Open Research Online

Exploring different dimensions of language use

Journal Item

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

oro.open.ac.uk

Exploring Different Dimensions of Language Use: tools for diagnosing learners' socio cultural and linguistic competence

Abstract

This article explores the way in which language teachers can diagnose language learners' competence from both a socio cultural and linguistic perspective. Using two sample 'letters of complaint', the article first considers competence in terms of how well the writers organise and structure their texts in relation to their social purpose and cultural context. It then examines the extent to which the learners have control over a range of grammatical and lexical resources a) for representing the world, b) for interacting and building interpersonal relations and c) for creating cohesive text. The article argues that by teasing out these different, 'functional' dimensions of language use, the language teacher and/or curriculum designer has a clear and systematic set of criteria for developing tasks and syllabi which are comprehensive in meeting the needs of language learners. Such an approach is underpinned by Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994; Butt et al 2000), a theory of language as 'social action'. The approach has been particularly influential in language teaching and learning in the Australian context (e.g. Feez, 1998; Hood et. al, 1996; NSW AMES, 1995).

Introduction

The following article is based on an analysis and diagnosis of errors typically made by learners of English. Using two letters of complaint (a task commonly set in English language classrooms), I show how linguistic analysis can draw attention to areas of student language use that require further development. The two letters of complaint referred to as Text A and Text B, are reproduced below.

A cursory glance will reveal that Text B is a more successful text than Text A. Syntactically, Text A is riddled with errors such as lack of person verb agreement, inaccurate use of prepositions and inaccurate punctuation and spelling. Text B, in contrast, makes very few errors of this type. Assessing such errors is, of course, an important part of diagnosing students' language competence in order to develop appropriate language programs. However, additional functional, rather than structural, dimensions of language use also need to be taken into account in order to develop comprehensive language curricula. This article outlines an approach which makes these functional dimensions explicit. In turn, it introduces the notions of text structure and experiential, interpersonal and textual grammar – areas of language use identified and explored within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Alongside and in relation to these four areas of language use, the success of the two sample letters is considered. This provides a basis for arguing that systematic, functional diagnosis has useful implications for devising language lessons and syllabi.

Text A

25th February 2001

John North
Litchfields Estate Agents

44 Green Lane
London N1

Mr John North

I don't know <u>how many times</u> I informs 'this' to you. 'This' is '<u>something wrong</u>' on the roof of my rent bedroom and my rent flat are on 5/15 Knightly Ave, London.

Last night until writing this letter again water still drift flow through that roof.

Yours sincerely

Peter

Text B

John North
Litchfields Estate Agents
44 Green Lane
London N1
Tel: 020 84626781

25th February 2001

Dear Mr North

Re: Leak to roof of Flat 5/15 Knightly Ave, London. Tel: 020 8432 9861

As you will know I am currently renting a flat from your agency. I am writing to make a further complaint about the roof in the bathroom which has been leaking for some time.

This leak has worsened recently causing rain water to seep into my bathroom from the roof. Last night, for example, a steady flow of water began to leak through from 2.a.m onwards. At the moment of writing, this water is continuing to flow through.

As you will recall from previous correspondence, the leak is not a new problem. It is now causing serious damage, not only structural damage but damage to my personal property.

I find your lack of attention to this problem quite unacceptable. The situation has been of great inconvenience to me and is also now likely to be a safety risk. Therefore I expect you to take immediate action and ensure that the problem is solved within the next 24 hours. Would you please contact me by phone on the day you receive this letter in order to let me know your proposed action.

Yours sincerely

Frank Gorndal

Dimensions of language use: text structure

Different types of written and spoken texts exist in all cultures (e.g. stories, public meetings, letters of complaint) but they are not necessarily uniform in the way they are shaped and structured and not all cultures share the same texts. This is because not all cultures engage in identical social activities and some activities have developed different conventions, reflecting diverse ideological, political and social values. Thus, whilst 'making a social security benefits claim' may be a common text in some cultures it may be an unfamiliar task in others. Similarly, whilst 'purchasing goods' in many contemporary urban situations requires minimal language interaction (often involving only a 'greeting' and 'statement of price'), making a purchase in a traditional, rural market frequently requires a bargaining stage. In systemic functional linguistics (SFL), conventionalised texts which have evolved to enact social purposes are referred to as 'genres'. Genres are categorised according to the distinct ways in which texts begin, develop and conclude in order to fulfil their social purpose. For example, the structure or 'stages' of a written argument can be described as:

Thesis (the writer's position on a topic)
Arguments with evidence (to support the thesis)
Re-inforcement of thesis (to reiterate and strengthen the writer's position)

In relation to the sample texts, A and B, we can see that the purpose of each text is to make a written complaint. Text B achieves this purpose successfully. It reflects the conventionalised, typical structure of a letter, specifically a letter of complaint. Hence it moves through the stages of *Address, Salutation, Identification of Complaint, Elaboration of Complaint, Demand for Action.* This is illustrated in the annotated text below:

Address

John North
Litchfields Estate Agents
44 Green Lane
London N1
4267819
25th February 2001

Salutation
Dear Mr North

Identification of complaint

   Re: Leak to roof of Flat 5/15 Knightly Ave, London. Tel: 8432 9861

As you will know I am currently renting a flat from your agency. I am writing to
make a further complaint about the roof in the bathroom which has been leaking for
some time.

