

KONAN UNIVERSITY

## Lessons Learned : Maintaining a Language Focus in CLIL Programs

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journal or publication title	Hirao School of Management review
volume	6
page range	178-188
year	2016-03-30
URL	<a href="http://doi.org/10.14990/00001739">http://doi.org/10.14990/00001739</a>

Hirao School of Management Review 第6巻

**Lessons Learned: Maintaining a Language Focus in CLIL Programs**

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**【Abstract】**

This paper, delivered as a dialog between the two authors, reviews some of the goals of the English language program at the Hirao School of Management, outlines some of the challenges experienced up to this point, and describes the why and how of a genre-based reading and writing program that has been introduced across the three semesters of required English courses for students in the Management Course. Other topics include self-determination theory, especially the basic psychological needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy, and the learning to write, reading to learn movement.

**【Keywords】**

Content-focused language instruction, systemic functional grammar, genre writing

## 1. Introduction

The English Language Program at Konan University, Hirao School of Management (affectionately known as CUBE) was designed in 2007-08 in preparation for the inaugural school year in 2009. One of the key decisions early on was to develop content-focused language courses, and a key promotional slogan for our entire program has been shifting the focus from studying English to studying in English (英語を勉強するではなく、英語で勉強する). An overview of the program as well as some of the design decisions we made and challenges we faced are outlined in Jones and Palmer (2011). Heading into the eighth year of the program, we have realized several improvements but also see areas that are still not functioning as we have envisioned. We now have data that shows the majority of students in the program achieve improved GTEC and TOEIC scores over the three semesters of required English courses. More importantly, we recognize a general increase in confidence in all four language skills. At the same time, we find that many students still struggle with English, especially reading and writing. In response, we have introduced genre writing into several of the courses over the past few years and are trying to highlight for students the reading-writing connection. This genre writing approach and a focus on the reading-writing connection are cornerstones of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), which has its roots in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

We decided to write this paper with the following aims in mind:

- (1) Review the strengths and weaknesses of our program as it is being delivered now.
- (2) Confirm our vision for the program.
- (3) Lay out an action plan for bringing about further improvements to the program.

With the hope that someone might actually read this, we have chosen to write in a conversation or interview style. We hope that this paper helps stakeholders better understand our intentions and initiates a dialog among these same stakeholders and other interested parties.

**Brent:** Do you remember when you first encountered the term systemic functional linguistics? This was definitely not part of the linguistics courses in my master's degree program in 2002-2003.

**Roger:** I think it was in 2010 when I was invited to give a plenary address at TEFLIN, which is the big annual English teachers' association conference in Indonesia, the equivalent of JALT National in Japan. That year it was held at the Indonesia University of Education (UPI) in Bandung, and I was fortunate enough to get to know the then

Chair of the English Department, Dr. Emi Emilia. It turned out that she had conducted her doctoral research in Australia in SFL. She asked me if I would be interested in collaborating on a project involving genre-based pedagogy (one of her research interests) using my experience of technology to support language learning. At that time, I had no idea about genre or its connection to SFL, but I was intrigued by what she had to say and I think that was the beginning of it, certainly in terms of its influence on what we are trying to achieve at CUBE.

**Brent:** What do you know about the historical developments of SFL or SFG?

**Roger:** Well, not as much as I should, but I can give a brief outline. SFL as we use the term here can be traced back to the work of MAK Halliday, and we are dealing with function and semantics or semiotics as the basis for language and meaning making. Through his own observations of language and as a scholar of Chinese, he arrived at key concepts including what he calls the context of situation. He discovered a systematic relationship between the functional organisation of language and our social environment. It think it is important to note the contribution of many others, as Halliday's work has found itself changing the way languages are taught in schools. Some of the key names who have developed his ideas are Frances Christie (2012), Jim Martin (1992), and David Rose (Rose, 2012) in Australia, and Mary Schleppegrell (2004) in the US.

For anyone like me who studied syntax before anything else in Linguistics or Applied Linguistics courses, it is a big step to look at the social context first. It follows that SFG is not a rule-based system to study in decontextualised skill-based lessons. Again, it goes against the grain of how many of us learnt languages at school, and against the orthodoxy of how languages are still widely taught. So when we talk about the history, Halliday frequently acknowledges the contribution of Basil Bernstein, the British sociologist of education, who specialised in theories of language codes. What we discover from Bernstein (1971) is the problems underprivileged children face in all schooling, which of course is language-based. This can be explained by what is called 'semantic variation' (Hasan, 2009). The variety of (or lack of) ways we say things impact on the range of meanings that we are able to construct. So if you want to know about the gap in achievement in education between our students, SFG is a good place to start. There are those who have been born into or otherwise benefitted in society from the language they have been exposed to, and others who have been held back.

