

Students' Perception of Teaching English Linguistics at University Level A Case Study

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Abstract This paper presents a case study on the teaching of a 30-hour module of English Linguistics for two courses in the first-cycle degree program in Modern Cultures and Languages. Data gathered through students' evaluation forms have been contradictory: the module scored high as far as students' satisfaction was concerned but it scored low regarding interest. This paper shows how students' feedback has helped us introduce changes. These are illustrated in the main part of this paper. They engage with pedagogical knowledge, methodologies and practices, as well as linguistic approaches specifically chosen to unpack the potential of the content of the module, improving students' language awareness and language skills.

Keywords Critical language studies. Language awareness. Language teacher education. Participants. Systemic functional grammar.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Content: Reasons and Issues. – 3 Context and Data. – 4 Re-framing the Teaching of Content Knowledge: Reflections and Directions. – 5 The Case Study: Teaching the Representation of Event Participants. – 5.1 Re-framing Content: Explaining Event Participants. – 5.2 Group Work: Aurora on a Cline. – 6 Concluding Remarks: Some Ways Forward.



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1 Introduction

The focus of this paper is a case study relating to the teaching of two 30-hour modules of English Linguistics in the second year of the first-cycle degree programs in Modern Cultures and Languages (*Classe di laurea Miur L-11*): *Lingue e Letterature Straniere* (henceforth LLS) and *Lingue, Mercati e Culture dell'Asia e dell'Africa Mediterranea* (henceforth LMCAAM) from a.y. 2017-18 to a.y. 2021-22. The university's official evaluation forms showed that this module persistently scored low for students' interest. Further, qualitative analysis of these evaluations and students' feedback pointed to a common problematic perception of the content of the module that was seen as difficult, abstract and unrelated to language learning. This feedback was perplexing, as this module's content focused on Systemic Functional Grammar (henceforth SFG), a model that was chosen precisely to provide a practical and down-to-earth approach to language in use, rather than abstract linguistic theories. Indeed, Halliday's SFG is often cited as a cornerstone for Communicative Language Teaching (Cf. Brumfit, Johnson 1979; Melrose 1995; Richards, Rodgers 2001), as well as being the theory underpinning Critical Language Studies approaches (Cf. Fairclough 2013, 8). While as scholars we were reassured that our choice had solid scientific foundations, at the same time, as teachers, we felt we could not ignore criticism that persistently showed a lack of understanding of our very aims and goals. This article shows how we addressed this issue, in particular how the students' feedback and information we gathered on their educational curricula helped us change the content of the module in an attempt to meet their criticism and make improvements.¹

In section 2, we outline the original content of the Linguistics module and the reasons that led to its adoption. Section 3 provides details of students' negative and positive feedback taken from the official course evaluation forms. Data and observations on the process of language learning from high school to the first year of university are also provided in an attempt to find some underlying causes for students' criticism. Section 4 is the central part of this study. Preliminary reflections illustrate how students' negative and positive feedback informed the changes that were implemented. These concern content as well as teaching methodologies. In particular, we engaged with a selection of pedagogical knowledge methodologies and practices as well as language theories that could help us clarify

¹ The author wishes to thank the reviewers of this article for their suggestions and comments. The pronoun 'we' is used throughout the article as much of what is reported is the result of collegial discussions. Any errors and omissions are the sole responsibility of the author.

and unpack the potential of the SFG model. In section 5, we present a case study that focuses attention on how we explained a specific topic to the classes in a way that, following students' feedback, integrated theory and practice. The conclusive section briefly outlines future plans for further improvements.

