

LEARNING-TO-WRITE AND WRITING-TO-LEARN IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

By Sachiko Yasuda, Kobe University, Japan

In this paper, I will demonstrate how the reciprocally-supported development of linguistic knowledge and writing expertise can be achieved in a college-level foreign-language classroom. To that end, I will address the theoretical interplay between systemic functional linguistic (SFL) concepts and task-based language teaching (TBLT) as a means to enrich the fields of teaching writing in a foreign language. To date, SFL approaches to second language (L2) pedagogies such as TBLT have been rather rare in second language acquisition (SLA) research. Due to the traditional boundaries between the disciplines of SLA and L2 writing (Ortega, 2012), language development (the writing-to-learn dimension) and writing development (the learning-to-write dimension) have been investigated separately (Manchón, 2011). This article therefore argues that for some of the core yet still insufficiently explored issues in the fields of SLA—the reciprocally-supported development of linguistic knowledge and writing expertise—linking the SFL theory to the idea of TBLT may help language teachers to develop a more realistic idea of how writing can be taught on the one hand, and help writing practitioners to become more aware of how language can be taught on the other hand.

Linking writing with task: How SFL informs TBLT

The concept of TBLT has increasingly been used as the theoretical underpinning of task sequences in language education (Skehan, 1996; Long, 2014). TBLT assumes that language is used as a means to an end and that the objective of language activities is the successful completion of a task (outcome-based), rather than the formation of accurate utterances (form-based). Despite its focus on outcome, however, the task-based approach seeks a compromise between communicative practice (i.e., a stronger form of TBLT) and formal instruction (i.e., a weaker form of TBLT), depending on the learners' needs. According to Ellis (2003), the weak version views tasks as a way of offering communicative practice for language forms in a rather traditional way, whereas the strong version sees tasks as a means of enabling learners to learn the target language by experiencing how it is used in an authentic context. In this way, the task-based theory provides an instructional framework that organizes language classrooms in a sequential manner, initially encouraging students to learn the formal features of the target language to construct a target genre

(“task-as-process”), then shifting to the genre realization or meaning-making process (“task-as-workplan”) (Ellis, 2003).

The main concerns of TBLT, however, have been about issues associated with developing oral proficiency (e.g., Ellis, 2009; Skehan & Foster, 2007; Robinson, 2007). In this paper, thus, I suggest that the scope of TBLT can be expanded by exploring writing events. Embracing writing in the agenda of TBLT will enable TBLT researchers and practitioners to gain a more complete understanding of the learners’ language use, insofar as it is motivated by the functional need to deliver complex content within discourse, as is achieved by combining the communicative purpose of the genre, the content, and the audience type.

With regard to the motivation behind the use of SFL, I would like to argue that, among the different conceptual frameworks used in L2 writing research, SFL is the most felicitous theory in providing a nexus point between language learning and writing development. This is because SFL offers an explicit framework for explaining the relationships among the written genre, the audience, and meaning-making linguistic choices (e.g., Christie, 2002; Halliday, 1994, 1996, 1998; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). More precisely, as described in Figure 1, SFL nicely explains how the context of a particular genre is construed through three layers of register variables: field (i.e., what is taking place), tenor (i.e., who is taking part), and mode (i.e., what role language is playing) (Martin, 2005). SFL then explains how the register variables of field, tenor, and mode are realized in three metafunctions of ideational, interpersonal, and textual choices respectively in the genre. In the SFL view, investigating these three register and metafunctional variables can lead to a systematic understanding of how genres are constituted and how they work in a particular social context. It is expected that these agendas of SFL can help TBLT practitioners develop tasks or materials enabling learners to learn the target linguistic features and eventually produce a text in a context-appropriate written genre as an outcome.

