

# Teaching Essay-Writing from an ‘Appliable’ Linguistics Model

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*This paper is humbly dedicated to the memory of Michael Halliday, who has recently parted to play around with the language of Heavens.*

## Abstract

In the last decades one of the main concerns of applied linguistics has been the analysis of students’ written productions (Christie 1999). This has led linguists to try different methodologies in order to teach students to improve the quality of their written productions (Schleppegrell 2000, Jenkins & Pico 2006, Whittaker & Lövestedt 2017). This paper focuses on the implementation of a recent methodology applied to teaching essay-writing at secondary, tertiary and university levels, with the aim of widening the scope of students’ registerial cartography (Matthiessen 2013). The paper explores the implementation of the Learning-to-Write-Reading-to-Learn cycle model (Rose & Martin 2012) with all-level students. The model has proved to be one of the dimensions in which Systemic Functional Linguistics can be deemed an ‘appliable’ theory (Halliday 2010:128). This paper reports the implementation of this model, which has resulted in students’ progress from the deconstruction of sample texts of argumentative registers to independent writing in terms of the stages to successful writing. It will be shown that the teaching of writing from this genre perspective contributes to students’ awareness of paragraph organisation, better grammatical and lexical cohesion, general coherence and more thoughtful choices in terms of the intended audience and purpose of the task.

*Educational linguistics is concerned with texts instantiating all registers enabling [students] to expand their personal repertoires.*  
 (Matthiessen 2009:39)

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## 1. Introduction

Although there is now a long tradition of analysis and pedagogy of the genre perspective (Bazerman 1988, Berkenkotter & Huckin 1995), in the last decades there has been an increasing concern of applied linguists for the design of new approaches to teaching writing. One such methodology is the Learning-to-Write-Reading-to-Learn cycle model in its different versions (Rothery 1994, Martin 1999, Martin & Rose 2005, Martin & Rose 2008, Rose & Martin 2012). This paper reports the implementation of this model to the teaching of essay-writing to students in the final year of secondary school and the first year at university. The paper develops in the following way: section 2 makes a very succinct summary of the theoretical model. Section 3 gives some details of the application of the model to the teaching of essay-writing and section 4 analyses two samples of the students' productions at their independent stage. The paper closes with some concluding remarks.

## 2. Theoretical Model

The origins of the genre pedagogy's development within Systemic Functional Linguistics (Painter & Martin 1986) focused on the recognition of functional features of different genres that students were expected to produce. This was carried out through a comparative analysis of different texts dealing with the same field (Halliday 1985). Originally, only two generic terms were familiar to primary-school teachers and students in Australia, where the first projects started. These were *story* and *essay*. Later further generic terms were identified, together with some of their features (Table 1).

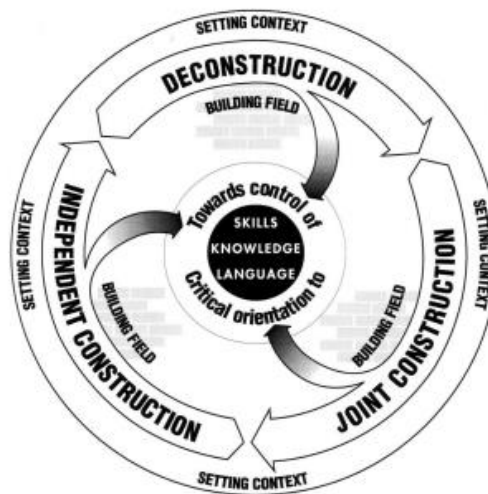
	Genre	Purpose	Stages
Stories	Recount	Recounting events	Orientation
			Record of events
	Narrative	Resolving a complication	Orientation
			Complication
			Resolution
Factual texts	Description	Describing things	Orientation
			Description
	Report	Classifying and describing things	Classification
			Description
	Explanation	Explaining sequences of events	Phenomenon
		Explanation	
Arguments	Procedure	How to do an activity	Purpose
			Equipment
			Steps
	Exposition	Arguing for a point of view	Thesis
			Arguments
			Reiteration
	Discussion	Discussing points of view	Issue
			Sides
Resolution			

**Table 1:** First genres identified by teachers and students

For an overt teaching of writing within a curriculum of genre, a pedagogy called the teaching-learning cycle was designed (Rothery 1994). The cycle (see Figure 1) starts with a Deconstruction stage, wherein the expected features of samples of texts of the genre to be taught are overtly explained. At this stage, students are guided to identify the organisation, purpose and stages of the genre being taught, using the terminology in Table 1. After deconstructing the text, a stage of Joint Construction follows. At this point, both teacher and students together embark on the production of a new text of the genre under study. This text is also critically analysed and enhanced collaboratively. A final stage of Independent Construction succeeds, in which students

produce their own text independently.

