

Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) and its applications in ELT¹

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Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a school of linguistics originally developed by the British linguist Michael Halliday. Its basic concern is to develop analytic categories for language that capture “the relationship between language and social structure” (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p. 10). Unlike other linguistics theories, it has from its onset sought to be an “applied linguistics” or “a kind of linguistics where theory is designed to have the potential to be applied to solve problems that arise in communities around the world, involving both reflection and action” (Matthiessen, 2012, p. 436).

After its inception in Britain in the 1950s, SFL continued to be developed in Australia after Halliday and his wife and co-author, Ruqaiya Hasan, took appointments at the University of Sydney and Macquarie University, respectively. A line of SFL inquiry that is particularly relevant for ELT is that which focuses on understanding the social, linguistic processes and products of literacy. As exemplified by the seminal work on cohesion of Halliday and Hasan (1976) and Martin and Rose (2007), SFL has been greatly concerned with discourse. Therefore, it has been used extensively to analyze written academic and scientific texts, including those produced by second language learners (e.g. Busseniers, Giles, Núñez Mercado & Rodríguez Luna, 2010; Moore & Andrade Mayer, 2016). As stated by Colombi (2002, p. 69), “a functional approach goes beyond analysis of students' errors to look at the lexicogrammatical choices that students make and how they change over time, moving or not moving in the direction of academic language.” SFL has also been used to analyze classroom talk and its role in supporting the combined learning of English and science (e.g. Gibbons, 2002).

Alongside this descriptive work, SFL has developed interventions for the teaching of reading and writing, such as the Teaching-Learning Cycle (Rothery, 1996), the Reading to Learn program (Rose, 2017), and text-based instruction (Burns, 2003). Examples of recent English-focused applications in Mexico are López Blé's (in press) intervention on essay writing, Moore and Andrade Mayer's (2016) contrastive analysis of essays, and Herrin Obregón's (2014) literary analysis.

A central element underpinning these instructional interventions is genre-based pedagogy, a fusion of SFL theory and practice grounded on the concepts of genre/register and visible pedagogy. SFL posits that the potential of the language system is instantiated in types of texts which are themselves composed of different genres, such as narratives, reports, expositions, and so on (Martin & Rose, 2008). Genres organize vocabulary and grammar in predictable patterns, or registers. Visible pedagogy rests on the tenet that powerful, expert ways of writing and reading must be made clear and explicit to learners by actively showing them how written language works in different registers and genres (Martin & Rose, 2005). SFL scholars maintain that this type of instruction is particularly relevant when working with disadvantaged

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populations who need a high level of explicitness in order to come to read and write in ways that are socially valued and powerful (Schleppegrell & Colombi, 2002). For these reasons, SFL approaches holds great promise for the Mexican context, where meeting learners' EFL literacy needs presents a strong challenge to ELT professionals.

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