2 The Content: Reasons and Issues

When Linguistics modules were introduced, colleagues in English collectively decided to adopt M.A.K. Halliday's model of SFG in all three years of the BA degree. What was attractive about this model were the following characteristics:

- Functional Grammar "is essentially a 'natural' grammar, in the sense that everything in it can be explained [...] by reference to how language is used" (Halliday 1994, xiii). For this reason, we thought this model was well suited to a course that also included practical language learning;
- Functional Grammar is a holistic and complete approach that considers all meaningful strata of language from morphemes to texts as well as context. It provides a lexico-grammatical approach that also includes elements of pragmatics. We thought this was particularly suited to meet the official requirements for Linguistics modules at university level set by the Ministry of Education in 2000 (see section 3);
- its compartmentalized structure made it possible to distribute content across the three-year degree. According to Halliday (1994, 33), language is organized around three lines of meanings also called metafunctions: the ideational and experiential metafunction used to understand language in the environment; the interpersonal metafunction that focuses on who is taking part in the language exchange, and the textual metafunction that considers how meanings are organized in a message.

After a transitional period, it was decided that the second-year curriculum was going to focus on the following metafunctions and topics:

- grammatical metaphors across the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions (Thompson 2014, 233-54);
- the experiential metafunction with reference to the lexico-grammar of transitivity (Thompson 2014, 91-114; 117-44);
- the interpersonal metafunction with reference to the lexico-grammar of modality and appraisal (Thompson 2014, 70-86).

The focus on metafunctions was seen as showing students that the three-year curriculum was both structured and interconnected. A

schematic illustration of the SFG model that we prepared especially for the students' benefit was adopted by all teachers across the three years to constantly remind students of the pivotal role of metafunctions in bridging context of situation and lexico-grammar, reinforcing the message that the grammatical approach adopted was firmly set in real contexts of use [fig. 1]. This message was also supported by the two textbooks that were adopted as main readings: initially *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* by M.A.K. Halliday in its second edition (1994), later replaced by Geoff Thompson's *Introducing Functional Grammar* in its third edition (2014). The connection we aimed to communicate to our students is highlighted in the initial chapter of Thompson's book entitled "The Purposes of Linguistics Analysis" (2014), where the author notes that the SFG model is based on a close connection between form, meaning and context (11).

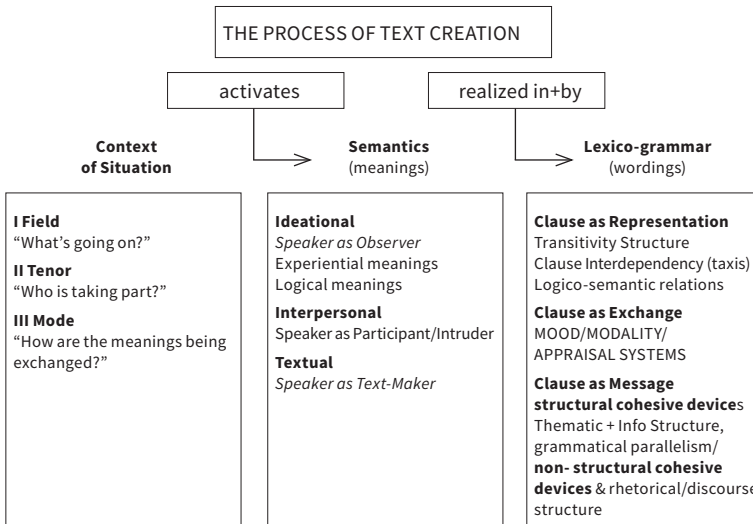


Figure 1 The process of text creation (Miller 2021, 40)

Our efforts to show the potential of the SFG model for providing an approach to grammar rooted in contexts of situation and of use were only partially successful, as will be shown in detail in the next section.

3 Context and Data

In this section, we look closely at persistent negative feedback from second-year students recorded from a.y. 2017-18 to a.y. 2021-22. In the attempt to contextualize this feedback and find some of its underlying causes, this section reflects on the way the relatively recent inclusion of the teaching of the linguistics of foreign languages at university impacted on high school and university students. These reflections are integrated by data obtained through an *ad hoc* questionnaire for high school students enrolled in their fourth year.

