

Incorporating systemic functional linguistics in the unlock course book: English intermediate level at Birzeit University

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Abstract

This research attempts to develop a supplementary writing teaching method that is compatible with the Unlock intermediate level students at Birzeit University. To achieve this goal, the study identifies four general writing needs and purposes for such students: understanding purpose and genre; using clause and sentence structure for these purposes and text types; developing a sense of audience and writing coherently. This review includes an overview of genre and the three register dimensions: ideational, interpersonal and textual. Writing instruction is provided through two teaching methodologies: Joint Construction and the Logical Tree which will be discussed thoroughly under the Methodology section. The sample of this study is 54 intermediate level students of Unlock English program; 27 of which were the control group and the other 27 were the experimental group. The overall results showed more use of the measured variables in the experimental group than in the control one.

Keywords: Systemic functional linguistics, unlock course book, metafunctions, ideational, interpersonal, textual.

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1. Introduction

In the Year 2016–2017, Birzeit University started using the Cambridge Unlock English teaching program to fulfil the English language academic and pedagogical needs of the students. The program consists of four levels: Remedial, Intermediate I, intermediate II and Advanced. Based on a placement test, the students do prior to their freshman year, the students are placed in one of these levels. Every level consists of 10 units that should be completed over the course of one academic year. In 2018, the decision was made that only six units of each level are required to advance to the next level. This is to sufficiently focus on all the English language skills. This research focuses on the Reading and Writing book of the Intermediate II level (B1), particularly the argumentative writing task in the History unit.

Halliday (1994) defines Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as an approach that looks at the function of language in a meaningful context in order to achieve coherence in academic texts. He posits that language choices are made according to the three elements: genre, register and language (p. 111, as cited in Suzanne Eggins, 2004). These elements will be addressed in details in the literature review. Although these elements are not explicitly presented in Unlock, the structure of Unlock does allow them to be incorporated and elaborated upon for more effective writing instruction. In Unlock, each unit in the Reading and Writing book of the Intermediate II level consists of two reading passages. The first reading aims to build the students' schematic knowledge of the unit's topic. The second reading is a text type of a specific genre which the students are required to imitate. Each reading provides an idea about the topic of the passage through pre-reading vocabulary and questions. They also have post-reading practices and discussion questions to ensure a complete comprehension of the vocabulary and ideas. Each unit also has a Language Development section that focuses on cohesive devices that are effective in writing. The purpose behind such a scaffold is to prepare the students for the writing task in the end of the unit. The grade distribution requires two writing tasks with five points given for each writing task. They are scaffolded and later written in class as a test knowing that the students can use the text type and their outlines while drafting their essays.

2. Statement of the problem

One of the main difficulties that Intermediate level unlock students encounter in essay writing is achieving coherence. This is mainly because of their lack of awareness of genre and purpose and their role in academic writing. This study is concerned with exploring an approach that provides writing instruction that contribute to increasing the students' understanding of genre and purpose. Despite the focus of the Intermediate level unlock course book on the language choices appropriate for the targeted text type, the book needs a supplementary approach that increases the students' knowledge of organisational patterns.

In addition, there is a need for an approach that provides direct writing instruction for these students. The writing approach adopted by the Unlock course book is the writing process. In this approach, the majority of the time is dedicated to the prewriting stage. The writing stage is done in isolation where there is no interaction between the students and the teacher. In other words, to enhance the students' writing skills, there has to be an approach that focuses on both the process and the final product.

This research will offer a selective review of the literature of the SFL theory and will investigate the extent to which such a theory can help improve the academic writing skills of the Unlock Intermediate English students at Birzeit University. This review is based on four main writing needs and purposes: understanding genre and text type, making appropriate grammatical choices, developing a sense of audience and writing coherently. Therefore, the study will answer the following research questions.

