Analyzing the Writing of English Learners: A Functional Approach

Mary J. Schleppegrell and Ann L. Go

Teachers can respond to the writing of students who are learning English by asking questions about meaning that identify grammatical features that are functional for writing particular kinds of texts.

"... writing is difficult. I have to think about it in Chinese then translate it into English. I know a lot of words in Chinese, but I don't know the English translation. It is frustrating when I know the word 'endurance' in Chinese, but I can't find a good English translation for it." (Joann, a sixth-grade student)

Writing is difficult for students who are learning English, as they often struggle to express what they really want to say. Writing is difficult for their teachers, too, who often struggle to respond in ways that are helpful. In this article, we offer an approach that looks at students' writing from a functional linguistics perspective, allowing us to recognize strengths and focus on what writers need to learn. The approach offers ways of linking meaning and structure that help students write in fuller and more effective ways. Using the framework of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), we illustrate how teachers can use students' writing to identify features that are relevant to a particular task and then help students expand their control of those features (Matthiessen, Slade, & Macken, 1992).

The approach calls for close analysis of the language of students' texts and is best accomplished by teachers working together to identify the language features. By discussing the functional grammar constructs and investigating how students use language in their writing, teachers can build their understanding and share ideas about how to further support students' growth in writing English.

The four students whose writing we use to exemplify this approach participated in a study of the experiences of ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese children from Vietnam during their first year in the United States, in this case, in a northern California elementary school (Go, 2003). Nam and Lin were in fifth grade; Joann and Han in sixth. They were placed in mainstream classrooms, but also met as a group with an ESL specialist for one hour each day. Ann observed their writing development over the year and became a mentor to the students. At the same time, we saw that teachers working with these students had few tools for helping them improve their writing in explicit and concrete ways. Even though national and state standards (California Department of Education, 1999; IRA & NCTE, 1996) call for attention to language structures and forms in writing instruction, teachers are given little guidance about how to teach writing in ways that enable students to expand their control of language (Schleppegrell, 2003). We recognized that the analytic tools from SFL that helped us analyze student writing development could also offer teachers ways of focusing on language that is relevant for particular tasks, giving them one more way to help students expand their range of meaning. In this article, we describe one such task to illustrate how the approach works.

The Task: Writing About a Shared Experience

One of the challenges in second language writing instruction is responding to the rudimentary texts of beginning writers. A functional linguistics approach can help identify which language features to focus on when reading students' writing. The texts we use to illustrate the approach were written by the four students toward the end of the academic year in the ESL class. The writing illustrates the range of English proficiency development that the students experienced during their first year in U.S. schools. Although the complex reasons for the variation are beyond the scope of this discussion, the texts reflect a typical situation...
in which teachers find themselves working with students at different levels of proficiency.

The writing was done after the children had attended the performance of Mr. Lee, an expert in using tops and yo-yos and a skillful master of origami. Mr. Lee showed the students different types of tops and ways to play with them. The students were mesmerized by his skills and impressed by the beautiful origami. The next day, the ESL teacher wrote Mr. Lee’s Visit on the whiteboard and asked students to write about it. This task—to recount an experience—is a common writing assignment. In California, intermediate students in grades 6–8 are expected to “narrate a sequence of events and communicate their significance to the audience” (California Department of Education, 1999, p. 68). Recounting experience is a step toward writing complex narratives (Christie, 1998) and is also relevant for expository writing, where students need to report on science experiments or recount historical events. This makes the recounting of experience an important area of writing development. The approach presented here suggests ways of identifying the language that is functional for students when recounting experiences through writing.

**THE APPROACH: A LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE ON STUDENT TEXTS**

The children’s texts illustrate that they took the task of recounting Mr. Lee’s visit seriously. They wrote neatly, shared their excitement about what they experienced, and used the language resources they had to include as many details as they could. The texts all have the kinds of grammatical errors that are common for students who are learning English as a second language, but these errors are not the focus of our attention here. Errors are a natural part of language development and students learning English will continue to make errors as they attempt new tasks and more complex constructions. A focus on error ignores students’ strengths and their ideas and insights (Coady & Escamilla, 2005).

