

# The importance of teaching Systemic Functional Linguistics and Text Linguistics to improve writing in Bilingual Education Programs in the USA

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**ABSTRACT:** The study reported in this paper examines a corpus of essays written in English by pre-university Mexican students who followed a Bilingual Education program in the USA. Working as a bilingual teacher offered me the opportunity of concentrating on the writing process and observing different aspects related to written texts in English that students should be aware of to improve their writing skills such as the following ones: the importance of understanding the text as an authentic product and as a way of communication, the importance of paragraph division to organise content and the analysis of theme and rheme and information structure.

In this article I intend to demonstrate that the study of Text Linguistics helps students to increase their level of literacy. I will point out that Text Linguistics has a crucial role in literacy since it concentrates on the production and analysis of texts in a given language. I will highlight the relationship between, literacy, Text Linguistics and effective writing with an applied educational emphasis. Systemic Functional Grammar will be used as a framework of analysis to evaluate students' writing and reflect on the relationship between linguistic links across sentences and textual coherence.

**Key words:** Bilingual Education, literacy, error, Text Linguistics, Systemic Functional Grammar.

**RESUMEN:** El estudio presentado en este artículo examina un corpus de ensayos escritos en inglés por estudiantes pre-universitarios mexicanos que formaban parte de un programa de educación bilingüe en EEUU. Trabajar como profesora bilingüe me ofreció la oportunidad de prestar atención al proceso de escritura y observar diferentes aspectos relacionados con textos escritos en inglés que los alumnos deben conocer para mejorar sus destrezas de escritura como los siguientes: la importancia de entender el texto como un producto auténtico y como un modo de comunicación, la importancia de la división en párrafos para organizar el contenido y el análisis de tema y rema y la estructura de la información. Me propongo demostrar que el estudio de la Lingüística del Texto ayuda a los alumnos a mejorar su nivel de escritura<sup>1</sup> y destacar que esta disciplina tiene un papel crucial la escritura de los alumnos debido a que se centra en la producción y análisis de textos de una lengua. Mostraré cómo la Lingüística del Texto puede contribuir a que los alumnos

<sup>1</sup> En realidad nos referimos al nivel de "literacy" (the ability to read and write) de los alumnos pero en español no es fácil encontrar una traducción exacta de esta palabra inglesa.

escriban mejor. La Gramática Sistémica Funcional será el marco teórico empleado para evaluar los ensayos de los alumnos y para reflejar las relaciones lingüísticas entre las oraciones y la coherencia textual.

**Palabras clave:** Educación bilingüe, error, Lingüística del Texto, Gramática Sistémica Funcional, escritura.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I intend to show that the study of Text Linguistics helps students to increase their level of literacy. Text Linguistics has a crucial role in literacy since it concentrates on the production and analysis of texts in a given language. I will highlight the relationship between, literacy, Text Linguistics and effective writing with an applied educational emphasis. In his *Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Halliday declares what follows about the educational application of Systemic Functional Linguistics (hereafter SFL):

*This last is probably the broadest range of its applications; it includes experience in initial literacy, children's writing, language in secondary education, classroom discourse analysis, teaching of foreign languages, analysis of textbooks, error analysis, teaching of literature and teacher education". (Halliday, 1994: xxx)*

Text linguistics offers the tools to write effective texts that contain ideas consistent with the cultural conventions in which the text is written; in this way, writing will result in a coherent text. Since this discipline concentrates on the analysis of written discourse, it is essential that students know different tools to analyse written texts, and are aware of the different genres or text types. Students have to be encouraged to experiment with text production. Once students are confident at recognizing and producing text types, they can use them for different purposes.

An exchange program between Spain and the United States gave me the opportunity of working as a bilingual teacher at Deming High School, New Mexico (USA) for a year. I taught Bilingual Language Arts to grades 10, 11 and 12. Working as a bilingual teacher offered me the opportunity of working on the writing process and I was able to observe different aspects related to written texts in English such as the importance of understanding the text as authentic product, as a way of communication; the importance of paragraph division to organise content and the analysis of theme and rheme and information structure.

