
10-11-2022

Grounding Systemic Functional Linguistics and Critical Theory in Deepening ELL's Discipline Knowledge and Exploring the Praxis of Teaching and Researching Disciplinary Literacy Development: A Book Review

Elih Sutisna Yanto

Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang, elih.sutisna@fkip.unsika.ac.id

Junjun Muhamad Ramdani

Universitas Siliwangi, junjunmuhamad@unsil.ac.id

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Recommended APA Citation

Yanto, E. S., & Ramdani, J. M. (2022). Grounding Systemic Functional Linguistics and Critical Theory in Deepening ELL's Discipline Knowledge and Exploring the Praxis of Teaching and Researching Disciplinary Literacy Development: A Book Review. *The Qualitative Report*, 27(10), 2202-2207. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5946>

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Abstract

In the book, *Teaching and Researching ELLs' Disciplinary Literacies: SFL in Action in the Context of US School Reform* (2019), Meg Gebhard, professor of Applied Linguistics and co-director of the Secondary English Education Program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA, provides a comprehensive description to second language researchers, multilingual learners, language teachers, and teacher educators of how Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) can be applied to give ELLs access to the language and literacies they need to succeed across the curriculum. Throughout the chapters, Gebhard provides convincing evidence that mastering their various grammars and genres (text types) is equally important. This well-referenced book is a valuable resource for practitioners and educators who want to expand their understandings of how language works and how to best support its development in school settings. Gebhard offers a straightforward introduction to SFL-based literacy instruction and discourse analysis. The work is distinctive in its use of highly contextualized examples of how teachers and students utilize texts across the curriculum. This book is also unique because as the reader moves through the chapters, the suggested practices get more detailed and begin to take into account the institutional and community conversations that shape how teaching and learning happen in our public schools.

Keywords

disciplinary literacy, discourse analysis, genre, systemic functional linguistics

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Grounding Systemic Functional Linguistics and Critical Theory in Deepening ELL's Discipline Knowledge and Exploring the Praxis of Teaching and Researching Disciplinary Literacy Development: A Book Review

Elih Sutisna Yanto¹ and Junjun Muhamad Ramdani²

¹Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang, Indonesia

²The University of New South Wales, Australia

²Universitas Siliwangi, Indonesia

In the book, *Teaching and Researching ELLs' Disciplinary Literacies: SFL in Action in the Context of US School Reform* (2019), Meg Gebhard, professor of Applied Linguistics and co-director of the Secondary English Education Program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA, provides a comprehensive description to second language researchers, multilingual learners, language teachers, and teacher educators of how Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) can be applied to give ELLs access to the language and literacies they need to succeed across the curriculum. Throughout the chapters, Gebhard provides convincing evidence that mastering their various grammars and genres (text types) is equally important. This well-referenced book is a valuable resource for practitioners and educators who want to expand their understandings of how language works and how to best support its development in school settings. Gebhard offers a straightforward introduction to SFL-based literacy instruction and discourse analysis. The work is distinctive in its use of highly contextualized examples of how teachers and students utilize texts across the curriculum. This book is also unique because as the reader moves through the chapters, the suggested practices get more detailed and begin to take into account the institutional and community conversations that shape how teaching and learning happen in our public schools.

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Based on our more than 20 years of experience as English teachers in foreign language settings, the ultimate goal for English teachers should be to engage students in exploring meaning in text through classroom discussions about language and to enable teachers to identify language patterns in order to help language learners see how language works. Meg Gebhard's (2019) book, *Teaching and Researching ELLs' Disciplinary Literacies: SFL in Action in the Context of US School Reform*, provides a critical evaluation of recent research grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Her research demonstrates novel and well-supported applications of SFL in curriculum, instruction, and testing for students. This allows them to maximize their cultural and linguistic resources. She has discussed the perspectives of teachers, curriculum, student work, and action research questions.