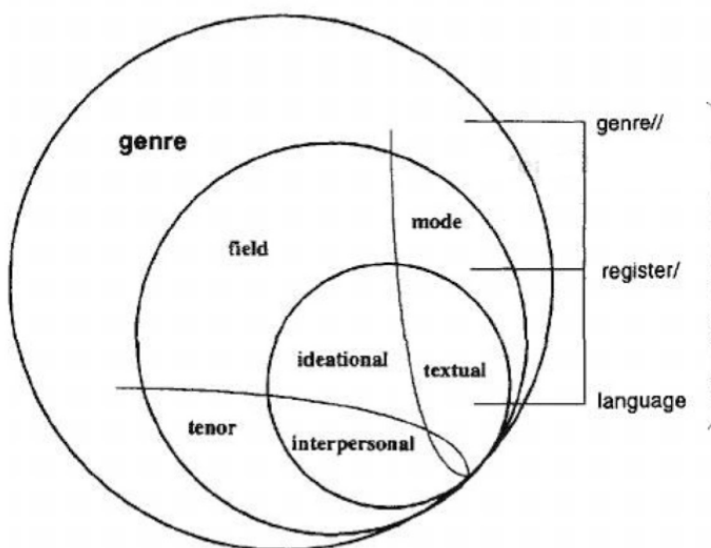


Figure 1 Genre, register, and language (Martin, 2005, p. 8)

Linking task with writing: How TBLT informs SFL

While the SFL theory has much to contribute to TBLT, TBLT also has much to inform SFL. SFL is a theory of genre and language, not one of teaching and learning. As indicated above, SFL's primary focus is on explicit descriptions of genre features or lexico-grammatical choices made by the writer to construct the meaning (i.e., what should be done). The theory itself does not offer pedagogic procedures that make both language learning and writing development occur concurrently (i.e., how it can be done). Herein lies the role that TBLT could play in compensating for the theoretical gaps in SFL.

As for the systematic pedagogic procedures for teaching language, TBLT assumes that there are two types of task: target tasks and pedagogic tasks. Target tasks are communicative acts that we accomplish through language in the real world (e.g., making an appointment, making a request, and, and reading a newspaper so on), while pedagogic tasks are the activities and materials used to help learners to accomplish those target tasks (Norris, 2009). These conceptual discussions about task types indicate that TBLT can be an effective framework that offers sequenced tasks in which learners are encouraged to utilize language to accomplish a certain outcome in a certain context/genre/task.

By borrowing these ideas from TBLT and combining them with SFL, this article aims to present a concrete example concerning genre-based tasks. In the rest of this paper, I will present how genre-based tasks were designed and implemented based on the synergetic theoretical combinations of SFL and TBLT in the context of college-level academic English as a foreign language (EFL) courses for biology-major students at a Japanese university.

The Context

This section will demonstrate a four-semester sequence of genre-based EFL courses (Levels 1–4) offered for biology-major students at a Japanese university. This course was 15 weeks in length and taught by the author. With reference to Byrnes (2005, 2011), the four-semester course sequence was designed to familiarize the students with various written genres in different textual spheres in a step-by-step manner, shifting from private to public and general to academic. Precisely, within the four-level curricular progression, Level 1 focused on primary discourses used in everyday oral situations. In Level 2, the target genre shifted to secondary discourses used in the written mode primarily through expository essays such as description, comparison and contrast, and argumentation. Level 3 introduced students to email writing as a blurred genre in which the oral and written modes were combined to enable students to experience a wide range of modalities and consider the audience and the overall purpose (see Yasuda, 2011). Finally, Level 4 expanded language use in the written mode from general to more academic by focusing on subject-specific texts.

Due to the space limitation, I will focus on the Level-4 portion in demonstrating how genre-based tasks were developed and implemented considering the needs of biology-major

students at the Japanese university. The Level 4 course sought to shift its target genre-based tasks toward a scientific representation of reality by integrating content-oriented reading of academic texts (e.g., research reports on biotechnology, genetics, and biodiversity) into language learning tasks. Writing a summary was selected as the target task since this genre serves as “an aid to close reading and understanding of a field of knowledge” (Hood, 2008, p. 352) and it provides the opportunity to demonstrate an understanding of the new subject itself and of the specialized language associated with it—which exactly corresponded to the biology-major students’ future genre/task needs.

Designing Tasks for Teaching and Learning How to Write a Summary: Pedagogic and Target Tasks

To design task sequences for the 15-week course, the target task (writing a summary of an academic text) was broken into its component pieces or sub-tasks. Table 1 is a course schedule for the Level-4 course and demonstrates how pedagogic tasks were sequenced and integrated into reading activities so that learning genre, task, content, and language could happen concurrently.

