

FEATURE: First hand experiences of a learner from a diverse culture

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What makes a good essay? – Learners' perceptions

Marilyn Lewis

Academic writing teachers aim to inform students about what constitutes a "good" essay in a number of ways: through direct teaching, by modelling the process and by designing tasks that lead students to discover essay features for themselves. This discovery includes evaluating their own work in the light of what they are learning. This study, conducted in a first year university academic writing course, investigated students' ongoing self-evaluation of their own English writing. The results show that the course content had only a partial influence on their concerns and that their self-evaluation sometimes differed from their teacher's views. Questions remain about the reasons for these differences and for the learning that took place during the course.

Lessons for onshore ESL from offshore scientific writing workshops

Margaret Cargill

This paper aims to draw out the implications for teaching practice in Australia of evaluative findings from three workshops, delivered offshore but designed in Australia, to help Vietnamese and Chinese scientists develop skills for publishing their work in the international scientific literature, which is dominated by English-language journals. All used an integrated, task-based approach which has proved highly successful in Australia. Issues raised included: to what extent can participants' needs be predicted in advance from a distance? how do the goals of employing or facilitating institutions intersect or conflict with the needs and goals of participants and presenters? and, what is the relationship of these issues to a range of onshore ESL contexts? An earlier version of this paper was published in Cadman, K. (Ed.) 2002. Learners from Diverse Cultures: Advancing Australia's Potential. Proceedings of the ACTA/ESLE National Conference, Adelaide, SA. It is published here with permission of the Editor.

Metaphors in the media: Helping ESL students to understand media texts

Ursula McGowan

This paper demonstrates the application of the Systemic Coder software package, WAG (Workbench for Analysis Generation), to the language of an Australian media article used in a tertiary Economics assignment. The text is analysed for the occurrence of lexical, grammatical and complex metaphors, abstract and idiomatic terminology, and short-cut references to local and general background information. The second part of the paper outlines how results from such analyses can be used in advising ESL students on how to develop a broader understanding of the media articles which are required reading in some secondary and tertiary subjects, and as a basis for critical analysis. An earlier version of this paper appeared in Cadman, K. (Ed.) (2002). Learners from Diverse Cultures: Advancing Australia's Potential. Proceedings of the ACTA/ESLE National Conference, Adelaide, SA. It is published here with permission of the Editor.

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Exploring the development of a narrative of personal experience in adult second language writing: a systemic functional linguistic perspective

Len Unsworth, Cristina Astorga and Silvia Paul

This paper focuses on the value of systemic functional linguistic (SFL) analyses in describing adult learners' development in writing English as a foreign language. The authors contend that traditional notions of grammatical 'correctness' and decreased incidence of morphological, lexical and syntactic errors are insufficient to the task of describing how increased grammatical facility accounts for development in second language writing. This thesis is illustrated in a case study comparing three versions of the same narrative of personal experience written by the same second language learner over a period of just under two years.

Introduction

One of the crucial issues in teaching second language writing is deciding on criteria for assessing students' progress. This entails dealing with the complex issue of what 'development' in writing involves. In this paper, we illustrate how these issues can be addressed from a semantic point of view: from the point of view of the meanings which the second language learners build up in the process of constructing texts in the second language they are learning. We focus on one adult learner's development in writing narratives of personal experience in English as a foreign language. As one might expect, the learner's use of conventional story structure seems to be well developed from the outset, while significant development occurs in the deployment of grammatical resources. However, traditional notions of grammatical 'correctness' and decreased incidence of morphological, lexical and syntactic errors are insufficient to the task of describing how increased grammatical facility accounts for development in the writing of these personal narratives. Common quantitative measures of syntactic development such as those based on T-units have not been able to clearly establish the relationship between syntactic complexity measures and judgments of improved quality of writing (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996). We will show how descriptions of development in

writing narratives of personal experience are facilitated through the analytic tools of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) in a case study comparing three versions of the same narrative of personal experience written by the same second language learner over a period of just under two years.

