

A Study of a Collaborative Instructional Project Informed by Systemic Functional Linguistic Theory: Report Writing in Elementary Grades

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the teaching of report writing from pre-kindergarten through fifth grade through the lens of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) theory. Teachers were part of a university and public school collaboration that included professional development on teaching genres, text organization, and language features. Grounded in this knowledge, teachers explicitly taught students to write reports. Results indicate that students understood the purpose of reports. Although report writing was challenging, students at all levels, supported by their teachers, presented the topic in an organized way, showed awareness of audience and voice, and used language that resulted in coherent writing.

INTRODUCTION

"Writing today is not a frill for the few but an essential skill for the many" (National Commission on Writing [NCW], 2006, p. 49). The types of writing required for success in college and at work include writing to inform, persuade, describe, and report. However, the findings of a survey of 178 primary-grade teachers, conducted by Cutler and Graham (2008), showed that writing instruction focused on "narrative writing (stories, personal narratives, and poems), writing to communicate (letters), completing worksheets, and responding to material read. Expository writing activities, such as writing to inform or persuade, were much less common" (p. 916). It is through engagement in expository writing activities such as writing reports that children learn new information, organize what they learn, and share it with others (Derewianka & Primary English Teaching Association [Australia], 1990).

The situation in the middle grades is similar. In a recent survey of 103 teachers of grades four through six, Gilbert and Graham (2010) found that although their responses suggested that teachers were providing instruction in writing short answers, journals, responses to readings, and worksheets, weekly or more often, only 10% reported that they were teaching report writing monthly or more frequently. Teaching expository writing cannot be left to chance if students are to learn to write in the informed and coherent manner required to succeed in school, gain admission to college, and succeed in competitive work environments (NCW, 2004).

The study that is the focus of this article examined the effects of professional development on systemic functional linguistic (SFL) theory (Halliday, 1994) and the ways the theory informs instruction in report writing in the elementary grades. Together

with the university researchers, the teachers in one elementary school developed strategies to teach writing in a variety of genres, including reports. The project emerged from collaboration between the Boston Public Schools and Boston College.

The use of this theory to inform writing instruction began in Australia (J. R. Martin, 2009) and continues to influence linguists and educators. The central idea that informs instruction is that writing practices in a given culture are characterized by *genre*, recurrent forms of texts used for specific purposes, with specific discourse organization and language features. According to this definition, reports are a genre. A SFL perspective on writing instruction focuses on how the language and structures of a writing task vary with respect to the genre of the text (J. R. Martin & Rose, 2008) and the ways teachers can make the academic language demands explicit to students, thereby allowing them to manipulate language to create meaning.

TEACHING AND LEARNING TO WRITE REPORTS

Research on the development of the ability to write reports has revealed that students come to school in kindergarten and first grade with some basic knowledge of writing that enables them to participate in the creation of reports at the level of drawing, labeling, and making lists (Newkirk, 1987), and distinguish between the genres of stories, poems, and science reports (Kamberelis, 1999). In one study students in third, sixth, and ninth grades were found to have basic knowledge of report writing, but did not show much improvement throughout the grades, with two exceptions: Older students were better able to organize texts, and they learned more about syntax. The researcher concluded that students have the requisite knowledge and ability, but without adequate teaching only marginal improvement can be realized (Langer, 1985).

Research on teaching children to write shows that when done in a strategic manner, such teaching is successful (De La Paz & Graham, 2002). A strategic teaching approach engages students in all aspects of the process from selecting a topic to completing a coherent final product, and gradually releases the responsibility to students as they master new writing abilities (Barclay & Traser 1999; Perry & Drummond, 2002). The gradual release of responsibility model includes: demonstration and modeling, guided practice, collaborative practice, and independent practice (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). The work is done as a whole class, in small groups, and independently through a recursive process of writing that includes planning, drafting, writing, revision, and editing

(Hayes, 1996, 2000). Mini-lessons on all steps of report writing and the relevant language choices reinforce students' growing independence (Rog, 2007).

Essential to this study is the recommendation of SFL researchers who suggest that the teaching-learning cycle begin with teachers deconstructing a mentor text to show the features of a particular genre. Then teachers jointly construct text with students by accepting and negotiating students' contributions. Finally, students are encouraged to construct text independently (J. R. Martin, 2009).

Teaching can also focus on ways of organizing the content of reports beyond simply creating subtopics relevant to the subject. Common organizational structures include description, sequence, enumeration, and comparison/contrast (Englert & Hiebert, 1984). Teaching the structure of reports and writing collaborative reports also helps develop reading comprehension and recall of factual information, which can then be transferred to other topics (Kinney, 1985; McGee & Richgels, 1985).

In addition to teaching the text structures and the language that are relevant to reports, students must also be explicitly taught to be researchers (Perry & Drummond, 2002). "An information report is a factual text used to organise and store information" (Butt, Fahey, Feez, Spinks, & Yalop, 2000, p. 238). Therefore, reading for information, reading from a variety of sources, recognizing what is important, and taking notes are necessary parts of gathering the content needed to write reports. However, simply reading and taking good notes is not enough; students also need to be taught to create meaningful, content-rich sentences from their notes. The importance of teaching students how to create coherent paragraphs cannot be overlooked. Students must be able to balance content and structure to achieve coherence (Flood, Lapp & Farnan, 1986). These tasks are often rendered more complex by requiring students, including those at the elementary level, to synthesize information from multiple sources. Such complex tasks are possible with high-quality instruction (Barclay & Traser 1999; Perry & Drummond, 2002).

