

WORKING WITH TEXTS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM



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*To our parents, teachers and students
for all the inspiring lessons we have learnt from them.*

Acknowledgements

It is very gratifying to look back on the journey undertaken and the companies we have kept.

We are very grateful to Laura Hlavacka with whom, back in 1999, we first designed the course *Genre Theory: Preparing to teach texts*. This was, in fact, the beginning of a good deal of what is happening now, as we publish our first book. From the general idea behind the course, emerged the idea of conducting more research on the teaching of texts in EFL classrooms. Part of the results of our research has gone into this book.

We are also indebted to other colleagues, such as Victoria Magariños, with whom we have discussed at length issues pertaining to the teaching of literary texts in our Language classes and to Silvina del Pópolo for her careful and insightful reading of the draft of our book.

Students have also, once and again, given us fresh and inspiring ideas as they took their first steps into their professional life thinking about ways to teach texts.

Very many thanks, as well, to all the Systemic Linguists who have come to Mendoza, starting way back in 1994 with Cecilia Colombi's first invitation into the theory. Special thanks should also go to Heidi Byrnes, Jim Martin, Christian Matthiessen, David Rose and Geoff Thompson for generously sharing articles, books and sample texts that would, otherwise, be hard for us to come by. They all brought with them new winds and posed challenges that have endured. We have drawn upon these ideas and have attempted to apply them productively to our local educational and professional needs.

And, of course, our gratitude goes to our families. Writing our book has affected a large community of partners, husbands, parents, children and a grandchild. Thanks to all of them for their understanding and support during the long hours that we spent away from them.

FOREWORD

M. CECILIA COLOMBI

Working with Texts in the EFL Classroom describes a useful and valuable approach to teaching English in the foreign language classroom. The writing of this book was coordinated by Cristina Boccia, Samiah Hassan and Guillermina Perera de Saravia and is based on the experiences of a group of teachers and researchers working in the EFL Department at the Universidad Nacional de Cuyo, Mendoza, who over several years have trialled various ideas and approaches for ways of implementing text-based theory and Systemic Functional Linguistics in their classroom. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and genre-based theory are based upon the work done by M.A.K. Halliday, Ruqaiya Hasan, Jim Martin, Frances Christie, Joan Rothery, David Rose and others developing a functional model of language for use in schools.

SFL is a school of linguistic thought that is focused on explaining how the many resources available in language function to make meaning. Meaning, in turn, is achieved for systemicists in and through texts. This textual and meaning-making orientation to language then has implications for foreign language acquisition and research because it requires investigating texts both as a source for and as outcome of language acquisitional process. Therefore the title of the book: *Working with Texts in the EFL Classroom*, i.e. texts as the focus of the teaching/learning experience.

Working with Texts in the EFL Classroom is intended primarily for teachers of English as a foreign language in primary to tertiary levels of instruction. Foreign language teachers in general and student teachers in linguistics and foreign languages will find the book immensely valuable. This book leads the reader through the analysis

and teaching of texts in the foreign language classroom to illuminate the challenges students face in working with them and to offer ways of exploring meaning in texts. It provides detailed suggestions for incorporating language analysis and exploration of meaning in three types of texts: narratives, service encounters and movie reviews.

Working with Texts in the EFL Classroom presents an innovative alternative to traditional perspectives on teaching English in the foreign language classroom. What is exciting about this book is that it focuses on the application of a highly theoretical model of language to the interpretation of the texts for language teaching, and that it does it in a very accessible, clear and precise way. Additionally, it gives attention to areas that continue to challenge us, such as the development of writing and literacy skills in a foreign language classroom. This book enables learners (and teachers) to develop the knowledge and skills which will allow them to engage with whole texts appropriate to social contexts.

I predict that *Working with Texts in the EFL Classroom* will become a significant resource for teachers and researchers, not only of foreign languages but also of language arts and discourse analysis. This book provides an expert synthesis and an effective pedagogical model to the teaching of texts in the foreign classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Our aim

The idea to write this book originated in the many inspiring discussions we had in several teaching-learning and research contexts about how to teach texts in an EFL teaching context. As teachers of English we all believe that texts are key objects that we wish our students to engage with effectively if they are to operate successfully in another culture. As members of any community, we need to both understand and produce texts in countless situations during our daily lives in our private, educational and job related worlds. We listen to weather forecasts or news reports as we get ready for work, we engage in casual conversation, read a fire alarm warning or hear today's horoscope over the radio on the bus, we send e-mails, both personal and professional from work, we confirm a dentist appointment and buy fruit on our way home. Each of these activities involves us in socially recognized interactions in which language plays a key role. As language teachers, we wish our students to participate in these social interactions as effectively as possible. The better we understand how these texts work, that is, how language helps them fulfill their social function, the more informed our decisions about our teaching practice will be. Even when we are able to take part in different types of social interactions in which language is used, that is, even when we are effective users of different *genres*, we may find it a little harder to explain how it is that these social activities fulfill their functionality through the use of language. Our idea is that the more explicit our understanding of the role that language plays is,

the more explicit we can be with our students as we guide them to better comprehend and effectively produce texts.