A systemic functional linguistic perspective

In this case study we are interested in the learner's increasing facility with the linguistic resources that construct the experiential, interpersonal and textual meanings that characterize a mature, written narrative of personal experience. To illustrate the learner's development in constructing the experiential meanings, we analyse her texts in terms of 'activity sequences' (Martin, 1992), showing her increasing facility with the grammatical construction of 'counter-expectation'. From the perspective of interpersonal meaning we are interested in the learner's deployment of evaluative language in constructing her attitudes to the events in the narrative. Here we categorize lexical items in the narratives according to a framework for differentiating types of evaluative language known as 'Appraisal theory' (eg Martin, 1997). In terms of textual meanings we show how the writer has learned to manipu-

late the element(s) in the initial position in the clause, known in SFL as the Theme of the clause (Halliday, 1994), drawing attention to the role of these elements in orienting the reader and locating new information at the end of the clause.

A case study in the writing of a narrative of personal experience

These narratives were written by an undergraduate student, whose first language is Spanish, undertaking a four year degree program at the University of Rio Cuarto in Argentina to prepare her as a teacher of English as a foreign language. The narratives provide useful baseline data for comparing development of writing skills because they are complete texts, they belong to the same genre and were produced by the same learner at three different points in time : Text 1 and Text 2 were written at the beginning and at the end of a semester unit of study designed to improve

students' writing in English as a foreign language – an interval of three months. The unit of study was taught by the second author.

The students were asked to write about a personal experience they found traumatic for some reason. There was no preparatory discussion, modelling or conferencing. One hour was allowed for the writing, which was undertaken under test conditions, so the resulting texts were first drafts and not edited versions. The initial piece of writing was regarded as a 'pre test' and was not specifically referred to in subsequent work in the semester unit of study. The learning experiences provided to the learners in the unit of study involved writing practice which was scaffolded to support them in staging other narratives of personal experience and selecting lexicogrammatical and discourse features that were appropriate to each structural stage of the genre.

	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3
Orientation	My kid is 3 years old and her name is Julieta. Two years ago, my husband and I had a shop in this city. My kid was always there with us.	Three years ago, my husband and I had a grocers in Rio Cuarto. We and our daughter went every day there. One day we were working there and our daughter was playing around with her toys. She was two years old. and she was very clumsy.	Three years ago, my husband, my daughter and I were working at our grocery. It was Sunday morning and the day was cool and sunny. Our little two years old child was always playing in the shop while we were working. Although we looked at her frequently, that day something shocking happened.
Complication	When she's 1½ years old, she got out of the shop alone. We're working in the shop when we noticed she didn't stay there. I run out of the shop quickly, but I couldn't see her. I was afraid about her. Suddenly I saw her in the corner of the street. She was crossing the street.	But while we were working our child escaped from the shop. We didn't noticed that she had gone. When we realized of that we became on panic. We looked for her everywhere. We looked outside the shop, inside and suddenly I saw her. She was crossing the street. She was taking her little doll in her hands.	While I was talking to a customer, our child went out of the shop. Five minutes had passed when we realized that she wasn't there. My mother's instinct told me that something terrible was going to happen. And I was right. As soon as I ran away to the street, my little girl was crossing the street. The distance between us was only half block and the period of time just a few seconds.
Evaluation	At that time my legs were quiet, I couldn't run. My voice was broken. I couldn't shout.	I was paralyzed. I wanted to scream but I didn't.	That situation was so terrible that I stood motionless.
Resolution	My husband run faster than me and caught her in the middle of the street.	My husband run quickly towards her and picked her up.	Suddenly, somebody else ran quickly towards her and picked her up.
Evaluation	I was crying during all day. I never feel nervous or afraid about anything, but that day was the worst day of my life.	When they returned to the shop I was crying. I tried to talk to her but I sta..? words. My daughter didn't understand well what had happened. She was a little child only. Fortunately, nothing happened that day.	That experience will be in my mind for ever.
Coda	Julieta never knew what she did. She was only a little baby.	After that we take care of her more than nothing in the world.	

