

# TEACHING WRITING TO INDONESIAN EFL LEARNERS WITH SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS INSTRUCTION

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## **Abstract**

*Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) has obvious impacts on teaching writing. However, many language teachers are doubtful to use SFL instruction in their classroom. In this research, I studied the implementation of SFL in English writing class. I taught Indonesian university students and observed the teaching process. In teaching writing, I combined the SFL with Genre Based Approach (GBA) and Collaborative Learning (CL). From the observation, I offered three considerations for preparing a writing class with SFL instruction.*

**Keywords:** Theme, Rheme, SFL, Academic Writing, TEFL

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Writing is a challenging activity for learners of a second or a foreign language. It is a proficiency that they have to do well in the academic affairs. The ability to write good academic essays is widely considered as one of the key features of a higher education. So, when the learners are asked to write, they find that the most difficult part of the writing task is starting the writing task itself.

In the English as Foreign Language (EFL) setting, the learners often write paragraphs or essays consisting of sentences which are not connected together into a cohesive text. Writing might be difficult. It requires active thinking during a continuous creative process where ideas are transferred into a cohesive and coherent text, not only words and letters on paper.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) could be a good alternative instruction to teach English writing. SFL is one of the main functional theories of language. It has had an influence on educational studies throughout the world and its most noticeable impact has been on teaching writing (Emilia, 2010).

However, many Indonesian teachers are hesitant to use SFL in their language class. They come with some principle questions, like how should SFL be taught to their students? Implicitly or explicitly? Is it the same as when the students are introduced to the aspects of traditional or generative grammar? How should syllabus and teaching materials be prepared? What technique is appropriate with SFL? These questions are really reasonable because SFL is a language theory that is different from other theories of language in several respects. Its view of grammar and text is distinctive. First, to SFL scholars the grammar used to construct text is not a set of abstract rules which could be applied to all texts. It is a system of choices regarding to aim, context, and audience (Thompson, 2004).

This research departs from the most basic question: how SFL should be applied. Although, in the end, this study has not answered all the

language teachers' questions, it offers some aspects to start a writing class with SFL instruction. In this research, I conducted teaching to university students who had not been introduced to SFL before and observed the teaching process. I started my teaching with explicit teaching instruction, to the combination of genre based approach (GBA) and Collaborative Learning (CL). The observation results lead to the conclusion which is open to further research.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) views language as a resource of meaning construction. It attempts to portray language in real use and enormously focus on text and its context. It is concerned not only with the structure but also how meaning is resulted by the structure (Gerot, 1994). SFL postulates a model of language which really helps EFL teachers and students understand how text works to create meaning; this in sequence facilitates teachers to improve their students' interpretation and production of text. This model of language elaborates the connection between context and text.

All meaning is situated in a context of culture and in a context of situation. Context of culture is the sum of all the meanings in a culture. It determines its members' identity, manner, and speaking. Context of situation is the sum of the motivating textual features. It is specified with the use of three variables: *field*, *tenor* and *mode*. Field of discourse specifies what is going on with reference to what; it constructs *ideational meaning* – meaning about phenomena (living and non-living, abstract and concrete things). Tenor of discourse refers to the social relationships between participants who take part; it creates *interpersonal meaning* – meaning which express a speaker's attitudes and judgments. Mode of discourse refers to how language is being used, whether the channel of communication is spoken or written or language is being used as a mode of action or reflection. Mode constructs *textual meaning* expressing the relation of language to its verbal and non-verbal surroundings (Butt, 2000; Gerot, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

### 2.2 Theme and Rheme

Theme-Rheme is one of elements realising a textual meaning. It is a structure that conveys a "line of meaning". The structure presents the distribution of information within a clause. Theme is defined as "the point of departure" of the message (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), and normally serves to present given information which has been previously mentioned or understood as a common knowledge from a particular context. Rheme is the second part of the clause which is developed by Theme and usually contains unfamiliar information, or new knowledge which a writer assumes his/her readers do not know.