In this book, Gebhard uses the notion of "English Language Learners" (ELLs), which belongs to multilingual learners. "Multilingual learners" refer to all students who regularly

come into contact with and/or engage in languages other than English. “They include English language learners (ELLs), dual language learners (DLLs), newcomers, students whose formal schooling has been interrupted (SIFE), long-term English learners (L-TELEs), English language learners with disabilities, gifted and talented English language learners, heritage language learners, students who speak English as an additional language (EAL), and students who speak different dialects of English or native languages” (WIDA, 2020, p. 11).

As Gebhard stated in the first chapter, this book addresses the challenging task of teaching disciplinary literacy to all students. This book also offers pre- and in-service teachers, teacher educators, literacy researchers, and policymakers a critical viewpoint on the development of disciplinary literacy. This book allows educators to reconsider their ideas about language and learning. Regarding language development, I recognize Halliday's perspective. Language learning, according to Halliday, is a semiotic process: "learning is learning to mean and to develop one's meaning potential" (Halliday, 1993, p. 113). In this way, learning a language means expanding one's language repertoire, hence, language learners can communicate in a wide range of settings, from the casual, everyday settings of home to the more formal settings of school, work, and institutions. Social semiotic theory is a theory of meaning and communication.

The term "social semiotics" was coined by Michael A. K. Halliday, a British linguist and the founder of social semiotics and systemic functional linguistics, in his 1978 book, *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. Today, social semiotics and systemic functional linguistics are strong directions in language and text studies. Scholars use Halliday's method of describing language and understanding meaning-making in educational settings on all continents, with no exception in the United States. Scholars have added to and changed Halliday's work and used his ideas in new fields and contexts. Halliday looks at how language and other meaning-making systems create ideas and experiences at the same time, negotiate social roles and change identities, and control the flow of discourse in different situations.

At the end of each chapter, Gebhard uses Hasan's (1996) work on reflection literacy to build meaningful reflective activities for collaborative teacher praxis. Hasan (1996) suggested that to know something, readers have to ask questions, analyze, and think. Readers also have to be able to turn normative practices and dominant ways of thinking on their heads. Hasan asserts that this kind of literacy requires students to be able to do more than just decode and understand texts. They also need to be able to think about how language and other meaning-making systems shape knowledge and how that affects society. According to Hasan, "the literate person should be able to interrogate the wording and meaning of any utterance" in order to determine who is presented, who is excluded, and how different methods of constructing knowledge affect the world we live in (2003, p. 447). Throughout the book, Gebhard gives a growing list of activities that can help both new and experienced teachers do deep reflective praxis.

Gebhard concludes that her book guides readers through the investigation of the following important questions:

- What is “disciplinary literacy” and how is it different from more “everyday” ways of making meaning with languages and other sign systems (e.g., gestures, images, graphs, equations)?
- What is learning and how can teachers design curriculum, instruction, and assessments to support the development of new literacy practices that will, in turn, help students accomplish a wider variety of disciplinary, social, and political goals?

- To what extent do school reforms of the past and present support and/or constrain teachers in enacting an equity agenda in their classrooms, especially for students institutionally designated as ELLs?
- How can teachers, working in collaboration with others, use ideas presented in this book to become change agents to support multilingual students' disciplinary literacy development and their own sense of professional efficacy? (pp. 3-4)

Gebhard's nine chapters provide a strategy for future research and educational reform and support pre- and in-service teachers, teacher educators, and literacy researchers, including doctoral students. In Chapter 1, she highlights her interests and resources, including the disciplinary and linguistic skills she developed as a public school teacher, a PhD student, and finally, a teacher educator. She also talks about her critical view of language, learning, and the way American society and education are changing.

Chapter 2 presents a case study in the classroom in which Mr. Banks, a well-meaning journalism teacher, provided Celine, a multilingual Brazilian student, with "word-and sentence-level corrections" (p. 1) but was unable to provide her with more comprehensive feedback on how to develop her work into a publishable article. In this case, Gebhard uses the conceptual framework to investigate language, learning, and social change in U.S. public schools. She works with pre-service teachers pursuing a master's degree in ESL or secondary English language arts. She helps her graduate students understand the linguistic requirements of disciplinary instruction. The chapter introduces readers to a broad concept of "grammar" through a case study, with a focus on semiotic choices that vary by discipline, audience, and purpose. She wants professional development for teachers to be refocused on the language, disciplinary, and cultural interests of multilingual learners. At the end of the chapter, there are exercises and discussion questions to help readers put together action research groups to think critically about how students use text and work on their own professional development.