The introduction of a module on the Linguistics of foreign languages in Italian university curricula is relatively recent; it dates back to the beginning of 2000, following the reorganization of disciplinary fields.² Prior to this, in Language and Literature Departments, foreign language teaching was a part of foreign literature courses; these were practically-oriented *lettorati* taught by mother-tongue language teachers. Following the above-mentioned re-organization, the literature component turned into an independent course, and the *lettorati* - re-named *esercitazioni* - became part of courses that also included a module in Linguistics of the foreign language taught by Lecturers and Professors of Language and Translation. This effectively marked the beginning of foreign language learning as independent from literature.

The introduction of the Linguistics module affected students' transition from high school to university; not only did university students have no previous background in linguistics, but the introduction of linguistics of foreign languages demanded that they adapted to a new way of learning a second language. At school students associated language learning with the acquisition of language skills; the introduction of linguistics of foreign languages had the effect of adding to these also metalinguistic skills. In particular, as far as the English language is concerned, Linguistics modules were meant to encompass

the metalinguistic analysis of English language in its synchronic and diachronic dimensions, its phonetic, morphological, syntactic, lexical, textual and pragmatic structures, as well as different levels of register of oral and written communication.³

² See Atti Ministeriali, Anno 1999, Dicembre, DM 23121999, <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/1999/03/15/61/so/55/sg/pdf>.

³ https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/serie_generale/caricaArticolo?art.versione=1&art.idGruppo=0&art.flagTipoArticolo=2&art.codiceRedazionale=00A13012&art.idArticolo=1&art.idSottoArticolo=1&art.idSottoArticolo1=10&art.dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=2000-10-24. The translation is mine.

In order to obtain data to document this transition, a survey was devised as part of a PCTO (*Percorso per le Competenze Trasversali e l'Orientamento*) activity and submitted to a group of high school students enrolled in the fourth year of a *Liceo Classico*.⁴ The survey contained yes and no as well as open questions targeting students' knowledge of specialized terminology connected with the afore-mentioned ministerial specifications. Results showed that of the 33 students who participated in the survey, 81.2% did not know what metalanguage meant and 18.2% were not sure about it. Asked to provide a short definition or, alternatively, an example of metalanguage, only one participant provided an answer, which was wrong. The majority of students - more than 87.9% - declared that they knew the meaning of phonetic, morphological and syntactical structures, while only 66.7% knew about pragmatic structures. This survey confirmed that at the end of high school, students had no knowledge of metalinguistic analysis and only a partial knowledge of specialized linguistics terminology that they acquired in connection with the process of learning practical language skills and grammatical structures.

Moving closer to the focus of this study, what emerged from second-year university students' official evaluation forms from a.y. 2017-18 to a.y. 2021-22 was overall positive feedback, but persistent negative results concerning interest in the content of the Linguistics module. Table 1 reproduces selected data of students' evaluation.⁵

The table [tab 1] shows that students' criticism concentrated on Q. 11, where results consistently remained lower than those targeting other aspects of the module. Furthermore, as shown in Table 2 below, Q. 11 results were also comparatively low in relation to courses in the same degree program and School. Differences oscillated from -42.9% in LLS in a.y. 2017-18 to -5.2 % in LMCAAM in a.y. 2021-22. Feedback obtained through personal communications from colleagues teaching linguistics of other European languages in the same School confirmed that persistent low interest was a peculiar feature of the English modules.

⁴ The survey involved students in Liceo Classico *Dante Alighieri* in Ravenna and was conducted between April and May 2022 using Google Forms. Results can be found at <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1aunnzEOIchujDdK1dJ4NZvpPhqTIFS6zJ9SZsoq63pI/edit>. The PCTO was organized in connection with this research project to gather further data and information on students' transition from high school to university.

⁵ Evaluation forms in a.y. 2019-20 were not included as this was an exceptional year due to the disruptions caused by the Covid pandemic.

