

SFL: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF EFL WRITING AT UPPER-INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

*Patricia Veronica MEEHAN
(Universidad Nacional de Córdoba)*

1. Introduction

One of the most frequent worries facing upper-intermediate EFL teachers lies in the fact that even though many students reaching this level are capable of producing pieces of writing which are almost error free, they are, at the same time, often incapable of making their written texts effective and meaningful. The great challenge for teachers at this level is how to turn these “accurate” writers into effective ones. Experience has demonstrated that the sole application of a structuralist approach is not enough. Halliday and Hassan (1976) claim that a text is not just a string of well-formed sentences, and that it should be best thought of not as a grammatical unit at all, but rather as a unit of a different kind: **a semantic unit**.

How can teachers working in the classroom actually help those students who despite their accurate language, write texts which hardly ever produce any effect on the reader; texts which say a lot but hardly mean anything? It is here that SFL comes into play. I am convinced of the feasibility of applying SFG in the ESL/EFL classroom and of the pedagogical usefulness of making learners see grammar as a network of interrelated systems, each containing a set of options from which the speaker selects according to the meanings he or she wishes to make. It is worth pointing out, though, that at this level the learner is by no means expected to master SFG but simply to be familiar with the staples of the theory.

As regards how teachers should go about it, I believe it would be a good idea to begin by defining what SFG mainly focuses on. For instance, Graham Lock in “Functional English Grammar” states that the focus of this approach is usually on the appropriateness of a form for a particular communicative purpose in a particular context (1996). Bearing this concept in mind will help students never to lose sight of language as source of making meanings with a particular purpose in a particular context.

The purpose of this paper is to share a “Student’s Descriptive Functional Guide” (SDFG) (see appendix) I have designed and whose main aim is that once the learners are familiarized with the three levels of meanings or metafunctions in Systemic Functional Grammar: IDEATIONAL, INTERPERSONAL AND TEXTUAL, they can make use of the SDFG to analyse their own written production from a functional perspective.

2. Turning Accurate Writers into Efficient Ones: Writing Speeches Effectively.

Persuasive speeches is a writing task which is becoming more and more common as a requisite for both international exams and course syllabuses. As the name suggests, the communicative aim of a persuasive speech is precisely to persuade the audience of the speaker’s point of view. Therefore, not only *what* the student chooses to say in his/her speech, but *how* he/she says it is vital to succeed. When writing persuasive speeches students are asked to argue for or against a certain topic in such a way that they end up convincing the audience of their own view. Nevertheless, the sole use of accurate structures does not ensure that their communicative aim will be fulfilled. Therefore, the first thing teachers should do is train their students in identifying what type of choices comprise the register which is most functional for each type of writing, in this case, what recognizable characteristics are expected to be found in effective *persuasive speeches*. A most effective method of training students in identifying such characteristics is awareness raising. The aim of the SDFG is precisely to raise learners’ awareness as to what features typically characterize each type of writing.

3. Analysis of Sample Speeches Using the SDFG

These two sample speeches have been selected from a corpus of 46 speeches written by Argentinian upper-intermediate students ranging in age from 16-17 years old. As part of their preparation to sit for English B (subject requirement on offer for the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program), students were asked to write a speech on the following topic: “*You take part in a school debate on the motion: MONEY IS THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL. Write your speech either agreeing or disagreeing with this motion.*” (350-400 words)

Sample A constitutes an example of an inaccurate but effective writer, while sample B constitutes an example of a more accurate but far less effective one. The students are made to make a descriptive analysis of the three metafunctions in each of the speeches. The aim of this

functional descriptive analysis is to make them discover, on the one hand, how the careful selection of choices which are functional for the speech genre will result in an effective piece of writing, and on the other, how accurate use of language in itself does not ensure “successful writing”.

