

A critical assessment on “*A Writing Apprenticeship for Sixth-Grade English Learners: An Application of the Theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics*”

I. Introduction

“*A Writing Apprenticeship for Sixth-Grade English Learners: An Application of the Theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics*” is a research article in terms of the application of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) in English writing teaching and learning studied by Christina Pavlak from Quinnipiac university, and Tracy Hodgson-drysdale, from Lesley university. This study is aimed at applying theories of the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and the Teaching and Learning Cycle (TLC) in the sixth-grade English teaching in an American school to enhance writing instruction of teachers and improve writing skill of students. This essay tries to critique this research article from 3 aspects: scientific method, methodology and results and relevance to theory.

II. Theoretical considerations

In this article, researchers attempted to explore how teachers can develop the theoretical underpinnings of teaching writing through using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a guide and Teaching and Learning Cycle (TLC) as a key strategy to scaffold sixth-grade English learners’ English writing ability as result.

1. The application of SFL in the research

Systematic functional linguistics (SFL), as one of several approaches to analyse the form and function of language, is “*a theoretical approach that analyzes the relationship between social contexts and linguistic aspects*” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). According to the SFL theory, language can be regarded as a social semiotic system, people need to understand and apply language from a functional perspective. Writing texts are “*determined by their social purpose and the situations in which they are produced*” (Schleppegrell, 2004). Therefore, understanding the particular text genre, which is different type of text constructed in similar and recognizable ways, is

crucial for writing. In this article, researchers constructed the SFL-informed writing instruction by applying the “genre” theory of SFL in the definition of writing purposes and trained English writing teachers to apply the SFL-informed writing instruction in practical teaching. The writing purposes have been refined into four aspects by researchers: “storytelling, giving instructions, organizing information, and persuading”, each purpose is associated with different genres.

This study attempts to further deepen teachers' understanding of the genre of texts by familiarising them with and differentiating between the four potential purposes of writing in school and applying the SFL-informed writing instruction, thus further improving their ability to teach English writing. This is a beneficial attempt to combine the SFL theory with practical teaching of English writing, which will help improve English writing teaching methods and achieve teaching objectives.

However, this research does not go far enough into the application of SFL in English writing classes. In fact, the application of SFL theory in English writing classes could be much deeper and broader. Firstly, the notions of register and genre in SFL can both be applied into English writing teaching, for making students aware of the sociocultural features of text type and enabling students to make more appropriate language choices in English writing (Alyousef, Alyahya, 2018). Secondly, the application of SFL's meta-language theory can also help teachers to grasp a way of talking about language when teaching English writing. Besides, this research did not explain the process of constructing SFL-informed writing instruction, which may cause readers to have a vague sense of the application of SFL theory.

2. The application of TLC in the research

The Teaching-Learning Cycle (TLC) is a framework for teaching and learning that supports academic writing through academic discussion, interactive reading, deep and critical thinking tasks, and language development. Through the Teaching-Learning Cycle method, students are able to examine and interpret particular written texts, practise writing the same type of text and use the tools to write independently to support their ideas about texts and the language they use, as well as self-evaluation

(Spycher, P, 2017). Due to its ability to combine theory and practice, TLC has become an entry point for teachers to apply SFL theory in the classroom (Brisk, 2015). In this research, researchers tried to train the English writing teacher to apply these four phases of TLC theory to scaffold students' English writing ability, which is "negotiating field, deconstruction, joint construction, and independent construction".

The researchers provided a detailed account of the process of applying these four aspects of TLC to the practice of teaching English writing, and explained how teachers can clarify the rules of English writing in terms of both genre structure and linguistic resources, so that students learn to control these resources for creating meaningful texts.

Where it falls short is that there is too much use of the two phrases: construction and joint construction and not enough mention of the role of negotiating field and independent construction. Furthermore, the process of combination of TLC method with SFL theory has not been explained clearly, and it feels like for readers both methods are used independently of each other in the teaching of English writing.

III. Methodology

1. Research design and data collection

For purpose of exploring how teachers can develop the theoretical underpinnings of teaching writing and how English learners' writing ability can be cultivated by implanting the SFL theory and applying the TLC method in English teaching class, this study chose a six-grade class in St. Elizabeth School as a place for experimentation, which is located northeast United States. The researchers trained the class's English writing teacher, Chloe Quin, in SFL theory and TLC methods to equip her with relevant methods for teaching writing, and evaluated the results through her effectiveness in the English writing class.