Figure 1. Schematic structure of three narratives of personal experience

Text 2 was completed at the end of the semester unit under the same test conditions and in response to the same task. The student whose work is discussed here was the only one of thirty in the group who chose to write about the same incident on the two occasions. Fortuitously, a year and a half later, the student whose writing is discussed here undertook an advanced unit of study and happened to be in the class group taught by the second author. At the beginning of this unit of study the same writing task, again under test conditions and with an hour for writing, was assigned to the students to give an indication of their initial level of writing development. Text 3 was written in response to this task. As the learner spontaneously chose to write about the same personal experience in the three texts, they offer interesting data for researching the learner's linguistic choices in constructing the same kind of meanings at different stages of her interlanguage development.

Genre analysis

The schematic structure of the narrative of personal experience consists of five stages: the Orientation introduces the characters and establishes the settings; the Complication introduces a disruption to the usual pattern of events, causing a problem to be solved by one or more of the participants involved; the Evaluation involves some reflection on the implications of the disruption or counter-expectation; the Resolution is the stage where the problem is confronted and some kind of outcome occurs; the Coda gives

a retrospective overall evaluation of the narrative's events (Rothery, 1996). The Coda is an optional stage and in some narratives the Evaluation is interspersed with the Complication (Rothery, 1996; Rothery & Stenglin, 1997). The analyses of the schematic structure of our three texts are shown in Figure 1. The three texts are very similar in this respect. In Texts 1 and 2 there is an additional Evaluation stage after the Resolution. This seems to bridge from evaluating the events to a reflection on the episode as a whole in the Coda. By Text 3 the Evaluation more conventionally follows, and is interspersed with, the Complication.

Constructing narrative experience: activity sequences and counterexpectation

Since the three narratives are concerned with the same occasion in the writer's life there is a great deal of commonality in the experiential meanings they relate. The narratives include the same participants involved in the same events in the same places and at the same times. Furthermore, the configurations of participants with actions and locations in time and space form a number of activities which are sequenced according to our cultural expectations of the nature of the social activity taking place – in this case parents looking after their child while working in their shop. The pivotal feature of the activity sequence in these texts is the unexpected activity – the child leaving the shop unobserved.

In order to compare the set of activity sequences in the

Text 1	Text 2	Text 3
	Parents' usual activities One day we <u>were working</u> there and our daughter <u>was playing</u> around with her toys.	Parents' usual activities Three years ago, my husband, my daughter and I <u>were working</u> at our grocery. Our little two years old child <u>was always playing</u> in the shop while we <u>were working</u> .
Something unexpected happened When she's 1½ years old she <u>got out of</u> the shop alone. We're <u>re working</u> in the shop when we <u>noticed</u> she <u>didn't stay</u> there.	Something unexpected happened But while we <u>were working</u> our child <u>escaped</u> from the shop.	Something unexpected happened That day something shocking <u>happened</u> . While I <u>was talking</u> to a customer our child <u>went out of</u> the shop.
Parents' reaction I <u>run out</u> quickly but I <u>couldn't see</u> her.	Parents' reaction We <u>looked for</u> her everywhere. We <u>looked</u> outside the shop, inside and suddenly I <u>saw</u> her.	Parents' reaction As soon as I <u>ran</u> to the street
Child in danger Suddenly I <u>saw</u> her in the corner. She <u>was crossing</u> the street.	Child in danger She <u>was crossing</u> the street. She <u>was taking</u> her little doll in her hands.	Child in danger my little girl <u>was crossing</u> the street.
Parents' reaction My husband <u>ran</u> faster than me and <u>caught</u> her in the middle of the street.	Parents' reaction My husband <u>ran</u> quickly towards her and <u>picked</u> her <u>up</u> .	Parents' reaction Suddenly, somebody else <u>ran</u> quickly towards her and <u>picked</u> her <u>up</u> .

Figure 2. Activity sequences in the three narrative texts

three texts and focus on the linguistic strategies the learner used to signal counter-expectation in each text, we grouped the activities into episodes under a semantic label according to the type of experience they represent. Within the episodes we included only those clauses encoding actions or events, that is to say, clauses with verbs indicating action or perception (described in functional terms in SFL as material, behavioural, mental and verbal processes). The labeled activity sequences for each text are shown in Figure 2.

