

## Redefining conceptions of grammar in English education in Asia: SFL in practice

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### *Abstract*

This case study analyzes how a Taiwanese EFL teacher participating in a U.S. based MATESOL program made sense of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and genre based pedagogy in designing and reflecting on literacy instruction for EFL learners in Taiwan. Using longitudinal ethnographic methods, the findings indicate that this teacher's conceptualization of grammar shifted from a traditional sentence-level, form-focused perspective to a more functional understanding operating in interconnected ways across genre and register features of texts. This shift occurred as she developed an ability to use SFL to discover how language works in children's literature. However, the degree to which this teacher was able to use SFL and genre based pedagogy in classroom practice was influenced by the mandated curriculum framework and assessment practices in the context of where she taught when she returned to Taiwan. The implications of this study relate to re-conceptualizing grammar in EFL instruction and teacher education in Asian contexts.

**Keywords:** Systemic functional linguistics; Genre theory; Children's literature; EFL literacy; L2 teacher education

### **Introduction**

The changing role of English as a global language has placed new demands on learners of English in Asian<sup>1</sup> contexts. These demands involve using English to learn disciplinary knowledge, communicate for scholarly exchanges, carry out economic and political transactions, and participate in various communities of practice where varieties of world "Englishes" are used for social, academic, and professional purposes

(Pennycook, 2007, p. 30; see also Crystal, 2003; Hasan & Akhand, 2010; James, 2008; Matsuda & Matsuda, 2010; Warschauer, 2000).

In response to these new demands, policymakers have enacted reforms aimed at improving students' English proficiency by pushing English education into earlier levels of schooling and mandating teachers adopt a more communicative approach to English language teaching (Butler, 2011; Hiep, 2007; Kirkgoz, 2008). However, to date, it is unclear if these reforms are enhancing students' English proficiency, especially their ability to read and write academically. Rather, many EFL students

<sup>1</sup>Asia is broadly defined as part of the world in or near the Western Pacific ocean. We define it as Asian Pacific regions to include countries in continental and insular Asia as well as Oceania.

continue to graduate from high school and even college with only the most rudimentary level of English language proficiency—a level that will not support them as they enter global communities where English is used to negotiate disciplinary, social, institutional, and professional goals. We argue that these unsatisfactory results are due to a wide variety of complex factors, one of which is how the field of second language acquisition has conceptualized grammar in teacher education programs. In an attempt to respond to this issue, we call for a critical reconceptualization of how grammar is understood and taught within Asian contexts in elementary and secondary schools. Specifically, we suggest that Halliday's understanding of grammar as a meaning-making resource provides English language teachers, teacher educators, policymakers, and researchers working in Asia with new and potentially more productive ways of providing English language and literacy instruction.

Halliday's conception of grammar as a semiotic resource stands in contrast to a Skinnerian perspective of grammar that advocates teachers drill and practice language forms or structural patterns (e.g., the audiolingual method). It also stands in contrast to a Chomskian perspective of grammar that maintains students develop linguistic competence through natural communication (e.g., the natural approach; see Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Rather, Halliday's meaning-making perspective of grammar shifts the focus of instruction away from drilling and practicing language forms or playing communicative games onto supporting students in developing a metacognitive awareness of language patterns, variations, choices, and styles as they make meaning with various interlocutors, for multiple purposes, and across different contexts. This awareness is what Kramsch and Whiteside call "symbolic competence," which they argue

should be the goal for second/foreign language education in today's globalized and multilingual world (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 667).

In making a call for a reconsideration of what grammar is and how it develops within second/foreign language classrooms, we provide an overview of Halliday's theory of SFL and how scholars such as Jim Martin (2009) have developed an SFL based pedagogy to support L1 and L2 students in negotiating the demands of the types of texts students routinely are required to read and write in learning disciplinary knowledge in English in school. Next, we report on a longitudinal ethnographic case study of how a Taiwanese teacher we call "Chenling" attempted to make sense of SFL and genre based pedagogy over the course of her participation in a MATESOL program in the United States and in her first year of teaching in a rural Taiwanese middle school. Aspects of this study were previously published in Gebhard, Chen, Graham, and Gunawan (2013). However in this article we focus more specifically on how Chenling used SFL to analyze culturally relevant literary texts as a way of teaching language, literacy, and culture as she transitioned from her MATESOL program to her first year in the classroom in Taiwan. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of this case study in light of a call for a more functional conception of grammar in EFL classrooms in Asia.

