A Functional Approach to Errors in Texts Written by English Language Learners

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This article presents a series of strategies English teachers can use to identify the linguistic resources employed in the writing of speech emergent and intermediate language proficiency level English Language Learners (ELLs). It discusses the effects of language inexperience on the educational outcomes of ELLs, explores the shortcomings of typical corrective feedback to the writing of ELLs, and highlights the value of direct linguistic instruction for promoting an environment of high expectations. Taking from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), two college-level ELL texts are presented to demonstrate how English teachers can scaffold students to reach the expectations of school-based tasks.

Language is the medium through which educators and administrators in K-12 and higher education insitutions expect students to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and ideas. In the earlier years, students are largely evaluated based on their spoken language and as they progress in the academic pipeline, their writing takes a more prominent role (Menyuk & Brisk, 2005). It is through their spoken and written language choices that students are evaluated and consequently placed in courses. Ironically, language instruction in the United States seldom focuses on teaching the value of such language choices (e.g., lexical, grammatical, and organizational resources) for success in school-based tasks (Schleppegrell, 2004). Much of what teachers expect is not presented in the form of linguistic features, but rather in habitual commands urging writers to be clear, organized, and accurate instead of pointing at the particulars of the text at hand (e.g., incorporation of noun phrases instead of short labels and pronouns, use of varied clause structures, utilization of time markers and transitional devices to structure their text over the more colloquial coordinated conjunctions). Such commands, although common features of teacher feedback, remain general recommendations that do not address the linguistic expectations teachers hold for different school-based tasks or genres. As an educator, both of English language learners (ELLs) in the Caribbean and of English speakers in the Midwest, I have encouraged students to engage in dialogue by unpacking the feedback I include in their papers and by using pieces of their own writing for in-class explorations of language choices.

      The absence of an explicit focus on linguistic features in school-

based tasks continues to enact advantages for students from privileged social classes (Schleppegrell, 2001) and linguistic backgrounds, such as native English speakers (Gibbons, 2002). As suggested by Christie and Unsworth (2003), our interactions in different contexts provide us with appropriate ways for communicating, including speaking and writing, and some learners might not be afforded the opportunities that would equip them to function in certain contexts. In fact, Zhang and de Oliveira (2010) note that native English speakers may have more access to spoken and written English elsewhere, whereas ELLs may lack such exposure. What limits students' language proficiency, particularly ELLs', is often a result of unfamiliarity or inexperience with the language features of school tasks such as those necessary to write a research paper, a report, or developing a creative piece. Thus, it is imperative for language educators to move beyond vague suggestions and provide students with explicit instruction on the linguistic features that are highly valued and expected in grade-level writing tasks.

Providing individualized feedback and explicit linguistic instruction to students may appear to be a challenging and time-consuming task for English teachers. Nonetheless, it is plausible and beneficial for educators to become "critical text analylists" (Gebhard, Demers, & Castillo-Rosenthal, 2008, p. 275). Teachers who are aware of the salient linguistic features of spoken and written texts typical of their grade-level are able to identify the linguistic resources used by their students, locate or create model texts, and develop materials to scaffold students' use of language features they have not yet mastered. I include here two ELLs' texts and explore the texts using strategies and terminology developed by functional linguists to show that teachers can attain this goal. These two texts were originally created for a non-credit college-level English course in Puerto Rico. They were written by two students who had completed 12 years of English education as part of their K-12 schooling in Puerto Rico.[1]

TEXT ANALYSIS

To analyze these texts, I focus on what scholars in functional linguistics have labeled the textual function—an area concerned with how to "create connected and coherent discourse" (Christie & Unsworth, 2000, p. 2). Schleppegrell (2004) explains that the textual function "provides a means for identifying the grammatical features that make a particular text the kind of text it is, so that the relationship of linguistic choices…can be explained [in terms of what they accomplish]" (p.19). As Gibbons (2002) explains, for instance, even narrative text types have particular linguistic features, such as specialized time connectives (e.g., once upon a time), past tense, and action verbs and saying verbs (e.g., said, replied). I provide a short description below of the terminology I use in the textual function analysis based on Martin & Rose (2004) and provide examples from the sample texts.