**Brent:** As an aside, I have also come across references to the Russian philosopher Bakhtin in articles dealing with SFL or SFG, which initially caught me off guard. I realize now that he was also involved in semiotics and distinguished early on the

difference between dialectic and dialogics, or the idea that a piece of text is actually part of a dialog with what has come before and what comes after.

Anyway, we spend a lot of time talking with full-time instructors about our goals for the program and where we envision each of the courses going. My feeling is that we don't yet have an effective system of getting these ideas to our part-time instructors. What are your thoughts on this?

**Roger:** You are absolutely right! I think there are several issues to consider here. The first one is what to do with the program as we learn more about language ourselves. Should we tack on what we now know about SFL and SFG to our existing program? Or should we completely rebuild the program? It is not a ground up reevaluation of our program, so I am wondering if it is possible to add something disruptive like this when the design decisions we made for the program were based on different assumptions. The second one is communicating the emphasis on SFL and SFG to all our instructors, and gaining their understanding in what we are trying to do, and why. We need to invest time, money and energy in training, in meetings, in workshops, in video support, in materials and lesson planning, etc. Furthermore, to turn the planned curriculum into the taught curriculum, we need class observations of teachers and enhanced tracking of students to monitor the efficacy of the changes. Oh, and another one is that at some point I think we may have to revisit the whole bigger question of program goals, because Goal Setting Theory has been taken from management and, to my mind at least, applied to education in a rather non-critical way. For example, if I write a text-based syllabus, I want students to have a deeper understanding of a variety of whole texts. Concrete goals, though, always lead me back to skills, which is something I want to get away from in our program. When the focus is on staged instruction, meaning making, building knowledge and whole texts, then the external goal as a motivating factor is less relevant than the meaningful learning.

**Brent:** One of the key ideas that I have picked up from the literature on SFL/SFG is how these approaches help shift the emphasis from the lesson plan and teaching (delivery) to what students are learning (uptake). How do you see this shift as occurring?

**Roger:** I know this is slightly tangential, but I'm reminded of what So & Bonk (2010) had to say about using blended approaches in teaching: "What is promising, however, in the current trends of blended learning research is the shift of focus from delivery-centered technology to learning technology coupled with pedagogical considerations." In other words, I am wondering if SFL works because it gives a better account of language learning than other linguistic theories. Taking lesson planning and teaching as the starting point, the social context and class environment are backgrounded, subsumed

to the goals of the class and the course. Those goals are hard for students to attain on an individual level, and probably unrealistic since they are imposed from the outside. I already alluded to the idea of learners having the desire and need to make meaning. If we turn things around, and look at what the students wish to accomplish by the end of the course, we arrive at something quite different. I think this is what Alison Littlefair (1991) was driving at when she wrote that a student emerging from an educational program will understandably expect to be a competent reader in their target language. When they pick up any kind of text, they will hope to grasp how the writers write for a range of purposes, and to be able to make sense of what they read. By framing the instruction we provide according to the requirements of the learners in this kind of way, we respond to actual needs of learners of a language in society, and program goals follow from that.

**Brent:** This leads me to some of our other non-SFG research. We have submitted a kaken proposal related to the theme of learner engagement, and the literature on learner engagement led me back to self-determination theory (SDT) and the work of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (2000), which I remember reading about as part of my research on second-language learning motivation. One of the key developments since I last visited SDT is the emphasis on basic psychological needs, specifically the need for competence, relatedness and autonomy. I see parts of our program that are already helping to fulfill these needs, but also see much more potential in this area, especially when approached systematically and consistently within courses and across courses. Do you see any specific areas where we can improve in this area?

**Roger:** I can't comment on psychological needs as it is way beyond anything I know about, but a lot of what we are trying to do revolves around the idea of implicit versus explicit instruction, low expectations versus high, and so forth. What attracts me to learner engagement is that it is not to be assumed: you cannot simply put learners into groups, assign a task, leave them to it, and wait for things to work out well. When we talk about autonomy, I would side with Kirschner and van Merriënboer (2013) who propose giving learners a measure of autonomy, but not so much it overwhelms the individual. We are not yet teaching the CEFR can-do statements in an integrated or systematic way, or making use of Europass or its Language Passport. Tying learning in our program to real world language development, in the community and wider society, seems to be an area in which we can still do more.

**Brent:** One of the resources we have been looking at is the Stories for Learning website, specifically the Functional Grammar for Teachers (Stories for Learning, 2015) pages and their Bookshelf (Stories for Learning, 2016). Can you talk about the strengths of this site and the interactive books they have on the site?

