SFL: Fundamentals and Its Applications in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a theory which describes language in its social context. Based on this concept, SFL provides teachers with a grammar that focuses on meaning rather than form and concentrates on whole texts and their organizations as well as on sentences. For learners, SFL suggests that language should be learnt "trinocularly", not only 'from below'- as with traditional grammar- and 'from above'- as with much communicative language teaching- but also 'from within' or 'from round about' (McCabe, Gledhill & Liu, 2011: 37). The SFL model therefore has been widely applied in educational settings around the world, both from research and pedagogical perspectives. In an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning context, a number of studies have employed different approaches of the SFL theory and reported the findings from different classrooms. By focusing on the context of Asian countries, the present paper discusses the fundamentals of the theory, summarizes the findings from the collected publications, illustrates the potential challenges from the applications in EFL classrooms, and discusses directions for future research.

Keywords: SFL, EFL context, applications, educational challenges

1 Introduction

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a theory of language and discourse developed by Michael Halliday (see Halliday, 1994) and extended later by his followers, for example, Susan Eggins, James Martin, Frances Christie, and Christian Matthiessien. The theory views language as having two characteristics: systemic and functional. Systemic in SFL refers to a conception of language as a network of systems or choices for expressing meanings, functional refers to a concern for what language does and how it does it (Flowerdew, 2013). This concept is in contrast to more structural approaches; and in this regard, language allows people to accomplish different communicative goals by providing them with a set of available options for which they can construe, express, and negotiate meaning in particular contexts of use (Linares & Zhi-Ying, 2020).

2 Metafunctions

The functional use of language simultaneously conveys three meanings at clause level: ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings (metafunctions). The three metafunctions are concerned with the use of language resources for representation, interaction, and information flow, respectively (see Figure 1).
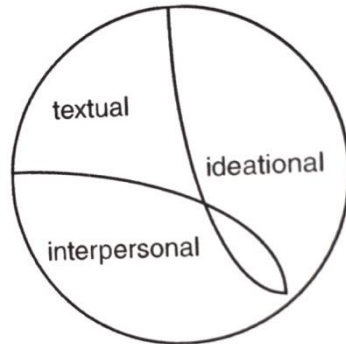
Figure 1. Metafunctions (Martin & White, 2005: 7)

The descriptions of the three functions can be explained as follows.

> Ideational resources are concerned with construing experience: what's going on, including who's doing what to whom, where, when, why and how and the logical relation of one going-on to another. Interpersonal resources are concerned with negotiating social relations: how people are interacting, including the feelings they try to share. Textual resources are concerned with information flow: the ways in which ideational and interpersonal meanings are distributed in waves of semiosis, including interconnections among waves and between language and attendant modalities (action, image, music etc.).
>
> (Martin & White, 2005: 7)

3 Stratification

The concepts of SFL emphasize the analysis of language, based on four strata: context, discourse semantics, lexicogrammar, and phonology-graphology.

- **Language**

Language in terms of SFL is a stratified semiotic system, including three cycles of 'coding' at different levels of abstraction: discourse semantics, lexicogrammar, and phonology. 'Coding' means the higher level is more abstract than the lower one, and is thereby 'realized' through the more concrete semiotic resources at lower level. This 'realizational relationship' is demonstrated in Figure 2 below.
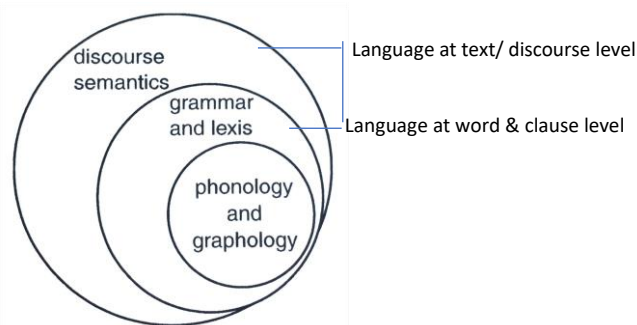
Figure 2. Language strata (Adapted from: Martin & White, 2005: 9)

In Figure 2, the first level is concerned with phonology (in spoken language) and graphology (in written language). Phonology deals with organization of phonemes into syllables, and their deployment in units of rhythm and intonation; graphology deals with the organization of letters into sentences, alongside punctuation, layout and formatting.