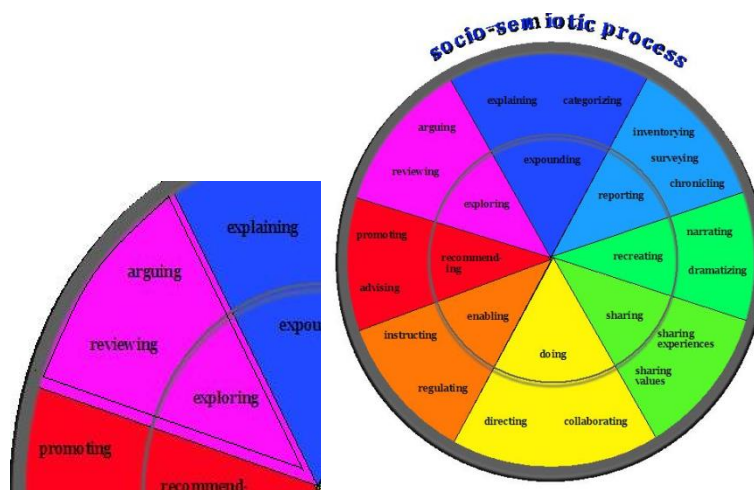
This model has proved to improve the quality of students' productions considerably. In the following section, the implementation of the model for the teaching of essay writing in secondary, tertiary and university levels in Argentina is summarised.



**Figure 1:** The Teaching-Learning Cycle (Rothery 1994)

### 3. Teaching Essay-Writing

Essays are within the arguing genres that make up the registerial cartography later designed by Matthiessen (2013). They have been defined as depersonalised texts wherein a thesis is developed supported by a limited number of arguments. (Matthiessen 2009:57).



**Figure 2:** The Registerial Cartography (Matthiessen 2013)

In essays, a thesis is an arguable statement expected to be impersonally constructed and followed by a limited number of arguments. In ensuing paragraphs, each of these arguments is produced in the form of a topic sentence, which is in turn followed by a supporting sentence wherein the point to be made is clearly elaborated so as to convince the prospective reader of the writer's stance.

Among the lexico-grammatical features of well-written essays are the inter- and intra-paragraph connectors and the pervasive use of grammatical metaphors, which in turn leads to a high level of lexical density. Connectors are used to bind ideas in a logical way and make essays more reader-friendly; Connectors contribute to the logical codification and interpretation of statements and sequencing and organisation of arguments and supporting ideas. Grammatical metaphors, originally introduced by Halliday, are devices fully exploited in academic texts in general and essays in particular. A grammatical metaphor consists of the transcategorisation of certain lexical and functional categories, which allows them to pack plenty of information in a grammatical group, which can be referred to as a seemingly unquestionable statement (see

Table 2).

Congruent:	Metaphorical:			
	Circumstance	Process	Quality	Thing
Quality: <i>unstable</i>				1 <i>instability</i>
Process: <i>absorb</i>			3 <i>absorptive</i>	2 <i>absorption</i>
Circumst.: <i>instead of</i>		6 <i>replaces</i>	5 <i>alternative</i>	4 <i>replacement</i>
Relator: <i>because</i>	10 <i>because of</i>	9 <i>causes</i>	8 <i>consequent</i>	7 <i>cause</i>

**Table 2:** Domains of Grammatical Metaphors (Adapted from Halliday & Matthiessen 1999:245)

Table 2 summarises some of the most frequent domains of grammatical metaphors with examples of such transcategorisations. For example, in the title from a recent academic article appears the nominal group *instability in gas absorption* (Skurygin & Poroyko 2016). A more congruent – or less metaphorical – realisation of the four-word nominal group would have been the nine-word clause-complex *gas is absorbed and this is an unstable process*. The grammatical metaphors used in the title of the research article abovementioned involve the transcategorisations from the adjective *unstable* and the verb *absorb* to the nouns *instability* and *absorption*, respectively. As can be seen, grammatical metaphors have allowed the author of the article to compress a nine-word clause-complex into a four-word nominal group. This packing of information results in a high level of lexical density. Lexical density can be defined as the number of lexical or content words divided by the total number of words in a certain expression. This has been calculated for the example given in its congruent and metaphorical realisations in Table 3, which shows the increase of lexical density from 44 % in its more congruent form to 75 % in the metaphorical variant.