Table 1 Students' ratings of two English Linguistics modules in two degree programs: Lingue, Mercati e Culture dell'Asia e dell'Africa Mediterranea (LMCAAM) and Lingue e Letterature Straniere (LLS)

	Q. 3: Quality of material provided	Q. 7: Teacher's style as regards their capacity to convey information in a clear way	Q. 11: Students' interest	Q. 12: Students' overall satisfaction
a.y. 2021-22				
LMCAAM	95.2%	90.5%	81%	100%
LLS	86.4%	72.7%	63.6%	72.7%
a.y. 2020-21				
LMCAAM	100%	100%	79.2%	95.8%
LLS	92.9%	78.6%	60.7%	70.4%
a.y. 2018-19				
LMCAAM	100%	100%	70%	100%
LLS	91%	82.2%	65.9%	82.2%
a.y. 2017-18				
LMCAAM	100%	91.7%	66.7%	100%
LLS	95.5%	95.5%	45.5%	77.3%

Table 2 Comparison of results of Q. 11 recording students' interest across the same degree program or School

	Q. 11: Students' interest	Q. 11: Students' interest
a.y. 2021-22	English linguistics	Degree Program
LMCAAM	81%	86.2%
LLS	63.6%	89.5%
a.y. 2020-21	English linguistics	Degree Program
LMCAAM	79.2%	90.6%
LLS	60.7%	90.8%
a.y. 2018-19	English linguistics	School
LMCAAM	70%	87.8%
LLS	65.9%	87.8%
a.y. 2017-18	English linguistics	School
LMCAAM	66.7%	88.4%
LLS	45.5%	88.4%

To shed further light on the issue of students' interest, we exploited qualitative data, consisting in anonymous comments taken from the official evaluation forms. The comment section in these forms is made up of five open questions, and it is not compulsory for students to answer any of these. Unfortunately, despite teachers' encouragement, only a small number of students provided answers. Out of a total of 203 evaluation forms received in the period taken into consideration, only 118 were filled in, most of them only partially. In line with the aim of this study, we focused on comments about the content of the module and/or its components (henceforth these comments will be referred to with the term *Appreciation*).⁶

In an attempt to investigate the persistent lack of interest, we focused our attention on those sequences that contained the lemma *interessant**. In contrast to quantitative results, the majority of comments were positive; more precisely, we counted 15 instances of positive *Appreciation*, 2 negative ones and 1 comparatively positive. This does not mean that comments were almost unanimously positive; indeed expressions of negative *Appreciation* often did not explicitly mention the lemma *interessant**.

The most articulate expressions of positive *Appreciations* that referred to the module as a whole included the following: "*Trovo che la Functional Grammar sia molto interessante e utile nel contesto comunicativo*" (I think that Functional Grammar is very interesting in the communicative context); "*Il corso si presenta veramente interessante e dà degli stimoli anche per una visione diversa della realtà e della comunicazione tra persone*" (The course is really interesting and provides the impetus to gain a different vision of reality and of communication); "*Interessante il tentativo di far apprezzare agli studenti il collegamento tra modo in cui si scrive in inglese e il tipo di effetto che viene creato*" (The attempt to have students appreciate the connection between the way you write in English and the effect that this writing produces is interesting). Instances of positive *Appreciations* also referred to specific parts of the module, as in the following cases: "*Il film 12 Angry Men [...] è stato molto interessante*" (The movie *12 Angry Men* [...] was very interesting); "*Fornire esempi e lavorare su testi letterari è molto interessante*" (Providing examples and working with literary texts is very interesting).

As instances of negative *Appreciations* did not include explicit mentions of the lemma *interessant** these had to be searched manually. What follows are the most articulate examples: "*Non è una materia molto utile per apprendere l'inglese secondo me, ed è piuttosto*

⁶ We have borrowed the term 'Appreciation' from Martin, White 2005. For an illustration of its meaning and the Appraisal System, see <https://www.grammatics.com/appraisal/>.

un riempitivo" (It is not very useful to learn English, in my view, it is irrelevant); *"La materia risulta tra le meno interessanti e [...] tra le meno pratiche"* (This module is amongst the least interesting and the least practical-oriented); *"Penso che il problema principale sia la difficoltà nel capire in modo concreto di cosa si stia parlando"* (I think the main problem is that it is difficult to concretely understand what this module is about).

