

Incorporating Systemic Functional Linguistics in the Unlock English Teaching Program

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Abstract: This research attempts to develop a supplementary writing teaching method that is compatible with the Unlock intermediate level students at Birzeit University. The purpose of the study is to also provide writing instruction regarding four general writing needs and for such students: understanding genre, using clause and sentence structure for chosen text types, developing a sense of audience, and writing coherently. The study is based on the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), and the writing instruction is provided through two teaching methodologies, Joint Construction and the Logical Tree. The sample of this study is 54 intermediate-level students of the Unlock program, 27 of whom comprised the control group, the remaining 27, the experimental group. Frequency tables were utilized to calculate the sum of the cohesive and structural devices used. Overall, the results revealed more use of the measured variables in the experimental group than in the control. In the experimental group, devices of nominalization, contrast, addition, reason, register, and voice were used 115, 34, 27, 49, 92, and 27 times, respectively. However, in the control group, the same devices were used 58, 19, 11, 19, 35, and 12 times, respectively. The researcher recommends further research be conducted on larger samples of different levels of English proficiency in order to identify additional needs and provide a more representative assessment.

Keywords: Systemic functional linguistics, Unlock course book, Unlock intermediate level students

Introduction

The Cambridge *Unlock* English teaching program has been used by Birzeit University to fulfill the English language academic and pedagogical needs of its students. This is to ensure that these students gain the required level of proficiency, Intermediate II, prior to starting their core university subjects. The program consists of four levels: Remedial, Intermediate I, Intermediate II, and Advanced.

Based on a placement test taken prior to entering their freshman year, students are placed in one of these levels. Each level consists of ten units that should be completed over the course of one academic year. In 2018, the decision was made that completion of only six units of each level would be sufficient to advance to the next level. This is to satisfactorily focus on all English language skills. This study focuses on the Reading and Writing book of the Intermediate II level (B1), particularly the argumentative writing task in the history unit.

Halliday (1994) defines Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as an approach that treats the function of language in a meaningful context in order to achieve coherence in academic texts. He posits that language choices are made according to the three elements: genre, register, and language (as cited in Suzanne Eggins, 2004, p. 111). These elements will be addressed in detail in the literature review. Though these elements are not explicitly presented in *Unlock*, the structure of *Unlock* does allow them to be incorporated and elaborated upon for more effective writing instruction.

In *Unlock*, each unit in the Reading and Writing book of the Intermediate II level consists of two reading passages. The first passage aims to build the students' schematic knowledge of the unit's topic. The second reading is a text type of a specific genre, which the students are required to imitate. Pre-reading vocabulary and questions provide students with an idea of the topic of the passage. Post-reading exercises and discussion questions to ensure a complete comprehension of the vocabulary and ideas as well as a Language Development section that focuses on cohesive devices that are effective in writing are also included in each unit. The purpose behind such a scaffold is to prepare students for the writing task at the unit's end. The grade distribution requires two writing tasks with 5 points given each. They are scaffolded and later written in class as a test. The students can use the text type and their outlines while drafting their essays.

Statement of the Problem

One of the main difficulties that Intermediate level *Unlock* students encounter in essay writing is achieving coherence. This is mainly because of their lack of awareness of genre and purpose and their role in academic writing. This study is concerned with exploring an approach that provides writing instruction that contributes to increasing the students' understanding of genre and purpose. Despite the focus of the Intermediate level *Unlock* course book on the content-specific diction appropriate for the targeted text type, the book needs a supplementary approach that increases the students' knowledge of organizational patterns.

In addition, there is a need for an approach that provides direct writing instruction for these students. The writing approach adopted by *Unlock* is the traditional writing process. In this approach, greatest portion of time is dedicated to the pre-writing stage. The writing stage is completed in isolation, where there is no interaction between the students and the teacher. In other words, enhancing the students' writing skills, requires an approach focused on both process and the final product.

This study will offer a selective review of the literature of the SFL theory and will investigate the extent to which such a theory can help improve the academic writing skills of the *Unlock* Intermediate English students at Birzeit University. This review is based on four main writing needs and purposes: understanding genre and text type, making appropriate grammatical choices, developing a sense of audience, and writing coherently. Therefore, to better understand the effect of SFL on *Unlock* students' understanding of genre and purpose, the study will answer the following questions:

1. What is the effect of SFL on *Unlock* students' grammatical choices for different text types?
2. What is the effect of SFL on *Unlock* students' sense of audience?
3. What is the effect of SFL on *Unlock* students' use of appropriate cohesive devices to achieve coherence?