**Figure 1. Theme-Rheme Structure**

The duke My aunt That teapot	Has given my aunt that teapot Has been given that teapot by the duke The duke has given to my aunt
<b>Theme</b>	<b>Rheme</b>

Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) describes a clause as construing “a quantum of human experience” of a process, the participants in that process, and/or any circumstantial factors involved. He stresses the Theme of a clause always has “one, and only one, of these experiential elements”, that is process, participant, or circumstance. This theme is called *topical* Theme. Topical Theme could be preceded by other elements which are textual and/or interpersonal themes. Textual Theme involves continuative, conjunction, and conjunctive adjunct. Interpersonal Theme includes modal or comment adjunct, vocative, and finite verbal operator.

**Figure 2. Multiple Theme**

Well	but	Then	surely	Jean	Wouldn't	The best idea	Be to join in (?)
Cont Theme	Stru	Conj	Modal	Voc	Finite	Topical	Rheme

(Halliday, 2004)

### 2.3 Thematic Progression

Thematic progression refers to the exchanging flow of information between Themes-Rhemes in a text (Eggin, 1994). If Theme is the “writer’s point of departure”, and then Rheme is the “temporary destination”. The writer must realise that s/he has to put interesting or important information in Rheme. All new meanings in the first part of a clause are hard to be expected (Butt, 2000).

Eggin (1994) classifies three main patterns of thematic progression: *constant Theme*, *zigzag Theme*, and *multiple Theme pattern*.

#### a) Constant Theme Pattern

In this pattern, the first theme is repeated in the beginning of the next clause. For example:

*A good teacher (Theme 1) needs to be understanding to all children. He or she (Theme 2) must also be fair and reasonable. The teacher (Theme 3) must work at a sensible pace and not one thing after another (Butt, 2000).*

**Figure 3. Constant Thematic Progression**

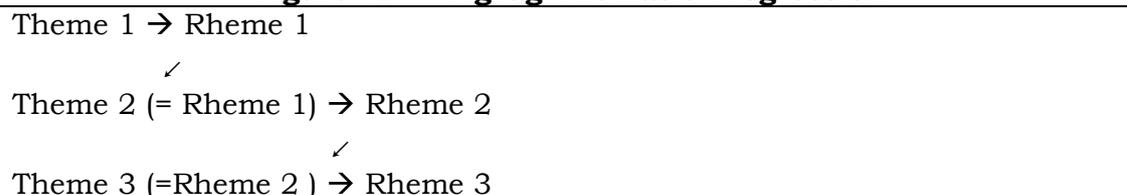
Theme 1 → Rheme 1
↓
Theme 2 (= Theme 1) → Rheme 2
↓
Theme 3 (=Theme 1 = Theme 2) → Rheme 3

#### b) Zigzag Theme Pattern

In this thematic progression, Rheme of one clause is taken up as Theme of the following clause. For example:

*Phonetic and phonology are concerned with speech with the ways in which humans produce and hear speech. Talking and listening are so much part of human life ... (Butt, 2000).*

**Figure 4. Zigzag Thematic Progression**



c) Multiple Theme Pattern

In this pattern, Rheme of a clause has multiple components, each of which is taken in turn as Theme of the next clauses. For example:

*It is possible to distinguish three auditory dimensions or parameters of phonation: loudness, pitch, and quality of sound that is sometimes called ‘timbre’. Perceived loudness is related to sub glottal pressure. Pitch is the perceptual correlate of the frequency of vibration of the vocal folds. The frequency...* (Butt, 2000)

**Figure 4. Multiple Thematic Progression**



## 2.4 Teaching Writing with SFL

In Australia, it has been developed the SFL genre-based approach (GBA) to teaching writing. It is called interventionist pedagogy or pedagogy of overt instruction (Emilia, 2010). Emilia (2010) provided four stage to implement the SFL GBA approach, based on her research in a language program at the secondary level. The stages are as follows:

a) Building knowledge of the field (Negotiating Field)

This phase aims to build learners’ knowledge about the topic they are going to write. The background knowledge is important to trigger the learners’ critical thinking.

b) Modelling (Deconstruction)

This very critical phase involves analysis and discussion about how and why examples of a specific genre are organised to make meaning. It allows the learners to analyse the representation of a text, then understand the world.

c) Joint Construction

This phase gives an opportunity to students to practice writing in groups and use their critical writing skill in working in groups, in discussing with peers, which creates a way to encourage critical thinking.

d) Independent Construction

In this stage, the learners practice individually their skills they grasped from the previous stage.