### **Grammar as a meaning-making resource**

A functional perspective of grammar is rooted in Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (SFL). This perspective attempts to explain how people get things done with language and other semiotic means within the cultural context in which they interact (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). As the name of Halliday's theory suggests, language is systemic in that it

involves users making functional semiotic choices that operate simultaneously at the phonological, lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels depending on the cultural context in which communication is negotiated. In other words, when we use language, we choose, consciously and unconsciously, particular ways of pronouncing or graphically rendering words, making grammatical constructions, and creating coherence across stretches of discourse depending on the nature of the content we are trying to communicate (everyday or discipline specific), who we are trying to communicate with (familiar or unfamiliar), and the mode through which interactions take place (oral, written, or computer-mediated). These choices reflect and construct the ideas we wish to express, the social relations we are trying to establish and maintain, and how we wish to manage the flow of communication to achieve the purposes of interaction.

In articulating this context-sensitive perspective of language, Halliday (1975) maintains that all semiotic practices involve three metafunctions that act simultaneously. The ideational metafunction realizes ideas and experiences (e.g., the subject matter or content of a text); the interpersonal metafunction constructs social relations (e.g., social status and social distance); and the textual metafunction manages the flow of information to make discourse cohesive and coherent (e.g., weaving given and new information together across extended exchanges of information in conversation or written text). Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) summarize this perspective by stating that “every message is both about something and addressing someone” and that the flow of information in a message is organized to create “cohesion and continuity as it moves along” (p. 30).

From this social semiotic perspective, grammar is understood as a resource for

making meaning in context, not as a set of decontextualized rules or list of fixed edicts regarding correct usage. Rather, grammar is a dynamic system of linguistic choices that expands as language learners are apprenticed to constructing a greater variety of meanings in a wider number of contexts. Halliday (1993) writes that this view of grammar as a semiotic resource “opens up a universe of meaning, a multidimensional semantic space that can be indefinitely expanded and projected” (p. 97).

In drawing on Halliday’s conception of grammar to theorize second language and literacy development, Gebhard, Chen, Graham, and Gunawan (2013) write that not only do L2 learners physically and cognitively mature as they grow up and learn varieties of the same language and additional languages, but the culture contexts in which they interact also expand and become more diverse as they move back and forth among family, community, peer groups, social media, school, and eventually work. As these contexts expand, the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions realized through language and other semiotic means also expand and become more syntagmatically and paradigmatically diverse, creating more meaning potential and choices within the system. This diversification drives the development of the L2 learners’ semiotic resources in regard to phonology/graphology, lexicogrammar, and discourse semantics as well as the evolution of the system as a whole (Gebhard, et al., 2013, p. 109; see also Halliday, 1993).

### **SFL based pedagogy**

The expanding social contexts and associated semiotic activities in which language learners participate construct what Martin calls different genres. Martin (1992) defines genres as “staged, goal-oriented social process[es]” (p. 505). Within the culture of schools, these social

processes include such activities as reading literary narratives in English, describing a classification system in science, arguing a perspective regarding historical events in social studies, or explaining a statistical analysis in mathematics. Following Halliday and Martin, we maintain that as L2 learners participate in these expanding social networks in and out of school, they use different genres in both their first and second languages and are socialized into new ways of knowing and being that expand the semiotic resources available to them. In describing Martin's understanding of genres, our goal is to capture how learning English as a second or foreign language reflects and constructs cultural linguistic practices (Gebhard, Shin, & Seger, 2011; Martin & Rose, 2008). For the purposes of this study, we focus on two fundamental genres that students encounter in learning a second language and developing advanced academic literacies (Byrnes, 2009; Brisk, 2014; Schleppegrell, 2004): the genre of narratives and the genre of responses to literature.

Each genre has a set of organizational and structural features that are specific to that genre. Narratives in English, for example, typically have an "orientation" in which the writer attempts to situate the reader in a particular time, place, or social context, and to introduce the main characters. They also have a "sequence of events" or series of "complications" in which the writer sets up a series of problems the characters confront. Through these events, the reader develops a deeper sense of who the characters are and how they have been shaped by their experiences, or not. Moreover, narratives typically have a "resolution" stage in which the characters come to terms (or not) with the problems at hand. This stage often shows how the characters have been changed (or not) by their experiences and may contain an evaluation or comment that signals the

overall meaning of the narrative as a whole.

In contrast, responses to literature in school are structured more like arguments. They typically begin with an introduction that identifies the guiding thesis of the argument and provides a preview of the supporting points the student will make. The subsequent sections each consist of an elaboration of these points that draws on evidence from the literary text in the form of quotes, which are then explicated. Last, responses to literature typically conclude with a reiteration phase in which the author restates the main thesis and summarizes the key points made in the paper (Christie, 2012).

