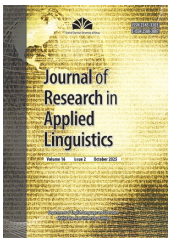
Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics
ISSN: 2345-3303 – E-ISSN: 2588-3887 – https://rals.scu.ac.ir
Published by Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz

Please cite this paper as follows:

McCabe, A., Arús-Hita, J., & Matthiessen, C.M.I.M. (2025). Introduction: SFL in language education. *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics*, *16*(2), 3-10. https://doi.org/10.22055/rals.2025.50875.3694

Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz



Introduction by Special Edition Editors

Introduction: SFL in Language Education

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Received: 16/10/2025 Accepted: 22/10/2025

This special issue of the *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics* contributes to understandings of language teaching and learning through the application of linguistic theory to English language education in a variety of contexts from around the world. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) has been applied to language education from its very foundations and throughout its ongoing development as a linguistic theory (for a recent overview, see McCabe, 2021). M.A.K. Halliday's pioneering work, which laid the foundations for what is now known as Systemic Functional Linguistics, was rooted in his experiences learning Chinese as a foreign language and teaching Chinese and Russian to English speakers and English to Chinese speakers (Halliday & Hasan, 2006). Halliday's book *The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching*, co-authored by Angus McIntosh and Peter Strevens and published in 1964, was just the first in a long tradition of applying SFL to language pedagogy. In fact, Halliday et al. (1964, p. 5) argued that, of all the possible applications of linguistic study the "teaching of native and foreign languages is perhaps the most important".

SFL theory continued to develop at the same time as it moved more fully into English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts through Halliday's work with mother tongue English teachers, leading to an SFL-informed pedagogy for literacy development that has taken hold in school contexts around the globe. The theory and pedagogy developed hand in hand, given that SFL's central concern is the linguistic description of text in context. Whereas traditional and formal grammars focus on explaining how language works at the level of syntax, SFL is concerned with how we use language to make meaning in social interaction across the varied contexts of our lives. It views language as a meaning potential—that is, as the range of meanings we can realize through the linguistic resources available to us (e.g. Halliday, 1973, 1978). To teach that meaning potential, we first need to analyze real texts and describe how they are constructed.

The 1964 book offers a model of language as a foundation for linguistic description and language teaching, a precursor to what would later develop into SFL with its emphasis on language as a patterned, meaning-making system shaped by use. While acknowledging the importance of other aspects of language learning, such as teaching method and motivation (Matthiessen & Yousefi, this issue) and highlighting the point that language teachers do not need to be fully versed in linguistics, Halliday et al. (1964) suggest that their model "is most useful for language-teaching purposes" as it makes "the task of the language learner, and of the language teacher, … easier" (Halliday et al., 1964, p. 18). They base their arguments on the need to take context into account in language description at a time when structural linguistics held sway over language teaching through the audio-lingual method, with its focus on the forms of language at the expense of its functions in context. Indeed, a very productive line of thinking about language introduced in the book is the notion of register, or "a variety of a language distinguished according to use" (Halliday et al., 1964, p. 87). Registers vary along three dimensions: field (what is going on in the context and what the text is about), tenor (who are taking part in the context: the relationship between interactants, then referred to as *style*), and mode (what role language is playing in the context: the channel and medium of communication, the rhetorical mode of the text). These three contextual variables each activate different dimensions of meaning in language, which are modelled as metafunctions in SFL. The view of the role of SFL in (language) education foreshadowed by Halliday et al. (1964) is developed further after decades of research and numerous educational applications around the world by Halliday (2023).

In educational and other applied contexts, one of the unique strengths of SFL is the fundamental distinction between theory and description (see e.g. Matthiessen & Teruya, 2024). The Systemic Functional Theory of language in context is a holistic theory of language as a shared human system — of "modern language" as it must have emerged with Anatomically Modern Humans (*Homo sapiens*) around 150 to 250 K years ago. This theory specifies the overall "architecture" of language in context. It has been designed to guide the development of descriptions of particular languages that have evolved as richly varied manifestations of "modern language" while ensuring that categories derived from major languages like English are not foisted upon other languages (the way that missionary linguists tended to do with categories derived from the description of Latin). The first languages to be described informed by SFL by Halliday were Chinese and then English. But now, over six decades later, the range of languages described in terms of SFL has been expanded considerably; the languages described include a number of the "major languages" spoken around the world, but also a growing number of "minor" ones. Just as systemic functional theory of language is designed to be holistic — in tune with general systems theory and systems thinking (e.g. Capra & Luisi, 2014), so systemic functional descriptions of particular languages are developed to be comprehensive — comprehensive, meaning-oriented descriptions based on a wide range of texts belonging to different registers (functional varieties of language). The combination of holistic theory and comprehensive descriptions ensures that SFL is an appliable kind of linguistics (e.g. Halliday, 2008) — a resource with enough power and coverage to support educational applications. Here it is worth noting that SFL is unique among approaches that have been used in institutions of education in that it offers both theoretically informed pedagogy and educational applications and a growing range of rich comprehensive descriptions of particular languages. This is an enormous source of strength and insight — and it enables us to ensure that work on language education actually engages both with language and with particular languages instead of keeping a considerable distance due to the reliance on (educational) psychology (cf. Halliday,1993).

