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OF RESEARCH ON
TEACHING THE
ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

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Grammar and Literacy Learning

MEG GEBHARD AND J. R. MARTIN

We begin this chapter by outlining three conceptions of grammar, which we term *traditional*, *formal*, and *functional* perspectives. We then focus on a *functional* perspective and how it can inform the work of literacy educators by providing an analysis of a text produced by an Australian tenth grader. We conclude with a brief discussion of how a functional perspective on grammar has been taken up in the United States as a way of supporting teachers and their students in negotiating the demands of changing social, political, and economic forces in education.

1. Which Grammar?

To talk about grammar, we first must establish what kind of grammar we are talking about. As educators, we have three choices: traditional school grammar, formal grammar, and functional grammar. Traditional grammar, inherited from the Greeks and Romans, was closely tied to the study of rhetoric and logic and enjoyed a scholarly tradition into the 19th century. The bare remnants of this tradition are what many of us would recognize as the grammar students study in English classes today (Christie, 1993). It consists of the study of parts of speech and prescriptive rules regarding correct usage. These parts of speech, or what linguists call categories or classes of words (e.g., noun, verb, preposition, adjective, adverb) are used in rules such as "Don't end a sentence with a preposition," "Don't begin a sentence with a conjunction," or "Never use the first person pronoun in academic writing." Some versions of school grammar, especially those used in teaching second languages, retain additional categorisation such as voice (active/passive), tense (present progressive, past progressive) and even more exotic phenomena such as gerunds and participles. In addition, relational categories such as Subject and Object are invoked to manage what is referred to as 'Subject verb agreement' (*I think, she thinks*). However, uncertainty about these additional categories can lead to nonsensical prescriptions such as "Avoid the passive tense."

School grammar of this kind has given the word "grammar" a bad name for a number of reasons. Students often find the experience of having their "grammar" corrected objectionable because it takes the focus off meaning; it imposes arbitrary rules that most people do not follow; it does not necessarily lead to more powerful ways of reading and writing; and it insults and discriminates against social or regional dialects. As a result of this bad name, many progressive educators and policymakers have worked to remove grammar instruction from state frameworks and teacher education programs altogether (Kollin & Hancock, 2005). This situation has created quite a challenge for educational linguists trying to get knowledge about language back into schools, since the only grammar that is less effective than traditional school grammar in fostering literacy development is no grammar at all. To this day, many debates about grammar polarize around school grammar of this sort, with conservatives arguing for prescriptive rules for language behavior, and liberals questioning the fairness and utility of these prescriptions.

Unlike traditional school grammar, which lost its footing in academe, both formal and functional grammar are based on work by theoretical linguists. One challenge for educators is that within these two broad traditions, there are many specialized theories with high levels of technicality. This diversification means care must be taken in choosing which models to adopt (Martin, 1999). As far as literacy learning is concerned, the choice has to do with selecting a model that best can inform studies of literacy development. In linguistics, especially in North America, formal grammar currently has more practitioners than functional grammar. Informed by Chomskian linguistics, the mission of formal grammar is to explore structures such as *Al wrote an essay* (Figure 43. 1) across languages to determine what all languages have in common. In addition, Chomskian linguists aim to propose universal constraints on the nature of constituent structures deriving ultimately from inferred neurological mutations allowing for just these structures

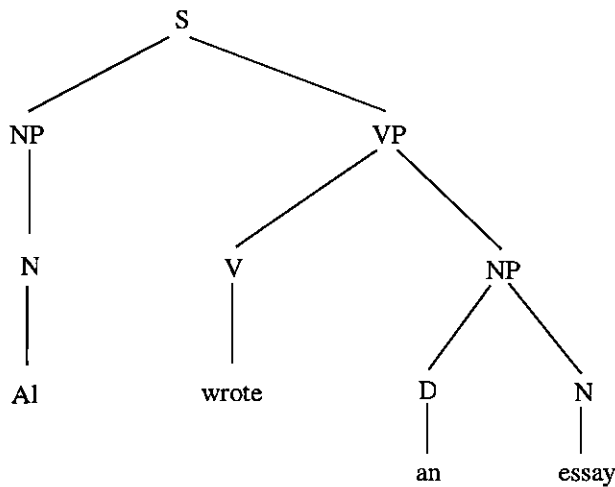


Figure 43.1 Phrase marker for the constituent structure in formal grammar.