The three texts are built up around the same set of activity sequences because they share the same experiential meanings. For this reason, comparing the linguistic resources that the learner uses in each text to signal counter-expectation indicates the grammatical basis for her development in constructing this aspect of the narrative. In Text 1 the first activity is realized by a clause complex which at the same time introduces the complication:

When she's 1½ years old she got out of the shop alone.

The action of the little child going out alone represents an unusual event within the normal sequence of events that were part of the writer's routine. However, what the child does is not presented by the writer as an unusual event, except for her use of the word 'alone', which signals to the reader that the child did something unexpected and dangerous in view of her age. In Text 2 the learner provides more information about the kind of activities the participants were involved in when the child did something unexpected:

One day we were working there and our daughter was playing around with her toys. She was two years old and she was very clumsy. But while we were working, our child escaped from the shop.

Interestingly, and in contrast to Text 1, here she uses the concessive conjunction 'but', which makes the counter-expectation explicit. Finally, in Text 3 we see how the learner, instead of directly introducing the unusual event, creates the counter-expectation by means of an evaluative clause following a concessive clause introduced by 'although':

...that day something shocking happened.

What we notice in Text 3 is that the learner uses linguistic resources not present in the previous texts, and in order to explain them, we need to consider how the experiential meanings simultaneously interact with textual and interpersonal meanings. For example, the noun 'something' shows that the learner has been able to distance herself from the events, which she now presents as a thing. Also the positioning of 'that day' in Theme position at the beginning of the clause

is what is known in SFL as a 'marked' theme (Halliday, 1994, p. 41). The most common choice of grammatical element for the initial or Theme position in a clause is the Subject – in this case 'something' – and the more common version of the clause would be 'something shocking happened that day'. By selecting 'that day' as a marked Theme, the effect is to draw special attention to this particular circumstance of location in time. In addition, the attitudinal choice in the lexical selection of 'shocking' shows how the learner is able to evaluate prospectively the events that she is about to recount. So through this kind of analysis, we can show that the learner progressively uses more effective strategies for signaling counter-expectation, which is a critical feature of narrative genre. Text 3 stands apart from the other two texts because the learner renders the counter-expectancy textually through the use of the marked theme and interpersonally by adding a prospective evaluation to it.

Personal stance: deploying evaluative language

SFL approaches to analysing interpersonal meaning have recently been expanded to include systemic accounts of the language of evaluation, attitude and emotion in what has come to be known as 'Appraisal theory' (Hunston & Thompson, 2000; Martin, 1997; Rothery & Stenglin, 2000). Here we will be concerned with the systems of Affect and Judgment. The system of Affect concerns the speaker/writer's evaluation of the mental state of the represented participant. A simplified view of the options is shown in Figure 3.

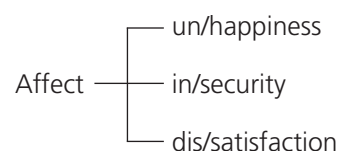


Figure 3. Subsystems of Affect

In Text 1 for example, we find 'I was crying during all day', where 'crying' codes unhappiness. In the same text we find 'I was afraid', where 'afraid' codes insecurity. The dis/satisfaction dimension would be coded by items like 'exasperated'/'engrossed' or 'bored'/'interested'.

The system of Judgment concerns evaluations of events in terms of socially determined expectations. Here we will be concerned with the subsystems of Propriety and Normality. In the subsystem of Propriety examples of positive judgments would include 'good', 'upright', 'admirable', and examples of negative judgments would be 'evil', 'unfair', 'cruel'. In the subsystem of Normality positive judgments would include 'lucky', 'fortunate', 'average' and negative judgments would include 'unfortunate', 'tragic', 'peculiar'.