In addition to typical structural features, any instance of a genre, including narrative and literature response, is constructed with a set of identifiable lexical and grammatical features that are functional for that specific genre. In describing these linguistic features, Martin draws on Halliday's concept of register, which consists of field, tenor, and mode choices (see Martin & Rose, 2008, p. 11). The *field* of a text refers to how a writer uses the ideational grammatical resources at his or her disposal to realize the content of the text. These resources include the use of verbal groups to realize different types of "processes." Unlike the traditional term "verb," the concept of a "process" captures functionally the semiotic difference between types of verbs such as material, mental, verbal, and relational verbs that construe different types of actions, ways of sensing, ways of saying, and ways of being. Likewise, the functional term "participant" captures more precisely the lexico-grammatical relationships that exist between nominal groups and types of processes within a text. Last, the term "circumstance" captures how specific grammatical resources support writers in constructing meanings related to the time, place, and manner in which events in the

text unfold (see Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 47, for a detailed discussion of processes, participants, and circumstances).

Second, the *tenor* of a text refers to how a writer uses interpersonal grammatical resources within his or her repertoire to construct social relationships with readers. For example, writers consciously and unconsciously make “mood” choices by using interrogatives, imperatives, or declaratives to construct social distance and power dynamics in texts (e.g., *Why don't you close the window?* versus *Close the window* or *You've left the window open*). Likewise, writers make “modality” choices to express the degree of truth, probability, or obligation of a proposition (e.g., *Would you mind closing the window?* compared to *You must close the window*). Last, writers exploit “appraisal” resources to construct attitudinal or evaluative meanings (e.g., *Would you be so kind as to close the window* versus *Shut the damn window!*; see Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 47, for a detailed discussion of mood, modality, and appraisal).

Last, the *mode* of a text refers to how a writer uses different textual resources to manage the flow of ideas and make a text cohesive. These resources include how writers grammatically weave together given and new information to move a text forward. In SFL terms, the given information in a clause is referred to as the theme and the new information is referred to as the rheme. In addition, mode resources include the use of cohesive devices to construct logical relationships between clauses (e.g., *and*, *moreover*, *because*, *as a result*; see Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 48, for a detailed discussion of theme/rheme patterns and cohesive devices).

As a way of supporting teachers in making the workings of different genres and register features transparent to students, Martin and his colleagues began

collaborating with teachers in the 1980s to develop an SFL/genre based approach to designing curriculum and instruction (Martin, 2009; Rose & Martin, 2012). This approach, known as the “teaching/learning cycle,” was developed to apprentice students to reading and writing the genres they are likely to encounter in learning specific subject-disciplinary knowledge across grade levels in schools (Martin, 2009, p. 6). The goal of this cycle is to expand students’ meaning-making repertoires by providing them with model texts, explicit instruction in genre and register features of model texts, and time for critical analyses of author’s grammatical choices. The steps of this cycle include: building students’ background knowledge through hands-on, dialogic experiences to prepare for specific reading and/or writing tasks; deconstructing model texts using functional metalanguage to name genre stages and register features; jointly constructing texts with students to make linguistic know-how visible and the range of linguistic choices available to students; and gradually apprenticing students to produce texts more independently by providing less scaffolding as students become more knowledgeable users of a particular genre over time (Gebhard, Chen, & Britton, 2014, p. 108; Gibbons, 2002; Rose & Martin, 2012).

In sum, SFL/genre based pedagogy provides a principled way for EFL teachers to support language learners in critically analyzing authentic texts as a way of developing academic literacies and exploring cultural issues simultaneously (see Byrnes, Maxim, & Norris, 2010, regarding learning German as a foreign language at the university level in the United States). However, despite literary narratives being one of the most powerful mediums for language learning and discussing multicultural issues, many EFL teachers have difficulty in engaging students in critically reading literary

narratives and in writing literary responses. These teachers lack an explicit awareness of how language works in constructing these two fundamental genres and how to teach EFL students to explicitly and critically identify the linguistic features of these types of texts so students might be better able to comprehend culturally relevant texts as well as develop the ability to construct their own texts in English more expertly over time.

To contribute to understanding how EFL teachers make sense of SFL based pedagogy and how their understanding informs their approach to designing literacy instruction, this case study explores how a Taiwanese EFL teacher's conception of grammar took shape over the course of her experiences in a MATESOL program informed by SFL and genre theory (Gebhard, Chen, Graham, & Gunawan, 2013).

#### **A case study: Chenling's conceptions of grammar and her teaching practices**

The context of this study is a MATESOL program in the United States that offers a 33-credit Master's Degree in Education. This program draws upon a sociocultural perspective of language and literacy development. It is also unique in that it incorporates analysis of children's literature as a way of apprenticing teacher candidates from both U.S. and international contexts to teaching language, literacy, and multiculturalism simultaneously (see Gebhard, Willett, Jimenez, & Piedra, 2011, for a description of the program; Botelho & Rudman, 2009, for a description of a critical approach to children's literature). In this context, we attempted to make a critical and functional perspective of language and academic literacy development accessible and usable to EFL teachers from Asia. These teachers, many of whom were from China and Taiwan, were enrolled in this program with the goal of improving their English

and returning to their home countries to teach EFL in a variety of contexts (e.g., elementary, secondary, and college levels). In attempting to understand how Asian teachers make sense of SFL and genre based pedagogy we conducted a longitudinal case study of how Chenling's conception of grammar changed (or not) over the course of her participation in an SFL informed graduate degree program. In addition, we analyzed how her teaching practices reflected an ability to implement SFL based pedagogy (or not) once she returned to teaching in Taiwan (Gunawan, 2014).