My students were following a Bilingual Education Program (Spanish-English). This means that they were Mexican and, their families had decided that they studied in USA so that they could get better opportunities of promotion. In this situation, students are under constant pressure to learn more than one language because of pragmatic, cultural or political reasons. In such situations languages compete and often generate linguistic controversies about the relevance or primacy of one language over the other. It is evident that individuals can develop positive, negative or mixed attitudes towards one or more languages.

Some of the students (around 30%) had acquired a good level of proficiency in English as I could observe paying attention to aspects such as their command of the grammar and vocabulary of English or the number and types of errors in their essays. Apart from this, it must be pointed out that some students hated English to highlight their social identity through

Spanish. On the other hand, some students made no effort to acquire proficiency in English because they saw it as a language of social value, superior to their mother tongue. Finally, I also found students interested in acquiring high proficiency in English but they lacked it because of their socio-economic background and the environment surrounding them.

From the previous paragraph it can be stated that there is a failure in several societies to produce literate L2 speakers. One of the reasons for this failure is the lack of empathy with the target culture. In these situations students make decisions not only about which language to learn but also about which language to use, i.e., if they adopt English, which can be considered as the language of power and dominance, they gain social prestige. On the other hand, they can choose to maintain their own language as a way of showing group identity.

The study reported in this paper examines a corpus of twenty essays written in English by the twenty pre-university Mexican students who were part of a Bilingual Education program in the USA in grade 12 during the academic year 2000-2001. Fourteen students were female and six were male. I am going to analyse the corpus of essays so as to identify their characteristics and possible shortcomings as comprehensible pieces of writing.

The theoretical framework of this paper is SFL because it is able to provide a greatly enhanced insight into the text, it offers the right instruments to analyse aspects related to form (i.e. paragraph division) and content in the text, and it concentrates on the function or purpose of the text. In this approach it is also very important that the writer shares with the reader the information that he has, the 'information gap'. This is what we do in real life: we share the information we have with other people. SFL concentrates on the idea of choice, as Ragan (1989: 117) puts it: "A systemic perspective focuses on choice, a relevant perspective as ESL students are often unable to draw freely from the choices which exist in the English linguistic code for aligning language with the context in which it is used."

Having SFL as a framework implies that students have to be aware of the three functions of language: language used to represent experience (ideational), to interact with others (interpersonal) and to create connected and coherent discourse (textual). SFL pays attention to the contextualisation of the writing task since students need to be interested in the topic they are going to write about and, they need to know something about the topic (hobbies, family, etc.). It helps a lot if we give students the opportunity of writing about things that they normally write in their mother tongue, such as postcards, notes, essays, journals, etc. In this way students will see that there is a relationship between language use and context, as Coffin (2001: 95) points out: "One of the most important features of SFL is the way its theoretical framework is designed to explain the interrelationships between culture, society and language use."

Some of the theoretical principles of SFL that I am going to use in the article are connected with some of the ideas introduced in the seventies by the communicative approach, such as the use of realistic activities based on situations that students can experience in live, the presentation of language related to specific contexts at the discourse rather than the sentence level, the use of everyday materials (newspapers, magazines, etc.).

It is evident that effective writing requires a number of things such as a careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns and sentence structures; a high degree of organization in the development of ideas and information; the use of complex grammatical devices for focus and emphasis, etc. All these characteristics contribute to create a style which is appropriate to the subject matter and to interact with the readers.

## 2. MAIN ERRORS IN STUDENTS' TEXTS

The following list of errors was prepared by correcting and observing students' essays. This list of eleven errors is based on the most common problems I found in those essays since they were found in at least ten of the twenty essays I have analysed.

Observing these errors and correcting them was essential to provide students with feedback and to concentrate on some aspects of Text Linguistics and SFL that could help them to write better as I will argue in section three and four of this paper.

Students wrote about things related to their personal life in the essays: what they did during the weekend, during the holidays, their hobbies and family life, etc. The essays were written at home after I had explained in class the basic steps of the writing process.

The following errors have been found in at least ten of the twenty essays analysed- fifty per cent of students had these problems.

2.1. *Interlingual transfer*, interference with the native language, i.e. with the mother tongue: we cannot forget that the phonology and the grammar of the first language impose on the second language. As a result we find incorrect grammatical patterns, wrong vocabulary or incorrect pronunciation.

