



The effectiveness of Teaching Systemic Functional Grammar in Improving EFL Postgraduates' Academic Writing Skills, Faculty of Arts and Languages

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دراسة فعالية تدريس قواعد اللغة الوظيفية في تحسين مهارات الكتابة الأكاديمية لدى طلاب الدراسات العليا في اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية اللغات والآداب

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Abstract:

The Functional Grammar Approach is a modern linguistic perspective that views language as a tool for communication rather than merely a set of formal rules. According to Halliday, language serves three main functions: the ideational function (expressing ideas and experiences), the interpersonal function (building social relationships), and the textual function (organizing messages in a coherent way). This approach represents a significant shift in linguistic studies, focusing on meaning, context, and communication, and offering a deep understanding of how language functions in everyday life. This study examined the effectiveness of the Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) approach in enhancing academic writing skills among EFL postgraduate students. An experimental design was employed to compare 25 students' performance in pre- and post-tests, and adopting content analysis to reveal which skills were truly improved. The results revealed a statistically significant improvement in students' writing after the implementation of the SFG approach. Furthermore, content analysis of students' texts showed noticeable progress in vocabulary use, organization, and cohesion. The findings also highlighted the important role of thematic structures, particularly theme and rheme, in improving coherence and textual organization. These results support the view that grammar should be taught as a functional and meaningful resource rather than a set of mere rules. Based on these findings, the study recommends integrating authentic learning environments, adopting implicit grammar teaching strategies, and promoting critical thinking to further develop students' writing competence.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), academic writing skills.

الملخص

يُعدّ منهج القواعد الوظيفية منظورًا لغويًا حديثًا ينظر إلى اللغة كأداة للتواصل لا مجرد مجموعة من القواعد الشكلية. ووفقًا لهاليداي، تؤدي اللغة ثلاث وظائف رئيسية: الوظيفة الفكرية (التعبير عن الأفكار والخبرات)، والوظيفة التفاعلية (بناء العلاقات الاجتماعية)، والوظيفة النصية (تنظيم الرسائل بطريقة متماسكة). يُمثّل هذا المنهج نقلة نوعية في الدراسات اللغوية، إذ يركّز على المعنى والسياق والتواصل، ويُقدّم فهمًا عميقًا لكيفية عمل اللغة في الحياة اليومية. تناول هذا البحث دراسة فعالية منهج القواعد الوظيفية النظامية (SFG) في تحسين مهارات الكتابة الأكاديمية لدى طلاب الدراسات العليا في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. استُخدم تصميم تجريبي لمقارنة أداء الطلاب في الاختبارات القبلية والبعدية. واعتماد تحليل المحتوى للكشف عن المهارات التي تم تحسينها. كشفت النتائج عن تحسّن ملحوظ إحصائيًا في كتابة الطلاب بعد تطبيق منهج القواعد الوظيفية النظامية. علاوة على ذلك، أظهر تحليل محتوى نصوص الطلاب تقدّمًا ملحوظًا في استخدام المفردات والتنظيم والترابط. كما سلّطت النتائج الضوء على الدور المهم لبناء الموضوعية في تحسين الترابط والتنظيم النصي. تدعم هذه النتائج وجهة النظر القائلة بضرورة تدريس قواعد اللغة كمورد وظيفي وهادف، لا كمجرد مجموعة من القواعد المجردة. وبناءً على هذه النتائج، توصي الدراسة بدمج بيانات تعليمية واقعية، واعتماد استراتيجيات تدريس ضمنية لقواعد اللغة، وتعزيز التفكير النقدي لتطوير مهارات الكتابة لدى الطلاب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: قواعد اللغة الوظيفية النظامية، مهارات الكتابة الأكاديمية.

1.1 Introduction

English becomes the international language of education and business, and the number of EFL learners is increasing in Libya. Learning a language essentially depends on mastering components such as vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, alongside the four core skills: writing, reading, listening, and speaking. In the Libyan context, recent research highlights that the interplay of pronunciation, intelligibility, and identity significantly shapes the perceptions of secondary school students (Ali & Bianku, 2025). Furthermore, these linguistic components are interconnected; a learner cannot be a proficient writer or speaker without mastering grammar and vocabulary. Mastering the fundamental skills of academic writing in English has become crucial and an urgent need for EFL learners for academic success and career advancement (Maulida et al., 2022). This mastery also contributes to improving overall language skills (Harmer, 2001). However, achieving this proficiency requires effective pedagogical strategies. Gtiesh and Matoug (2025) emphasize that university teaching methods and curricula must evolve to meet modern trends and overcome existing challenges. Moreover, classroom interaction remains a cornerstone of the learning process, as it fosters engagement between students and teachers in the Libyan secondary sector (Orafi, 2026).

