Original Research

EFL Writers’ Reconstruction of Writing Beliefs in a Functional Linguistics-Based Curriculum: What Does the Trajectory Look Like?

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Abstract
This case study explores how English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) learners reconstructed their writing beliefs when exposed to a systemic functional linguistics (SFL)–based writing curriculum. The study was conducted through qualitative content analyses of four EFL students’ interviews, journal entries, teacher/peer feedback, as well as their writing pieces collected in an argumentative writing classroom at a Chinese university. It shows that along with mediated instruction, the EFL writers overcame an array of factors in and outside of their classroom and gained more stabilized beliefs that conceptualized writing as a meaning-making process. In addition, the EFL writers gradually acted upon their new beliefs by attending to the concurrent roles of linguistic resources (e.g., grammar and vocabulary), meaning, and context when constructing writing. The study implicates that it is optimal for education administrators to promote meaning-making-based writing instruction through the tool of SFL to shape EFL writers’ beliefs and facilitate their effective construction of academic writing.

Keywords
EFL writers, writing beliefs, meaning making, systemic functional linguistics

Introduction
Effective writing involves meaning making; that is, writers should use appropriate vocabulary and grammar to express content, engage readers, and organize coherent sentences in response to a certain situational and cultural context (Schleppegrell, 2004). The ultimate purpose of writing is to project writers as endorsed members of an English language community (Hyland, 2002, 2015). While meaning-making-based writing is taught in many classrooms and exhibited by students’ actual writing (e.g., O’Hallaron, Plinscar, & Schleppegrell, 2015), it remains unclear whether language learners enact their meaning-making-based writing because of their teachers’ authority or their desire to meet their teachers’ expectations. That is, although language learners have gained meaning-making-based knowledge, they may have no intention of enacting it in their future writing practices, which signals the importance of investigating learners’ beliefs about writing, namely, their evaluative stances toward writing practices (Ellis, 2008; M. Borg, 2001).

When composing writing, English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) and English-as-a-second language (ESL) learners are generally motivated by their beliefs when engaging in actual learning activities on their own (Ellis, 2008; Fives & Buehl, 2012). Learners’ beliefs are open to change or intervention and are mainly formed from their learning experiences with their teachers, including observing or interacting with them (Ellis, 2008; Fives & Gill, 2015). However, almost no research has focused on assisting English language learners in constructing meaning-making beliefs that conceptualize writing as a meaning-making process. Given the motivational role of learners’ beliefs in writing composition, this study attempts to fill this gap and reveal the relationship between student writers’ meaning-making beliefs and their writing practices, while shedding light on writing learners’ authentic cognitive activities.

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Literature Review: Learners’ Writing Beliefs

Learners’ beliefs are defined as a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative [emphasis added] in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further it serves as a guide to thought and behavior. (M. Borg, 2001, p. 185; see Fives & Buehl, 2012, for a review)

It can be seen that learners’ beliefs are equivalent to their evaluative stances or their attitude toward a learning subject. In addition, learners’ beliefs are flexible constructs that can be externally reshaped, such as through effective instruction and practices (Fives & Gill, 2015; Wan, 2014). This also points to the possibility of reshaping learners’ beliefs to best guide and benefit their literacy practices.

Various descriptive studies have shown that language writers follow their beliefs about writing at the level of meaning. However, the focus of these studies has been on students’ beliefs about writing meaningfully in a general way, such as the importance of engaging readers and what constitutes good writing (White & Bruning, 2005). These studies failed to show students’ beliefs about the specific linguistic resources they rely on to produce meaningful knowledge. For example, through a quantitative analysis of a Writing Beliefs Inventory and the writing performance of students enrolled in an introductory educational psychology course at an American university, White and Bruning (2005) demonstrated (a) that students either believed that English writing was just conveying information or the process of engaging readers and (b) that students, respectively, manifested their different beliefs in their actual writing. In a more recent study, Ku, Lai, and Hau (2014), through a quantitative analysis of a Writing Beliefs Inventory and the writing performance of Chinese college students’ belief inventory and their writing samples, showed that students who believed in the credibility of the knowledge from authorities produced few counter-reasons and demonstrated weak arguments in their first language writing. These studies illuminated how language learners’ regulation of their writing practices is guided by their writing beliefs.

Even among those interventional studies that have tried to reconstruct students’ writing beliefs, students’ reconstructed beliefs about meaningful writing were also general, which were limited to such aspects as what constitutes good writing. For instance, Wan (2014) conducted a yearlong writing workshop for ESL students in a U.K. master’s education program and demonstrated that the students reconstructed beliefs about what good writing should be, such as the importance of language styles, and harnessed their beliefs in their own writing practices. Similarly, Negretti (2012), by primarily relying on qualitative analyses of students’ journals enacted in a writer composition course in an American university, concluded that these students gained new beliefs about academic writing in terms of what, how, and why to write an academic essay, and regulated their writing accordingly. Nevertheless, these studies suggest both the potential and the importance of reshaping learners’ English writing beliefs, which can, in turn, benefit their writing practices as endorsed academic English writers.

Overall, as effective writing requires language learners to produce writing “constructed out of the rhetorical options our communities make available” (Hyland & Tse, 2012, p. 156) and make contextually appropriate meanings (Hyland, 2015; Ivanič, 1998; Schleppegrell, 2004), this means that learners should hold meaning-making beliefs that will not only motivate them to write meaningfully but, more importantly, to use contextually appropriate linguistic choices to construe the content of writing. Based on the reviewed studies about students’ writing beliefs, it is imperative to foster student writers’ meaning-making beliefs for them to rely on.

Theoretical Framework: Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Its Potential as a Praxis for Constructing Student Writers’ Meaning-Making Beliefs

Besides its attention to structural accuracy, like traditional grammar, an SFL-based writing curriculum particularly unpacks academic English writing by emphasizing the meaning-making process (i.e., the triadic relationship between linguistic resources, meaning, and context; Gebhard, Chen, Graham, & Gunawan, 2013; Halliday, 1994; Schleppegrell, 2004). Thus, an SFL-based curriculum seems useful for shaping English learners’ beliefs about the authentic demands of writing as a meaning-making process.