In the oral and the written language it was very frequent to use *Spanglish*, a phenomenon that is very much connected with mother tongue interference. *Spanglish* implies the creation of new words such: *deletear* (to delete, in Spanish *borrar*), *emailear* (to send and e-mail or to e-mail, in Spanish *mandar un correo electrónico*).

2.2. *Intralingual transfer* (within the target language itself) or overgeneralization:

Overgeneralization means that the learner creates rules to process new language, based on the evidence. E.g. *She prepared the party, danced all night and dranked all the lemonade*.

2.3. *Register and appropriacy*: in the written language, it is very common that students do not know how to use certain words in the appropriate register. For example, they tend to forget the word *please*, which is used quite often in English. It is also normal in adolescence to develop certain words that are only used between teenagers to communicate with friends but they have to be conscious that they cannot use those words in that context.

2.4. Another problem related to vocabulary is *false friends*: students have to be aware that there are certain words that are similar in form to words in their own language but the meaning is very different, for example "library" does not mean *librería* in Spanish (*librería* means "bookshop"); "in front of" does not mean *en frente de* (*en frente de* means "opposite to"), "constipate" does not mean *constiparse* (*constiparse* means "to get a cold"), etc.

2.5. *Spelling* is also a problem when students write: they can forget to double a letter, write a letter in a different place, write one letter instead of another as we can see in: "apropriate" instead of "appropriate", "highligh" instead of "highlight", "analisís" instead of "analysis", etc.

2.6. *The omission of particles* is also frequent, as the auxiliary in the present perfect, prepositions in phrasal verbs, omission of *-ing*: "I gone to the party" instead of "I have gone

to the party”, “I can not give smoking” instead of “I can not give up smoking”, “I look forward to hear from you” instead of “I look forward to hearing from you”, etc.

2.7. *Difficulties with subject-verb agreement*: it is quite common to find a plural subject with a verb in singular or vice versa i.e., a singular subject with a verb in plural, as we can see in the following two examples:

*Along the beach was several small boats that had been washed ashore (were)*  
*The lack of logic in his arguments never cease to surprise me (ceases)*

2.8. *Word order choices*: sometimes the main problems in written communication are connected with word order and syntax because students tend to write following the syntactic order that they find in their mother tongue or are not familiarised with the main syntactical patterns of the English language. They have to know that English is a SVO (subject, verb, object) language but they also have to be aware of structures such as cleft sentences, existential sentences, etc., in which the order SVO has certain modifications.

One of the main difficulties related to word order has to do with the position of adverbials:

*And I was that cold morning of November in a wonderful and rough countryside with my father.*  
*They were all the week planning my surprise party.[...] I was absolutely excited and I hardly could believe that my best friend was there.*

In a similar way, students have problems with inversion as the following examples point out:

*But not only I was fascinated by the things I saw but also by the people: they offer you all they have. [...]*  
*Then I decided to go towards him and ask him why he had given me that lighter, but when we were face to face I could not talk, I could not even see and neither he could.*

2.9. There were also difficulties with *faulty reference and pronominalization* in examples such as the following ones in which there is no agreement between the pronoun and the word it refers to or it is not clear what is the reference of the pronoun. These examples show that students did not keep in mind that pronouns must agree in number with their antecedents or that the antecedent of a pronoun must be clearly understood.

*If everybody who had come to the meeting had brought their report with them, the meeting would have gone a lot more smoothly.*  
*Many of the students explained his situation to me personally.*  
*Mary told Paula she had to read Platon's Republic (she can refer to Mary or Paula).*  
*Paul saw his friend as he was walking across the campus (he can refer to Paul or his friend).*

2.10. *Difficulties with theme and rheme and information structure.* Sometimes there was new information in the wrong position (at the beginning of the sentence) as we can see in this example:

*A variety of programs in leisure time for young people are taking place in order to solve the problem of leisure time at week-ends.*

2.11. *Difficulties with the use of active versus passive structures.* In the next example, *Steak was eaten by me last night*, students forget that the active voice should be used because we are interested in what the person did and not in what happened to the steak- what is done to it. We often prefer to begin a sentence with something that is already known or that we are already talking about (in this case 'I'), and to put new information ('the steak') at the end.

