

Guidelines on Incorporating Systemic Functional Linguistics in Teaching History to EFL Students

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ABSTRACT: *The present article seeks to enhance the instructional practices of teaching British and American History in Algerian universities. The primary aim of this study is to introduce Systemic Functional linguistics (SFL) to teachers of history and to demonstrate the steps that teachers are supposed to follow in order to apply this language-based approach in their classes. SFL is an approach that helps to show the way lexico-grammatical features of a given text can relate to its socio-cultural background. Since the most acknowledged approaches to teaching history in Algeria are content based, teachers and students alike are caring less about language in their history classes, which can result in poor understanding of historical discourse and an unfavorable view about the subject. Therefore, this article suggests a theoretical framework for teaching history using SFL as way to demonstrate that historical texts are part of communicative events wherein the writers' intentions and linguistic choices are of paramount concern.*

KEYWORDS: historical discourse, lexico-grammatical choices, teaching history, SFL

Introduction

Teaching history in EFL classes is becoming a rich area of investigation, especially for applied linguists. Reasons behind this interest can be students' and teachers' complaint about the frustrating nature of the subject and the structure of the historical discourse that differs from students' everyday language. Linguists claim that the main difficulty of the historical discourse lies in the linguistic choices that historians make, especially because history is all discourse. Hence, being unfamiliar with the

way history is written can be one barrier to the understanding of the historical content.

In the Algerian context, history is taught to all levels using content-based approaches. The main objective of teaching history in Algerian universities is to make students acquainted with the historical facts and themes introduced in their syllabus. Hence, Algerian students and teachers believe that if students attend their history classes and take some notes of the content delivered by their teachers, their understanding of history will improve, and by extension, they will guarantee better grades. However, the moment students wish to elaborate on the content presented in class by means of doing some extensive reading, they encounter difficulties to understand the ideas being expressed, the writer's intentions, or even sometimes the arguments introduced (Kaabeche, 2024).

Some language-based approaches have emerged to get learners acquainted with the peculiarities of the historical discourse as well as the tools available for students and teachers to analyse, interpret, and even evaluate the content presented at the level of those historical texts. One significant theory is labelled Systemic Functional Linguistics. This branch of educational linguistics, which has its origins in the work of Halliday (1993), gives credit to the linguistic properties of the different genres of texts. It is mainly concerned with highlighting the way language functions in context and identifying the lexico-grammatical features pertinent to particular types of texts.

A number of researchers have shown interest in the way functional linguistics works to improve the learners' understanding of history and historical documents. Martin (2013) and Coffin (2006) argued that teachers should raise students' awareness about the linguistic specifications of historical texts. To them, exposing EFL learners to the way historical texts are structured and engaging them in analysing those texts is undoubtedly significant to foster their interpretive skills in history. However, there is still lack of awareness regarding the steps that teachers can follow to implement SFL in their history classes. Accordingly, this article aims at raising the awareness of teachers and learners about the importance of using Systemic Functional Linguistics to improve interpretive and analytical skills in history classes. The article also represents a guide to the stages and techniques that

can help teachers and students analyse historical texts linguistically through the lens of SFL.

1. Literature Review

Research on teaching history to Algerian EFL students is very scarce. However, there is an overall consensus among Algerian teachers and researchers that new paradigms to teaching history and historical discourse are required due to the various challenges encountered by teachers and students in EFL classes. The following section exposes the way history is taught in Algerian Universities, identifies the aspects of historical writing that might be problematic for students, and introduces Systemic Functional Linguistics_ a language-based approach that can be a solution to the perceived challenges in history classes.

1.1. The Status Quo of Teaching History in Algeria

Teaching history to EFL learners in Algeria is very significant. That is because Algerian students are now exposed to the Anglo-Saxon culture and are influenced by the British and American media, including songs, movies, real shows, news... Hence, the history lessons are conveying the cultural elements by which they are influenced. Besides, being EFL students dictates studying the English language and its culture, for language alone will never suffice to enhance learners' linguistic and communicative competence. Since language is one constituent of culture, and culture is conveyed through language, then exposing learners to the cultural and historical background of the language they are studying can be very effective to improve their academic level on one hand and boost their motivation and critical thinking skills on the other (Rahmani, 2022).

According to different research papers that attempted to investigate the circumstances surrounding teaching history in EFL classes, teachers claimed that they base their classes on lecturing using either a timeline to show students how events proceed or emphasizing the themes pertinent to a given historical event. Both techniques fall into the category of content-based approaches to teaching history (Kaabeche, 2024). While the former is referred to as "chronological approaches, the second is labeled "thematic approaches" to teaching history (Williams, 2016).