In the SFL-based curriculum, writing is taught through teachers’ deconstruction of sample texts and their mediation of English learners’ own construction of writing. In this process, writing is conceived as being shaped by contextual variables, which include field (i.e., the events going on), tenor (i.e., the relationship between the author and the readers, and the author’s attitude toward the subject matter), and mode (i.e., the channel of information, be it spoken or written). The content of writing is produced by calibrating the three factors, respectively, including ideational meaning (language learners’ internal and external experiential experiences and the logical semantic relationships of language), interpersonal meaning (language users’ social position in relation to their audience or subject matter), and textual meaning (the way language users organize ideational meaning and interpersonal meaning into a coherent piece). Take the final version of a writing segment produced by one student in the current project as an example. In her writing piece, when finishing two paragraphs on the benefits of being a vegetarian, she started a counterargument paragraph and wrote: “Nevertheless, when it comes to people’s health,
vegetarianism is criticized at the same time. Opponents hold that among vegetarians, nutrient deficiency is widely spread” (Student writing excerpt). In the writing excerpt, the ideational meaning is basically the literal meaning of the two sentences; that is, vegetarians are criticized and why they are criticized. The ideational meaning is in contrast with what was mentioned earlier in the text as indicated by the lexical use (i.e., nevertheless). The interpersonal meaning here is the attitudinal stance the opponents hold toward vegetarianism (e.g., the lexical use of widely spread). The textual meaning is how the two sentences are connected through the semantically synonymous relationship between criticize in the first sentence and opponents in the following sentence.

As also illustrated in the SFL-based deconstruction of the aforementioned student writing sample, the lexicon-grammar resources highlighted were based on categories provided by SFL, explaining the formation of the three meanings (i.e., how certain vocabulary and structure in valued discourse co-play to construct the three meanings) in a certain genre (e.g., argumentation; Halliday, 1994). In particular, regarding ideational meaning, participants (like the subject or the object in the traditional sense), process (verbs), and circumstance (prepositional or adverbial phrases) are main categories provided to deconstruct ideational meaning (such as nominalization or non-human nouns as participants; for example, vegetarianism in the aforementioned student writing sample) as well as logical connectors (e.g., however in the aforementioned student writing sample). To show interpersonal meaning, the SFL-based curriculum also provided categories, such as subjects (in the traditional sense), predicates (in the traditional sense), and appraisal resources (including attitude represented linguistically by words such as should, good, and modal verbs; graduation by kind of; and engagement by bare statements or statements with sources). In the aforementioned student writing excerpt, we can use the categories of attitude, graduation, and engagement to label criticized, widely spread, and opponents hold that, respectively. Categories, such as theme (the starting point of a sentence) and cohesion (e.g., conjunction words at the grammatical level, and repetition, synonymy, hyponymy at the lexical level), explain linguistically how to create fluent text, such as repeating a theme across sentences or using lexical repetition. In the aforementioned student writing sample, lexical cohesion can be used to explain the relationship between criticize and opponents in the two adjacent sentences. These three meanings are represented through the appropriate categories and are then mapped to clauses, which, in response to the context of culture (i.e., the institutional practices), are organized into a larger unit while achieving a specific purpose (e.g., to narrate or to argue). With regard to argumentative writing relevant to the current study (Schleppegrell, 2004; Zhang, 2018), nominalization (e.g., deforestation) tends to be used as the participant, subject, and theme simultaneously. In addition, argumentative writing favors explicit appraisal resources, such as the use of adjectives to show authorial stances and the use of engagement to show the interaction between different voices. Altogether, with a dual focus on the meaning and linguistic resources, SFL can usefully reveal the features in the genre of diverse discourses.

Nevertheless, despite the emphasis on the interconnections between context, meaning, and grammar in the SFL-based writing curriculum, SFL-based research has been mainly conducted to boost students’ writing practices and not student writers’ beliefs. In this line of research, SFL experts (i.e., instructors) typically adopted the pedagogy of reading to learn (Rose & Martin, 2012). That is, teachers used SFL-based labels (e.g., participant, appraisal resources) to guide students in deconstructing texts of diverse genres, with a focus on how genre-specific resources participate in meaning construction (e.g., nominalization in science texts), and then students conduct their independent learning (e.g., essay composing) (Rose & Martin, 2012). For instance, in the ESL context, O’Hallaron et al. (2015) reported on how explicit teaching of appraisal resources (one interpersonal meaning component in SFL) enabled students to construct and deconstruct authors’ judgments or attitudes in science texts. One participant in their study, for example, was able to identify that hiding the authorial role as the subject of a proposition is a strategy to impose authorial power on readers. Among the few studies relevant to the EFL context (e.g., Yasuda, 2015), Gebhard et al. (2013) implemented an SFL-based curriculum among pre-service English teachers in a graduate course at an American university. One participant in their study, a student from China who had held that correct language form (e.g., the importance of maintaining structural accuracy or the overall structure of texts) was crucial to good writing as taught by her English writing teachers in China, constructed her writing through meaning making following exposure to the SFL-based curriculum. For example, she chose non-human subjects/participants instead of the random use of pronouns when constructing academic writing, meeting the demands of academic writing.