Instead, what we suggest here puts the focus on what can be done with language, rather than what cannot. We ask three questions that help us see how a writer has drawn on the resources of English in making meaning: What is the text about? How is judgment/evaluation expressed? and How is the text organized? The first question—What is the text about?—focuses on the topic of the writing and the information the writer has presented. The second question—How is judgment/evaluation expressed?—focuses on the perspective and point of view of the writer. The third question—How is the text organized?—focuses on the structure of the text and its coherence (Schleppegrell, 2004). These three questions, taken together, enable a focus on content, voice, and structure, three aspects of writing that are often the focus of assessment and instruction.

The questions are answered by looking at how a writer has used particular language features. Table 1 shows how these questions about meaning are linked with grammatical structures that construct the meaning in the text. The connection between meaning and structure is based on Michael Halliday’s theory of systemic functional linguistics (see Dorga & Humphrey, 2003, and Derewianka, 1990, for introductions). SFL looks at language in terms of the alternative possibilities English offers, using the word grammar to refer to possible choices from the language and not to rules for correctness. SFL uses a functional language that helps us see the relationship between meaning and form. The functional labeling of language enables readers to divide clauses into meaningful chunks or whole grammatical constituents called processes, participants, and circum-
stances. Teachers without a strong background in grammatical analysis can more easily use the functional approach because the goal is to identify the whole constituent that constructs the process (in verb phrases, such as can make, don’t know), participants (in noun phrases, such as Mr. Lee, the tops), and circumstances (in prepositional phrases and adverbs, such as later, in the box). For example, the sentence “Yesterday Mr. Lee’s come to the 5th grade class” can be analyzed into its constituents as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yesterday</th>
<th>Mr. Lee’s</th>
<th>come</th>
<th>to the 5th grade class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Circumstance  Participant  Process  Circumstance  
(Adverb)  (Noun phrase)  (Verb)  (Prepositional phrase)

The functional labels focus on the generalized meaning that the structures construct and help us see what the student is writing about, what perspective is taken, and how the text is organized as a message. Looking at each of the student’s texts from this perspective and linking the grammatical structures students use with the meanings the structures make possible, we can analyze what students write and see where their meaning-making potential can be strengthened.

Of course, there is more to grammar than can be described fully here, but Table 1 provides a few general principles about how grammar makes meaning that can help teachers recognize what students are doing with language. Teachers can then offer learners relevant language practice to improve their ability to recount an event.

Next, we show how to use the three questions to analyze the texts written by the four students. As we discuss these texts, we demonstrate how even Lin and Han, writing in very basic ways, construct meanings about what happened and what they thought of it. Nam’s and Joann’s texts draw on a greater range of language resources as they elaborate these meanings and bring clearer structure to their writing. The analysis identifies the grammatical structures that students could add to strengthen their texts as they use writing to recount their experiences.

What Is the Text About?

To answer this question, we look at the types of processes constructed in the verb phrases. Verbs are categorized by their meaning into four process types: action, saying/showing, thinking/feeling, and describing. Each type enables the writer to present different meanings. In this task, action processes reconstruct the events and saying processes present what was said or demonstrated. Thinking/feeling processes present what the writers or other participants thought or felt, and describing processes construct generalizations and description that help the writers evaluate the events. (Table 1 gives examples.)

Lin’s and Han’s Texts

Let’s look first at the texts written by Lin and Han (see Figure 1). Lin’s text begins with a short orientation that tells us Mr. Lee came and demonstrated his talent. Lin then tells us who Mr. Lee is and what he looks like. He tells us what Mr. Lee

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To answer:</th>
<th>What is this text about?</th>
<th>How is judgment/evaluation expressed?</th>
<th>How is the text organized?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on:</td>
<td>Processes (constructed in verbs)</td>
<td>Thinking/feeling processes (constructed in verbs)</td>
<td>Circumstances (constructed in prepositional phrases and adverbs and connectors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For example:</td>
<td>Information about action, saying/showing, thinking/feeling, and describing</td>
<td>Information about whose thoughts/feelings and what is thought/felt</td>
<td>Information about when, where, how, along with notions of time, cause, and contrast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Also look at:</td>
<td>Participants (constructed in nouns)</td>
<td>Describing processes</td>
<td>Participants and tense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask:</td>
<td>What do they represent?</td>
<td>What is being described?</td>
<td>Are characters introduced and tracked with pronouns?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How are they expanded?</td>
<td>How is it evaluated?</td>
<td>Synonyms? Demonstratives? Articles? What tense/aspect markings are used?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Linking grammar and meaning in recounting experience.
knows and then recounts a sequence of events from the performance. Lin ends with his favorite part of the performance.