The methods used in this case study were qualitative in nature, relied on multiple sources of data, and were divided into three distinct phases of data collection and analysis between 2009 and 2011 (Gebhard, Chen, Graham, & Gunawan, 2013; Gunawan, 2014). Phase One focused on documenting Chenling's participation in a 14-week introductory course in SFL and genre based pedagogy. Data collection and analysis included observational fieldnotes from seminar meetings, transcribed seminar discussions, formal and informal interviews and email exchanges with Chenling, and an analysis of Chenling's midterm and final course papers. The midterm required Chenling to conduct a genre and register analysis of a section of a literary text and design instruction that would teach EFL learners to deconstruct this text to support them in learning language, exploring culturally relevant topics, and improving their reading comprehension. The final course project required Chenling to conduct a genre and register analysis of an L2 student writing sample and design instruction to support this student's literacy development with specific reference to the genre of response to literature.

Phase Two consisted of documenting and analyzing Chenling's experience in all other courses in her MATESOL program.

These courses included: Theory of Second Language Acquisition; L2 Reading and Writing Development; L2 Curriculum Development; ESL/EFL Methods; Critical Perspectives on Children's Literature; Multicultural Education; Assessment of L2 Language and Literacy Practices; Student Teaching Practicum; and a course on leadership in the profession. In reviewing Chenling's experiences in other courses in her MATESOL program, we collected final course papers and interviewed Chenling about her use of SFL concepts and SFL based pedagogy (if at all) through formal and informal interviews as well as email exchanges.

Phase Three consisted of collecting and analyzing data regarding Chenling's teaching practices during her first year as a full time teacher in a middle school in rural Taiwan. Data collection and analysis focused on samples of curriculum materials and formal and informal email exchanges with Chenling.

As reported in Gebhard, Chen, Graham, and Gunawan (2013), there are several limitations to this methodology. First, during Phase Three, we were unable to observe Chenling's classroom practices. Rather, we relied on an analysis of the curricular materials she used and her responses to formal and informal interviews conducted over email. Therefore, we have no first-hand accounts of her actual classroom practices during her first year of teaching in Taiwan. The second limitation, as well as possible strength, of our methodology relates to the different roles we played over the course of the study. For example, Wawan, an Indonesian man, drew on his past work as a teacher educator in his home country; I-An, a Taiwanese woman, drew on her experiences as an EFL teacher in Taiwan; and Meg, a white American woman, who was the instructor of the 14-week course focusing on SFL and genre based pedagogy, drew on her experiences as a

researcher of L2 academic literacy development and teacher educator in the United States. These roles, as participant observers, shaped our interactions with Chenling and therefore data collection and analysis in ways that are typical of qualitative case study methods (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). And finally, qualitative case study methods do not lend themselves to researchers making causal claims or claims that are generalizable to other contexts. Rather, these methods allow us to gain insider and outsider insights into how Chenling made sense of SFL as a way of adding to the growing empirical work regarding the knowledge base of L2 teacher education (Andrews, 2007; Borg, 2006; Freeman & Johnson, 2005; Johnston & Goettsch, 2000).

#### **A portrait of Chenling learning to use SFL and genre based pedagogy**

To present the findings from this qualitative case study, we provide a portrait of Chenling's attempts to make sense of SFL and genre based pedagogy over the course of her participation in a MATESOL teacher education program and in her first year as a full time EFL teacher in Taiwan. In providing this portrait, we begin by describing how she initially re-inscribed SFL metalanguage with traditional conceptions of grammar when she was first introduced to Halliday's theory of language and Martin's conception of genre theory and the teaching and learning cycle. We then detail how Chenling's ability to use SFL metalanguage more functionally developed as she used SFL tools to analyze children's literature and L2 writing samples in ways that provided her with insights into how to support the academic literacy practices of L2 learners. Last, we describe how Chenling was ultimately unable to implement SFL based pedagogy in Taiwan due to a number of institutional constraints including requirements that she adhere closely to a traditional, form-focused textbook and

form-focused assessment practices used to evaluate students and, ultimately, their teachers.

