

THE APPLICATION OF TEXTUAL METAFUNCTION IN DEVELOPING EFL LEARNERS' WRITING MATERIALS

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Abstract: In the 21st century, millennial generation tends to swipe and skip things on their gadgets easily resulting in shortspan of focus in learning English as a foreign language. They are not able to relate issues happening around them appropriately. This phenomenon is crucial as their dependence toward technology provoke them to only digest single-separated or chunky materials. Regarding it, then, it is very challenging for EFL learners to demonstrate good writing skill as one productive skill in English. The role of English teachers in providing appropriate materials to improve the students' writing materials as well as skills in producing a good writing, particularly on the level of semantics and discourse (context), becomes major. This library research, by using theoretical analysis, aims at exploring previous theories and findings on SFG, textual metafunction, theme, rheme, cohesion, and coherence in relation to improving EFL writing materials and skills. Furthermore, this research argued that the application of textual metafunction is coherent with enhancing concepts in students' writing, providing a systematic learning in a piece of writing, encouraging students' critical thinking skill, and finally promoting a meaningful learning in a writing class. Hence, this literature-based study provides insights for English teachers in teaching writing to facilitate textual metafunction theory and its components to develop EFL learners' writing materials and further skills.

Keywords – Textual Metafunction, Writing Materials, Writing Skill, Critical Thinking Skill, Meaningful Learning

INTRODUCTION

In the era of augmented reality where everything is enhanced by technology, millennial generation tends to swipe and skip things on their gadgets easily. This leads them

to lose focus and forget things quickly, and further not being able to relate issues happening around them appropriately. In learning English as a foreign language, this phenomenon is crucial as their dependence toward technology provoke them to only digest single-separated or chunky materials. This, of course, is not the goal of English language learning whose four skills (reading, listening, writing, and speaking) correlate to each other.

As one of the productive skills, writing skill is significant since it requires complicated phases or a ‘continuum process’ (Cahyono, 2012). In spoken text, learners can ignore the interrelation among the words. However, in written text, the learners need to show the relation between words clearly in order to transfer the message appropriately. Not only that, but according to Cahyono (2012), the learners as the writers also need to have worthwhile information and express it successfully by using writing strategies which are not “talent-oriented” (p.36). In fact, regarding their learning nature as well as the influence of augmented reality, it is very challenging for EFL learners to demonstrate those skills in their writing. This is due to “cognitively demanding” exercises which commonly require EFL learners to think critically when writing (Paziraie, 2012, p.71). For those reasons, the role of teachers in providing the appropriate material(s) to improve students’ writing skills is major.

An English teacher should provide materials which can help the students to produce a good writing, not only in terms of grammatical competence but most importantly in the coherence or the flow of the sentences in their writing. In Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) proposed by Halliday (2004), both the teacher and students can use Theme, Rheme, Cohesion, and Coherence which are the main components of textual metafunction to develop EFL learning materials and skills in a writing class. Those will help them be able to transfer the message(s) of their writing successfully.

Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG)

Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) or Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) proposed by Halliday (2004) is an approach to learn how a language works semantically and how it is used in a context. Halliday (2004) believes that SFG is a meaning-making process. It sees a language as “a system of meaning. That is, when people use a language, they construct meaning” (Paiva & Lima, 2011, p.3). This is linear to Thompson (2004) who mentioned that “meaning equated with function” (p.28). According to Gerot and Wignell (1994), the aims of SFG are investigating language users’ choices when communicating and showing the construction of meaning. They also explained that SFG mainly concerns

about how meaning is realized from the whole text (not in chunky paragraphs) and it sees language as something we do (not something we know). Regarding that, Halliday (2004) divides language into three metafunctions which are also believed as language meanings by Thompson (2004); ideational (language for talking about the world), interpersonal (language for interacting with people), and textual (how to organize language to fit in its context). Those metafunctions are beneficial to help language learners to perceive language whether it is through their experiences, interpersonal relationship, or verbal words within contexts. This paper, however, will be more focused on the textual metafunction as an influential theory for developing EFL learners' writing materials and skills.