- *Theme* is defined as the point of prominence in a clause or the focus of the text. It can be short in the form of a name or pronoun (e.g., I) or lengthier as a nominal group (e.g., "My experience learning English.").
- *New* is the portion of a sentence traditionally called the 'object'; the space where we expand on the theme or subject and is usually the lengthiest (e.g., "beleved [*sic*] that the learning process in the school isn't effective").
- *Process* is usually included in the new, and it corresponds to the verb in traditional grammar (e.g., "beleved [*sic*]").
- *Marked themes* are used to indicate "new phases in a discourse: a new setting in time [and] to scaffold discontinuity" (p. 192). Marked themes tend to occur at the beginning of a clause (e.g., "Today, in high school.").
- *Internal conjunctions* can be used to organize arguments, some by establishing consequence (e.g., because) and others by drawing comparisons (e.g., but).
- *Anaphoric reference* is similar to an antecedent because it is used to refer back to a point already mentioned in previous clauses (e.g., "This types of exersices [*sic*].").

Traditional Grammar Exploration of the Texts

Before I approach the texts from a functional perspective, I explore them from a traditional grammar perspective; a stance conventionally understood as 'school grammar' due to its prescriptive focus on correctness. Text A is an excellent example of what grammarians would conceive as student writing with multiple grammatical errors, which I have denoted with italics: misspellings (e.g., *beacuse*); incorrect tense construction (e.g., don't *learned*); missing pronouns (e.g., I can understand *that [it] is* very important). Some of these so-called errors are clearly the influence of grammatical conventions in the students' first language (L1). In contrast to English, for example, Spanish grammar does not use capital letters when a language is mentioned; a feature this ELL continuously transfers from her L1 every time she makes a reference to "english."

> Text A. *My experience learning English*
>
> My experience learning english was very bad. In high school I don't learned a good basic english, maybe beacuse my fear. Today, I understand that is very important to learn the english language and that I need motivation. I can understand people talking in english but the hard part is to write and to talk english. Day by day, I am getting more self-confidence and leaving my

fears apart.

Similar to Text A, Text B shows capitalization conventions of the first language (e.g., *english*). Another element that demonstrates the influence of Spanish conventions in Text B is the constant use of determiners (e.g., "the learning process in *the* school", "write *the* English", "talk *the* English"). In addition, Text B also shows a series of misspelled words (e.g., *beleved*, *exersices*), incorrect use of verb tenses (e.g., read a tale or *answered* question), and issues with number correspondence (e.g., *This* types).

> Text B. *My experience learning English*
> My experience learning english was so bored,because Idon't feel motivation.i beleved that the learning process in the school isn't effective,because for me the english is not read a tale or answered question,in this case we don't learn to talk the english language.This types of exersices learn to read and write the english,but not learn to talk the english

Some language educators, especially at the secondary or university level, grading texts such as the ones written by these students would have likely addressed the texts' multiplicity of flaws and shortcomings. In fact, language educators are expected to provide corrective feedback to prevent students from adhering to incorrect uses of language (Fillmore, 1989). Using their preferred format, (e.g., word processing software, pen and paper) these same educators would have probably annotated and marked a considerable amount of these errors. They might have gone a step further to include a paragraph with general comments encouraging the ELLs to revise their work for tense, number, misspellings, and capitalization. The downside of corrective feedback is the tendency to treat it as commentary made on paper or a digital file, which largely points at what is missing or lacking. Undoubtedly, this feedback would be more effective if the annotations made in student papers where followed by formal instruction.

Functional Analysis Of Texts

In order to provide an alternative to typical corrective feedback, I model how to employ two different textual tools (i.e., thematic progression and periodicity) to perform a functional analysis of students' texts—one that can be converted into in-class activities to help students see how their choices promote or hinder meaning making.