*Shifting toward a functional conception of grammar through an analysis of children's literature and L2 writing*

Chenling, like many international students, entered her MATESOL program with a very strong understanding of traditional grammar and an ability to analyze the structure of a sentence using formal metalanguage. She also held a tacit, but very firm belief in drill and practice approaches to language teaching based on her previous experiences as an L2 learner and EFL teacher (Gunawan, 2014; see also Borg, 2006). Therefore, analyzing how an SFL conception of grammar might work to construct meaning in longer stretches of discourse, especially in literature, was new to her. For example, early in her first semester in the program when she enrolled in the Introduction to SFL course, Gebhard, Chen, Graham, and Gunawan (2013) report that Chenling felt strongly that “[Traditional] grammar is considered the easiest way to teach English language. When teaching, I usually follow a textbook.” She further added, “It’s hard to connect—I always think that grammar is verb, noun—I think it is hard to think [of] genre as part of grammar” (p. 116). As a consequence, during the first couple of weeks in the SFL course, her assignments and participation in class discussions reflected a pattern in which she translated functional metalanguage into traditional form-focused terms in ways that limited her ability to develop a meaning-making perspective of grammar. In analyzing Phase I data, we coded this stage of her trajectory in the program as “pouring old wine into a new bottle.” We used this metaphor to capture how Chenling, as well as other students, used new SFL vocabulary in ways that re-inscribed these functional concepts with a formal and structural understanding. For example, she translated “process types” as “verbs that

come after the subject” and “circumstances” as “adverbs that modify subjects’ action” (Gebhard, Chen, Graham, & Gunawan, 2013, p. 116).

In addition, Gebhard, Chen, Graham, and Gunawan (2013) write that Chenling’s ability to think of “genre” as well as aspects of field, tenor, and mode “as part of grammar” developed through her ability to use SFL metalanguage as a tool to analyze award-winning children’s literature for her midterm project and a writing sample produced by an intermediate L2 learner for her final exam. For her midterm she analyzed *In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson* (1984) by Bette Bao Lord. Based on this analysis, she then developed a plan for how she would support L2 students in learning to critically discuss, read, and write about this potentially high interest and culturally relevant children’s book. This novel relates the experiences of a young Chinese girl named Shirley who immigrated to San Francisco in the 1950s. In her analysis, Chenling identified the genre stages and key register choices the author employed. At the genre level, Chenling noticed that the novel exhibited the genre stages typically found in narratives, including an “orientation, complication, and resolution” (Gebhard, Chen, Graham, & Gunawan, 2013, p. 116).

Next, she selected a short, but important passage from the novel on which she conducted a register analysis. At this level of analysis, Chenling elected to focus on the interactions between the field and mode choices in the text. Specifically, she noted how the author used pronominal referencing systems to create a lexical chain that built up information about Shirley’s feelings across the passage. For example, Chenling used a highlighter to mark personal pronouns and other lexical items referring to Shirley in the following excerpt:



*It is so unfair. **She** thought, must **I** drool like **Chow Chow**, eyeing each mouthful until someone is good and ready to toss a scrap my way? If Father was here, he'd tell. He would never treat **me** like **a child**, like **a girl**, like **a nobody**.*

In other words, by literally highlighting pronouns and nominal groups in this lexical chain, Chenling was able to identify and track participants related to Shirley and show how Shirley refers to the pronouns *she*, *I*, and *me*; the family's dog *Chow Chow*; and the nouns *a child*, *a girl*, *a nobody*. This "tracking of participants," according to Chenling, could be a key teaching practice used to support L2 reading comprehension but is one that is not used by EFL teachers who only focus on traditional grammar. Chenling used this insight to develop a plan for how she would design future instruction, reporting that she would use this passage to teach pronouns and new vocabulary so students could comprehend the passage, but also she would teach students how to use lexical chaining to support them in interpreting the meaning of what they read more critically.

For her final project, Chenling analyzed a student writing sample produced by "Adam," a seventh-grade ESL student from Malaysia who had been in the United States for five years. Chenling observed Adam in an American middle school classroom, collected curricular materials and samples of his writing, and interviewed him as well as his teacher. Chenling's analysis focused on a unit of study that required Adam to read a young adult novel *A Step from Heaven* by An Na (2001) and to write a "literary response" regarding the experiences of immigrants in America as depicted in this novel (Gebhard, Chen, Graham, & Gunawan, 2013, p.116).

Before analyzing Adam's text, Chenling

drew on Schleppegrell's work (2004) to identify the key genre and register features of a literary response. Chenling found that a literary response is usually realized in the form of an argumentative or persuasive essay where a writer presents a thesis statement, provides arguments with supporting examples taken from the novel, and finally sums up his or her position. In analyzing the genre stages of Adam's literary response, Chenling noticed that this essay contained a thesis statement, and each paragraph contained quotes cited from the novel but overall lacked clear arguments. Rather, she noted that he used selected quotes to simply re-narrate a summary of the novel (Gebhard, Chen, Graham, & Gunawan, 2013, p.116).