Descriptions of particular languages as resources for making meaning in context — meaning potentials — are organized around three interrelated metafunctions: the ideational (the construal of experience), the interpersonal (the enactment of social relationships), and the textual (the organization of experience and relationships into a discursive flow of messages in context). As a brief example, the text in the meme (Figure 1) "Decaf coffee only works if you throw it at people" ideationally constructs, through figuration, two related figures of experience — one of decaf coffee 'working' and one of it being 'thrown at people'. Interpersonally, at the level of speech exchange, it enacts a playful, informal relation between equals who share a world of coffee humor. Textually, in terms of progression, the meme moves from the given topic (*decaf coffee*) to that surprising new concept of what we can do with it.



Figure 1: Meme (Based on a popular Internet meme; created with ChatGPT, OpenAI, 2025)

In addition to the tri-metafunctional perspective, SFL also views language as a stratified system (Figure 2).

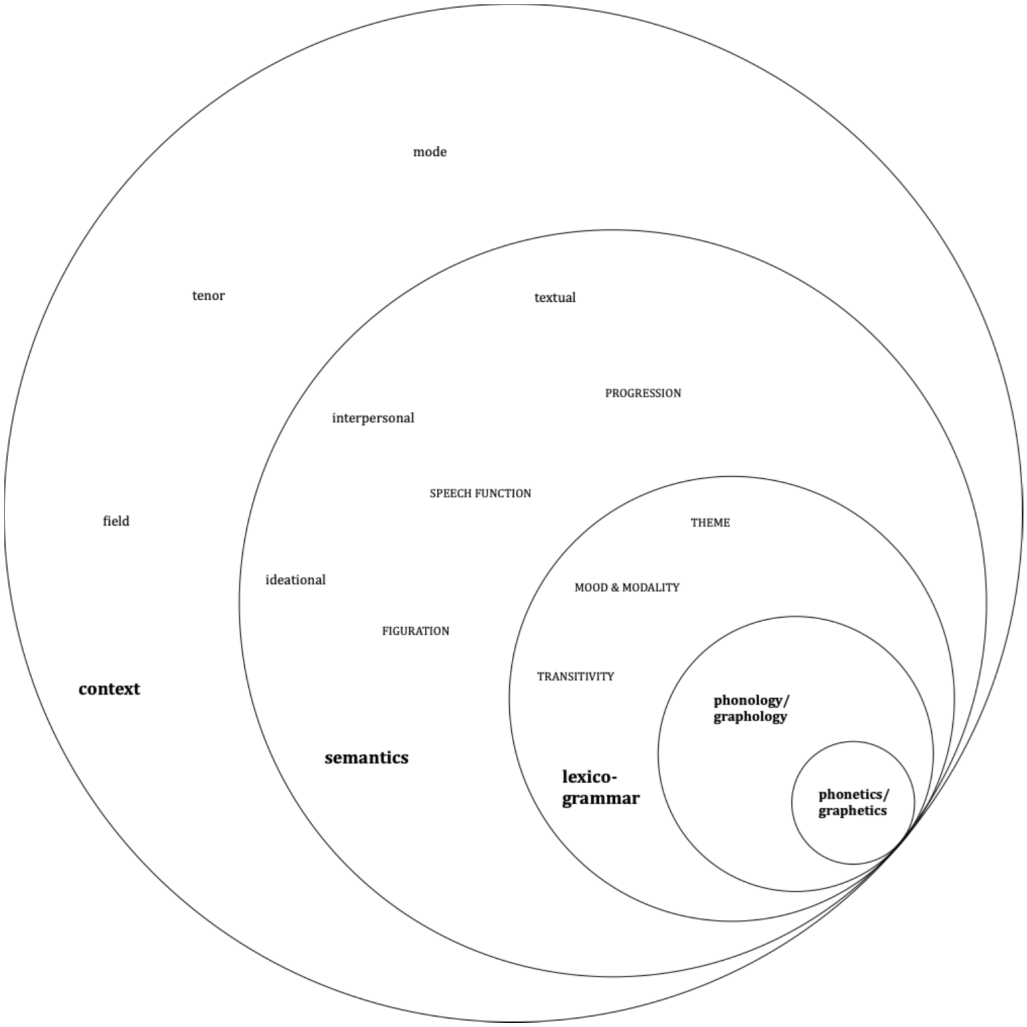


Figure 2: Stratified model of language

That is, in any given context, we have a range of choices in meaning available to us; these meanings are realized through the lexicogrammatical choices we make to construct those meanings as wordings, choices which are, in turn, realized through phonology (in the spoken mode) and graphology (in the written mode). So, viewing stratification from the bottom up, graphology/phonology realizes lexicogrammar, which realizes semantics, which realizes context. At the level of context, the meme depicted in Figure 1 is an example of internet humor, presupposing a shared cultural attitude toward coffee. This context is realized semantically through ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings as explained above. These meanings are then realized through lexicogrammatical choices: the ideational through transitivity choices of material processes (*work*, *throw*) with participants *decaf coffee*, *you* and *people*, constructing a dynamic, physical scene; the interpersonal through the choice of the declarative mood, thus stating the proposition as a fact, while using sarcasm to emit a negative appraisal of decaf coffee (*only works if…*); and the textual through the organization of the clauses as units of information, moving from Themes (or the point of departure of the clauses, i.e. *decaf coffee*, *you*) to Rhemes, which complete the message, leading to the new (and perhaps unexpected) Rheme of *throw it at people*. Finally, the meme's graphological realization, short captions in bold font, contributes to its delivery and immediacy.

SFL's stratified model is not uniformly modelled in the same way by all SF linguists, although the differences are complementary and productively drawn on for language education. For example, for Halliday (1978) and Matthiessen (2015), *register* is a linguistic phenomenon – a semantic variety of language reflecting variation in the meanings that are "at risk" in different situations (see Martin, 1992, pp. 502, 589, on his misunderstanding of Halliday's use of the term "register" to refer to a functional variety of language). This view has led to a highly productive focus in language teaching on showing students ways they can adapt their L2 language choices for varying contexts of situation (cf. Matthiessen, 2021; Matthiessen & Yousefi, this issue; Schleppegrell, 2020). For Martin (1992, 2014), the term register refers to patterns

