

Item Learning and System Learning: Contextualizing the Blend of a Structure-based and Notional-Functional ESL Syllabus

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Abstract

Of the several disciplines, many aspiring language teachers still find linguistics as one of the most formidable. Such condition is brought about by the scarcity of instructional materials and a limited number of well-trained teachers who can handle one of its allied fields, especially Systemic Functional Grammar. If this problem remains unattended, producing ill-equipped language teachers shall most likely become a vicious cycle. In this context, this paper discusses the observed inadequacies of the structure-based ESL syllabus, and it considers the use of a functional model in keeping with the recent issues, trends, and development in SLA research. To show the differences between item learning and system learning, this study analyzes and explains how errors, lapses, and artificially correct lexico-syntactic formal structures manifest in the preferred uses of tertiary ESL students. These observed difficulties – the verbal structures in particular – appear to be systemic in nature and cannot be fully attributed only to poor modeling or interference of the first language. In applying some principles regarding the meaning and use of selected English structures, this paper will apply some principles of Systemic Functional Grammar.

Key words: item learning, system learning, and Notional Functional Grammar

Introduction

A language is not just a collection of words. It is not only a system of structures, but it is also a system of systems. To teach a language, one has to remember that language learning is far more than just memorizing vocabulary words and grammar rules. In teaching English as a second language (ESL), the teacher should have sufficient working knowledge of the language to be learned, the learners' language, learning difficulties, structural ambiguities, and interpretation ambivalence.

One language model that can be used in ESL teaching is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). It is a framework for describing and modeling language as a resource for making meaning and a system of choices (Matthiessen, 1995). Hence, this language model transcends the formal structures of language. It treats language beyond its formal structures and takes the context of culture and the context of situation in language use (Halliday, 1994; Martin & Rose, 2003) which are crucial in ESL. Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar pioneered SFL in the 1960's and was updated in 1985, 1994, and 2004 (the latter co-written by Matthiessen), and was further developed by Eggins (1994), Thompson (1996), and Martin, et al. (1997). Because this language view is very much identified with MAK Halliday, it is also called Hallidayan linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Martin, 1992). One of the many countries that have adopted this model as part of language pedagogy is Australia (Education, 1995).

Item Learning and System Learning

Any grammar, traditional or contemporary, is very complicated. Traditional grammar teaching like what Fries (in Lado, 1957, p. 51) described some decades back would mean "giving traditional definitions to elements of speech, definitions that do not account for the facts of language." This observation is still perceived to be true by many teachers because they view language primarily as a set of formal structures, with much emphasis on language input and less on language intake. This

traditional practice is contrary to active learning in which learners enthusiastically involve in the process (Wilson, 1981; Ramsden, 1992). To Ellis (1997) language development can be explained only in part by external factors like input. His language view implies that there is a need to consider internal factors like the learner's intake, interlanguage, and errors. Language teaching requires knowledge of, but not limited to, structural analysis of the target language. He also noted that second language acquisition (SLA) should attend to how learners develop the target language. For this reason, Ellis differentiates 'item learning' and 'system learning'. To him, while item learning is a process that deals with learning separate and discrete items, system learning deals with the learning of the abstract rules that underlie the use of linguistic items.

Structural Syllabus and Notional-Functional Syllabus

A syllabus is a specific and detailed document that usually contains the scope of coverage and the skills to be learned and reinforced. The most common type of syllabus in the Philippine setting is the structural syllabus (Gonzalez & Romero, 1991). This syllabus is largely based on traditional grammar (TG) which stresses that language is a system of structures. The structural syllabus is rooted on traditional or Latin grammar which to Herndon (1976) is flawed because it is based on assumptions and precepts that whatever is true in one language is also true in other languages. The main problem in using the traditional grammar lies in the premise that one model fits the grammars of all languages.

A notional-functional syllabus (NFS), on the contrary, views language in terms of the communicative functions that allow the realization of the meaning potentials of language. NFS deals with what should be learned in terms of how things are done with words: stating, promising, declaring, asserting, questioning, asking, requesting, and commenting. Weber (1989) traces in part the roots of the notional-functional syllabus to Austin's Speech Act Theory and MAK Halliday's Systemic-

Functional Grammar (SFG), specifically the three metafunctions: textual, interpersonal, and ideational.

Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) and Brown (2000) have categorized NFS under the communicative approach by assigning grammatical structures secondary to language notions. It also stresses a means of organizing a language syllabus, with emphasis on breaking down the global concept of language into units of analysis in terms of communicative situations in which they are used. It largely developed from the works of Van Ek & Alexander (1975), Wilkins (1976), and Widdowson (1978). Notional categories, Baker (1994) adds, can be taught along with notions of time, quantity, space, motion, sequence, location, and communicative functions like persuasion, inquiry, relaying emotions, and establishing relationships. To Bachman (1997), NFS can be contextualized according to the four different language functions: ideational, manipulative, heuristic, and imaginative.