Chenling further identified register features in Adam's text that made his text read more like a narrative than an argument. For example, Chenling noticed that Adam's text relied predominantly on concrete participants in the theme position rather than abstract ones related to analyzing the main character's experiences as a Chinese immigrant (e.g., *I*, *the mother*, *the daughter*). These linguistic choices made his text "only tell a summary of the story" rather than "tak[ing] a position" and "show[ing] his critical thinking" (Gebhard, Chen, Graham, & Gunawan, 2013, p. 116). In addition, Chenling commented that Adam could have used nominalization, a rhetorical strategy that turns concrete happenings into abstract concepts and can be used to pack more information into each clause. As reported in Gebhard, Chen, Graham, and Gunawan, 2013, Chenling wrote:

Adam did not build his arguments from clause to clause, increasingly re-packaging and re-presenting information as nominalized participants in the ensuing clauses. Instead, he often remains focused on the same participant, especially concrete participants as theme, in a

way that is more typical of narrative than expository writing. (Gebhard, Chen, Graham, & Gunawan, 2013, p.116)

To support ESL and EFL students like Adam in developing the ability to write more expert academic arguments, Chenling articulated an instruction plan that focused on building L2 students' genre awareness of the differences between narrating a story and persuading a reader of a thesis. She planned to do this by drawing students' attention to the typical genre stages of a narrative and comparing these stages to the stages of an argument as a way of supporting students in writing more analytically. In regard to register, Chenling's instructional plan focused on guiding students toward understanding how to pack more information into clauses and how to build coherence between clauses by teaching them to notice how expert writers use nominalizations in model essays. Specifically, she reported that she would support students in "circling where noun phrases and nominalization form abstract subjects" (Gebhard, Chen, Graham, & Gunawan, 2013, p.116).

#### *Further exploration with SFL based pedagogy in other MATESOL courses*

In three subsequent required courses, Chenling elected to further explore using SFL and genre based pedagogy to support EFL students' abilities to critically read, discuss, and write about culturally relevant children's literature about Chinese immigration. These courses included a curriculum design course, an L2 assessment course, and a short practicum experience. In the curriculum design course, she developed a unit based on the illustrated children's story titled *I Hate English* (1989) by Ellen Levine. This book also portrays the experiences of a young Chinese immigrant who is frustrated with adjusting to school life in the United States and with learning a language she resents.

In her unit plan, Chen outlined how she would develop students' "genre knowledge" by illustrating how narratives typically have "an orientation, sequence of events, a complication, and a resolution" (Gebhard, Chen, Graham, & Gunawan, 2013, p.116).

In addition, Gebhard, Chen, Graham, and Gunawan (2013) report that at the register level, Chenling noted that she would instruct students in using:

...linking word [connectives], which make the story fluent; verbs, which can specifically present how the characters acted, felt, and thought; descriptive words, which can create the image of readers' mind; dialogues, which will focus on the format and the time tense; time tense and explain the reason why in some situation the time tense will change to other than past tense. (p. 117)

In the L2 assessment course she continued to further develop this curricular unit by creating a rubric to assess the degree to which students demonstrated an ability to produce texts that exhibited the genre and register features of canonical narratives. At the genre level, these features included producing personal narratives that had a clear "orientation, sequences of events, complication, and resolution" modeled after *I Hate English*.

In regard to register features, this rubric assessed students' narratives according to the degree to which students used a variety of action verbs to construct the plot of the text, mental verbs to capture characters' thoughts (e.g., *thought, wondered, worried*), verbal verbs to support dialogue (e.g., *whispered, mumbled, yelled, cried*), and cohesive devices to support the flow of the text (e.g., *one day, next, all of a sudden, in the end*).

Last, Chenling had the opportunity to implement her *I Hate English* unit with a group of volunteer ninth-grade EFL students in Taiwan in the summer of 2010 as part of meeting the practicum requirements for her degree. For her practicum, she was required to implement a short unit of instruction and reflect on her students' learning using assessment tools she developed in the L2 assessment course. In addition, she was required to reflect on her emerging teaching practices in a course reflection paper.

Following the teaching and learning cycle, Chenling began this unit by engaging students in a discussion of their attitudes toward learning English as a way of building their background knowledge or the "field" before asking them to read and write. Second, she asked them to write a short story about a memory they had regarding learning English. Third, she analyzed these baseline writing samples as a way of determining the focus of her instruction. This analysis revealed that students were unable to produce coherent simple narratives in English because they appeared to lack an understanding of the genre and the lexico-grammatical resources needed to coherently and cohesively weave simple sentences together into a story. Based on this analysis, Chenling established instructional goals that focused on developing "content, composing processes, textual forms, and language patterns to accomplish coherent and purposeful writings" (Gebhard, Chen, Graham, & Gunawan, 2013, p. 117). Fourth, she guided students in reading *I Hate English* as a whole class. Fifth, she provided students with a model of a personal narrative she had written based on her experiences as an EFL student and her analysis of the key linguistic features of *I Hate English*. She used this model to explicitly teach students to identify targeted genre and register features in her text. Sixth, she instructed students to

produce their own narratives modeled after *I Hate English* and her text. Last, she analyzed students' final narratives as a way of assessing their writing and her lesson plan's impact on their literacy development.

