

Innovating Selection and Use of Online Writing Resources for EFL Students: A Systemic Functional Linguistic Perspective

<https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v13i09.7910>

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Abstract—This study examined how teachers’ systemic functional linguistics (SFL)-based selection and use of online writing resources affect students’ perceptions of online resources and their writing performance. Through a case study of students from one academic writing course in an urban university in China, a primarily qualitative analysis of interviews with students, written artifacts, and students’ reflections revealed that such resources facilitated students’ understanding of writing as a meaning making process when selected and used by teachers based on SFL. Thus, students gained a principled perspective of the use of online resources and were able to harness pertinent knowledge from these resources when producing academic writing. The study concludes that the pedagogical use of online resources, when supported by SFL, can transform students’ perceptions of the value of online materials and improve their self-efficacy as academic writers.

Keywords—Online resources; EFL; meaning-making theory; academic writing

1 Introduction

In the field of English language teaching, modern technology is increasingly used in the classroom, including online resources [1] [2]. However, in the face of myriad online sources, many teachers have difficulty selecting appropriate learning resources for their students and using them effectively [3] [5]. As Hill, Song, and West [3] noted, “merely making resources available may have little impact on cognition or learning success ... instructors need to provide, and students need to develop, strategies to identify, interpret, and otherwise utilize available resources” (p. 93). This highlights the importance of teachers having appropriate pedagogical beliefs about language learning to guide their selection and use of online resources [4] [6] [7].

In English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) contexts, emphasis in academic writing is generally placed on advanced syntactic structures and vocabulary by teachers for a lack of effective teacher education [7] [8] [9]. That is, teachers generally teach using traditional textbooks, focusing on de-contextualized linguistic knowledge [9] and failing to select and use the most effective online resources for their students [4]. As a

result, many EFL students fail to communicate effectively in globalized communities, where academic writing has unique features of favoring both language forms and contextually appropriate meaning [10]. Indeed, academic writing should be optimally understood as the simultaneous interaction among context, meaning, and linguistic choices (i.e., a meaning-making process). Unfortunately, even among studies that explore the use of internet technology to better teach writing, the selection and use of online resources is limited to “computer-assisted classroom discussion, e-mail exchanges, and Web-based writing” (p. 162) [11]. To fill this research gap, this study explores how EFL teachers who act upon their meaning-making beliefs by selecting and using online materials affect students’ perceptions of online resources and their practices in the writing classroom.

2 Theoretical framework: SFL-based beliefs and practices in writing instruction

Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) theory highlights writing as a meaning-making process [12]. The uniqueness of using SFL as a meaning-making theory in writing classrooms particularly resides in its inclusion of multiple constructs that illuminate writing as a meaningful discourse [10] [13] [14]. In particular, the construct of genre demystifies writing as a sequential activity with a particular social purpose. For example, to inform readers, the generic structure of expository writing can be broken down into the sequence of introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion [15]. Within the matrix of genre, the construct of register, with its three variables, shows how writing as a meaningful unit is shaped by the context of situation (i.e., the immediate context to which the content of the writing relates). The three register variables are field (the on-going writing activities or topic), tenor (the audience), and the mode (the written language). In elaborating on the relationship between writing as a meaningful activity and register variables, SFL explains that the three meanings are generated and associated with the three register variables, constituting the content of writing. First, ideational meaning, a semantic representation of field, relates to writers’ inner or outer experiences with the world, which is roughly equivalent to the literal meaning of writing. Interpersonal meaning, a semantic manifestation of tenor, concerns writers’ evaluative stance or the way information is presented to readers. Textual meaning, a semantic representation of mode, focuses on organizing writers’ ideational and interpersonal meaning into an organic whole through writing. SFL also provides its own grammar mechanisms that clearly label how these three meanings are constructed in writing. For instance, participant and process are two key labels used to show the features of noun and verb phrases for ideational meaning. For interpersonal meaning, appraisal resources—graduation, attitude, and engagement are labels that reveal how words denote the semantic load, emotion, and source of information respectively [16]. Theme (i.e., the starting point of a sentence) and cohesive ties (e.g., conjunctions, synonyms, and antonyms) are labels that show the features of textual meaning [12].