and no others (e.g., *Al wrote an essay. What did Al write? Al wrote the beginning of an essay. What did Al write the beginning of? Al wrote an essay Bill published?* but not **Who did Al write an essay published.*)

A formal conception of grammar and associated scholarship continues across languages around the world today (Pinker, 1994). This research can be of relevance to literacy learning where it can be shown that certain syntactic structures develop before others and that structural configurations such as the one shown in Figure 43.1 can be used as evidence in measuring literacy development. For example, researchers such as Hunt (1970) in first language studies analyzed the syntactic complexity of students' writing samples to make claims about their stage of literacy devel-

opment. However, as Grabe and Kaplan (1996) make clear, "there has been an inability to demonstrate a clear relation between syntactic complexity measures and judgements of improved writing quality" (p. 45). The problem with trying to make such connections is, of course, that judgements of quality are not based on degrees of syntactic complexity alone, but on how aspects of syntax intersect with other meaning-making systems in particular contexts.

A question arises, therefore, as to what extent the study of grammar can be reoriented to the study of meaning (Coffin, 2006; Coffin, Donohue, & North, 2009). This in effect is the mission of functional linguists. One of the best known theorists of functional linguistics is M. A. K. Halliday, who from early in his career tuned his approach to grammar, known as systemic functional linguistics (SFL), to the needs of educators (e.g., Halliday, 2007). As a first step, Halliday's strategy relies on labelling the parts of a clause for grammatical function (e.g., Subject, Object) as well as class (for grammatical relations as well as categories in formalist terms). This information is left implicit in formal syntactic trees because it is argued that the shape of the tree can be used to infer functional relations: the Subject (S) is the Noun Phrase (NP) immediately dominated by S, while the Object (O) is the NP immediately dominated by Verb Phrase (VP) (see Figure 43.2).

Halliday prefers a flatter tree (because extra structure is not needed to show functions), with explicit function labels. Adopting his current terms for mood structure (Subject, Finite, Predicator, Complement), this graphically renders the clause structure illustrated in Figure 43.3. In this instance, there are two nominal groups immediately dominated by clause, distinguished by function labelling (the Finite and Predicator functions are conflated as Finite/Predicator

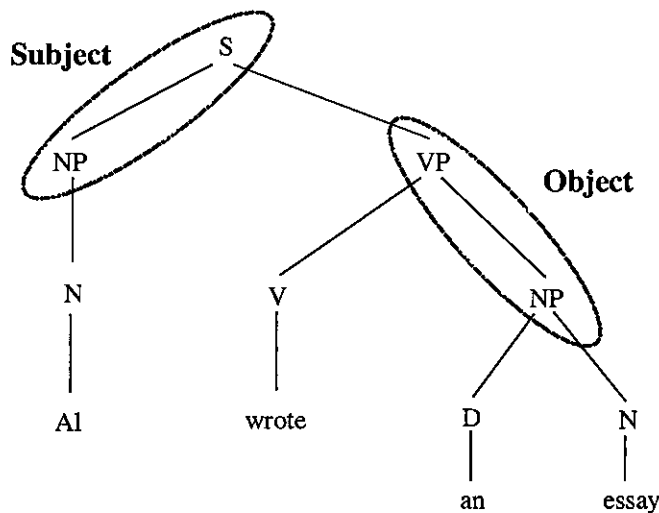


Figure 43.2 Implicit functional information in formal syntax.

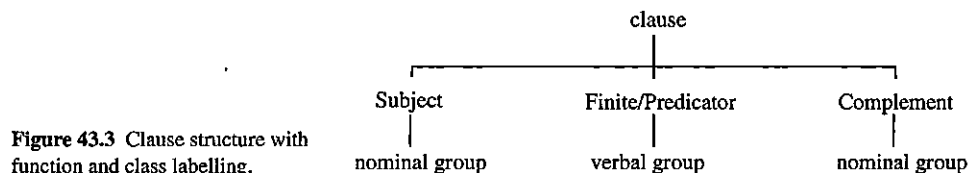


Figure 43.3 Clause structure with function and class labelling.