Textual Metafunction

As one of the three metafunctions introduced by Halliday (2004), textual metafunction is specifically a tool to construct meaning through its components. Compared to ideational and interpersonal metafunctions which also contribute meaning in a piece of writing, textual metafunction is beyond physical, biological and social issues. It is even stated in Ghaadessy (1995) as cited in Paziraie (2012, p.74), that “the textual metafunction constructs ideational and interpersonal meanings as information that can be shared by speaker and addressee; and it enables this sharing by providing the resources for guiding the exchange of meaning in text”. Supporting that, Halliday (2004, p.392) explained that textual metafunction “organizes the ‘flow of information’ within clauses”. Gerot and Wignell (1994), then, added: “*textual meanings* express the relation of language to its environment, including both the verbal environment—what has been said or written before (co-text) and the non-verbal, situational environment (context)” (p.14). Further, the meanings are revealed through Theme, Rheme, Cohesion, and Coherence.

Theme, Rheme, Cohesion, and Coherence

Theme, based on Halliday (2004, p.65-66), is “what sets the scene for the clause itself and positions it in relation to the unfolding text”. Thus, it needs to be put first in any clauses so that they construct a message along with the Rheme (the part in which the Theme is developed (Taboada, 2004); the provider of the new information (Christie & Derewianka, 2010)). This thematic process, then, can be analyzed to see the cohesion and coherence of the text as the major components of the relation between textual metafunction and EFL writing skills.

Cohesion and coherence are the basic concepts of textuality (de Beaugrande and Deressler (1981) as cited in Navratilova (2017)). “Cohesion is established mainly by

lexical cohesive devices, among which the most prominent are nouns, adjectives and verbs the choice of which is largely determined by the intended/implied readership of a particular paper” (Navratilova, 2017, p. 4). In brief, Cahyono (2012) reviewed cohesion as a semantic-relation or a relation of meaning to make clauses and paragraphs hang together nicely. According to him, "cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some elements in the discourse is dependent on that of another" (p.36). There are two kinds of cohesion; grammatical cohesion (references, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction) and lexical cohesion (repetition, synonym, hyponym, meronym, and collocation). They are known as cohesive devices.

Besides cohesion, coherence is also significant in writing. According to Cahyono (2012), “coherence means to hold together” (p.45). He believes that coherence exists when the textual world (concept and relations) is “mutually accessible and relevant”. This means that the coherence was derived from interrelated Theme and Rheme of the text while the cohesiveness is seen from the cohesive devices used in the text (Sipayung et.al, 2016, p.27).

EFL Learners’ Writing Needs

Regarding the previous notions, it becomes clear that textual metafunction (under the scope of SFG) with its components is important in writing. This is because the notions of Theme, Rheme, Cohesion, and Coherence will help EFL learners to connect and relate their clauses, sentences, and paragraphs into a well-structured text so that the message can be transferred successfully to the reader(s) (Cahyono, 2012&Paziraie, 2013). Hence, EFL learners need sufficient knowledge of textual metafunction to improve their writing skills realizing that they contain several processes and many deriving skills to be practiced as well as improved.

In relation to language teaching, the background and theoretical review of the paper narrate how textual metafunction can help EFL learners’ learning process in writing. Gerot and Wignell (1994) acknowledged that teachers can use SFG theories, particularly textual metafunction, to teach EFL learners more effectively realizing that they usually need to be a “discourse analyst” in teaching writing. It means that teachers should improve the students’ writing materials as well as skills based on their needs so that they will be able to produce a good writing, particularly on the level of semantics and discourse (context). Therefore, in order to provide insights for English teachers in teaching writing, this paper will discuss how textual metafunction theory and its components develop EFL learners’ writing materials and further skills.

METHOD

This paper is a secondary research or library research. It made use of theoretical analysis to explore experts and previous writers' theories and findings on discussing the same topic as well as constructs: SFG, textual metafunction, Theme, Rheme, Cohesion, and Coherence, and EFL writing materials and skills. Thus, as it is a literature-based study, the paper aims to answer this research question: 'How do textual metafunction theory and its components develop EFL learners' writing materials?'. There will be several arguments on the contribution as well as application of textual metafunction knowledge in improving the learners' writing materials and skills based on scientific supports from the previous studies.