4. Analysis of choices at the Ideational Level

The dominant Processes, Participants and Circumstances in a speech, will largely vary depending on the nature of the topic. In the case of the topic “Money the Root of all Evil”, we could say that it will most likely require Relational Processes since the speaker has to argue, precisely, whether money **is** or **is not** the root of evil. The author of sample A (an efficient student writer) makes use of this type of processes in a number of instances. However, if we analyse the choices in sample B, we will be able to see that the first two choices are Material Processes rather than Relational ones: “money can **buy** almost everything...”/”money **can’t buy** evil...” is already infelicituous, and thus makes the logical development of the argument somehow confusing from the very beginning.

Analysis of Choices at the Ideational Level

Sample A:

Human nature and power are the roots of all evil.

Token+ 1 Pr: Identifying + Value

Money is not the root of all evil.

Token+ 1 Pr: Identifying + Value

Money is an instrument.

Token+ 1 Pr: Identifying + Value

Money and power are a really bad combination.

Token+ 1 Pr: Identifying + Value

Money is a means.

Token+ 1 Pr: Identifying + Value

Sample B:

Money can buy almost everything.... tangible.

Actor+Material Pr.+Goal

Money can't buy evil.

Actor+Material Pr +Goal

Money can lead to wars ...crimes

Actor+Material Pr +circumstance

Money is ...capable of...power

Carrier+ Relational Pr. Intensive + Attribute quality type

Evil is not only in hand with money

Carrier+ Relational Pr.Intensive + circumstance

Crime is an evil thing

Token+ l Pr: Identifying + Value

Evil is inside humans

Carrier+ Relational Pr.+ circumstance

Evil is like oxygen

Carrier+ Relational Pr. Intensive + Attribute quality type

Evil is not a full consequence of money.

Token+ l P+r: Identifying + Value

5. Analysis of Interpersonal Resources

The interpersonal metafunction is concerned with those features of language which deal with the speaker's relation with his audience and to what he wants to use the language for. Due to the nature of the speech genre, the analysis will focus mainly on the Mood choices.

Sample A is made up of over 44 clauses. Out of which 40 are declarative and 4 (four) are interrogative. By applying the SDFG, the learners will discover that there are no instances of imperative Mood, again this is due to the nature of the topic in this speech. The descriptive analysis will also help them see that the student in sample A is an effective writer by the way in which he establishes a relationship with his audience through

the use of Vocatives. The use of Vocatives constitutes an important feature for the realization of interpersonal relationships, for it helps set up a relationship between the speaker and the people he is addressing. The SDFG will also reveal the fact that this speech A is more effective due to the choice of Pronouns. The student writer makes use of the first person pronouns, singular and plural almost all through, which gives his speech a tone of intimacy, proximity. By choosing these pronouns, especially, the inclusive “we”, he skillfully implies that the audience shares his views.

Sample B is made up 26 clauses. Out of which 24 are Declarative and 2 (two) are Interrogative. There are no instances of Imperative Mood. The descriptive analysis done with the help of the SDFG will raise the learners’ awareness as regards the complete lack of Vocatives in sample B, which implies no direct, or explicit acknowledgement of the presence of an audience. A most inappropriate choice if the writer wants to write a effective speech.

6. Analysis of choices at the interpersonal Level

Sample A:

- **MOOD SYSTEM**

Total number of clauses: 41

Declarative mood: 38

Interrogative mood: 3

Imperative mood: 0

Vocatives: 3 Good morning *everyone*, No *my fellows*, Well, *dear friends*.

Sample B:

- **MOOD SYSTEM**

Total number of clauses: 25

Declarative mood: 24

Interrogative mood: 1

Imperative mood: 0

Vocatives: 0

7. Analysis of Choices at the Textual Level

As regards the choices at the textual level, this analysis focuses mainly on the choice of pronouns and pronoun reference since they are vital to the cohesion and coherence of any text. The analysis resulting from the application of the SDFG to sample A will reveal that the choice of pronouns is not only appropriate but most consistent, while the inconsistent use of pronouns in Sample B accounts for its lack of cohesion and “clumsy” organization.