within context, roughly corresponding to Halliday's "situation type": it belongs to the stratum of context, which he divides into two substrata: the context of situation, or register (which is realized through the stratum of semantics), and the context of culture (genre). Genres are recurrent social processes shaped by cultural purposes and realised through typical stages (Martin, 2014). Stages (such as the Record of Events in a biographical recount), and the phases within them, are characterized within context by distinctive patterns of register, and within language by distinctive patterns of semantics and lexicogrammar. Based on extensive analyses of school texts, Martin and his colleagues developed a taxonomy of educational genres (e.g., factorial explanations, historical accounts; c.f. Martin & Rose, 2008) and designed a genre-based pedagogy (GBP) to make these patterns explicit to learners. In GBP, teachers guide students through three phases: first, drawing on the extensive SFL-based descriptions of a given genre, they deconstruct model texts with learners, highlighting the patternings of their stages and language features; this is followed by joint construction of a text within the genre; and finally, students are given the opportunity to independently construct their own instance of the genre (Boccia & Hasan, this issue). This teaching macro-genre is known as the Teaching-Learning Cycle (TLC, Rothery, 1996 — drawing on Jerome Bruner's work), and both the TLC and GBP have been adapted to school contexts around the world (cf., Chang et al., this issue; Herazo Rivera & Sagre Barboza, this issue) .

It is worth noting further here that SFL's metalanguage has also been adapted for analysis of semiotic systems other than language, elucidating their modes of meaning, such as image (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Rossette-Crake, this issue). As with verbal text, visual image also realizes three kinds of meaning. The representational metafunction (corresponding to the ideational) in this case is realized through the choice of the central participant, the cup full of coffee, while the viewer of the image is positioned to function as an interactive participant in a conceptual process. The interactive metafunction (corresponding to the interpersonal) is realized through, for example, camera angles and framing; in the case of the meme, the close-up shot and slightly elevated angle of the coffee cup invite a familiar, observational stance. The compositional metafunction (corresponding to the textual) is realized through positioning of elements and framing: the text tightly frames the coffee cup, and is arranged top and bottom, in which the bottom clause (*"if you throw it at people"*) introduces the new – the humorous twist.