The second level of abstraction is lexicogrammar, concerned with the coding of phonological and graphological patterns as words and structures. Based on the concept of 'coding' as stated above, lexicogrammar is not made up of phonological or graphological patterns; rather it is 'realized' through them (Martin & White, 2005). In other words, lexicogrammar is a more abstract level, not just a bigger one.

The third level of abstraction is discourse semantics. It is concerned with meaning beyond the clause or at text level.

- **Context**

At a broad level, a text is understood as functioning in a context, and the context of language can be categorized into two levels: context of situation and context of culture. The context of situation is concerned with the immediate situation in which a particular text is produced. It includes the concrete product of language of different social interactions. At this level of context, the semantic meanings of language (ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings) are related to the three semiotic dimensions (variables) of register, namely: field (what language is used to talk about), tenor (the type of relationships between participants), and mode (the medium of communication either written or spoken), respectively (Eggins, 2004).

The context of culture is concerned with the wider institutional and societal context of the text. At this higher level of culture, the social goal for using language has the influence on the linguistic choices, resulting in the realization of different text types or genres (staged, goal oriented social processes- Martin, 2000). Martin explains this realizational relationship by using the term 'metaredundancy relationship', meaning the manifestation of system in process, and the way in which manifestations rebound on and ultimately reconstrue the system from which they derive (see Figure 3).
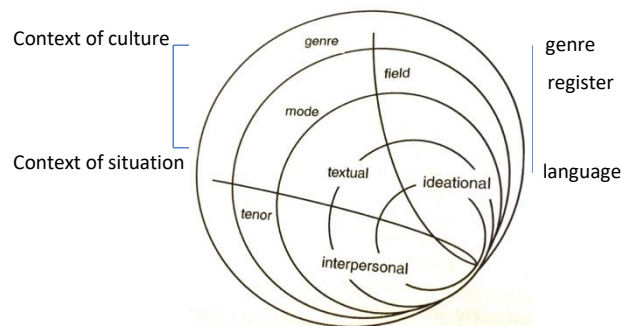
Figure 3. The metaredundancy relationship of language, register, and genre (adapted from Martin, 2000: 8)

4 The study

The discussion above shows that the concepts of SFL are beneficial for language education, and there have been a number of studies employing the theory in language classrooms in different learning contexts.

This paper reviews previous studies and discusses the findings from an investigation of papers published by scholars from Asian countries taking the SFL lens. Although focusing on educational settings, the corpus of papers also included those in which the findings have potential implications on language learning. The study aims to answer the research questions below.

Which areas within the SFL theory have been commonly investigated in the collected papers published by Asian scholars? And what are the reported findings?
What are the implications that could be drawn from the findings reported in those previous studies?

5 Methodology

The corpus included forty-one research articles published by authors from 7 countries, namely: Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Cambodia, and Singapore. These papers were searched and collected from international journals and electronic search engines. Most of the collected papers (46.34%) were published by Thai scholars and the significant numbers were published by Indonesian and Vietnamese researchers (19.51% and 17.07%, respectively). Meanwhile, small numbers of the papers collected in this corpus were published by scholars located in the contexts of the Philippines (7.31%), Malaysia (4.87%), and Singapore (2.43%). Figure 4 below summarizes the details of the collected papers.
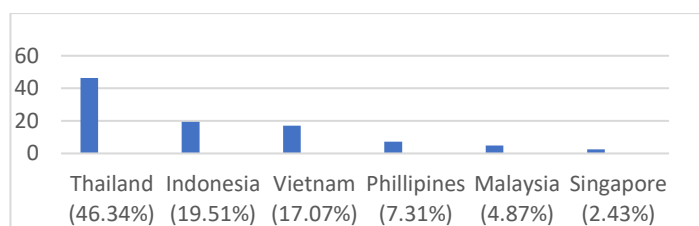
Figure 4. The corpus size

6   Findings and Discussion

The areas of investigation reported in the collected papers were analysed. The results showed that most of the studies applied an SFL lens to analyse genre or clause structure of their data. Most papers focused on particular areas in their analysis. Some of the studies, however, examined more than one area of the theory, and thereby the analysis covered more than one level of language. This section discusses the findings based on the research questions set above.