	N° Lexical Words	N° Words	Lexical Density
Clause-complex	4	9	44 %
Nominal group	3	4	75 %

**Table 3:** Comparison of Lexical Density in 2 expressions

For lack of space, the stage of Joint Construction is not dealt with in this paper. The following section is devoted to the analysis of (parts of) essays produced by students in the independent stage.

#### 4. Independent Construction of Essays

Figure 3 exhibits a writing task given to different groups of students in the independent stage. Samples of the written production<sup>1</sup> by a couple of students are analysed below. We will focus on a paragraph by a student in the last year of secondary school (Figure 4) and an entire essay by a first-year university student (Figure 5).

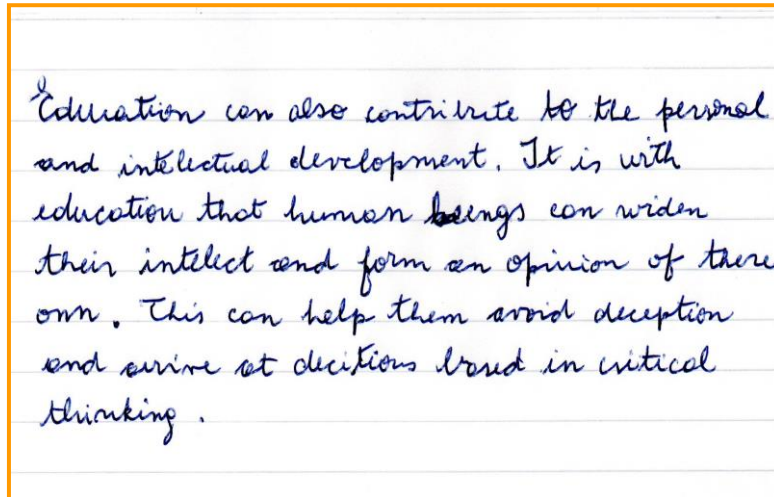
- You have had a discussion in your class on the importance of education. Among the topics raised are individual benefits, such as more intelligent persons and social mobility; and more general benefits, such as the economy or society itself. Your teacher has asked you to write an essay on the topic. The best essay will be published in the school magazine.
- Write your **essay**.

**Figure 3:** Writing Task

One of the students of the last year of the secondary school produced a very good essay, whose third paragraph is reproduced in Figure 4 below. Let us analyse here some of the reasons that have made this paragraph a high-quality one. To begin with, in the paragraph there is a clear organisation. It begins with an

<sup>1</sup> No mistakes in the students' production were corrected at this point.

effective topic sentence, which is followed by two supporting sentences.



**Figure 4:** Sample Paragraph Answer

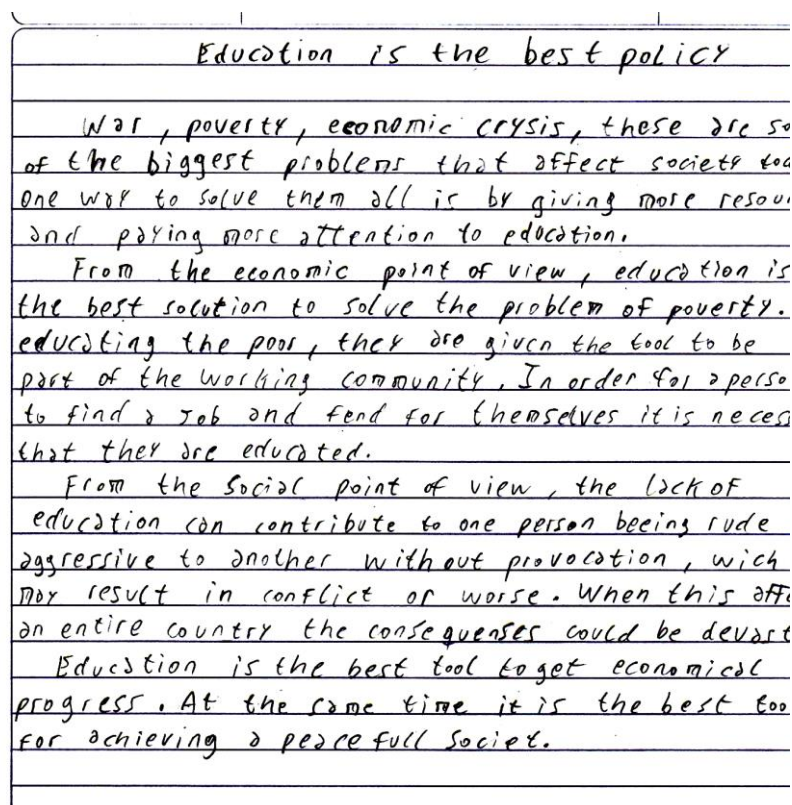
Besides, the paragraph is constructed in a very cohesive way, as it successfully exploits lexical chains such as *intellectual, intellect, opinion, decisions, critical thinking; personal, human beings, own; development, widen, form, arrive at*. Additionally, the paragraph starts with the topic of the essay – *education*, which makes a lexical chain through its repetition in the second sentence, while the modal auxiliary verb *can* is also repeated thrice. What is more, the lexical verb *contribute* in the first sentence is substituted by its near synonym *help* in the third sentence and the adverb *also* in the first sentence makes a logical connection with the previous paragraph, signalling a further argument to be developed in favour of education in the present paragraph. Finally, the last sentence of the paragraph thematises the determinative pronoun *this*, which introduces the summary of the paragraph and specifies its main idea in rhematic position.