**Roger:** One of the best things about the website is that it is clearly laid out with good visual examples. I think even a novice tackling SFG for the first time can quickly get the hang of how English sentences function from the explanations there. It shows that a sentence has a participant (who or what), a process (the does, has, or is by something or someone), and then in most cases also has a circumstance (when, where or how). Formal grammar terms like subject, verb and object just do not show learners how sentences operate. One nice touch is the colour coding of red for participant, green for process, and blue for circumstance. It is a feature of the ebooks that are linked to via the site, which are easy to teach. Anything like this that helps teachers to embrace what we are trying to accomplish in our program is a big help. I am hoping we can use some of the books in our courses such as Global Challenges, European Studies, CUBE English, and American Studies to directly benefit our learners. We have been looking for a way to teach the metalanguage that they need to understand and describe functional grammar, and I am hopeful that this will prove effective.

**Brent:** Sadly, it seems that the Stories for Learning website is shutting down or moving. We may want to start developing our own site for students and teachers. In terms of other resources, one of the best introductions to SFL/SFG that I have found is the collection of papers in the Special Issue of NALDIC Quarterly (Coffin, 2010). These papers contain a good mixture of theory and practice, and there are several concepts and figures that I want to work into posters for our classrooms. Do you know of any other approachable introductions to SFL/SFG?

**Roger:** Well, there are a number of short introductions which could be made into posters, such as those produced by the Literacy Secretariat, part of the Department of Education and Children's Services at the Government of South Australia. As for introductions in book form, I would start with those on Applied Linguistics, such as *Exploring the Writing of Genres* by Beverly Derewianka (1996), *Text-based Syllabus Design* by Susan Feez (1998), and *Reading All Types of Writing* by Alison Littlefair (1991). Moving into linguistics, my favourite introduction to SFL and SFG is *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics* by Suzanne Eggins (1994). I have all of these if you want to take a look!

**Brent:** Another concept that seems to be gaining traction in first-language contexts is writing to learn strategies (Teaching Channel, 2016; The WAC Clearinghouse, 2016). Have you come across any discussion of this, and how do you feel this aligns with SFL/SFG and the direction we are going with our program?

**Roger:** I just checked it out, and my first reaction is that I am sceptical. It has very little in the way of explicit instruction, lots of implicit activities like peer review, and I still cannot fathom out what specific language and which text structure would go with each

particular genre. It claims that the teacher would spend very little class time on the writing activities. It looks like it is trying to get students to work with whole texts, which I applaud, but does not nearly go far enough in my opinion. A much better approach, from my point of view, is what may be termed learning to write, reading to learn (Rose & Martin, 2012). I think this is the kind of direction we should be going in.

**Brent:** I think maybe I had these two programs confused. We've talked about this before, but I would like to document our concerns about some of the English readings that are assigned outside the English program at CUBE. We have seen some assigned readings that would severely challenge students with native-like reading abilities. And although well-intentioned, we feel there is little or no educational value. Readings that are way beyond a learner's ability might even do long-term damage in terms of confidence and motivation. How might we address this issue in our program?

**Roger:** If those readings are assigned outside our program, I am not sure that we can rightfully interfere! Perhaps by letting others know about what we are trying to accomplish, and the reasons why we are going about it in the way we are, we can get some agreement on what is appropriate. But it might be fair for us to comment on materials delivered in English if they act against what we are trying to accomplish as a program and as a department. I can imagine a scenario where a student loses motivation in her English classes due to unrealistic burdens placed on her in another program in our department, where the materials in English are beyond her comprehension.

Incidentally, I had a question for you about SFG. I know you have been conducting some preliminary research into engagement, with a view to pursuing it further, and I was wondering how the reading you had done had led you towards SFG, since like me I think until recently you have been looking at linguistics in a different way.

**Brent:** Actually, there hasn't been any specific mention of SFG in any of the literature I have found on learner engagement, likely because most of this has not been related to second-language acquisition. My interest in SFG has kind of developed in parallel to my other research, but I am intrigued by the possibilities of making individual learning tasks more engaging via an SFG approach. What I am trying to do is theorize why this is so. My initial impression is that it is related to those basic psychological needs mentioned earlier. In terms of competence, we are more likely to help learners build confidence and competence through the kind of meaning-making exercises used in the SFG type approaches I have been reading about. In terms of relatedness, I see a lot of potential in using SFG type dialogs and increased emphasis on the metalanguage needed for these dialogs. By this, I mean that teacher-led discussions about the decisions that writers make and how language is used to make meaning seem ripe for creating the kind of classroom atmosphere that learners feel comfortable in and where



they can connect to their classmates and teacher. Of course this is an oversimplification, but I do see the potential. The psychological need for autonomy is another area where an SFG approach can be leveraged. As you mentioned earlier, autonomy without structure is not desirable. Approached in the right way, learners can be made to feel autonomous rather than controlled. Using an example from the recount genre and the biographies that students are reading and writing for our American Studies and Japan Studies courses, individuals are free to choose the subjects for their biographies and what to highlight, but the genre writing framework provides a structure that to me seems empowering rather than controlling.