The challenges encountered by Algerian students in their history classes are immense. These include cultural challenges, which include learners' reluctance to accept any aspect of the other's culture, considering it a bad influence on their native culture, which may result in little awareness of and inability to build the so-called "cross-cultural understanding". Another challenge can be rather of a cognitive nature as most students struggle to memorize how events proceed throughout a given period in history or rather recall the names of some leading figures in history (Hocine & Benseddik, 2022). Some students went even to argue that they even sometimes confuse elements linked to the British history with others related to the American civilization. The last challenge is simply language. Students lack the linguistic competence that enables them to comprehend the historical discourse and the ideologies embedded there (Kaabeche, 2024; Tihal, 2023).

1.2. The Historical Discourse: Definition and Characteristics

Since the structure of historical language and text is very peculiar, multiple definitions were attributed to historical discourse. The peculiarities of the historical discourse were enumerated in the definition weaved by Caroline Coffin (2006) who described it as a discourse of time, cause, and evaluation. In her definition, Coffin alludes to the three motifs of historical discourse which correspond to three main genres of historical writing: Recording, explaining, and arguing genres. To explain further, Coffin (2006) adds: It is the "discourse produced by historians (including textbook authors) or student historians which has the express purpose of recording, explaining and interpreting past events" (p.52). Other researchers opted for a definition that draws distinction between historical and literary discourse, for the two tend to have much in common. As Rodwell (2013) noted, "Historical discourse is a privileged instantiation of the human capacity to endow the experience of time with meaning, because the immediate referent (the *Bedeutung*) of this discourse is real, rather than imaginary, events" (p.157). Although literary and historical discourses are both concerned with pursuing how events progress throughout time, history writing takes the real world and what actually took place as its raw material. However, much of the literary discourse is subject to the authors' imagination.

Considering the features that designate hierarchical discourse (scientific discourse) and horizontal structure (the discourse of humanities), historical discourse can be placed within a horizontal typology. The discourse of history is said to be of weak verticality wherein knowledge is constructed segmentally (theme by theme or era by era), for themes are not closely related as it is the case in hierarchal discourses. Besides, Historians are more interested in the process of interpreting recorded data instead of testing hypotheses against data as it is the case in some sciences (Martin et al., 2010). Also, history proliferates a variety of discourses, perspectives, and methods of dealing with different events and movements. Teachers can make use of knowledge structures by exposing learners to different viewpoints so that they eventually possess different strategies to address historical events and reason about them (Christie, 2007).

There are three crucial aspects of historical discourse: Time, cause, and value. Recent research suggests that historical thinking cannot take place in the absence of chronological consideration. Lomas (as cited in Coffin, 2006, p. 95) points out, “without chronology there can be no real understanding of change, development, continuity, progression and regression”. Developing the way learners conceptualize time when reading history does not only help them to place events in history, but also to understand how these events relate to one another. As for cause, historians are not merely responsive to what happened in the past, but also to the reasons that motivated events to take place. The mere description of events has been denounced by Carr who claims that “one may describe events but explain nothing” (as cited in Brien, 2013, p. 73). This denotes that a thorough understanding of historical texts can be only fulfilled when description is accompanied by explanation and causality. Explanation is needed in historical texts to render events in the past coherent and intelligible (Brien, 2013). However, causality is not usually as explicit as it may appear since historians make use of subtle linguistic tools that render it challenging for learners to pinpoint causal relationships or to recognize the points of views imbued with those causes (Coffin, 2006). Recognizing the nuanced causality present in historical texts is pivotal for an accurate interpretation of historical discourse. The third aspect is the so-called “value”; readers of historical discourse are supposed to evaluate and criticize the content being

produced because history is usually written from the perspective of the writers themselves, which makes history subject to the involvement of personal whim (Maton, 2008).

In an attempt to deal with the long-held debate around subjectivity and objectivity of history writing, Coffin coined a three-term stance system that encompasses “recorder” voice, “interpreter” voice, and “adjudicator” voice (as cited in Schleppegrell & Colombi, 2002). These voices show the degree of the historians’ involvement and authorial intrusion, suggesting that objectivity in historical texts is but a “rhetorical illusion” (Coffin, 2006, p. 151). Defining historical discourse as a channel through which events in history are conveyed does not necessarily suggest that historical discourse is impersonal. The recorder stance, despite seeming very neutral and objective, is not value free since the historian is still narrating events from his own perspective, which results in implicitly evaluative materials with a “neutral feel”. The Interpreter voice, on the other hand, highlights judgments of behavior like power and fortune. The adjudicator stance, often described as the most subjective of the three voices, is primarily concerned with moral and ethical judgments (Schleppegrell & Colombi, 2002). Blanco and Rosa (as cited in Coffin, 2006, p. 166) claim that if those three levels are made clear in history classes, learners will possess the tools to “untangle the fabric of the historical stories they encounter” and defend themselves from “ready-made stories and their implications”. Hence, exposing learners to the three historical voices will help them question every historical detail they encounter in their classes, even if it were described as a historical fact.