Review of Relevant Literature

Martin (2008) defines genre as the field or "culture" of the text and its effect on the language choices used (p. 55). This means, for instance, that a narrative essay requires textual organization and register that are different than those in an argumentative one. Burke states that genre describes texts of common linguistic and stylistic characteristics resulted from "situational demands" (as cited in Carolyn Miller, 1989); that is to say, the purpose conveyed in a text is determined by the subject matter of the text. In other words, genre looks at the text as whole, thereby focusing on the discourse level of a text.

Register consists of three main variables or meaning areas: field, tenor, and mode (Halliday, 1978, as cited in Martin, 2010). Field, as Martin explains it, is "a set of activity sequences oriented to some global institutional purpose," meaning that field reflects what is happening and where it is happening (2008, p. 34). Based on field, lexical and grammatical choices are selected to offer an appropriate representation of it.

The second meaning area of register is tenor, which is concerned with the relationship between the writer and the audience. This, too, is another factor that affects the linguistic choices used in a particular text type. In addition to field and tenor, mode is how the text is constructed to convey its purpose. The three register categories are parallel to the three meta-functions of SFL theory's framework: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Through these dimensions, the literature review will tackle the question of how SFL can clarify grammatical choices for different text types.

Halliday posits that the ideational meta-function of the SFL framework involves the experience represented in a clause (1994). He explains that these experiences are expressed in clauses through processes, and these processes have participants and circumstance. This meaning dimension also focuses on the logical connection between clauses (Halliday, as cited in Suzanne Eggins, 2004).

Moreover, the ideational dimension deals with linguistic features such as grammatical metaphor. Duff, Ferreira, and Zappa-Hollman (2015) explain that grammatical metaphor occurs when one grammatical class substitutes for the other. A major example of grammatical metaphor is the types of nominalization used in writing. Gibbon (2002) mentions that nominalization is simply turning a process into a noun (p. 41). She asserts that doing so shifts the focus from being the participant and the process to being the concept itself (p. 41).

The second dimension is the interpersonal dimension of register which looks at the relationship between the writer and the reader, and the writer's attitude. One of the aspects that the reader-writer relationship includes is

formality. This aspect suggests distance between the reader and the writer. The writer makes language choices based on the degree of the distance he/she has with the reader. This can be done through the use of the passive voice.

Another aspect that the interpersonal dimension deals with is modality and its influence on the author's voice. Martin and White (2005) explain that modality can be used to express probability or a degree of certainty in a text. This can be done through how a writer 'entertains,' which refers to epistemic word choices that indicate that the author's position represents one among multitudinous possibilities acceptable give various contexts or interpretations. Modal auxiliaries such as *might*, *could*, and *must* are an example of epistemic words that reflect the degree of possibility expressed in an utterance.

Also, adverbs of likelihood such as *probably* and *maybe* demonstrate the writer's commitment to the truth value. Mental processes such as *think*, *view* and *imagine* can also be used to express possibility (Martin & White, 2005, p. 105). Authors choose from these words in order to express a degree of truth to their propositions. By doing so, writers take into account the audience who may not have the same position.

The textual dimension deals with coherence - which is, as Byrens (2006) defines it, the overall unity of the text and the logical connection and organization of ideas within the text. This connection, Byrens (2006) states, can be achieved in the text explicitly through the use of cohesive devices or conjunctive adverbs, such as *in addition*, *however...*etc. It can also happen through implicit devices, such as thematic progression and the passive tense.

The use of implicit devices contributes to the flow of ideas as it helps maintain the focus or the topic throughout the text. It also helps create an academic text with no redundancy. According to Schleppegrell (2008), "the theme is the point of departure for the clause that establishes in some sense what it is about" (p. 223). To clarify this quote, examine the following sentence: *Some schools offer annual scholarships for their students. Most of these students live below the poverty line.* Here, the first clause begins with the noun phrase, *some schools*, which is the theme.

