

***Teaching and Researching ELLs' Disciplinary Literacies:  
SLF in Action in the Context of US School Reform***

Meg Gebhard. Routledge, 2019. 282 pp.

***Second Language Writing in Transitional Spaces:  
Teaching and Learning across Educational Contexts***

Lubie Grujicic-Alatraste & Cathryn Crosby Grundleger (Eds.)

University of Michigan Press, 2020. 272 pp.

Jacqueline Nenchin\*

Molloy College

**There** are two recent books that warrant the attention of New York ESOL teachers and teacher educators. The first one explores the use of pedagogy informed by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) in the context of school reform, and the second one investigates second language writing during school transitions. Both offer some vital insights and concrete suggestions for effective pedagogy that can improve the academic development and equitable progress of our English language learners (ELLs).

*Teaching and Researching ELLs' Disciplinary Literacies: SFL in Action in the Context of US School Reform* by Meg Gebhard (2019) offers a fresh critical view of recent research grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory in urban classrooms in the US. Her work suggests new and proven ways to use the resources of SFL in designing curriculum, instruction, and assessments for students, and in maximizing their cultural and linguistic resources. She provides readers with insight into teacher voices, curriculum, student work, and guiding questions for carrying out action research. In her meticulously organized nine chapters, readers can follow the road map to further research and educational change that Gebhard has set before them. This book makes a significant contribution to the repertoire of teacher educators and K-12 educators interested in improving instruction and equity for English language learners.

The chapters are organized with the intent of emulating the major steps associated with action research. The first three chapters introduce readers to Gebhard, her six guiding principles, and SFL and its connection to equity in education. In Chapter 1, Gebhard identifies her interests and resources, including her disciplinary and linguistic expertise from her own experiences in public school to her experience as a teacher there, then as a doctoral student, and finally as a teacher educator. She also introduces her critical approach to understanding language, learning, and the changing dynamic of US society and education. In Chapter 2, she describes her collaborative work with pre-service teachers in an education master's program based on a case study involving a text written by a multilingual immigrant of color and the

---

\*Corresponding author: jnenchin@molloy.edu

challenges that the student faces. Chapter 3 presents an outstanding and clear explication of the similarities and differences among the three major paradigms on grammar in the teaching and learning of languages and literature in school: Behaviorist (Skinner), Psycholinguistic (Chomsky and Krashen), and Social Semiotic (Halliday, Hasan, Vygotsky, Fairclough). The strength of this chapter is Gebhard's ability to explicate the features of each paradigm succinctly and without oversimplification. She also summarizes them in Table 3.5, so readers can easily reference the differences among them.

The next chapters build on the content of previous chapters to present Halliday's functional model of text and context dynamics in conjunction with teacher use in the classroom. In Chapter 4, Gebhard presents analyses of authentic texts written by students to introduce the SFL concepts of context of culture, context of situation, genre, and register. The chapter also provides instructions for teachers in how to use this knowledge to design curriculum, instruction, and assessments. She describes three long-term US initiatives that have proven the benefits of SFL-informed practices: (a) the California History Project and the Language and Meaning project, (b) the partnership between Boston College and Russell Elementary School, and (c) the ACCELA (Access to Critical Content and Language Acquisition) Alliance (involving a focus on SFL and action research). Chapter 5 presents work on registers in connection with the ACCELA teachers' research projects to show how teachers used SFL to help students understand and master the writing genres found in grades K-12. A strength of this and other chapters is that at the end of the chapter she provides a section called Praxis, which interprets how teachers can use this information in their own schools and classrooms.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 address the leading federal and state mandates on school reform and legislation. Chapter 6 on policies and practices provides an overview of the federal and state laws conceived to protect and support students' civil rights regarding bilingual and ESL education. She also discusses the WIDA Consortium, which stands for World Class Instructional Design and Assessment Consortium, and its role in supporting teachers in dealing with new and ever-changing state and federal laws. Chapter 7 on changing conceptions of equity also has a similar emphasis on some specific legislation such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the practice of high stakes testing that is intended to evaluate not only students but also their teachers. A strong point of this chapter is Gebhard's explanation of the unfortunate unintended consequences of these reforms and the ways in which teachers and future teachers can deal with them by collecting and analyzing data on their effects on students. In Chapter 8 "Placing the Education of ELLs in a Historic, Economic, and Political Context," she explores public education in the US over the last century, delineating the two conflicting conceptions of progressive education. Gebhard argues that these conceptions do not always benefit English language learners despite the original intent. Her conclusions are that school reformers have often lacked "a well-articulated understanding of what language is, how language practices shape the development of subject-matter knowledge, and how approaches to teaching literacy are implicated in undemocratic learning outcomes" (2019, p. 234).