In the following example students are not aware that the passive voice should be used because we want to talk about an action (the action of building), but we are not interested in saying who or what does/did it.

*Workers built the road in two years at a cost of five million dollars.*

### **3. WAYS IN WHICH TEXT LINGUISTICS CONTRIBUTES TO INCREASE STUDENTS' LITERACY**

As teachers we should guide students and make clear they have to keep in mind several things to improve their literacy:

3.1. Students analyse the social purpose of different texts and discover that different text types occur in order to achieve different goals or social purposes. They have to be able to see the different stages in every text type. Butt et al. (2000: 10-13) offer the following division of text types:

- Recount
- Narrative
- Procedure
- Information report
- Explanation
- Exposition
- Discussion

3.2. Teachers have to help students to be aware of the different contexts surrounding them- the context of situation, the context of culture, etc. and they also have to teach students to create context in their written texts. When students understand context they are much more likely to write effectively.

3.3. Students have to be able to adapt texts to different contexts and situations. This implies a selection of the appropriate lexico-grammatical choices depending on the subject

matter and the text type. Students have to develop the ability to adapt the text to different audiences depending on their cultural and situational background. One of our roles as teachers is to remind our students that they need to co-operate with their intended readers and to point out the importance of interaction in writing.

3.4. Students need to know the different linguistic choices which construct degrees of formality in written texts and the different patterns of sequencing such as problem- solution or general-particular. In this way students get to know the structure, the social purpose and lexico-grammatical features of different text types.

3.5. Students should be aware of the structure of texts at different levels

- Theme/Rheme patterns
- Information structure (given/new)

This analysis offers the possibility of studying the effect that marked themes have in texts and the importance of thematic progression patterns to organise the information in a text (Continuous or 'constant', Linear or 'zig-zag' pattern and Split Rheme pattern).

Students should study nominalisation as an important resource for creating abstract and technical terms in written language. and for condensing information in texts, e.g.:

*More people live in urban areas today- there has been an increase in urbanisation.  
E.g. It is important to develop your ideas in a logical way- the logical development  
of ideas is very important.*

It is also important that students are familiar with grammatical metaphor and are able to transform examples such as:

*We walked in the evening near the castle to the beach **in examples such as the following:** Our evening walk near the castle took us to the beach.*

3.6. Introduce students to concepts that can help them to write better, such as the different cohesive devices introduced by Halliday and Hasan (1976): reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion.

3.7. Highlight that the written text should be a purposeful communication and that the goal is to create interaction through the written message.

The different aspects mentioned in the previous paragraphs related to teaching Text Linguistics help students to analyse texts critically and to be aware of the different types of texts, the linguistic characteristics of each type and the different resources they have to write good and effective texts.

#### 4. APPLICATIONS OF SFL TO THE ANALYSIS OF TEXTS

SFL has a very clear educational application, as I have already said in the introduction. Having SFL as a framework, I emphasized the following things to help students to improve their essays:

#### 4.1. See the text as authentic product

My purpose was that students saw writing as a way of communication. During the whole academic year I emphasized the writing process. Students were used to being given a topic and starting writing about it, without reflecting on the topic. The first step to correcting the habit of writing without reflecting was presenting the stages of the writing process: pre-writing, drafting, revising and editing. In this way, I wanted to give them the idea that the creation of writing is a process, not a product, whereas the final output is a product. For this reason, I wanted students to be aware that without following the process it was impossible to obtain a good product; both process and product must be taken into account; it is unreasonable to eliminate one.

I tried to convince students that writing good texts needs some degree of organization and planning. It is important to emphasize the idea that when we write we have to interact with the reader. That is the reason why students need to know the different interactive resources since it is largely through texts that individuals collaborate with others.

Students have to realize that when they create a text they have power because they can do things with their texts. In Halliday's words (1978: 27): "Language, [...] is a potential: it is what the speaker can do".

#### 4.2. Be aware of the different types of context

I believe that when students understand context they are much more likely to write effectively. This is the reason why the following paragraphs define the main types of contexts.