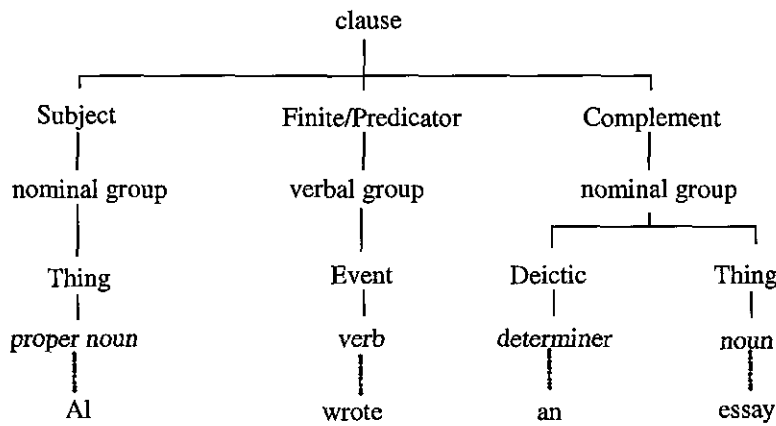


Figure 43.4 Function and class labelling at clause and group rank.

because they are realized by a single verb *wrote*; cf., *has written* or *will write* where they are separate constituents of the clause).

Whereas functional labels describe the role something is playing in a structure (e.g., Subject), class labels describe what it is (e.g., nominal group). The distinction is important because a function can be realized by more than one class (e.g., Subject realized by a nominal group or clause: *Al excited them/What Al said excited them*), and a class can realize more than one function (e.g., the nominal group as Subject and Complement above). Double labelling is also used for the next level of analysis of groups and phrases, as displayed in Figure 43.4. Once again, a group function can be realized by more than one class (e.g., Deictic by determiner or nominal group: *an essay, the student's essay*), and a class can realize more than one function (e.g., a noun as Classifier or Thing: *the student essay, the student*).

The additional function labelling allows us to be more specific about the work done by different classes, and thus infuses the grammatical description with more specific meanings. For example, in Figure 43.3 and 43.4, we have a Subject and Finite function. These functions give us the terms we need to describe the so-called Subject verb agreement noted above (i.e., Subject agreeing with Finite). In addition, they give us the categories we need to describe how English distinguishes between statements and questions (between declarative and interrogative mood):

Al has written an essay:
Has Al written an essay

And they further give us the terms we need to describe the formation of English tag questions:

All wrote an essay, didn't he?
 And elliptical responses:
 Has Al written an essay?
 - He has.

The Complement 'complements' these terms by designating the part of the clause that can be made Subject through a change of voice from active to passive:

An essay has been written by Al.

This change potentially sets up a different kind of argument to that invited when Al is Subject:

Al has written an essay.
 - No, he hasn't.
 - Yes, he has.

An essay has been written by Al.
 - No, it hasn't.
 - Yes, it has.

The function labels in other words invest the analysis of clause structure with interpersonal meaning, focusing on how we position ourselves in dialogue and negotiate propositions with one another.

As a second step, Halliday develops the idea that classes can be labelled for function in more than one way, depending on the type of meaning we are orienting to. We could reconsider the example we are working with from the perspective of experiential meaning or what Halliday calls transitivity. Interpreted along these lines, the clause can be further labelled as Actor, Process, and Goal, so that we see explicitly who is doing what to what or whom:

<i>Al</i>	<i>has written</i>	<i>an essay</i>
Actor	Process	Goal
nominal group	verbal group	nominal group

Function labelling of this kind can be used to distinguish the grammatical construal of different types of experience from one another, for example the mental and verbal processes exemplified below:

<i>Al</i>	<i>liked</i>	<i>the essay</i>
Senser	Process	Phenomenon
nominal group	verbal group	nominal group

<i>Al</i>	<i>read</i>	<i>his essay</i>	<i>to Tipper</i>
Sayer	Process	Verbiage	Receiver
nominal group	verbal group	nominal group	prepositional phrase

The third aspect of Halliday's grammar is textual in nature. This permits us to re-label the clause as complementary waves of information. For English, this involves beginning with Theme, the function orienting us to what we are talking about, and typically ending with New, the function flagging newsworthy information. We'll show how his Theme analysis can be used to improve student writing in section 3 below.

<i>Al</i>	has written	an <i>essay</i>
Theme		New
nominal group	verbal group	nominal group

Space precludes further discussion of this kind of labeling in this chapter. Gee (2005) includes a beginners' appendix that provides a useful snapshot of Halliday's perspective. Derewianka (1998) provides accessible introductions for teachers. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) provide the primary resource for research, and Martin, Painter, and Matthiessen's workbook (2010) supports these materials with grammar synopses, troubleshooting guides, and exercises. In considering taking up Halliday's functional metalanguage to support classroom literacy practices, educators need to balance the demands of introducing unfamiliar SFL terminology against the benefit of being able to work with students to analyze how grammar makes meaning in the texts they routinely read and write in school.

