LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS: A STATE-OF-THE-ART REVIEW

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Abstract

The purpose of the present paper is to offer a state-of-the-art review on the topic of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and its theoretical and practical implications on the field of language education. SFL has been widely recognized due to its potentiality to encourage both reflection and action for the participants involved, becoming over the years in a very influential appliable linguistic theoretical approach. Recent empirical studies were thoroughly reviewed, which shed light on the three most researched areas, including text analysis and literacy intervention, classroom discourse, and language teaching and learning processes. As a final remark and taking into account the literature analysis, some prospective studies are briefly listed.
INTRODUCTION

Language allows people to accomplish different communicative purposes by providing them with a set of available options from which they can construe, express, and negotiate meaning in particular contexts of use. This functional or "inter-organism" view of language, in Halliday's words (1978, p.10), is a result of the theoretical advancements in Western linguistics dating back from Ancient Greece and Rome (related to philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle), where the conceptualization of language and its grammar followed a philosophical-logical and syntagmatic framework. It stressed on the prescriptive and fixed quality of language as a set of rules and a model of judgment that compared meaning with truth-conditions, leading people to engage in learning activities that included the study of the structure and formation of words and sentences (being the latter its basic unit of analysis), the translation of whole passages word-for-word, the generation of multiple sentences from a complex one, among some others.

This traditional perspective of language, highly supported by scholars such as Ellis (1995), Hinkel and Fotos (2002), Sharwood (1981), and Willis (2003), has been long introduced to the education setting, more specifically to the teaching field. It has been mainly orientated towards the learning of grammatical categories or parts of speech (such as verb, noun, pronoun, and adjective), structures (such as subjects and predicates), and its preferred patterns of expression (such as the principle in English that states that a current action should be signaled by a present progressive tense, as in she is playing the piano, not she plays the piano). Grammar-based methods of language teaching, such as the grammar-translation method is an exact representation of the concern over the focus on form as it emphasizes on the explicit and detailed explanation of the correct form and the grammatical rules as well as its mechanistic practice. At the same time, it relegates to a second place, for instance, the role of the oral work.

Despite its seemingly never-ending pedagogical applications, as found by Assalahi (2013), Shawana, Muhammad, and Mustanir (2016), and Shenderuk, Tamarkina, and Tetiana (2018), this conception of language has also been a subject of lengthy discussions and criticism. It has been considered to be decontextualized, to lack of theoretical rigor, and to show a simplistic and fragmented understanding of the grammar (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Matthiessen & Halliday, 2009), among some other shortcomings, which ultimately fails to meet students' communicative needs by not being able to provide them with the essential skills and knowledge to face the outside world (Brown, 2007).

As a reaction to this approach, in the twenty Century, schools of modern linguistics expanded their scope. They adopted a more descriptive-ethnographic view that sought to
explain the very nature of language, how it is formed, its functions, and contexts of use. The first one to be on the scene was the generativism, product of Noam Chomsky's work (1957), which theorized about the language acquisition process (i.e., the linguistic competence) and proposed the idea of the universal grammar. The second one was the functionalism that considered language as a system of social interactions oriented towards the communicative phenomena (i.e., functions performed by language) and how meanings are construed. This latter theoretical framework gave rise to a series of approaches such as the functional typology, the function-to-form mapping, the information organization, and the well-known *Systemic Functional Linguistics* (hereafter referred to as SFL) discussed in the present paper.

In particular, the spread of SFL came originally from classics such as "Introduction to Functional Grammar" (Halliday, 1985; 1994) and "Cohesion in English" (Halliday & Hassan, 1976). It has demonstrated over the past decades increasing acceptability owing to its major contributions both within (e.g., typology, discourse, intonation, language learning, and computational linguistics) and outside linguistics (e.g., education, psychology, and sociology). Countries like the United Kingdom, Australia, China, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, to mention some, have demonstrated interest in engaging in research studies, publishing scholarly articles in general or specialized journals, designing syllabi, producing undergraduate and graduate dissertations, as well as hosting a variety of academic events (i.e., conferences, forums, seminars, and workshops) all under the fundamentals of SFL. Even more, the expanding representativeness of this linguistic approach can be illustrated in the several educational institutions that have adopted its theoretical-practical basics across the world, suffice to mention, for example, the Beijing Normal University–Center for functional linguistics, the Sun Yat-sen University–Functional Linguistics Institute, the Xiamen University; and the Singapore University of Social Sciences (Asia); the Macquarie University, the University of Sydney, and the Wollongong University (Oceania); the Coventry University, the University of Birmingham, the Saint Louis University; and the University of Oslo (Europe); the University of Michigan and the University of California; the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México; the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (Brazil); Universidad de Valparaíso (Chile); and the Universidad del Norte (Colombia).