Considerable research has been conducted on how teachers' SFL-based beliefs were acted upon in traditional classrooms. Such research has shown that students' appropriation of SFL benefited their school literacy. However, despite online resources being an engaging learning channel for students [1], there are a lack of studies that have examined the relationship between teachers' SFL-based beliefs and their use of online resources. As a result, empirical studies on SFL-based use of traditional teaching materials (e.g., teachers who design their own instructional materials) are provided to understand the potential of online resources [10] [13] [14]. For example, Schleppegrell [14] showed that SFL constructs enabled American elementary English language learners to understand the relationship between linguistic resources and meaning-making when reading texts and map their knowledge to writing, such as using conjunctions to indicate logical relationships and different types of reporting verbs to present evidence. More relevant to the EFL context of the current study, Yasuda [8] found that through semester-long SFL-based instruction in a Japanese university, EFL students demonstrated SFL awareness in using nominalized phrases (either adjectives or verbs) as their participants or themes and in creating an impersonal tone in summary writing. Similarly, Cheng [17] showed that first-year college students in Taiwan were more aware of the relationship between the context and meaning-making in their narratives because of SFL-based knowledge. For example, students' focus shifted from sentence accuracy to narrative meaning-making by demonstrating appropriate logical relationships, cohesive ties (e.g., conjunction words), and appraisal resources (e.g., emotive words and intensifiers).

Thus, empirical research demonstrates that teachers who incorporate SFL-based beliefs into teaching writing enable students to produce appropriate writing in terms of meaning and linguistic features. These studies have mainly centered on the use of traditional hardcopy textbooks, with teachers using their own knowledge to facilitate students' meaning-making. Based on this line of research and researchers' calls for effective selection and use of online resources for teaching writing [4], the current study is guided by the following research question: how did EFL teachers' SFL-based beliefs about selecting and using online resources affect their students' writing experiences (including their perceptions and practices)?

3 Methodology

3.1 Context and participants

This study was conducted in an English writing classroom at a university in China. The teacher had previously used SFL to support English language education in the United States (US) and witnessed substantial success among language learners. As such, the teacher had strong beliefs about SFL as a praxis for supporting language learners' literacy development. On returning from the US, the teacher began to teach college-level English writing in a similar way, focusing on developing students' meaning-making awareness and corresponding writing practices. During the course, the teacher was obligated to use a mandatory textbook, which did not include suffi-

cient information about writing as a meaning-making process. Thus, online resources were also utilized to support students' meaning-making and understanding of writing.

In accordance with the researcher's SFL-based beliefs, online resources were selected from multiple locations that were freely accessible to the teacher and students. All online resources were divided into the following topics by the teacher and assigned to students every two weeks: genre, register, three-meta meanings, and lexico-grammar. These SFL-related online resources included videos, readings on SFL constructs (e.g., academic essays in the students' first language and plain language-based texts on SFL), and relevant practices. Thus, his selection of online resources was well organized and based on language theory, in accordance with his beliefs about writing as a meaning-making process. In addition, relevant mediating activities (e.g., teacher-student interactions in the students' first language) were also conducted to better support students' understanding of the online resources. Feedback on students' writing was also provided in an indirect manner (e.g., do you think this paragraph is coherent enough?) to encourage students to regulate their writing based on SFL knowledge.

All students (N = 19) were born and raised in China, speaking Chinese as a first language, and were willing to be involved in this project. Four representative students were selected as focal students for in-depth exploration of the research questions, due to their willingness to be interviewed at any time during the semester. These four students were Amy, Sara, Kelly, and Julie (all pseudonyms), and they had not been exposed to SFL prior to the class. These students, similar to the rest of their classmates, believed that writing was about organizing ideas using advanced vocabulary and complex language structures [7].

3.2 Data collection and analysis

In addition to pre- and post-project surveys, data were collected during the semester through student interviews, reflections, and writing. Interviews were conducted monthly in the students' first language to elicit optimal data. Students' reflections on SFL-based readings were collected, with some written in English and others in Chinese. Qualitative data analysis was conducted [18], and students' interviews and reflections underwent a content analysis, during which interview transcripts and written reflections were read multiple times before codes and themes were identified. The research question and relevant literature were used to refine theme selection. Students' writing was analyzed based on the relationship between meaning-making units and linguistic features [12].