Comparison of Traditional Grammar and Systemic Functional Grammar

While TG is limited to the sentential and subsentential dimensions of language, SFG concerns with its sentential and suprasentential features. TG deals with syntax, but SFG does not give much distinction between lexis and grammar because SFG is meaning-focused. On the one hand, to show the meaning potentials and semiotic nature of language, Halliday distinguishes field, tenor, and mode (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 2008). Field is the social activity in which the language is being used and what is being talked about. Tenor refers to the roles and relationships of interlocutors or language users. Mode is the channel of communication (written or spoken, face to face or remote). On the other hand, TG takes into account grammatical roles, as SFG with the semantic roles. Also, Halliday introduces the language metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational metafunction refers to the expression of content like promising, narrating, requesting, regretting, among others. The interpersonal metafunction is the expression of commitment that manifests the language user's sense of certainty and

accountability. The textual metafunction serves as the link between the utterance and the extra-linguistic situation, that organizes a text into a thread of unified whole. These sensitive aspects of grammar are not usually given consideration in using traditional approaches.

Statement of Purpose

As an abstract system of systems, a language is realized through strings of words in invisible relations that are subject to different layers of interpretation. These abstract relations are not made available through structural analysis only. ESL learners may find these relations indistinct and confusing. To demonstrate these troublesome aspects of ESL learning, this study was conducted to answer the following questions:

- a) How may the ability of the student-respondents (SRs) in disambiguating grammatical structures be described in terms of verb category, verb structure, noun modification, intensifier, sentence coherence, transitivity, voice of verb, sentence focus, tense-aspect relationship, and transitivity?
- b) How may the scores of the SRs be compared in relation to their curricular groups?
- c) What syllabus may be designed to assist students in disambiguating ambiguous selected grammatical structures?

Method

Subjects

One hundred tertiary students participated in this study. These student-respondents (SRs) were taking Bachelor in Secondary Education, major in English, in a state university. Twenty-five students were randomly selected from each of the four curriculum levels. The subjects were grouped according to their curriculum levels: freshmen (G_1), sophomores (G_2), juniors (G_3), and seniors (G_4). The sample population was primarily composed of female students ($N_f = 76$) and a minority of male students ($N_m = 24$), with 18.5 years as the mean age. The mean age

of G_1 was higher than the mean age of G_2 because there were some older, regular students enrolled in the college of education for their second course. Table 1 shows the distribution of the 100 SRs.

Table 1
Distribution of the Student Respondents (SRs) by Group, Sex, and Age

Group	Male	Female	Group Mean Age
G_1	7	18	17.9
G_2	10	15	17.3
G_3	2	23	18.7
G_4	5	20	20.2
Total	24	76	Overall Mean Age: 18.5

Data Collection

This study used a three-part locally constructed instrument. Part I (completion-type, five items) consists of verb category (items 1, 2, & 3), intensifier (item 4), and sentence coherence (item 5). Part II (multiple-choice type of test, nine items) includes transitivity (items 6 & 8), verb category (items 7 & 14), verb structure (items 9 & 13), voice of verb (item 10), noun modification (item 11), and sentence focus (item 12). Part III (modified multiple-choice type of test, six items) covers voice (item 15), tense-aspect (items 16, 17, & 18), verb category (item 19) and transitivity (item 20). The items were chosen based on the most frequent lapses in the quizzes and occasional essays of the SRs. The items included in the instrument were taken from examples found in the works of Halliday (1997), Trask (1993), Lyons (2001), Kroeger (2004), Nida and Taber (1969), and Elson and Pickett (1964).

The questionnaire was used to measure the SRs' consistency in using the learned grammar items and to contrast their scores with how much they have acquired with the systems of the given items. The 100 SRs supplied the missing structures and passed judgment on the acceptability of usage. The SRs were divided into lower (G_1 & G_2) and upper (G_3 & G_4) groups for

comparison scores. Percentages were used to show the scores of the four groups of the SRs, giving the participants equal representation.

Results

Verb Category

Table 1 shows how the SRs answered items 1, 2, 3, 7, 14, & 19. Choosing between the *-s* and the *-ing* inflections appears to be very ambiguous to the SRs. For example, to complete *The baby _____ because he/she has got a bad cold* (item 1), the SRs chose between *coughs* and *is coughing*. The lower groups favored the *-s* form as the upper group did with the *-ing* form. While the SRs could hardly differentiate one from the other, native speakers of English would prefer *is coughing* to *coughs*. The ambivalence cannot be accounted only for the form of the verb but for its category. In SFG, Halliday (1997) categorizes processes like *cough* as behavioral in which the subject is not an *actor* but an *experiencer* of a process. The difficulty of SRs can be attributed to their inability to identify the category of the processes because they were more particular with its form.

In multicultural and multilingual contexts of ESL, it is very important to acknowledge the role of the learners' first language (L₁). Carl and Garrett (1991), and Fairclough (1992a; 1992b) recognize that critical language awareness is very important in language teaching. In relation to this, ESL teachers should consider the role of the students' L₁ for it is a potential source of problems. Since the SRs' L₁, Tagalog/Filipino, does not provide them the opportunity to differentiate the *-s* and the *-ing* forms, the SRs were ambivalent about it and they find it confusing especially those who belong to the upper groups.

As regards the use of verb *be* (item 2), the SRs chose between *we* and *us*. For the sentence *Our cousins are more fortunate than _____*, majority of the respondents chose the second option *us* even if this usage is contrary to what they read in traditional grammar books, in which the use of *it is us* runs counter to the traditional usage. According to TG, sentences like *It is me* should

be discouraged because the verbs *be* should be followed by pronouns in the nominative case. This grammar prescription, however, is opposed to Halliday's (1994) idea that "the clause *It is I* is simply a 'bad grammar'" (p.126) because native speakers do not use it. This prescription is one of the grammar rules that do not account for facts of language, as cited in the work of Lado (1957). SFG does not categorize *be* as a linking verb but as a relational process. The SRs' choice was the same as that of the native speakers'. Their choice can be accounted for some other factors, not with their familiarity with TG.