Strategy #1: Thematic progression

Thematic progression is concerned with patterns that allow for the development of ideas within a text. One strategy teachers can use to help students divide their texts according to the function of each component is a theme/new chart. As explained by Aguirre-Muñoz, Park, Amabisca & Boscardin (2008) this strategy can help students visualize "overall patterns [theme/new]…flow between sentences (i.e., clause-combining strategies)… and repetitive subjects" (p. 312). Table 1 shows a sample theme/new chart.

Table 1
Theme/new Chart of Text A.

Theme	New
My experience learning English	was very bad.
I	don't learned a good basic english, maybe beacuse my fear.
I	understand that is very important to learn the english language and that I need motivation.
I	can understand people talking in english but the hard part is to write and to talk english.
I	am getting more self-confidence and leaving my fears apart.

A quick glance at the first column in Table 1 indicates that the student is the main recurrent choice for theme in Text A, made evident through the use of the pronoun 'I.' This choice presents the text's main orientation: the writer as the focal point. The pattern is clear: the student is the theme of each clause. The only exception is the first example in which she highlights her experience learning English.

Another way to look at the development of ideas or thematic progression in Text A is to consider the writer's use of marked themes and processes in the new. As shown in the first column of Table 2, Text A is characterized by the use of marked themes such as: "in high school," "today," and "day by day"; notably, the writer's preferred sentence structure. These marked themes also serve another function; they indicate shifts in time or tense. These shifts in time, specified before the theme, are subsequently mirrored in the new.

Table 2
Marked Themes and Tenses in Text A.

Marked Themes	Processes in the new	Traditional grammar tense
In high school	Don't learned [didn't learn]	Simple Past
Today,	Understand; is; to learn; need	Simple Present
Day by day,	Getting; leaving	Present Progressive

ELLs in the stages of speech emergence and intermediate fluency (for a thorough description of these stages see Krashen & Terrell, 1983) could benefit from a discussion on the effects each marked theme has in the development of this short narrative. For instance, the use of the marked theme "in high school" dictates the need to use the past tense when describing the process in the new. The event occurred in the past, and it is over. As a result, the writer tries to use the simple past by automatically adding –ed to the process "learn." The writer is cognizant of the fact that adding the suffix –ed to a regular verb transforms it into the past tense—a rule, which proves to be erroneous in this context but is a common source of confusion for my Puerto Rican Spanish-speaking ELLs. It is precisely such grammatically informed choices that can become the subject of in-class explorations of common student errors. Teachers can develop mini lessons during writers' workshop for students who struggle with the same linguistic features. Similarly, when the writer refers to "today," she uses the simple present tense to account for the immediacy of the processes: "understand" and "to learn." Finally, as the writer transitions to the marked theme "day by day," the present progressive is used by adding the suffix –ing to the verbs "getting," and "leaving" in an effort to establish that learning English is a continuous process. In sum, the writer of Text A successfully develops a narrative from one orientation (e.g., herself) and takes the reader from one stage of her experience learning English to the next through the use of marked themes and corresponding processes.

Strategy #2: Periodicity

Another functional strategy language educators can model is how language choices mark the development of texts or how the argument flows. This is also known as periodicity. Two language features that play a

prominent role in periodicity are internal conjunctions and reference devices (e.g., demonstratives). To illustrate, Text B uses internal conjunctions to organize and foreground the direction of the discourse between clauses. In Table 3, the dependency arrows draw the relationship between the clauses in Text B.

Table 3
Internal Conjunctions and Information Flow in Text B.

Relationships	Clauses
Consequence	My experience learning english was so bored, because I don't feel motivation.
Consequence	I beleved that the learning process in the school isn't effective, because for me the english is not read a tale or answered question, in this case we don't learn to talk the english language.
Comparison	This types of exersices learn [teach] to read and write the english, but not learn [teach] to talk the english.

Text B opens by making the claim that "My experience learning english was so bor[ing]." Immediately, the use of the conjunction "because" indicates that the next clause will move the argument forward by providing the reasons for this claim. Some of the reasons presented in the next clauses include a lack of motivation and the ineffectiveness of the learning process, which consists of "read[ing] a tale or answer[ing a] question." Once the writer establishes the limitations of her English learning experience, she proceeds to compare it to the skills she would like to learn: "to talk *the* english."