Han’s text constructs more of a “snapshot” of the scene. He describes what Mr. Lee likes and is and knows, writes about his age and how he looks, and then mentions the tops and origami and tells us his favorite part. We can see that Han’s text is more about how it was than what happened, and analysis of the language shows how these different perspectives are constructed.

Both Lin and Han use action and saying processes to construct the events (came, show, play, said), and thinking/feeling and describing processes to evaluate them (knows, is, look like), but the frequency with which each uses these processes differs, as Table 2 shows. Lin mainly uses action processes to report what Mr. Lee did. Han focuses more on his own reaction to the experience, using more processes of thinking and feeling than action. It is the student’s perception of the social purpose of the text that determines the shape of the writing, not the topic (Rothery & Stenglin, 1997). Although both students are writing about Mr. Lee’s visit, the texts differ because the students’ purposes differ. For Lin, the purpose is to tell what happened when Mr. Lee came; for Han, it is to describe Mr. Lee and to share what he liked about the origami. Both responses may be appropriate, but if a particular kind of response is expected, students will benefit from instruction about the relevant structure and language features associated with the expected response.

What is the text about? can also be answered by looking at the noun phrases in the texts that introduce grammatical participants. It is important to look at the whole noun phrase to see how the writer uses articles, modifiers, and other language resources to characterize and describe the grammatical participants in the text. In general, Lin’s and Han’s noun phrases are simple (my room, this game), although they each attempt expansion of noun phrases with rudimentary adjective clauses (a person play a music; the one I like best). Adjective clauses, also known as relative clauses, enable a writer to embed a clause following a noun to add more information about it. One reason this structure is complex is because sometimes the who or that that introduces the adjective clause can be omitted, as in the one (that) I like best, while other times, it cannot, as in a person (who) plays music. The focus on processes and participants helps us recognize where students are using difficult structures.
Table 2. Processes in Lin’s and Han’s texts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Saying/showing</th>
<th>Thinking/Feeling</th>
<th>Describing/defining</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lin</td>
<td>came, play (2), make, dry play, give, hole, take (3), open</td>
<td>2, show, said</td>
<td>2, know, like</td>
<td>6, is (5), look like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Han</td>
<td>play (2), origami (used as a verb in how to origami)</td>
<td>1, show</td>
<td>5, like (2), know, think (2)</td>
<td>6, is (6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nam’s and Joann’s Texts

The texts written by Nam and Joann are more developed, drawing on a broader set of language features to give us a richer picture of Mr. Lee’s visit. For example, Nam (see Figure 2) includes modal auxiliaries in her verb phrases (can make). Modal auxiliaries (e.g., can, may, should, would) introduce ability, likelihood, obligation, usability, and other meanings into the verb phrase. Using can gives Nam added flexibility in writing about what Mr. Lee is able to do (e.g., He can make the bugs; He know how to play the origami). Having alternative ways of “saying the same thing” is important for a writer. Nam also uses more expanded noun phrases than Han or Lin, including the 5th grade class, many kind of top, and the top strength, a phrase that is distinctive in constructing an abstraction (strength).

Joann’s text (see Figure 3) is the most elaborate of the four. She introduces additional grammatical participants, including the teacher and the students, and her text provides more information about the events, with action processes punctuated by thinking processes that report what Mr. Lee knows. She uses a wider variety of action processes than any of the other writers, with words like twirl and clapping embellishing vivid descriptions of the events. She concludes with a describing process that provides closure (That was a good day to me). She expands noun phrases with modifiers before and after the noun (one giant top, so many trick, Mr. W’s class, the origami he had made; a man doing something), enabling her to include more information.

Helping Students Expand What the Text Is About

We answered the question What is the text about? by focusing on the processes constructed in verbs and the participants constructed in noun phrases. This showed that the students mainly recounted events in common action verbs such as play, give, show, and make, and that they all attempted to expand information in noun phrases. So, how do we help them expand meaning?

Students can be guided to expand their use of language resources by working with them to generate a list of verbs appropriate for the task of both reporting events and evaluating them. Students should also be encouraged to name and describe the people and things they want to write about and to practice expanding noun phrases with adjectives, prepositional phrases, and other modifiers. The analysis we propose helps us see structures that students are attempting with mixed success, and to recognize structures they do not use that could help them with the task. We see

Figure 2. Nam introduces more complex language features in her retelling.