Additional requirements of report writing are understanding the audience and using the appropriate voice and language to address them. Students can develop an awareness of audience in elementary school, but familiar audiences such as family and peers are most effective (Beach, 1983; Wollman-Bonilla, 2000, 2001). Students need be able to put themselves in the position of the reader because "writing's potential power relies on successfully anticipating audience perspectives and needs" (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000, p. 37). Without the ability to switch roles from writer to reader and back again, crucial details may be omitted, and the audience will struggle to make meaning. Collaborative tasks such as peer editing can be beneficial in helping students learn to switch roles in this manner and better understand the audience's perspective (Beach, 1983). While children may be able to write for a specific audience within a genre, it is also possible that they may "simultaneously develop the ability to improvise on these genres with their intentions and their audience in mind"

(Wollman-Bonilla, 2000, p. 59), to create texts that draw the audience in, or employ a more familiar voice than is usually associated with the genre.

SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS THEORY AND REPORT WRITING

As noted earlier in this article, SFL provides many insights that inform the writing of reports or informational text. In SFL theory a text is defined as, "any instance of language, in any medium, that makes sense to someone who knows the language" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 3). All texts exist within the context of culture and are further embedded in the context of situation. Culture defines the genres of writing, and register is defined by the context of situation (Gebhard & J. R. Martin, 2010), thus, an understanding of genre and register combine to guide the language choices made by language users when they create texts (Butt et al., 2000).

Different situational contexts require different language choices based on the topic addressed (*field*), the relationship between the writer and audience (*tenor*), and the channel of communication: written, oral, or multimodal (*mode*). Together these elements constitute the linguistic *register*. Thus, the content of the text, the audience for whom it is written, and the mode of communication have an impact on the vocabulary, the complexity of grammatical structures, the level of formality, and other features of language. It is also necessary to understand the features of the *medium*, which can include books, letters, poems, or posters, each requiring its own organization and language features.

One aspect of writing that influences language choice is the purpose, such as telling a story, giving instructions, providing organized information, and persuading. These different purposes are realized in the various genres. The most common genres for elementary settings include many types of recounts, fictional narratives, procedures, reports, explanations, and expositions.

Schleppegrell (2004) defines a report as a factual text written to organize and store information clearly and succinctly. The structure of a report consists of a general opening statement and an abundance of factual information grouped by topic and written as paragraphs (Butt et al., 2000; Derewianka et al., 1990). Reports usually provide information about a whole class, for example, dogs. A report can also be about a member of a class, for example My Dog Spot, and in this case is referred to as a "description" (Derewianka et al., 1990; J. R. Martin & Rose, 2008). When writing about a whole class, the participants are generalized (e.g., wild animals, continents), and the verbs are in the "timeless" present (e.g., Wild animals roam the plains). Since reports are used to provide factual information about a subject they generally present the author as an expert on the topic. Therefore the tenor, or relationship between writer and audience, is "relatively formal and objective," and the text is written in the third person. "The use of first person pronouns (I, we) and the writer's opinions are not generally appropriate in this type of writing" (Derewianka et al., 1990, p. 53).

In order to convey factual information in a precise manner, report writers employ rich vocabulary in the form of technical language and complex noun groups, which include a variety of noun types and *adjectivals*. Adverbials give the reader a clear sense of time, place, and manner through the use of adverbs and adverbial phrases. Attention to reference ties, lexical ties, text connectives, and theme and rheme help the overall coherence of a text. Strands of text keep track of people and things as the text unfolds, using reference ties such as pronouns and definite articles (Butt et al., 2000). Relational processes, or verbs, such as *be* and *have*, are used to link information; material processes (action verbs) are used to describe actions and behaviors; and the tense is generally timeless present.

Lexical ties are achieved through groups of words that are semantically connected in different ways, for example, class/subclass, synonyms, and whole/part relationships (Droga & Humphrey, 2003). Text connectives “provide the reader with signposts indicating how the text is developing” (Derewianka, 1998, p. 110). For example, to show results the writer uses “therefore,” “consequently,” etc. Another way to analyze how clauses organize meaning is with the concepts of theme and rheme. *Theme* is the point of departure of the message, usually what comes before the verb, and *rheme* is the remainder of the message. The theme is often a noun group as in “Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968,” (theme underlined), but it could also be an adverbial, “In 1968 Martin Luther King was assassinated,” used here to stress the passage of time (Droga and Humphrey, 2003).

THE COLLABORATIVE STUDY

This study was designed to investigate the effects on the report writing of elementary students when their teachers were introduced to SFL theory and the ways the theory informs instruction.

The Participants

The teachers. The work of one student of one teacher at each grade level, K1 through grade five, was selected for study. For K1 the science teacher was selected because it was he, not the classroom teacher, who taught the children report writing. He shared the responsibility for teaching science in all the grades with another specialist. There is a range in the background experience among these teachers. The science and fifth-grade teachers were finishing their third year of teaching as we started the project, while the kindergarten and first-grade teachers had been teaching for seven years. The third- and fourth-grade teachers had taught for twenty years, while the second-grade teacher was a twenty-five-year veteran. Both the second- and third-grade teachers were fluent in Spanish and had been bilingual teachers when a bilingual program functioned in the school. These teachers have been at this school for most of their careers. All the teachers, including the science teacher, are certified in elementary education. The second- and fifth-grade teachers hold a master’s degree in reading.

The students. The population of students in the elementary school where the study was conducted is diverse and includes Hispanic

(57.7%), African American (25.7%), Asian (10.5), multi-race non-Hispanic (3.4%), and white (1.8%) students. Among these students, 68.5% speak a language other than English as their first language, and 57.7% are limited English proficient (LEP). Twenty-one percent of the students are enrolled in Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) classes, which are designed specifically for students who are in the process of acquiring English. They all come from Spanish-speaking homes, and their teachers are bilingual in English and Spanish. The majority of students are classified low-income (86.9%), and receive either free or reduced lunch; 15.7% of students receive special education services.

Of the seven students whose writing is the focus of this article, three spoke Vietnamese as their first language; three spoke Spanish; and one spoke English. There were three girls and four boys. The selected students were assessed by their classroom teachers as having average-level writing skills based on the students’ performance on a writing prompt given at the beginning of the year and scored with a holistic rubric.