Beyond linguistic skills, the role of English literature is also recognized as a vital tool for enhancing speaking skills among university students (Adam, 2025). Conversely, academic success can be hindered by psychological factors; for instance, a study at Bani Walid University identified "learned helplessness" as a significant barrier among students in the Faculty of Education (Almanqoush, 2025). Regarding the technical definitions of language, the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2005) describes grammar as a code of rules that regulate how vocabularies connect to form meaningful sentences. Eggins (2004) offers a different perspective, describing it as a dynamic process where learners use grammar meaningfully. In recent years, Halliday developed the functional grammar approach, viewing language as a social semiotic system where meaning is achieved through the interaction of language, context, and culture. This method concentrates on how students use linguistic resources to construct meaning in different contexts and asserts the vital role of context in helping students use language for diverse social purposes.

1.2 Statement of the Problem.

Acquiring writing skills are the most challenging skills to all language learners. Writing different academic tasks is considered challenging skill for postgraduates' students Zakaria, Hashim, and Zaini (2024). For the reason that the students faced difficulties in mastering proper grammar, including using correct tenses, agreements and reporting verbs. Also The members' committee who are responsible for postgraduate studies admission exam in Faculty of Education and Languages in Tripoli, noted that most of MA students were very weak in writing task in the exam. Students have difficulties in trying to express their ideas under different contexts and providing an effective sequence of ideas. Besides, the English learner often ignores some language structures, which happen to be common in natural texts. According to functional systematic grammar theory, meaning is basically achieved through interaction of language, context and culture. Unfortunately, that students don't have enough knowledge about employing functional grammar in writing tasks, not only making them linguistically proficient but also engaging, and relevant. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the effectiveness of teaching a systemic functional grammar in improving MA students' academic writing skills.

1.3 Question of the Study

- 1- What is the impact of teaching a systemic functional linguistic approach on students' academic writing skills?

1.4 Objective of the Study.

This study targets to:

- 1- To explore the impact of teaching a systemic functional linguistic approach on students' academic writing skills.

1.5 Significance of the study.

By studying this issue, it is hoped the results will bridge the gap in the literature, and it will contribute to our understanding of how systematic functional linguistics improve students' writing skills, as well as shed light on the challenges and opportunities connected to using this approach. This research may inform pedagogical implications of SFL to both students and teachers. For students, it might be used as a good resource for them in the field of research writing, and it may help to provide a better understanding of how they improve their research writing. For the teacher, this research may help them understand the problems faced by the students so they can provide more meaningful feedback to improve the quality of the students' academic writing.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Systematic Functional Linguistics

Cordeiro (2018) describes SFL as a linguistic theory that views language as a social semiotic system aimed at meaning-making. SFL is developed by Halliday in the 1960s, emphasizes that language serves as a communicative resource that can be analyzed in terms of its functions, structures, and contextual applications. At the core of SFL is the idea that language achieves social purposes (Nagao, 2019), providing a framework for exploring how language generates meaning in different contexts. SFL outlines three primary functions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual.

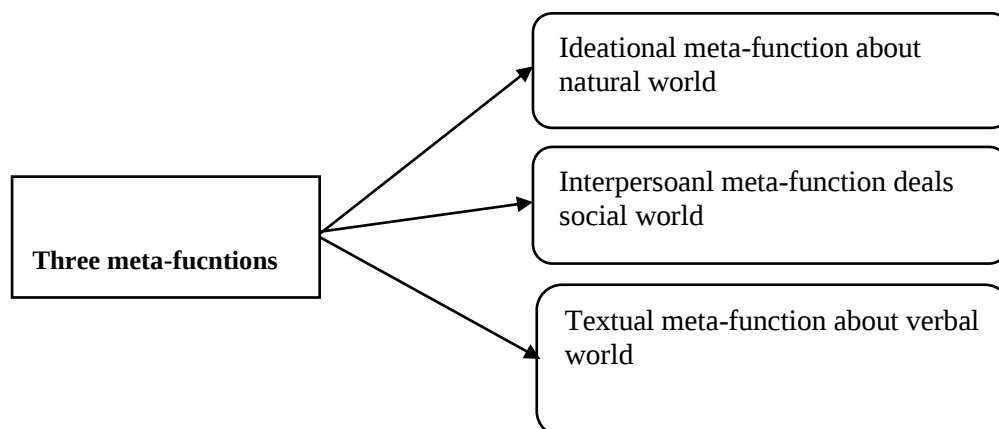


Figure 1: The three meta-functions of language (Halliday, 2014).