## **2.5 Explicit or Direct Teaching Instruction**

The term explicit or direct instruction has been used to refer to any educational instruction that is led by the teacher. This term appeared in 1893 in Joseph Meyer Rice's book, *The Public School System of the United States*. Rice criticised "in many of the grades the children received direct instruction for no more than two or two and a half of the five hours spent in school, the pupils being engaged in busy-work more than half the time" (Roshenshine, 2008).

This instruction aims "to direct learner attention and to exploit pedagogical grammar in this regard" (Doughty & Williams, 1998). It gives learners conscious attention to form. Muranoi (in Maeda, 2011) states the effectiveness of this instruction. First, by providing linguistic information explicitly, learners' development of the interlanguage could be accelerated. Secondly, by teaching forms explicitly, the learners will focus on linguistic forms of the input. This also helps learners to be sensitive to their grammatical errors and to correct them.

## **2.6 Collaborative Learning**

Collaborative learning (CL) is an approach to teaching and learning that involves groups of learners working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product (Laal & Laal, 2012). Johnson et al (in Laal & Laal, 2012) suggested five basic elements in CL.

### a. Clearly perceived positive interdependence

Team members are bound to rely on one another to reach the goal. If any team members fail to do their job, everyone gets consequences. All members need to understand that they are connected to each.

### b. Considerable interaction

Members help and support each other to learn. They do this by explaining what they understand and by understanding and sharing knowledge.

### c. Individual accountability and personal responsibility

All members are held accountable for doing their share of the work and for comprehending of the whole classroom material.

### d. Social skills

Team members are persuaded and helped to create and practice trust-building, leadership, decision-making, communication, and conflict management skills.

### e. Group self-evaluating

Team members set group goals, at times measure what they are doing well as a team, and identify changes they will make to work more effectively in the future.

## **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

I conducted this research to Indonesian EFL learners, who are 75 third-semester students of UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung. The learners belonged to three different classes. This research was run in the reading-writing connection session which is a part of Reading for Comprehension III class. The total of classroom meetings was five. I observed and reviewed teaching and learning process of each meeting.

## 4. RESULT

### 4.1 Learners' First Writing

In the first meeting, the learners were asked to read a woman magazine article on how to win at marriage, taken from the book of Genuine Article by Catherine Walter. After their reading, the learners did the task on summary skill. In this task, they were given 13 statements regarding the article and decided whether the statements were true or false. Subsequently, the learners wrote a paragraph summarising the article.

The task-summary results gave me two good illustrations on the learners' competence. First, they had good reading comprehension. 80% of them could correctly determine which statements were relevant to the ideas conveyed in the article. They were just a little confused to understand ideas of supposition paragraphs.

Second, even if they were good in reading comprehension, they were pretty bad in writing. They usually made no-clause sentence, e.g. *'Second step, screaming and yelling to express your anger...'* They also failed to transfer their grasp on the article to their paragraph. Some students wrote irrelevant sentences, not stated in the article, e.g. *'There are many problems in marriage such as fight caused economic problem'*. Some student made contradictive statements. For example, a student wrote *'Third, cry if you like'* – this was against the original sentence from the article is *'Cry, if you like. But be sure you're not crying out of a failure to say what you mean'*. He was unsuccessful to bring the article's complete message on *'crying'* to their writing. Additionally, they failed to keep their writing cohesive, e.g. *'The article tells about how the women wit at marriage when they get mad with her couple and tells several solution for her to make... Don't expect to win when we get mad...'* Lastly, many of them wrote incoherent paragraph, e.g. a no-topic-sentence paragraph or a poor topic development.

### 4.2 Teaching Theme-Rheme

At the second meeting, I delivered the materials on Theme-Rheme with direct teaching instruction. The materials involved the notion of SFL, Thematic system, unmarked and marked Theme and Thematic progression. This long lecture became less interactive. Many learners also reported their confusion; they were hard to grasp the intention of the whole lecture. At the end of the meeting, I gave them a group task. They had to identify Theme-Rheme and Thematic progression of two texts. The task result showed that they could distinguish Theme-Rheme of simple and compound sentences well. They were merely confused by Thematic system of complex sentences. Moreover, they could not recognize the Theme development if the next sentence is complex.