Sample A:

- **Consistent Use of Pronouns Adds to Cohesion and Clarity:**

...today **we** argue.... .. just a way to blame something for **our** own mistakes, **our** human nature

we, as humans have represent **our** own evil...those creatures are a representation of **ourselves**.

that leads **us** to the question.....as **we** can see.....the decision is up to **us**

Sample B:

- **Inconsistent Use of Pronouns Leads to an Ineffective, “Clumsy” Text :**

...but if **we** want to refer to money and evil **you** have to take into account....**people** get so blinded with by the obsession with money that they are not capable of...This also leads to selfishness up to a point that all **you** care about is money. Money is also capable of leading **you** to power,power may make **us** do evil things...

- **Schematic Structure:**

Finally, the SDFG will also help the learner discover that one of the reasons why sample B is hardly an effective piece of writing is that fact that, as illustrated in the chart below, the student writer has not respected the schematic structure expected for a persuasive speech.

Schematic Structure

Sample A	Sample B
Audience Greeting*	-----
Opening *	-----
Thesis	Thesis
Taking a stand	Taking a stand
Restatement of thesis	-----
Salutation*	Conclusion

*Essential schematic structure features of a persuasive speech.

8. Teaching implications

In providing feedback to students, teachers are typically confronted with a wide range of error types that are not errors of form, but rather “infelicitous” or innappropriate uses of the language. The SDFG may prove to be a most useful tool when it comes to explaining the nature of such errors and it can, therefore, help teachers target their assistance and feedback to aspects of writing that students can later monitor by themselves - a fundamental step if we want our students to become independent learners.

The SDFG can help students understand, for example, that each assignment represents a genre with its own register requirement. By using this guide, students will be made aware of the grammatical features which are especially important for conveying meaning in a particular writing task and, as a consequence, they will stop seeing their piece of writing as a display of linguistic ability and will start regarding it as a purposeful, goal-oriented, meaningful activity in which writers engage as members of society.

I am convinced a functional approach will provide students with the ability to use codes of writing (the genres and grammar) more effectively

and efficiently. Without these codes the process of writing can turn into a frustrating and unproductive process. How many times do we see students staring at a blank piece of paper because they do not know how to start, let alone proceed with their compositions? I am totally convinced of the impelling necessity of applying a Systemic Functional approach to teaching EFL/ESL learners. It is time Halliday's theory stops dwelling in purely academic milieu and "descends" to the classroom. The SDFG is my humble contribution to this aim.

REFERENCES

- DOWNING, Angela and P. LOCKE. 2002. *A University Course in English Grammar*. UK: Prentice Hall International.Ltd.
- HALLIDAY, M.A.K. and C. MATTHIESSEN. 2004. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.
- HALLIDAY, M. A. K., & HASAN, R. 1976. *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.
- LOCK, G. 1996. *Functional English Grammar*. Cambridge: C.U.P
- MARTIN, J.R., MATTHIENSEN, M.I.M., PAINTER, C. 1997. *Working with Functional Grammar London : Arnold*.
- TOMLIN, R.S. 1994. Functional grammars, pedagogical grammars, and communicative language teaching. In T. Odlin (Ed.), *Perspectives on Pedagogical Grammar* (pp. 140-178). Cambridge: C.U.P

APPENDIX

INTERPERSONAL LEVEL

What is the type of genre of the text under analysis? What is its mode of communication? Spoken? Written?

What is the general purpose of the genre and what is my particular purpose in this case? Do I want to narrate, amuse, inform, request information, complain, persuade?

What are the moods that would be most appropriate for realizing this genre effectively: Declarative, Interrogative, Imperative?

What is my identity as a writer? Do I know a lot or little about the subject? Am I speculating? Am I giving my own personal view? Am I giving or requesting information? By means of what kind of lexicogrammatical choices can I show my audience either my knowledge, my doubts or my desires?

What is the identity of my addressee (listener, reader)? What type of relationship is there between us? Distant? Close? Which linguistic choices will help me show this?

IDEATIONAL LEVEL

What type of Processes, Participants and Circumstances are more likely to be “required” by this genre?

Taking into account the topic of this text in particular, what type of Processes, Participants and Circumstances would be more appropriate to express the ideas I want to express? What about the choice of tenses?