In describing these key differences between tradition, formal, and functional grammar in light of classroom practice, our main point is to reinforce the idea that when considering grammar and literacy, we must be clear about what kind of grammar we are talking about. Crucially, as educators, we have to ask how much insight a perspective on grammar gives us into meaning and meaning making in schools. For the remainder of this chapter we will focus on a Hallidayan perspective on grammar that maximizes this concern.

2. Functional Grammar in a Model of Literacy

The next step to take is to ask about the theoretical context of the grammar we are adopting. Traditional grammar, as we have noted, was once closely allied with rhetoric and logic as a resource for helping people use language more effectively, but its degeneration into school grammar shattered these connections, undermining its utility. Formal grammar is generally conceived as related to phonology, semantics, and pragmatics, which are studied separately using different methodologies. The study of formal syntax is not designed to help understand other levels of linguistic systems. In functional grammar, on the other hand, the relationship between levels is conceived as a coherent whole, with phonology/graphology, lexicogrammar, and discourse semantics designed to support one another in understanding and analysing meaning-making processes. As articulated by Martin and Rose (2008), SFL pushes this a step further by

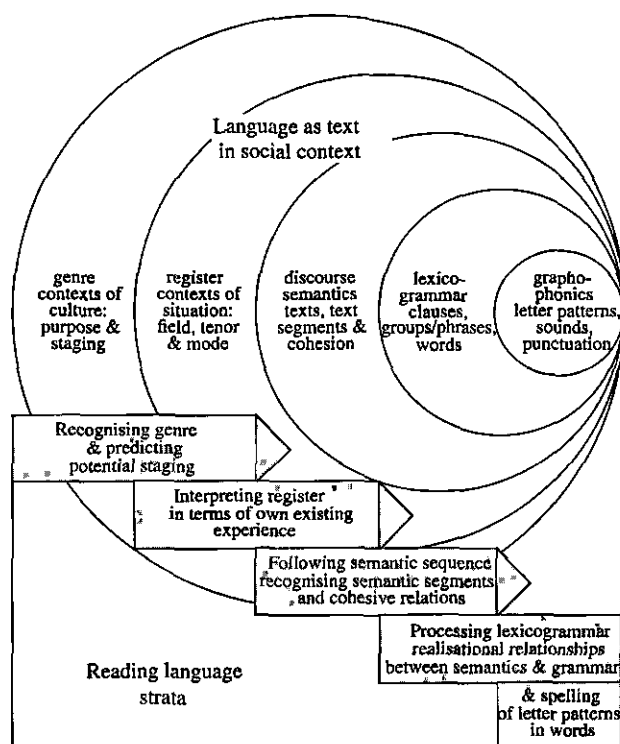


Figure 43.5 Rose's 2000 reading perspective on levels of language and context.

modelling social context along similar lines as genre and register (field, tenor, and mode). Rose's (2000) diagram for the relationship of these levels to grammar is presented in Figure 43.5, along with his glosses on its interpretation in relation to reading.

In this model grammar is positioned as realized by phonology (speaking) or graphology (writing) at the same time as it is realizing discourse semantics (i.e., the organization of grammatical units into texts). Turning to context, ideational meaning in language is interpreted as building field (institutional activity), interpersonal meaning as negotiating tenor (social relationships), and textual meaning as texturing information flow in relation to mode (the semiotic impact of channels of communication through speaking, writing, phoning, blogging, texting, or twittering); these three strands of meaning are then coordinated with one another at the level of genre.

As far as literacy is concerned, the critical issue centers on the relation of the grammar we are using to studying texts in context. Literacy, after all, is about successful communication, and this means getting all levels of language successfully working together in coherent texts that suit their social purposes. This makes a global fractal perspective on making meaning, including grammatical meaning, a key concern (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2009). A grammar that is theoretically decontextualized is going to be much less helpful for literacy educators than one that shows how grammar is related to all levels of the reading/writing process (Martin & Rose, 2003, 2008).