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Mr. d's visit

Yesterday afternoon, the teacher took me with few children to Mr. W class watching a man playing top and make origami. He also knows how to playing yo-yo. He said that he don't know we want to see he play yo-yo. He will come to play for us at the other time. He know every thing. He playing so many tricks at the top that make us so quiet to watch. No one talking. He can make turn into a piece of paper. He got one Everybody clapping after he playing.

Figure 3. Joann produces the most elaborate text.

that all of these students attempt to expand noun phrases with adjective clauses (e.g., Every picture that I like). Although students can be encouraged to develop this structure, as it enables them to enrich their description of the grammatical participants in their texts, it is interesting that not every student uses adjectives before nouns (e.g., a big box), a structurally simple form. In Vietnamese, like Spanish, adjectives come after the noun, so these Vietnamese speakers may find it easier to use adjective clauses than the less familiar pattern of adjectives before nouns.

Other features of the noun phrase, such as use of possessive modifiers, could also be brought into focus. Most of the students attempt to construct possessives (my, Mr. W's), but this is a difficult system of the grammar when it involves more than simple possessive pronouns. We see this in the way the students use the noun phrase Mr. Lee's Visit. As noted above, these were the words written on the board as the title for their texts. Three of the students interpret Mr. Lee as the name of the visitor, using it as a subject in sentences like Yesterday Mr. Lee's come to the 5th grade class (Nam). Han uses the whole phrase Mr. Lee's Visit as the subject of his first sentence. Recognizing this misunderstanding provides a context for teachers to help students analyze and practice possessive marking in English.

Activities such as highlighting the processes and expanding the participants can help students focus on the forms and meanings in their texts. Focusing on processes and participants—how they are constructed and what they mean—enhances the ability to write about what happened and gives students information about how English works that offers them more language resources to work with.

How Is Judgment/Evaluation Expressed?

To answer the second question in this task, we look at the thinking/feeling and describing processes in these students' texts, as shown in Table 1. Seeing how the writers use these processes helps us understand their perspectives on the event and how they express their reactions and points of view.

Lin's and Han's Texts

In Lin's and Han's texts, is serves as the main verb in the describing processes, where adverbs and adjectives help construct descriptions of Mr. Lee in clauses like He is China but he look like VietNam (Lin), and he very good of this game
(Han). As we saw, Han expresses more judgment/evaluation and includes more description than Lin. Lin evaluates the event by writing He play a tops is very good, and his personal response is constructed in the clause Every picture that I like a man play a piano. The meaning in the latter sentence is not clear (does he mean The picture that I like best is a man playing a piano, or Every picture that I like is of a man playing a piano, or I like every picture, especially the man playing piano, etc.?). Teachers can offer writers the opportunity to clarify and recast such sentences in different ways by engaging in discussion about the meanings the writers intend and then helping them construct those meanings through shared and guided writing.

Nam’s and Joann’s Texts

Joann and Nam use more language resources to express judgment and evaluation. Joann introduces more participants (childrens, the kids) and refers to them using the indefinite pronouns everybody, some, and nobody. This enables her to comment on the students’ reactions, describing the actions that show their engagement with Mr. Lee’s performance (everybody clapping; no one talking). Nam and Joann also venture further into the grammar of thinking/feeling, attempting to write about needs and wishes. The grammar associated with thinking/feeling processes is different from the grammar of action processes, and clauses with thinking/feeling processes are more difficult to construct. For example, while the writer can say He plays tops, using a noun-verb-noun structure to produce an action process, writing about what Mr. Lee knows, a thinking process, often requires the writer to construct a whole clause after the verb (He knows how to play tops). These writers struggle with such forms and are inconsistent in their accuracy. For example, Nam writes: Mr. Lee’s not just know to play. But her next sentence is: He know how to play. Students can practice writing about thoughts and feelings with guidance on how these clauses are constructed.

Unlike Han and Lin, Nam uses the resources of punctuation for quoting Mr. Lee (He said, “Have some origami need to make twenty hours”). Joann reports the same comment, using indirect speech: He said some need to make in 20 hrs. These writers go beyond saying what happened and report on Mr. Lee’s comments about the effort origami can take, but this is a challenging task. Learners of English need guidance and models for constructing the clauses and sentences that present these complex meanings.