Her analysis of changes in students' writing samples and of her teaching practices revealed concerns that are typical of many novice teachers. For example, she reported that she ran out of time and planned too ambitiously given the amount of contact she had with students (e.g., four 150-minute sessions). She also described how students, based on their understanding of what to expect in an EFL class, resisted her speaking English in class as well as being asked to write an extended text rather than doing grammar and translation exercises. She accounted for this problem in her reflection by stating:

These students more or less know the concept of writing a correct sentence in English, but they do not practice a lot, since they don't have a formal English writing program and multiple choice is the only type of assessments to measure progress." (Course assignment, 2011, p. 31)

Despite these limitations, Chenling reported some success. She reported that the handout she made to scaffold genre knowledge "may have [had] positive influences on students' writing structure, since most of the students have clear and properly developed genre moves in their narratives." In regard to register features, Chenling's reflection also provided an accurate quantitative analysis of the register features of students' texts. She reported that students:

...use an interrogative clause (e.g., Don't you feel surprised?) to give a more dialogic conversation in their text, and imperative clause (e.g.,

don't forget to keep learning English) as a quote from the character in the story. Additionally, the students were able to use various circumstances of time (e.g., before, after, now, in the future, after class, in fourth grade) and of places (e.g., in the school, at the bus stop), adjuncts of frequency (e.g., often, usually, always), of manner (e.g., easily, happily, about), and of degree (e.g., very, more and more, not at all, really, even). (Course assignment, 2011)

In sum, in reflecting on teaching this unit in an interview, Chenling reported that previously she did not enjoy anything related to literature in English, but she added, "I now have started to like reading literary works in English, maybe it is good for me as an English teacher, and you know I changed...because honestly it [these analyses] made me change" (Gebhard, Chen, Graham, & Gunawan, 2013, p. 117).

Despite this new interest and some observable gains in students' abilities to produce narratives, Chenling remained skeptical about the feasibility of using SFL in Taiwan, especially after her practicum experience. She stated repeatedly that she was interested in SFL and genre based pedagogy and that she had used concepts learned in the course to improve her own ability to write academic papers in English (e.g., use of nominalization in constructing theme/rheme patterns). However, she reported that in the future, she would base her own planning on the kinds of exams her students need to pass, indicating that assessment systems used in Taiwan were never far from her mind despite the investment and gains she had made in understanding and applying a more meaning-oriented literature based approach to EFL teaching and learning (Gebhard, Chen, Graham, & Gunawan, 2013, p. 116).

### *Drifting back toward a traditional conception of grammar after graduating*

Upon completion of her MATESOL study, Chenling returned to Taiwan in September, 2011, and began to teach EFL at the same middle school where she previously had taught as a summer intern. In December of that year, she reported in an email exchange that she had not made any attempt to incorporate children's literature or SFL/genre based pedagogy into her teaching practices. Rather, she described following the mandated EFL textbooks to teach "vocabulary, dialogue, focus sentence pattern (oral practice), reading, listening exercises" (Email exchange, 12/26/2011).

In accounting for why Chenling did not draw on work she developed in her MATESOL program, the data suggest that institutional forces, related to how students and, therefore, teachers are assessed in Taiwan, constrained her ability to teach academic literacy using SFL and genre based pedagogy. Namely, the education system in Taiwan tends to reward EFL teachers for teaching traditional grammar as efficiently as possible. As a result, Chenling reported that she must "finish the textbook by the end of the year" and "prepare students for passing the exam"; therefore, she did not "have time for SFL" (Email exchange, 12/26/2011). Moreover, the kinds of assessment her students are required to pass focused almost exclusively on vocabulary memorization and sentence-level grammatical correctness rather than the ability to deconstruct and construct meaning critically in extended discourse. Therefore, Chenling reported spending most of her instructional time explaining, drilling, and practicing the decontextualized rules for sentence construction such as the correct usage of "auxiliary verbs," "verb tenses," and "adjective modifiers."

Another force that discouraged Chenling from designing and implementing SFL and

genre based pedagogy in Taiwan was the lack of institutional attention given to extended discourse competence and written communication abilities at the middle school level. She remarked that the mandated curriculum for middle school English classes highlighted developing students' "spoken language abilities" through the use of "fun learning activities" such as songs, games, movies, and role play (Email exchange, 3/10/2012). These activities focused on introducing students to the terms and dialogues that they might encounter when they travel to English-speaking countries. Moreover, the reading and writing activities that were part of this curriculum tended to focus on reading short comic books, fill-in-the-blank worksheets, and English-Mandarin sentence translation.