DISCUSSION

As a matter of fact, Industrial Revolution 4.0 has been digitalizing everything, including EFL learners' style of learning. As a teacher, we are not able to control them in a classroom realizing that learning materials can be easily found on the internet through gadgets. Being a teacher nowadays means a model, initiator, and facilitator for the students, not merely teaching pedagogic aspects to the students. Furthermore, learning-centered is more preferable than teacher-centered or student-centered. This is supported by Hodgson (2010) who believes that there is a "sweet spot" in which the demands and needs of the teacher and students are negotiated in the learning-centered approach. It will, then, result in the free occurrence of learning which is defined as "surprise, creativity, and wonder balanced by accountability, clear roles, and enough structure" (p.13). For that reason, learning materials developed in the classroom are not necessarily from the teacher only, but they can be from a joint construction between the teacher and students throughout learning process. Thus, the materials can be more meaningful.

In developing meaningful materials in a writing class whose aim is to improve the EFL learners' skills in producing a well-constructed text, the idea of textual metafunction offers significant applications. Therefore, latter scrutiny discusses how English teachers can use textual metafunction and its components to develop writing materials as well as skills in a writing class.

1) Enhancing Concept in Writing

As explained before, there is theme (the initiator of a clause) and rheme (the information provider; usually comes after the Theme) in textual metafunction. According to Gerot and Wignell (1994), theme refers to "this is what I'm talking about" whereas

rheme refers to “this is what I’m saying about it”. These two form thematic progression which refers to “the way in which the theme of a clause may pick up, or repeat, a meaning from a preceding theme or rheme” (Cahyono, 2012, p.42). The ideas of theme and rheme teach us to understand a concept. A concept itself is defined as “something conceived in the mind” (Merriam Webster). In the view of philosophy, a concept is “an idea or mental image which corresponds to some distinct entity or class of entities, or to its essential features, or determines the application of a term (especially a predicate), and thus plays a part in the use of reason or language” (Oxford Dictionary). In brief, a concept is used as the big idea or the umbrella of thought.

In order to be able to compose a clear context in their writing, EFL learners should be able to apply the writing concept appropriately. It can be achieved from the thematic progression forms; a reiteration/constant theme (Butt et.al, 2001:142), a zigzag/linear theme pattern (Clogg and Wheeler 1991:83), and a multiple theme/split rheme pattern (But et.al. 2001:21). These patterns help the students to conceive things easily as they have concrete ideas to understand the abstract ones (Theme and Rheme). For instance, the constant theme pattern found in Cahyono’s (2012) students’ writing.