The vision of language, as meaning-making potential, constitutes the cornerstone of SFL, social semiotic theory, and a theory of social action developed by Michael Halliday in the early sixties and further explored by himself and other recognized scholars such as Hasan (1985 and 1996), Martin (2010 and 2014), Matthiessen (2007; 2009; and 2015), Maton (2017), among others. The principles of SFL were highly influenced by the work of B.L. Whorf in conjunction
with the contributions of European functionalists, including J.R. Firth and his predecessor B.K. Malinowski. Particularly, Whorf's (1952; 1956) conception of the intrinsic relationship between language and culture, Firth's (1950; 1957) idea of meaning as function in context and system, and Malinowski's (1923; 1935) context of situation, context of culture (1935), together with his notion of the multifunctionality of language later came to be the major basis of Halliday's postulates.

Throughout his extensive publications, Halliday (1973; 1978; 1992; 1993; 2002a; 2002b; and 2007) submits that language is a resource for making meaning realized through wording (i.e., lexicogrammar choices), and grounded in a context of situation and context of culture to attain the speaker's or writer's communicative purposes and aims. In this sense, the functional use of a language implies conveying meaning on three simultaneous levels within the system network of a clause. The first level of meaning is known as the experiential or ideational metafunction by which individuals can construe and represent the world of experiences through the transitivity system (i.e., process types, participant roles, and circumstances). The second one is the interpersonal metafunction that allows them to enact their interactions with the world in terms of their attitude and judgment via the mood (i.e., declarative, interrogative, and imperative), polarity (i.e., positive and negative), and modality system (i.e., modal verbs operators). Lastly, there is the textual metafunction that enables them to manage the flow of discourse to make it into a coherent and unified text by employing the theme-rheme structure. These semantic metafunctions are in turn related to social contexts by the concept of register and its three key semiotic dimensions, the field (e.g., what language is used to talk about), the tenor (e.g., the type of relationships between participants), and the mode (e.g., the medium of communication either written or spoken).

Within this context, as indicated by Christie (2004) and Halliday (2002a), SFL is known to develop theoretically in response to the applied needs, problems, and questions arising from communities around the world. Becoming then into socially accountable linguistics that centers its concerns on subjects like "the emergence and development of national languages, the status of linguistic minorities, functional variation (i.e., register) in language, unwritten languages and dialects, conceptual-functional grammar, and linguistic typology" (Halliday, 2002b, p.118), together with the educational research, and the development of a theory of language in education (Christie, 2004). This latter area comprises the focus of the attention of the present document. The potential domains and directions of current research on SFL have mainly advanced on three subtopics: text analysis, language teaching and learning, and classroom discourse.
DISCUSSIONS OF MAIN THEMES

By way of general contextualization on the subject of language education and SFL, it should be noted that its consolidation can be traced back to the eighties in the English speaking country of Australia. Halliday's theory of language development comprising the notions of language learning (i.e., mastering the four language skills), learning through language (i.e., activities that lead to learning about the world through the language), and learning about language as an object of the study constituted the cornerstone for the Language Development Project launched in 1977 in Australia as a national curriculum project that sought to generalize the conception of learning as a semiotic process itself, as learning to mean and to expand individual's meaning potential (Halliday, 1993). Further discussions led by Halliday (1973), Halliday and Martin (1993), and some other scholars about the role of linguistics in the language education and the importance of knowing about one's language, progressively positioned SFL as a revolutionizing and more coherent framework that worked perfectly as "a theory about the nature of social life, a theory of language as a fundamental semiotic system involved in the shaping of social life, and a theory about the possibilities of social change" (Christie, 2004, p.21). Moreover, Halliday's language learning and teaching experiences, mainly in China, England, and Australia, allowed him to disseminate his early ideas about the nature of language (e.g., grammatical structure) and, later on, his theory of functional grammar and its application to education, to the point of reaching a considerable degree of global influence nowadays.

