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(配合課程名稱/Course Name: 實用英語技巧)

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Applying Systemic Functional Grammar to Innovating Grammar and Vocabulary Instruction in First-Year College English Classes

Content

1. Research Motive and Purpose

The request my colleagues and I often received in the past from our students in First-Year College English classes was rid of rote learning grammar and vocabulary. That is, explicit instruction on grammar and vocabulary, or transmission of English grammatical and lexical knowledge should no longer be the focus of college English courses because, “we are no longer in high school,” a point stressed by these students across different English proficiency levels and academic disciplines. On the other hand, we came across complaints from the faculty members, also across different academic disciplines, that many of their undergraduate students seem to lack the ability to write ‘grammatically accurate’ sentences in English, not to mention using appropriate English vocabulary for writing (or speaking) in English. In response to such complaints, many colleges in my university started to offer academic English courses in their disciplines, such as Technical Writing and Legal Thesis Writing. However, the overwhelming majority of these courses are intended for graduate students. Given this reality, how First-Year College English could help undergraduate students develop the grammatical and lexical abilities needed to perform academic English tasks successfully without giving students the impression that they are limited to learning ‘high school English’ is the quest that has prompted this research project.

2. Research Question

To examine the efficacy of an alternative approach that attempted to meet the learning expectations of first-year university students while developing their abilities to use appropriate grammar and vocabulary for effective communication in English, two research questions were raised:

- (1) To what extent can the approach informed by Systemic functional grammar (SFG) to teaching grammar and vocabulary enable the English learners of First-Year college courses to move beyond grammatical competence to pragmatic competence?
- (2) What forms of assessments can accurately describe and evaluate pragmatic competence in terms of making appropriate linguistic choices for meaningful communication?

3. Literature Review

Since Dell Hymes (1972) proposed the notion of communicative competence, which posits that language learners need both grammatical or linguistic knowledge and pragmatic competence to communicate effectively in the target language, the significance of incorporating the communicative nature of languages into language teaching and learning has gained considerable attention in second and foreign language education (AT Tulgar, et al., 2017). Pragmatics is generally defined as the ability to interpret communicative contexts accurately and then make appropriate linguistic choices to negotiate meaning for effective communication. In this sense, language learners must be aware of the sociocultural context where the communication takes place, as well as take into account the interlocutors with whom or to whom they communicate to avoid communication breakdown or even more serious trouble that pragmatic failure can lead to. That is, as Rintell-Mitchel (in Savignon, 2007) puts it, “no error of grammar can make a speaker seem so incompetent, foreign, so inappropriate, as the kind a user gets when he does not understand or otherwise disregard the language’s rules of use”. Here ‘grammar’ refers to the structuralist view of grammar that focuses on analyzing the structures of the target language and sees grammar as the foundation of language teaching. Functional grammar, in contrast, views meaning as the foundation, and structures are used to realize the meaning-making process in oral and written communication (Halliday, 1994). The interrelationship among form, meaning, and use can be conceptualized in Larsen-Freeman’s Three Dimensions of Grammar (Figure 1).

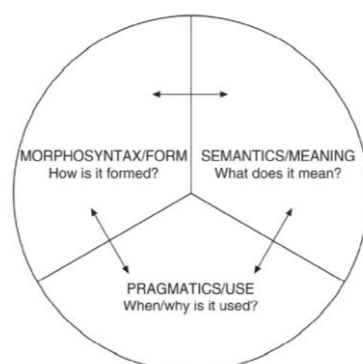


Figure 1. Three Dimensions of Grammar (Larsen-Freeman, 2014)

Take the structure of relative clauses as an example. Most high school English textbooks in Taiwan tend to present restrictive/defining and non-restrictive/non-defining relative clauses as a set of rule-governed grammatical constructions regardless of their textual or communicative purposes. In accordance, writing exercises at the sentence level that ask students to use restrictive clauses to define an object, a person, or an event are commonly seen in those textbooks. However, while relative clauses with *who*, *which*, and *that* seem less problematic to learners because they can be understood regarding the subjective or objective nouns in a ‘text sentence,’ relative clauses with *where* and *when* are often more difficult to comprehend since they need to be realized in a ‘system sentence’ as they are used concerning adverbs (Cornish, 2018). Without such discourse-level comprehension; that is, understanding grammatical terms in relation to their textual or communicative context, language learners may find it extremely challenging to bridge the gap between knowing and using. To help language learners develop an awareness of the context of language use and the ability to make appropriate choices of grammar and vocabulary accordingly, systematic training beyond the sentence level should be an integral and essential part of the teaching and learning process.