Table 1 The course schedule

Week	Reading Topics	Genre of the Reading	Pedagogic Tasks for Summary Writing
1	Guidance		
2	The Uses of Genetics	Research report	Pre-instructional summary-writing task (baseline task)
3	How to write a summary		Analysis of the selected summaries on the “Uses of Genetics” in Week 2
4	Hirofumi Yamashita’s Three Star Vegetables	Magazine Column	Paraphrasing practice (i) Acknowledge/ Clarify
5	What is COP 17?	Magazine Column	Paraphrasing practice (ii): Summarize/ Organize
6	What is TPP?	Newspaper Article	Paraphrasing practice (iii): Shift level of abstraction
7	TPP & Domestic Agriculture	Newspaper Article	Paraphrasing practice (i), (ii), and (iii)
8	Disappearance of Wildlife	Science Textbook	Summarizing practice (i): The target readers are those who have little background knowledge on the topic.
9	Photosynthesis	Science Textbook	Analysis of the selected summaries on “Disappearance of Wildlife” in Week 8
10	Evolving animals	Science Textbook	Summarizing practice (ii) The target readers are those experts who have certain background knowledge on the topic.

11	Species Diversity of Mammals	Research Report	Analysis of the selected summaries on “Evolving animals” in Week 10
12	Bio-Diversity	Research report	Summarizing practice (iii): Using reporting verbs and acknowledging the author of the original source
13	DNA Testing	Research report	Analysis of the selected summaries on “Bio-Diversity” in Week 12
14	Wrap up		
15	Biotechnology & Genetic Engineering	Research report	Post-instructional summary-writing task (Outcome)

The course schedule illustrated in Table 1 highlights some notable features that make it different from a traditional content-based syllabus implemented in previous years at this institution. First, the reading topics were selected based on the students’ academic needs, aiming to develop their content knowledge as well as discipline-specific words and lexical phrases. Second, the reading materials came from authentic sources (e.g., science textbooks used in high schools in English-speaking countries, online newspaper articles, and research reports) which the students were likely to encounter in their future academic careers. Third, the genres of the reading materials were sequenced based on their relative complexity, not impressionistically, i.e., shifting from magazine column, newspaper articles, and science textbooks and to research reports.

Lastly and most importantly, the reading activities were integrated into summary writing, which constituted a range of pedagogic tasks or sub-tasks. As shown in Table 1, in Week 3, the students learned fundamental conventions of summary writing through an analysis of the selected students’ summary samples. The fundamental conventions of summary writing included: (i) definition, (ii) purpose and the importance of considering who their audience is and what they need; (iii) how summarizing is different from paraphrasing in terms of purpose and meaning-making linguistic operations (the purpose of a summary is to condense the content into a short form; while paraphrasing is concerned with the restatement of the original sentence in a form that is different from the original); and (iv) summary conventions (e.g., using reporting verbs, citing the author’s last name, using the present tense, etc.). Then, in Weeks 4–7, the students learned the three types of paraphrasing: the acknowledging paraphrase, the organizing paraphrase, and the abstracting paraphrase (Lipton & Wellman, 1999). Through explicit instruction on various types of paraphrasing techniques, the students were expected to increase their awareness of how to control the level of abstraction depending on the audience (expert or general public). In Weeks 8–13, the students moved to summary writing practice. They were encouraged to write a summary of the source text they had read in class to different audiences, such as an elementary school student who has little technical knowledge on the topic and a graduate student who has substantial knowledge on the topic. The summaries were submitted to the instructor after each class and then returned to the student in the following week with

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the instructor's comments and feedback. Some of the students' summary models were selected and used in class for genre analysis to raise their awareness of what does or does not constitute an effective summary.

In fact, this in-class analysis of sample summaries, conducted every other week, constituted the main feature of the pedagogic genre-based tasks for this course. The students engaged in the model analysis based on the scaffolding questions that were informed by the ideas of SFL. Sample scaffolding questions and the student worksheet for the analysis of genre models are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Scaffolding questions for analysis of the genre model

Read and analyze the summaries and answer the following questions.

1. Content

- What is a main topic of the original article?
- How does each of the three summaries address the main topic?
- Which sentence plays the role of thesis statement?
- How is the thesis statement in each summary supported by further details?
- Which summary sample do you think is better than the others? Why?

2. The relationship between the summarizer, the original author, and the audience

- Suppose the intended audience of your summary was a secondary school student, which summary sample do you think s/he would prefer? Why?
- If the intended audience of your summary were a professor, which summary sample do you think s/he would prefer? Why?
- How does the writer acknowledge the original author?