The second part of the clause that elaborates or introduces new information is the rhyme, which is the verb phrase *offering annual scholarship*. Now, if the sentence is to be developed into a text, maintaining a theme-rhyme structure would contribute to the flow of information. This flow begins in the second clause where *students*, who were introduced in the rhyme of the first clause as new information, have become an old piece of information in the next clause's theme. Theme-rhyme progression is not only limited to the clause level but also works across multiple clauses and whole sentences. This is an effective means of connecting ideas within and between paragraphs.

Method

Instrument of the Study

The results of both the control and experimental groups were calculated using frequency tables. In both groups, the measured variables were classified into two categories: implicit cohesive devices and explicit cohesive devices. The frequency of both devices was measured by the number of occurrences of the transitioning devices that fall into each of these categories. The main measured implicit device is nominalization, and its frequency is measured by the occurrence of the nominalization devices in the taught unit: demonstratives, demonstratives followed by a noun, prepositional phrases, such followed by noun, pronouns, and nouns.

On the other hand, explicit devices were distributed into five categories based on their function. These categories are represented in contrast, addition, reason, register, and voice. The frequency of each of these was recorded by the sum of occurrences their transitioning devices were highlighted in the unit. The difference in the frequency of both cohesive devices in the control and experimental groups will be discussed thoroughly in the discussion section.

Research Design

The study's qualitative design is based on two SFL compatible pedagogical strategies: Information Management and Joint Construction. Arani and O'Dowd (2005) explain that information management consists of three main

stages: text discovery, structure and drafting, and structured feedback. The text discovery stage concentrates on the focus and flow of the text. For this purpose, the students examine a text type similar in genre to that they will write. To help them understand the structure of the text type, the students write a logical tree that includes the main focus and the supporting ideas in the examined text.

The structure and drafting stage focuses on creating a logical tree for the text the students will write. Arani and O'Dowd (2005) call this stage *labeling template*. That is to say, prior to the writing, on the paragraph level, the function of each sentence should be indicated to help create a smooth text flow. Based on this, the students define their main focus and supporting sentences then turn them into a paragraph. The structured feedback stage follows Derewianka's (1990) Joint Construction method, wherein which the students exchange texts and share opinions concerning language choices and rhetoric patterns used in their texts with guidance from the teacher. In the Information Management strategy, this happens by having peers create logical trees for each other's essays to ensure that each sentence in their paragraphs serves a particular function.

In *Unlock 3, Reading 2, Should We Teach History*, is the text type the students imitate in their writing task. The genre of this text is argumentative, and it consists of four paragraphs: an introduction, a counter argument, an argument, and a conclusion. Prior to reading, a general discussion about genre is held to illustrate the relationship between genre and language choices. The discussion begins by asking students what they expect when watching a comedy movie. Previous discussions yielded responses such as 'jokes,' 'puns,' 'funny situations,' and 'stupid things.' These examples explain how understanding the purpose helps students make appropriate diction.

Following the discussion, the figure below is shown to students to illustrate how genre is applied in writing. Figure 1 below shows how genre looks at the text as a whole with all of its language choices. Some of these choices are elicited from students and written on the side of the board. For example, students generate words such as *argue* and *claim* as verbs that can be used in an argument.