4.2.1 Context of culture (Genre): The term context of culture was coined by the anthropologist Malinowski (1923). He saw that in any appropriate description it was necessary to give information not only about what was taking place in that precise moment but also about the whole cultural environment, since in any type of linguistic interaction, in any type of conversational interchange, the only thing that counts is not the sounds and visions that surround the event but also the whole cultural history that is behind the participants and behind the social practices in which they take part, determining in this way their meaning inside that culture.

The context of culture can be described as the sum of all the meanings it is possible to mean in that particular culture. (Butt *et al.*, 2000: 3)

4.2.2 Context of situation (Register): The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski needed a term to refer to the whole environment of the text and that also included the situation in which the text was produced. He coined the term context of situation to refer to the environment of the text in an article written in 1923.

With the term context of situation we refer to all those extra-linguistic factors that are present in the text in any way. As Butt *et al.* (2000: 3) declare: "Within the context of culture, speakers and writers use language in many more specific contexts or situations. Each of these is an inner context, which functional linguists call the context of situation."

Leckie-Tarry (1995: 28) claims that when the writer does not have direct knowledge of the context of situation in which the text will be received, "the producer must construct a

possible context of situation for the text, which must derive from his/her background knowledge, that is knowledge of the context of culture, and the possible configurations of contextual elements which that context of culture allows.”

In the following paragraphs we are going to refer to two other types of context mentioned by Halliday and Hasan (1985: 48-49):

4.2.3 The intertextual context makes reference to the relationships between the text with other texts and to the deductions we can draw from those relationships.

4.2.4 With intratextual context we refer to the text’s internal coherence. This internal coherence is related to the meaning of the text. Halliday (1994: 339) states the following:

*For a text to be coherent, it must be cohesive; but it must be more besides. It must deploy the resources of cohesion in ways that are motivated by the register of which it is an instance; it must be semantically appropriate, with lexicogrammatical realizations to match (i.e. it must make sense); and it must have structure.*

4.2.5 The context of reference is the one created by the text, in Fowler’s words (1986: 89) it refers to “the topic or subject-matter of the text.”

4.2.6 As regards the “context of utterance”, it is the one that determines the situation in which discourse takes place and the relationship between the author, the narrator and the characters, in Fowler’s words (1986: 86):

*[...] context of utterance<sup>2</sup>, the situation within which discourse is conducted. This comprises: the physical surroundings; the location of the participants vis-à-vis<sup>3</sup> one another; whether they are two people talking face-to-face, one person addressing a large audience, two people speaking by telephone, a group of informal conversationalists scattered through a large room, or whatever; the channel employed, in particular whether speech or writing.*

#### 4.3. Revision of the variables of the context of situation

Field refers to what is taking place, to the nature of the social action, and to the objectives why we use language in a determined situation: “what is it that the participants are engaged in, in which the language figures as some essential component?” (Halliday, 1989: 12). The notion of field concentrates on the physical aspects of communication: the place and the moment in which discourse takes place (“setting”), the topic of the linguistic interchange (“subject-matter”), the objective of the message (“purpose”) and the speaker’s intention and attitude (“key”).

Tenor makes reference to the participants that take place in communication, to the roles and social positions that participants have: “what kind of role relationship obtains among the

<sup>2</sup> Italics appear in the original text.

<sup>3</sup> Italics appear in the original text.

participants, including permanent and temporary relationships of one kind or another, both the types of speech role that they are taking on in the dialogue and the whole cluster of socially significant relationships in which they are involved?" (Halliday, 1989: 12).

Without any doubt, the roles and the relationships between participants carry with them a social interest. The participants are: the "sender"/"addresser", from whom information starts- the person that writes or talks; the "addressee"/"receiver"- the person to whom the message is addressed or anyone receiving the message.

Mode refers to the role that language plays, to what participants expect language to do for them in that situation: the symbolic organization of text, its function in context, including the channel (if it is written or oral or a combination of both) and also its rhetorical component, i.e., if we are able to persuade, teach, state, etc. through the text.

This concept is clearly connected with the "medium", the channel of communication used. The selection of one medium or channel implies some inherent restrictions to that "mode", for example, for oral channels, the dialogue normally follows ordered intervention shifts, meanwhile there is never an answer in a monologue, and that is the reason why we have to take into consideration the rules of interaction and interpretation.

