

THE FORUM

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Novice Teachers and Linguistics: Foregrounding the Functional

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■ This forum article describes a postgraduate certificate teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) program with a strong linguistics orientation and argues that such a program provides novice language teachers with knowledge and skills superior to those of programs which focus more on methodology and practicum experience and less on linguistic knowledge. Such programs are commendable, but they can be challenged in terms of the quality and usefulness of the linguistics training they impart to their students. The preservice postgraduate TESOL program described in this article foregrounds knowledge about language and has been developed in a linguistics department at a leading Australian university. It achieves tight coherence and integration between coursework and practical experience through a language-based theory of learning involving an orientation to language as a social resource and medium through which learning takes place. Two coursework units and a practicum have been designed, putting Halliday's systemic functional linguistics theory into practice, ensuring that preservice teachers are engaged with the complexities of language and communication through all aspects of the course in a way that instills confidence in their subject knowledge and teaching abilities. Graduates are thus both novice language teachers and linguistically informed reflective practitioners.

Teacher educators working on preservice postgraduate teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) programs have an immense task to perform. They are often working with career-switchers

who have little or no knowledge of and experience with the world of language teaching. These students' knowledge about language is tacit and is usually confined to their experiences as learners of their first language at school or perhaps a second or foreign language. Their knowledge about teaching is likewise heavily influenced by their historical engagements with formal educational settings, which Lortie (1975) describes as the apprenticeship of observation phenomenon, during which the average person spends up to 13,000 hours in direct contact with teachers by the time he or she leaves secondary school.

Against this sociohistorical backdrop, teacher educators are charged with transforming the everyday, commonsense understandings of language, language learning, and language teaching into a systematic, conceptual knowledge base. This knowledge base is generally held to inform understandings about what novice teachers need to know, how they should teach, and how they should learn to teach (Johnson, 2009), which in turn help them develop understandings of the variety of contexts in which language teaching occurs, the processes of language learning, the concept of language as something which can be taught as well as learned, and the particular educational experience of becoming a language teacher. In practice, most certificate-level preservice TESOL teacher education programs seek to develop the novices' competencies from an initial set of how-to skills, aimed at teaching the macro skills and knowledge about language, to competencies of a more cognitive nature, involving what is now commonly known as *reflective practice* (Farrell, 2007; Richards & Freeman, 1996). Novices in these programs are often engaged in a variety of classroom-related learning experiences focused on the preparation, delivery, and evaluation of language lessons, but which may or may not include an element of reflective practice.

Recently, there have been discussions about the relative merits of TESOL teacher education programs focusing, on the one hand, on compartmentalised knowledge and skills seeking to describe best practices for language teaching and, on the other, on the social practices and processes involved in growing into the life of a language teacher (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Richards, 1998). In this article we do not pursue these discussions at any length, yet we acknowledge that for novice language teachers an emphasis on both the product of good language teaching and the process of becoming a good language teacher is needed. We caution against following any approach that diminishes the centrality of language in the syllabus and argue that there needs to be a clear focus on developing teachers' understandings of the *meaning potential* of situated language use; that is, the notion that language is a resource for making meaning. It is this emphasis that we feel is highly productive for initial TESOL teacher

education programs, especially when integrated with teaching methodology, and that we highlight in this article.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The postgraduate certificate in TESOL program (henceforth PG Cert TESOL) is a recently revised version of a longstanding and popular program first run in the 1990s. It has always retained at its core a functional approach to teachers' understandings of language and the language needs of their learners. The preservice teachers are from a variety of educational, vocational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Eligibility requirements for the program are simply a recognised bachelor's degree in any field and satisfactory English proficiency (e.g., minimum IELTS 6.5). Students can elect to study on campus or in distance mode; enrolments can be full time (i.e., one semester to complete) or part time. This flexibility in delivery offers affordances for a range of learning experiences with a diverse student cohort, including a variety of web-based activities that bring together all learners, regardless of geographic proximity or mode of participation.

The PG Cert TESOL program comprises three units: (1) Linguistics and Language Teaching, (2) Language Teaching Methodologies, and (3) Practicum in TESOL. The Practicum is the final unit taken. More details of each of these units are provided later in this article, but here it is worth noting the profiles of the language learners the program's novice teachers are preparing to teach. Those learners are typically young adults studying English as a foreign language (EFL), (im)migrant adults studying English as a second language (ESL), or schoolchildren studying ESL. Graduates of our program are qualified to teach in many EFL contexts worldwide, in (im)migrant adult education run through community services providers, and in Australian public schools (provided the graduates also hold a recognised primary or secondary teaching qualification). Our program has had very positive outcomes as measured by student satisfaction surveys and employability. Indeed our philosophy of language learning and teaching is reinforced in the wider ESL community in Australia, where both (im)migrant and school curricula favour a functional approach. The graduates who work in EFL contexts are, we believe, better prepared than most to deal with grammar teaching, in particular, in a coherent and principled way.