Elaboration of Complaint
This leak has worsened recently causing rain water to flow into my bathroom from the
roof. Last night, for example, a steady flow of water began to leak through from 2.a.m
onwards. At the moment of writing, this water is continuing to seep through.
As you will recall from previous correspondence, the leak is not a new problem. It is
now causing serious damage, not only structural damage but damage to my personal
property.

Demand for action
I find your lack of attention to this problem quite unacceptable. The situation has been
of great inconvenience to me and is also likely to cause a safety risk. Therefore I
expect you to take immediate action and ensure that the problem is solved within the
next 24 hours. Would you please contact me by phone on the day you receive this
letter in order to let me know your proposed action.

Yours sincerely

Text A, on the other hand, displays a confused and underdeveloped staging -
*Elaboration of Complaint, Identification of Complaint, Address, Elaboration of
Complaint*. There is no *Salutation*, or *Demand for Action*.

In educational applications of SFL, genres are a key organising principle for syllabi
and for teaching grammar. Often referred to as text based syllabus design (Feez, 1998,
v) such an approach to program organisation and language teaching involves:

- linking spoken and written texts to the social and cultural contexts of their use

- designing units of work which focus on developing skills and grammar in relation
  to whole texts

- teaching explicitly about the structures and grammatical featuers of spoken and written texts

A text based syllabus is organised on the basis of identifying and teaching genres that meet students' objectives, whether these be to pass an English test (such as IELTS), participate successfully in the workplace or to socialise in an English speaking community. The genres are organised and sequenced according to increasing levels of linguistic demand and/or relevance to immediate need (the latter playing a particularly important role in the case of adult learners).

Functional Grammar – making experiential, interpersonal and textual meaning

According to systemic functional theory, every utterance made by speakers or writers draws on grammatical and lexical resources that have evolved for:

representing internal and external reality – experiential grammar
interacting and building interpersonal relationships – interpersonal grammar
organising information coherently – textual grammar

How well language learners use resources along each of these dimensions and, more signigicantly, how they vary these resources in relation to different social contexts captures in a comprehensive way the learner's socio cultural and linguistic competence.

Dimensions of language use: experiential grammar

Experiential grammar comprises a set of grammatical resources for representing the world. In functional terms, these resources can be referred to as Participants, Processes and Circumstances. Participants refer to the 'people'and 'things' involved in various events or 'goings on' (Processes) and Circumstance is the functional label referring to the background of the 'goings on' (in terms of the *when, where, how* or *why*).

In relation to the two student letters, Text B shows considerable variety in the use of each of these grammatical resources, whereas Text A reveals poor and limited control. To exemplify this point, we can see that, in Text B, Participants are specific and human (such as *you, I, me*) as well as non human (e.g. *a flat, rain water*) and abstract (e.g. *a further complaint, this leak, a safety risk*). In Text A, however, there is no use of abstract Participants and, in some cases, the use of Participants is unclear eg. 'this' in *I should inform 'this' to you* makes an inappropriate forward reference and it is difficult to retrieve the meaning. In terms of human Participants, Text A is very much oriented to 'I' rather than focusing on the accomodation agent – 'you' in Text B.

In Text B, Processes serve a variety of functions. For example, to relate one thing to another (e.g *this leak **is not** a new problem, the situation **has been** of great inconvenience*) and to express mental activity (*know, recall, expect*). There are also a

wide variety of action Processes (*renting, is solved , contact*), including those referring to various types of water action (*flow, leak, seep*). In this way, the nature of the complaint (in terms of cause and consequences) as well as expected response is fully elaborated. Text A, in contrast, displays a narrower range of process types whereby the nature of the complaint is left unclear (water *drift flow*).

Similarly, whereas Circumstances in Text A are limited or unclear in terms of specifying time (*last night until writing this letter)* and place (*on the roof of my rent bathroom*), Circumstances in Text B are more precise *(into my bathroom from the roof, within the next 24 hours*, *on the day you receive this letter*).

