REIMAGINING THE TEACHING OF SYNTAX IN TESOL P-12 TEACHER PREPARATION

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We revise our M.S.Ed. TESOL PreK-12 (P-12) program regularly to ensure it meets the needs of teachers and adheres to current state regulations. Since P-12 teachers of English as a New Language (ENL) in New York State are expected to learn phonology/ phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, discourse, and pragmatics as they pertain to "English Language Learners' oracy and literacy development" (NYS: ESOL Test Framework, p. 6), we include pedagogical applications of each topic in our introductory linguistics course.

Field experiences help teachers make connections between, for instance, sound-spelling correspondence and second language and literacy development, or morphology and teaching academic vocabulary. However, disconnects persist in the study of syntax, where references to Chomsky's earlier theoretical research are still prominent, even in pedagogically-oriented linguistics textbooks. I propose a pragmatic approach to teaching syntax based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). SFL views language structure as inextricably linked to textual, relational, and experiential functions, and uses it as a powerful meaning-making resource for teaching and learning disciplinary literacies in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.

Theoretical linguistics requires that teachers learn technical labels and abstract schemata. However, our goal is not for teachers to learn complex systems of linguistic analysis, but rather to be able to explain to learners how the language works in real settings. Therefore, a pragmatic approach to teaching syntax would do the following: (a) rely on applied research; (b) use inductive methods that guide teachers to draw on existing tacit knowledge to discover the grammar system; (c) employ simpler labels for word and phrase classes and sentence structures; and (d) limit the curriculum to a core of sentence structures and discourse patterns most relevant to discipline-specific language.

Psycholinguistics theory and related pedagogies introduced groundbreaking insights into language learning, but they have also been critiqued for ascribing too much responsibility to the learner, while failing to hold schools and communities accountable for providing ELLs with an equitable education (Gebhard, 2019). In addition, conversational varieties of home language(s) acquired by L1 learners differ from dense, abstract, specialized academic literacies. Evidence suggests such domain-specific language is best learned when, in addition to existing literacy strategies, teachers and students "deconstruct[ing] and construct[ing] texts ... to make linguistic ... and disciplinary know-how readily available" (Gebhard, 2019, p. 261). The kinds of questions asked when deconstructing texts might include: What language choices express characters' attitudes in a work of fiction? How do specific words and phrases reflect scientific "objectivity" or degrees of probability? How does the language of a television broadcast shape social identities or signal ideologies and judgments (Gebhard, 2019, p. 58-59)?

A focus on decontextualized syntax also fails to equip students to become critically aware of

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language choices. The same passive voice used in science and social studies to "foreground" phenomena can also be used to hide agency and deny responsibility, such as "Toxic chemicals *were released* into the waterways," or rewrite historical narrative, as in "Women *were given* the vote" versus "Women *fought* for the vote" (as cited in Gebhard, 2019). Gebhard (2019) cites a study where two English learners composed a letter to government officials about potential environmental impacts of a local bat disease, while learning about concept development and textual cohesion. The agency wrote them back, and the students used this same metalanguage to critique the poorly written response and the discouraging message it communicated to them as engaged citizens.

ENL schoolteachers have been encouraged to teach content literacy through strategies Fang (2006, p. 516) calls: (a) *"fluency-oriented"* (e.g., chunking text, repeated reading, sentence or paragraph frames); and (b) *cognitive-metacognitive"* (e.g., prediction, inferencing, think-alouds). As vital as these are to literacy development, ELLs also need explicit teaching of complex structures that can obscure semantic relationships (Fang, 2006). For example, academic discourses frequently use complex noun phrases with pre- and post-modifiers around the core noun. "A tornado is *a rapidly whirling, funnel-shaped cloud that reaches down from a storm cloud to touch Earth's surface*" (Fang, 2006, p. 501). Students can unpack complex noun structure by learning to identify the determiner, core noun, and surrounding modifiers.

> **Determiner:** "a"
> **Pre-modifiers:** "rapidly whirling, funnel-shaped"
> **Core noun:** "cloud"
> **Post-Modifier:** "that reaches down from a storm cloud to touch the Earth's surface"

Students can also use shorter sentences —"A tornado is a kind of cloud. It is shaped like a funnel and moves very quickly. It reaches down from a storm cloud to touch Earth's surface"— to construct denser noun phrases (Fang, 2006, p. 501).

Word-level nominalization is another example; it transforms process verbs and concrete nouns into abstract nouns (e.g., "divide" / "division;" "desert" / "desertification"). However, nominalization also occurs across sentences as a cohesive device (Fang, 2006). In the excerpt below, the noun phrase *this situation* refers to multiple earlier observations (italicized). Teachers can guide students' awareness by gradually reading the text and building meaning as new information is revealed, while also noticing lexical and grammatical connections and to what they refer:

> In some places, the two high tides and two low tides are easy to observe each day. *But in other places, the range between the water levels is less dramatic. One set of tides may even be so minimal that there appears to be only one high tide and one low tide per day.* **This situation** is common along the coasts of Texas and Western Florida, due to the gradual slope of the ocean floor in the Gulf of Mexico (p. 500).

Form-function discussions should not be limited to proficient or older ELLs/MLLs, as even very young children can learn the meaning of complex syntax with age-appropriate supports. Teaching syntax as a pragmatic, integrated learning tool across the curriculum and grade span has the potential of increasing curricular and instructional rigor for ELLs/MLLs.

Finally, in contrast to other decontextualized approaches to the teaching of grammar, SFL insists that language form is only ultimately understandable as it is integrated with meaning and context, intention, and relationship—and used for a range of authentic purposes. In one study, English learners who were about to lose recess to make more time for test preparation each decided to write the principal a persuasive letter to ask for recess to be restored (Gebhard, 2019). In the process of composing with their teacher, they deconstructed effective grammatical forms of persuasive language, presented arguments

that included research on recess and learning, and negotiated to trim time from other activities. The principal was so impressed with their writing that he changed his mind (Gebhard, 2019).

Given the challenges facing P-12 ELLs/ MLLs in accessing the languages of disciplinary literacies, and the urgent social justice implications, we believe integrating SFL principles and practices into linguistics will broaden our foundations with sociohistorical and critical perspectives and equip teachers to support learners in more inclusive and empowering ways.

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