A substantial number of the PG Cert TESOL graduates return to complete a diploma or master's degree in TESOL at our university. Indeed, one of the strengths of the certificate program is that it is

nested in a TESOL stream, both functionally and philosophically, and the progression through these different awards provides ongoing and coherent professional development. The diploma requires the study of four additional units: (1) Classroom, Curriculum and Context; (2) Language Testing and Evaluation; (3) Second Language Acquisition; and (4) Communicative Grammar. This latter course explores form and function in grammar and therefore serves to reinforce and extend what PG Cert TESOL graduates have studied in their Linguistics and Language Teaching unit. At the master's level, students take a further two units: (1) Genre, Discourse and Multimodality and (2) Research Methods in Language Study. The former again builds on certificate- and diploma-level understanding by broadening students' understanding of meaning-making by focusing beyond the lexicogrammatical level to a range of semiotic systems (e.g., images, actions) in different and mixed modes.

To summarise, the nested PG Cert TESOL program developed and taught by academics who once were English language teachers themselves has an academic pedigree not found in certificate programs offered through private language institutions. Moreover, unlike most other universities' TESOL offerings, the PG Cert TESOL program was born of linguistic expertise. Indeed, central to our program is a theory of grammar (i.e., systemic functional grammar) which forms part of a comprehensive theory of language (i.e., systemic functional linguistics).

LANGUAGE IN TEXT IN CONTEXT

Introducing functional grammar to novice language teachers is always an interesting process, for the idea that language is looked upon from different perspectives needs to be developed and the terrain mapped out, as do the key elements of the theory of systemic functional linguistics (SFL). In a traditional approach to teaching grammar, parts of speech are typically labeled and learned, then stretches of language such as phrases or sentences are parsed and labeled according to form. Language is viewed somewhat as an object, often disconnected from contexts of use, and functions, or meanings, are usually treated secondarily. By contrast, a key component of a theory of language in use is the principle that language occurs in texts, which are in turn inextricably linked to their social and cultural contexts.

What is critical in following an SFL approach is to introduce and demonstrate the relations between the concepts of text and context in a manner relevant for second language learners and then to make that relevance apparent to the novice teachers by way of links to

methodological questions. One needs to anticipate questions such as these: What use does this approach to language have for people learning and teaching a second language? Why can't we just look at the "usual" grammar of many course books? Why the complexity? These questions can be answered by referring to Halliday's (1977) claims that viewing language as a formal system of rules over viewing it as a functional resource with which to think about and act upon the world is unwarranted. Indeed, Halliday demonstrates that these are two complementary views of the same phenomenon; the latter resulting from individual experiences with language as something that connects people with the world during their development as social beings, and the former resulting from experiences at school with language as an object of study that people are enculturated to talk about. The former, language organised according to rules; the latter, language organised according to its functionality.

Context, thus, is important because it provides teachers with a way to highlight for learners, especially in classrooms involving a variety of cultural backgrounds (of learners and teachers in the here and now as well as the future), the differences that may exist between how something is done in one culture compared with another. This, of course, includes activity involving language, and it acknowledges that it is easier to understand what someone has said or written if you know something about that person's cultural backdrop. It also allows for a focus on the more immediate situation in which language is playing a part—what the speakers are doing—so that the different ways of saying something can be teased apart for teaching and learning. This involves an understanding of language choice, based on the function that the language will take in the particular social setting, which is an essential part of SFL theory. Different cultural and social contexts lead speakers and writers to choose differently from the repertoire of language that they have at their disposal. For example, the simple use (or misuse) of a modal verb is related to the cultural and social context in which the speaker is a part at that particular time. Thus, one might choose to say "I wonder if I could help you with that?" in one instance and "You wanna hand?" in another. Although this is a rather trite example, it demonstrates that an acknowledgement of the cultural and social context in which these two offers to help are made can help learners understand a little more about how modality functions to mediate our actions upon our world, thus paying due respect to both form and function, rather than a more one-sided approach to the form that a range of modal verbs takes. The former is a more ethnographic and learner-centred approach, including elements of descriptive, prescriptive, and productive language teaching; the latter can tend to dwell on the ascribing of rules—prescriptive teaching *in vacuo*.