Table 2

Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Verb Category

Items: 1, 2, 3, 7, 14, & 19	Preferred Answer	SR Group			
		G ₁	G ₂	G ₃	G ₄
1. The baby _____ because he/she has got a bad cold. <i>What is the missing word/phrase?</i> (coughs, is coughing)	is coughing	56	64	48	44
2. Our cousins are more fortunate than _____ because their parents are very successful in doing business. <i>What is the missing word?</i> (we, us)	us	84	92	92	96
3. The incident _____ before anyone knew what was happening. <i>What is the missing word?</i> (occurred, was occurred)	occurred	36	72	76	92
7. The gift pleases her. <i>Which question can probe the given statement?</i> Does she like the gift? Does the gift please her? Is she pleased by the gift?	Does she like the gift?	40	60	36	60

Cont. Table 2

14. The books were quickly disposed of because. . . <i>What is the missing phrase?</i> ...the books sold quickly. ...they sold the books quickly ...the books were sold quickly.	...the books sold quickly.	12	12	08	12
19. My uncle is doing business. <i>Is business the direct object of is doing?</i> (Yes, Uncertain, No)	No	12	04	08	16
<i>Is my uncle a doer /actor?</i> (Yes, Uncertain, No)	No	16	00	04	04
<i>Is the sentence the same as my uncle is a businessman?</i> (Yes, Uncertain, No)	Yes	96	76	68	56

For conditions involving ergativity, the SRs were asked to choose between two verb structures: one in the active and another in the passive form. The verb/process *occur* was used. In sentences using this verb/process type, the *subject* is not an *actor* but an *existent*. In item 3, the SRs favored *occurred* more than *was occurred* relative to their group levels. G₁ preferred to use *was occurred* indicating that they were unlocking structural ambiguities on the basis of the item learned, not on the system that governs its use. They must have thought that the verb should be in the passive voice.

In probing *The gift pleases her* (item 7), the SRs preferred *Does she like the gift* more than the other two: *Does the gift please her* and *Is she pleased by the gift*. G₃ appeared to be the most ambivalent with their answers. To Halliday (1994), sentences like *The gift pleases her* and *She likes the gift* could be representations of the same state of affairs. Based on their answers, G₁ and G₃ could not seem to see such condition.

Clauses like *The books sold quickly* (item 14) do not in fact show actions. The phrase indicates that *the books are good*. In *the books were quickly disposed of*, the SRs could have mistaken that it is in the passive form (given the assumption that the *subject* is acted upon by a covert *actor*). The sentence, if read closely, would require the phrase *the books sold quickly* to mean *the books were good*.

Asked why *the books were quickly disposed of*, the SRs answered *the books were sold quickly*, an expression that is action-oriented and not form-driven. The SRs must have been thinking of the action performed, not of the semantic role of the subject. The data suggest that the SRs were structure-driven in disambiguating the meaning of the sentence.

To the question *What does your uncle do for a living?* (item 19), a possible answer could be *My uncle is doing business*, which means *My uncle is a businessman*. Here, the *subject* is not an *actor*; instead, it is identified by giving one of its attributes. Majority of the SRs thought that *business* is the *direct object* of *is doing*. They were uncertain if the argument *my uncle* is the *actor*. Also, most of them failed to interpret that the sentence is the same as *My uncle is a businessman*. These data support the earlier observation that the SRs disambiguate sentence structures primarily on the structure level.

Verb Structure

Table 3 presents the SRs' scores in disambiguating verb structure. For the sentence *My friend and I used to write each other* (item 9), majority of the SRs indicated *write* as the main verb. The rest of the SRs, specifically G₁ and G₂, thought that the main verb is *used* and *to write* as an infinitive complement, which is superficial because *used to* is a modal expression indicating that the sentence is in habitual past perfective aspect.

The SRs were asked to complete *We're late, let's go to the gym ...* (item 13) by choosing between *has started* and *has been started*. Majority of them, except G₁, chose *the program has started*. The responses indicate that G₁ found this item problematic and confusing. They assumed that the verb/process should be in the passive voice probably because the subject *the program* is inanimate and incapable of acting/doing and it is acted upon by an implied actor/doer.

Table 3
Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Verb Structure

Items: 9 & 13	Preferred Answer	SR Group			
		G ₁	G ₂	G ₃	G ₄
9. My friend and I used to write each other. <i>Which is the main verb?</i> (write, used)	write	72	48	52	72
13. We're late. Let's go to the gym. I think the program. . . <i>The missing phrase is. . .</i> (has started, has been started)	has started	44	56	56	80

Noun Modification

Table 4 shows the SRs scores in disambiguating noun modification. Using the idiomatic expression *Paul wrote an angry letter* (item 11), the SRs were asked which argument is described by the adjective *angry*. Many in G₁ chose *Paul*, while the rest chose *letter* for their answer. Those who chose *letter* must be generalizing that an adjective precedes the noun it describes. In this sentence, such condition is not possible because *letter* is inanimate and incapable of feeling. The SRs failed to understand that the sentence does not have to be literally taken. Again, those who picked *letter* heavily relied on the syntactic structure, not on the meaning of the sentence. This item shows that the SRs need to attend to metalanguage in ESL. To Schleppegrell (2004), the metalanguage of SFL provides the means for contextualizing the role of language in the educational process that is vital in language pedagogy. Metalanguage helps the students explicitly understand meaning as used in the registers.