The ideational metafunction relates to how experiences are represented (Maledo & Edhere, 2021) and is used to express thoughts and convey meaning. It focuses on how language describes the world, including the relationships between entities, the processes connecting them, and their attributes. This metafunction is analyzed at the clause level (Vinchristo, 2022), emphasizing the relationship between the subject and the predicate (Herman et al., 2023).

The interpersonal metafunction deals with expressing social relationships (Darong, 2021) and helps establish and maintain interpersonal connections. It reflects how language communicates attitudes, emotions, and power dynamics, also analyzed at the clause level, focusing on the interaction between the speaker and the audience (Herman et al., 2022).

The textual metafunction involves organizing language into coherent texts (Wada & Wappa, 2020) and is used for generating meaning within and across texts. It examines how language structures discourse, including the organization of information, the creation of themes and rhemes, and the use of cohesive devices to connect sentences and paragraphs. This metafunction is analyzed at the text level, focusing on the interconnections between different parts of a text. SFL suggests that language is structured on multiple levels (Sembianti et al., 2021), including phonology, grammar, discourse, and social context. It identifies three levels of language structure: lexico-grammar, discourse semantics, and social semiotics. The lexicogrammar level concerns the internal structure of clauses and phrases and their ability to generate meaning. It involves grammatical elements such as rules for word formation, sentence construction, and the use of tense, aspect, and modality.

SFL has been applied in various fields, such as linguistics, education, and communication studies, to analyze language use in different contexts. In education, SFL has guided the creation of teaching materials that emphasize the functional use of language for specific goals. Overall, SFL provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing language structure and function, significantly enhancing our understanding of how language constructs meaning.

2.2 Writing Skills

Writing skills consist of a complex set of abilities that enable individuals to produce clear and effective written texts to specific purposes and audiences. Emilia (2010) and Zeng (2005) assure that writing is a complex process which includes several strategies and activates such as: setting goals, selecting proper language, generating ideas, organizing them logically, and expressing them coherently, reading, reviewing and editing. Therefore, as a key aspect of language acquisition, writing needs significant attention from educators, students, and researchers (Khazaal, 2019). Hence process of transferring thoughts and ideas in written form in EFL becomes a challenge for many EFL learners. To have good writing skills, some aspects

of writing are taken into such as grammar as system of rules for constructing grammatically acceptable and sensible sentence in English (Correa & Echeverri, 2017). Toba et al., (2019) also declare that the ability to apply grammar, syntax and punctuation correctly is essential element in EFL writing. These foundational rules ensure that written communication is structured and understandable. In this study the researcher focuses on how teaching functional grammar approach could improve MA students' competence to write texts in English.

2.3 Previous Studies about the Impact of SFL on EFL Students Writing

Systemic Functional Linguistics links grammar to the purpose for which individuals use language in context. In SFL, the emphasis is on meaning and the way in which language brings about meanings rather than on strict grammatical rules, assuming that language is dynamic and contextual. It has been shown in a number of studies the effectiveness of using systemic functional linguistic, such as Clarence-Fincham (2001) investigated the use of systemic functional grammar in helping students in: producing their own texts, interpreting media texts, and in increasing their motivation. The results showed that using SFL increased the learners' engagement, motivation, and interaction. It also helped them produce and analyze media texts. AlHamdany (2012) also, examined the effectiveness of SFL and its impact on students' grammar skills in the EFL context. It showed that SFL was effective in EFL classrooms in that they engaged students in contextual and interactive learning. Likewise. Horverak (2016) conducted an experimental study on the effect of systemic functional linguistics approach to teaching writing. He applied t.test to measure the significance of applying functional linguistics approach. McCrocklin and Slater (2017) founded that SFL analysis approach can be useful for EFL learners and struggling readers because it provides students with useful tools for text analysis. Reviewing previous studies showed that most of them didn't clarify in which way students writing skill improved. There wasn't any evidence to support the reliability of the scores results. Besides using SFL to improve writing skills in Libya has not received due attention at universities, especially regarding academic writing. Therefore, this study attempts to fill in gap in literature, and the gap in the methodology to investigate the efficiency of SFL theory in improving Libyan EFL students' academic writing in Tripoli- Libya.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Two quantitative methods were applied to explore the effectiveness of a systemic functional linguistic (SFL) approach in improving students' academic writing. An experimental method and content analysis were utilized to examine to what extent the students applied a systemic functional linguistic (SFL) approach in writing. An experimental method was conducted for one group study with pre-post-test. The second instrument was adopted was content analysis. Content analysis can be involved in qualitative and quantitative forms. Quantitatively, content analysis emphasizes numerical patterns, such as the frequency of specific words or themes, enabling researchers to quantify and statistically analyze aspects of the communication content (Wilson, 2016). The research collected five written works from five student from the beginning to the end of teaching session. They were analysed quantitatively.