Taken together, the above studies illuminate the importance of SFL in helping learners conveniently analyze and construct texts in both EFL and ESL contexts, as is expected in academic English discourse. However, knowledge is still lacking on what these students believe in the process of receiving the meaning-making-based perspective on writing. Meaning-making-based writing practices may be enacted by students out of their respect for their teachers’ authority, which might not be authentically accepted by students either because of their emotional resistance (Margolis, 2001) or because it might be contradictory to their prior knowledge of writing instruction and their interest in high-stakes tests that traditionally focus on language form (vocabulary and structures of sentences; Gebhard, Chen, & Gunawan, 2014). Given the motivational role of students’ beliefs in their actual practices as well as the usefulness of SFL, it is worthwhile to explore the impact of the SFL-based curriculum on EFL learners’ writing beliefs, understanding the potential change.
of their evaluative stance toward the curriculum. Therefore, this case study, with a focus on four EFL learners, is guided by one research question:

**Research Question:** How does SFL-based pedagogy impact EFL learners’ beliefs about writing meaningfully, if at all?

**Method**

An exploratory qualitative case study approach was adopted because the research purpose was not to yield generalized findings, but to focus on exploring students’ beliefs reconstruction in an SFL-based classroom (Merriam, 1988).

**Research Context**

The case study was conducted in an argumentative writing classroom for sophomore English major students at Lumpkin University (pseudonym) in Northern China. Lumpkin University does not provide mandatory instructional guidelines to instructors, which means they have the freedom to use their own teaching practices, with the exception of a designated textbook required by Lumpkin University. Following a pre-study survey that revealed students’ dominant writing beliefs about language form, the instructor began to teach writing in accordance with SFL-based pedagogy, with the aim of fostering students’ meaning-making beliefs and the construction of effective writing.

Different from traditional EFL writing instruction that was focused on grammatical accuracy (Zhang, 2017), the course curriculum design attempted to help student writers develop meaning-making beliefs and corresponding writing practices, informed by the pedagogy of reading to learn (Rose & Martin, 2012). It included reorganizing the textbook content based on its closeness to the three SFL meta-meanings (i.e., ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings) that were being taught. Other curriculum components included sample writing texts from other authoritative textbooks by internationally renowned publication houses, visual–audio learning resources on SFL, and weekly after-class reading assignments on materials (e.g., online resources). In class, the instructor (also the researcher) used sample texts and deconstructed the three meanings with a focus on linguistic realization.

For example, when deconstructing a sample essay that argues for regulating cell phone use (Hacker, 2006; see the appendix for the link of the sample text), the instructor first showed the structure of this text (i.e., introduction, body paragraph, and conclusion). Following this, the instructor adopted the pedagogy of reading to learn and mediated through SFL-based labels the meaning representation in the class. Take the counterargument on the fourth page of this essay, for example. At the level of ideational meaning, the instructor highlighted participant (e.g., “some groups”) and process (e.g., “argue”) to show the way how the opposing claim that preferred traffic laws over legislation was presented. The instructor also explained the way of expanding on authorial arguments through logical connectors (e.g., “for example”) to display evidence. Regarding interpersonal meaning, the instructor showed that evaluative stances could be projected explicitly when rebutting an opposing argument, through highlighting lexical and phrasal resources (i.e., “sadly,” “not true”). Citation was also taught as a type of engagement resources to enhance information reliability.

In terms of textual meaning, constant theme (e.g., “In Georgia, a young woman,” “her sentence”) was taught to make a coherent narration of evidence (i.e., the uselessness of traffic laws in punishing negligent drivers). Following joint deconstruction, students were instructed to deconstruct in a similar way the meaning-making resources in a different sample text of the same genre, which was followed by teacher–student discussions in or out of class to clarify students’ confusion, depending on students’ need.

In addition, the students were also required to read and discuss materials on cross-cultural linguistic differences between Chinese and English to avoid negative transference from their first language, such as the Chinese language’s lack of explicit cohesion (Lian, 1993). Across the semester, the students wrote three papers, including pre-write, revise, and rewrite, at a rate of one per month. The first paper was only reviewed by the instructor to help the students revise their writing and to show them how writing can be reviewed from a meaning-making perspective. This was followed by in-class explanations. In addition, the gist of SFL was not fully taught to the students until they started their second essay. For this reason, the students were not expected to peer review the first essay. The second and third papers were first reviewed by two of their classmates and then the instructor, which was also followed by in-class clarification. Altogether, all papers were revised at least twice, one following the peer review and the other following at least one round of teacher feedback. Notably, all feedback was provided in indirect ways (e.g., “Do you think the chunk is coherent?”; “Can we use explicit evaluative stances when presenting evidence?”), with the ultimate purpose of having students regulate their own writing (see what is presented in the “Findings” section of this article). In all, the purpose of the SFL-based curriculum was to offer students labels for understanding meaning construction through in-class support (i.e., reading to learn pedagogy) and out-of-class assistance (e.g., teachers’ oral or written feedback). However, it has to be noted that this current study was focused on the trajectory of students’ writing beliefs when exposed to SFL-based pedagogy. Therefore, data used to illustrate students’ writing beliefs, as shown in the “Findings” section, mainly include students’ verbal narrations (e.g., interviews and reflections), which was further illuminated with their writing practices that best exemplify their beliefs (i.e., writing samples and their response to teacher feedback) (S. Borg, 2006; Wan, 2014).
Of the sophomore students in the class, all had come to Lumpkin city a year ago, with the exception of one student who was local. Prior to this writing class, they had already taken two semesters of writing (narrative and expository writing) in their first year of college, and they had been instructed by five different teachers. All students had received English writing education that focused on language form and text structures from these teachers, similar to their learning as pre-college students (Zhang, 2017). While all students had given their consent to join this project, four of them were selected to provide an in-depth picture in this case study. They were chosen because they were representative of the students in the classroom as well as those in larger EFL contexts in terms of their writing beliefs about the importance of language form (Zhang, 2017). Moreover, they were also willing and happy to share their cognitive changes through diverse channels, such as interviews and journal entries; this ensured the ethical standards of this project. The four students—Dianna, Cecelia, Tina, and Jenny (pseudonyms)—are all female. They were all born and raised in China and speak EFL, with Mandarin Chinese and their local dialect as their first languages.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through multiple ways across the whole semester to answer the research question, and included pre-study surveys, semi-structured interviews, and students’ biweekly journal entries. In particular, a pre-study survey was conducted on the first day of the course; the purpose of the survey was to reveal students’ prior beliefs about writing and their previous experiences with writing curricula. The pre-study survey at the beginning of this project showed that the students’ writing beliefs were limited to presenting language form, with only the slightest idea of writing as meaning making in context. Survey was used in the study only to make sure that the students were intact before SFL-based instruction and they were suitable participants for a project that was focused on their writing belief change in an SFL-based curriculum. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students in their first language over the course of the semester to elicit their beliefs about writing. As Luft and Roherig (2007) noted, interviews, through interactions with participants, can elicit participants’ beliefs that “cannot be captured through observation or other modes of data collection” (p. 41). As such, interviews were considered the primary source to reveal the changes in students’ beliefs when exposed to the SFL-based curriculum. In addition, S. Borg (2006) pointed out that students’ actual performance can be used to show their belief changes, given that students generally act upon their beliefs in their practices. To further triangulate the data analysis and augment reliability, students’ biweekly journal entries, their writing assignments, as well as peer feedback (in written form) and teacher feedback (in both written and oral form) were also used as supplementary data to help reveal their belief formation. All data were transcribed following collection and read immediately.