The researchers. Cheryl O’Connor is the fourth-grade teacher who participated in the study. When the project began, she had been teaching for nineteen years; she often functions as the liaison to the district in literacy matters. Tracy Hodgson-Drysdale, an advanced doctoral student, provided on-site technical assistance as requested by the participating teachers.

The Procedures

The research for the current project came about as part of a larger research study sponsored by a Collaborative Fellows Grant that facilitates collaborations between Boston College and the Boston Public Schools. As part of this collaboration the first author designed a professional development program and research project based on SFL theory. The main goal of the project was to introduce the SFL theory to teachers and to make it possible for them to learn to use this theoretical framework to inform the teaching of writing throughout the elementary school curriculum. The entire school staff, including the principal and all the specialists, participated in the professional development. Prior to this collaboration the teachers at this elementary school did not follow any specific guidelines for teaching writing. Individual teachers chose the approach to teach writing. They were informed mainly by Writers’ Workshop (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001), an approach encouraged by the district. However, implementation had not been done in a systematic way, and the preferred genre had been personal narratives. The science teacher had never taught writing, with the exception of student teaching. None of these teachers had taught report writing before it was introduced and highly encouraged through this project.

Professional development. A two-day summer institute occurred immediately before the beginning of the school year for each of the three years of the research project. All teachers, including specialists, attended the institutes. The topics included an introduction to SFL theory (emphasizing the different genres appropriate

for elementary school writers with an emphasis on teaching language), analysis of a variety of texts including student writing, and planning genre units. Teachers began implementing their initial units in September or October of each year. An outcome of this institute was a writing calendar for the whole school. Grade-level teams worked together to decide which genres they would cover during the year. Then the teachers reviewed the plan as a whole to make adjustments. For example, when they realized that no one planned to teach explanation, the science teachers agreed to cover that genre in fourth and fifth grades.

Although all teachers participated in the professional development and implemented the ideas in their writing instruction, not all were observed because of limited resources. In each grade, either one or two teachers were observed by mutual agreement. For the purposes of this study one teacher from each grade level (K1–5) was selected as the focus for analyzing the impact of report instruction based on the availability of student work. The larger study required opportunities for classroom observation, as well. The science teacher was included because he worked on report writing with K1 students. For consistency, the data that were derived from the initial teaching of report writing were analyzed. Because Cheryl is a co-author, this article includes more detailed observations of her teaching.

Scaffolding report writing. Report units lasted between three and six weeks. With the exception of the K2 students who wrote reports on planets, students in pre-kindergarten through grade five composed reports on animals. The decision to choose animals was based on a combination of students' interest, curricular requirements, and the presence of live animals in some of the classrooms. The students created different texts in different media, and the teachers used different strategies to scaffold the process. Students in K1 through second grade wrote books. The second graders included a title page with author and illustrator, a table of contents, a glossary, a bibliography, and information about the author at the end. Third graders created reports with running text on the right half of the page and illustrations that matched each paragraph on the left half of the page. Fourth graders designed large posters, and fifth graders wrote several pages of written text without illustrations.

Teachers scaffolded the process in three different ways. The science teacher, who taught about live turtles, helped the four-year-olds write a four-page book about turtles. He taught the content at the same time that he modeled each page on chart paper, and the students followed the model as they drew and wrote on their own papers. One of the pages included the picture of a turtle with the body parts labeled. To focus on the food eaten by turtles, he gave them a page with four numbered squares and the question, "What do Diamondback Terrapin Turtles eat?" The students drew and labeled a type of food in each of the squares. Two more pages included turtles' nests and turtles' habitats with labels such as *baby turtles*, *beach*, and *moon* to indicate they hatch in the evening.

Kindergarten through third-grade teachers introduced the general text structure of a report that includes a general statement,

subtopics, and a concluding statement. They spent most of the time creating subtopics through questions such as: *What do they look like? What is their diet?* The number of questions increased from three in kindergarten to five or six in second and third grade. These questions were written on graphic organizers or chart paper for the whole class to see. Teachers read aloud a mentor text, and together with the class modeled how to find information to answer each question. They provided books, encyclopedias, and information downloaded from the Internet, and the students researched the information guided by the questions. For example, the first-grade teacher showed the students how to extract information about bluebirds from a book, and the students went on to look for information on different types of birds. These students worked in groups to research the same bird, while the second- and third-grade teacher allowed each student to research a different animal.

Additionally, the third-grade teacher code-switched between English and Spanish to scaffold instruction for her class of students who were fairly new to English. Students wrote in either English or Spanish, depending on their level of English proficiency. The teacher also deconstructed texts by reading aloud sample reports and discussing how the authors achieved their purpose. When students were having difficulty concluding their reports she encouraged them to consult mentor texts. In this case the focus was not the particular content but the language and organization of the text.

Teachers provided students with pages that had a space for a drawing and lines for writing. For some of the kindergarten projects the teacher asked students to read the pages aloud as she typed them. After printing the typed version the students added illustrations and a title page.

Instruction in the upper grades was more a process of scaffolded discovery of how this genre works. Cheryl, a fourth-grade teacher and one of the co-authors, introduced the report genre to her class by telling the students that report writing involved becoming an expert on a topic in order to write about it. She repeatedly stressed the need for students to educate themselves before writing about a topic and informing their audience. To gain a general sense of students' understanding of the genre, she asked them first to write a report on their favorite person. The most common challenge found in these products was that the information was not grouped by subtopics. It was just listed as it came to mind.

Next she provided mentor texts that were written as reports but at a lower level than the fourth-grade books they usually read, such as *Fantastic Bats* (J. M. Martin, 2006). Cheryl presented a graphic organizer on chart paper with the components of a report including the general statement, subtopics, and an optional concluding statement (see Appendix A). As she read the book on bats and discussed the components with the students, they filled in the graphic organizer. Cheryl read aloud a number of these books, and for each book the students had a similar graphic organizer to complete, based on the information in the teacher's read-alouds. Some students had difficulty with the graphic organizer because they needed to think not only about the information they would write, but also, to consider the topic to determine the column in which

the information would be written. She gave these students a different web that provided space for the information to be written without the need to categorize it at the same time. Later, they grouped the information into categories. As they worked on these graphic organizers she reminded them to think about language; vocabulary is important, and their language needed to be descriptive to educate their audience on the subject. She used the mentor texts and the descriptive language in them as examples. On an overhead projector, she compared parts of the mentor texts with and without the author's descriptive language, and the students were asked which piece was more informative and why. The students all came to the same answer: The descriptive knowledge helped to serve the author's purpose, which is to inform the reader. Cheryl also discussed with them the role of the illustrations to complement the written text and reflect important information.