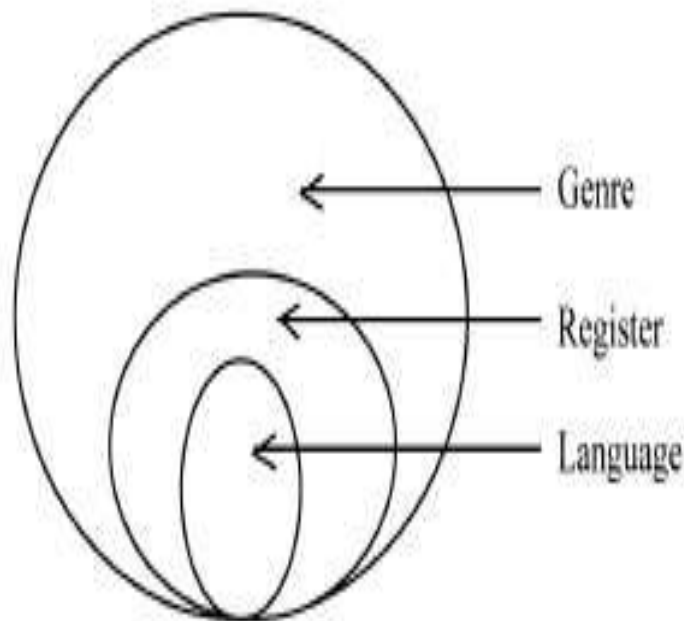


Figure 1. Representation of Genre

During reading, students highlight main ideas and supporting details in each paragraph. An outline of a text's structure with main ideas and details is then written on the board. This is the *text discovery* stage in which students create a logical tree of main ideas expressed in each paragraph to better understand focus and flow. In the *structure and drafting* stage, the function of each sentence in the paragraphs is discussed. Figure 2 below illustrates the analysis of the structure and sentences on the paragraph level.

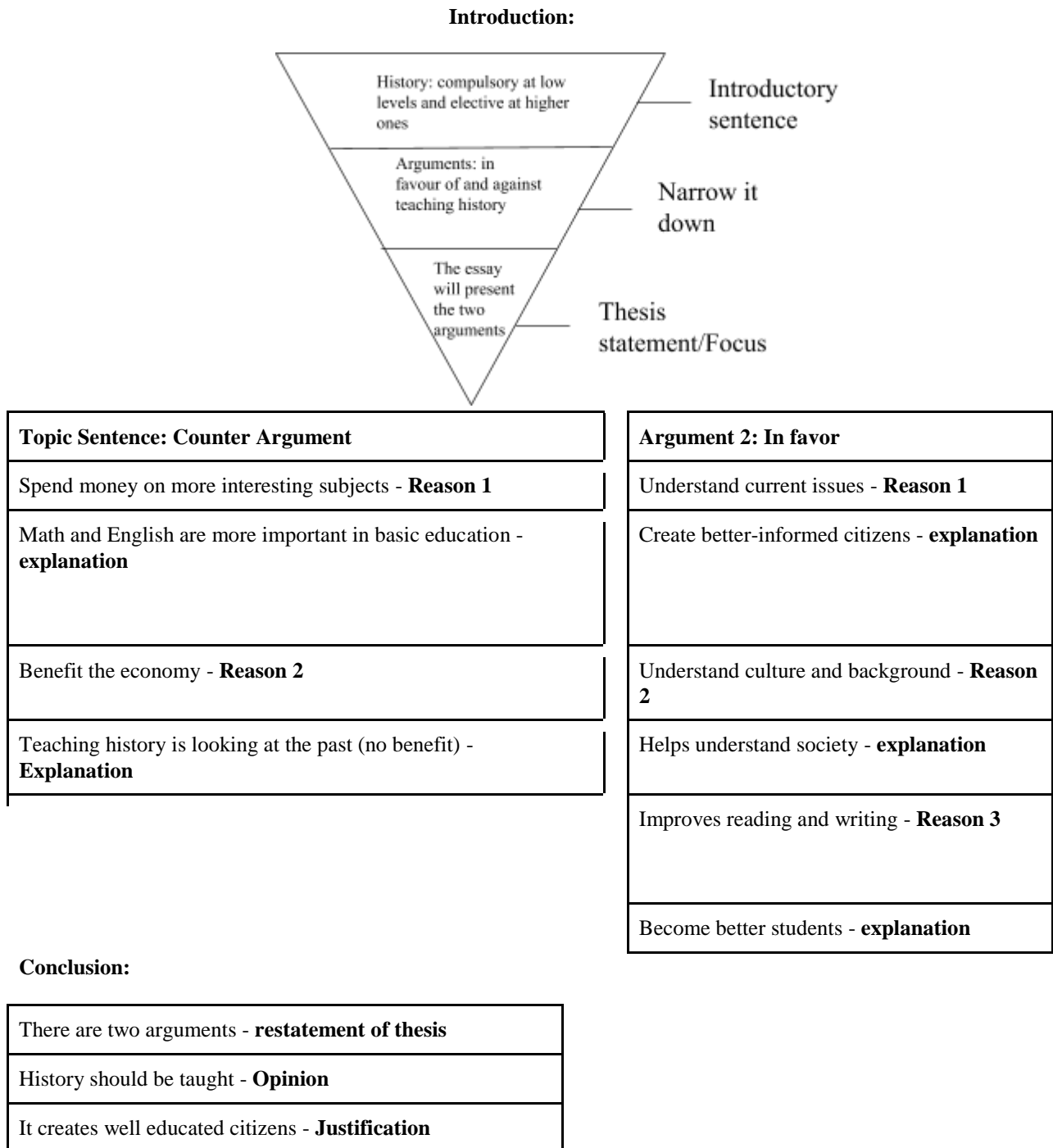


Figure 2. Logical Tree

In this stage, the sample body paragraph below is written on the board with the help of the teacher. The purpose is to draw the students' attention to the elements of the three SFL meta-functions and their role in achieving coherence:

Some people are against paying entry fees for museums¹. This is because more people will be given the chance to enter the museum². By doing so, people's historical knowledge will be enhanced³. Another reason is that students will widely access museums⁴. Such access will help the students in their school work, such as projects and presentations⁵.

Thematic progression is then explained while writing the sample paragraph above. During writing, the students' attention is drawn to the main focus and how it shifts throughout the paragraph. In sentence 1, *people* is the theme or the topic and *are against paying...* is the rheme or what is being said about the topic. In the following

sentence, the focus shifts *are against paying*, which was the rhyme in sentence 1. To compact the previously expressed idea and place it in subject position, the students choose the indicative *this*. During the tracking of thematic progression, in each sentence different language choices, such as *by doing so*, *another reason is that*, and *such* may be made to create a smooth flow in the paragraph.

While writing, nominalization is discussed as a means to facilitate thematic progression. For a better understanding of nominalization, students perform an unpacking exercise. They examine the structure of 5 individual sentences. The sentences are first divided into processes, participants, and circumstances rather than verbs, subjects, and adverb. Doing so encourages focus on function rather than form. Nominalization is then highlighted as a tool in which the whole experience of process, participants, and circumstance can be compacted. An example of this is *such access* in sentence 5. If unpacked, this noun includes the participant *students* and the process *access*. In addition, other ways of nominalization such as *this*, *that*, *such* and *by doing so* are highlighted. This exercise draws students' attention to grammatical metaphor and its importance to the flow of the text.

To eventually produce an academic text, there is a focus on two main interpersonal elements: the passive and modality. The contribution of the passive voice in the text is suggested as manifold. First, it helps shift the sentence structure in a way that puts the focus in a theme position. Second, it helps the students eliminate first person pronouns they may use when signposting. For example, in one of the iterations of this exercise, some students wrote: *I think that we should teach history* or *it seems to me that we should teach history*. These sentences were turned into the passive to show its effect in academic text. They were later rewritten in a formal way as follows: *history should be taught*, and *it seems that history should be taught*. Moreover, the use of modals was discussed as a way to leave possibility for other opinions to be taken into account, thereby avoiding generalization in sentences.

In the structured feedback stage, writing happens in class over the course of two periods. It begins with a brainstorming session where students create a logical tree for their main ideas. The brainstorming is followed by a primary selection of explicit cohesive devices. These language choices are discussed in relation to the genre of the text; that is, they are argumentative. Having created logical trees and a list of cohesive devices that could be possibly used; the students then write their texts. After writing each paragraph, the teacher checks if language choices and rhetoric patterns are used appropriately.

Results and Discussion

Findings regarding Nominalization

Figure 3 shows a total of 115 uses of nominalization that contribute effectively to the logical flow of ideas in the 27 argumentative essays of the *Unlock* intermediate experimental group. In these texts, nominalization is represented by the use of demonstratives, demonstratives followed by noun, prepositional phrases, *such* followed by noun, pronouns, or nouns, with a total of 44, 17, 9, 4, 22 and 19 uses of each, respectively.