In Chapter 3, Gebhard provides an excellent and straightforward explanation of the similarities and contrasts between the three major grammar paradigms used in school language and literature teaching and learning: Skinner's behavioral approach, Chomsky's psycholinguistic perspective, and Halliday's social semiotic perspective. Using classroom transcripts, the author demonstrates that behavioral and psycholinguistic theories do not help students enhance their language skills. On the other hand, Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory has enabled language teachers to support their students' reading, writing, and critical analysis of different types of texts both in and out of the classroom. Halliday looks at how language and other meaning-making systems create ideas and experiences at the same time, negotiate social roles and change identities, and control the flow of discourse in different situations. She lists them in Table 3.5 so that readers can easily compare and contrast different ideas about grammar that are used in schools to teach and learn language and literacy.

The goal of Chapters 4 and 5 is to assist teachers in making the transition from SFL theory to classroom examples. Chapter 4 expands on previous chapters by exploring Halliday's functional model of text/context dynamics and how it has shaped disciplinary literacy instruction across grade levels and content areas. Through an analysis of email writings written by her students, Gebhard explains SFL context of culture, context of situation, genre, and register through an analysis of email writings written by her students. She also discusses how teachers can utilize this information to develop curriculum, instruction, and assessments as well as research the effectiveness of their teaching on student learning using the teaching and learning cycle. In this chapter, she explains how SFL concepts and pedagogical approaches were implemented by teachers in under-resourced

urban schools. The chapter demonstrates how teachers, most of whom were unfamiliar with linguistic knowledge, used SFL perspectives to plan, carry out, and research how their teaching practices benefited the literacy development of their students.

Chapter 5 broadens the focus on SFL by looking at how register choices contribute to the creation of disciplinary meanings in texts that K–12 students are often asked to read, write, and discuss in school. This chapter uses examples from Access to Critical Content and English Language Acquisition (ACCELA) teachers' research projects to show how teachers helped students notice how field choices build the content of a text, tenor choices show the voice, and mode choices control the flow of information in the genres that are usually part of the K-12 curriculum (e.g., narratives, descriptions, explanations, arguments). At the end of the chapter, there are suggestions for how teachers could use SFL tools to plan, carry out, and think about their teaching.

The first of the three main chapters gives an overview of the bigger issues that affect teaching and learning in public schools. In Chapter 6, Gebhard discusses how federal legislation protecting the civil rights of children has altered bilingual and ESL education approaches. The purpose of this chapter is to explain how state and federal policies influence how teachers teach reading and writing. The chapter also discusses how the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment Consortium (WIDA) assists teachers in dealing with new and constantly changing state and federal laws in order to help them respond to changing state and federal standards. In the final section of the chapter, teachers are shown how to collect and analyze data to determine how well their schools protect the civil rights of ELLs. In chapter 7, the author explained the continuation of the dynamics in relation to the school reforms highlighting the standardization and accountability movement. In this parts, She explores how school reforms affect teaching practices and learning opportunities for ELLs. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, English-only mandates, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and high-stakes testing to assess both students and teachers are all part of the standardization and accountability agenda. It is argued that these reforms have brought about several unfavorable consequences, for example, for vulnerable students and the weakness of teachers' professional development. At the end of the chapter, there are suggestions for how teachers and teacher candidates can collect and analyze data on the effects of these reforms through fieldwork, graduate studies, or participation in a collaborative research group. In this collaborative work, they may undertake critical reflections towards the standardization and accountability movement in a more localized context to identify positive and negative consequences of the school reforms. This practice may form a supportive community of practice at micro- and meso-contextual levels, a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998) for sustaining collaborative learning.