 # Which areas within the SFL theory have been commonly investigated in the collected papers published by Asian scholars? And what are the reported findings?

The answers will be summarized and discussed, based on the hierarchical scales of language, namely: genre analysis (eighteen papers- 43.90%), discourse analysis (eleven paper- 26.82%), and clause analysis (thirteen papers- 31.70%). The percentages of the areas of investigation presented below were based on the forty-one collected papers.
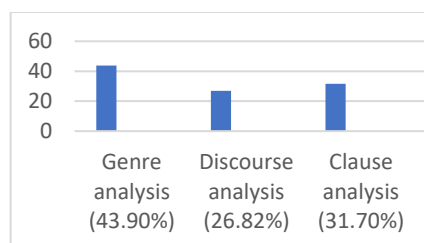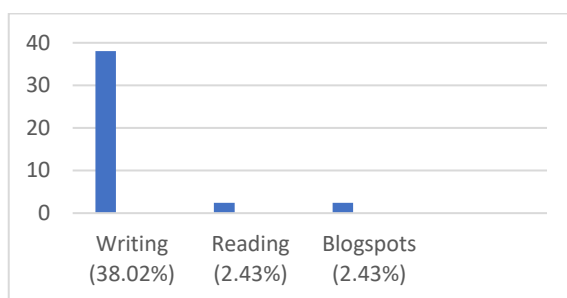

Figure 5. The areas of investigation

• Genre analysis

Out of the forty-one papers collected in this corpus, eighteen papers (43.90%) used the SFL genre-based approach (GBA) as an analytical tool to examine different genres in different contexts. While all of the studies were related to educational contexts, the areas of investigation did not show much variation of the focused genres or skills (see Figure 6). Out of the seventeen papers which employed the SFL GBA in the curriculum and followed the teaching and learning cycle (TLC) in their classroom instructions, sixteen papers (38.02%) aimed to improve student writing. One study (2.43%) also employed the TLC in a reading classroom. It, however, aimed to improve Thai students' reading comprehension (Kongpetch, 2014). Moreover, there was one study in this corpus (2.43%) which was not

conducted for the purpose of students' language improvements (i.e., Le, 2019). The study was, however, still related to an educational context as it employed the SFL GBA as an analytical tool to compare the generic stages of instructional Blogspot posts in English and Vietnamese.

Figure 6. The focused areas of genre analysis

As shown in Figure 6 above, the application of SFL GBA focused heavily on students' writing improvement (38.02%). Further investigation has been made into these studies to examine the genre types. It was found that, out of the sixteen papers, the most common genre taught was an exposition (six papers- 14.63%) while both the description and review genres were taught twice in the classrooms (4.87%). Other genres, namely: oral presentation, recount, discussion, summary, explanation, and letter were taught only once (2.43%). The findings are summarized in Figure 7 below.
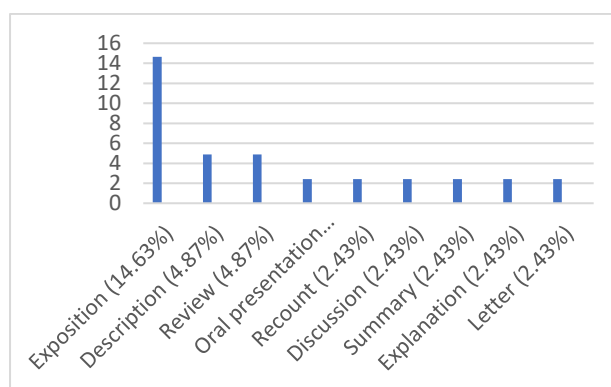
Figure 7. Common text types taught in the writing classrooms

When the findings reported from the studies employing the SFL GBA in writing classrooms were analysed, it was consistently reported that the SFL GBA has the potential to raise students' awareness of the focused genres, and that students have shown the ability to take control of the generic stages of the taught genres. When the use of language at lower level was examined, however, mistakes in terms of grammar or language could still be found at clause level (e.g., Aunurrahman, 2020; Srinon & Sucharitrak, 2020; Sritrakarn, 2019a).