1. How can SFL improve Unlock students' understanding of genre and purpose?
2. How can SFL help Unlock students clarify grammatical choices for different text types?
3. How can SFL help Unlock students develop a sense of audience?
4. How can SFL help Unlock students achieve coherence through appropriate cohesive devices?

3. Significance of the study

The study identifies major challenges that Intermediate level students encounter in writing and offers a method for effective writing instruction. If incorporated in the curriculum, such a study will contribute to the academic writing progress of the students. It will also improve their achievement in other courses, such as science and business. This is because awareness of genre will assist them in selecting jargon suitable for versatile fields within which they may write. In addition, due to its focus on coherence, the study will help better prepare the students for the marketplace.

The implementation of the SFL's framework can be a cornerstone for further studies. It will open the door for new assessment methods to be developed. If applied on a larger sample, this approach is hoped to help teachers envision a wider range of language needs. This will help teachers develop effective writing instruction appropriate for these needs.

4. Limitation of the study

The study has two major limitations. First, the research is only based on four writing needs and purposes observed in the writing tasks of two groups. This may not provide a specific representation of what these needs are. This is to say, there may be more than the four needs discussed in the study. The study lacks a bigger sample that would provide a more representative assessment. Second, the time constraint had an impact on the instruction and feedback given to the students during the implementation of the method. The writing was done over the course of four lessons, with only half of the class time given for it. Moreover, due to the limited time, the peer review stage of the Joint Construction did not happen. Overall, if more samples were examined and more time was allotted for the empirical part of the study, more language needs would have been identified with more representative results.

5. Literature review

Jim Martin and Rose (2007, p. 55) defines genre as the field or 'culture' of the text and its effect on the language choices used. Meaning, for instance, that a narrative essay requires textual organisation and register that are different than an argumentative one. Kenneth Burke states that genre describes texts of common linguistic and stylistic characteristics resulted from 'situational demands' (as cited in Carolyn Miller, 1984); that is to say, the purpose conveyed in a text is determined by the subject matter of the text. In other words, genre looks at the text as whole, thereby focusing on the discourse level of a text.

Register consists of three main variables or meaning areas: field, tenor and mode (Halliday 1978, as cited in Martin, 2010). Field, as Martin explains it, is 'a set of activity sequences oriented to some global institutional purpose,' (Martin & Rose, 2007, p. 34) meaning that field reflects what is happening and where it is happening. Based on field, lexical and grammatical choices are selected to offer an appropriate representation of it. The second meaning area of register is tenor, which is concerned with the relationship between the writer and the audience. This, too, is another factor that affects the linguistic choices used in a particular text type. In addition to field and tenor, mode is how the text is constructed to convey its purpose.

The three register categories are parallel to the three metafunctions of SFL theory's framework: ideational, interpersonal and textual. Through these dimensions, the literature review will tackle the question of how SFL can clarify grammatical choices for different text types.

Halliday (1994) posits that the ideational metafunction of the SFL framework involves the experience represented in a clause. He explains that these experiences are expressed in clauses through processes, and these processes have participants and circumstance. This meaning dimension also focuses on the logical connection between clauses (Halliday, as cited in Suzanne Eggins, 2004). For instance, in a sentence like *People perform the dance around fire*. The tradition has been happening since 1900s. The experience is expressed through the verb *perform* and the participant *people*, and the circumstance *around the fire*. Moreover, the ideational dimension deals with linguistic features, such as grammatical metaphor. Duff, Ferreira and Zappa-Hollman (2015) explain that grammatical metaphor occurs when one grammatical class substitutes for the other. A major example of grammatical metaphor is the types of nominalisations used in writing. Gibbons (2002, p. 41) mentions that the nominalisation is simply turning a process into a noun. According to her, doing so shifts the focus from being on the participant and the process to being on the concept itself (p. 41). This is demonstrated in the above sentence where the experience is compacted in the noun *tradition* and is placed in subject position as it is the focus of the clause. This example shows how ideational contributes to the logical relationship between clauses.