Text 1	Text 2	Text 3
I was <u>afraid</u> about her	We became on <u>panic</u>	That day something <u>shocking</u> happened
My legs were <u>quiet</u> (evoked)	I was <u>paralyzed</u>	something <u>terrible</u> was going to happen
My voice was <u>broken</u> (evoked)	I wanted to <u>scream</u>	My <u>little</u> girl
I was <u>crying</u> during all day	I was <u>crying</u>	That situation was so <u>terrible</u> that I stood <u>motionless</u>
That day was the <u>worst</u> of my life	She was a <u>little</u> child only	That experience will be in my mind for ever
She was only a <u>little</u> baby	<u>Fortunately</u> , nothing happened that day	

Figure 4. Attitude and emotion in the three narratives

The instances of evaluative language concerned with attitude and emotion in the three narratives are shown in Figure 4.

In most of the instances of language concerned with attitude and emotion in Figure 4 the affect is construed directly or 'inscribed' in the lexical choices. This is clearly the case in the first clause, where 'afraid' inscribes insecurity. However from our reading position and knowledge of the situation in which the writer was involved, we can also say that the following two clauses convey fear and anguish:

My legs were quiet.
My voice was broken.

Here the affect is 'evoked' rather than inscribed (Martin, 1997).

If we examine the realizations of affect in Figure 4, we will notice that they draw on the systems of Affect and Judgment noted above. Those drawing on the system of Affect refer to the writer's own personal mental state realizing either unhappiness ('crying') or insecurity in the form of fear and anguish ('afraid', 'panic'). The choices of evaluative language drawing from the system of Judgment relate to either the subsystem of Normality ('Fortunately') or Propriety ('shocking', 'terrible'). These evaluations are directed to the situation itself. This distinction draws attention to a shift in the ways in which the writer uses evaluative language over the three texts. In Texts 1 and 2 the realizations of affect mainly focus on the writer herself and her feelings, in Text 3 affective expressions tend more to evaluate the events themselves, which the learner has packaged by using the nouns 'situation' and 'experience'.

Some of the writer's expressions are clearly unidiomatic, especially in Text 1 where she uses the expression 'My legs were quiet'. This kind of expression of interpersonal meaning might result from the application of the communication strategy known as paraphrase (Tarone, 1983). The paraphrase strategy may have been used either because the learner's current inter-

language did not include the appropriate target form or because other formal alternatives were not readily accessible at the moment she wrote her first narrative. It is also evident that in the second and third narrative the learner has overcome her lexical limitations so 'My legs were quiet' is realized as 'I was paralyzed' in Text 2 and as 'I stood motionless' in Text 3. But the development of the learner's capacity to realize interpersonal meanings in the context of writing a narrative of personal experience includes both progress from unidiomatic to idiomatic expressions and more extensive inclusion of situational judgement with expressions of personal affect.

Theme and textual meaning: Orienting the reader and managing new information

We have briefly introduced the SFL concept of Theme in our discussion of activity sequences and counter-expectation. The Theme, occupying clause initial position, functions to orient the reader, indicating that with which the clause is concerned (Halliday, 1994, p. 37). The remainder of the clause, the Rheme, is the part in which the Theme is developed. As noted earlier, the most common selection for Theme is the Subject of the clause and this is the normal or 'default' option. If some other element of the clause is selected as Theme it is therefore 'marked'. The Theme/Rheme system interacts with the Given/New system (Halliday, 1994, p.59). This means, in written genres, that Given or expected or familiar information is usually located in Theme position functioning as the point of departure for the reader, and the New is located at the end of the clause in the Rheme. The thematic principle also applies across clauses in a sentence including subordinate clauses. If a subordinate clause is placed in first position, it is considered to function as a marked theme (Martin, 1992, p. 440).

Theme in relation to context is genre-oriented as it 'angles' a text in relation to its social purpose (Martin, 1993b, p. 244). If we examine the Themes in the Orientation stage of the three narratives in Figure 5,

we see that they orient us to time ('Three years ago', 'Two years ago', 'One day') and to the participants involved ('My kid', 'We and our daughter', 'She').

However, if we compare the way the Themes are realised across the three texts, we find a significant development. In Texts 1 and 2 the Themes are mainly simple nominal groups ('My kid', 'Our daughter', 'One day') which have the function of orientation and re-orientation, shifting from the participants to time and back to the participants. In Text 3 the learner uses longer Themes such as 'Our little two years old child', which is a complex nominal group, and the marked Theme consisting of a dependent clause introduced by a concessive conjunction – 'Although we looked at her frequently'. The complex nominal group is much more typical of written than spoken mode and the Thematic position of the dependent clause indicates an amount of pre-planning that is less common in spoken than in written language (Eggs, 1994 p. 301).