At the third meeting, I decided to apply teacher-cantered instruction and CL technique together to build a more interactive classroom. In the beginning, I delivered the material of given and new information. Then, I gave them two texts to compare and to choose which text is less coherent. The first text was taken from their first writings and the second was the corrected version of the first text. At this point, they could learn the material from their own errors.

Afterward, I initiated them to a collaborative writing. This activity was intended to respond their difficulty to summarise a long text. In this

activity, they learned to summarise information in charts, graphs or tables, to organise the key information, and to present it in a good paragraph. To start the activity, I showed them a simple bar chart. I told them to read the trend in the chart. Most learners failed to read the trend. Then, we all together noted and organised important ideas in the chart with mind-mapping, which was drawn on the whiteboard. After the mind-mapping was finished, I asked one of them to write a topic sentence representing the main idea of the chart, and then the other children to continue the sentence. They were enthusiastic to do this activity. Once they finished their paragraph, I gave a review.

At the fourth meeting, I continued the combination of teacher-centered instruction and CL technique. I strengthened their ability to read and write a description of charts, graphs and tables. I explained the schematic structure of descriptive text and provided some powerful words to describe any number change. Then, the learners did collaborative writings to describe more complex charts and tables.

At the fifth meeting, I gave them a writing test. They were asked to read two pie charts, which showed information about American spending in 1966 and 1999, then to write a 250-word paragraph about the charts.

### **4.3 Learners' Final Writing**

Learners' final writings were enhanced. Most of them wrote a more cohesive and coherent paragraph. No learner made no-clause sentences. They also successfully transferred information in the pie charts to their writing. However, some of them still did some silly grammatical mistakes, e.g. "*Book is decrease become 6% in 1966 from 1% in 1996*" and "*American spending on food decline 28% from 44% in 1966 to 16% in 1996*". Then, many of them were preferred to repeat a word instead of using it synonym, e.g. "*The pie charts above, shows the changes in American spending patterns in 1966 and 1996. It displayed American spending ... Percentage of American spending pattern on ...*"

## **5. DISCUSSION**

The learners' low participation at the second meeting was resulted by the poor design of teaching material. It did not convey the SFL perspective on text and context. The whole teaching aspects with SFL instruction has to allow learners to bring their real language use to the classroom. Teaching language with SFL, at this point, means two things, teaching SFL and it grammar and teaching language from the perspective of SFL.

The four stages postulated by Emilia (2010) could be adopted in this research. These stages were referred to design material and classroom management. To complete the stages, I implemented CL. I designed a collaborative writing activity which effectively promoted the learners' participation in the classroom. With this combination the learners' critical thinking was gradually developed as well. They, at the forth meeting, began to discuss and express constructive criticism. In addition, this combination facilitated me to organise a large classroom and to give feedback to the learners' writing.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

SFL is a distinctive theory of language in some aspects. However, this is not an actual obstacle to implementing SFL in writing classes. SFL is very likely to be applied and has proven effective in teaching writing long before

this research. The possible problem is that teaching writing with SFL instruction is not departed from the perspective of SFL. To avoid this problem, from the research result I suggested the following:

- a) SFL and its grammar have to be explicitly introduced to learners; however this introduction should be connected to learners' real language use. Learners need to know and understand the significance of SFL to their language development.
- b) Learners require example texts before they start writing. They will analyse the texts' schematic structure and how the texts are organised to construct meaning.
- c) Collaborative task is an excellent classroom activity. It gives learners a change to practice their writing skill in a group before they practice individually. It triggers their critical thinking as well.

## **7. Further Research**

This research finding is really open to further research. The next study should be focused on the following matters:

- a) Teaching other aspects of SFL in writing class
- b) The design of teaching material for writing class with SFL instruction
- c) The implementation of SFL GBA in teaching other text genres at the university level
- d) The implementation of SFL GBA in teaching other language skills

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