The second dimension is the interpersonal dimension of register which looks at the relationship between the writer and the reader, and the writer's attitude. One of the aspects that reader-writer relationship includes is formality. This aspect suggests distance between the reader and the writer. The writer makes language choices based on the degree of the distance he/she has with the reader. Moreover, the interpersonal dimension involves the writer's attitude. Martin and White (2005) describe attitude as the system of feelings which are found in texts. They state that this system consists of three regions: affect, judgment and appreciation. Affect is concerned with the negative or positive feelings expressed in the text. For instance, a particular text can reflect happiness or sadness; another may reveal boredom or lack of interest. The second attitude region is judgment, and it is usually a criticism of behaviour where a writer may criticise how a particular group of people is treated during a historical period. Finally, writers can express appreciation in their texts. Martin and White (2005, p. 43) explain that the appreciation 'involves evaluations of semiotic and natural phenomena, according to the ways in which they are valued or not in a given field'. For example, a writer may express his/her appreciation for the heroes who fought in the Vietnam War. Another aspect that the interpersonal dimension deals with is modality and its influence on the author's voice. Martin and White (2005) explain that the modality can be used to express probability or a degree of certainty in a text. This can be done through 'entertains'—which are epistemic words that indicate that the author's position is not the only one. Modal auxiliaries, such as *might*, *could* and *must* are an example of epistemic words that reflect the degree of possibility expressed in an utterance. Also, adverbs of likelihood such as *probably* and *definitely* demonstrate the writer's commitment to the truth value. Mental processes such as *think* and *view* can also be used to express possibility (p. 105). Authors choose from these words in order to express a degree of truth to their propositions. By doing so, writers take into account the audience who may not have the same position.

The textual dimension deals with coherence—which is, as Heidi Byrnes (2006) defines it, the overall unity of the text and the logical connection and organisation of ideas within the text. This connection, Byrnes states, can be achieved in the text explicitly through the use of cohesive devices or connectives, such as *in addition*, *however...etc*. It can also happen through implicit devices, such as thematic progression and the passive tense. The use of implicit devices contributes to the flow of ideas as it helps maintain the focus or the topic throughout the text. It also helps create an academic text with no redundancy. According to Mary Schleppegrell (2008, p. 223), 'the theme is the point of departure for the clause that establishes in some sense what it is about'. To clarify this quote, examine the following sentence: *Some schools offer annual scholarships for their students. Most of these students live below the poverty line.* Here, the first clause begins with the noun phrase, *some schools*, which is the theme. The second part of the clause that elaborates or introduces new information is the rheme, which is the verb phrase *offers annual scholarships*. Now, if the sentence is to be developed into a text, maintaining a theme-rheme structure would contribute to the flow of information. This flow begins in the second clause where *students*, which was introduced in the rheme of the first clause as new information, has

become an old piece of information in the next clause's theme. Theme–rheme progression is not only limited to the clause level but also works across multiple clauses and whole sentences.

6. Method

6.1. Instrument of the study

The results of both the control and experimental groups were calculated using frequency tables. These tables include six independent variables: nominalisation, contrast, addition, reason, register and voice; each of which has both implicit and explicit devices that were measured in both groups. The results were sought based on the analysis of the above mentioned devices.

6.2. Research design

This qualitative research is based on two SFL compatible pedagogical strategies: Information Management and Joint Construction. Arani and O'Dowd (2005) explain that the information management consists of three main stages: text discovery, structure and drafting, and structured feedback. The text discovery stage concentrates on the focus and flow of the text. For this purpose, the students examine a text type similar in genre to that they will write. To help them understand the structure of the text type, the students write a logical tree that includes the main focus and the supporting ideas in the examined text. The structure and drafting stage focuses on creating a logical tree for the text the students will write. Arani and O'Dowd call this stage labelling template. That is to say, prior to the writing, on the paragraph level, the function of each sentence should be indicated to help create a smooth text flow. Based on this, the students write down their main focus and supporting sentence then turn them into a paragraph. The structured feedback stage follows Derewianka's (1990) joint construction method where the students exchange texts and share opinions concerning language choices and rhetoric patterns used in their texts with guidance from the teacher. In the information management strategy, this happens by having peers creating logical trees for each other's essays to ensure that each sentence in their paragraphs serves a particular function.