Do all my lexical choices collocate? Do all my lexical choices mean what I expect them to mean?

Have I chosen Processes, Participants and Circumstances bearing in mind not only the text-type but also my communicative purpose?

Have I chosen Processes, Participants and Circumstances that will “match” my identity as a writer and the identity of the addressee as well?

TEXTUAL LEVEL

What is the typical schematic structure for this genre? Have I respected it? Why? Why not?

Are the ideas in my text clearly organized and expressed? In other words, is my text “reader-friendly?”

Is my text cohesive? Do I guide my reader through lexical cohesion? Do I repeat the same word or phrase every now and then? Do I use synonyms or near synonyms?

Have I chosen and used pronouns making sure they clearly refer to what I actually want them to refer to? Do they agree in person and number with the referent I meant? Am I consistent in the use of pronouns?

Is my writing “lively”, “vivid”, “convincing”? Have I focused, emphasized the information I wanted to highlight? How?

STUDENT'S DESCRIPTIVE SFG GUIDE (SDFG)

SAMPLE A:

Good morning everyone, today we argue about a very controversial topic: "Is money is the root of all evil"; What a deep phrase, isn't it? ... No my fellows, that is just a way to evade reality; a way to blame something else for our own mistakes, a way to deny that evil is in fact inside us..

Evil has existed; even before money appeared. We, as humans, have represent our own evil through demons, and evil and bizarre creatures. Well, those creatures are just a representation of ourselves. That leads us to the question: "If evil has existed even before money; then, what is the root of evil itself?" There's something that certainly has existed throughout time, among human beings: Power... Power. This jerarquic characteristic divides the weak from the strong. This human characteristic often blind us and make us violent and evil beings. This trait is the root of all evil. However, I don't mean that being bad resides always in human nature; there are qualities and virtues that gives us some value as humans, there is generosity, or compassion. It is when power and human nature decide to combine that evil appears, for power corrupts us. For example, there had been wars since the bare begginings of humanity; and hasn't been for the money, but for power. Certainly, is silly to think that powerful leaders do wars just for the money, they do them to show everyone they have more power over us, and consequently, control us. So we can see that money is not the root of all evil, but an instrument. However, is definitely true that money and power are a really bad combination; it makes us evil, blind our own actions, makes us greed people. Fortunately, there's also people that has money and decide to do something for the benefit of humanity, that is when we combine money with a virtue. When this happens, we notice that there are some qualities in human nature that are worth to be proud of. Here is when we can see that money is not the root of all evil, but just an instrument, that can be used for good or bad, the decission is apt to us... It is easy to blame something or some others for our own mistakes; but to accept them, and correct them... Well , my dear friends, that is a whole other story... Thanks for your atention.

SAMPLE B:

Money can buy almost everything tangible and sometimes not tangible. But money can't buy evil. Crime can be an evil thing, wars and bullying also; but if we want to refer to money and evil you have to take into account both words. On the one hand, money can lead to wars and to crimes, just because people get so blinded by the obsession with money that they are not capable of measuring their actions and their consequences. This also leads to selfishness up to a point that all you care about is money. Money is also capable of leading you to power, and this is wrong, as power and the aim of reaching power by an economic factor may make us do evil things. Also, evil does not always go hand in hand with money.

Crime is an evil thing and can also be committed by other factors besides the economic one. There are passion crimes which involve envy and jealousy but not money. Terrorists also kill people not for the money but for ideological and religious purposes trying to show the world how things must be for them. Does money affect us up to the point that we are incapable of controlling our own actions? In my opinion, evil is mainly controlled by feeling and emotions rather than money. I believe evil is made by humans or by things humans have invented or created such as guns or the atomic bomb? I think evil is inside humans. But in some humans evil is like oxygen, without it the person can't live. However, having evil as a quality depends on each person. With this, I am not trying to say that evil can't be caused by money, on the contrary, I am saying that in many cases it is caused by it.

As a conclusion I would like to state that just as happiness can't be bought by money, evil is not a full consequence of money but of many other factors, too.