Chapter 8 investigates the economic, political, and historical context of public schooling in the United States since the development of the modern public school system. Gebhard explores how public education growth in several U.S. regions in the 20th century reveals two opposing notions of progressive education: administrative progressives and social progressives. These progressives contributed to the development of large public school systems intended to provide all students, rich and poor, with access to a public education that would enable them to realize their individual potential and build a strong democracy and economy. The chapter contends that these beliefs lead to inconsistencies in immigrant families' approaches to literacy development and education. The chapter encourages teachers to learn about local immigration history in order to understand how demographic, economic, and political changes affect schools now. The author (2019) concludes that many current and former school reformers lack "a well-articulated understanding of what language is, how language practices shape the development of subject matter knowledge, and how approaches to teaching literacy are implicated in undemocratic learning outcomes"(p. 234).

In the final chapter, a secondary teacher named Grace Harris recounts how she used Figure 1.1's conceptual framework to develop and implement disciplinary reading education in a high-poverty urban school. In collaboration with literacy researcher Kathryn Accurso, Gebhard demonstrates how Grace used SFL with "children with little or interrupted formal education" (SLIFE). Gebhard and Accurso document the literacy progress of the Guatemalan immigrant, "Valencia." By assessing model texts and employing multilingual and multimodal resources, Valencia learned to read and write autobiographies, poetry, scientific descriptions, mathematics reports, and social studies arguments. The chapter includes a case study that blends theoretical principles, instructional strategies, and an analysis of student learning. At the end of the chapter, there are suggestions for teachers on how to make their own case studies to help improve the literacy skills of their multilingual students and further their own professional development in the classroom. Situated in a multicultural setting, this chapter provides the readers with detailed accounts of how the teacher scaffolded focal students who developed multimodal literacy practices. It is suggested that practitioners (e.g., teachers, teacher educators) and researchers integrate action research and SFL-genre based pedagogy as a means of professional development to enhance practices in language teaching in multilingual societies and beyond (Accurso & Gebhard, 2021; Pessoa et al., 2018; Ramdani et al., 2022).

The fundamental issue with Gebhard's book is that it is challenging for both in-service and pre-service teachers to understand grammar and SFL in general. The book is also difficult for teachers who have never been taught in SFL. Nevertheless, she makes SFL and genre theory obvious and accessible for teachers. As a result, the main strength of the book *Teaching and Researching ELLs' Disciplinary Literacies* is that it includes a praxis feature in each chapter to investigate teaching and researching disciplinary literacy development. Readers will discover how to do research and improve their own instructions. Throughout the chapters, the author demonstrates the importance of mastering grammar and genres for teachers. This well-referenced book is important for practitioners and educators who want to understand how language works and how to support its development in schools. She discusses SFL literacy teaching and discourse analysis. The work employs contextualized examples of how teachers and students interact with literature across the curriculum. This book is unique in that the suggested actions grow increasingly specific as the reader progresses through the chapters, taking institutional and community dialogues into account. In addition, the power of Gebhard's book is that it transcends the boundaries of the classroom. As our review or essay shows, we think this book is a great resource for ESOL teachers who want to learn more about the language and strongly recommend it for TESOL graduate programs and all ESOL teachers.

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Author Note

Elih Sutisna Yanto is a reviewer for the *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, published by EMERALD and *Cogent Arts & Humanities* published by Taylor & Francis. Elih is a board member of the Exploratory Practice Indonesian Community (EPiC) and faculty member of teacher training and education at Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang, Indonesia. He has taught English for twenty years. His research interests are language teacher professional development, Systemic Functional Linguistics in language education, and qualitative research in ELT. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to elih.sutisna@fkip.unsika.ac.id.

Junjun Muhamad Ramdani is currently a PhD candidate at the School of Education, University of New South Wales, Australia. He is also a faculty member of the English Education Department of Universitas Siliwangi, Indonesia. He has taught English for eight years. His research interests are language teacher professional development, teaching English speaking, TELL, and qualitative research in ELT. junjunmuhamad@unsil.ac.id.

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Article Citation

Yanto, E. S., & Ramdani, J. M. (2022). Grounding systemic functional linguistics and critical theory in deepening ELL's discipline knowledge and exploring the praxis of teaching and researching disciplinary literacy development: A book review. *The Qualitative Report*, 27(10), 2202-2207. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5946>