In Unlock 3, reading 2, *Should We Teach History?* is the text type the students imitated in their writing task. The genre of this text is argumentative, and it consists of four paragraphs: an introduction, a counter argument, an argument and a conclusion. Prior to reading, a general discussion about genre was done to illustrate the relationship between genre and language choices. The discussion started by asking the students what they expect when watching a comedy movie. Some of them answered saying: jokes, puns, funny situations and stupid things. This example explains how understanding the purpose helps choose appropriate linguistic choices.

Following to the discussion, the figure below was demonstrated to illustrate how genre is applied in writing. Figure 1 shows how genre looks at the text as whole with all of its language choices. Some of these choices were elicited and written on the side of the board. Some students mentioned argue and claim as verbs that can be used in an argument.

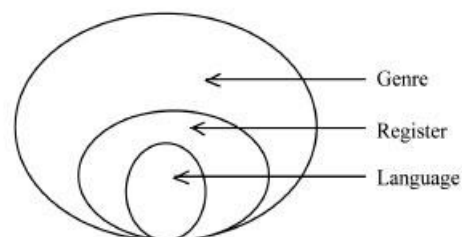


Figure 1. Representation of genre

During reading, the students highlighted main ideas and supporting details in each paragraph. An outline of the text structure with main ideas and details was created on the board. This was the text

discovery stage in which the students created a logical tree of the main ideas expressed in each paragraph to better understand focus and flow. In the structure and drafting stage, the function of each sentence in the paragraphs was discussed. Figure 2 illustrates the analysis of the structure and sentences on the paragraph level:

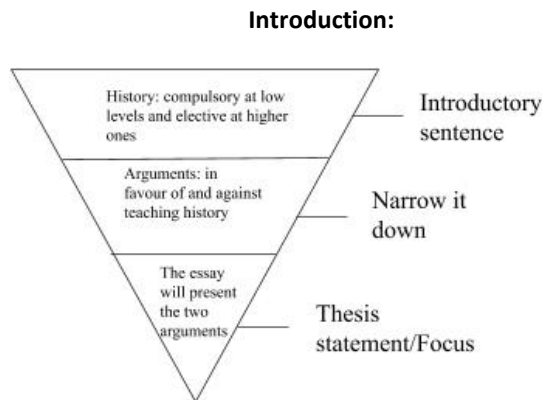


Figure 2. Logical tree

Topic Sentence: Counter Argument	Argument 2: In favor
Spend money on more interesting subjects— Reason 1 Math and English are more important in basic education— explanation Benefit the economy— Reason 2 Teaching history is looking at the past (no benefit)— Explanation	Understand current issues— Reason 1 Create better-informed citizens— explanation Understand culture and background - Reason 2 Helps understand society— explanation Improve reading and writing— Reason 3 Become better students— explanation

7. Conclusion

There are two arguments—**restatement of thesis**
History should be taught—**Opinion**
It creates well educated citizens—**Justification**

In this stage, the sample body paragraph below was written on the board with the help of the teacher. The purpose was to draw the students’ attention to the elements of the three SFL metafunctions and their role in achieving coherence.

Some people are against paying entry fees for museums 1. This is because more people will be given the chance to enter the museum 2. By doing so, people’s historical knowledge will be enhanced 3. Another reason is that students will widely access museums 4. Such access will help the students in their school work, such as projects and presentations 5.