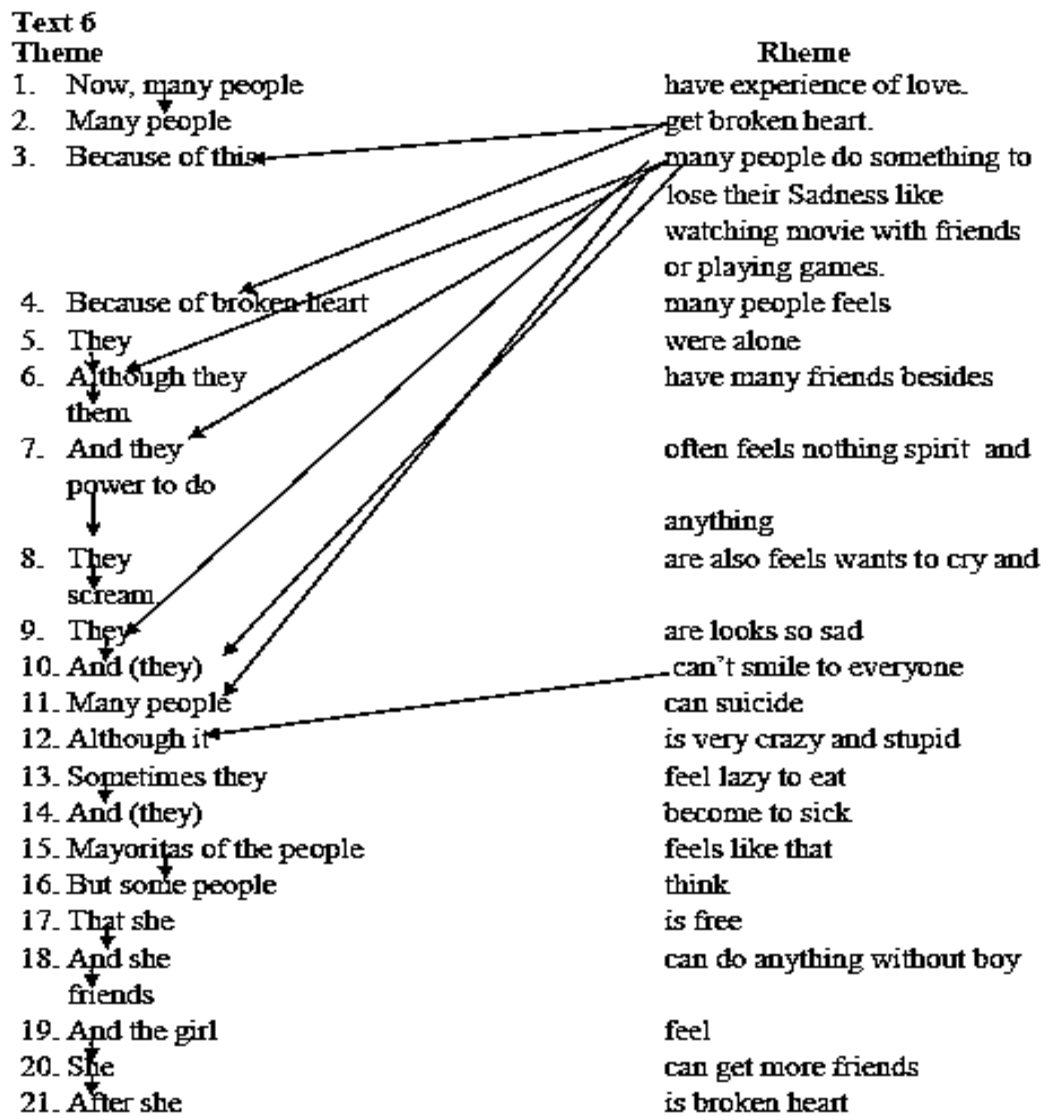


Figure 1. Constant Theme and Rheme Pattern (Cahyono, 2012, p.48)

The dominant pattern found in Cahyono's above shows that the use of thematic pattern can form the students' concrete understanding of theme and rheme. By separating the theme and rheme in the pattern, the students will be able to comprehend what those two notions are as well as how both are supposed to be used in their writing. Further, by teaching the patterns of thematic progression, the teacher will be able to enhance students' application of concept in their writing. It is also possible for the teacher to provide a practice of identifying, comparing, and then applying the three thematic patterns before the students start to write. It will make the students get the ideas of theme and rheme better as the basic concept in producing a good piece of writing.

2) *Providing a Systematic Learning*

The notions of theme and rheme, cohesion and coherence, as well as cohesive devices help the teacher to train EFL learners to be systematic. This is relevant in a way that textual metafunction highly promotes how words should come before or after other words in order to form a well-constructed text. According to Gerot and Wignell (1994), the beginning and the end are prominent in English. They explained that “the beginning of a clause is where we put information which links the clause to what has come before” (p.102). For instance, theme that has to be the first word in a clause followed by rheme, conjunction which connect clauses in temporal, consequential, comparative, or additive sequence, and Substitution which replace the previous word in the next clause or sentence. In the context of SFG, Gerot and Wignell(1994) also added that systematic learning is “how we make sense of our meaning” which I believe as the result of sequences in delivering the learning materials