One aspect of language that required repeated discussion was the students' tendency to insert themselves into their writing. They often started sentences with I think, I believe, or I learned. Cheryl pointed out that the report was not about the author but about the topic they were researching. Often she had students read through the mentor texts to see if they could find such clauses.

To demonstrate that information does not come only from books, she downloaded from the Internet various texts on different animals and gave them to groups of students to read and extract information to complete one of the graphic organizers. As she walked around the room the students were asked to demonstrate that they had chosen important information.

Feeling comfortable with students' ability to do research, Cheryl read aloud the book *Slinky Scaly Slithery Snakes* (Patent, 2000), written at a fourth-grade level. Each page has complex paragraphs with respect to both language and content. She further discussed the language of reports as it was used in this book. Cheryl had planned to introduce more books and then have students choose one animal to research for their final product. However, the students were enormously enthusiastic about the snake book so she changed her mind and decided that they could all work on snakes. Throughout the process of preparing her students to do research and understand the purpose and language of reports, Cheryl was concerned that these fourth graders would not be able to create a complete book so early in the year. When one of the researchers suggested having the students create a poster, she was greatly relieved. Later as the posters came to life, she was amazed at how well students could demonstrate what they

had learned about writing reports. When the students had completed their posters, they displayed them, and the class went around checking each other's work with the goal of ensuring that the written information and the illustrations were consistent. Cheryl felt that because they were all experts on the topic they were able to check each other's work better than if they had written about different topics. As an extension of this report project, in May, the science teacher collaborated with the fourth-grade classroom teachers and had students observe animals in the science classroom, do research, and write multi-paragraph reports.

Once all the students were satisfied with their final products, they had a publishing party that was open to the school. Cheryl gave her students a set of questions for the authors to ask as they viewed the posters. These questions were all related to process. The students were told that they must provide feedback that was relative to the elements of a report. For example, they could not respond with, "This is very good. I liked it." Their feedback responses had to show their knowledge of the genre as well. For example, one student said, "Your use of the words predator, habitat, prey show that you have done your research on the snake." Another said, "Your word choice 'The slithery, sneaky, venomous cobra' captured my attention and showed me that you were thinking of word choice for effect."

Data Collection

To collect data for the major study research assistants observed writing instruction one day a week, took detailed notes using laptops, and collected relevant copies of student data and materials that were used by the teacher. Data were collected as one of the teachers at each grade level implemented a report unit for the first time (see Table 1). In the first year of the project only the third-grade teacher taught report writing. All the teachers were encouraged to include report writing in the curriculum, and as a result, during the second year, most of the teachers at other grade levels, as well as the science teacher, implemented report units for the first time. In the final year of the project Cheryl and her fourth-grade colleagues implemented a report unit.

The report of one participating student (all names are pseudonyms) was selected at each grade level from K1 through five (see Table 2). Students in K1 through fourth grade wrote reports with coaching from their teachers. At the end of the unit, the fifth-grade teacher asked the students to write a new report independently, without coaching. This last uncoached piece was selected for

Table 1. Participating Teachers, Grade, and Year of Implementation							
Year/Grade	Science - K1	K2	1	2	3	4	5
08–09					ER		
09–10	EB	MJ	LH	JC			JE
10–11						CO	

Table 2. Participating Students, Grade Level, Linguistic Background, and Date of the Analysis of the Report				
Grade Level/ Language Background	English	Spanish	Vietnamese	Report Date
K1			Michael	4/6/10
K2		Carlos		1/13/10
1	Karen			5/5/10
2			Christine	1/20/10
3		Clara		2/11/09
4			Daniel	10/5/10
5		Oscar		12/4/10

analysis in this study. This text was used in order to determine what average students in fifth grade might be expected to write independently after SFL-informed instruction.

The observations were reread, analyzed, and coded in a matrix of key SFL features specified by the first author (see Table 3). Student writing was typed and analyzed by genre according to the same SFL discourse and lexicogrammatical features (Butt et al., 2000; J. R. Martin, 2009). Paragraph and sentence formation and expressive level features such as spelling, mechanics, and letter formation were not analyzed because they are not particular to report writing but part of students' general writing development.

RESULTS

This section will present the findings that describe the reports elementary school students produced when the teachers' instruction was informed by SFL theory. The results are presented with respect to students' understanding of the purpose and structure of reports; their ability to present the topic including participants, processes, circumstances, and logical connections; their understanding of field and grammatical rendering of the topic; their understanding of tenor as reflected in their language; and their ability to organize and use language to produce a coherent text.

Understanding of Purpose

In general students showed an awareness of the purpose of reports i.e., giving and organizing information. It should be noted that their teachers coached them on the ways to locate and organize the information. However, in the case of the first grader, instead of writing a report about hamsters, Karen (1) (denotes grade level) wrote a procedure for taking care of hamsters.