Thematic progression was explained while writing the sample paragraph above. During writing, the students’ attention was drawn to the main focus and how it shifted throughout the paragraph. In sentence 1, people is the theme or the topic and are against paying... is the rheme or what is being said about the topic. In the following sentence, the focus shifts to are against paying, which was the rheme in sentence 1. To compact the previously expressed idea and place it in subject position the students chose the indicative this. During the tracking of thematic progression, in each sentence different language choices, such as by doing so, another reason is that, and such were made to create a smooth flow in the paragraph.

While writing, nominalisation was discussed as means to help in the thematic progression. For a better understanding of nominalisation, the students did an unpacking exercise. In the exercise, the students examined the structure of five individual sentences. The sentences were first divided into processes, participants, and circumstances rather than verbs, subjects and adverb. This helps the students look at the function rather than the form of the sentences elements. Nominalisation was then highlighted as a tool in which a whole experience of process, participants, and circumstance can be compacted. An example of this is such access in sentence five if unpacked, this noun includes the participant students and the process access. In addition, other ways of nominalisation such as this, that, such and by doing so were highlighted. This exercise drew the students’ attention to grammatical metaphor and its importance to the flow of the text.

To eventually produce an academic text, there was a focus on two main interpersonal elements: the passive and modality. The contribution of the passive voice in the text was indicated as manifold. First, it helps shifting the sentence structure in a way that puts the focus in a theme position. Second, it helps the students eliminate first person pronouns they may use when signposting. This was seen in the students’ previous conclusions where some wrote: I think that we should teach history or it seems to me that we should teach history. These sentences were used to show the role of the passive in the formal voice reflected in a text and were later rewrote in a formal way as follows: history should be taught, and it seems that history should be taught. Moreover, the use of modals was discussed as a way to leave possibility for other opinions to be taken into account, thereby avoiding generalisation in sentences.

In the structured feedback stage, the writing happened in class over the course of two periods. It started with a brainstorming session where students created a logical tree for their main ideas. The brainstorming was followed by a primary selection of explicit cohesive devices. These language choices were discussed in relation to the genre of the text that is argumentative. Having created logical trees and a list of cohesive devices that could be possibly used, the students then started to write their texts. After writing each paragraph, the teacher checked if language choices and rhetoric patterns were used appropriately.