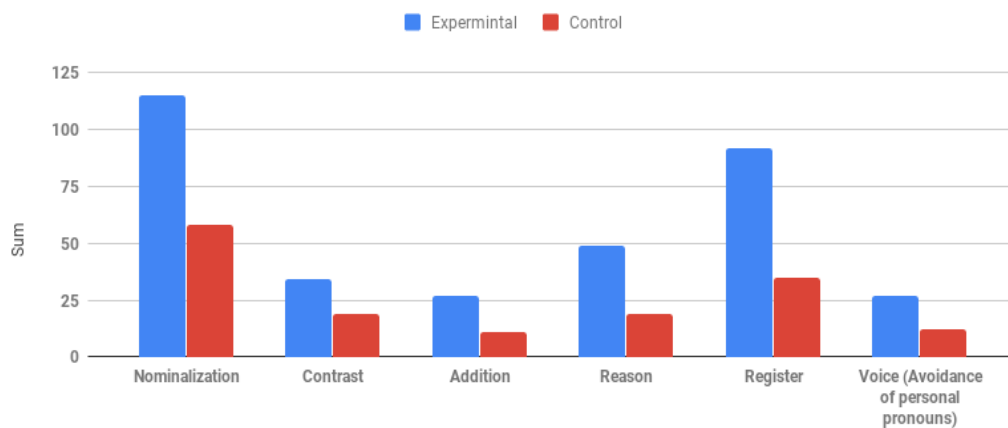


Figure 3. Number of Uses of Explicit and Implicit Devices

On the other hand, the graph shows that 58 uses of nominalization are found in the texts of the control group. These are divided into 24 demonstratives, 1 demonstrative preceded by a noun, 11 pronouns and 22 nouns. None of the essays compacts previous ideas using prepositional phrases or *such* preceded by a noun. These findings show that direct writing instruction focusing on thematic progression and organizational patterns helped the experimental group demonstrate logical flow in their texts. This instruction was provided in the structuring and drafting stages and during writing. Therefore, the participants in this group utilized such tools to compact previous ideas in order to avoid repetition and redundancy in their texts and to create logical relationships between clauses. The use of nominalization indicates the participants' understanding of thematic progression explained by Gibbon (2002) and Schleppegrell (2008).

Findings regarding Contrast

Figure 3 also shows 34 uses of contrast in these essays. Contrast is expressed through three explicit devices: *however*, *on the one hand* and *on the other hand* with a total of 20, 2 and 12 uses of each device, respectively. As for the control group, the graph shows 19 uses of contrast. These are represented in 12 uses of *however* and 7 uses of *on the other hand*. Addition is also reflected through the use of conjunctive adverbs, such as *in addition*, *moreover* and *also* with a total of 14, 2 and 11 uses of each connector, respectively, in the experimental group. In the control group, 11 addition devices are found: 2 uses of *in addition*, 3 uses of *moreover* and 6 uses of *also*. Reasons are introduced using *this is because* 25 and *another reason is that* 24 times. In the control group, 19 reason devices are found with a total of 13 uses of *this is because of the reason for this is* and 6 uses of *another reason for this is*. To ensure that these transitioning devices are used correctly and accurately, the participants decide on where to place them within the paragraph upon completing their logical trees. Following the methods explained above, the participants in the experimental group discuss the function of each of these devices. Doing so allows more coherence to be reflected in their texts. These results confirm Byren (2006) who asserts that these explicit devices create unity in the text. This is because they contribute to the logical organization and connection within the text.

Findings regarding Register

The register of argumentation used in these texts is represented in the verbs *argue*, *claim*, *suggest*, *believe*, *agree/disagree*, *support*. The graph shows 28, 14, 2, 9, 6, and 1 use of each verb, respectively. There is also a total of 15 uses of the prepositional phrase *in favor of* and 17 uses of the preposition *against*. In the control group, argumentation register is represented in the verbs *argue*, *claim*, *suggest*, *believe*, *agree/disagree*, *support* with a total of 8, 11, 4, 6, 1 and 1 use of each, respectively. There are also 2 uses of *in favor of* and 2 uses of *against*. The importance of register and its impact on achieving the purpose of the final product – the written argumentative text—is thoroughly explained in the experimental group. This is done in the text discovery stage and pointed out later while creating logical trees. The findings reveal more use of argumentative jargon in the experimental group than in the control one. This is due to the compatibility of the two applied methods that are based on the SFL framework. These methods suggest a focus on what Miller (1989) describes as “situational demands” that genre requires. Based on these demands, jargon is used in order to create what Martin (2008) calls the “culture of the text.” The methods applied are effective in drawing the participants' attention to register in relation to genre at an early stage.