Data were primarily analyzed qualitatively and inductively (Merriam, 1988; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data in Chinese (e.g., interviews) were analyzed in its original language and translated into English only for presenting the findings. In addition, relevant data sources, such as journal entries and interviews, were constantly and vigorously compared and contrasted before themes emerged while ensuring the trustworthiness of the data analysis (Merriam, 1988). In particular, given that students’ beliefs were equivalent to their evaluative stances, interviews and journal entries were first broadly identified linguistically based on those lexical and grammatical resources that realize their evaluative stances (e.g., their emotions and their judgments; Martin & White, 2005; Zhang, 2017), or in Luft and Roherig’s (2007) words, those belief excerpts selected are “highly personalized, often constructed in episodic ways, and contained affective and evaluative components” (p. 42). Typical evaluative linguistic resources include “I believe,” “I think,” “should,” and “important” (see also Zhang, 2017, for a detailed coding scheme). Following this, thematic content analysis was conducted on these belief excerpts, which were then synergized with relevant SFL-based research (e.g., Halliday, 1994; Yasuda, 2015). When conducting thematic analysis, the belief experts were read multiple times and relevant literature was also examined (e.g., M. Borg, 2001; Fives & Buehl, 2012) to unearth codes pertinent to the research question raised in the current study. These codes (e.g., battling with previous beliefs, practice-based understanding of meaning making) were then combined to form themes, answering the research question. At the same time, while the students’ writings and student and teacher feedback were not the main data sources in the project, they underwent a similar content analysis and were consulted to further enhance the findings regarding the research question. All codes and analyses were checked by a veteran researcher in language literacy to ensure the validity of data categorization and pattern identification.

Findings

By the end of the semester, the students’ beliefs about writing became stabilized and were epitomized by their positive stances toward writing as a meaning-making process. That is, through exposure to the SFL-based English writing curriculum, the students believed in the importance of focusing writing meaningfully through contextually appropriate linguistic expressions. However, in the process of appropriating the curriculum, the students’ writing belief reconstructions also experienced interactions with an array of factors.
Students’ Initial Beliefs: Mixed Evaluative Stances to the Curriculum Components

Following a two-lesson orientation about the SFL-based writing curriculum, the students’ initial beliefs about the SFL-based curriculum ranged from Dianna’s neutrality to Cecelia’s doubtfulness to Jenny and Tina’s anticipation. For instance,

Dianna: I know we cannot make a hasty decision about a new teaching curriculum . . . My previous teachers were good at teaching language form . . . The new curriculum focused on something that was different, and I value difference in language teaching. (Journal excerpt)

Cecelia: I was a little upset at that time . . . And I was wondering what you [the instructor] were going to do . . . It sounded like completely different teaching and learning strategies . . . I was successful with my previous learning outcome [tests], and all my teachers taught the same way [language form-based] . . . I was curious about the necessity for a changed curriculum. (Interview excerpt)

Jenny: I do not want to just write as other people who emphasize complex structure or advanced vocabulary . . . I am an English major student. It [English writing] will be the important skill I rely on for a living . . . I felt what you [the instructor] said about SFL and writing is what I need to create effective and better writing. (Interview excerpt)

As seen from the excerpts, students’ different writing beliefs at the beginning seemed related to their personalities and their willingness to improve themselves as well as their learning experiences. Dianna was an open-minded student who did not resist the new curriculum, indicating her initial embracement of it even at the beginning of the semester. Similarly, Jenny was also open-minded, but she was more enthusiastic than Dianna about the potential of a new curriculum in that she already had a good writing knowledge of language form and wanted to further enhance herself as an English major student. However, in contrast to Jenny and Dianna, Cecelia seemed conservative at the beginning of the semester, and as a student who had done well on the language-form-based tests, she held a doubtful attitude toward the curriculum and questioned the necessity of its implementation.

Students’ Gradual Change of Beliefs About the SFL-Based Curriculum: The Role of Teacher Mediation

The students’ alignment with the SFL-based curriculum was gradually facilitated due to the mediated teaching practices, including the instructor’s use of interactional strategies (e.g., code-switching between Chinese and English, reformulation, recasting and questioning, form-based teaching when needed, material adaptation, and supplementary materials; see also Zhang, 2018; Rose & Martin, 2012, for similar instructional strategies), and enhanced by the teacher’s SFL-based feedback.