As shown in Figure 6, one study (2.43%) employed the SFL GBA in the reading classroom to improve Thai students' reading comprehension (Kongpetch, 2014). By focusing on a narrative genre, the study used the local narrative texts (Isan folktales) and employed the TLC in classroom instructions. The study proposed that genre analysis could help raise student awareness and assist them to make better predictions while reading. The study was, however, still at an early stage; and the paper did not demonstrate sufficient evidence of student improvements and in which ways the students' awareness had influenced their reading comprehension.

In this corpus, one of the eighteen papers taking the SFL GBA (2.43%) did not focus on the improvement of students' English language learning. The findings from the study, however, are still beneficial to an educational context as it examined the generic structure of English and Vietnamese instructional Blogspots. The study found that English instructional Blogposts accomplish the mission of advertising, instructing and increasing leads while Vietnamese instructional posts serve the purpose of instructing and increasing traffic to the page.

• **Discourse semantics**

In this corpus, eleven studies (26.82%) took the discursive perspectives and analysed the language used to construct a text. Six out of eleven (14.63%) investigated Appraisal resources (Badklang & Srinon, 2018; Huan, Deng & Sritrakarn, 2021; Knox, Patpong & Piriyasilpa, 2009; Nguyen, 2017; Srinon & Tuppoom, 2019; Tilakaratna & Szenes, 2017) and five investigated thematic development (12.19%) in summary (Dalimunthe, 2018) and expository (Cahyo, 2018; Jantrasakul, 2016; Piriyasilpa, 2012; Piriyasilpa, 2009) texts.
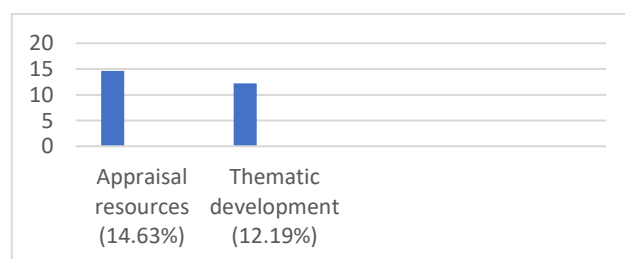
Figure 8. Areas of discourse analysis

Appraisal

Figure 8 shows that the two common areas of investigation at discourse level among the papers collected in this corpus were Appraisal and thematic development.

By investigating the realizations for interacting and sharing feelings, four studies (Huan et al, 2021; Knox, et al, 2009; Nguyen, 2017; Tilakaratna & Szenes, 2017) examined the use of language in news reports to communicate Attitudes, and how the news resources position themselves (Engagement) in the news. Two papers in particular (Huan et al, 2021; Knox et al, 2009) took a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach in the Appraisal analysis to draw implications in terms of political power represented in Thai news reports and focused on a non-educational context.

Two of the six studies (4.87%%) focused on an educational context and both of the studies were conducted in the Thai classrooms (i.e., Badklang & Srinon, 2018; Srinon & Tuppoom, 2019). By taking the Attitude system of the Appraisal theory, Badklang and Srinon (2018) examined the three types of attitudinal resources (affect, judgement, and appreciation) and demonstrated how classroom relationships between a male muslim teacher and his students were constructed. The study provides some insightful guidelines of how the Appraisal theory plays out in the sample of classroom discourse and its implications. The other study conducted in the English language classroom was by Srinon and Tuppoom (2019), investigating how students positioned themselves in a discussion essay. Srinon and Tuppoom argued that the genre awareness helped students write their discussion essays more interestingly and critically by employing resources of intersubjective stance which involves heteroglossia and covers four sub-appraisal elements of disclaim, proclaim, entertain and attribute.