In the final chapter, Gebhard together with Kathryn Accurso and a secondary teacher Grace Harris report on their collaboration on a project in a school failing to achieve the state-required objectives. Harris committed to changing her teaching to help the students, who were all endangered and on a weak track to finishing school. As in New York State, these Massachusetts students were required to take high stakes exams in ELA, math, and science, after only a year of English instruction. Together, the three developed a plan to design and implement literacy instruction using the SFL tools for scaffolding. They detail a case study of an immigrant student from Guatemala named Valencia and her writing over the course of the study. The chapter's purpose is to illustrate how the theoretical concepts, teaching practices, and measurable parts of student learning come together for student success. As it is the final chapter, Gebhard (2019) also includes guidance for teachers to emulate the work to support their multilingual students through targeted SFL-informed language instruction.

Transitions in educational contexts present a number of challenges that educators and students grapple with across the spectrum from preschool through graduate school. A new anthology that can assist teachers in their pedagogy during times of transitions for L2 students is *Second Language Writing in Transitional Spaces: Teaching and Learning across Educational Contexts* (2020) by Lubie Grujicic-Alatrسته and Cathryn Crosby Grundleger. The editors have compiled contributions from ten authors and groups of authors that provide valuable perspectives on teaching second language writing at crucial times in students' journey through their schooling. Second language writing remains an area that is under-researched and often poorly understood by the teachers who have to teach it, especially as writing demands increase and change as students advance. This book examines these transitional periods with regard to pedagogy, curriculum, writing genres, textbooks, and policies, and it provides teachers not only with important insights but also with practical suggestions for implementation in their classrooms that will benefit second language writers.

There is often a disconnect between practitioners and research, but *Second Language Writing in Transitional Spaces* seeks to overcome that issue with its choice of teacher research describing classroom practice and other pertinent situations affecting it. Chapter 1 addresses issues with "Writing Instruction across the Elementary School/Middle School Divide" by Wong, Ober, and Meadows, examining a case study of an ESL teacher's challenges, including the discontinuity among elementary, middle school, and ESL curriculum, and the strategies on these levels, such as writer's workshop and vertical and horizontal collaboration among ESL and content teachers across both schools. This research underscores the need for both vertical (across grades) and horizontal (ESL and non-ESL) collaboration among teachers for ELLs' success during the transition from elementary to middle school. In Chapter 2, based on her study of three students, Grundleger describes ways to transition K-2 English learners to school writing using the Learning Experience Approach (LEA), which she found was effective in L2 writing development. One of the strengths of this chapter is that the appendix gives a breakdown of how to use the LEA for teachers to follow. In the third chapter "Genre-Based Pedagogy as an Approach to Second Language Writing," de Oliveira et al. explain the use of genre-pedagogy and the Teaching-Learning Cycle (TLC) as a framework for second language writing instruction (Martin, 2009) that has facilitated successful writing instruction primarily in Australia but also here. The authors provide a graphic representation of the TLC and a developmental trajectory and learner pathway of writing genres across K-12 schooling. Of particular note is Table 3.1, which shows genre families, genres, purposes, stages, and language features; this table can help teachers identify the type of writing their students have to do and the purpose and language features of each type.