Like Jenny, Dianna noted the role of teacher feedback in shaping her meaning-making beliefs regarding ideational meaning and textual meaning. In Dianna’s first essay, some places were not clearly written and organized. For example, in arguing against postponing the retirement age, when providing research evidence, Dianna broadly pointed out how Chinese people were living longer than before, without providing the methodology and research contexts. In response to the teacher’s feedback (“Watch your ideational meaning. Your readers may not know as much as you know;” “Please also use cohesive devices to connect different evidence”), Dianna provided research details and used cohesive devices (e.g., additionally). Dianna later on also shared:

The written feedback I received on my writing helps me to remind myself to engage with readers . . . I did sometimes dialogue with myself, not my audience . . . I really need to elaborate and organize my expressions. Teacher feedback further enhanced my love for the course. (Journal excerpt)

Through the combined in- and out-of-class teacher assistance provided within the SFL-based curriculum, students further realized their writing issues that were yielded through their old writing beliefs, and they developed meaning-making beliefs.

Teacher feedback also helped students to construct meaning-making beliefs at the interpersonal level, such as Cecelia, who had been doubtful about the SFL-based curriculum. For instance, in the process of deconstructing the texts, the students were told that when writing the argumentative thesis, their authorial voices or stances (such as I believe and I think) were not to occur to meet the demands of ideational meaning and interpersonal meaning. Yet, in the first paper, Cecelia still had: “I hold the opinion that . . . ” [thesis statement was omitted]. Thus, the teacher commented: “It looks casual. You are not writing an essay on your opinion but a research-based essay. Please consider revising.” In response to the teacher’s implicit feedback that attempted to help her link the thesis statement with the generic expectations of an argumentative essay (i.e., using research evidence rather than random personal thoughts to achieve a persuasive purpose), Cecelia deleted her personal stance. She later on recalled:

It was not that I did not know about this. I actually came to understand that writing is not just about grammatical accuracy. Interpersonal meaning construction should fit in the convention. I was just not so versatile in applying the knowledge. Understanding this makes me appreciate the value of the curriculum. (Journal excerpt)

Cecelia’s belief about meaning making was emerging but was constrained by the time needed to digest and act upon
her new beliefs. As Jenny also said, “Learning something like linguistics in a writing course was very mysterious to me, but it turned out to be very helpful . . . because of the way of teaching” (Interview excerpt).

In all, the students were taught through diverse mediational strategies as part of the new curriculum that bridged the students’ prior learning experiences (i.e., their knowledge of language form) and guided them into learning more than language form from the writing curriculum. As a result of this mediation, the students came to understand the value of an SFL-based curriculum design that fits their learning needs, and they displayed enhanced meaning-making beliefs gained from the SFL-based curriculum.

**Students’ Accelerated Belief Formation About Writing Meaningfully When Realizing No Conflict of Interests**

The four students’ meaning-making beliefs were also facilitated by their better understanding of the curriculum’s complementary, rather than contradictory, role in relation to their prior knowledge of writing (i.e., their prior knowledge of writing at the grammatical level). That is, they further embraced their beliefs about writing as a meaning-making process when they found that their beliefs about language form simply needed to be extended to the meaning-making level but not replaced. For example, Cecelia remarked,

> The new curriculum teaches what is beyond the test skills and practical to our life . . . It is about real English use . . . I can see how much my writing is getting close to the sample texts beyond grammar. I am not saying grammar knowledge [the traditional structure-based grammar] is not useful at all. Honestly, I do occasionally check my grammar with my previous knowledge, such as morphological inflection or run-on sentences. I attend to SFL more now, and I know I am making progress. I think some test raters will also see what a great job I do beyond language form. (Interview excerpt)

As shown in the excerpts, Cecelia—who initially questioned the potential of the curriculum to hamper her success with high-stakes exams—further demonstrated her enhanced beliefs about writing as a meaning-making process. Her doubtfulness about the value of the SFL-based curriculum seemed to be vanishing as she came to understand that SFL-based knowledge would not hurt her interests in high-stakes tests that emphasize language form; instead, it would enhance her writing at the meaning-making dimension.

> Like Cecelia, Dianna, Jenny, and Tina experienced a similar trajectory of constructing meaning-making beliefs. For instance, Dianna said,

> The curriculum emphasizes language form and meaning and culture-specific expressions. It makes us more specialized and spices up my knowledgebase. When testing, we cannot only just do as required and expected from test raters but also do it well at the meaning-making level. (Journal excerpt)

That is, when the students (e.g., Cecelia and the other three) found their crucial interests in the tests remained intact, the students were motivated to align themselves with the meaning-making beliefs as the predominant beliefs, which, in Dianna’s words, “spiced up” their understanding and helped further guide their practice construction of writing.

For instance, in their first version of their second paper, prior to either the peer or the teacher review, they demonstrated more meaning-making features that were lacking prior to familiarity with SFL (i.e., when they composed their first paper), although they were still not at a level of maturity. For example, at the level of ideational meaning, they demonstrated smooth transitions from sub-claims to empirical examples through the use of logical connectors (e.g., for example), but in several other places, logical relationships were still not explicit, especially when interpreting evidence (e.g., causal relationship). At the interpersonal meaning, they also used appropriate reporting verbs when presenting evidence (e.g., show, suggest). However, they were not adroit in presenting engagement resources when countering an argument (i.e., a lack of skills in navigating different voices between opponents and their own). At the level of textual meaning, they used conjunctions to connect supporting examples (e.g., moreover) but not lexical devices.

**Students’ Momentary Divergence From Meaning-Making-Based Beliefs**

Students’ meaning-making beliefs seemed to momentarily disappear in the middle of the semester and failed to be mapped out in practices, especially in the face of peer feedback or teacher feedback. The temporary dissonance turned out to be caused by external and internal factors, that is, the limited amount of time provided against the time needed to comply with the curriculum requirements, personal attempts to be creative, and first language transfer.