Halliday (1999) underscores that language is developed in three forms in schooling: in learning language (first language or second language development), in learning through language (content matter), and in learning about language (metalanguage). He adds that while the first two of these may develop to some degree without conscious attention to language itself, learning about language, and becoming conscious of the power of different

ways of using language, requires conscious attention by teachers, and requires that teachers develop their own knowledge about language.

Table 4
Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Noun Modification

Item 11	Preferred Answer	SR Group			
		G ₁	G ₂	G ₃	G ₄
11. Paul wrote an angry letter. <i>Which is described by angry?</i> (Paul, letter, and either Paul or letter)	Paul	46	16	20	28

Intensifier

Table 5 shows the scores of the SRs in disambiguating intensifiers. The intensifiers *so* and *too* have opposite connotations: the former is positive and the latter is negative. Most ESL learners are confused as regards the uses of *so* and *too* especially if their first language does not give them the opportunity to differentiate one from the other. The SRs were asked to contrast *so* and *too* in the sentence *The professor is _____ good that he can easily explain the lesson even if it seems _____ difficult* (item 4). Those in G₂ showed homogeneity with their answers, and they did not find this item problematic. However, there were still few of them, especially G₁ and G₂, who had relative difficulty with this item.

Table 5
Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Intensifier

Item 4	Preferred Answer	SR Group			
		G ₁	G ₂	G ₃	G ₄
4. The professor is _____ good that he can easily explain the lesson even if it seems _____ difficult. <i>The missing intensifiers are. . .</i> (so... too, too...so, so...so, and too...too)	so... too	52	92	76	56

Sentence Coherence

Table 6 presents the SRs scores in using sentence coherence. The SRs were asked to complete the short dialog:

Man: Will you marry me?

Woman: Yes, I _____.

The responses varied, but majority of the SRs chose *will* showing that this short dialog appears to be less confusing. Nevertheless, there were few who chose *do* and *am*. Also, this item was found less ambiguous by the SRs.

Table 6

Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Sentence Coherence

Item 5	Preferred Answer	SR Group			
		G ₁	G ₂	G ₃	G ₄
5. Man: Will you marry me? Woman: Yes, I _____. <i>What is the missing word?</i> <i>(will, do, and am)</i>	will	68	80	76	84

Transitivity

Table 7 presents how the SRs analyzed sentences involving transitivity. Trask (1993) defines transitivity as a condition denoting a verb or a clause containing such a verb that subcategorizes for a *direct object* that is either a *goal* or a *patient*. To Lyons (2001), transitivity suggests that the effects of the action expressed by the verb pass over from the *actor/agent* to *patient/goal*. *Direct object*, to Trask, is an obligatory argument that undergoes the action of the verb. To analyze transitivity, the SRs were asked to contrast *The dean had the documents signed* and *The documents had been signed by the dean* (item 6). They were asked which of the two means *The dean signed the documents*. Most of the SRs answered this item correctly. What appears to be anomalous, however, is that Group1 scored better than G₄.

Also, they were asked which of the two sentences makes sense: *I sent a letter to Baguio* and *I sent Baguio a letter* (item 8).

These structures appear parallel to *I sent a letter to John* and *I sent John a letter*. Most of the SRs chose the first item because in the second *Baguio* is a *locative*, not *goal/patient*.

Table 7
Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Transitivity

Items 6 & 8	Preferred Answer	SR Group			
		G ₁	G ₂	G ₃	G ₄
6. Which of the two sentences means <i>The dean signed the documents?</i> The dean had the documents signed. The documents had been signed by the dean.	The documents had been signed by the dean.	88	80	82	68
8. Which of the two sentences makes sense? I sent a letter to Baguio. I sent Baguio a letter.	I sent a letter to Baguio.	96	96	92	100

Voice of Verb

Table 8 presents the scores of the SRs in analyzing voice of verb. Kroeger (2004) defines voice as a property of verb denoting change in semantic roles. Voice in structural grammar is either active or passive. To test how the SRs determined voice, they compared *Mary was born in Manila* and *The glass is broken*. Based on the data, the SRs could not clearly decide which of the two is in the passive voice. G₁, G₂, and G₃ chose the first sentence. No one in G₄ chose the second sentence; they favored both the first and second sentences. All the four groups, most especially G₄ showed interpretation ambivalence.

To Lyons (2001), the first sentence is *agentless* and an example of an absolute passive because it has no active transformation. In addition, the second sentence is considered neither passive nor active—it is in the middle voice. To Halliday (1994), “the middle voice has no feature of agency” (p.168). That

means *broken* is not part of the verb phrase, but it is an attribute of the subject.

The SRs analyzed the voice of *My spirit is dampened* (item 15). Most of those in lower groups agreed that the sentence is in the passive voice. However, the SRs in upper groups thought that the sentence is not, and the rest could not decide at all. Sentences like this one are neither in the active or passive voice. *My spirit is dampened* is in the middle voice.