Cheryl frequently reminded her fourth-grade students that they needed to do research in order to educate themselves about a topic in order to present the information in their texts. Nevertheless, a couple of student texts reflected confusion regarding the purpose. For example, Oscar (5) shows a hint of confusion when he appropriately states at the beginning of his report on jaguars,

Table 3. Report Features Analyzed	
Discourse Level Features	
• Field/topic:	
Processes:	What is going on Verb types for reports: action, relating: being/having; existential
Participants:	Who or what is involved (people, places, things, concepts, etc.) Noun describers are an important feature of reports
Circumstances:	Where, when, how, with whom, etc. (do they make sense, do they help the flow of the piece)
Tenor: audience/voice/identity	Audience: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> language is appropriate given the relative social status of writer/audience author is aware of the background information the audience needs Voice (identity, point of view, cultural background, personality) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1st and 3rd person writer uses formal and objective language; reader "trusts" writer's expertise on topic
• Mode: coherence of the piece achieved through	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>referent ties</i>, ["I was in my house and she was helping . . ." Who is she? Should have named before] ["told me to read the question"; question should have been mentioned before, otherwise one needs to use a] <i>lexical ties</i>, (word associations) [dandelion, seed, structure, fruit, flower, wind. These words are semantically connected] <i>text connectors</i>, <i>theme/rheme</i> (Beginning of clause, everything until verb) [for example, I think plants need water, soil . . . Vs. Plants need water, soil . . .]
• Structural organization of the piece	General statement or classification Subtopics Concluding statement (optional)
Lexicogrammatical Level	
• Sentence formation	Don't consider punctuation when scoring. Those errors should be counted with punctuation. For example: <i>We went to the marvelous pool the pool was wonderful . . .</i> these are two correctly formed sentences missing a period.
• Vocabulary	(variety, appropriate for the genre and audience, level of difficulty)
• Noun groups	Noun describers are an important feature of reports Complex noun groups
• Verb groups	Verb tenses (vary depending on the genre)
• Circumstances	Are they appropriately constructed Circumstances include time, place, manner, cause, etc.

their [there is] lots of information I could give you, but at the end he writes, *that is the end of my story.*

Text Construction

Each genre has certain general expectations of how a text is structured. Thus reports start with some sort of general classifying

statement, followed by a series of subtopics organized in a logical way. Although teachers often encourage students to write a concluding statement, published reports sanctioned by the culture do not require such conclusions (Butt et al., 2000; J. R. Martin & Rose, 2008).

Throughout the grades the initial general statement is absent while students focused on the subtopics with one notable exception. Christine (2) appropriately starts her report with “*A penguin is a kind of bird.*” Oscar (5) embeds an attempt at a general statement in an initial dialogue with his audience, “*Do you like Jaguars? You should cause their lots inform information I could give you.*”

In Pre-K through third grade the subtopics were organized in a logical manner because the teachers coached the students on the order of the subtopics through modeling or questioning. It became more challenging when the students had their choice of order. Oscar (5) starts with a paragraph about what jaguars eat, followed by where they live. Only in the third paragraph, before the conclusion, does he describe the features of a jaguar. A more logical order would be exactly the reverse.

By creating a poster, the fourth graders avoided, to a degree, problems with the opening statement and organization of subtopics. However the choices Daniel (4) made reveal his priorities. His poster (see Figure 1) includes a design at the top center where he writes the title, his name with a drawing of himself, and a warning about touching vines when going to the jungle. On both sides there are two lists, one entitled, *Snakes Pray*, and the other, *Snakes Pereditor*. Underneath is a sentence entitled “*fun facts.*” All around the perimeter of the poster there is a long drawing of a snake, divided into compartments with pertinent information in the following order: climbing trees, what they eat, how they move, where they live, movement, how they survive even when they lose a piece, the effect of their poison, and how they use camouflage. Thus there is a sense of organization regarding the placement of different types of information on the poster, but within the snake figure there is no particular order.

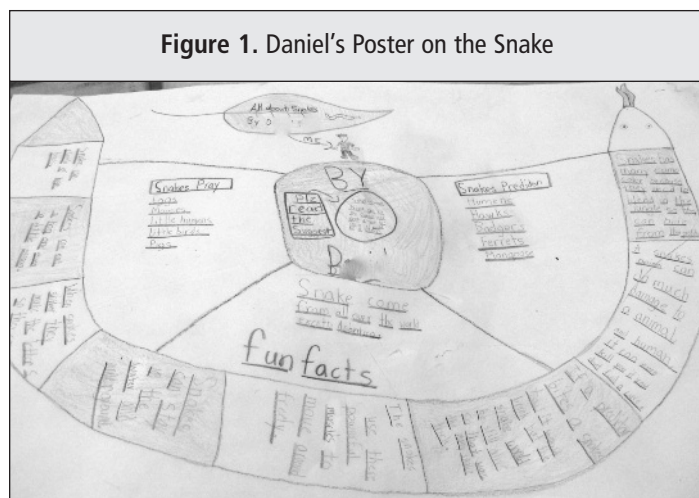


Figure 1. Daniel's Poster on the Snake

Tenor

The content and the language of the pieces became more complex as the students progressed through the grades, resulting in more informational pieces with an increasing number of language challenges. As they developed awareness of audience and a voice, students felt the need to address the audience directly by switching from third-person text to first and second person.

Awareness of audience is evidenced in both the language choices students made and the amount of information provided. To guide the reader in understanding the writing in the Pre-K and K reports background knowledge is provided here. For example, when Carlos (K2) starts his book on the solar system with “*The sun is hot,*” he assumes readers already know about the solar system. As the students grow older the information becomes more explicit, as when Christine (2) appropriately starts her piece with “*A penguin is a kind of bird.*” In fourth and fifth grade the reports include substantial information about the animals, including description, habitat, eating habits, predators, etc.

Students understand that they need to demonstrate expertise, i.e., show an authoritative stance in report writing. As they grow older they become more aware of other students in their audience. Although their writing is authoritative, the choice of words or facts reflects their desire to appeal to other children. Therefore they increasingly frame their reports by addressing their audience directly. For example, Oscar (5) starts his essay on jaguars with “*Do you like Jaguars? You should cause . . .*” Daniel (4) places a warning to his audience prominently at the center of his poster, “*Never go in the Jungle and grab a vine because it might be a SNAKE!*” He adds a bubble pointing to this warning, “*Plz read the suggest [Please read the suggestion].*” In this sentence, Daniel not only addresses his audience directly, but by using text message language indicates that this is a child writing to other children.