1.3. Systemic Functional Linguistics: An Approach to Text Analysis

The definitions attributed to SFL are manifold, each having a distinct outlook and articulating a different perspective of the theory. Halliday, the founder of the approach, relates the theory to the notion of register (as cited in Schleppegrell, 2004). According to him, SFL is a tool to describe how and why language fluctuates whenever change occurs at the level language users or social contexts. Therefore, it is register which makes plain the relationship between language and context. According to Halliday & Hasan (as cited in Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 18), register is “the constellation of lexical and grammatical features that realizes a particular situational context”. Here, Halliday attributes a relatively sociological

orientation to SFL by describing how language works in particular social and cultural situations to produce given outcomes. Schleppegrell, along with other researchers (Coffin, 2006; Martin et al., 2011), went even farther to consider SFL as a pedagogical tool, defining it as “the theory of language that shows the power of language and the role it plays in the demands and challenges of schooling” (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 18). SFL can be widely used to comprehend what speakers and writers intend to communicate in a given situation. However, schooling is not the only area wherein SFL can be applied, for the theory is also a strategic tool of responding to everyday real- life language-related issues in profuse social, professional and academic contexts (Coffin & Donhue, 2012).

Doing SFL necessitates analyzing three metafunctions: The ideational, the interpersonal, and the textual metafunction. Within the ideational stage, it is paramount to analyze participants (usually appear in the form of a subject or object), processes (verbs’ types and significance), and circumstances (adverbials of time, place...etc). Doing so can help the analyst answer an important question: Who did what and in what circumstances? Analyzing verbs can also help readers comprehend the type and purpose of the text. Using material processes (action verbs/verbs of doing), for instance, indicates that the writer is either narrating or reporting events while the use of relational processes (to be, to look, to appear) is an indicator of the writer’s tendency to do description. When analyzing the participants, readers can obtain information about whether the agent responsible for the action (the doer of the action) is present or not, which can be understood through the analysis of passivation (Dominguez & al., 2011). Table 1 illustrates the different types of processes.

Process type	Category meaning	Participants
Material:	‘Doing’	Actor, Goal
Action	Doing	‘Behaver’
Event	‘Happening	
Behavioral:	‘Behaving’	
Mental:	‘Sensing’	
Perception	‘Seeing’	Senser
Affection	‘Feeling’	Phenomenon
Cognition	‘Thinking’	
verbal:	‘Saying’	Sayer, target
Relational:	‘Being’	Token, value
Attribution	‘Attributing’	Carrier, attribute
Identification	‘Identifying’	Identified, identifier
Existential:	‘Existing’	Existent

Table 1. Types of Processes according to Systemic Functional Linguistics (Babaii & Ansary, 2005, p.4)

The second stage of SFL is the interpersonal analysis. Interpersonal resources refer to the ways of establishing relationships with others. Interpersonal distance, which points to the degree of proximity and the nature of relationship between speaker and listener or between reader and writer, comments that evaluate the status of a message in relation to its context, and modality which indicates how events or assertions are framed (Whitelaw and Argamon, 2004). To do so, one can analyze three main linguistic items: Mode, modality, and personal pronouns. Mode refers to the way a sentence is structured. Using a declarative sentence in its negative form is a linguistic choice that implies a given thought or attitude. The statements “leave the room” and “can you leave the room?” reflect one idea, but the user’s intention is different. Analyzing modality stresses the significance of employing modal verbs. The latter can unveil proximity levels (“would” is more formal compared to “can”) or even commitment level; the use of the modal verb “will” usually reflects more certainty compared to other modal verbs (Halliday & Mathissen,

2004). When analyzing personal pronouns, however, readers can comprehend the degree of inclusiveness; the pronouns “I” and “you” are exclusive compared to the inclusive pronoun “we”, for the latter indicates that both the sender and receiver of the message are involved in the situation (Kondowe, 2014).