3. Context, Genre, and Grammar

What about context? How have functional linguists responded to literacy educators' concern with literacy as social process and the dynamics between texts and contexts? As reviewed by Hyland (2004), the most influential contributions have focused on *genre* and include the Sydney School, the New Rhetoric perspective, and English for Academic Purposes. Of these three, the Sydney School has drawn on SFL to push the furthest into language to show how graphological, lexicogrammatical, and discourse semantic resources construe genres.

As an example of the significance of an SFL perspective for literacy learning, consider the following text produced by an Australian 10th grader in a Geography class in an urban high school. The students have completed a unit on federal, state, and local government and have been assigned an essay question: "Are Governments necessary? Give reasons for your answer."

[1] I think Governments are necessary because if there wasn't any there would be no law people would be killing themselves. They help keep our economic system in order for certain things. If there wasn't no Federal Government there wouldn't have been no one to fix up any problems that would have occurred in the community. Same with the State Government if the SG didn't exist there would have been noone to look after the school, vandalism fighting would have occurred everyday. The local Government would be important to look after the rubbish because everyone would have diseases.

Dismayed though teachers might be by writing of this kind, if equipped with only the tools of traditional grammar, few can do more than edit the punctuation, spelling, and grammar "errors" in an effort to transform the text into standard written English (1' to 1'' below):

[1'] I think Governments are necessary because if there [wasn't] any there would be no law [] [p]eople would be *killing themselves*. They help keep our economic system in order for certain things. If there wasn't [no] Federal Government there wouldn't have been [no one] to fix up any problems that would have occurred in the community. [] Same with the State Government [] if the SG didn't exist [] there would have been [noone] to look after the school[,] vandalism fighting would have occurred everyday. The local Government would be important to look after the rubbish because everyone would have diseases.

[1''] I think Governments are necessary because if there weren't any there wouldn't be any law: people would be killing themselves. They help keep our economic system in order for certain things. If there wasn't any Federal Government there wouldn't be anyone to fix up any problems that occur in the community. It's the same with the State Government --- if the State Government didn't exist there wouldn't be anyone to look after the schools; vandalism and fighting would occur everyday. The local Government is important to look after rubbish, because otherwise everyone would have diseases.

Because this kind of editing concentrates on low-level features, the writing ends up looking more like standard written English, but it is still a bad essay—not the kind of writing that will allow students to pass high-stakes exams or gain entry to college.

Genre-based literacy programs would of course attend to editing issues, but starting from the other end of Rose's levels of language diagram—with genre. As the essay question flags, the text the student is working on is a proto-exposition. The student makes a statement regarding the necessity of government and supports his claim with three arguments:

[1'''] I think Governments are necessary because if there weren't any there wouldn't be any law: people would be killing themselves. They help keep our economic system in order for certain things.

If there wasn't any Federal Government there wouldn't be anyone to fix up any problems that occur in the community.

It's the same with the State Government - if the State Government didn't exist there wouldn't be anyone to look after the schools; vandalism and fighting would occur everyday.

The local Government is important to look after rubbish, because otherwise everyone would have diseases.

The local Government is important to look after rubbish, because otherwise everyone would have diseases.

So, how can grammar help? Halliday's (2007) theme analysis gives us one way in. His topical themes are underlined below, with marked Themes in bold. What this analysis reveals is the spoken counter-factual nature of the argumentation: 'I think x because if not a then b, if not c then d' and so on.

I think Governments are necessary
because if there weren't any there wouldn't be any law:
people would be killing themselves.
They help keep our economic system in order for certain things.

If there wasn't any Federal Government there wouldn't be anyone to fix up any problems that occur in the community.

It's the same with the State Government -
if the State Government didn't exist there wouldn't be anyone to look after the schools;
vandalism and fighting would occur everyday.

The local Government is important to look after rubbish, because otherwise everyone would have diseases.

In academic writing, we typically organize our argument differently by using Theme to scaffold the structure of a written exposition genre. For this text, therefore, it would make sense to make governments Theme in the Thesis and

Reiteration stages of the exposition, and the appropriate level of government Theme is the Arguments.

[1''''']

Governments are necessary at different levels. They make laws, without which people would be killing themselves, and (they) help keep our economic system in order.

The Federal Government fixes up problems that occur in the community.

The State Government looks after schools, preventing vandalism and fighting.

The Local Government is important to look after rubbish: otherwise everyone would have diseases.

Governments at several administrative levels are necessary.

This structure could be further reinforced by adding textual Themes to the Arguments (italic below) and making use of circumstances of cause (italic bold below) in the Thesis and Reiteration stages. From the perspective of discourse semantics, what these grammatical resources do is organize the text's conjunctive structure (Martin & Rose, 2003).