To sum up, as far as quantitative data is concerned, an unusually high percentage of students reported low interest, while at the same time they appreciated the course material, the teacher's style of delivery and overall felt positive about the module. Qualitative results on the issue of interest in the forms of students' comments yielded scant results that were mostly positive, suggesting that most students were not able, or not willing, to articulate the reasons for their lack of interest. Positive Appreciations consistently made connections between the module content, context of language use and communication, as well as mentioning exercises and examples as particularly useful.

Negative Appreciations found the content of the module unclear, difficult, excessively abstract, pointless, and unrelated to language learning. Negative comments showed an underlying misunderstanding between teachers and students that led to a paradox: on the one hand, teachers adopted the SFG approach as an alternative to more theory-oriented grammatical models in order to provide knowledge that is relevant for language in use and language learning; on the other, students' lack of interest was caused precisely by what teachers endeavored to avoid.

Given this scant feedback, it was difficult to find reasons for this paradox. However, consideration of data and reflections on students' transition from high school to university reported at the beginning of this section point to lack of adequate preparation and of background information concerning metalanguage as the main reason for students' lack of interest and their inability to explain it. As noted previously, when enrolling at university, students have studied English without having been introduced to metalanguage. Moreover, as shown in the course specifications of first-year language courses in our degree program, Linguistics modules of European languages other than English covered selected aspects of grammar without explicitly framing them as metalinguistic reflections. Therefore, at the end of the first year, the concept of metalanguage may have been referred to implicitly or explicitly in passing only in courses of general linguistics and at the beginning of the module of English Linguistics, when SFG was illustrated as an alternative to formal grammatical approaches. Consequently, when they began their second year, students were far from having had enough time or information to gain a deep and solid understanding of the importance of metalinguistic

approaches and were ill prepared to understand a model that had the concept of metafunctions as its core component.

In addition to presuming that a lack of adequate preparation and background information was the main reason for students' lack of interest, it should also be noted that students' awareness of language and/in context emerged as the main reason for positive comments. This showed that development of language awareness was central to raising interest in our Linguistics module, besides being connected, as is well known, with improvement of foreign language learning.⁷

4 Re-framing the Teaching of Content Knowledge: Reflections and Directions

These preliminary data, reflections, and hypotheses shaped changes that have been gradually implemented in the last five years. These changes sought to introduce ways to improve the accessibility of the module content in order to unpack and clarify linguistic knowledge that we used to take for granted but remained sketchy and unclear to most students. To implement these changes, it became necessary to step out of our comfort zone and engage with pedagogical knowledge, methodologies and practices, as well as linguistic approaches other than SFG.

With regard to pedagogical studies, contributions in the field of Language Teacher Education (henceforth LTE) that connect language awareness and metalinguistic awareness to the acquisition and development of content knowledge (Wright 2002, 113; see also Andrews 1997, 2001) were particularly helpful. Amongst these, pedagogical content knowledge was particularly useful as it provided ways to re-structure and integrate the module without introducing new material. This approach has been defined as

a special form of professional understanding unique to teachers and combines knowledge of the content to be taught with knowledge of what students know or think they know about this content and knowledge of how the content can be represented to the students [...] in ways that is most likely to be effective in helping them to attain the intended outcomes of instructions. (Brophy in Andrews 1997, 148)

Following this approach, we considered what students already knew about the SFG model, and, more generally, about linguistics and

⁷ James, Garrett 1991; Andrews 1997; Fairclough 2013, 13-14; Svalberg 2007, 288; Farias 2004, 213.

metalinguistic approaches, as well as shared non-specialized and axiomatic knowledge of language based on experience. This background knowledge was used to construct a brief introduction to the module content and to restructure explanations of theory.

Regarding the employment of language approaches other than SFG, elements of Critical Language Studies (henceforth CLS) were introduced in the module. Following Fairclough (2013, 2), CLS encompass what is also referred to as Critical Linguistics, or Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA), indicating not a theory but rather “one contributory element in research on social practice” (Chouliaraki, Fairclough 1999, 16). CLS played a central role in our restructuring for two reasons: firstly, they are the basis for the development of Critical Language Awareness (Fairclough 2013, 2); secondly, as noted by Clarence-Fincham (2000, 25), CDA complements SFG and contributes to highlight that SFG provides insights into the social dimension of language: “CDA provides the critical and ideological dimension to the analysis of texts, Halliday’s SFG complements the critical perspective, providing linguists with fine-tuned insights into the social nature and function of particular linguistics systems”.