This study relies on qualitative data, mainly consisting of field notes from class observations and regular conferences with teachers, and students' writing samples. The researchers coded the collected data and then analysed the field notes and records from classroom visits and meetings using an iterative procedure.

This research design is conducive to the researcher's intuitive experience of the whole process of applying SFL theory and TLC methods to English writing teaching and learning, and enable the researchers to receive immediate pedagogical feedback, identify shortcomings in the teaching methods, and modify and improve them. The entire research process creates a cycle of positive interaction. Meanwhile, through reading the field notes from class observations, researchers are able to visually assess the effectiveness of the teaching.

The shortcomings of this research design and methodology are, firstly, that researchers were unable to analyse scientifically this field notes collected for the study and could only look for trends in these data. Secondly, the data sources were collected only from filed notes and transcripts of observations and teacher conferences, students' writing samples, and the lack of direct assessment and feedback from students on the effectiveness of teaching made the data collection incomplete. Thirdly, this study purely relies on qualitative research, the lack of quantitative research analysis leads to a lack of credibility of the results and the inability to identify the extent to which specific teaching effects have been improved.

2. Participants

The English writing teacher, Chloe's teaching targets are 21 six-grade students aged from 11 to 12, with English language skills range from WIDA level 3 to native English speakers, including students who are functioning two years below grade level to those at grade.

In terms of participants, It was appropriate for researchers to select students with bilingual backgrounds as object of teaching experiment. Due to the different rhetoric traditions in different cultural backgrounds, the application of SFL information writing teaching is particularly important for bilingual students learning English writing. However, the varying levels of English language skill of the laboratory students and the mixture of L1 and L2 students can also lead to confusion about the teaching objectives, which is ultimately detrimental to the final experimental results.

Besides, the number of students involved in the experiment was too small - only 21 - to establish sufficient reliability for results.

3. Duration

In addition to a full-day summer institute, the time spent on training teachers to master SFL theory in this research also included a monthly two-hour meeting with faculty members in the following academic year. And the time to actually put SFL theory into practice in the English writing teaching classroom was 6 weeks. The six-week teaching is aimed at finishing a particular writing genre instruction, which enables the researcher to analyse the effectiveness of a targeted unit of writing teaching in a short period of time and to evaluate the effectiveness of the application of SFL and TCL theory to the teaching of English writing in a particular genre.

On the other hand, the limit of practice duration also raises the question of whether the results of this experiment can be applied to the teaching of English writing in a long-term context.

IV. Results and relevance to theory

In this study, researchers summarized two results. Firstly, Chloe's writing teaching instruction was directly aligned with SFL and TLC theories. She made good use of SFL's genre theory and TLC phrases method in her instruction.

Secondly, nearly all students in Chloe's writing class started to develop an awareness of choosing language according to the purpose of writing, and became more familiar with the requirements of the narrative genre and built up a strong community of writers.

The first result in the study clearly shows that by mastering and applying the relevant SFL theories, the English writing teacher has improved her teaching methods. She shifted her focus on helping students to distinguish the purpose of writing and therefore the language in which it is written (based on genre theory in SFL). In the same way, the English writing teacher utilized the phases of the TLC method to help students to distinguish the purpose for each writing topic and teach them how to write

personal recount independently. What's more, Chloe initiated a student apprenticeship model to scaffold student's writing ability through innovative application of "joint Construction" phase in the TLC theory, which achieved good results.

However, it's hard to prove the second result. Although the researchers claimed that students involved in this study had developed an awareness of writing genre and language choice, then built up a strong community of writers of writing as a result, The data from this study, field notes from the teaching class and teacher's conference, and students' writing examples (only single genre writing samples over 6 weeks), do not demonstrate a significant increase in students' writing awareness and writing skills. There is a lack of strong evidence between the data and the results the researchers claim.

V. Conclusion

By using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a guide and Teaching and Learning Cycle (TLC) as a key strategy, this study provided some answers to the question of how to improve the pedagogical knowledge and skills of English writing teachers and enhance the writing skills of students, and offered a sample of relevant experiments and results. At the same time, during this study, the English writing teacher's innovative applications of the 'joint construction' phase in the TLC theory in the teaching of English writing - Student Apprenticeship Model, one of the highlights of the experiment, will provide new ideas for the further application of TLC theory in teaching practice.

On the other hand, the inadequate sample size and duration of the experiment and the single research method resulted in only one of the two research objectives of the study being fully achieved, the other should be supported by a more varied research data and research samples. Furthermore, the results of the study cannot be generalized as a general theory on a larger scale.

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