As foreign language teachers, we wish to help our students to fully understand the social activities they are likely to engage in and to feel confident with the resources in the foreign language that will help them to communicate efficiently. Work with texts becomes a very productive context for us to introduce and practice language items, both lexical and grammatical. Texts in EFL textbooks represent authentic social interactions as closely as possible and, given the right level of instruction, the texts we work with can, in fact, be authentic. So teaching EFL can be viewed as the acquisition of the linguistic skills that our students will need to participate in social activities in which language is used as effectively as possible. We will be teaching them the resources (the vocabulary and the structures they need) with a view to help them become effective participants in authentic interactions.

This is, in short, the main purpose of this book. We wish to talk about texts, how they work, how language does what it does. Once we better understand texts, we can do a better job teaching them.

Our effort to look into texts has been extensively guided by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as it is theorized by authors such as Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), Hasan (1984), Martin (1992) and Martin and Rose (2007, 2008). We have drawn upon key notions from this theory to ask texts the questions that interest us. For the pedagogical application that we suggest, we have relied on the Genre Pedagogy proposed by authors such as Martin (1999), Martin and Rothery (1990), Martin and Christie (2007), Christie and Derewianka (2008) and Martin and Rose (2012). This book is not strictly about this theory, but, rather, about the results of its applications to the study of texts.¹ We will only need to review some very basic notions that will form a useful common ground for us to communicate along the book.

With the backdrop of SFL and Genre Pedagogy, we will examine three types of texts, or *genres*, that are frequently included in EFL textbooks for students of all ages and levels of instruction: narratives, service encounters and movie reviews. We will first discuss the social function they perform in a culture, and how this function is fulfilled by their textual structure and by the language that is used to express it. Then, in each chapter, we will suggest a set of classroom activities aimed at helping students become better users of these genres, both for comprehension and for production.

This book can be used as a resource book for activities that can be taken straight to the EFL classroom. We hope to satisfy your need for concrete, specific suggestions on what can go on in a classroom that will help you teach texts. If this is your main interest, the second part of each chapter should be particularly useful to you. There we will list and describe the set of classroom activities we propose.

¹ The following textbooks provide an accessible introduction to the theory: Egging (2004), Thompson (2004), Bloor and Bloor (2004). Other suggested readings are listed on pages 174, 175.

The book can also be approached as an introductory discussion of basic notions of Genre Theory and Genre Pedagogy within SFL. An initial effort to become familiar with them will hopefully allow you to better understand the rationale for the activities we later propose and, more importantly, will give you tools to make informed decisions *yourself* as you plan your *own* activities for these or other genres you need to teach. We would like to encourage this second approach to the book, hoping you will eventually be interested in pursuing your reading on the theory.

We would very much like to hear about your experience as you read the book or as you apply some of our suggestions. Please share your impressions at: teachingtexts@gmail.com.

How this book is organized

The three chapters that follow deal with narratives, service encounters and movie reviews. We have attempted to structure each chapter similarly.

We start out by discussing the contribution that the genre makes to the culture in which it operates: its purpose, the typical role relationships that are established between the participants (its tenor), the way in which language is used –as characteristically oral or written (its mode), and the area of experience that is typically constructed in the text (its field). In this first part, we also review the stages through which the text unfolds and the key linguistic features that characterize each one.

We then go on to provide a brief review of the treatment that these genres typically receive in EFL textbooks that are being used in our local context in private and public institutions and the language focus they are usually associated with.

Finally, we make suggestions for classroom practice with a view to enhance the teaching of the genre. We first follow the different stages in the genre pedagogy as an organizing principle for the activities we suggest. Then, in the chapter on narratives, we offer a complete lesson following the genre pedagogy that will be introduced below, and in the two remaining chapters, we examine a sample lesson and suggest two complete writing tasks on service encounters and movie reviews, respectively.

At the end of each chapter, we include either a list of names of or links to sample texts. We have also included some sample service encounters. We tentatively suggest the age and the instructional level that these readings could be used with. As we said earlier in this introduction, at the end of the book we include some additional suggested readings for those of you who would like to pursue this introductory and panoramic first encounter with SFL, Genre Theory and Genre Pedagogy, the theories that we have drawn upon all along the book.