After these preliminary reflections, we decided to implement changes through top-down and bottom-up approaches.

Our top-down approach was designed to provide immediate and convincing answers to students’ criticism on the irrelevance of metalinguistic analysis. Following the pedagogical content knowledge method illustrated above, we exploited knowledge students had already acquired. This approach comprised two strategies that were both implemented at the beginning of the module.

The first strategy was meant to make students reflect on the ways in which language conveys meanings. We used a narrative that exploited knowledge of semiology and structuralism (though these linguistic approaches were never explicitly mentioned) that students acquired from courses in general linguistics. We began this narrative by recalling Saussure’s concept of sign:

words are not symbols which correspond to referents, but rather are ‘signs’ which are made up of two parts [...] a mark, either written or spoken, called a ‘signifier’, and a concept (what is ‘thought’ when the mark is made) called a ‘signified’. (Selden, Widdowson 1993, 104)

Then, by means of examples, we introduced C.S. Peirce’s distinction of three types of signs:

[...] the ‘iconic’ (where the sign *resembles* its referent [...] e.g. the picture of a ship [...]); the indexical [...] (where the sign is *associated* [...] with its referent [...] e.g. smoke as a sign of fire); and the

'symbolic' (where the sign has an *arbitrary* relation to its referent, e.g. language). (Selden, Widdowson 1993, 105)

Drawing attention to the symbolic relation between sign and its referent via Saussure and Pierce alerted students to the nature of language as a construct and the consequent need to understand how it works. By referring to language as a construct, we also challenged the idea of language as neutral and foregrounded one of the foundational principles of discourse (cf. Fairclough, Wodak 1997), preparing students for the need to develop Critical Language Awareness.

As our second strategy, we took a critical appraisal of the concept of the arbitrariness of language, providing instead a view of language as a social construct. To this end we used some of Halliday's foundational definitions of the functions of language: "Language has evolved to satisfy human needs; and the way it is organized is functional with respect to these needs - it is not arbitrary" (1994, xiii) and "language is as it is because of the functions it has evolved to serve in people's lives" (1978, 4). These down-to-earth, logical, and effective formulas were meant to contrast students' prejudice about the SFG model as abstract. After that, following Halliday's method, "we [...] proceed[ed] from the outside inwards, interpreting language by reference to its place in the social process" (1978, 4). Using Figure 1 in section 2, we guided students through easy examples of connections between familiar contexts of situation, metafunctions and their lexico-grammar.⁸

Where the top-down approach was meant to set up a dialogue with students and dispel criticism, bottom-up approaches exploited students' positive comments and used practical activities to support course content knowledge. As noted in section 3, students commented positively on the recent implementation of activities and the introduction of examples for providing simple and clear explanations grounded in real life contexts. Bottom-up approaches were used at various points in the module. Depending on the class group and on the topics, they might serve to round up explanations, or, if a topic was repeatedly perceived as particularly difficult, they were used to introduce it. Practical activities included teacher-led activities, and more often group works. Group work was favored by teachers for the positive effects it has on developing language learning, and Language Awareness. As already noted in empirical studies in LTE:

8 At this early stage, we took the class experience as context of situation and we asked students to answer simple questions that exemplified the three metafunctions: "What is going on in the class?"; "Who is involved in the class experience?"; "How are meanings exchanged?".

- a. group work is inductive and discovery-oriented and hence it stimulates Language Awareness (Wright 2002, 115);
- b. during group work students are asked to communicate only in English to support “the process of appropriation” of the language (Tocalli-Beller, Swain 2005, 8) and, in our specific case, also appropriation of metalanguage with beneficial effects on both the language and linguistics components of the course;
- c. during group work, students participate actively and cooperate with other members of the group in order to encourage interaction and engagement that, in turn, make explicit the way language works (Borg 1994, 290), at the same time stimulating awareness.