Thus, the metalanguage of SFL provides for robust descriptions of meaning as created through texts as interactive events within any context, about any topic, geared toward any audience and as realized through multiple semiotic modes, including their verbal lexicogrammatical realizations. There is now over half a century's treasure trove of SFL-based descriptions of different genres, including conversations, healthcare interactions, and especially of academic genres across ages, fields, and cultures (cf. Christie & Martin, 1997). These descriptions have formed the basis of SFL-informed pedagogies such as GBP and Reading-to-Learn (Acevedo, Rose & Whittaker, 2023; Rose & Martin, 2012) and variations as adapted to specific teaching contexts (Guerra Lyons et al., 2023). Many such applications have focused on L1 literacy education, where explicit teaching of registers and genres supports learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Chang, Bui & Harman, this issue). For example, SFL-based literacy pedagogy has been widely implemented in Australia (Jones & Derewianka 2016) based on descriptions of school discourse (cf., Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Humphrey, 2016) and has more recently gained strong traction in North America, following initial resistance due to competing linguistic traditions (Christie 1994). In North America, growth has been driven by the work of Schleppegrell (2004) and others, and includes applications to numerous school contexts (Brisk, 2023; de Oliviera & Iddings, 2014; de Oliveira & Westerlund 2022). SFL-based guides that include multimodal and multiliteracies pedagogies have also emerged (de Silva Joyce & Feez, 2018; Macken-Horarik et al., 2017; Unsworth, 2001), and literacy pedagogy has been applied to higher education contexts (Dreyfus et al., 2015). As the SFL-informed research and applications have increasingly been taken up around the world, the SFL community are now addressing the challenges identified for the "Global South", with members of the global community working to re-orient from the dominance of the "Northern" view of the world. Here the work on *Reading to Learn* has been at the forefront, opening up opportunities for complementary developments: e.g. Acevedo, Rose & Whittaker (2023).

While much of this work has centered on L1 literacy, applications to foreign language teaching have been more limited, and English as a foreign language (EFL) in particular has seen comparatively little uptake until recently (McCabe, 2021). Nevertheless, SFL researchers and practitioners have made valuable contributions to foreign language pedagogy across several languages (c.f., Byrnes 2006, 2022; Troyan, 2021). Recent work on systemic networks further highlights SFL's potential for language education, offering explicit maps of linguistic resources that learners can gradually master (Arús-Hita, 2008; Arús-Hita, Matthiessen, & Xuan, 2024; Gebhard & Accurso, 2023; Harman, 2018). Building on this

expanding interest, this special issue brings together studies that apply SFL-based pedagogies in diverse EFL contexts. In an application set in Colombia, José David Herazo Rivera and Anamaría Sagre Barboza ("Talking to Learn: Genre pedagogy for spoken communication in the foreign language classroom") report on a decade of research applying genre-based pedagogy to spoken communication. They demonstrate that their adaptation of GBP to oral interactive genres, such as shop exchanges and anecdotes, may help learners to internalize the genre's organizing logic and patternings, preparing them to adapt to the fluid demands of spontaneous interaction. Their study draws on a wealth of data, including teacher interviews, focus groups, lesson observation, and lesson artefacts, from which the authors also discovered the vital role of diagrams in mediating the internalization of the genres. Also drawing on a similarly rich array of data, in "Culturally sustaining SFL Praxis in mathematics: Supporting newly arrived multilingual learners in high school classrooms", Seon Ja Chang, Khanh Bui and Ruth Harman follow two multilingual teachers as they implemented an embodied Teaching and Learning Cycle to help multilingual students in an ESL context in the United States develop mathematical understanding and genre awareness through multimodal, dialogic, and language-focused classroom practices.

Extending the discussion of evaluative meaning to the level of instructional materials, Nadia Abid, Fatma Benelhadj and Dorra Moalla's "Representation of self and other in two Tunisian EFL textbooks" explores how cultural identities are linguistically construed in two widely used textbooks. Drawing on the Appraisal framework, the authors reveal an imbalance in evaluative resources, with positive self-appraisal predominating and interpersonal dimensions underplayed. Such findings raise important questions about the representation of cultures and the ideological positioning of learners within EFL materials. Turning to higher education contexts, Fatma Benelhadj's "How do master's students link their ideas?" compares the use of conjunctions in professional master's dissertations with that in the research articles students cite. Drawing on the Attitude system of Appraisal Theory and operationalizing it in UAM CorpusTool, the authors examine Attitude sub-systems, Polarity, and the identities of Appraiser and Appraised. The analysis reveals an imbalance in the use of evaluative resources: Appreciation of cultural attributes is dominant, while interpersonal meanings are less frequent. Most evaluations are positive, leading to an overall idealized portrayal of cultures and people. The study also finds that Self-Appraisal predominates and that British culture is evaluated more often, reflecting the prevalence of native-speaker perspectives.