Thematic development

Other studies examined textual resources and sought to explain how language is used to construct connections and unity of discourse to make a text a unified whole. These studies were conducted in the educational context of Indonesia and Thailand. By raising the students' awareness on 'periodicity' (the waves of information flows: giving readers some idea about what to expect, fulfilling those expectations, and then reviewing them- Martin & Rose, 2003: 175), scholars consistently claim that students became more self-evaluated by showing the ability to analyse their own written drafts before submission (Cahyo, 2018; Jantrasakul, 2016; Piriyasilpa, 2009; Piriyasilpa, 2012) and produced more critical responses to the topic assigned (Cahyo, 2018). In the context of Thailand, Piriyasilpa (2012) found that even though students may have shown mistakes in terms of grammar in the final drafts of their essay writing, their awareness of periodicity helped them to create the text which unfolded cohesively. Based on the findings, Piriyasilpa proposed that the knowledge of 'periodicity' should be taught together with the genre of exposition, and that; as 'periodicity' was examined how topical Themes developed, the effects of 'periodicity' on the application of other types of Theme (textual Theme and interpersonal Theme) should also be investigated.
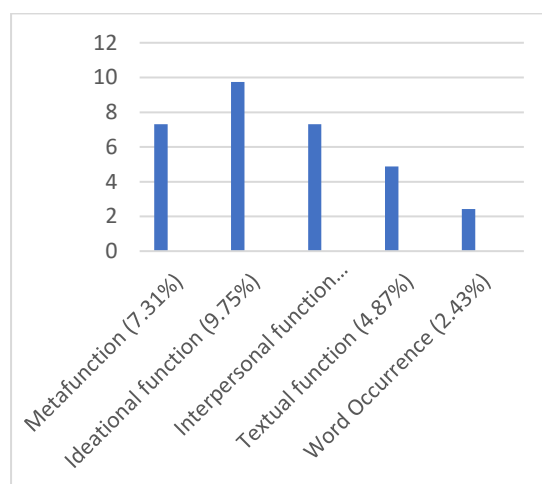
• **Clause analysis**

At clause level, thirteen studies (31.70%) examined both the words and clause structures (see Figure 9). Three papers (7.31%) analysed clause structure and investigated how language is used to communicate the metafunctions (Arunsirot, 2016; Mingsakoon & Srinon, 2019a; Van2021). Van (2021) collected extracts from a variety of text types, e.g., folk poetry, poems, short stories, and Vietnamese grammar books, analysed the system of VOICE in Vietnamese language, and claimed that SFL serves to empirically elaborate descriptions of individual languages, including Vietnamese. The other two papers focused on a Thai educational context. Mingsakoon & Srinon (2019a) analysed the clause complex for metafunctions in students' writing of a recount. It was found that the complex clauses constructed by the students were communicable.

Meanwhile, Arunsirote (2016) took the SFG lens to analyse the clause structure in students' translation texts and identify errors made in their translation. The study found that errors in experiential meaning were found to be the highest. The study has also demonstrated

students' errors due to mother tongue interference and students' limited knowledge of grammar.

Figure 9. Areas of clause analysis

As far as the individual functions are concerned, there have been previous studies investigating ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings independently.

Ideational function

Four out of the thirteen papers (9.75%) examined the use of language to construe and represent the experiences of the world by analysing the structure of transitivity in the chosen texts (Asad, Moh Noor & Jaes, 2019; Cunanan, 2011; Moh Noor, 2017; Vo, 2013).

Out of these papers, three papers examined how social actors are represented in online newspaper broadcast in the contexts of Malaysia (Asad et al, 2019; Moh Noor, 2017) and Vietnam (Vo, 2013). By comparing the transitivity choices used in Pakistani and Malaysian news reports, Asad and colleagues claimed that both Malaysian and Pakistani newspapers have taken a direct source for quoting to influence the reader on the sensitive issue of corruption, and that both new resources remained neutral to represent themselves as fair social actors. Moh Noor (2017) investigated the graduate employability issue published in the three English language publications of a mainstream newspaper, an alternative newspaper, and a government document, and argued that the graduates were represented as the least powerful in the three publications.

Meanwhile, the study by Cunanan (2011) demonstrates how the transitivity framework can be used to demonstrate connections between linguistics and literature of which the guidelines could be useful for future studies seeking to identify the relationship of language used in the two text types.