### **Conclusion and implications**

In response to the changing nature of English language teaching in a globalized world, this study reveals opportunities and challenges regarding re-conceptualizing grammar based on a Hallidayan perspective in EFL teacher education. The findings from this study indicate that Chenling was able to make sense of SFL and genre based pedagogy and use the teaching and learning cycle to design and implement academic literacy instruction in a Taiwanese middle school during her practicum experience. In sum, the data suggest that over the course of Chenling's MATESOL program her conceptions of grammar shifted from a form-focused, sentence-level perspective to a more functional understanding of how language works in interconnected ways across lexico-grammatical and discourse semantic features of specific genres essential to advanced language learning. This shift occurred as she developed an ability to use SFL metalanguage to analyze

the genre and register features of published children's literature focusing on the Chinese immigration experience, and L2 students' attempts to produce their own narratives or literary responses to these authentic texts. The insights Chenling gained from these analyses enabled her to design instruction to support EFL students in reading and writing academic texts about culturally relevant issues.

However, the degree to which Chenling was able to use SFL based pedagogy in classroom practices was influenced by a number of institutional forces shaping the teaching of English in Taiwan. These forces included a mandated form-focused textbook and aligned assessment system that discouraged Chenling from designing instruction based on an SFL conception of grammar and constructivist perspective of learning. Therefore, despite asserting repeatedly over the course of her MATESOL program that she believed an SFL based approach to instruction would most likely benefit her EFL students, Chenling ultimately chose to teach English in ways that were more reflective of a traditional conception of grammar and a behaviorist perspective of learning. This disconnect between Chenling's ability to design SFL based instruction and her reported teaching practices supports findings from other studies that highlight how institutional contexts shape L2 teachers' work (Andrews, 2007; Borg, 2006). For example, the data regarding Chenling's compliance with mandated textbooks during her first year of teaching corroborate Borg's (2006) findings that "contextual factors can constrain what teachers do, particularly in the work of novice teachers whose ideals about language teaching may need to, at least

temporarily, be put aside while they come to grips with the instructional and social realities they face in schools” (p. 275).

The implications of these findings relate to three issues in EFL teacher education. First, SFL based pedagogy has been critiqued as too theoretical and technical to be accessible and usable to classroom teachers (e.g., Bourke, 2005). This study supports other investigations that indicate pre-service and in-service L2 teachers are capable of making sense of a Hallidayan perspective of grammar and using SFL metalanguage to analyze texts and design academic literacy instruction for elementary, secondary, and tertiary second language learners (Aguirre-Muñoz, Park, Amabisca, & Boscardin, 2008; Brisk, 2014; Byrnes, Maxim, & Norris, 2010; Harman, 2013; Moore & Schleppegrell, 2014). Therefore, this study highlights that the difficulty of implementing a Hallidayan perspective of language and learning in EFL teacher education may not be rooted in teachers’ abilities to act as applied linguists, but in the field of second language teaching, which has historically been shaped by a Skinnerian approach to L2 teaching and learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Second, this study highlights the benefit of pre-service teachers learning to design curriculum and instruction using authentic children’s literature to critically teach L2 reading, writing, listening, speaking, and culture simultaneously in ways that parallel the work of Byrnes and her colleagues in Georgetown University’s German Department (see Byrnes, 2010; Byrnes, Maxim, & Norris, 2010). Byrnes’ department engaged in a highly successful curriculum renewal project that created a

genre based program of study for undergraduate learners of German across all levels of proficiency. This program integrated the learning of language and the study of culturally authentic multimodal texts and has demonstrated the success of this approach using both qualitative and quantitative measures of gains in students’ academic literacy development. This present study regarding Chenling’s ability to use SFL pedagogical tools to analyze children’s literature and design academic literacy instruction for EFL students suggests that Byrnes’ approach has promise for the teaching of English in Asian contexts in secondary schools. However, additional research beyond this single study is needed to explore the potential of this proposition.

Last, this study highlights the ironies created by conflicting policies and practices within institutional contexts (Gebhard, 2004, 2010). For example, many Asian countries have strongly advocated for communicative approaches to English language teaching as a way of promoting higher levels of English proficiency to support their citizens in participating in global communities where world varieties of English are increasingly used. However, curriculum materials and assessment practices in these countries still tend to focus on the mastery of sentence-level grammatical structures in ways that do not necessarily lead to successful comprehension and production of extended oral and written texts for authentic real-world purposes. Therefore, the gap between EFL educational aims, policies, and practices in Asian contexts is an essential issue for teachers, teacher educators, policymakers, and researchers to address if the field of EFL is to make

progress in supporting Asian students in using English as a world language to negotiate social, academic, economic, and political goals.

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