Moving to interaction within social media environments, in "Recontextualizing primary genres in macro-genres: The case of photo-stories in IG", Cristina Boccia and Samiah Hassan first provide an in-depth description of the various levels of meaning-making in the genre of photo-stories that have been published on Instagram. They then explain how to implement a pedagogical cycle that leads intermediate and upper-intermediate teenage students and young adults in an EFL environment to produce their own. While Boccia and Hassan focus mainly on verbal meanings in their article, Fiona Rossette-Crake in "Approaching critical social media literacy within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics: the example of 'social media oratory'" includes descriptions of other semiotic resources used in videos created for social media. Thus, her article focuses on lexicogrammatical choices and their interplay with other multimodal resources, highlighting the need for making explicit these ways of making meaning in order to teach critical literacy to language learners in a multiliterate world.

Several of the papers in this issue contribute with deep insights into writing for academic contexts, such as Ana Llinares, Tom Morton & Nashwa Nashaat-Sobhy's "An analysis of presence in CLIL students' writing when defining and exploring in science". Set in a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) classroom in a bilingual secondary school in Spain, their cross-sectional study draws on Martin's notion of *presence,* realized through linguistic features that strengthen or weaken the context dependency of concepts, to illustrate how students develop disciplinary literacy as they write in L2 English. Continuing the focus on disciplinary writing in CLIL contexts, Leah Tompkins' "Beyond the facts: evaluative language use in secondary CLIL history" explores how Spanish secondary students express evaluative meanings when writing about historical events. Drawing on Cognitive Discourse Functions and Appraisal frameworks, Tompkins shows that while learners often reproduce the evaluative stances modeled in textbooks, they struggle to make such evaluations explicit, sometimes relying on everyday lexis or overstating disciplinary claims. Her comparison of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds also highlights variation in how stance and subjectivity are realized, pointing to the importance of scaffolding evaluative meaning-making in history writing.

Extending the issue's attention to academic writing, Leila Shoja and Esmat Babaii's "A diachronic perspective on thematicity in research articles" examines how thematic organization in research articles has evolved over five decades

in the disciplines of mechanical engineering and horticulture. Through a systemic functional analysis of Theme-Rheme structures, the authors reveal both stability and change—while thematic choices have diversified over time, patterns of thematic progression remain largely constant. Their findings invite reflection on how disciplinary conventions evolve and on the pedagogical value of diachronic awareness for teaching academic writing. Complementing this diachronic focus, Marii Abdeljaoued and Akila Sellami Baklouti's "Authorial authority and reader positioning in doctoral theses across disciplines" examines how evaluative stance and engagement resources vary across time and discipline in British doctoral writing. The authors trace a gradual shift toward more assertive, monoglossic positioning, particularly in the hard sciences, while the humanities maintain greater dialogic openness. By mapping these tendencies across decades, the study highlights how evolving academic conventions shape doctoral writers' negotiation of authority and offers pedagogical insights for English for Academic Purposes instruction and supervision.

Adopting a broader perspective, the final two papers move to wider dynamics of pedagogy, investigating ways that SFL-based understandings of how language works can inform policy and illuminate learner motivation. In "Exploring the gaps between policy and practice in a South African Reading Comprehension Class", Tracy Kitchen and Ralph Adendorff draw on Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal framework, which describes areas of interpersonal meaning in English in SFL by analyzing how evaluation and stance are enacted in language. Using this framework, they show that limited attention to invoked evaluative meaning in South African reading policy, curriculum, and classroom practice contributes to the literacy crisis, revealing a disjunct between policy and practice and an overreliance on literal comprehension. Finally, in "Engaging with L2 motivation: Towards a language-based interpretation of learner motivation", Christian Matthiessen and Moslem Yousefi use SFL to provide a novel view of motivation in language learning: as an intersubjective, language-based phenomenon shaped by learners' engagement with different registers and meaning potentials.

In sum, this special issue of the *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics* explores how Systemic Functional Linguistics contributes to English language education worldwide. From its beginnings, SFL has linked linguistic theory with pedagogy, tracing back to Halliday's experience with teaching and learning languages. Halliday's early conception of language as a meaning potential—a resource for making meaning in context—laid the groundwork for subsequent developments in SFL-based approaches to language education. Collectively, the contributions in this issue affirm SFL's value for integrating linguistic theory, pedagogy, and multimodality in language education, offering insights for diverse sociocultural and institutional settings.

Author Contributions

All authors collaborated in writing this introduction.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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