For example, Dianna submitted the second essay as it was although her peer classmates had pointed out that her counterargument on abolishing Chinese college examinations needed revisions (“You need to state the issues of the opposing argument. You have to make it clear from your perspective whether it is insufficient, wrong, or irrelevant, but at this time, you have only listed evidence.”). That is, in the counterargument, Dianna failed to effectively interact with readers at the level of interpersonal meaning; what she was supposed to do was to clearly show her authorial stance. This was also not corrected when similar teacher feedback was provided the first time. As she said,
I was busy with other courses . . . and I had to submit this paper before deadline, so I just rushed into it . . . I just wrote whatever was in my mind and just felt no motivation to reread and rewrite following feedback. (Interview excerpt)

Facing multiple assignments from other courses, Dianna engaged in writing in a time-saving way—stream of consciousness and first language-based translation.

In comparison, the students’ temporary dissonance (e.g., in her writing, Tina repeatedly used “also” to connect chunks in the text or the lack of cohesive devices) was caused by unstable knowledge and the negative transfer of their first language into English writing. As Tina said, “I was overusing conjunction words or did not use them in appropriate places. I was influenced by my first language . . .” (Journal excerpt). This was understandable when students’ knowledge was not proficient enough and could be exacerbated by their first language (i.e., Chinese), which does not have a similar explicit use of cohesive devices as English and in which readers consciously combined them when decoding a text (Lian, 1993).

The students’ dissonance also seemed to be based on rebelling against the curriculum or perhaps a spontaneous motivation to be different. For instance, in the second paper, in each paragraph where Cecilia made arguments, she often provided solutions (e.g., “what government should do is . . .”). As Cecilia remarked, “I want to be creative and see what happens if I do not follow instructional strategies” (Interview excerpt). Peer feedback seemed to fail to notice this as this was more like an idiosyncratic issue and not touched upon in class.

Taken together, students’ meaning-making beliefs were undermined by different factors, which failed to be acted upon during their actual practices. However, these factors were only being played out momentarily.

**Momentarily Shattered Beliefs: Recovering Along with Continuous Teacher Mediation and Increased Proficiency**

The students’ momentarily shattered beliefs seemed to be pieced together in a constantly mediated context. As Tina reflected,

> Through in- and out-of-class teaching, I feel more familiar with the curriculum . . . I also studied the materials by myself after class . . . I feel more aligned with the curriculum . . . and overcame first language constraints. (Journal excerpt)

Along with her recovered beliefs about meaning making, Tina, based on enhanced knowledge, thoroughly revised her second paper a third time, responding to both teacher feedback and peer feedback (e.g., she deleted the overuse of *also*, and she used other grammatical ties, such as *in addition*, *moreover*, to construct the textual meaning for her second paper). The student’s momentary dissonance from meaning-making beliefs, caused by the negative transfer of first language knowledge, was offset by her increasing knowledge of the curriculum through exposure to the meaning-making curriculum, including other helpful curricular components (e.g., teacher feedback and self-agency in rereading materials).

Similarly, the teacher’s constant mediation also helped students realize that a genre has certain conventions that may not allow for creativity. In this regard, Cecilia said,

> I should not be creative in this matter . . . this disrupts the readership . . . and it is an argumentative writing anyway; at the interpersonal meaning level, I am presenting evidence, not making personal suggestions. I can do it in the conclusion part. (Journal excerpt)

That is, due to their increased exposure to meaning-making-based writing, Cecilia also realized how a large context (i.e., context of culture or genre) regulated the writing. As such, she realized that certain conventions weighed more than her personal creativity in the genre of argumentative writing. She not only deleted the expressions that expressed her personal comments, but she also reflected, “we really need to double check the lexical choices should, need to, when concluding a paragraph” (Journal excerpt). That is, Cecilia competently recognized the relationship between the linguistic resources and interpersonal meaning (personal stance) in warning herself not to break the convention. This clearly illustrated Cecilia’s enhanced meaning-making beliefs in guiding her writing practices.

The students also realized the importance of producing good writing at the meaning-making level and that limited time should not be an excuse for them. As Dianna said,

> Rounds of feedback on the paper and in-person discussions made me feel embarrassed to think how I had carelessly treated my paper . . . and I now had more proficient knowledge . . . it won’t take me much time to revise my paper to the extent that it looks like sample texts. (Interview excerpt)

That is, the limited amount of time as a constraint for revising papers at the meaning-making level was also vanishing, along with the students’ enhanced knowledge and determination to produce good writing in a constantly mediated context. For example, Dianna also made another round of careful revisions after receiving the teacher’s feedback on the second version of her second essay and being instructed to slow down. In particular, by focusing on linguistic resources at the ideational and interpersonal meaning levels, she used *however* to make the logical transition to her own position, and pointed out the logical issue of the opposing arguments by particularly using the word *insufficient* to show her evaluative stance and to better engage readers.
Stabilized Meaning-Making Beliefs as Academic Writers

The students’ meaning-making beliefs became more stabilized by the end of the semester. The beliefs could be best illustrated by their final paper, which involved minimal revisions from their peer classmates and instructor.

Students’ beliefs as regards to the textual meaning in writing. All four EFL students demonstrated their beliefs about the important relationship between textual meaning and English-specific linguistic resources, and they also followed the strand of belief in flexibly regulating the fluency of their academic English writing. Tina, Jenny, and Dianna stated the following by the end of the semester:

Tina: In Chinese writing, our teachers told us to attend to the textual cohesion . . . but it is about the general content. They never mentioned using linguistic resources . . . I think I had done the Chinese way in my English writing . . . All this [textual meaning and its realization in English] makes me think how different and important it is to be fluent in English at this level . . . I now can do better on creating my texts, such as the use of lexical chains through changing the lexical category or zigzag themes . . . When I finish my writing, I also look around to recheck any grammatical resources, lexical resources, and themerheme patterns I have used. (Interview excerpt)

Jenny: My previous English teachers often blamed me for my messy writing, but they did not explain clearly how to avoid messy writing . . . I had just written what was in my mind. Learning the textual component, I came to realize what should be used in English texts. Now in my writing, I use conjunction words and theme-rheme progression, connecting neighboring sentences, sometimes, a chunk of sentences, such as claim and evidence. (Interview excerpt)