The robust theoretical-practical framework of SFL has led to a positive impact on educational linguistics and literacy as it has proposed a more comprehensive approach to language. As presented below, SFL has majorly contributed to three themes that include the understanding of the way language is employed in texts, the analysis of how a classroom functions as a socially structured activity, and the enhancement of language students' ability to create meaning and convey it in different cultural contexts and academic areas.

Text analysis, literacy intervention, and SFL

Serving a dual purpose, as a theory of language and as a text analysis method (Eggins, 1994) that enables the systematic description of a language, the principles of SFL within the education setting have been widely applied to the interpretation and explanation of texts (Halliday, 2007). It has proved to raise awareness of the functional organization of language through its lexicogrammatical realizations present in the diverse text types. Hence, the
emphasis is placed on the examination of how the functional elements in a text realize the available semantic options (i.e., metafunctions) within specific contexts of use (Byrnes, 2008; Schleppegrell, 2004), a task that requires from both teachers and learners the development of descriptive and analytical skills (Tucker, n.d.).

A representative example of the above is shown in the research conducted by Achugar, Schleppegrell, and Oteíza (2007). They studied how public-school disciplinary teachers could gain functional linguistic metalanguage knowledge and analysis skills to enhance their multilingual students' language written and reading skills. They argued that "teachers need knowledge about language and tools to analyze language to understand the demands their subject matter poses to students, to support their students' literacy development and to approach the texts they use critically" (p.8), a possible aim to meet if teachers reflect on the meanings and values construed within a language through the assistance of a solid theoretical framework like the one provided by SFL. Thus, participants were purposely engaged in textual analysis of historical documents to unveil the meanings in texts by indicating the linguistic cues that presented the historical content. This analytical exercise was, in turn, expected to be done in the future by their students. Similar works have been carried out on different text types like students' narratives (Adetomokun, 2012; Correa & Domínguez, 2014), essays (Rodríguez, 2013; Tshotsho, 2014), and examinations (Oliveira, 2015), language textbooks (Putra & Lukmana, 2017; To, 2018), to mention some.

SFL's underlying principles have not only a powerful impact on teachers but also pupils. García, Sagre, and Lacharme (2014) found that, generally, language students find it challenging to analyze written texts and are at a literal level of analysis. They showed not to be trained to locate, for example, the structure of texts concerning its functions, genre, linguistic features, and the writer's intentions and ideologies, making it difficult for them to know how language is used in real-life situations. This study suggested that it is compulsory to propose classroom activities and lessons based on SFL to teach students to develop their literacy skills.

This latter pedagogical purpose was further validated by McCrocklin and Slater (2017), Caamaño (n.d.), and Rojas-García (2016). Thus, the former discovered that by carrying out linguistic-based literary analysis, students could move beyond summarizing works of literature to study them critically. Through their teachers' guidance, students acquired the metalanguage to talk about how meaning was constructed in texts to understand how the writer used language to achieve particular purposes. In the same vein, Caamaño highlighted the importance of SFL in strengthen college learners' reading comprehension ability for them to easily understand academic texts and go beyond the simple linguistic decoding to its evaluation. Rojas-García as
well found in Halliday's model a relevant tool for improving writing processes in higher education. Similarly, researchers like French (2009), Lim (2018, Nagao (2019), Potradinata (2018), Prasiyanto (2018), to reference a few, have also reached a similar conclusion.

Finally, as stressed by Schulze (2015), teachers' knowledge of language contributes to the construction of language-focused instructions to promote language learners' academic literacy, being the reason why it is paramount to incorporate SLF into teacher-preparation and professional-development programs.

**Classroom discourse and SFL**

The twofold focus of SFL on text and context (Halliday, 1992) makes it into a theory par excellence to address classroom discussions and, therefore, understand the functions and meanings of language. The construction of real-life communicative interactions within the classroom setting (i.e., text) sheds light on what meanings are construed and how these are organized via the employed lexicogrammar choices made in the target language.