Field and the Grammatical Rendering of the Topic

The development of the topic in the reports that were analyzed generally moves from relying on illustrations with labels in K1, to illustrations and sentences in K2, to short paragraphs in grades two, three, and four and finally, to full essays with no illustrations in grade five.

Field or topic is rendered in writing through the introduction of participants, processes or verbs, circumstances, and logical connections. In K1 texts the labels only inform the reader about the participants. For example Michael (K1), working with the science teacher, produced a four-page book on turtles. In addition to a title page that the teacher provided, he drew a picture of a turtle and labeled *HEAD*, *claw*, *FEET*, and *shell*. For the second page the teacher prepared a sheet with a question on top: *What do Diamondback Terrapin Turtles eat?* The page was divided into four numbered quarters. Michael drew a picture in each box and wrote the labels *seaweed*, *jelly fish*, *turtle Pellets*, *crabs snails* by copying the words from a chart. Two additional pages illustrated the nest and the habitat. The latter included a picture of a beach and ocean with a moon on the horizon hinting at circumstances

of place and time. Participants continue to be important throughout the grades. The animal or planets students write about appear in the theme position. For example, Clara (3) wrote six paragraphs of one or two sentences, each about sharks. The first four begin with “*The shark*” or “*The sharks*.” Throughout the grades the description of participants (nouns) is limited. Rather than as part of the noun group as in *sharp teeth* (Clara, 3), a *snakes tail* (Daniel, 4) or *The most biggest and dangerous cat* (Oscar, 5), in the early grades the attributes were connected with the copula (to be). For example, Carlos (K2) writes, *Venus is the hot planets*. Christina (2) writes about the tundra: *it’s cold and freezeng*. Although Clara (3) includes some noun groups with describers she also uses the copula as when writing about sharks where she explains, *some of them are huge large*. Christina (2), when researching the attributes of penguins, located the information but had difficulty creating noun groups. She writes, “*A baby penguin drink milk from its mother*,” rather than “*Baby penguins drink their mother’s milk*” and “*The belly color is yellow at the top*” for “The top of the belly is yellow.”

Other features of the students’ noun groups included: difficulty with ordinal numbers, *earth is the three pnt* [planet] (Carlos, K2); omission of the determiner, *A habitats of a penguin is* [the] *tundra* (Christine, 2); inappropriate use of “the,” *The sharks have sharp teeth*, (Clara, 3); inclusion of the plural “s” marker when it was not needed, *A habitats of a penguin* (Christine, 2) and omission, when needed, *Snake come* (Daniel, 4); omission of the apostrophe to indicate a possessive *Snakes Pray* [prey] (Daniel, 4); formation of the possessive as a prepositional phrase rather than by using the possessive, *A habitats of the penguin* (Christine, 2); and formation of the comparative structure, *most biggest* (Oscar, 5).

Processes or verbs are not very complex in reports; they are mostly relational combined with some use of action verbs, usually in the present tense. Some K1 drawings hint at processes. For example, Michael’s (K1) drawing of the turtles’ habitat shows the mother turtle swimming (action verb) in the ocean. Most of the processes or verb types in the early grades were relational, either *to be* or *to have*. Carlos (K2) wrote a book on the solar system that was several pages long, each page including a picture and a sentence using the verb *to be* to provide information about one of the planets, for example, *MaRs is The five Pnt in the SLS*, [Mars is the fifth planet in the solar system]. The verbs, *to be* and *to have*, figure prominently throughout the grades. By second grade some action verbs also appear. For example Christine (2) used *live*, *eat*, *drink*, and *fly* in her report about penguins. One interesting structure is the use of the verb group “use to + action verb” instead of the direct use of the action verb. For example, “*They use they teeth to bit*” (Clara, 3) instead of “*They bite with their big teeth*.” In fifth grade, sensing verbs, not commonly found in reports, are used, such as *smell* and *taste*. Reports are usually written in the timeless present indicating how things are. This was true in the writing of all students. Occasionally students used modals, especially “can.” For example, in Daniel’s (4) poster about snakes, he used a number of action verbs accompanied by “can” as if admiring what

snakes were capable of doing, “*Snakes can climb of high trees. Snakes can eat a hog . . . Snakes can stay in the water . . .*”

Very rarely, students used the past tense, which is more appropriate for stories. For example, Christine (2) wrote, “*Penguin have soft fur so that it could proect* [protect] *itself*.” Daniel (4) used the imperative to give direct advice to his audience, “*Never go in the Jungle and grab a vine because it might be a SNAKE!*”

Christine (2) once omitted the “s” in the third-person singular, an error typical of second language learners, “*An animal who hunt . . .*” and Daniel (4) overextended the rule of using “s” for third-person singular and also used it with a plural noun, “*Snakes has many . . .*”

Only circumstances of place were present at all grade levels, “*The sharks live in the ocean*” (Clara, 3), while circumstances of time were rare. Michael (K1) indicated time by drawing a moon in his pictures about turtles hatching on the beach. However in writing, circumstances of time did not appear until fifth grade, for example . . . *they use their whiskers to sense at night* (Oscar, 5). Clara used two additional types of circumstances, of accompaniment, *The sharks live in the ocean with other fish and sharks*, and comparison, *the shark grow like us*. All the adverbials used by these students were in the form of prepositional phrases as the examples above illustrate, except for one case where Daniel (4) used just words, *move around freely*.

In the early grades students wrote mostly simple sentences. As students’ language became more complex they showed difficulty with logical connections. Daniel (4) wrote on his poster on “Snakes,” “*When snakes slither they make the letter S so they can swim*.” The source book included the following sentence “Snakes’ bodies make S shapes as they glide along. This kind of movement also helps snakes swim” (Patent, 2000 p. 6). Therefore the connection is not one of cause (glide/slither) and effect (swim), as Daniel puts it, but rather, that gliding and swimming are both helped by the S-type movement. Oscar (5) used multiple complex sentences that were difficult to understand or made ambiguous connections. For example he wrote, *What Jaguars eat is Deer cause the size of their horns*, leaving the reader to wonder what is it with the size that allows jaguars to eat deer. In the following sentence the connector Oscar chooses creates ambiguity, *About what they eat like deers*. He does not mean to compare how jaguars and deer eat but to clarify. Thus instead of “like” he should have used “for example.”