Another component adding to a successful flow of information in Text B is the use of anaphoric references, which the writer achieves by using the demonstratives "in this case" and "This types of exersices." Table

4 uses arrows to represent these linkages. In short, the writer of Text B presents a well-substantiated argument by connecting statements through internal conjunctions and constantly referring to the downside of her English education through demonstratives.

Table 4

Anaphoric References and Information Flow in Text B.

My experience learning english was so bored,
because I don't feel motivation.
i beleved that the learning process in the school isn't effective
becuase for me the english is not read a tale or answered question,
in this case we don't learn to talk the english language.
This types of exersices learn [teach] to read and write the english,
but not learn [teach] talk the english.

A functional exploration of Text A and Text B emphasizes the successful language choices made by these two ELLs. As mentioned earlier, a traditional review of these texts might have served to indicate the contrary: negative influences of the writers' L1 and common errors with tense, number, and misspellings. Understanding the differences between functional and traditional grammar approaches creates the opportunity for reconsidering one's praxis. In this sense, language educators move beyond identifying mechanical errors and into offering meaningful language choices to our students (Aguirre-Muñoz, et al., 2008).

IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE EDUCATORS

The lessons learned from the functional analysis presented here have several implications for language educators. First, the analysis shows that ELLs, even those who are labeled as limited proficient, bring knowledge about how language works from their first language (Menyuk & Brisk, 2005). This can be seen in Text A where the writer focuses on one theme and recognizes that marked themes often determine the tense to be used in the processes. Similarly, the writer of Text B demonstrates knowledge of argument development by using internal conjunctions to control the direction of the discourse and demonstratives to track 'points' she has already mentioned.

Second, the analysis demonstrates that functional linguistics can aid teachers in identifying language structures suitable for improving meaning making in students' texts (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2008). Language educators must provide instruction that responds to ELLs proficiency levels. At the same time, language educators must also strive to create a challenging

environment where ELLs are held to notions of intellectual quality and high expectations. For example, the writer of Text A could have been encouraged to use varied sentence structures by avoiding clause embedding through conjunctions. The writer of Text A could have also furthered the efficacy of her text by learning how to transform short themes (e.g., 'I' and 'English') into complex nominal groups (e.g., Learning English in Puerto Rico). The writers of both texts could have written more effective accounts by using complex linking or transitional devices (e.g., first, consequently). As Colombi (2009) explains, ELLs often limit their use of linking words to conjunctions typical of oral rather than written language.

Third, awareness of the functionality of language could help teachers make writing expectations clear to students (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2008). For instance, in light of the writing task presented in this paper, teachers can explicitly tell students to consider modeling their texts after narrative and argumentative genres. For instance, language educators can reiterate that narrative genres place emphasis on time markers, descriptions of setting and context, and relationships between seemingly disconnected experiences. Likewise, educators can highlight that argumentative papers often present contrasting examples and use linking devices to indicate the direction of the writer's argument. The exploration of linguistic features characteristic of various genres should be carried out using sample texts and showing how each one works to create meaning. Gibbons (2002) presents the features of various text types (e.g., including recounts, narratives, reports, procedures, discussions, arguments) and models how to conduct such scaffolding; a task that is beyond the scope of this article. Language educators must introduce students to a variety of language choices useful in particular writing tasks, valued in their classrooms, and needed for academic success.

As shown through the analysis of thematic progression and periodicity in two ELLs' texts, a functional approach to language provides educators with tools to make meaningful observations about student writing and effective approaches to offer much needed explicit instruction of linguistic features. Understanding language as a conscious combination of various components instead of a static system of rights-and-wrongs presents great potential for language instruction—one that hinges on writers' strengths rather than their limitations. Such an approach may be a catalyst for seeing and evaluating the writing produced by ELLs as that of an "emergent bilingual learner" rather than a limited proficient student.

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(Endnotes)

1   Since a 1949 educational policy, English has been taught in Puerto Rico as a subject matter and Spanish continues to be the language of instruction in public educational institutions (Algrén de Gutiérrez, 1987).