For example, in a study to investigate the linguistic resources utilized by professors and EFL students when interacting with each other, Badklang and Srinon (2018) found that even when both participants conveyed attitudinal meanings, professors, in particular, used a greater number of judgment resources when providing their evaluative feedback towards the students' language abilities, characters, and behaviors. This appraisal was mainly realized by utilizing verb phrases, adjectives (e.g., good, excellent, well done), and modals, all loaded with positive attitudes. It was then concluded that the strategic use of language by professors allowed them to negotiate solidarity with students to promote a fairly harmonious and democratic relation. Yang and Tao (2018) also tackled the role of educators' participation in the construal of classroom discourse. Thus, their research on two Chinese teachers of English as a foreign language, one rated with high performance and one with low performance, unveiled that the former used to have the floor most of the time but presented engaging content that created a friendly ambiance; meanwhile, the latter gave students more opportunities to practice speaking but chose unattractive information, mostly focused on the study of language, that conversely set a distant relationship. Researchers were able to draw this conclusion due to their close analysis of the discourse features (i.e., meaning patterns realized in lexicogrammar forms) exhibited by participants, which could portray the reality of language teachers' performance assessment during the interaction with their pupils. Li (2016), along with Sunardi et al. (2018), reached a similar outcome.
Another growing area of SFL application within the frame of classroom discourse is the one centered on enhancing students' language learning performance due to their class interaction. This educational goal could be achieved through the sociocultural notion of mediation and the mode continuum or variations in language use situations. Gibbons (2003) demonstrated that teacher-student talk contributed to the participants' language learning (in the specific case of a CLIL science lesson), in the sense that students, guided by their teachers, reconstructed what occurred in the face-to-face experiments and later on, recontextualized it in the academic discourse, that is, their knowledge gradually transformed across a mode continuum into the specialist discourse of the school. The teacher's mediation played an essential role in students' success as these former facilitated linguistic bridges between the learners' language and the target register by "recasting [e.g., they attached to each other], signaling to the students how they can self-reformulate [e.g., what did you find out?], indicating where a reformulation is needed but handing this task over to the learner [e.g., can you explain that again?], and modeling alternative ways of recontextualizing personal knowledge [e.g. ...Gina do you want to try]" (p.267). Further explorations on this topic have been carried out by Lim (2019) and Taylor (2014) on multimodality and gestures, Martin and Rose (2003) on the register, and Sagre and Herazo (2015) on listening as a textual genre.

As a final note, it should be mentioned that the importance of unveiling the meanings behind classroom interactions has brought scholars to propose, based on SFL, a series of methodological designs. This is the case of Vidal (2017), who suggested a model of analysis that allows obtaining more systematic descriptions about the teaching practices and its principles, moving then beyond the linguistic analysis of language patterns to their interpretation from a sociological perspective, which would, in turn, lead to reconfiguring the teaching process. The model involves two steps, an analytical step informed by SFL that seeks to perform a discourse analysis of the classroom discourse, and an interpretive step that translates the discourse semantics patterns of the ideational and interpersonal meanings concerning varying strengths of epistemic and social relations.

**Language teaching-learning and SFL**

The learning and teaching process of a language (e.g., mother tongue, foreign or second language) has also been a core concern within SFL, unveiling the "need to provide explanations of problems faced by the learners, (...) to develop some kind of coherent notion of a language, how it works, how it was learned, and so forth, in order simply to improve the quality of the language teaching" (Halliday & Hasan 2006, p.16). In this sense, SFL leads students to
comprehend the functions of a language by knowing how these are commonly used by people so that they can apply them to achieve a wide range of communicative purposes in diverse social contexts.

Halliday's attempts to understand language development in human beings brought him to research early ontogenesis, studying his son named Nigel. As a result of his observations, he suggested a three-part stage-model (i.e., transition from the protolanguage to the home language, making of abstract meanings, and making of specialized meanings) that represented and compared children's earliest utterances with those enacted by adults, furthermore, he asserted that individuals develop language as they need to mean their inner and outer world (Halliday, 1993). Alongside this research, Hasan (1986), Hasan and Martin (1989), Oldenburg (1986), Painter (1996), and some other scholars have likewise contributed to the growing literature and understanding of this concern. A more recent exploration done by Torr and Simpson (2003), for instance, indicated that preschoolers can produce sophisticated levels of linguistic realizations and that the interpersonal function serves as an important element in the development of the grammatical metaphor, a resource for construing literacy-oriented meanings like the ability to affirm their standpoints and acknowledge and interpret others'. Related research was executed by Derewianka (2003), whose participant this time was a child in the transition to adolescence; observations allowed her to verify Halliday's claim that grammatical metaphor develops greatly in later childhood.