Text 1	Text 2	Text 3
My kid	Three years ago	Three years ago
Two years ago	We and our daughter	It
My kid	One day and our daughter She and she	Our little two years old child Although we looked at her frequently

Figure 5. Theme in the Orientation of the three narratives

In the Complication stage the Themes (shown in Figure 6) again orient to time and to the people involved. The information about time is more specific in Texts 2 and 3 where it is conveyed by adverbial dependent clauses in Theme position ('But while we were working', 'While I was talking to a customer'). But what distinguishes Text 3 is the introduction of grammatical metaphor.

Text 1	Text 2	Text 3
When she's 1½ years old	But while we were working	While I was talking to a customer
she	we	Five minutes
we	When we realized of that	we
I	We	My mother's instinct
but I	We	And I
I	I	As soon as I ran away to the street
I	she	The distance between us and the period of time
She	she	

Figure 6. Theme in the Complication of the three narratives

Grammatical metaphor refers to

...a substitution of one grammatical class, or one grammatical structure, by another; for example, his departure instead of he departed. Here the words (lexical items) are the same; what has changed is their place in the grammar. Instead of the pronoun he + verb departed, functioning as Actor + Process in a clause, we have determiner his + noun departure, functioning as Deictic + Thing in a nominal group (Halliday, 1993, p.79).

In Text 3 we have the noun 'the distance', instead of an adverbial expression of space, and the nominal form 'the period of time', instead of an adverbial expression of time (Coffin, 1996; Martin, 1997). The use of these nominal forms enables the writer to put information about distance and time into Theme position. This strategy has a very important effect within the Complication stage. It orients the reader to the distance and the time as the given information, which the rest of the clause is going to give us some crucial new information about. This has the effect of heightening the tension through the retention of the crucial New ('only half block', 'just a few seconds') until the end of the clause.

A similar effect can be seen with the use of grammatical metaphor in the Evaluation and the Coda. The nominal forms 'That situation' and 'That experience' enable the writer to summarize the events already recounted and restate them as familiar information in Theme position. This gives the emphasis of the New at the end of the clause to 'I stood motionless' and 'will be in my mind for ever', enhancing the effectiveness of the narrative through this impact.

Stage	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3
Evaluation	At that time	I	That situation
	I My voice I I I but that day	I but I When they returned to the shop I My daughter She Fortunately nothing	I
Coda	Julieta She	After that we	That experience

Figure 7. Theme in the Evaluation and Coda stages of the narratives

By means of the linguistic strategy of nominalization, the learner construes reality in Text 3 in a way that is

different from the other texts. As there are fewer Themes orienting to people she produces a more abstract version of her narrative. This strategy has a distancing effect as Text 3 achieves a more reflective stance towards the events it narrates. Since grammatical metaphor is a characteristic feature of more formal discourse, we may conclude that Text 3 shows the learner making more use of the grammar typical of many public written texts. She deploys less iconic grammatical forms in response to the demands of the genre, and achieves the desired effect of creating and sustaining the tension prior to the resolution.

Conclusion

The SFL concepts we have drawn upon have enabled us to see how the learner has drawn on systems within the target language as resources for constructing ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings within the genre of narrative of personal experience. We have not been able to pursue the causes of the changes in her writing. What we have been able to show is the facility of the systemic functional linguistic descriptions of language in describing the nature of the changes. Ongoing research in SFL is specifying the characteristic linguistic features of a range of written genres which are prominent in school and university teaching and learning (eg Coffin, 1996; Eggins, Wignell, & Martin, 1993; Humphrey, 1996; Martin, 1993a; Martin, 1997; Martin & Veel, 1998; Rothery, 1996; Unsworth, 1997; Unsworth, 2000; Veel, 1997). Further case studies employing systemic linguistic analyses of students' writing in a range of such genres may afford significant implications for the teaching and testing of writing development in English as a second language.

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