4 Findings

4.1 Students' perception of online resources in the writing classroom

Initially, students' perceptions of using online resources for writing in English were that such resources were limited. Prior to this project, 55% of students considered online resources as a means of learning vocabulary or grammar. As Amy said,

“For writing, I would only use them [online resources] for checking vocabulary use or maybe checking grammar rules.” Similarly, 35% of students considered online resources as a means of shaping ideas prior to drafting to check sample texts and related content. As Sara said, “I feel they [online resources] were intended for reading to come up with ideas or content to write.” Only 5% of students considered online resources to play a dual role in the writing process to learning grammar and vocabulary and to shape ideas. As Julie said, “The internet is everywhere ... using it to check grammar and vocabulary or to search for relevant information for a writing topic is a great option.” The remaining 5% of students did not consider online resources important. As Kelly said, “I only use online resources if I am told to by my instructor.” Thus, students did not have a clear idea of how to effectively link online resources with writing production prior to this project.

Through mediated SFL-based learning with online resources, students’ perceptions changed as they began to use online resources as a tool to improve and increase their knowledge of writing as a meaning-making process.

Amy: I feel online resources could be [useful for] more than just learning grammar or vocabulary. The information on SFL constructs and related practices really helped me improve my writing ... I have gained a new understanding of writing from a meaning-making perspective.

Kelly: I used to dismiss online resources as not important ... I think my negative attitude was because I had no idea how to use online resources ... Now, through reading these online resources on SFL, I feel that they could be very helpful.

Students’ original perceptions of online resources were that they were either unhelpful or lacked guiding principles. However, the SFL-based online resources that were presented to them in an accessible way enabled students to better understand writing and overcome their original perceptions of online resources.

Although students’ change in perceptions was not smooth, it was the result of their own interactions with mediated instruction in class and their own self-agency out of class. As Sara said:

Reading is one thing; but it was not completely understood. It was not until our teacher presented reading using easier language and our first language that I gained a clear understanding ...

Similarly, Julie felt that:

These materials were clearly organized and presented to us each time, but if I do not spend time reading them and thinking about them ... I may still have trouble understanding my teacher’s intention of having us read these resources.

Indeed, SFL was a difficult concept for students with no linguistic background to understand [19], but such challenges were met by their own self-investment and mediated in-class interactions.

In particular, one construct that related to online resources and facilitated change in students’ perceptions of online writing resources was register.

Sara: When writing an essay on the difference between spoken English and written English ... I did some research. The on-line readings were about the concept of register ... [which helped me understand] why there was differences between the two [types of writing] ... [The readings] helped me avoid using informal language in my

writing, but more importantly, [they] really helped me understand why such differences exist between spoken English and written English.

Amy: *About the construct of register, the online resources made me realize that words cannot be randomly used. Instead, writing has its own specific register; “lots of” and “get” can be avoided in academic writing.*

The construct of register from SFL enabled students to gain a critical understanding of language variation in different registers, such as with Sara, who had only used online writing resources to write plots. The construct also reminded students that the appropriateness of language use was valued, offering them contextual awareness of language use.

Students were also guided by online resources when learning about the three meta-meanings and related linguistic features in academic writing. Textual meaning was the first construct introduced to students through online reading materials. As Julie reflected:

I just feel these dimensions of knowledge are so useful ... I read the sample texts, not just for the content ... I also read the cohesive patterns and theme-rheme patterns ... and did practices online ... These online resources tell me how to effectively present information in my own writing. We might not find all of this information in the textbook. [My experience with online resources] was like being taught how to fish rather than giving me a fish.

With time, students (e.g., Julie) learning through online resources moved to more micro-dimensions of writing (e.g., textual meaning). Students felt that these online resources gave them transferable knowledge that could be used effectively in their own writing.

Students also gained a great understanding of writing content because of their learning of appraisal system through online resources. As Kelly said:

Kelly: *The academic paper in Chinese described how our writing interacts with our audience ... through its subcategories. In turn, when I read the sample texts, I realized how they can help me understand how to write objectively by not mixing personal opinions with facts.*

Thus, students gained an understanding of the importance of constructing appropriate interpersonal meaning in their writing.

Similarly, online resources provided information about ideational meaning; this included process types and participant selection, as well as logical connections between sentences, to help them overcome their original conceptions of online resources.