Other chapters focus on preservice teacher education, student perspectives, and textbooks that affect educational transitions. For instance, Chapter 4 "Reflection Literacy in Pre-service Language Teacher Education: Critical SFL Practice with Multilingual Youth" shifts the focus to ongoing research that Harman et al. were conducting on the use of functional language resources such as appraisal theory and arts-based methods of inquiry such as storytelling and photography in pre-service L2 teacher training in a combined teacher and youth program. The authors found that reflective writing led to a deepening of insights into preservice teachers' pedagogy and the development of a multimodal curriculum for multilingual learners, thereby better preparing preservice teachers for their transition to teaching. In Chapter 7, Grujicic-Alatrسته examines high school students' perspectives on the types of written genres represented on college admissions tests. This exploratory study provides important perspectives on the disconnect between high school writing and the demands of college writing for L2 writers in an urban setting. For example, she found that students knew there was a disconnect between high school and college writing and that an intake questionnaire can help to reduce professors' biases and false expectations about what students bring with them from their previous writing. In Chapter 9, Warden focuses on the transitions that new teachers make from being writers to L2 teachers. Her case study findings suggest the need for more reflection, professional development, and support from teacher

educators. In Chapter 10, Hirvela focuses on the ways argumentation is represented in L1 and L2 writing textbooks in K-16 English education. He points to areas of concern, such as the confusion of the terms “persuasion” and “argument” and the different approaches to the treatment of argumentative writing in L2 writing textbooks. Given the importance of argumentation on the high school and college levels, Hirvela’s analysis has significant implications for K-16 transitions and helps teachers to realize the need to look critically at how textbooks address text types (genres) of writing across transitional spaces.

*Second Language Writing in Transitional Spaces: Teaching and Learning across Education Contexts* also covers what is arguably the most crucial transition -- from high school to college writing in Chapters 5, 6, and 8. In “Policies Impacting Multilingual Writers from High School to Higher Education A Guide for Inquiry across Contexts,” Bunch and Schlamon found a disconnect between students’ coursework, their future profession’s requirements, and ESL and English coursework on the community-college level. “Theoretical and Textual Divides between High School Teachers and College Faculty” by Ruecker identifies a conflict between what high school teachers believe about L2 students’ needs and what college teachers believe as students transition to college. Cox, in her chapter “Multilingual Writers, Identity, and Assignment Design in First-Year Composition,” discusses her sequence of writing assignments that help students form their identities as college students while affirming their multilingual and multicultural backgrounds during the transitional period from high school to college. A strength of this chapter is the clear presentation of the assignment sequence for a multilingual section of college composition; it clearly describes the assignment, the target audience, identities constructed by the assignment, and the educator’s hope for each assignment.

Both books have some drawbacks. The main drawback of Gebhard’s book is the difficulty that many teachers find in understanding grammar in general and SFL in particular. Though she makes SFL and genre theory accessible to teachers by her clear and explicit explanations, the book is still challenging for teachers not trained in SFL. Even the more familiar traditional view of grammar is a stumbling block for so many teachers and teacher candidates, who at best receive one semester of grammar content in their master’s or bachelor’s program. Nonetheless, Gebhard presents valuable insights and essential tools for ESOL teachers willing to learn more about language. Grujicic-Alatriste and Grundleger’s volume presents valuable information from the collection of researchers that may not benefit teachers as much as needed. For example, in the conclusion of Chapter 4, an important chapter on social equity, Harman et al. suggest the development of a set of sequenced curricular modules. This might be difficult for teachers to implement based on the information available. Each chapter would benefit from a section that is specifically devoted to praxis. While each chapter does have a section with implications for teaching, the authors could present more information on the practical ways in which teachers can use the research.