Ability to Write a Fluid Text

Four features of text enhance fluidity: clear referents, word associations or semantic relationships between the vocabulary, text connectives, and the concepts in theme position, i.e., “the starting point for a text, paragraph or clause” (Droga & Humphrey, 2003, p. 89).

Difficulties were found with connections between the pronoun and the referent: for example, *Saturn is like Jupiter they* [it] . . . (Michael, K2). Clara (3) writes at the beginning of her last paragraph about sharks, *Another interesting fact*, without having written about interesting facts before. Determiners were used unnecessarily with generalized participants. For example Daniel (4) writes, *The snakes use there* [their] *powerful muscles* and later, . . . *damage to a*

animal. In both cases he is referring to “snakes” and “animals” in general; there is no need for the determiner. Use of determiners in English causes particular difficulty for second language learners.

One persistent feature of the children’s writing throughout the grades was switching between the plural and singular of the central participant. For example, Clara (3) mentions “sharks” twelve times in her report, switching five times between “sharks” and “shark.” In all cases she was referring to “sharks” in general. Only Oscar (5) consistently uses the plural “jaguars” throughout his essay. Oscar’s work was the last text of the unit that was not coached by the teacher.

In developing their topics, the children used groups of words that are semantically connected in different ways. For example, words can be connected by class and subclass: *solar system, sun, planets, Jupiter, Mars, etc.*, or by collocation, words that belong together: *climb and tree*. Students did not take advantage of synonyms to avoid repetition, thus, the focal animal is referred to only by a noun or pronoun, leading to substantial repetition.

Younger students do not use text connectives in their writing, which is not unusual in reports. Oscar (5), on the other hand, overused them. Thirteen of the 19 sentences in his essay start with “also.” Daniel (4) used “so” a few times.

Across the grades the theme of the sentences is the central participant, with either the noun or the pronoun repeated again and again. Oscar (5) writes,

Also all Jaguars use their body parts to sense for an example they use their whiskers to sense at night. Also they use their big teeth to hunt down animals. Also they use their big claws to climb up trees. Also they use their ears to hear a animal from far away. (Themes underlined)

The second sentence is the only one with a different theme, where Oscar (5) attempts to expand the idea written in the previous sentence. The rest of the sentences start with the same theme, each one telling about a new feature of leopards with no attempt to expand the information about the feature. This style was typical of all students. Their reports read almost like a list of sentences with key information about their topic with no further development.

DISCUSSION

Elementary school students of all ages were able to produce reports with the support of their teachers. Through a collaborative project with a group of university researchers, these teachers had developed expertise on the features of a report as explained in the SFL literature, and they felt empowered to try report writing in their classrooms.

The data from the various grade levels suggest students’ capacity for report writing with teacher coaching (Perry & Drummond, 2002). There is still evidence of many challenges in the process of development with respect to the genre and register. Comparable challenges have been found in studies conducted in Australia with children of similar ages (Christie & Derewianka, 2008).

Development of Genre Understanding

In general, students showed that they understood that the purpose of reports is to give information. Frequent reminders from teachers supported this understanding. The few instances of confusion, like the fifth grader who called a report “a story,” may be related to the fact that children often hear teachers talking about their writing as stories (J. R. Martin & Rose, 2008). The problem experienced by the first grader who switched genres after doing research on hamsters and encountering a source that described taking care of hamster, is also a common occurrence. When children do research they often use the genre of the source. For example, when doing research for persuasive pieces some students unintentionally wrote reports or historical recounts based on the source (Brisk, in press).

Moving from organizing text chronologically, as in personal recounts, to clusters of topics in a logical order is a challenge for students (Brisk, Horan, & MacDonald, 2008; Christie & Derewianka, 2008). Students succeeded due to careful scaffolding by teachers through shared writing, questions, or deconstructing text with the support of graphic organizers. In the upper grades order of subtopics was a challenge. For these students graphic organizers provided a way to group information, but they did not support students in ordering subtopics in a logical way, as in the other strategies. Reports should begin with a statement or paragraph that includes a general statement or classification. In the early grades there was no effort to scaffold this aspect of reports, and only the second grader included a brief statement. Fourth graders were not required to do this because posters do not require such a statement. Cheryl predicted correctly that the choice of this medium would ease the challenges of text structure. The fifth grader faced the greatest challenge because he was writing an essay, which requires more care with aspects of text structure. In addition, the use of a graphic organizer without coaching on the order of subtopics resulted in a less acceptable order of subtopics, with the description of the animal written last rather than first.

Development of Register and Language

To produce effective texts, awareness of audience and self as reflected in the writing, ability to develop the topic, and ability to construct a coherent text are demanding and necessary. An essential ingredient of expressing the intended meaning in such texts is language knowledge, which is required in order to make appropriate choices.

In the early grades teachers successfully coached the students to write reports in the third person, the typical voice of this genre where the author shows expertise by placing the focus on the topic and not on the writer. However, it is not clear whether it was intentional on the part of the children to use this voice or if it was the result of coaching. Certainly the amount of information provided does not show an understanding that the audience needs complete and clear information. To understand the children’s writing, their readers need full understanding of the topic

to be able to interpret the limited information included in their pieces. As students start to develop audience awareness in fourth and fifth grade they feel that the audience and the authors themselves must be present in the actual text. Although most of their pieces were written in the third person, as a result of teacher coaching, students also managed to interject direct talk to their audience in the form of questions or commands. They used “I” or “me” to establish their presence in the text. In more personalized genres, such as personal recounts or persuasive pieces, audience awareness has been shown to appear in earlier grades (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000, 2001).