Interpersonal function

Three papers (7.31%) in this corpus examined how participants create relationships or interactions through the use of interpersonal resources to communicate their attitudes or judgement (Astrero, 2017; Fikri, Dewi & Suarnajaya, 2014; Oliver & Nguyen, 2015). While

the three papers shared the common areas of investigation i.e., MOOD structure and modality, the interpretations of findings, and research locations varied. Among these three papers, only one paper focused on an educational context (i.e., Fikrl et al, 2014), comparing the talks in the two classrooms of Indonesian male and female teachers. The study found that the female teacher asked more questions and were more polite when doing so. The finding was however based on the recording of certain periods of teaching, and thereby cannot be used to generalize or explain the classroom talks of Indonesian teachers. Further investigation is still needed to confirm the findings of other classes conducted by the two genders.

The other two papers investigated interpersonal function in the non-educational contexts of Vietnam and the Philippines. In Vietnam, Oliver and Nguyen (2015) examined the interpersonal meanings created in business texts. The paper has informed certain strategies (e.g., the use of Vietnamese kinship terms, emoticons, etc.) employed by Vietnamese communicators to enact social meaning-making process. By taking critical discourse analysis (CDA) lens, the study by Astrero (2017) analysed the message of President Aquino with Pope Francis and found certain resources used by the President to show politeness and respect. While the study can serve as a model of how political or religious texts can be analysed, more samples of the texts may be investigated in future studies.

Textual function

Concerning the investigation of textual metafunction, two papers (4.87%) explained how textual resources, such as Theme and Rheme, substitutions, and conjunctions, were used to create connections within the texts (Hernandez, 2020; Rosyda & Amalia, 2018). Hernandez compared academic texts written by Fillipino and American scholars and found similar use of textual resources, namely: Theme and Rheme, nominalization and cohesion. In Indonesia, Eosyda and Amalia trained students to use SFL's notion of grammatical cohesion and analyzed a research article. The study found that the common textual resources found were demonstrative pronouns, substitution, conjunction, but no ellipsis.

Word occurrence

Among the papers collected in this corpus, there has been one study (2.43%) analyzing the language at clause level, and focused on the analysis of words (i.e., To, 2013). To (ibid.) collected the samples of English textbooks used in different institutions in Vietnam and examined the occurrence of different word types (lexical density, nominalization, and grammatical metaphor). The study found that the language becomes more complex when textbook levels advance.

What are the implications that could be drawn from the findings reported in those previous studies?

The discussion above shows that the notions of SFL have been employed in a number of research projects in Asian countries, of which the findings have led to useful implications for both educational and non-educational contexts. This section discusses the implications drawn from the above discussed findings. Based on educational contexts, the discussion will

be organized under two concerns: implications on future studies in general and implications for future studies in the post-pandemic of COVID 19.

The common area of investigation was SFL GBA.

In this corpus, most of the studies employed the SFL GBA in the language classrooms and followed the TLC in their classroom instructions to improve students' writing. The findings are consistent with the claim made by Wells (1987) that its prominent influence is in teaching writing. The findings also reflect that GBA has become the significant trend of an area of investigation within the SFL framework and the application within an educational context as it is helpful for teachers to create teaching models which provide "clear guidance for setting up social situations in the classroom that enable students to learn how to write and use other modes of language appropriate for different social purposes" (Feez, 2002: 55).

Even though previous studies have agreed that the SFL GBA has the potential to improve students' writing, these studies focused heavily on the teaching of an exposition while the instructions of other text types were still very rare. Future studies should therefore be conducted to focus on the application of the genre-based approach to improve students' writing of other genres, for example: a news report, review or recount. In addition, a number of previous studies have investigated language choices used in the news reports (e.g., Huan et al, 2020; Knox et al, 2009; Moh Noor, 2017). The findings from these studies may be useful for the teaching of a news report. In so doing, findings from previous studies can be taken into account, and the news items broadcast in their countries can also be employed by teachers as model texts to demonstrate the certain language resources and raise student awareness of the focused genre.