The different choices (in terms of experiential grammar) made by the two writers has an overall effect on the meaning and effectiveness of the texts. The writer of Text A clearly needs to develop their repertoire of resources for expressing experiential meaning in order to build a clear representation of events and develop with the reader a shared understanding. Primarily they need to be more precise and less ambiguous in their use of Participants, Processes and Circumstances and to move from a simple, concrete (and incomplete) rendering of what happened to a more detailed analysis of causes of, and solutions to, the problem.

Dimensions of language use: interpersonal grammar

Interpersonal grammar has evolved to allow people to interact with each other, namely by establishing and maintaining links, exchanging information and goods and services and expressing attitudes. Importantly, different types of social relations and situations lead to different linguistic choices for achieving such interaction. For example, in relation to requesting a service, in a situation where both interactants know each other well and the request is predictable, an imperative form is often the default choice - *pass the butter please*. In more formal contexts, an interrogative form is more typical - *Can I make an appointment for a hair cut please?*

Predictably the writer of Text B politely but firmly frames his demand for action through a question:

> *Would you please contact me by phone on the day you receive this letter.*

The writer of Text A, in contrast, makes no demand for action. Rather than making explicit his request, he makes a series of declarative statements assuming that the agent will recognise that a problem needs to be fixed.

In relation to the expression of attitude, Text A draws on a graphic/formatting technique (underlining) to emphasise his annoyance - *I don't know <u>how many times</u>* and *This is '<u>something wrong</u>'.* The writer of Text B is more explicit – he directly inscribes the type and degree of his annoyance (for example, *quite unacceptable, of great inconvenience*). The emphasis, in this letter, is on the incompetence of the agency rather than the emotional effect of the situation on the writer, thus preserving his control and authority.

Although only a small difference, another feature of interpersonal meaning which distinguishes Text A from Text B is the use of modality. In text B, the writer is

unequivocal in terms of information and opinions expressed - meanings are either positive or negative rather than located between the two poles. Text A writer, however, introduces an intermediate modal meaning concerning obligation (*I don't know how many times I **should** inform 'this'*). This contributes to the overall lack of authority and assertiveness of the Text A writer.

Dimensions of language use: textual grammar

Textual grammar concerns the organisation of of a writer (or speaker's) message. The resources of textual grammar have therefore evolved to facilitate a smooth flow of information. An important device for 'packaging' messages is nominalisation. Nominalisation refers to the process whereby what is usually expressed as a 'verb' (e.g. *causes*) or 'conjunction' (e.g. *because*), is instead expressed as a noun (e.g. *the cause*). Nominalisation is generally more frequent at the more written, formal end of the continuum of 'more spoken like' to 'more written like' communication. Likewise dense nominal groups (*e.g lack of attention to this problem*), in which a noun is pre and/or post modified, are more common in formal written texts.

Text B makes greater use of nominalisation and dense nominal groups than Text A. Therefore, whereas Text B can be characterised as being at the more written end of the spoken-written continuum, Text A is at the more spoken end. In addition, in Text A, the use of nominalisation serves to package in initial position of the clause (Theme position), the events of the previous clause. The contributes to the cohesive flow of text:

> I am writing to make a further complaint about the roof in the bathroom which <u>has been leaking</u> for some time.

> <u>This leak</u> has worsened recently causing rain water to flow into my bathroom from the roof.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the close examination of two letters of complaint illustrates how learners' language competence can be assessed along a number of dimensions all of which are critical in the production of meaningful, effective language use. I would argue that by analysing more and less successful examples of a target genre, teachers establish a useful basis for planning language tasks and programs. Not only can they diagnose problem areas in student writing (or speaking) but they can design language learning tasks and create communicative opportunities which stretch students language use (cf. Swain, 2000) and which develop their linguistic repertoires for structuring texts and expressing experiential, interpersonal and textual meaning. By drawing on the principles of a text based syllabus the teacher can select a set of spoken and written genres that directly relate to the social and cultural contexts in which the learners need to operate and design a motivating and principled language program.

(2834 words)

References

Butt, D., Fahey, R., Feez, S. Spinks, S. and Yallop, C. (2000) *Understanding Functional Grammer: An Explorer's Guide*. Sydney, Australia: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research.

Feez, S. (1998) *Text-based Syllabus Design*. New South Wales, Australia: AMES and Macquarie University.

Halliday, M.A.K. (1985/94) *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold (2nd edition).

Hood, S., Solomon, N. and Burns, A. (1996) *Focus on Reading*. Sydney, Macquarie University: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research.

Martin, J. R. (1992) *English Text: System and Structure*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

NSW AMES (1995) *Certificates in spoken and written English*. Sydney: New South Wales Adult Migrant Education Services

Swain, M. (2000) 'The output hypothesis and beyond: mediating acquisition through collaborative dialogue', in J.Lantolf (ed) *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning.* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Key words
Australia
Systemic Functional Linguistics
Language competence
Genre and lexico-grammar