Table 8

Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Voice of Verb

Items 10 & 15	Preferred Answer	SR Group			
		G ₁	G ₂	G ₃	G ₄
10. Mary was born in Manila. The glass is broken. <i>Which of the two is in the passive voice?</i> The first sentence The second sentence The first and second sentences Neither of the two sentences	The first sentence	36	28	28	20
15. My spirit is dampened. <i>Is this sentence in the passive voice?</i> (Yes, Undecided, No)	No	16	36	52	68

Sentence Focus

Table 9 presents the scores of the SRs in determining sentence focus. Nida and Taber (1969) define focus as “the center of attention in a discourse or portion of a discourse” (p. 201). To test how the SRs identify the sentence focus, they were given *John ran away* (item 12). Based on the given sentence, the SRs were asked what would they answer if somebody would ask them *Who ran away?* Most of them answered *John did*. Very few of them chose either *He did* or *He ran away*.

Table 9
Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Sentence Focus

Item 12	Preferred Answer	SR Group			
		G ₁	G ₂	G ₃	G ₄
12. John ran away. Who ran away? John did. He did. He ran away.	John did.	92	92	92	96

Tense-aspect

Table 10 reflects the ability of the SRs in analyzing the tense-aspects of verbs. Trask (1993) defines tense as “a grammatical category which correlates most directly with distinctions with time” (p. 276). Aspect is not always easy to distinguish from tense. Aspect shows contrast in meaning of the following: “action at a point in time, over a period of time, complete or incomplete, one time or repeated, begun or finished, etc.” (Elson & Pickett, 1964, p. 23).

Whether English has a distinctive future tense has been a controversy. Trask (1993) stresses that English has two tenses only: past and non-past. This observation was reported much earlier by Lyons (2001). The latter explains that the persistence in using future tense was brought about by the 18th century scholars who used the grammatical principles of Greek and Latin as the bases of the English prescriptive grammar. Such parallel prescriptions were based on the faulty premise that whatever was true in Latin can also be true in English. Lyons furthers that *will* and *shall* do not, in most cases, indicate futurity but modality.

The SRs were asked if *will* in *Will you please hand me that book* (item 16) indicates the tense of the verb. A greater majority, except G₄, agreed that *will* indicates tense. G₄ did not consider *will* as tense marker and the rest were undecided. Further, when asked if the action or event happens at the time of speaking, majority of the SRs agreed that it does. Even those who earlier considered *will* as a carrier of tense believed that the sentence happens at the time

of speaking. This item shows that the SRs were uncertain with their choices.

In another sentence, *I have to go now* (item 17), most of the SRs thought that *to go* constitutes an infinitive. Also, most of them, especially G_1 thought that *have* indicates ownership. On the contrary, G_4 perceived that *have* does not mean ownership. Asked which of the two (*go* and *have*) is the main verb, more SRs in G_1 chose *go* and those who preferred *have* were fewer. The SRs in G_4 were also ambivalent. A little more than half of them thought that the main verb is *have*, while less than half of them thought otherwise.

In *The visitors are about to leave* (item 18), whether *are* is a helping verb or not, the SRs, especially G_1 , showed conflicting choices. Those who thought that *are* is a helping verb were fewer than those who did not. A similar dilemma was shown by G_4 . Those who thought that *leave* is the main verb were equal to those who did not. Also, most of the respondents believed that *to leave* constitutes an infinitive. Again, the data show that the SRs were ambivalent in their choices.

Table 10

Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Tense-aspect

Items 16, 17, &18	Preferred Answer	SR Group			
		G_1	G_2	G_3	G_4
16. Will you please hand me that book. <i>Does the word 'will' show the tense of the verb? (Yes, Uncertain, No)</i> In the sentence, does the event or action happen at the time of speaking? (Yes, Uncertain, No)	No	28	24	28	60
17. I have to go now. <i>Does the sentence have an infinitive? (Yes, Uncertain, No)</i> <i>Does the sentence show ownership? (Yes, Uncertain, No)</i> <i>Is go the main verb? (Yes, Uncertain, No)</i> <i>Is have the main verb?</i>	Yes	72	64	64	80
	No	20	24	12	00
	No	32	52	52	72
	Yes	68	60	64	68

Cont. Table 10					
(Yes, Uncertain, No)	No	48	52	56	44
18 . The visitors are about to leave.					
<i>Is are a linking verb?</i>					
(Yes, Uncertain, No)	No	52	28	20	28
<i>Is leave the main verb?</i>					
(Yes, Uncertain, No)	Yes	68	68	72	48
<i>Does to leave constitute an infinitive?</i>					
(Yes, Uncertain, No)	No	16	24	16	08

Transitivity

Table 11 shows how the SRs analyzed transitivity in a sentence. When asked to analyze *I'll cross the bridge when I get there* (item 20), the SRs showed that *the bridge* receives the verb *will cross*. Regarding this item, G₄ showed that they could hardly decide because those who thought otherwise did not differ much in number. When asked whether *the bridge* is affected by the action *will cross*, the majority in G₁ agreed, but G₄ did not. Further, when asked if the sentence could be changed into passive form *The bridge will be crossed by me*, most of the SRs agreed. Finally, the lower groups interpreted the sentence similar to *I will walk across the bridge* except G₄. Again, the upper group interpreted the sentence according to its syntactic structures only.