In addition to the lexical cohesion, the student makes use of grammatical metaphors in the form of the nominalisations *education, development, deception* and *decisions*. This makes the paragraph a very lexically dense one, which can clearly be seen in the remaining transparency of the argument when the functional words in the paragraph are erased, as in:

- Education | contribute | personal | intellectual | development
- Education | human beings | widen | intellect | form | opinion
- Help | avoid | deception | arrive | decisions | based | critical | thinking

All these cohesive devices are fully exploited in the essay of the following example<sup>2</sup> (see Figure 5), which was written by a first-year university student. For example, the lexical chains *education, educating, educated; economic, poverty, the poor; solution, solve, problem, given the tool, working community, find a job, fend for themselves* in the second paragraph; and *rude, aggression, provocation, conflict; contribute, result in, consequences* in the third paragraph make a very cohesive production. Both these paragraphs start in a parallel fashion by signalling the writer's stance in *from the economic point of view* and *from the social point of view*, respectively. Besides, the use of the cataphoric connector *in order for* and the clefting of *it is necessary that* in the second paragraph and the anaphoric references in the form of the clausal relative pronoun *which* and the determinative pronoun *this* in the third paragraph make the essay very reader-friendly. Additionally, the use of the passive constructions *they are given* and *they are educated* in the second paragraph and the use of the modal auxiliaries *can, may* and *could* in the third paragraph are an indication of the perfect command of the register.

<sup>2</sup> Here, for lack of space, we will only focus on the two middle paragraphs.



**Figure 5:** Sample Essay

Similar to the previous example, grammatical metaphors are fully exploited in *poverty, education, solution, lack, provocation, consequences, progress*. These nominalisations are appropriately joined with relational processes such as *be* – in different forms, which double all other lexical processes in number, which makes them the prevailing process types in the essay. The outcome of these two points is a highly lexically dense essay. This can be seen by eliminating the functional words in the two middle paragraphs, which reveals the remaining lexical words, whose interpretation is still very transparent.

- Economic | point | view | education | solution | solve | problem | poverty
- Educating | poor | given | tool | part | working community
- Person | find | job | fend | necessary | educated
- Social | point | view | lack | education | contribute | person | rude | aggressive | provocation | result | conflict
- Affects | entire | country | consequences | devastating

## 5. Concluding Remarks

All in all, it can be seen that the implementation of the Learning-to-Write-Reading-to-Learn cycle model proves to be a highly effective tool to the teaching of writing at all levels. It has been shown that even in the case of extremely challenging writing tasks, as essays can be, this model can help students improve considerably on their written productions. The model provides students with very helpful strategies to scaffold their arguments in a cohesive and coherent way and thus produce highly valued texts. The detailed analysis of sample texts and the frequent practice of the joint construction stage make it explicit for students to fully understand what they are supposed to produce at their independent stage.

The application of the model at institutional levels can be very fruitful as students increasingly explore the writing of more varied writing tasks from different registers. Moreover, it is expected that students can successfully compare the distinctive features of different tasks and thus be able to master a more varied command of their registerial cartography. As for their essay-writing, we have argued that the sooner students are introduced to this challenging type of task, the better results are obtained.

A final word must be given to the theoretical framework wherein the abovementioned model has been designed. This theoretical framework is the so called Systemic Functional Linguistics, whose Founding Father, Michael Halliday, has recently passed away, and to whom this paper intends to pay a humble homage. Halliday himself coined the term *applied* in 2010, to refer to “a theory that tackles and tries to answer questions,” and one of the four broad areas in which his theory has proved to be applicable has been precisely that of foreign language learning and teaching. If we, his followers, can continue applying his theory in the exploration, design and development of materials for the learning and teaching of foreign languages successfully, the flame of the fire that Halliday initiated will not cease to illuminate our path to knowledge.

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