The enhancement of foreign and second language learning has also been seen exponentially benefited from SFL by departing from the premise that learning implies "to think with it and act with it in one and the same operation" (Halliday, 2007, p.133). SFL Theory on this induced process (i.e., type of learning under instructional conditions) has been widely applied as it serves the language learners' communicative purpose and offers them the chance to recognize the linguistic features of the target language. Thus, Estiyowati's study (2017) revealed that non-native English learners manifested to gain a better understanding of the language when being introduced to lectures that followed the SFL principles in comparison with traditional grammar instruction.

Proof of the above was highlighted by Berry (2013), who found that SFL enables pupils to become aware and visualize choices in speaking and writing to model them easily. This idea of reconceptualizing grammar teaching to support language learning was additionally described by de Oliverira and Schaleppeegrell (2015) via one classroom experience by which they showed that, even without relying on technical knowledge, it is possible to explore lexicogrammar choices to help students identify how a language functions and learn new means
to employ it. They explained how in a class, as an excuse to work on the command speech functions, the teacher asked students to rank sentences in a story to reflect how the writer elaborates on the characters and how these interact with each other. Here the emphasis was placed on the meaning of the forms, in the sense that learners’ attention was centered on specific examples to recognize patterns of language (i.e., mood choices -form- linked to giving commands –functions). A similar methodological proposal was introduced by Arús, Bárcena, and Rodríguez (2010), but this time with the special pedagogical objective to develop the intercultural competence through language exposure. Students were then expected to gain empathy towards the English-speaking cultures by unpacking the linguistic resources entailed within the language through contextualized activities that would familiarize them with the most frequent lexicogrammar options to negotiate meaning in specific cultural situations.

Lastly, on the advancements of immersion or bilingual education via Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), SFL has provided tools to raise awareness and control over language within the educational context, as indicated by Whittaker (2010). To illustrate this point, Whittaker presented the results of a study she conducted in two CLIL history classes at secondary schools, in which she examined in light of the SFL theory the teachers’ and students’ use of language to help them become conscious of the way meanings are construed in their discipline (i.e., specific academic registers and genres). Particularly, this knowledge would help teachers to have explicit information about the language required, such as the types of texts in a discipline and the favored lexicogrammatical choices so that they support learner's construction of disciplinary meanings. On this matter, Barwell (2016) adds that together CLIL and SFL offer an essential integration to goal-directed learning in the way that students learn to think about language, learn how to use it, and so to organize content (i.e., scientific linguistic structures) in more advanced fashions as further noted by Maxwell-Reid (2011), Jeong and Lo (2017), Somers, Llinares, and Morton (2016), among others.

CONCLUSION

From the panorama illustrated above, it can be concluded that Systemic Functional Linguistics, as a socially-oriented theory, has proven to have a powerful and positive impact on learners, teachers, teachers’ educators, researchers, and even educational institutions since it enables them to reach advanced levels of understanding of how a language is construed and enacted. This insight is accomplished by providing them with a suitable analytical and interpretative framework for them to perform, to a greater or lesser extent, a systematic analysis of language in terms of its constituent structure and implications on the diverse social contexts.
The present state-of-the-art review unveiled that research is primarily concentrated on topics like language text analysis and literacy intervention, classroom discourse, and teaching-learning processes. However, it should be highlighted that there are still opportunities of study in areas such as sign language and its metafunctional stratum, indigenous languages and the implementation of a social semiotic education program, intercultural discourses and SFL, ontogenesis (i.e., the development of the language system in individuals), and multimodality (i.e., studies the semiotic resources -textual, visual, aural- used to communicate and interact) in digital language learning environments. Ultimately, SFL implies language education, the enhancement of teaching practices and learning practices, and performance, which constitutes bringing worldwide pedagogical reform proposals.

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