Table 11

Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Transitivity

Item 20	Preferred Answer	SR Group			
		G ₁	G ₂	G ₃	G ₄
20. I'll cross the bridge when I get there. Does the bridge receive will cross ? (Yes, Uncertain, No)	No	20	28	32	40
<i>Is the bridge affected by will cross?</i> (Yes, Uncertain, No)	No	24	28	44	60
<i>Can the sentence be changed into passive form like the bridge will be crossed by me?</i> (Yes, Uncertain, No)	No	04	20	12	12

 Cont. Table 11

<i>Does the sentence suggest I will walk across the bridge?</i> (Yes, Uncertain, No)	Yes	84	48	72	32
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Discussion

The data show the average of correct scores of the SRs. This suggests how wanting their level of performance was because their overall average scores were below the 50% level. Comparing the scores of SRs, Fig. 1 shows slight differences in the scores of the four groups. Specifically, the figure indicates that the senior (G₄) respondents registered the most improved performance. Fig. 1 also suggests that a relative improvement was gained during the third year in the curriculum. It is during this time that the SRs engage more in task-based activities as implied by the checklist of subjects/courses taken shown in Table 12. The figure may also suggest that system learning is reinforced by doing authentic language activities. This observation conforms to the observation of Widdowson (1978) that when one learns a language he or she learns at the same time how language works.

The summary of scores in Fig. 1 suggests that the SRs' abilities to disambiguate grammatical structures do not differ much according to their curriculum level, but a relative gain is observed when the students get more exposure to some more task-based activities. Also, given that G₃ and G₄ students start to have their field studies, class observation, and participation, they are given the opportunities to use and practice the language in authentic teaching-learning situations. Table 12 presents the major subjects taken by the SRs.

Figure 1

Comparison of the Average Scores of the Student Respondents in Disambiguating the Ten Different Grammar Structures

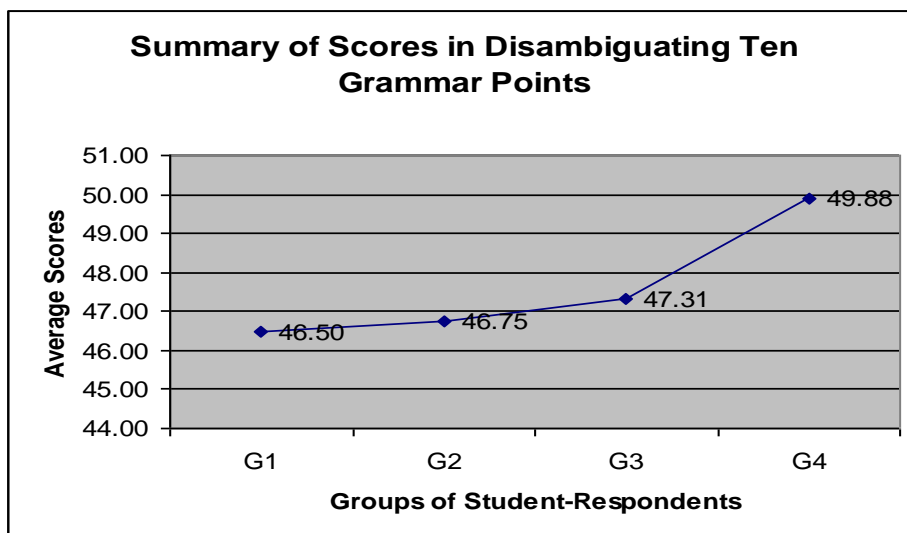


Table 12

Checklist of English Subjects for Bachelor in Secondary Education (English Major)

Curriculum Year	No. of Units	Course Title
I	3	Communication Arts I
	3	Structure of English
	3	Communication Arts II
	3	Introduction to Linguistics
	3	Speech & Stage Arts
	(15 units)	
II	3	Campus Journalism
	3	Teaching of Speaking
	3	English for Special Purposes
	3	Remedial Instruction
	3	Introduction to Literature and Philippine Literature
	3	Language Curriculum for Secondary School
	3	Creative Writing
	(21 units)	

Cont. Table 12

	3	Developmental Reading
	3	Afro-Asian Literature
	3	Mythology & Folklore
III	3	Literary Criticism
	3	English & American Literature
	3	Introduction to Stylistics
	3	Translation & Editing Texts
	3	Teaching of Literature
	(24 units)	
IV	3	Preparation and Evaluation of Instructional Materials
	3	Language and Literature Assessment
	3	Language Research
	(9 units)	

While the summary of scores does not represent the overall English proficiency of the respondents, these data can be used in comparing the abilities of the SRs as regards their ambivalence in disambiguating grammatical structures. The overall scores show that the lower and the upper groups did not differ at all. Overall, the mean scores of SRs were below 50.00%. The mean scores with relatively greater difference lie between the mean scores of G₃ and G₄.