Dianna: I think I had a little knowledge of this [how to construct textual fluency], such as conjunction words from my previous English teachers. The textual meaning makes me reflect on many other resources available (lexical ties, theme) . . . Inspired by the textual component, I now write things carefully, keeping in mind the mechanisms that are crucial to the successful flow of academic writing. (Journal excerpt)

As shown from the interview excerpts, because of a lack of effective instruction, the students’ previous writing practices in textual fluency had been informed by their intuition (e.g., Jenny), limited knowledge of cohesion and conjunction words (e.g., Dianna), or reliance on the knowledge of their first language (i.e., Tina) that gives priority to general meaning connections in a text and expects readers to decode the detailed cohesive relationships in a text (Lian, 1993). Through immersion in the new curriculum, they demonstrated a clear emotional attachment to the relationship between textual meaning and English-specific linguistic resources, and they followed the strand of belief and flexibly regulated their actual English writing, diluting the negative influences from the Chinese language or their idiosyncratic conceptions. For instance, in their third paper, they could appropriately use lexicon-grammar in constructing their writing (e.g., the use of conjunctions or lexical words to conjugate research evidence, such as moreover, on the other hand, and another research also shows). They could also respond to peer and teacher feedback and make revisions in a few places that were inappropriate in terms of textual meaning (e.g., in one paragraph, Cecelia used linear themes, instead of constant themes, to narrate research evidence as suggested by her classmate to enhance the flow and readability of the text).

Students’ beliefs as regards to the interpersonal meaning in writing. The EFL students demonstrated and acted upon their beliefs about using English-specific linguistic resources to engage readers as academic English writers, including linguistically realizing interpersonal meaning in response to register and genre. Located in the interpersonal dimension, all participants also demonstrated their belief about the positive role of appraisal and followed this belief to facilitate their academic writing. For instance, Dianna stated the following:

I now realize how interesting the lexical and grammatical choices are, even some non-adjjectives can carry evaluative stances, such as modal verbs and verbs . . . Appraisal helps me understand and organize them [evaluative stances] and construct my own through both implicit and explicit linguistic choices in due places. (Interview excerpt)

Similarly to the other three participants, Dianna’s understanding of attitude in academic writing had been limited to the traditional sense (e.g., adjectives such as good, bad). Yet, like the other three participants, learning SFL-based appraisal helped her gain a new strand of belief regarding the appraisal resources that guided her actual writing.

The students’ beliefs about appraisal were particularly constructed in regard to the relationship between genre (argumentative writing in the case of this study) and two of the appraisal resources: graduation (the linguistic resources that convey meanings between yes and no, such as maybe) and engagement (using mere statements or external sources). As Tina further remarked,

In my first paper, I always used “show,” whatever the context . . . I think when writing argumentative writing, the signal verbs linking evidence and our own analysis do not have to be “show” all the time. We have to modulate our tone, depending on the strength of evidence we have and the analysis we want to present . . . I switch these signal verbs among those verbs such as “suggest,” “indicate,” and “show.” (Journal excerpt)
As the students noted, emphasis on how to appropriately represent language activi-

ties and logic-semantic relationships. As seen from the above excerpts, cultural influences from their first language that emphasize politeness, reluctance to refute opposing viewpoints (Shen, 1989), as well as using logical reasons instead of textual evidence in academic writing (Lian, 1993), the students had not been adroit in projecting their academic identities appropriately. By the end of the semester, they gained beliefs about the dynamic relationship between genre, interpersonal meaning, and appraisal resources in English writing for a specific type of genre (i.e., argumentative writing). They followed their beliefs and controlled the degree of tone in a text (e.g., Tina and Cecelia), used textual sources (e.g., Jenny), and boldly showed their evaluative stances as required in the genre of argumentation (e.g., Dianna).

For example, in their essays, they could effectively navigate engagement resources to clearly write counterarguments through appropriate resources, such as “some argue that . . .” Following this, they would use transitional words, such as however or nevertheless, along with appropriate engagement resources, such as is, are, or maybe to boldly point out the logical fallacy. They then used graduation resources, such as in fact, to bring in their own voice along with empirical evidence. In addition, students learned how to choose reporting verbs that are suitable in the local context of their writing to effectively interact with readers (e.g., students’ proficient use of show, indicate, suggest).

**Students’ beliefs as regards to ideational meaning in writing.** The participants acquired beliefs about the correlation between ideational meaning and linguistic features. Their beliefs in this dimension of SFL were particularly illustrated by their emphasis on how to appropriately represent language activities and logic-semantic relationships. As the students noted,

Cecelia: I have realized that the choice of participants should be linked to our topic, so as not to be random . . . we have to have topic-based lexical choices, for example, not “kids” but “children” . . . But I used to write what I wanted . . . that was why my writing was not so native . . . now when I complete my writing, I make sure my lexical choices fall within an academic register and use appropriate additional explanations when using technical terms. (Interview excerpt)

Jenny: In English argumentative writing, it favors textual evidence by showing who said what, or heterogloss . . . not just monogloss . . . But I now know how to refute different voices and use appropriate appraisal resources to show that. (Journal excerpt)

Dianna: I misused evaluative stances . . . when showing counterarguments. I was scared to refute the counterarguments, though I had ample evidence. I would say, “seems not valid” or “may not be valid” . . . I thought it would be so rude to criticize someone else’s points . . . So, we should constantly remind ourselves of being assertive when possible in actual writing, thanks to the role of appraisal resources in writing. (Interview excerpt)

As seen from these excerpts, the students demonstrated strong beliefs about lexical choices in realizing ideational meaning in response to the context of situation. In their final paper, students used field-specific choices or inanimate nouns or phrases, and they also avoided mental process (e.g., I think, I believe) either when writing their thesis or the counterargument.