Helping Students Expand Expressions of Judgment and Evaluation

We answered the question How is judgment/evaluation expressed? by focusing on what students describe and the way they report thoughts and feelings. Teachers can help students expand their range of verbs with these meanings and assist them in writing sentences using the complex constructions they often need for this purpose, such as like to try and want to see. Teachers can also help students develop control of more saying processes and provide practice with quoting and reporting.

How Is the Text Organized?

To answer this third question, we look at how the writers begin their sentences and how they track the participants they introduce. While these students mainly begin their sentences with sentence subjects, a sentence can also begin with a grammatical circumstance, constructed in an adverb phrase or a prepositional phrase, or with conjunction that makes a logical link with some other part of the text. These language features help writers organize and structure their texts and introduce meanings that show how elements are linked. Because these texts recount an experience, we expect time sequencing to be the primary organizational strategy.

Lin’s and Han’s Texts

Lin’s text is introduced with the adverb yesterday, and he uses but to construct the contrast between Mr. Lee’s looks and nationality. He depends mainly on the conjunction and to link simple clauses that sequence the events. In Han’s text, only one clause, in the middle of the text, has a time expression, Last time. He uses and twice in one long sentence at the beginning of his text—not to sequence events, but to link clauses that construct his description and evaluation. We noted above that Han’s text presents more of a snapshot than a sequence of events, and we see this again, both in his lack of sequencing resources and in the but and because that highlight his focus on evaluation. Neither Lin nor Han organize texts that have the full structure expected in recounting an experience, a structure that can

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include an *orientation, record of events, and reorientation* (Rothery & Stenglin, 1997).

**Nam’s and Joann’s Texts**

In contrast, both Nam and Joann begin with an orientation, move through a sequence of events, and reorient the reader at the end. Nam organizes her text with the adverbs and conjunctions *yesterday, and then, and then.* Joann draws on a wider range of language features for sequencing, using *yesterday afternoon, after, later, and at the end* to lead us through the events. *And* is the most commonly used connector in all of these texts, with *but, or, and because* used only a few times. This indicates that the writers present few logical relationships of contrast, comparison, or cause in the texts. By using a variety of connectors, writers can structure their texts more clearly (e.g., with *then, after that, finally*) and build in the logical relationships that enable evaluation and judgment (*but, because, etc.*).

As Table 1 indicates, another aspect of text structuring is introducing a participant into the text and then tracking that participant as the text develops. The students are able to introduce Mr. Lee and then refer to him with *he,* but only Joann uses *it* to refer back to something she has introduced. Joann’s text also shows an advance in her use of *that,* a demonstrative pronoun that refers back in *That is a long time and That was a good day.* Being able to use demonstrative pronouns to make cohesive links in their texts helps writers construct evaluation and make the organization of their texts clear.

**Helping Students Recognize the Language of Sequence and Organizing in Texts**

We answered the question *How is the text organized?* by focusing on how the writers organize and link events and how they introduce and track grammatical participants. Teachers can help students recognize the meanings that prepositional phrases, adverbs, and conjunctions contribute and draw students’ attention to how they begin their sentences. Teachers can also highlight these language resources when they occur in the texts students read so that learners begin to recognize their use, making it easier to introduce them into their own writing.

Other language features also contribute to creating clear structure. For example, articles (*a, the*) are a resource for developing the flow of information in text. Articles are difficult for students learning English because the rules are complex, but some generalizations can be helpful. For example, students can learn that the indefinite article *a/an* is typically used to introduce a grammatical participant, and the definite article *the* is used to track it once it is introduced. For Lin, this would be useful information as he writes *He take a box, and he open a box, and inside the box is a picture.* He could learn that the second mention of *box* could use *it or the box* (e.g., *He took a box and he opened it/the box*). Teachers can guide writers by modeling effective article use and focusing on it in student texts, thus raising awareness about this challenging language feature.

**Going Further: How the Meanings Interact**

We have shown that the three areas of meaning—*what the text is about, how judgment/evaluation is expressed, and how the text is organized*—can be separately analyzed by asking three broad questions about the writer’s intention. In context, of course, each language choice contributes simultaneously to all three functions of language. Verb tense is an example. Tense marking helps the writer tell *what it is about* by setting the time frame in the past, present, or future. Shifts in tense also help students evaluate as they move from telling what happened (e.g., *Yesterday Mr. Lee came*) to describing in a timeless way (e.g., *He is Vietnamese*). In Table 1, we have highlighted the role of verb tense in answering the question about organization because of the important role that tense shifts can play as students move between events and description or evaluation (He *came* to our class; He *knows* how to play tops).