The data indicate that while the SRs rely mostly on the formal features of the language items on the one hand, they downplay the semiotics components on the other hand. The works of Matthiessen (1995), Martin (1992), Halliday & Matthiessen (1999), and Caffarel et al. (2004) are good sources in exploring the semiotic dimensions of TESL particularly along SFL. The works of these forerunners of SFL primarily consider language as a resource for making meaning rather than mere set of rules. In particular, Halliday (1978) sees language as a social semiotic. According to Eggins (1994), SFL makes four theoretical claims about language: (a) that language use is functional, (b) its function is to make meanings, (c) meanings are influenced by social and cultural context, and (d) the process of using language is a semiotic process in which people make meanings by making linguistic choices. Also, Halliday and Matthiessen have

contributed to the development of the two general descriptions of the grammar of English in systemic-functional terms: Halliday (1994) presents the grammar from the structural angle, while Matthiessen (1995) presents it in the form of systems and system networks.

The semiotic dimensions of SFL, notably stratification, instantiation, and metafunction are explained in Caffarel et al. (2004). Stratification refers to the context of culture and of situation which is a way of expressing how the function of language determines its formal structures. Instantiation has to do with the transition from the semantic potential (both contextual and linguistic) available to speakers, to the actualization of that potential, i.e., transition from system to text. Metafunction refers to the three complementary modes of meaning: ideational metafunction (or expression of content), interpersonal metafunction (expression of commitment and social relations), and textual metafunction (expression of link between the utter and the extra-linguistic situation together with the organization of the flow of information). These concepts provide for understanding field (the nature of what is happening), tenor (nature, statuses, and roles of participants in the discourse or text), and mode (organization, role, and channel of language), respectively.

Since SFL accounts for the social dimensions of language, its functions and formal structures are determined by context, both of culture and of situation. To explain these dimensions, Martin (1992) states that "texts are social processes and need to be analyzed as manifestations of the culture they in large measure construct" (p. 493). In TESL, written texts and discourses should be viewed as constituents of culture.

Based on the gathered data in the present study, the scores of G_1 and G_2 in disambiguating the 10 grammatical structures did not show much difference at all. Among other factors, over dependence on structures does not favorably help in solving semantic ambiguities. Instead, it leads to interpretation ambivalence. In light of this observation, it may be argued that language development should be considered in terms of how the learner discovers the meaning potential of language by participating in communication (Ellis, 1985). It is most likely for

this reason that those SRs who engaged more in task-based activities scored better in unlocking and disambiguating grammatical structures. To this condition, Hatch (1978) commented:

In second language learning the basic assumption has been... that one first learns how to manipulate structures, that one gradually builds up a repertoire of structures and then, somehow, learns how to put up the structures to use in discourse. We would like to consider the possibility that just the reverse happens. One learns how to do conversation, one learns to interact verbally, and out of this interaction syntactic structures are developed. (p. 404)

Based on this perspective, language function should be given equal importance with, if not priority over, formal structures. Several studies have been supporting the efficacy of the functional approach for the past few decades (Christie, 1989; Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Martin & Christie, 1997).

Research studies on the functional approaches to language teaching shows that there is a need to adopt a constructivist framework. These studies recognize that the abstract, formal, explicit, and quite logical formalization of language alone fails to account for the much deeper functional aspects of language which are better understood through social interaction (Brown, 2000). Hence, there is a need to blend structural and functional approaches to help learners achieve 'grammar consciousness raising' (Ellis, 1997).

In this context, language learners are given not only the chance to practice the target language but also to understand how that language relates to the 'beliefs, behavior, and values' of its culture (Omaggio, 2001; Brooks, 1975). These extralinguistic aspects of the target language can be attained through communicative means given that linguistic forms are acquired better when doing a communicative task than when doing drills. This position is consistent with that of Berns (1984) who advocates task-based approach. While traditional approach to language teaching "sees language as a body of content to be mastered", task-based language teaching is "an approach to pedagogy based

on an analysis of things that people do with language rather than an inventory of grammatical and lexical items" (Nunan, 2009, p.10).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study supports the earlier observations that learners exposed to traditional and structural syllabus get acquainted with English through item learning, and those who are exposed to functional syllabus through task-based activities learn the language through system learning. This study puts forward that exposure to the traditional and structural syllabus alone does not contribute much to the acquisition of the system of English. Furthermore, some empirical data provide a context for blending traditional structural syllabus and notional functional syllabus.

In light of the findings, it is suggested that notional-functional aspect be incorporated in the language syllabus through the use of functional categories suggested by Finocchiaro & Brumfit (1983, p.65-66) in Table 13. Specifically, these functional categories can be taught by creating classroom opportunities so that the students will have the chance to use them for accomplishing communicative tasks.

Table 13

Scope of a Notional-functional Syllabus

Category	Description	Examples
Personal	Clarifying or arranging one's ideas	Clarifying or arranging one's ideas; Expressing one's thoughts or feelings: love, joy, pleasure, happiness, surprise, likes, satisfaction, dislikes, disappointment, distress, pain, anger, anguish, fear, anxiety, sorrow, frustration, annoyance at missed opportunities, moral, intellectual and social concerns; Expressing everyday feelings: hunger, thirst, fatigue, sleepiness, cold, or warmth