One concrete example to provide a systematic learning is giving the students a numbered text with bold words as the conjunctions. The students can analyze each connection between clauses; whether it is temporal, consequential, comparative or additive sequence. This kind of exercise is provided in Gerot and Wignell’s (1994) as follow:

Text 3

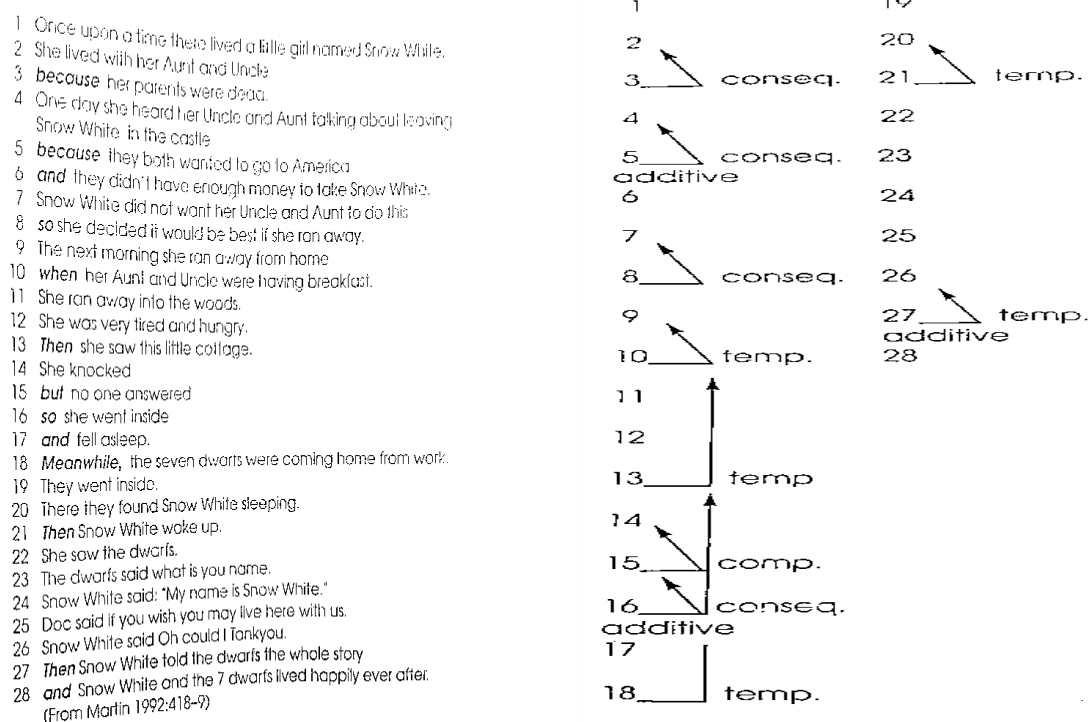


Figure 2. An example of systematic exercise and its pattern (Gerot and Wignell, 1994, p.183-184)

Based on the example, it is clear that conjunction as one component of cohesive devices help the students to arrange or organize clauses in writing. In other words, textual metafunction provides a systematic way of thinking for EFL learners in composing their writing. By teaching the components (rheme, conjunction, substitution), the teacher can help the students to sequence their ideas coherently (which one should come first, before or after a clause) so that the message can be clear to the reader(s).

In a broader scope, the teacher can also apply this systematic learning by encouraging the students to write an outline so that they will be able to see the connection between one idea to another. This will help them to mind map their final writing and decide which components of the textual metafunction that should be used in the text.

3) *Encouraging Students' Critical Thinking Skill*

Critical thinking skill is one prominent skill pronounced in this 21st century. It is crucial for EFL learners to be critical as it will be their strength when everything is being replaced by technology or robot in the near future. As higher level of academic students, EFL learners need to have a critical thinking skill as one component of higher-order thinking skills. Critical thinking skill is defined as the skill involving “reasoning, evaluation, judgement, and problem solving” (Alidmat and Ayassrah, 2017, p.84) while writing is a progressive process with high level of thinking (Alidmat and Ayassrah, 2017). Thus, critical thinking skill can help the students' writing through reasoning or logical thinking skill to compose their ideas.