Both books under review have strengths that far outweigh any insufficiencies. An important strength of *Teaching and Researching ELLs’ Disciplinary Literacies* is the exciting addition of a praxis section to the end of each chapter that explores the practice of teaching and researching disciplinary literacy development. Readers learn concrete ways to conduct their own research and improve their own pedagogy. For example, in chapter 4, the praxis section contains help for people wanting to plan a curricular unit using her expanded teaching and learning cycle (TLC). Gebhard explains how teachers can identify and analyze model texts for their students to follow and how they can develop targeted instructional materials that will scaffold the content area literacy instruction. She offers task directions and topics for discussion and recommends collaboration with others. She also gives a step-by-step guide that includes doing a genre and register analysis and asking teachers to make a commitment to study at least some SFL concepts so that they can better understand texts and the needs of their students. She provides multiple suggestions for analyzing the passages and identifying genre stages throughout, and offers help in how to select a text, how long that text should be, and how teachers should break the text into clauses and identify how (a) ideas and experiences are constructed, (b) social roles are enacted, and (c) the flow of information is managed. Though the strengths of individual chapters are explicated above, a critical strength of *Second*

*Language Writing in Transitional Spaces* as a whole is its scope across the language learning continuum with its foundation grounded in research and innovative pedagogical practices for second language writing. Rose and Martin (2012) have written extensively on the transitions from reading and writing in the primary to the secondary grades and beyond. While their work explores the context of Australian education, it nonetheless has application beyond its national borders. Their work explicating writing across the school curriculum supports the research in the anthology under review.

I strongly recommend both books to TESOL graduate programs and all ESOL teachers. Gebhard's book is a monument to the little-recognized work of SFL education researchers in the US and to struggling teachers dissatisfied with the status quo and seeking concrete language-based ways to help their students. Most importantly, Gebhard reminds teachers of Halliday's key concept that "as a child learns, he learns through language" (2009, p. 198), so she "calls for greater attention to be paid to social semiotic theories of language, learning, and social change" (2019, p. 234) in teacher education and praxis. She argues convincingly that if teachers devote more time to learning about and teaching language, they can empower their language learners and help them receive a more equitable education. In their anthology *Second Language Writing in Transitional Spaces: Teaching and Learning across Educational Contexts*, the editors Lubie Grujicic-Alatrisme and Cathryn Crosby Grundleger have provided teachers on all educational levels with some important perspectives and approaches that can help them ease L2 students through all transitions in schooling. A tome on writing in transitional spaces in American education is a welcome addition offering research-based approaches to writing pedagogy and fresh views on critical periods of change. This is an essential resource for teachers on all levels. Both books provide valuable contributions to the TESOL field and are must-read choices for ESOL educators in New York and beyond.

---

Jacqueline Nenchin holds a Ph.D. in linguistics from Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, and is a professor in the Graduate TESOL Program and the Department of English at Molloy College in Rockville Center, NY.

## References

- Gebhard, M. (2019). *Teaching and researching ELLs' disciplinary literacies: Systemic functional linguistics in action in the context of U.S. school reform*. UK: Routledge.
- Grujicic-Alatrisme, L., & Crosby Grundleger, C. (Eds.). (2020). *Second language writing in transitional spaces: Teaching and learning across educational contexts*. Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (2009) Language as social semiotic (pp. 169-201). *Language and Society*. In J. J. Webster (Ed.), *Collected Works of M. A.K. Halliday* (Vol. 10). London: Continuum. (Reprinted from *LACUS Forum 1*, 1975, published by the Linguistics Association of Canada and the US).
- Martin, J. R. (2009). Genre and language learning: A social semiotic perspective. *Linguistics and Education* 20, 10-21. doi:10.1016/j.linged.2009.01.003
- Rose, D., & Martin, J. (2012). *Learning to write, reading to learn: Genre, knowledge, and pedagogy in the Sydney School*. Bristol, CT: Equinox.