[1''''']

Governments are necessary at different levels *for a number of reasons*.

They make laws, without which people would be killing themselves, and (they) help keep our economic system in order.

To begin, the Federal Government fixes up problems that occur in the community.

Similarly, the State Government looks after schools, preventing vandalism and fighting.

Finally, the Local Government is important to look after rubbish: otherwise everyone would have diseases.

As a result of these factors, Governments at several administrative levels are necessary.

Pushing further, we could add nominal groups to the Thesis to predict the ideational orientation of each Argument (*levels of government*) and consolidate each Argument's news (problems, schooling, and waste disposal).

[1''''''']

Governments are necessary at different levels for a number of reasons. These have to do with the special responsibilities of Governments at different administrative levels - Federal, State and Local.

To begin, the Federal Government fixes up problems that occur in the community.

Similarly, the State Government looks after schools, preventing vandalism and fighting.

Finally, the Local Government is important to look after rubbish: otherwise everyone would have diseases.

As a result of their concern with general difficulties, schooling and waste disposal Governments at several levels of administrative organisation are necessary.

We are now in a position to elaborate each Argument, as we have done for the first Argument below, fleshing out the scaffold we have built thus far and moving the essay toward the advanced academic literacy functionality upon which upper secondary and college studies depend.

[1''''''']

Governments are necessary at different levels for a number of reasons. These have to do with the special responsibilities of Governments at different administrative levels - Federal, State and Local.

To begin, the Federal Government is concerned with general difficulties faced by the community.

It organises armed forces to defend the country in case it is attacked and to help keep things peaceful in various parts of the world. It tries to improve the economy, helping businesses run more effectively and provide more jobs for people. And it collects taxes which it spends on Medicare, universities and airports.

Similarly, the State Government looks after schools, preventing vandalism and fighting.

Finally, the Local Government is important to look after rubbish: otherwise everyone would have diseases.

As a result of their concern with general difficulties, schooling and waste disposal Governments at several levels of administrative organisation are necessary.

Space precludes consideration of field, tenor, and mode here. But we have offered a glimpse of functional grammar interacting with discourse semantics in the interests of genre.

4. Using SFL in K-12 Contexts

A Hallidayan perspective was put to use in classrooms during the 1980s as a way of teaching academic literacies to linguistically and culturally diverse students in Sydney, Australia. Educational linguists, such as Christie, Derewianka, Kress, Martin, and Rotherty, drew on Halliday's theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to support teachers in making the workings of academic literacy practices transparent and potentially transformative for students, especially students from non-dominant linguistic and cultural communities (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993, Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Martin & Rose, 2003, 2008). Since then, a number of applied linguists in the United States have drawn on SFL scholarship as a way of supporting the academic literacies of English language learners (ELLs) and speakers of non-dominant varieties of English, particularly in the context of high-stakes

school reforms such as No Child Left Behind legislation and English-only mandates (e.g., Brisk & Zisselsberger, in press; Gebhard, Demers, & Castillo-Rosenthal, 2008; Achugar, Schleppegrell, & Oteiza, 2007).

In California, for example, Schleppegrell (2003, 2004, 2005) collaborated with teachers to analyze the academic language demands placed on students by state curricular frameworks and aligned exams. As part of this project, they identified the genres California teachers were required to teach and their students were required to read and write in school (e.g., recounts, narratives, responses to literature, summaries, descriptions, explanations, reports, arguments, and analytic essays). In addition, they made recommendations regarding how state frameworks could be revised and aligned to support all students, not just ELLs, in developing "pathways" to academic literacy across disciplines as they transitioned from elementary to secondary schools (2003, p. 20; see also Christie & Derewianka, 2008). These pathways center on developing students' and teachers' metalinguistics awareness of genre and register features as they progress from reading and writing more everyday texts such as personal narratives, descriptions, and procedures to reading and writing more technical and grammatically denser texts in specific content areas, including, for example, scientific laboratory reports, mathematical proofs, explanations of historical events, and analyses of literature (Achugar & Schleppegrell, 2005; Fang, 2006; see also Fang, Schleppegrell, & Cox, 2006; Schleppegrell, 2007; Schleppegrell & Go, 2007; Schleppegrell & de Oliveira, 2006).