4. Teaching Planning

The first step of such training is incorporating context analysis into the preview assignment. This step is to raise students’ awareness of the textual or communicative context in which specific grammatical structures and/or vocabulary function to meet communicative goals. In the case of relative clauses, for example, students were asked to preview an article in the textbook that describes the generational difference in the attitude towards the Great Canyon National Park and identify what makes the national park worth visiting, from the perspective of an older generation. Given the nature of the preview assignment, students were exposed to the use of relative clauses at the discourse level without receiving explicit instruction or being told to pay attention to how relative clauses are used in the article and for what purpose. Then, when the class met, the students were put into pair work to share the factors they had found that would make the Great Canyon unique, and what functional words had led them to such information. Not surprisingly, only a few students were able to point out the relationship between the use of relative clauses and the information about the uniqueness of the park. Therefore, after drawing students’ attention to how language functions to make meaning at the discourse level through the pair work following the preview assignment, a group task was assigned in class to move the students from knowing to using. For example, in our lesson on reading where the use of relative clauses was also examined, the students were presented with a short text from the textbook, normally a stand-alone paragraph that needed to be rewritten or revised for an authentic communicative purpose, as the following:

On the weekend, a man moved into a new apartment. He didn’t know anyone in the building. His neighbors invited him to their party on the fifth floor. The party started at eight o’clock. He met lots of other people.

The students were told that the short text was part of the setting description of a detective story which needed revising to make the description more appealing to the readers. The students had the option to give defining or non-defining information to three of the four subject/object nouns and adverbs, including a man, a new apartment, his neighbors, and the party. It was a group work instead of an individual task that was implemented because students' awareness of the context in which relative clauses are used seemed to be further raised as they negotiated meaning during the revising process. Metacognitive discussions about the functions of certain relative clauses were also made possible when the students explored together if the goal of making the setting description more appealing for a detective story could be achieved with or without the defining or non-defining information given in specific relative clauses. The instructional design of this research project is thus a combination of both inductive and deductive approaches within the framework of systemic functional grammar. The former refers to the fact that explicit instruction on the pragmatic functions of grammar and vocabulary was given after the students had been guided to analyze and gain sufficient knowledge of the communicative context. The latter, on the other hand, was actualized in the way functional grammar and vocabulary were practiced and produced in authentic learning tasks, usually through collective effort, that followed explicit instruction.

5. Research Methodology

(1) Context and participants

During the two consecutive semesters (18 weeks per semester) of the First-Year College English course titled, Practical English Usage and Communication Skills, two classes of 90 students in total were involved in this research project as participants. Nearly 95% of the participants were in their first year of college and enrolled in different academic disciplines including Science, Engineering, Social Science, Business, Education, and Law. Their TOEIC scores ranged from 500 to 650 which could be roughly equivalent to B1 in the CEFR levels. Both classes met once a week for 100 minutes.

(2) Data collection

To evaluate the students' awareness of context and self-perceived ability to use functional grammar and vocabulary, a self-perception questionnaire was adapted from Sogutlu & Veliaj-Ostrosi (2015) and implemented. In addition, student work from in-class learning tasks, take-home assignments, and spoken and written English produced on the midterm and final achievement tests as well as at the group English final project presentations were the major sources of data not only because the research project is primarily qualitative, but because gaining an in-depth understanding of the students' pragmatic competence in terms of making appropriate linguistic choices for meaning-making is at the heart of this research project. Meanwhile, field notes from classroom observations and follow-up interviews, each of which lasted for approximately 20 minutes with 15 students that were selected from both classes based on their academic performance, i.e., the top 5% and the bottom 5% and the rest in between, were documented to take into account the perspectives from both the instructor and the students.

(3) Data analysis

The student work, field notes, and interview transcripts were analyzed qualitatively to identify the themes regarding how the instructor and students conceptualized the teaching and learning of grammar and vocabulary through an approach of functional grammar. Aside from qualitative analysis, percentages of the participants that showed statistical significance of the survey data were documented to gain an overview of the teaching and research outcomes.

