



# Scaffolding Chinese as a second language writing through a Systemic Functional Linguistics approach



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## ABSTRACT

Since current research on Chinese as a Second/Foreign Language (CSL/CFL) instruction has paid scant attention to writing at the discourse level, the purpose of this study is to explore and address this gap by investigating the effect of a writing pedagogy, based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), on the development of Chinese writing ability. The present study derives from a research project in which an SFL-based multimedia writing program was designed for CSL/CFL learners. The effectiveness of this project was examined through the assessment of two CSL course, consisting of a total of 16 pre-intermediate level participants, at a university in Taiwan. To provide an in-depth account of the instructional potential of an SFL-based writing approach, this paper reports a case study focusing on the progress made by two of the participants during a lesson unit on descriptive writing. Pre- and post-instruction texts written by the two students were collected and analyzed in detail to illustrate the potential affordances that an SFL-based writing approach can offer to CSL/CFL learning. The results of this qualitative study indicate that the two pre-intermediate level writers demonstrated increased control in their use of the ideational, interpersonal, and textual resources associated with the descriptive genre. These findings suggest that SFL-informed educational practices may prove effective for CSL novice writers, and thus have further pedagogical implications for second/foreign language education.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, little attention has been paid to CSL/CFL (Chinese as a Second/Foreign Language) writing for communicative purposes, either theoretically or pedagogically (Zhang, 2009). Given the complexity of the Chinese writing system, CSL/CFL imposes enormous challenges on beginning learners with an alphabetic first language (Allen, 2008; Chen et al., 2013; Ye, 2013). As such, a great deal of CSL/CFL research has focused on the issue of learning Chinese characters, such as through Pinyin (e.g., Lee & Kalyuga, 2011; Shen & Xu, 2015; Xu, Chang, Zhang, & Perfetti, 2013) or radical awareness (e.g., Chen et al., 2013; Shen & Ke, 2007). Despite the fact that some studies have offered pedagogical suggestions on CSL/CFL writing (see Shum & Zhang, 2005; Everson & Xiao, 2011), the instructional designs of these studies have been presented in an anecdotal manner and have not been subject to adequate systematic investigation necessary to inform educators regarding effective pedagogies for teaching CSL/CFL composition. While a few studies have empirically investigated CSL writing by

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exploring the instrumental role of writing as a language learning activity in CSL/CFL classrooms (Mou, 2003; Zhang, 2009), their findings fail to address the issue of instructional approaches to CSL/CFL writing. As a consequence, CSL/CFL writing instruction at the discourse level remains comparatively underdeveloped, with few theoretically sound educational approaches applicable for Chinese language classrooms.

The overarching goal of language education is to foster students' ability to use language appropriately for effective communication in a wide array of social contexts (Bachman, 1990; Hymes, 1966; Savignon, 1997). Likewise, composing a text as a meaning-making activity is demonstrated to facilitate second language acquisition (Byrnes, 2013; Manchón, 2011). Most importantly, a growing population will require Chinese literacy as a communicative tool to achieve academic goals, as indicated by a recent statistical report on foreign students in China (Ministry of Education, 2016). This report reveals that, in 2016, China recruited 442,773 foreign students, representing an 11.4% increase over 2015. It further highlights that almost half (47%) of all international students in China are pursuing undergraduate studies at Chinese universities and nearly 30% study in Chinese primary and secondary schools. Above all, technological advancement has eased the burden involved in learning to write Chinese words by hand, as learners can now use word processors to input Chinese characters through Pinyin transcription systems (Stickler & Shi, 2013). Based on the above theoretical and practical considerations, it is clear that more scholarly attention is warranted in the area of developing and evaluating pedagogy for learners' acquisition of Chinese writing skills. The present study seeks to address this research gap by applying an SFL-based genre approach to CSL writing instruction, described in detail in following sections, and investigating the learning potential of such an approach for improving pre-intermediate Chinese learners writing proficiency.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Theoretical background

In the past decades, the concept of 'genre' and the pedagogical value of genre-based writing pedagogy have attracted growing interest among second language (L2) writing scholars and educators (e.g., Cheng, 2006; Hyland, 2004; Hyon, 1996; Swales, 2011; Tardy, 2009). One major advantage of genre approaches over other pedagogical options is the emphasis on promoting L2 writers' understanding of the connections between the communicative purposes and the discourse features of a text (Harman, 2013; Hyland, 2004). The Systemic Functional Linguistics-based genre approach to teaching writing is one of three broad approaches to genre instruction, which were proposed by Hyon (1996) and are widely acknowledged by genre theorists and researchers (see excellent reviews by Hyland, 2004; Johns, 2002; Gebhard & Harman, 2011; or a special issue of *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 2011). The SFL-based genre approach has been envisaged as "perhaps the most clearly articulated and pedagogically successful" among these various approaches (Hyland, 2004, p.25). Below, I will briefly explain its underlying conceptualization of language and its implications for writing instruction, including examples from several empirical studies related to this approach across different educational settings and languages.

According to Hyland (2004) and Hyon (1996), the SFL-based genre approach to writing instruction, as developed by linguists and practitioners in Australia, draws on the linguistic theory of Michael Halliday (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Halliday, 1994). This theory conceptualizes language as a set of systems from which users make choices to create meanings in a social context to achieve specific communicative functions (i.e., expressing their experiences, interacting with others, or organizing coherent and logical messages) (Hyland, 2004). That is, the SFL model of language is comprised of three dimensions of language resources related to meaning-making: ideational, interpersonal, and textual resources. Ideational resources are used to construct the content of the text and represent our experiences as we engage in various social events and professional activities. Interpersonal resources relate to the maintenance or negotiation of social relationships and are primarily expressed through emotional responses and subjective evaluations. Textual resources are utilized to manage the logical flow of ideational and interpersonal meanings, obtaining the goals of cohesiveness and coherence, and are tailored to different modalities (such as speech, writing, or multimodalities).

This model of language is considered as "an indispensable foundation" for genre-based instruction (Martin, 2009, p.11). Martin (2009, p.13) has elaborated on the concept of genre in the SFL tradition and defines it as "a staged, goal-oriented social process, consisting of unfolding stages to achieve a communicative purpose in a social situation". Thus, 'genre' is an umbrella term to show how texts vary in terms of their social purposes, and how different types of text utilize different language resources to achieve their communicative goals. This notion of 'genre' is embedded in the SFL model of language and social context (see Fig. 1).

As can be observed in Fig. 1, the ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings are "projected onto social context, giving rise to the register variables of field, tenor and mode" (Martin, 2009, p. 11). Language choices in genre construction are made and varied by register variables (Martin, 2009; Troyan, 2014), of which there are three types: field (topic or focus of the activity), tenor (the relationship between the writer and reader), and mode (expectations for how particular text types should be organized). As indicated by the figure, the field variable of discourse is related to ideational resources, while the tenor variable relates to interpersonal resources, and the mode variable relates to textual resources.

The SFL approach to genre instruction is grounded in the belief that learning to write should be based on explicit awareness of language (Byrnes, 2009, 2013; Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Hyland, 2004; Hyon, 1996; Martin & Rose, 2008; Martin, 2009). It should be emphasized that such language awareness for writing development not only entails conscious knowledge of linguistic resources used in the construction of vocabulary and sentence structure but also extends to discourse

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