In addition, the students also realized that ideational components that are Chinese-specific should be provided with additional explanations and the importance of carefully constructing logical semantic relationships. As Tina said,

I feel I wrote randomly, sometimes, just a mere assertion without explanation . . . [did] not really carefully about the clear causal relationship in it. Through the teaching of different logical semantic relationships, such as addition, contrast, extension, I know I have to carefully attend to them . . . Now, I always recheck it to avoid any random thoughts or mere assertions. (Interview excerpt)

As seen from the excerpt, the students’ beliefs in relation to ideational meaning in academic writing enabled them to overcome the constraints of their first language (i.e., a heavy reliance on readers to decode meaning) and apprentice themselves into conveying information with logical and understandable content in their academic writing. For example, in the final paper, they would use conjunction words to display logical relationships (such as, this was because, therefore) to clearly show logical connections. They would also use lexical resources to elaborate on empirical evidence (such as it shows, which means).

**Discussion and Implications**

This study shows that the trajectory of EFL students’ writing beliefs changes when exposed to an SFL-based writing curriculum, filling the research gap on student writers’
meaning-making beliefs. First, it shows that students’ belief changes interacted with both external and internal factors. For example, students’ belief reconstruction was met with obstacles from the meaning-making-based curriculum, resulting in students’ unwillingness to believe and act upon the curriculum. This was understandable, given that a new curriculum inevitably creates challenges for students (e.g., Margolis, 2001). Nevertheless, as a result of many mediating strategies included within the curriculum, by the end of the semester, the EFL students constructed meaning-making beliefs, even though their high-stakes tests value language form. This differs from a previous study in which EFL teachers with less advanced language learners (e.g., high school EFL learners) had to give up SFL teaching because of their students’ struggles with the curriculum and pressure from administrative requirements to enhance less advantaged students’ knowledge of language form (c.f., Gebhard et al., 2014). The difference in regard to the students’ ultimate beliefs about the SFL-based curriculum might be due to the different proficiency levels of language learners, where students with low proficiency may just want to focus on learning language accuracy and meeting the demands of tests in their contexts. It may also be because of pre-tertiary EFL students’ difficulty in understanding a relatively complex theory, which was compounded by the teaching strategies enacted and their lack of motivation in digesting the new knowledge.

By apprenticing students into a new curriculum that highlights writing as a meaning-making process, this study shows that SFL is an effective tool in constructing language learners’ central beliefs about writing as a meaning-making process, although their language-form-based beliefs still exist. This finding echoes the research that different beliefs can coexist with each other, with one type being dominant and the other being peripheral (e.g., Zhang, 2017). The finding on students’ belief reconstruction is also consistent with studies that concluded that beliefs, as cognitive constructs, can be changed by effective teacher instruction (e.g., S. Borg, 2006; Fives & Gill, 2015; Junqueira & Payant, 2015). Nevertheless, the effective role of SFL-based instruction in regard to changes in EFL learners’ beliefs interestingly complements the literature on language learners’ beliefs that were either limited to shaping learners’ general beliefs about writing (e.g., Negretti, 2012; Wan, 2014) or revealing decontextualized beliefs about traditional grammar (e.g., Simon & Taverniers, 2011).

Most importantly, this study shows the dynamic relationship between learners’ meaning-making beliefs and their academic writing practices. In this case study, the EFL students demonstrated compliance with their ongoing meaning-making beliefs in the process of writing and created linguistically and culturally endorsed English writing, although they experienced constraints in the process, such as first language interference and cultural practices (e.g., being conservative in showing countergarments) influenced by their Chinese mother tongue (Ku et al., 2014; Lian, 1993). In this sense, the finding complements our understanding of the relationship between language learners’ beliefs and meaningful writing construction by particularly highlighting a linguistic gateway (c.f., S. Borg, 2006; Negretti, 2012; Wan, 2014). In this sense, it complements with previous research that called for providing community-endorsed linguistic options for language learners to rely on (e.g., Hyland, 2002; Ivanič, 1998).

The implications for EFL writing pedagogy are focused on the following three aspects. First, in the classroom, educators and researchers need to attend to learners’ beliefs in addition to their actual practices. This is because learners’ beliefs are one crucial construct that motivates their literacy in a power-free context. Second, the study implicates that in educational contexts where teaching has traditionally emphasized language form, SFL can be employed to reshape learners’ beliefs and enable them to effectively communicate. Third, the study also points to the need for educational policy changes that give teachers freedom and agency in the classroom. In countries where English is learned as a foreign language, stringent curriculum may need to be followed, including the strict use of textbooks and high-stakes tests where language form is emphasized. In such countries, it is incumbent on policy makers to realize that learning and teaching a language lies in effective communication, not in a test. Thus, teachers must be offered the freedom to adapt their teaching content to learners’ needs (e.g., the construction of academic English writers’ identities).

Conclusion

This case study has two important conclusions to draw. First, the study contributed to the literature on the complexity of language learners’ (particularly EFL students) belief changes when exposed to an SFL-based curriculum. With multiple mediating strategies, students gradually came to believe in the value of an SFL-based curriculum that highlights the meaning-making perspective on writing while interacting with external and internal factors. Second, along with their solidarity with the new curriculum, the EFL learners shifted from their language-form-based beliefs to new beliefs that are represented by their refreshed conception of the co-current role of language form, meaning, and context in English writing as central writing beliefs. Their new beliefs were also exemplified in their actual writing, illuminating the authentic espousal of meaning-making-based academic writing.

The limitations of this study also have to be acknowledged. This study was conducted in an EFL education context where the participants had relatively advanced knowledge of English, as well as with only female participants who might be better suited to English and language theory appropriation (Bacon & Finnemann, 1992; Bernat & Lloyd, 2007). Future research could be conducted to investigate how EFL learners’ SFL-based beliefs and practices play out over an extended time across different genres, and how they interact with both female and male students as well as those with limited language proficiency.
Appendix

One sample text used in the study: https://depts.washington.edu/owrc/Handouts/Hacker-Sample%20MLA%20Formatted%20Paper.pdf

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