3.2 Instrument of the Study

Based on the purpose of this study, pre/post-test were applied to collect the data. As a pre-test, it was used to determine the study participants' level in some EFL grammar skills before the treatment. As a post-test it was used to investigate the effectiveness of systemic functional grammar approach in developing EFL academic writing skills for MA students at Faculty of Education and languages. These both tests were academic writing tests adopted from (Bowers, 2011). Students respond to a point of view or argument or problem in about 40 minutes. Besides, twenty-five written works were collected from five students and analyzed.

3.3 Participants

For the sample selection for the study, the researcher adopted a random sampling method to select the participants. Dornyei (2007) affirms that “random samples are almost always more representative than non-random samples” (p. 97). They were 25 students, who are particularly knowledgeable and experienced in the traditional grammar.

Table 3.1 Background of the Participants

Demography	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	22	88%
Male	3	12%
<i>Age</i>		
25-30	6	24%
30 and above	19	76%

3.4 Procedures of the Study

The study was conducted within three months. Pre-test was done in the first month before starting training session. Only 20 of the 25 students in the class were able to participate in this study showed up on the day. The teaching intervention was implemented within ten weeks, one session per week for three hours, and each session focused on a specific skill(s). As well as, it was started at the beginning of the first semester of the academic year 2024-2025. Power Points and hand notes were used as teaching material to instruct student how to practice and grammar instructions, and the content of teaching intervention was adopted from “making sense of functional grammar” which edited by Berti Nurul Khajati. It’s included the grammatical components that are relevant in SFL, such as mood, theme and rheme, cohesive links, modality, reference, formality of language level and clauses. After explaining the lesson, students were given writing exercises to practise and discuss the issues in applying FG in writing tasks.

3.5 Reliability of the EFL writing Skills Test

The researcher applied SPSS, version. 22 to measure the reliability coefficient of the test by testing seven students. Alpha Cronbach method resulted the reliability coefficient of the test was (.671). This indicates that the EFL written skills test is reliable for the objectives of the study.

4. Results and Discussion of the Study

4.1 Results of the pre-post test

After conducting the teaching functional grammar g session which was done over a period of ten weeks, the students were tested for three hours. The finding of t.test analysis showed that the equal variance not assumed null hypothesis states that the mean scores between the two tests is significantly different. The findings revealed that there is a significant mean difference between test one and test two group scores ($df = 19$, $t = 18.661$, $p < 0.05$). In other words, the result obtained (0.000) is statically significant; therefore, the study rejects the null hypothesis and concludes that there isn’t statistically significant difference between the marks scored by students in both tests after the training session. This can be further proved by looking at the

mean difference of 31.40 for the second-test sample. This further proves that the training session had a significant influence on the group.

Table: 4.1 Results of Post-test for Students in Test 1& Test 2

One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig.	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Test1	18.661	19	.100	25.25000	22.4179	28.0821
test2	29.559	19	.000	31.40000	29.1766	33.6234

4.2 Results of the content analysis

Five students from the experimental group were selected randomly to take part in this study. These students were asked to do homework after each class. The researcher selected five works from each student' homework. These texts were analysed quantitatively. So, the results of content analysis of students' texts showed that the students have progressed in different aspects. For example, student one obtained highest mean score in organization and cohesion skills (Mean=2.80, Std. Deviation=1.095). Table (4.2) highlights that the student improved in organizing the ideas and events in the text after studying functional linguistics approach. Similarly, student four evolved in organizing the texts (Mean=2.40, Std. Deviation=0.54772).