The third SFL stage is the textual analysis which enables the reader to see how a text is constructed. It is carried out via analyzing thematization and coherence. Analyzing the way themes and rhemes are distributed in a text can help the reader understand the relationships existing among the ideas being expressed, and how every sentence is connected to the previous and following sentences (Martinez, 2006). Analyzing coherence, however, can be only realized when studying the different functions of the connectors present at the level of the text under analysis. The existence of a given category of coordinating or subordinating conjunctions can help readers identify the type of the text they are analyzing and the purpose of producing it (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). A narrative text, for instance, is characterized by embodying the so-called “time sequencers” like “then”, “after that”, “subsequently” ...

2. A Theoretical Framework of Teaching Historical Texts through Systemic Functional Linguistics

For the sake of overcoming the language-related problems that EFL students encounter in history classes, Systemic Functional Linguistics should be applied according to a well defined framework. The following section introduces the various steps of incorporating SFL in history classes along with a number of recommendations needed to implement this approach.

2.1. Steps of Integrating SFL in History Teaching

In order to implement an SFL approach when teaching history, teachers ought to follow a three-step process that enables them to go through the various meanings conveyed by the studied historical texts and the linguistic properties pertinent to those texts. Achugar and Stainton (2010) worked on identifying the main steps that help teachers to move into a more functional approach to teach history. According to them, teachers should start with selecting the most significant historical questions that are linked to the topic to be dealt with. Then, teachers can

choose a set of historical documents that serve the topic as well as the questions selected. Finally, the teacher guides learners into the main aspects of the historical documents under discussion using a detailed text analysis that is based primarily upon analyzing the three language metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, textual).

2.1.1. Preparing a Set of Guiding Questions

The first step of implementing SFL consists of deciding about the main points that should be tackled while teaching a particular historical unit. Identifying the main objectives that should be met by the end of a specific chapter will help teachers to select the documents that correspond to those objectives as well as the lexico-grammatical items that should be made clear for learners. If a teacher intends to introduce a unit about WW 1, for instance, s/he should narrow down the scope of the course so as to highlight the most significant stations of this war. Since history is primarily about “who did what to whom and in what circumstances?”, the teacher can set the following questions to help students select the appropriate documents.

1. How was the world’s political and economic situation before WW1?
2. What are the main causes of WW1?
3. What are the main events that shaped the four-year period of WW1?
4. How did WW1 affect the political and the economic scene of the world?
5. Which country is responsible for provoking WW1?

2.1.2. Selecting a Set of Documents

According to the type of questions and objectives that have been shaped, teachers can choose some texts that they consider appropriate to answer those questions. For instance, the teacher can choose books’ extracts of the recording genre to set the background for WW1. Doing so, the teacher will help learners describe the circumstances that were prevalent prior to the declaration of WW1 as well as the main events that took place during this war. Besides, the teacher can make use of some newspaper articles that discuss the main causes and consequences of WW1. Therefore, teachers will be answering questions 2 and 3 above

which require the use of some texts that belong to the explaining genre. Eventually, some speeches of British or American leaders can be selected to show the British/the American perspective towards WW1 and compare them to other views. Thus, learners will be working on the arguing genre of historical texts.

2.1.3. Making Detailed Analysis of the Texts

The analysis that teachers and learners should proceed through when introducing the documents' set is a three-stage analysis. Teachers can start with considering the type of processes, participants, and circumstances present at the level of those texts, then move to detecting the elements that demonstrate the writer's attitude about the issue raised and the types of linkage utilized.

➤ Ideational Analysis

To carry out an ideational analysis of a text, the teacher should ask questions like: what are the types of verbs used? And why did the writer opt for these verbs? When classifying the verbs into different categories and detecting the type that dominates, learners can guess the intentions of the writer as well as the genre of the text they have been analyzing. If the text "Britain and the First World War" (See Appendix) is taken as an example, one can see that material processes (fail, defeat, penetrate, fall, develop, capture, break, attack, withdraw, wear down, invade) are prevalent. If teachers ask learners about the significance of the frequent use of material processes, learners can go back to the text and find out that those verbs are used to recount events. Therefore, the main objective of the extract is to list the main events that took place during WW1. The teacher can also ask learners to identify "who did what?" in the text. When learners analyze the verbs attributed to the participants (subjects and objects), they will see that Britain in the first lines is attached to verbs like "withdraw" and "suffer". However, by the end of the extract, more positive verbs like "blockade" and "defeat" were rather attributed to the country, which attests to the fact that Britain could move from failure to success.