In our module, group work focused on analyses of texts set in specific contexts, as these were particularly suitable for practicing SFG theories (Thompson 2014, 221), while also supporting and integrating content knowledge and stimulating Critical Language Awareness.

5 The Case Study: Teaching the Representation of Event Participants

This section is divided into two parts: the first one focuses on the delivery of content relating to event participants as part of the system of transitivity; in the second one, we describe a group work activity that was meant to support and practice this knowledge.

Event participants are one element of the transitivity analysis. They are “participants in the process” (Halliday 1994, 107) logically and functionally connected to the lexical verb. For this reason, they are labelled in relation to the kind of action indicated by the lexical verb.

5.1 Re-framing Content: Explaining Event Participants

Based on the evaluation forms, transitivity was the topic most frequently mentioned as the one that students understood better, the reason being that it was introduced in the first year. This provided confirmation of the benefits of the cyclical-spiral structure of the degree programme, which facilitated the revision, development and reinforcement of knowledge.

To explain event participants in practical terms, we drew on Hasan's (1989) work on the poem *The Widower* by Les Murray. First, we used Hasan's binary distinction between -er and -ed roles, which considers participants according to their active and passive roles, or,

to borrow Hasan's expression, according to their "effectuality - or dynamism - as the quality of being able to affect the world around us" (45). After this, students were presented with Hasan's representation of the cline of dynamism [fig. 2].

DYNAMIC		
1	↑	(Actor + Animate Goal) <u>John</u> took Harry to London
2		(Actor + Inanimate Goal) <u>John</u> took the books with him
3		(Sayer + Recipien) <u>John</u> told Harry . . .
4		(Sayer + Target) <u>John</u> praised the system
5		(Sayer) <u>John</u> talked
6		(Phenomenon + Senser) <u>John</u> /the picture attracted her
7		(Senser) <u>John</u> recognised the house Mary was attracted by i/him
8		(Actor — Goal) <u>John</u> went away
9		(Behaver) <u>John</u> woke up
10		(Carrier) <u>John</u> was sleepy
11		(Goal/Target. . .) John took <u>Harry</u> with him
12		(Range) I watched <u>the house</u>
13	↓	(Circumstance/. . .) I have a <u>sister</u>
PASSIVE		

Figure 2 Cline of dynamism and *The Widower* (Hasan 1989, 46)

Hasan's cline is based on the reasoning that participants' effectuality can be represented on a continuum between the poles of dynamic and passive. After Hasan (1989, 46), we took 7 as the half-way point of the cline and defined 1 to 7 as more dynamic and 8 to 13 as more passive. Hasan's way of representing participants interestingly connects SFG with Critical Discourse Analysis because it offers a representation of participants that is power bearing (Fiske 1994, 3): the more dynamic a participant, the more powerful, the less dynamic, the more powerless. In order to make this connection clearer and more memorable for students we referred to Hasan's "cline of dynamism" as "cline of power". This way, students understood event participants not only as grammatical labels, but also as representations of social entities that act or are acted upon. Hasan's cline of dynamism was used to structure the group work that is illustrated in the following section.

5.2 Group Work: Aurora on a Cline

This group work was used in the second-year module to round up the explanation of Transitivity. A slightly adapted version of this was also used during the above-mentioned PCTO (see section 3).

5.2.1 Aims of Group Work and Description of Texts

The aims of this group work were:

- test students' knowledge of types of processes and participants;
- stimulate awareness of participants as representations of social entities;
- demonstrate how participants are shaped and, at the same time, contribute to shape the context in which the texts were produced;
- provide an example of Halliday's theory of meaning as choice (1994, xiv).