Table: 4.2 Results of Content analysis: Students One

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
TC	5	1.00	2.00	1.8000	.44721
VOC	5	1.00	2.00	1.6000	.54772
ORG.COH	5	1.00	4.00	2.8000	1.09545
G.P	5	1.00	2.00	1.6000	.54772
Valid N (listwise)	5				

Table: 4.3 Results of Content analysis: Students Four

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
TC	5	1.00	1.00	1.0000	.00000
VOC	5	1.00	3.00	1.8000	.83666
ORG.COH	5	2.00	3.00	2.4000	.54772
GRA.PUN	5	1.00	1.00	1.0000	.00000
Valid N (listwise)	5				

Likewise, the results of the descriptive statistics of table 4.3 reveals that student two developed using academic vocabularies and organize the texts consistently. He enriched a little slightly in aspects of grammar (Mean=2.00, Std. Deviation=0.707).

Table: 4.4 Results of Content analysis: Students Two

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
TC	5	.00	1.00	.6000	.54772
VOC	5	1.00	3.00	2.0000	.70711
ORG.COH	5	1.00	4.00	2.4000	1.14018
GRA.PUN	5	1.00	1.00	1.0000	.00000
Valid N (listwise)	5				

Interestingly table 4.4 demonstrates that the highest mean scores were in vocabulary and grammar (Mean=1.800, Mean= 1.800). This illustrates that student three improved his written work in terms of utilizing new vocabularies, framing sentences and using punctuation correctly in writing texts.

Table: 4.5 Results of Content analysis: Students Three

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
TC	5	1.00	2.00	1.2000	.44721
VOC	5	.00	3.00	1.8000	1.30384
ORG.COH	5	.00	3.00	1.6000	1.34164
GRA.PUN	5	1.00	3.00	1.8000	.83666
Valid N (listwise)	5				

Finally, table 4.6 interprets the highest mean value which scored by student five. She achieved highest performance in grammar and punctuation. Such performance often highlights the effectiveness of teaching session in enhancing advanced skills, enabling advanced skills to better produce high-quality written work.

Table: 4.6 Results of Content analysis: Students Five

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
TC	5	1.00	1.00	1.0000	.00000
VOC	5	1.00	3.00	1.8000	1.09545
ORG.COH	5	1.00	1.00	1.0000	.00000
GRA.PUN	5	3.00	4.00	3.2000	.44721
Valid N (listwise)	5				

4.3 Discussion of the Findings

From the finding above, there is statistically significant difference between the marks scored by students in both tests. Besides, the content analysis of the texts of students showed the aspects where students improved in writing texts. Both findings ascertain that teaching a systemic functional grammar approach can enhance EFL postgraduates' academic writing skills. The current results were consistent with the results of previous studies which ascertained the great impact of systemic functional grammar approach in developing EFL written skills such as (McCrocklin & Slater, 2017; Maldin1 & Wibowo, 2022; Hanh, 2021; Hassan, et al 2021). All these studies revealed that teaching functional grammar approach enhances students writing skills. This determines that grammar is not just rules or mechanics, but something more vivid. Learning to grammar means using the language appropriately and meaningfully not only explicitly. Students need grammar in real-life situations to express meanings so systemic functional grammar approach let the students practice grammar in meaningful communicative contexts.

In terms of content analysis, the findings showed student achieve great progress in vocabularies, organization and cohesion. These findings are similar to the studies done by Downing (2001), Tshotsho (2014) and Wang (2007) who claim that, in the students' writings, Theme and Rheme patterns take an important role in maintaining coherence and cohesion in textual organization. Additionally, the use of NTP contradicts the theory proposing that themes are composed of given information and rhemes are composed of new information (Eggins, 2004; Halliday, 1985). Roza et al (2026) study sheds light on the imperative role of thematic progression in fortifying the cohesiveness of ideas within discussion texts, offering valuable insights for educators and learners alike.

4.4 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study confirmed that effectiveness of teaching functional grammar approach in enhancing writing skills among EFL students. It can be concluded that most students comprehend the SFL three meta functions, SFL theory, and SFL exploration, since they made significant improvement in writing competence, particularly in organizing ideas and connecting information. This was clearly noticed in student texts in a way of using themes, rhemes, clauses, mood, and coherent. Hence, according to results of this study, the following recommendations can be presented:

1. Embedding the authentic environment in teaching target language
2. Grammar should be taught implicitly, in which students should be exposed to grammatical structures in a meaningful and comprehensible to acquire the grammar of target language.
3. Encourage group work activities among students to communicate and interact with each other.
4. Encourage students involving the critical thinking and active participation by discussing and analysing what they write.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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