#### **4.4. Theme and rheme and information structure**

When I had to explain to students the structure of the sentences they had written I did not use terms like Theme or Rheme; I referred to them as the beginning and ending of sentences.

Sometimes there was new information in the wrong position (at the beginning of the sentence) as we can see in: *A lot of people from Africa and South America are coming to work in the shops of the city*, where the new information is right at the beginning of the sentence.

With examples like this, I could explain to students that the theme coincides normally with 'known information' and 'new information' is to be found in the rheme. An analysis of theme requires an examination of the text as a whole. Then, students see how in good writing new information is often introduced at the end of one sentence and referred to at the beginning of the next.

I wanted to point out the importance of the principles of 'end-focus' and 'end-weight': last is more important and the heavier part of the structure is normally at the end of the sentence as we can see in extrapositions.

#### **4.5. Revision of the different cohesive devices following Halliday and Hasan, (1976) (cf. section three)**

### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

Text Linguistics and SFL are two essential disciplines that help students improve their writing for several reasons:

Firstly, Text Linguistics offers the tools for the analysis of grammatical features in written texts, such as: the different stages of texts, theme and rheme position, lexical choices (technical vocabulary, descriptive vocabulary, vocabulary of judgement or attitude), processes

of verbs, noun groups (nominalization, extended noun groups), cohesion (types of conjunctions, types of reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical cohesion). When students are able to analyse these features, they can predict the context of the text and at the same time they learn to use these grammatical features in their written texts and improve their level of literacy.

Secondly, when students learn Text Linguistics they become aware of the different genres they can use depending on their communicative purpose, the audience, the level of formality, etc. This is essential so that students can see how members of a culture use written texts as part of their social lives and they can conclude that the purpose of a genre determines its shape, i.e., its schematic structure. This subject also helps students to develop understanding of the language they are learning and helps them to use it effectively.

Next, Text Linguistics focuses on the relationship between texts and the context in which those texts occur and offers tools for the analysis of texts. In this way we can see an educational application of this subject since it teaches students to operate in social contexts depending on their social needs.

It is important that students keep in mind that they can understand a culture by paying attention to all texts that are produced in that culture. This subject helps students to learn that texts cannot be considered autonomously because they always go together with historical, social, etc. factors.

A SFL approach is suitable for the interpretation of 'text and context' and 'language learning and development'. I have tried to apply SFL to the analysis of texts in order to help students to write better or more easily since the language class is to be the place where individuals can experiment with communication. Having SFL as framework to analyse students' texts my intention was to pay attention to the importance of the organisation of information at text level and to see the text as a social product reflecting the social context in which it is written since there is a connection between form and meaning.

The main problems I have observed in the bilingual education program under analysis are the following: the competence of one of the two languages, normally the mother tongue, is superior to the other; mixture of the two languages and creation of linguistic phenomena such as *Spanglish*; grammatical problems such as faulty reference, word order choices, parallelisms, etc.; students rebel against the majority group's language and culture and show no interest for learning, etc.

Some possible solutions to these problems are: the importance of the teacher in the process of helping students to learn that the two languages and the two cultures taking part in bilingual programs provide students with positive elements that complement; the second language enriches the students' way of thinking and communicating. In this way, students will become balanced individuals, that is to say, they will have an equivalent competence in both languages. Bilingual education also enriches students' way of thinking since they are in contact with two cultures. This lets us speak of cultural pluralism, which implies a better understanding of different realities, values, ways of acting, etc. This is connected with the inclusion of culture in the classroom, which can be done through teaching through genre or text types. Since teachers want to make L2 learners literate, we have to help them to activate and automatize the linguistic pattern. In order to do so L2 teaching has to encourage the search for meaning through interaction and, that is why we have to bring culture into the classroom.

Other solutions are the revision of the different cohesive devices, types of context and

variables of the context of situation, the concepts of theme and rheme and information structure. The revision of the writing process is also important so that students see that the structure of the text needs to be planned in advance and that the structure of the text and the lexico-grammatical choices are not random because they depend on the subject matter and the text type.

It is necessary to emphasize that language is a tool and it is necessary to learn to use it because language is always connected with communication and opportunities to work, travel, discovering other cultures, etc.

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