methodical means to understand how academic texts are used to create knowledge, relationships, and coherence. The results of this research indicate that the SFL approach to educating English language teachers helps improve the professional competence as well as the pedagogical confidence of teachers. By working with SFL metafunctions, teachers gain a clearer insight into how academic English works out in other academic disciplines and are better positioned to make linguistic expectations clear to the learner. This clear emphasis on the language can be used in ensuring fair accessibility to academic literacy especially to the linguistically diverse learners who might otherwise be marginalized due to the implicit method of instruction. In the case of teacher education programs, the findings highlight the importance of getting past intuitive or the skills-based models of language teaching but instead systematically integrate the SFL-informed pedagogy in curricula and professional development programs. Further studies can also be done on the long-term effect of SFL based teacher education in different setups, and this study would add to the more inclusive and effective English language education even in a changing times.

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