Cont. Table 13

Interpersonal	Establishing and maintaining social and working relationships	Greetings and leave takings; Introducing people to others; Identifying oneself to others; Expressing joy at another's success; Expressing concern for other people's welfare; Extending and accepting invitations; Refusing invitations politely or making alternative arrangements; Indicating agreement or disagreement; Changing an embarrassing subject; Offering food or drinks and accepting or declining politely; Sharing wishes, hopes, desires, problems, making promises; Committing oneself to some action; Expressing and acknowledging gratitude;
Directive	Attempting to influence the actions of others	Making suggestions in which the speaker is included; Making requests; making suggestions; Refusing to accept a suggestion or a request but offering an alternative; Persuading someone to change his point of view; Requesting and granting permission; Asking for help and responding to a plea for help; Forbidding someone to do something; issuing a command; Giving and responding to instructions; Warning someone; Discouraging someone from pursuing a course of action; Establishing guidelines and deadlines for the completion of actions; Asking for directions or instructions
Referential	Talking or reporting about things, actions, events, or people, and about language	Identifying items or people in the classroom, the school the home, the community; Asking for a description of someone or something; Defining something or a language item or asking for a definition;

Cont. Table 13

		Paraphrasing, summarizing, or translating (L1 to L2 or vice versa); Explaining or asking for explanations of how something works; Comparing or contrasting things; Discussing possibilities, probabilities, or capabilities of doing something; Requesting or reporting facts about events or actions; Evaluating the results of an action or event;
Imaginative	Discussions involving elements of creativity and artistic expression	Discussing a poem, a story, a piece of music, a play, a painting, a film, a TV program, etc; Expanding ideas suggested by other or by a piece of literature or reading material; Creating rhymes, poetry, stories or plays; Recombining familiar dialogs or passages creatively; Suggesting original beginnings or endings to dialogs or stories; Solving problems or mysteries

In the adapted notional-functional syllabus, the five functional categories are presented from the least to the most challenging tasks in which the teacher has to be COOL or 'creator of opportunities for learning'. In adapting the syllabus, the notions and functions of the target language are prioritized with learning the formal structures for carrying out these tasks both in spoken discourses or written texts as the corollary.

As a result, grammar teaching shall become implicit and incidental, that is, inputting of the desired formal structures shall be made only as the needs arise. With this approach, the context of culture and the context of situation shall be considered along the authentic needs of the learners. Hence, the learning process becomes realistic, relevant, and meaningful.

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Appendix Questionnaire

Name of Student: _____ Sex: _____
 _____ Age: _____

A. Complete the sentences by supplying the missing parts. Circle a letter for an answer.

1. The baby _____ because he/she has got a bad cold.
 a. coughs b. is coughing
2. Our cousins are more fortunate than _____ because their parents are very successful in doing business.
 a. we b. us
3. The incident _____ before anyone knew what was happening.
 a. occurred b. was occurred
4. The professor is _____ good that he can easily explain the lesson even if it seems _____ difficult.
 a. so . . . too b. so . . . so c. too . . . so d. too . . . too
5. Complete the short dialog. Man: Will you marry me?
 Woman: Yes, I _____.
 a. do b. will c. am

B. Read and answer the following items by giving your best choice. Circle a letter for an answer.

6. Which of the two sentences means *The dean signed the documents*?
 a. *The dean had the documents signed.*
 b. *The documents had been signed by the dean.*
7. Which question probes the sentence *The gift pleases her*?
 a. *Does the gift please her?*
 b. *Does she like the gift?*
 c. *Is she pleased by the gift?*
8. Which of the two sentences makes sense?
 a. *I sent a letter to Baguio.*
 b. *I sent Baguio a letter.*
9. *My friend and I used to write each other.* In the sentence, the verb is . . .
 a. *used* b. *write*
10. Compare the two sentences.
 Mary was born in Manila.
 The glass is broken.
 Which of the sentences is in the passive voice?
 a. the first sentence c. both the first and second sentences
 b. the second sentence d. neither of the two sentences
11. The sentence reads: Paul wrote an angry letter. The adjective angry describes. . .

- a. Paul. b. letter. c. Paul and letter.
12. If you know that John ran away, and somebody asks you, "Who ran away"? Your answer will be. . .
- a. He did. b. John did c. He ran away
13. We're late. Let's go to the gym. I think the program. . .
- a. has started. b. has been started.
14. That the books were quickly disposed of was true because. . .
- a. the books sold quickly. c. the books were sold quickly.
b. they sold the books quickly.

C. Read the following sentences and give your opinion whether you agree or not to the subsequent items. Mark a column with a check (✓) for an answer.

	Yes	Uncertain	No
15. My spirit is dampened.			
The verb is in the passive voice.			
16. Will you please hand me that book.			
The word <i>will</i> shows the tense of the verb.			
In the sentence, the event or action happens at the time of speaking.			
17. I have to go now.			
The sentence contains an infinitive.			
The sentence shows ownership.			
The main verb is <i>go</i> .			
The main verb is <i>have</i> .			
18. The visitors are about to leave.			
<i>Are</i> is a linking verb.			
The main verb is <i>leave</i> .			
<i>To leave</i> constitutes an infinitive.			
19. My uncle is doing business.			
<i>Business</i> is the direct object of <i>is doing</i> .			
<i>My uncle</i> is a doer or actor in the sentence.			
The sentence means <i>My uncle is a businessman</i> .			
20. I'll cross the bridge when I get there.			
In the sentence, <i>the bridge</i> receives the verb <i>will cross</i> .			
<i>The bridge</i> is affected by the verb <i>will cross</i> .			
The sentence can be changed into passive form like <i>The bridge will be crossed by me</i> .			
The sentence means <i>I will walk across the bridge</i> .			

About the Author

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