In regard to the teaching of History specifically, Schleppegrell and her colleagues developed summer professional development institutes for teachers. These institutes, called the California History Project (CHP), introduced teachers to SFL tools they could use to deconstruct the meaning of textbook passages and primary source documents. These tools included noticing how texts were structured and made coherent through the use of temporal markers and other cohesive devices; unpacking meaning clause by clause to see how participants were omitted or verbal processes transformed into nouns or became nominalized; and identifying participants, processes, and circumstances in key passages to become aware of how writers make agency explicit or not (Schleppegrell, Achugar, & Oteiza, 2007; Schleppegrell, & de Oliveira, 2006). Achugar and colleagues (2007) report that teachers planned lessons that incorporated this kind of language analysis and found that the approach enabled more in-depth discussion and understanding of history for the ELLs in particular:

Students whose teachers participated in CHP institutes made significantly greater gains on the California History-Social Science test (a standardized measure) than students whose teachers had not participated in the workshops, and ELLs were among those who show great benefits from the approach....Students whose teachers used these strategies also wrote more effectively, developing a thesis and supporting it with evidence and analysis. (p. 15)

In Massachusetts, Gebhard, Willett, Jimenez, and Piedra (in press) have come to similar conclusions based on their work with elementary and middle school teachers and students in economically struggling school districts in former industrial cities in a project called the ACCELA Alliance (Access to Critical Content and English Language Acquisition). This project was established in 2002 with federal funds to support in-service teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and researchers in understanding and responding to the changing nature of literacy and schooling in the context of rapidly changing technologies, economies, and demographics (New London Group, 1996).

The broad goal of this on-going partnership has been to provide sustained and reciprocal professional development to all participants by engaging in collaborative research regarding the academic literacy development of non-dominant students in today's urban schools. A key feature of this collaboration has been that teachers, doctoral students, and faculty have used SFL tools to design curricular interventions aligned with state standards and student investments and to collect and analyze case study data (e.g., student writing samples, curricular materials, video and audio transcripts of classroom interactions, and formal and informal interviews with participants). For example, second graders created a class blog to share and respond to each others' recounts; third graders analyzed the genre of "show your thinking" in Math as a way of preparing for the state exam; fourth graders analyzed the genre and register features in Puerto Rican children's literature to create their own narratives; and fifth graders researched the benefits of recess to make an argument for reinstating recess in letters to their principal (Gebhard, Habana Hafner, & Wright, 2004; Gebhard, Harman, & Seger, 2007; Gebhard et al., in press; Shin, Gebhard, & Seger, in press).

Similar to the findings of Schleppegrell and her colleagues, ACCELA case studies suggest that participants developed a deeper understanding of both disciplinary content knowledge and associated language practices, both of which are essential components of teachers' knowledge base. Teachers also were supported in negotiating the imposition of scripted approaches to instruction and the language demands of high-stakes testing while making space for students to read and write about topics that mattered to them and their communities. The data also indicate that SFL-based pedagogy supported emergent ELL writers in analyzing and producing more coherent and autonomous texts reflective of written as opposed to oral discourse (e.g., greater use of *and* as a coordinating conjunction, greater use of temporal and logical connectives, a greater ability to manage new and given information). While these findings are promising, they would be strengthened by mix-method studies that would couple qualitative with quantitative methods to analyze changes in a greater number of students' texts over time. In addition, more research is needed to analyze how both micro and macro institutional practices opened and/or shut down critical discursive spaces for participants

in the partnership (e.g., work intensification, institutional instability, unpredictable funding streams, and contradictory reform initiatives).

In sum, however, the work of the CPH and ACCELA, coupled with the robust scholarship of SFL scholars internationally (Unsworth, 2000), suggests that SFL-based pedagogy has the potential to support teachers and students in responding to the rapidly changing nature of schooling and ultimately the changing nature of work. Following the New London Group (1996), whose argument is rooted in a Hallidayan perspective of text and context dynamic, we argue that for non-dominant students to negotiate their way in a post-industrial world order (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996), they must be able to engage strategically and fluidly in the symbolic work of positioning and re-positioning themselves through their uses of texts. And students are better able to accomplish this task when they are in command of many, often hybrid, literacy practices and associated ways of knowing and being. Moreover, students are more likely to be prepared to engage in this kind of strategic semiotic work if they have been in classrooms with teachers who have a critical awareness of language and how to apprentice students to playing high-stakes language games (Wittgenstein, 1965).

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