6. Teaching and Research Outcomes

(1) Teaching process and outcomes

The instructional design that began by guiding the students to comprehend and analyze language use at the discourse level and then organizing authentic learning tasks for them to practice and produce appropriate language to achieve specific communicative goals has yielded a number of positive learning outcomes. To begin with, 92% of the students surveyed expressed growing

awareness of how language functions are used for effective communication, and almost two-thirds of the students were able to use polite language, albeit varied in the degree and complexity of the language used when making suggestions in an email-writing assignment. For example, 65% of the students replaced ‘I want to’ with ‘I would like to’ in the purpose statement of the email, while just under half of the students used ‘maybe we could,’ a strategy that combines the uses of a qualifier, an inclusive pronoun, and a polite modal, instead of ‘you should’. The learning outcomes found in the student work as such are correspondent with the survey results in that, compared with the high percentage of students who stated that they were more aware of the relationship between language functions and context, merely 86% of the students surveyed said that they were more confident in using appropriate vocabulary or grammar for communication (Figure 2).

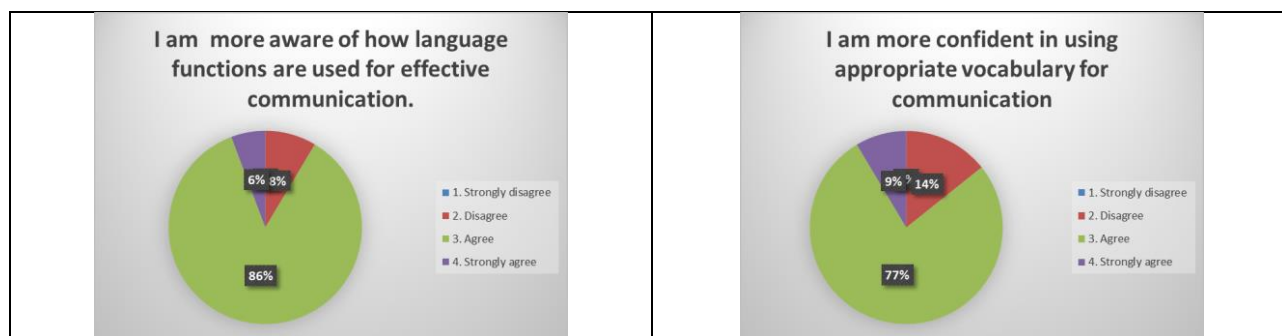


Figure 2. Results of the Student Self-Perception Survey

Nonetheless, the gap between knowing and using seemed to have become smaller as the students came to see and experience language as a means to effectively express themselves rather than as a knowledge base merely to be acquired. Such awareness and practice of language use also took the students a step further as they applied their understanding of the relationship among form, meaning, and function to making the source information their own by paraphrasing at lexical and syntactic levels – an academic skill that is crucial for students to participate in the academic context of the university (Appendix).

(2) Teacher reflections and learner feedback

Despite the positive outcomes of the functional approach, the bottom 5% of the students interviewed reported a need for more traditional, or structural, individual grammar assignments before and after class, so they could be more confident in participating in the group learning tasks or gaining better exam grades. In addition, all the students interviewed, regardless of academic achievement or English proficiency, reported a struggle when previewing for class. In fact, they complained that it had been difficult for them to ‘get’ the functions of structures without deductive instruction.

7. Recommendations and Implications

Two implications were made in response to the teacher reflections and learner feedback: (1) Structuralist grammar practice may still be used as supplements to functional tasks especially for learners who may be more familiar with the traditional approach to engage students with different learning needs. (2) Explicit instruction on functional grammar or language functions is essential to raise learners’ awareness of the context and the communicative nature of language.

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Appendix

Sample student work of paraphrasing at lexical and syntactic levels (excerpts from a final project):
Students turned underlined words in the source information to the two noun phrases in the square.

1. Strong brand equity: Nike is a very well-known and reputable brand. It's the most valuable brand in the world, with a brand value of \$30.4 billion as of 2021
2. Nike bases its business model on a direct-to-consumer approach. The company designs, develops, markets, and sells its products directly to consumers through its retail stores, e-

- | |
|---|
| 1. High brand value
2. Successful business model |
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