As far as the language teaching in the post-pandemic is concerned, the topics assigned for students to write about could be something related to the Corona virus or related issues. To practice the writing of a recount, for example, students may write about their experiences and how they coped during the waves of pandemic or the lockdown periods. In a discussion writing classroom, students may be assigned to discuss the pros and cons of the pandemic lockdown while an exposition classroom may practice to write about the causes and effects of the COVID 19 infections, or the class learning about a procedure may practice writing how to prevent the spread of the disease or ways to look after the infected patients (see Table 1).

Table 1. Possible topics for writing

Genres	Possible topics to write
Recount	My experiences during the lockdown period
Exposition	The effects/ causes of COVID19 pandemic
Discussion	The pros/ cons of COVID19 pandemic
Information report	Corona virus strains
Procedure	# How to look after COVID infected patients

How to stay safe during the pandemic

Larger corpus size should be constructed.

Some studies collected in this corpus involved the analysis of small sample texts, one learner group or individual participants. The study by Fikri and colleagues (2014), for example, investigated the classroom talks of two teachers in order to compare the differences which may be influenced by genders. Due to the small size of collected data, the identified differences could be used to compare the talks between the two classes, but cannot be used to explain the classroom talks made by other teachers in Indonesia. In addition, Srinon and Tuppoom (2019) analysed the generic structure development and resources of intersubjective stance in students' discussion essay. The study investigated only two sample texts of which the data cannot be used to represent the use of interpersonal resources in Thai students' essays. Further studies could also focus on teacher talks in more diverse classroom contexts. Especially, as online learning has become the common mode during the pandemic, the patterns of interaction could be examined to compare if the online interaction is similar with or different to the normal classroom. As the classroom instructions in many countries have been conducted online, there may be many different areas which are interesting to investigate, for example, the quality of the teacher talks, appraisal resources, or question types.

Diverse areas of investigation should be conducted.

The findings discussed above have shown that there are still the areas of investigation which have not been the focus of previous studies. As far as the GBA is concerned, scholars have compared students' writing drafts and identified the generic stages while other areas of investigation have not been explored in much detail. The study by Srinon (2019) found that students showed their potential to construct texts which include macro genres. In terms of textual meaning, Cahyo (2018) found that students' writing improvements were related to their critical responses to the topic assigned while Piriyasilpa (2012) claimed that the concepts of thematic development or 'periodicity' should be taught together with the genre of an exposition. These areas of improvement, however, have not been adequately investigated in later studies based on Asian EFL classrooms, and thereby could be other potential areas for future studies.

7 Conclusion

This study reports the findings from the corpus collecting published papers of scholars from Asian countries which employed SFL as an analytical tool and focused on educational contexts. The study has shed light on the trends of research employing different approaches of the theory in the language classrooms. Challenges and obstacles have also been reported in the collected papers in relation to students' limited knowledge of language and the SFL terminologies.

As evidenced from previous studies, students' problems in terms of linguistic resources, including grammar and vocabulary choices, seem to be the problems found among low level learners in almost all of the investigated studies regardless of any learning contexts (e.g., Arunsirote, 2016; Mingskoon & Srinon, 2019; Sritrakarn, 2019b). To solve this

problem, different strategies or techniques could be employed in the language classroom. Scholars suggested that a longer and more focused approach needs to be developed to support this student group (Truong, 2017). By addressing the same problem, Emillia and Hamied (2015) proposed that the effects of explicit teaching of grammar as well as peer feedback activity on students' development of texts should be investigated. Future studies could employ the suggested strategies or other approaches to assist students to successfully overcome the problems of grammar.

With regards to students' limited knowledge of the SFL terms, SFL metalanguage should be foregrounded at an early stage (Pribady, 2012). This could be done by creating links among the related subject series that students have to take to foreground the knowledge of the theory as well as terminologies at an early stage. For the classes that employ the SFL GBA, in particular, the instructional process as well as input knowledge could be simplified to match the student level. As such, the TLC should be repeated in the case of low-level leaner groups to ensure that students have explicit understanding of the target genres (Mingsakoon & Srinon, 2019b). Moreover, the model texts may not be used authentically in the classroom, but in the simplified version to ensure students' understanding of contents while explicit teaching as well as activities which build student understanding of the contents should also be employed (Pribady, 2012).

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