We see, though, that for the most part, tense marking is not a feature of these writers’ grammatical repertoires. Han’s text uses only present tense (e.g., *Last time he play top . . .*), and although Lin uses two irregular past tense forms (*came, said*), he does not consistently use past tense to construct the event sequence. Nam also lacks control of past tense, using it only for the irregular *said,* but she attempts a present perfect construction (*have try to do*) and a future with *will* to relate her personal experience and express her
future hopes. Joann shows the most awareness in this area, with -ing forms even appearing on some action verbs in her text. She may be ready to start using the progressive forms: He was playing so many tricks; No one was talking. This is a complex area of the grammar—one that not all students are yet positioned to recognize and use—but attention to the way the different verb forms work in this context can offer them insights.

**Using Language Analysis to Inform Pedagogy**

Academic writing is challenging for students learning English, but it can offer rich contexts for language development (Harklau, 2002). Teachers can support writing development by helping students learn language that is functional for the writing tasks they assign. The functional grammar perspective recognizes students’ strengths and can help teachers provide specific feedback and instruction that challenges writers to use more academic language choices. We have seen that Nam’s and Joann’s texts are more advanced than Lin’s and Han’s because of the language resources they are able to draw on for this task. But their stronger grasp of language resources does not necessarily mean fewer grammatical errors; we must understand that as they take more risks and endeavor to make more complex points, they will continue to struggle with language choices.

Through language analysis, teachers can recognize the language features relevant to the texts that the students have produced. Students’ writing can then be used as a basis for developing responses and interventions that focus students on their language choices and the role of language in accomplishing their writing goals. Students can share in the analysis, becoming aware of their own language choices by asking questions about their texts. For example, they can ask, *what have I presented in action, saying, thinking/feeling, and describing processes?* They can use color to highlight these different process types, making visible their efforts to evaluate and describe events and participants. Such analysis can motivate them to add to their texts and to take up new forms and structures.

Students can analyze the thinking/feeling processes they have included in their texts, asking whose thoughts and feelings have I included? and what are the thoughts and feelings that I have included? They can look at their describing processes, asking what have I described? and how have I evaluated it? Students can also look at how they have organized their texts, looking at the way they introduce each sentence and the connectors and markers of time and other logical meanings that they have introduced. Students may not be able to analyze all aspects of their texts; control of verb tense, for example, may develop slowly, but explicit attention to these features can raise students’ awareness of patterns in the way English works.

Teachers can also explain the expected structure of the texts they assign and review options for structuring that will be valued. When reading together, teachers can focus students’ attention on language features that show how English works in context. For example, texts with clear organizational structure can illustrate how conjunctions present meanings of different types or show how demonstrative pronouns such as that enable writers to refer back to what they have written. Teachers can point to how meaning is constructed in model texts and then co-construct texts with students, focusing on how particular language features are used. In all of these ways, the focus on grammar is linked with meaning, and the point of the language focus is to expand students’ meaning potential.

**Conclusion**

We have illustrated how meaning and form are closely linked, using a functional linguistics approach to contextualize language instruction in a particular task—the retelling of an experience. Other tasks could be similarly analyzed, keeping in mind that different features are relevant for different purposes at different grade levels. More research is needed to expand these descriptions and establish new pedagogical interventions, but this article has shown how teachers can work together to analyze their students’ current repertoire of language choices, and then work strategically with students to expand that repertoire and improve writing on assigned tasks.

As we have demonstrated, students need instruction about language in the context of
writing particular kinds of texts. Teaching grammar at the sentence level separates the language from whole texts where the grammar is meaningful. While sometimes it may be useful to simplify the presentation of a complex feature and practice it in manageable chunks, such practice does not help students understand how these chunks fit coherently in a whole text. If students are asked to practice conjugating verbs whose tenses they got wrong, they will not intuitively know, from such an exercise, how the verb tense shifts work when they write a text.

Students who are learning English need instruction and support for practicing and developing a wide range of language features. The functional grammar approach we have presented here provides a systematic way for teachers to analyze students’ writing. Identifying students’ strengths and needs can focus our teaching on expanding students’ language choices in ways that deepen meaning in specific types of texts. When we focus on grammar in the context of a student’s own writing, we approach language development by starting where learners are grammatically, acknowledging the meanings they have constructed. Through meaningful writing activities, supported by a focus on language, students may come to find academic writing not so difficult after all.

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