➤ Interpersonal Analysis

In order to make an interpersonal analysis of a text, the teacher can ask questions like: What is the nature of relationship between the writer

and the readers? What are the opinions present? And how are they expressed? Showing learners how to analyze the mood book of the text, learners will be able to look over the words that the writer manipulates as subjects. For instance, to reflect that Germany was in a position of power, “Germany” is placed as subject in sentences like “the Germans penetrated deeply” while Britain appears as an object/agent like in “the British troops were withdrawn”. However, to express that Britain regained power, the writer puts “Britain”/ the Allies in a subject position, such as “the Allies wore down the Germans”. Learners can also analyze the types of adjectives and adverbs manipulated by the writer. Doing so, they can see how some adverbs like “quickly” and “deeply” are used to express the German’s power while adverbs like “desperately” are used in the text with the British to convey the unfortunate situation that the country has been through.

➤ **Textual Analysis**

Deconstructing a text into its main structural constituents is the last step of conducting a functional analysis of historical texts. This step allows teachers and students to explore the various conjunctions employed, and thus deciding about the genre that predominates. In the text under discussion, time conjunctions (by December 1917, in April 1917, on November 1918) are the most frequent, which attests to the recording genre of this extract. Some causal relationships, however, were expressed by means of nominalizations. As an illustration, the sentence “the successes of the British navy [...] was also telling on the Germans” conveys one of the causes behind the German withdrawal.

2.2. General Tips and Recommendations

➤ One significant pedagogical implication is the graduality needed to move from one historical text to another. It is important for a teacher to present texts starting from what s/he considers less linguistically complex. This implies that teachers ought to start with the recording genre of history writing before moving to more complex texts that represent explaining and arguing genres. As an illustration from fourth-year syllabus of history, teachers can use diverse historical texts to teach the two world wars. They are recommended to present a background for the two world wars (recording genre), the main causes of the two world wars

(Explaining genre) before tackling more abstract issues like considering the role of diplomacy in these two world wars.

➤ One further implication of this study is the inclusion of primary sources when teaching history. It is crucial for learners to examine the texts that are written by historians in order to detect the main features of historical discourse. In addition to extracts from history books, teachers can also opt for other documents like presidential speeches or Congress articles. Fourth-year students can be exposed to the speeches of Winston Churchill when tackling Britain during WW2.

➤ In order to frame working techniques for bringing to students' consciousness the way in which history texts are linguistically structured, there must be collaborative efforts between educational linguists, literacy consultants and history teachers.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, a theoretical framework for the integration of SFL within the teaching of history has been designed. This approach can be efficient to help learners enhance their interpretive and analytical skills, and thus, improve their performance in history classes. This work also identifies the preeminent steps that teachers can follow to implement this approach, providing illustrations from different lessons from the history syllabus. This approach can help immensely to develop learners' autonomy and improve their critical thinking skills. If appropriately implemented, it would complement the traditional methods employed by history teachers, and therefore, create a new pedagogy for teaching this subject. The researcher also maintains that the efficacy of such an approach would be only attained if teachers of linguistics and teachers of history collaborated to create a more language-oriented approach to teach British and American Civilizations.

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Appendix: Britain and the First World War

Most people, and certainly the Germans, thought the war would only last a matter of weeks. In Britain, there was a general feeling that it would all be over by Christmas. But Lord Kitchener, the newly appointed Secretary for War, was not so sure; he dismayed the cabinet by telling them that it would last nearer three years than three months. And Kitchener was right—the Germans Schlieffen Plan failed to achieve the rapid defeat of France. Although the Germans penetrated deeply, Paris did not fall, and stalemate quickly developed on the western front, with all hope of a short war gone. Both sides dug themselves in and spent the next four years

attacking and defending lines of trenches which were difficult to capture because the increased fire- power provided by magazine rifles and machine-guns made frontal attacks suicidal and rendered cavalry useless. The British, desperately looking for a way to break the stalemate, opened up a new front by attacking Turkey at the Dardanelles (1915); but everything went wrong and the troops were withdrawn.

In Eastern Europe, there was more movement with Russian successes against the Austrians, who constantly had to be helped out by the Germans, causing friction between the two allies. But by December 1917, the Germans had captured Poland * Russian Territory* and forced the defeated Russians out of the war. Britain, suffered heavy losses of merchant ships through submarine attacks, and France, whose armies were paralyzed by mutiny seemed on the verge of defeat. Gradually, the tide turned; the Allies, helped by the entry of the USA in April 1917, wore down the Germans, whose last despairing attempt at a decisive breakthrough in France failed in the spring of 1918. The successes of the British navy blockading German ports and defeating the submarine threat by defending merchant convoys, was also telling on the Germans. By the late summer of 1918 they were nearing exhaustion. An armistice was signed on 11 November 1918 although Germany itself had scarcely been invaded; a controversial peace was signed at Versailles the following year.