3. Language

- How does the writer reword the source information in a way that avoids copying the original author's words verbatim?
- What kinds of lexicogrammatical resources does the writer use to generalize the gist?
- What kinds of lexicogrammatical resources does the writer use to condense the information?
- How is the summary organized?

For this genre analysis, the students were presented with different summary models of the same source text that addressed different audiences (e.g., experts and non-experts) for different purposes (e.g., overview summary and goal-oriented summary). On other occasions, the students were presented with both effective and less effective summary models. Then, referring to the SFL-initiated scaffolding questions in Table 2, the students were encouraged to dig into the summary models as discourse analysts (Désirée, 2009) in terms of how each summary reflected ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings and how the three types of metafunctions interacted simultaneously with one another to realize

the genre. At the ideational level, the analysis encouraged the students to identify the main point of the text and analyze how writer expressed his/her macroproposition (“Content” in the worksheet in Table 2). At the interpersonal level, the students were prompted to analyze how the writers positioned themselves vis-à-vis the original author and how they expressed appraisal, evaluation, and judgment (“The relationship between the summarizer, the original author, and the audience in the worksheet in Table 2). At the textual level, the students were encouraged to analyze the flow of information and the lexicogrammatical resources that helped transform the original text (“Language” in the worksheet in Table 2). The students then independently composed their summaries regarding the content of the article that they had read in class. These pedagogic tasks were designed and implemented so that students could eventually transfer what they learned to the target task for this course (See Yasuda (2015, 2017) for major findings regarding the students’ concrete outcomes).

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study presented how pedagogical procedures of TBLT can be linked to conceptual principles of SFL in the context of the college-level EFL course for biology-major students. Analysis of the students’ outcomes at the end of the course indicated that the in-class model analysis based on the SFL-inspired scaffolding questions may have given them a new insight into how to write a summary. As the students continually engaged in analyzing various summary models from the tripartite metafunctional perspectives, they might have developed metalanguage, which enabled them to distance themselves from the model text and consider genre-appropriate lexicogrammatical choices and patterns. Further, the results revealed that their increasing awareness of language choices was accompanied by their enhanced awareness of the audience. The changes in the students’ audience awareness and understanding of the genre were also apparent in their summaries of the source text at the end of the course. While extensive copying was evident in the pre-instructional summary tasks, the occurrences of direct textual duplication decreased markedly in the post-instructional tasks.

The findings suggest that linking SFL to TBLT enables teachers to develop tasks and materials promoting the concurrent development of linguistic knowledge and writing expertise. This insight is of particular importance in the EFL context because EFL writers, in general, are often less exposed to the intricate relation between language and genre in real-life situations than is typically the case for English as a second language writers. Therefore, incidental learning of the genre-language relations is less likely in EFL contexts. In such contexts, the linguistic resources for constructing meaning in a text, including lexis, grammar, and discourse structure, must be brought to consciousness and explicitly taught to students. Although this study focused on academic summary as a target genre, the genre-based tasks in this study could be applied to other task types; e.g., emails (Yasuda, 2011), book reviews (Ryshina-Pankova, 2010); interviews (Achugar & Colombi, 2008), and lab reports (Schleppegrell, 2002). These studies have shown that SFL-informed genre

tasks encouraged learners to analyze and discuss the tripartite relation among field, tenor, and mode in specific L2 instances, which helped them in becoming sensitized to a variety of lexicogrammatical resources, genre functions, and realization patterns as well as the lexicogrammatical items that were appropriate to make meaning in a given rhetorical context. Although these rhetorical situations were artificially devised by the instructor, interactive contexts can be created during in-class tasks in a manner that can enhance the students' deeper involvement. These conveyance-of-meaning-oriented writing tasks can thus be implemented by linking the two theoretical notions of genre and task such that they enable students to be sensitized to the lexicogrammatical items with reference to their contextual adequacy and communicative success as a whole. The interplay between SFL and TBLT could fruitfully provide a nexus point between learning-to-write (the content) and writing-to-learn (the language) or linguistic knowledge and writing expertise.

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Author Bio



Sachiko Yasuda is an Associate Professor in the School of Languages and Communication at Kobe University, Japan. She received her PhD in Second Language Studies from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Her research is in the area of second language writing, systemic functional linguistics, and foreign language pedagogy and assessment through CLIL, TBLT, and genre-based approaches.