Amy: *I have never paid attention to my logical relationships or how the so-called logical relationship between Chinese and English is different; it reminds me of the explicit use of conjunction words in English writing.*

Sara: *I just wrote down thoughts and ensured the accuracy of my grammar most of time ... the online resources (i.e., an essay on process type) used statistics to guide us in understanding how particular process types should be used in academic writing.*

Online resources also facilitated students' understanding of appropriate projection of ideational meaning in their writing, which had been ignored in their previous learning experiences.

By the end of the semester, the students were taught how to synthesize all of the information learned in class in their own writing. With their improved knowledge, students had a more holistic understanding of SFL in relation to writing. As Sara said:

I really enjoyed the learning experience with the online resources ... they taught me how to effectively use information online ... The information I learned has provided me with effective learning strategies ... These constructs, through multiple layers and labels, provided guidance on how to write effectively.

With the students' gradual appropriation of central knowledge from SFL, they achieved a balanced understanding of crucial constructs and writing from an SFL-based meaning-making perspective. In post-semester interviews, the students all reported their perceptions of using online resources. Table 1 presents the changes in students' perceptions that the online readings, when guided by SFL, prepared them to effectively produce academic writing, evidenced by their unanimous positive attitude toward online SFL resources.

Table 1. Students' post-semester perceptions

Amy	Online resources can help deconstruct texts and regulate our writing in terms of content and linguistic features (lexico-grammar).	All four students believed that SFL-based online resources provided them with a holistic understanding of writing beyond sentential grammar or decontextualized use of vocabulary. They could use their SFL-based knowledge to deconstruct or construct texts.
Sara	Online resources show how contextually embedded linguistic resources participate in constructing meaning.	
Kelly	Online resources provide a key to understanding the myths of academic writing. Through learning with these online resources, users can produce similar quality writing.	
Julie	Online resources are as important as textbooks because they are used in line with certain principles. The appropriate use of online resources helps writers produce near-native texts.	

4.2 Students' application of SFL knowledge from online resources in their writing

Students' writing excerpts were selected to show changes in their writing practices. During the semester, students read and interacted with the teacher using SFL knowledge, and the teacher provided implicit feedback on students' writing using SFL terms, such as "this paragraph is not coherent at this time, please rework it". Students were encouraged to use strategies from online resources to improve their writing. By the end of the semester, students submitted a final version of four pieces of writing they had worked on in class. Initially, the students directly transferred their thoughts from Chinese into English, without considering the style of academic writing. However, in their final written pieces, they made progress on this. For example:

Julia's initial writing: *In high school, students act, most of the time, like passive receptacles for predigested ideas, and they learn things by rote ...*

Julia's final writing: *In high school, students act, most of the time, like passive receptacles for fixed content, and they learn knowledge by rote ...*

In her final writing piece, Julie realized the inappropriate choice of participants (i.e., the use of *things*) in her earlier writing and used a more concrete noun (i.e., *knowledge*) in her final writing. This participant was more suitable for an academic writing style.

Similarly, students changed nouns into verbs to make their academic writing more vigorous. For example:

Sara's initial writing: *There is a difference between spoken English and written English.*

Sara's final writing: *Spoken English and written English differ in terms of vocabulary, grammatical structure, and channel of communication.*

Sara modified the process of the sentence, making her claim more effective by changing *there is* (an existential process) to *differ* (a material process), which more vigorously demonstrated her claim.

In terms of logical relationship, there was also progress among students' writing. For example:

Amy's initial writing: *Compared to spoken English, written English demonstrates vigorous grammar and formal choice of words. Incomplete sentences are never used in writing.*

Amy's final writing: *Compared to spoken English, written English demonstrates a vigorous choice of words and structure. For instance, incomplete sentences are never used in writing.*

In her initial attempt, Amy directly translated her ideas into English without considering the logical features of English writing (i.e., the English language's preference for an explicit logical relationship). At the end of the semester, Amy used *for instance* to better show the logical relationship between the claim and the supporting evidence.

At the interpersonal level, students also demonstrated how to present information to their audience by hiding personal tone. For instance:

Kelly's initial writing: *However, in college ... Students are offered more freedom so that they can make arrangements for their spare time according to their own expectations for their future. Instead of passively following others' steps, students should find the study style that fits them best.*

Kelly's final writing: *However, in college ... Students are offered more freedom so that they can make arrangements for their spare time according to their own expectations for their future. Instead of passively following others' steps, students find the study style that fits them best.*

When supporting her claim, Kelly subconsciously inserted her personal comments, which might be due to her misuse of modal verbs and her lack of understanding of the difference between facts and personal comments. In her final writing, she removed the modal verb, creating a more objective statement.