Discussing the reasoning skill, textual metafunction can facilitate this by using its thematic progression and cohesive devices. This is supported by Gerot and Wignell (1994) who stated that “we find conjunctions at the beginning of clauses because they provide a logical link with what has gone before” (p.142). This might be overlapping between critical thinking skill and systematic way of thinking. However, critical thinking, particularly reasoning skill, asks more questions about how a piece of writing can be structured that way. Hence, it can be answered from the use of the components of textual metafunction. As an example taken from the exercise of Gerot and Wignell (1994), the second and third clauses of Text 3 are connected by consequential conjunction.

- | | |
|---|-----------------|
| 2. She lived with her Aunt and Uncle (<i>effect</i>) | } consequential |
| 3. <i>because</i> her parents were dead. (<i>cause</i>) | |

The third clause is the cause of why Snow White lived with her Aunt and Uncle. The teacher can use the cause-effect relation of the sentence to trigger the students' critical thinking skill. The students will learn how the conjunction of ‘because’ can be moved to

the beginning of the sentence as the cause and add ‘comma’ after the third clause; *Because her parents were dead, she lived with her Aunt and Uncle*. The teacher can also provide them with other typical conjunction which is possible to be used by the students to organize the clauses; so, for that reason, etc. The idea is to identify the relation between clauses or sentences, and then logically place them in the right order using the conjunctions or other cohesive devices, not only based on the usual pattern used.

By teaching it, teachers will help the students to see how clauses, sentences, and paragraphs are sequenced in such a way through the process of thematic progression and cohesive devices connect words. In other words, making use of textual metafunction to encourage the students to think and elaborate their writing using its components will make the materials developed by the teachers and students in the class more meaningful as well as purposeful (Chen, 2008).

4) Promoting a Meaningful Learning

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, critical thinking skill encourages EFL learners as well as the teacher develop meaningful materials. This is relevant to teaching textual metafunction to promote meaningful writing material and even project. When the students are taught how to compose a good writing using the components of textual metafunction, they do not only learn from the grammatical level but also from semantics and discourse levels. This is supported by Cahyono (2012) as he believes that a semantic relationship between clauses cannot be achieved by grammatical structure as it needs other resources (discourse), and therefore it requires cohesion and coherence.

Moreover, the application of cohesion and coherence will give a “soul” in the students’ writing since the flow of the information contained in the text will be inherently connected which makes the readers easier to get the message of the text. The teacher, then, can further use this to build EFL learners’ awareness to their surroundings. He/she can implicitly teach the students to be concerned about the issues happening around them through applying textual metafunction in their writing. This is closely related to the main notion of textual metafunction: relating verbal words. As a teacher, we can always develop the notion into a wider context (relating the students’ writing to their world). For instance, the students are given some topics of current issues happening around them to write an argumentative essay. The topics can be national education policy, political election process in Indonesia, depression and suicide cases among Korean idols, and so on. These topics will help them build their awareness through their writing.

Finally, the students will not only be able to relate words in a piece of writing but also connect them to their social community. This, I believe will make the learning activity as well as learning materials more meaningful for both the EFL learners and the teacher. In addition, the learning will be more challenging yet exciting for the learners (Chen, 2008).

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTION

The application of textual metafunction under the scope of Systemic Functional Grammar by Halliday (2004) appears to be beneficial for EFL learners in writing class. English teachers can use the textual metafunction and its main components (theme, rheme, cohesion, and coherence) to improve the learners' writing materials which currently need the contribution of both the teacher and students as the effects of learning-centered approach and the augmented reality. Further, the teacher will be able to help EFL learners enhance concept(s) in their writing, experience systematic learning, think critically, and experience meaningful learning in writing class. Based on the arguments, then, it can be concluded that textual materials cannot only be used in developing EFL learners' writing materials but also writing skills.

Furthermore, language teachers can use this paper as an insight for using textual metafunction as an alternative strategy to teach a meaningful writing class. Then, further study using research instruments and more supports are needed to develop the ideas presented in this research better.

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Contributor's Biodata

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