8. Findings and discussion:

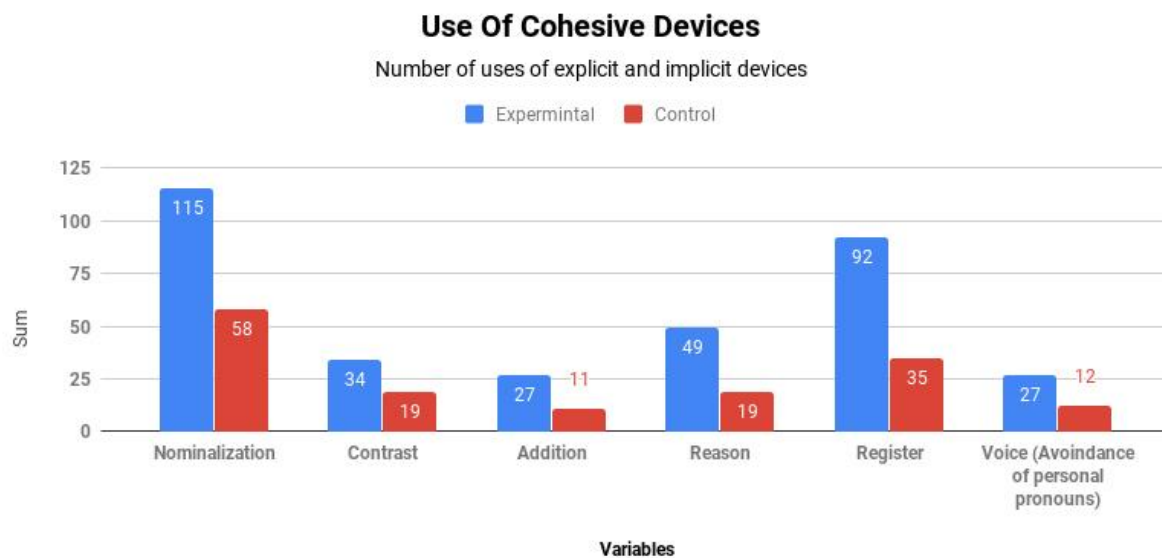


Figure 3. Use of cohesive devices

Figure 3 shows a total of 115 uses of nominalisation in the 27 argumentative essays of Unlock intermediate experimental group. In these texts, nominalisation is represented by the use of demonstratives, demonstratives preceded by noun, prepositional phrases, such preceded by noun, pronouns, or nouns with total of 44, 17, 9, 4, 22 and 19 uses of each, respectively. On the other hand, the graph shows that 58 uses of nominalisation are found in the texts of the control group. These are divided into 24 demonstratives, 1 demonstrative preceded by a noun, 11 pronouns and 22 nouns. None of the essays compacts previous ideas using prepositional phrases or such preceded by a noun. These findings agree with Gibbons (2002) who pointed out that nominalisation contributes to the logical relationship between clauses, thereby creating an organised logical flow of the text. On the other hand, lack of such a cohesive device resulted in redundancy represented in repetitions and wordiness which disrupted the flow of the texts of the control group.

Figure 3 also shows 34 uses of contrast in these essays. Contrast is expressed through three explicit devices: however, on the one hand and on the other hand with a total of 20, 2 and 12 uses of each device, respectively. As for the control group, the graph shows 19 uses of contrast. These are represented in 12 uses of, however, and 7 uses of on the other hand. Addition is also reflected through the use of in addition, moreover and also with a total of 14, 2 and 11 uses of each connector respectively in the experimental group. In the control group, 11 addition devices are found: 2 uses of in addition, 3 uses of moreover and 6 uses of also. Reasons are introduced using this is because 25 and another reason is that 24 times. In the control group, 19 reason devices are found with a total of 13 uses of this is because or the reason for this is and 6 uses of another reason for this is. These results confirm Byrnes (2006) who asserts that these explicit devices create unity in the text. This is because they contribute to the logical organisation of the ideas within the text.

The register of argumentation used in these texts is represented in the verbs argue, claim, suggest, believe, agree/disagree and support. The graph shows 28, 14, 2, 9, 6 and 1 use of each verb, respectively. There is also a total of 15 uses of the prepositional phrase in favour of and 17 uses of the preposition against. In the control group argumentation register is represented in the verbs argue, claim, suggest, believe, agree/disagree, support with a total of 8, 11, 4, 6, 1 and 1 use of each respectively. There are also **two** uses of in favour of and **two** uses of against. According to Miller (1984), the jargon used in a text should speak to 'situational demands' that the genre requires. This means that in the experimental group there is more use of register that contributes to the genre of argumentation.

As far as voice is concerned, there are **four** uses of the passive voice. There is also 1 use of it is important that and 4 uses of it seems that. Two main general nouns, such as people and the government are used 17 times. The use of phrases to reflect voice **is** 12 using it is important that only once, it seems that twice and of general nouns, such as people and the government, 9 times. Instead, there is more use of these expressions accompanied by personal pronouns, such as i, me, we and us. General nouns and the passive were used in order to avoid the use of personal pronouns, thus conveying a more academic text, as stated by Martin and White (2005).

9. Conclusion

The study highlighted four different needs of Unlock intermediate English students at Birzeit University. These needs are represented in understanding genre, making language choices appropriate for a targeted genre, developing a sense of audience and writing coherently. It examined the effectiveness of the SFL's framework in meeting these needs through looking at how the four dimensions of this framework can speak to these needs. To do this, the study uses two methods: Joint Construction and Information Management that are compatible with SFL.

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