In the PG Cert TESOL program, integration of the linguistics and methodologies units is achieved from the very beginning of the course. Demonstrations are given of how the use of SFL provides the teacher with a powerful tool with which to mediate her or his explanations of language and thus mediate learners' understandings of how to use the language they are in the process of learning. This tool is the bridge between context and text—between the sociocultural setting in which the speaker is conducting her or his activity and the language that is a part of that activity. The tool is Register, which gives the teacher the opportunity to unpack the context of language use and identify

- the field: what is going on in the activity,
- the tenor: who is taking part in the activity, and
- the mode: the part language plays in the activity.

Looked at individually, it is possible to identify, for example, the kinds of lexis that are relevant to the field, the kinds of interpersonal language that are appropriate for the tenor, and the kinds of textual features (say, cohesive devices) that are going to help make the spoken or written text coherent. Taken together, they provide rubrics for language teachers to plan their teaching around (be they spur-of-the-moment explanations or, indeed, whole lessons) and for language learners to sort out in their own minds where, when, and how language can be used to successfully communicate across social and cultural settings.

INTEGRATING KAT, KAL, AND KAS IN A PRESERVICE TESOL PROGRAM

A distinct advantage of working with a functional model of language is that it integrates well with an approach to language teaching that gives prominence to a language-based theory of learning. That is, just as language is seen as a resource from which people make choices in order to mean something to others, learning is seen as being first and foremost tied to the interactions between the learner and expert others. These interactions are, of course, enacted largely through language. Thus, we have a natural triadic relation between language, learning, and teaching. This relation was codified by systemic functional linguists and the educators with whom they were working several decades ago in Australia (see Martin, 2003). The result of this productive engagement was an approach to language teaching steeped in a theory of language and learning that has at its heart the notion that we not only learn language but learn through language in interaction with others (Halliday, 1993; Vygotsky, 1986).

What this means for preservice TESOL programs is that the possibility presents itself to integrate a methodology strand—knowledge about teaching (KAT), with a linguistics strand—knowledge about language (KAL), using a model termed the Teaching/Learning Cycle. Novice ESOL teachers are introduced to the notion that effective language teaching is based not on language-centred, learner-centred, or learning-centred principles (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), but on language learning-centred principles. A variety of scaffolding interaction patterns, as represented in the outer layer of the cycle illustrated in Figure 1, provide the impetus for text- and context-focused activities aimed at leading learners to closer approximations of the spoken or written texts.

In the PG Cert TESOL program, the Teaching/Learning Cycle is presented to novice teachers not as a lockstep approach, but as an organising principle. Once a firm understanding of the learner and her or his language-learning needs are established (KAS, or knowledge about students), the focus is on presenting language as part of a text in a relevant context. Choices based on methodology are made at each stage of the cycle. In a normal course of events, the first stage of the cycle,

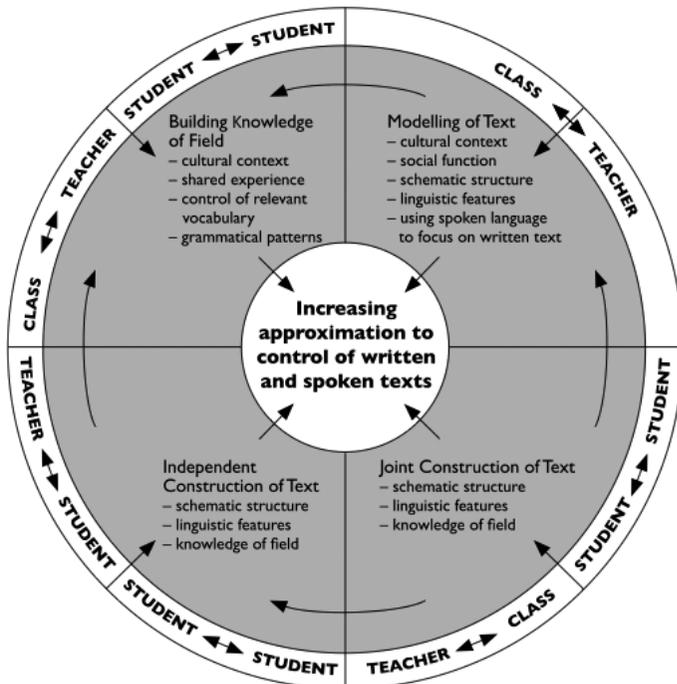


FIGURE 1. The Teaching/Learning Cycle.
 Source: Hammond, Burns, Joyce, Brosnan, & Gerot (1992, p. 17).