**Roger:** I also wanted to ask you about the work we had done with genre, or text types, until now. What helped to convince you that our students were benefitting from a whole text approach, as opposed, say, to a skills-based approach. After all, I think what we are doing is ambitious in the Japanese context.

**Brent:** Yes, it is ambitious, and I think this is what makes our work so interesting for me personally. To answer your question, it wasn't one big thing that convinced me but a series of small things. I am sure you remember the textbook that we originally used for American Studies. I still think it is a wonderful book, and provides a good overview of the history of the USA. However, the curriculum that developed around that text involved a lot of out-of-class, unsupported, unstructured reading and the majority of students just didn't get it. And the writing that students produced revealed a serious lack of foundational writing skills. At that time, we didn't see much semester-to-semester writing progress and there were several students who went through the motions but couldn't produce a decent piece of writing even after completing the three semesters of required English classes. This past year I taught the highest and lowest level students in Japan Studies. Some of the writing produced in the highest-level class was amazing, and showed me that many of these students had learned the conventions of each genre. We compiled a collection of writing that I hope to use for future classes. What was interesting though was the lower class. Even with some of the more reticent learners in this class, I saw evidence that there was a foundation there and that they were now ready to push their writing to the next level. Actually, two of the students from this class enrolled in my second-semester project and produced some pieces of text that would have been beyond the reach of some of our early cohorts. This is just one example, but these are the things that continue to convince me we are going in the right direction.

**Roger:** Going forward, we have discussed a reading to learn focus or similar for our program. Do you think we would be better served by adding to or subtracting from our program incrementally, with small adjustments year by year, as we have done so far? Or do you think we would be better served by making major changes to our program on a regular basis, such as every 5 or 10 years?

**Brent:** My pragmatic side wants to say no big changes. However, we currently have a lot of moving parts to the program and this is likely part of the problem we have with delivery. With this in mind, the idea of starting fresh is appealing. I think I need more time to step back and take stock of where we are. We've talked before about the field of Appreciative Inquiry which has its roots in Positive Psychology, and I think this is a good place to start. We have some core strengths, and I think recognizing these and building on these is more sensible than wiping the slate clean.

**Roger:** Given what you mentioned above about the psychological needs of the learner, do you think we need to revisit the 90-minute class model? It seems to me that students could do more in short bursts, for example, by splitting classes into two sessions of 40 or 45 minutes. For the kind of staged, explicit instruction that we have in mind, it might give us more flexibility.

**Brent:** For me the bigger issue is the limited contact time that comes with fifteen weeks of once-a-week classes. I think students would get so much more out of five weeks of intensive study in one area. The overall curriculum that students have is so disjointed and drawn out that it is a minor miracle that they take away anything. And while we are on the topic of desired structural changes, it seems desirable to have at least two streams to accommodate different motivation or aspiration levels. Having an opt-in accelerated course for self-starters and other more goal-oriented learners would be a step in the right direction.

**Roger:** Yes, I can see that different streams or pathways tailored more closely to individual needs would be a step up. I think it would also encourage the instructors in many ways, to make them feel that they really do make a difference, because when the learners are doing well there is a general feel good factor that spreads. The kind of accelerated course you describe would bring with it the challenges that advanced learners face, and just to link it to the theme of this paper, would require much more in terms of language focus - which to my mind is how it should be.

**Brent:** Well, I think my fingers are running out of steam. Are you ready to give some concluding remarks?

**Roger:** Just going back to the discussion on SFG, I'm hoping we can get away from the negative remarks I sometimes hear about grammar and grammar teaching at conferences. When we talk about grammar, I think we are often at cross-purposes. There was a time when the grammar-translation method was paramount in second language teaching, and quite rightly it gave rise to a reaction against the teaching of grammar as a rigid system. What seems to have happened is that we have gone too far

away from teaching language, and too much in the direction of a rudderless, constructivist, implicit form of instruction typified by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Many Japanese university entrance exams have ended up as a weird hybrid of grammar-translation juxtaposed with CLT! An awareness of genre and register appears to be absent, excluded from the years of schooling here. Without explicit teaching in what is referred to as grammatical metaphor in SFG, our learners will not build the linguistic resources they need to express the meanings they wish to. And I think our emphasis on reading and writing, centred on the academic language of schooling, by which I mean school discourse and school texts, is leading us in the right direction.

**Brent:** Well, I am not entirely sure we accomplished all of the goals we set out at the beginning of this paper, but at least we got some things off of our chests. Let's keep the dialog going and see if we can get more of the stakeholders involved.

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