The texts chosen are a description of the plot of Charles Perrault's famous fairy tale *The Sleeping Beauty* adapted from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sleeping_Beauty and a synopsis of the Walt Disney movie *Maleficent* (2004) adapted from <https://m.imdb.com/title/tt1587310/plotsummary/>, one of the fairy tale's most recent reinterpretation. This group work provided an example of the way SFG and CDA complement each other. The story of *The Sleeping Beauty* is ideal for a CDA analysis for being a classic fairy tale that over the centuries has fed a powerful message to young girls about their role in society, a message that the movie deconstructs through the empowerment of the female protagonists. Both texts were introduced to students with reference to the context in which they were produced and received. At this stage, rather than providing information, we decided to elicit students' knowledge to encourage active participation and collect information for our pedagogical content knowledge methodology. We found that we could rely on a good amount of knowledge that students already had. Our hypothesis that all students were familiar with this fairy tale was confirmed and those who had not yet watched the movie were happy to do so and enjoyed it. We also found out from colleagues teaching English literature in the same year that we could rely on students knowing the concept of re-writing, or "writing back" (Ashcroft et al. 1989) from discussions on postcolonial and feminist fiction. In same way contemporary postcolonial and feminist fiction deconstruct canonical texts by questioning and undermining widely accepted power structures, so the movie can be seen as deconstructing the deep-set myth of the beautiful but passive heroine of the fairy tale.

5.2.2 Preparation

An electronic hand out providing a guided analysis was uploaded on the module learning platform. This included:

- both texts, annotated, where all instances of Aurora as event participant were numbered consecutively;
- two clines modeled on Hasan's [fig. 2], one for each text, with participant labels ordered from the most dynamic to the most passive;
- some questions and statements to help students making connections between data retrieved through the analysis of participant Aurora and power issues relating to her representation in the two texts.

5.2.3 Task and Discussion

Students performed the task in groups without teacher interference; though they were asked to follow directions for group work illustrated in b. and c. in section 4. Students were asked to, so to speak, position the two Auroras on the cline and exchange opinions on the meaning of her representation based on the results of their analysis and using appropriate metalanguage. Once students had completed the task, the teacher prompted the class to assign a participant role to each instance of Aurora marked in the texts. A discussion followed that was structured to encourage students to use reasoning based on the data collected in Table 3 below as a starting point for their reflections in an attempt to prevent them from expressing subjective and impressionistic opinions. Discussion focused on a comparison of data of the most dynamic and most passive roles (marked in bold in Table 3) in order to highlight differences between the two protagonists and show how the choice of different participant roles produces different power relations to suit different representations of women, produced in different contexts and by different social structures.

Table 3 Aurora on a cline: A comparative analysis of Aurora as event participant based on Hasan's cline on dynamism

+ dynamic = er role	Aurora 1 (Sleeping Beauty)	Aurora2 (Maleficent)
Actor + Animate Goal	4.3%	16.66%
Actor + Inanimate Goal	8.6%	11.11%
Sayer + Receiver	0%	16.6%
Sayer	4.3%	0%
Senser + Phenomenon	4.3%	11.11%
Actor without Goal	13.04%	11.11%
Behaver	17.13%	5.5%
Carrier	4.3%	0%
Goal	43.47%	27.77%
+ passive = ed role		

6 Concluding Remarks: Some Ways Forward

This is an open conclusion providing brief reflections on this case study and some ways forward. In these past five years we have found that the dialogue we have started with students through their comments has been invaluable for introducing positive changes. Our planned actions are aimed at intensifying this dialogue following two directions. Firstly, we are planning to construct specific questionnaires and carry out discovery interviews to gather more detailed qualitative feedback specifically aimed at parts of the module content that remain difficult. Secondly, we aim to encourage students to become the actors involved in the process of redesigning the module, rather than passive beneficiaries. In order to do so, during the last two years we have devised a take-home test that students can opt for on a voluntary basis as an alternative to a quiz. The take-home test is very labor-intensive and requires that students engage in the preparation of material that we plan to adapt for further group work activities; it includes the selection of real texts, guided SFG analyses and the production of metacommentaries. So far, we have collected about seventy-two tests that we have analysed closely to form an idea of what kind of text-types and topics are more likely to attract students' interest. In the near future we plan to select a small sample of students' work to be uploaded with their permission on the module's learning platform to provide additional much needed practical work.

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