Building Knowledge of the Field, will involve a suite of activities aimed at establishing understandings of the context of culture; the context of situation; and the Register variables of Field, Tenor, and Mode, which are directly linked to the ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings (the *metafunctions*) contained in the text (see Figure 2). These three simultaneously encoded meanings found in every clause are concerned with, respectively, construing human experience, enacting social relationships, and organising the discursive flow of texts. The suite of activities is vast, and novice teachers are encouraged to focus on the development of the macro skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in an integrated manner, together with an explicit focus on vocabulary development at this stage. Subsequent stages of the cycle are linked to the ongoing development of learners' control over the text type in question, and systematic attention is paid to the linguistic features of the text that are significant in terms of the achievement of the communicative goals of those concerned with the production of the text.

For this approach to make any practical sense, novice TESOL practitioners undertake an intensive introduction to the lexicogrammar of

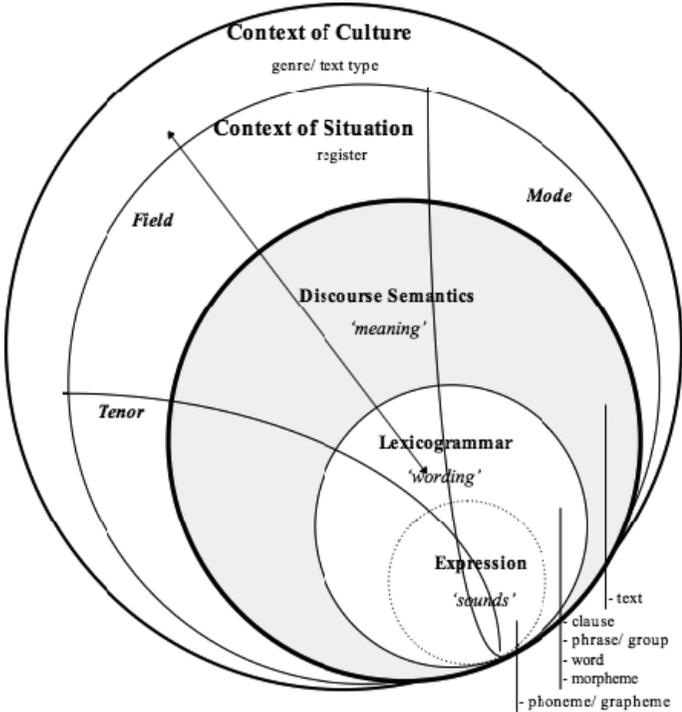


FIGURE 2. Halliday's Stratified Model of SFL. Based on: Martin & Matthiessen (1991, p. 359).

both spoken and written texts at the various grammatical ranks of the clause complex (or sentence), the clause, word groups and phrases, word units, and morphemes. Together with this focus on the elements of clause grammar, there is systematic coverage of the grammar that helps texts achieve cohesion as well as the nuts and bolts of phonology and graphology representing the expression level of the text. Halliday's stratified model of SFL has a role and a place for each of these levels, as shown in Figure 2, where inner levels realise and are realised by the adjacent outer level in a dialectical relationship.

WEAVING PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE INTO A PRESERVICE TESOL PROGRAM

In the PG Cert TESOL program, the metaphorical thread that weaves together the methodology and linguistics coursework units is the Practicum in TESOL. The Practicum occurs concurrently with the coursework units and provides a professional site in which the language-learning-teaching principles developed in the program are re-contextualised by systematically linking KAL and KAT to the kind of specific language teaching activities the novices will be expected to carry out independently with students. Moreover, practicum training and placements take account of KAS and different learner cohorts such as ESL schoolchildren and international students learning English for academic purposes. Time devoted to practicum-related activities is substantial. Novice teachers are socialised into the institutional practices of TESOL through a variety of task types promoting self-directed reflective teaching practices revolving around effective methodologies for text-based language teaching. The functional approach to language is intertwined with the language-based approach to teaching in the Practicum with the aim of realising Halliday's vision of a language-based theory of learning.

CONCLUSION

A postgraduate TESOL program bears great responsibility to adequately equip its preservice teachers with the skill set that will best enable them to carry out their duties as confident novice teachers. Many such programs choose to focus on methodology and practicum experience. In our view, these programs have a tendency to neglect the centrality of linguistics training that we hold to be vital in TESOL. This article has argued for postgraduate TESOL certificate programs to embrace the linguistics of a functional approach to understanding and teaching language and

thereby to provide an invaluable resource from which novice teachers can continually draw to develop their teaching practices.

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