In a report, topic development is very demanding because it requires knowledge of the topic and knowledge of language to adequately express meaning. Acquisition of content knowledge requires the ability to do research, assimilate the content reviewed in various sources, synthesize the information, and then write about it using the appropriate vocabulary and ideas (Perry & Drummond, 2002). In these student texts the topic is reflected in the multiple concepts they introduced. The challenge for elementary students is to use the language of written texts as opposed to oral language, which is more familiar to them.

A difficult area for all students in all grades was the expansion of noun groups as a tool to pack concepts and descriptions. In their study of elementary students’ writing conducted in Australia, Christie and Derewianka (2008) found that some upper elementary students showed this capacity to construct dense nominal groups including adjectivals and appositions, for example, “*Krill is a fish-like creature with ten legs*” (p. 189, nominal group underlined). In this study, as the students’ writing became more complex from third grade on, logical connections became the major challenge for the writer and the audience. These complex sentences were difficult to comprehend because of the choice of connecting words and gaps in the information.

Producing an effective text requires knowledge of cohesive devices that students were not fully capable of handling. Unclear referents were common throughout the grades; no synonyms were used to avoid repetition; and the theme of sentences or paragraphs was often the central participant repeated throughout the piece. Christie and Derewianka (2008) found similar characteristics.

These teachers had not encouraged report writing among the students prior to this project. Information acquired through exploring SFL theory with a focus on genre and register and their impact on language choices, provided these teachers with a framework for how to scaffold report writing. Instruction played a key role in the report writing of these students, however there are still many areas in need of development. In particular, students need to “understand how a change in mode from speaking to writing involves using new kinds of sentences to make new and unfamiliar kinds of meaning” (J. R. Martin & Rothery, 1986, p. 241). It remains to be seen whether the practice of teaching report writing as informed by SFL theory across grades and over time will present a different picture from what is described in this article with respect to expectations of what students can do at different grade levels.

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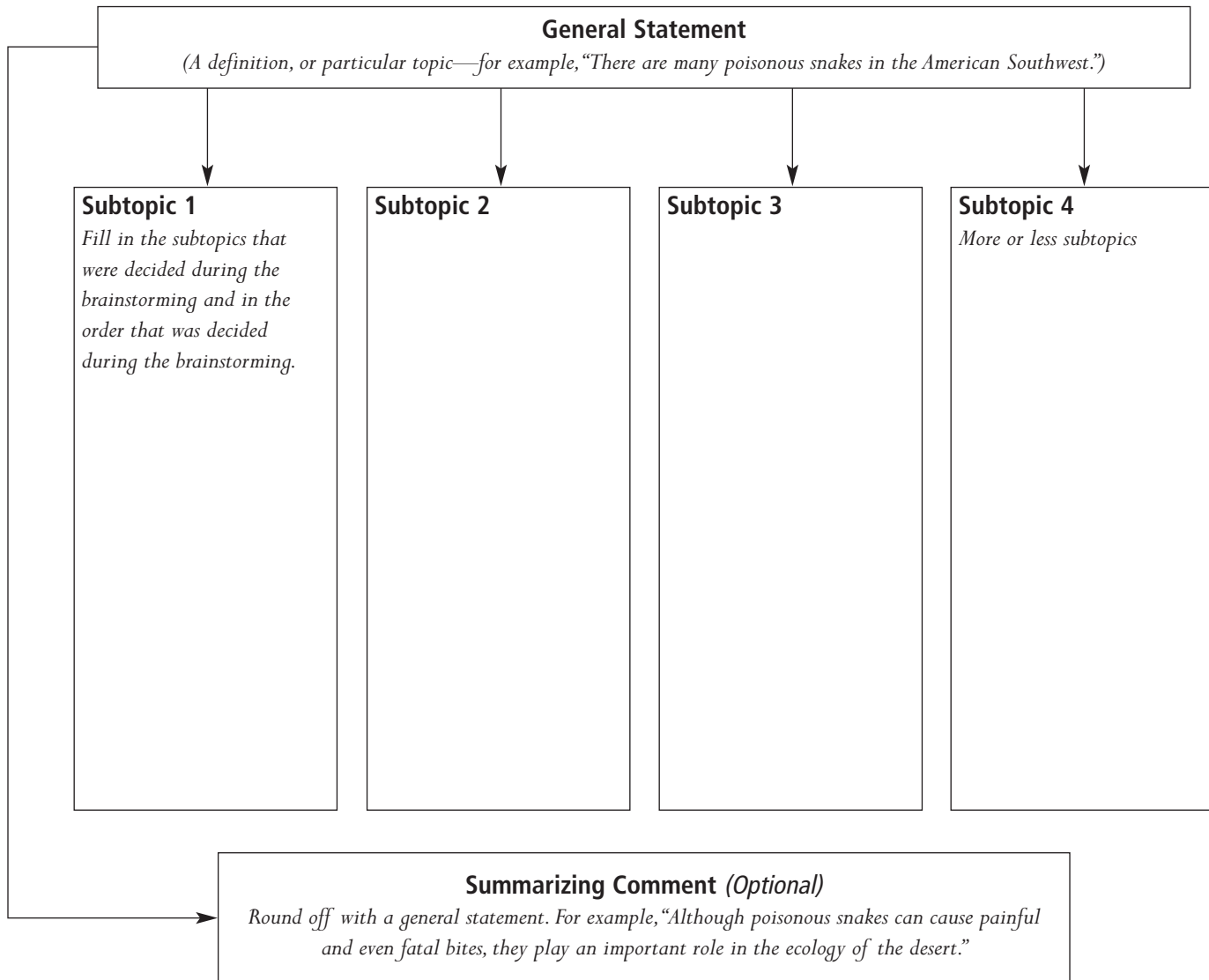
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APPENDIX A

Graphic Organizer: Organizing Information Phase

Title:



Note: Omit the italics in the graphic organizer that will be used by students or placed on chart paper. For each rectangle in this GO, prepare a different sheet of colored paper for the students to use.