Findings regarding Voice

In the experimental group, the findings show that there are 4 uses of the passive voice. There is also 1 use of *it is important that* and 4 uses of *it seems that*. Two main general nouns, such as *people* and *the government* are used 17 times. However, in the control group, the uses of phrases to reflect voice are 12: *it is important that* only once, *it seems that* twice, and of general nouns, such as *people* and *the government*, 9 times. Instead, there is more use of these expressions accompanied by personal pronouns, such as *I*, *me*, *we*, and *us*. General nouns and the passive are used in order to avoid the use of personal pronouns. Linguistic choices in regard to voice and audience are mostly observed in the conclusion section. This is the part that allows space for writers to express their opinion. However, the main goal of the experiment is to express voice in an academic manner. The results reveal that the methods were successful in stressing the importance of the function of interpersonal devices. Use of such devices in the experimental group contributed to the formality and modality. Martin and White (2005) state that the latter aspects can be achieved by creating distance between the reader and the writer and by taking into account probability and possibility in texts. It is worth mentioning that there isn't much difference in the

use of phrases necessary to reflect voice between the experimental and the control group. This is due to the fact that *Unlock* focuses on signposting in the history unit. However, it is the only voice-related element, on which it elaborates. Therefore, the SFL-based methods used in this study supplement the *Unlock* and help express voice academically.

Conclusion

The study examines the effectiveness of the SFL framework in speaking to *Unlock* intermediate level students' writing needs at Birzeit University. It investigates how such a framework affects these students' grammatical choices for the chosen text type--argumentative, sense of audience and use of cohesive devices in order to write coherently. This text type is taught within the history unit of *Unlock*, which consist of two readings, with preparing to read, while reading and post reading exercises for each one. The study offers writing instruction following two writing teaching methods: Joint Construction and the Logical Tree. These methods are compatible with the framework of SFL, which looks at the function of the language through three main dimensions: the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual. This approach comes as an attempt to supplement *Unlock* for the purpose of creating more coherence in the participants' texts. The participants of the study are English language learners who are expected to complete the intermediate level of English over the course of one semester. The findings of the study revealed more use of the implicit and explicit devices in the argumentative essays of the experimental group than in the control one. The results show that the applied methods helped draw the participants' attention to genre and the linguistic choices required to achieve the purpose of the written text.

The research findings and the literature confirm that providing writing instruction based on the ideational, interpersonal, and textual dimensions of SFL led to an improvement in the participants' writing (Ersan & Uslu, 2020; Unsal Sakiroglu, 2020; Uslu, 2020). On the ideational level, using nominalization reflected knowledge of participants, processes, and circumstance. It also allowed the experimental group to use grammatical metaphors as a way to compact previous ideas and put them in a position of focus in their next sentence. This contributed to logical flow and coherence. As far as voice is concerned, the results indicated more formality and modality in the experimental group. This is due to writing instruction that focused on the function of cohesive devices necessary to express opinion in an academic way. Finally, the approach helped students make linguistic choices appropriate for the purpose of the text they wrote. It appears from the findings that the jargon used in the experimental group was suitable for the argumentation genre. In regard to voice, the results indicated more formality and modality in the experimental group. This is due to writing instruction that focused on the function of cohesive devices necessary to express opinion in an academic way.

Recommendations

The researcher highly recommends conducting further research on a larger sample. This study sheds the light on four apparent needs observed in the writing tasks of the two groups, but it may not provide a specific representation of what these needs are. This is to say that there may be more than the four needs discussed in the study. Therefore, a larger sample would provide a more representative assessment. In addition, the time constraints had an impact on the instruction and feedback given to the students during the implementation of the method. The writing was done over the course of four lessons, with only half of the class time given for it. Moreover, due to the limited time, the peer review stage, which is a part of the Joint Construction, did not happen. The time constraint also limited compacting and unpacking exercises and examining additional similar text types to explore more linguistic choices for discussions and practices. Another important aspect of argumentation that could have been done more effectively has to do with the thesis statement part in the introduction. The presentation of thesis statement in the *Unlock* appears to be more of an announcement than thesis. This is due to its lack of claim. The thesis is the map that lays out what will be discussed in the body paragraphs, but it should also have a statement of opinion. Therefore, an elaboration on pro/con thesis statement should be incorporated in the unit. This includes an assertion with justifications highlighted in the thesis statement. Thus, future research should be conducted within a sufficient timeframe. Overall, if more samples were examined and more time was allotted for the empirical part of the study, more language needs would have been identified with more representative results.

Acknowledgements

To Dr. Robert Fox, may his soul rests in peace.

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