At the textual level, students demonstrated the cohesive use of thematic patterns to construct fluent text. For example:

Julie's initial writing: *After graduating from high school and coming to university, many students find it hard to adjust since there are many differences between high school life and university life. There are three prominent differences, including the different methodologies applied, the different impacts parenting and schooling had and the flexibility of time.*

Julie's final writing: *After entering university, many Chinese students find it hard to adjust since high school life and university life in China are much different. Indeed, there are many distinctions existing between the two types of school lives in China. Among them, there are three prominent differences: teaching methodologies, parenting and schooling styles, and the flexibility of time.*

In the initial writing, Julie included background information and a thesis because it was the introduction of her essay. However, the relationship between the background information and the thesis was not smooth. In the final version of her essay, Julie intelligently used *among them* to start her thesis, which is a linear theme pattern (i.e., using part of the previous sentences to start a new sentence) and demonstrates lexical cohesion (i.e., repetition of words with similar meanings from earlier sentences), resulting in a more coherent organization of the section.

In sum, with implicit feedback from the instructor, the students were invested in harnessing their SFL-based knowledge from online resources to actively improve their writing during the semester. Their navigation of writing within their drafts illustrates their internalization of SFL-based knowledge from online resources.

5 Discussion

Unlike previous studies that primarily used internet-based technology as a platform for digital writing and ignored teachers' roles [11], this study focused on the relationship between teachers' roles and students' perceptions and practices in the writing classroom. With a focus on the teacher's use of online resources guided by his SFL-based teaching beliefs in an EFL writing classroom, this case study shows that students, through exposure to SFL-based teaching practices, gained a meaning-making perspective of the effectiveness of online resources for their writing. In addition, from the online resources students understood that there is a complex relationship among context, meaning, and linguistic features in academic writing. This finding illustrates the importance of the principled use of SFL-based online resources in EFL writing classrooms, compared to SFL-based writing instruction that only involves traditional textbooks and teacher mediation [13] [14]. More importantly, it has helped address the call to recognize the importance of teachers' role as "designers in development as a new way of bridging the gap between technology and pedagogy" (p. 494) [4], which allows students to gain transferable and effective knowledge applicable to their writing.

The study also shows that online resources related knowledge were mapped by students on to their writing. Students actively appropriated SFL-based knowledge from online resources, and used relevant internalized knowledge in their writing practices, ultimately leading to independent regulation of their writing. For instance, stu-

dents' original writing knowledge was limited (e.g., their emphasis on the use of advanced vocabulary or grammatical sentences). However, over the semester, they utilized online resources-based knowledge to improve their writing, which was characterized by appropriate use of noun phrases, verbs, impersonal tone, and cohesive mechanisms. This narrowed the distance between students' writing capabilities and the expectations of international academic communities, helping them gain the capital needed for entry into globalized academic communities [10] [20]. Compared to school-based or university-partnership designed SFL-based teaching [10], this finding illustrates the power of using SFL for writing instruction and learning and shows that online resources should be capitalized on by EFL teachers.

6 Conclusion and implications

This study, although limited to an EFL classroom, yielded two important findings. First, teachers' SFL-based beliefs on the use of online writing resources and related practices can transform students' perceptions of internet-based learning for in-class writing, especially when emphasis is placed on the principled selection of online resources and their role in developing students' awareness of writing as a meaning-making process. Second, students can actively apply their SFL-based knowledge from online resources to independently regulate their own writing in terms of content and linguistic features to ensure appropriate academic writing style. This study empirically shows the importance and effectiveness of incorporating SFL-based design and use of online resources in the EFL writing classroom.

Implications of this study include providing an SFL-based workshop for pre-service writing teachers to teach meaning-making beliefs about writing and using online resources accordingly. Given the heavy reliance on traditional hardcopy textbooks in many EFL classrooms, the role of online resources has often been ignored. The study points to the importance of including online resources in traditional classrooms to assist students in meeting academic challenges in this globalized English-language world.

7 Acknowledgment

This study is funded by National Social Science Foundation of China (17CYY019)

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Article submitted 30 October 2017. Resubmitted 08 February 2018. Final acceptance 10 February 2018.
Final version published as submitted by the author.