

Some Linguistic Challenges of Learning History in English at Dagon University (DU): Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) Perspective

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Abstract

To explore students' linguistic challenges of learning History texts in English at Dagon University, the current study conducts the text analysis of 17 topics from the contents of World History 1500-1900 I (Hist:1102) prescribed in Myanmar universities under the Department of Higher Education (DHE). The language features in History texts are categorized by deploying genre analysis and lexico-grammatical analysis focused on subject specific vocabulary, general academic vocabulary, temporality, causality, individual participant and abstract/ institutional participant. Results from the text analysis confirm that lexical density of History texts is high. Therefore, first year History Specialization students find it difficult to understand and face linguistic challenges in learning History in English. This study gives a new insight to both content teachers and students so that they can derive meaning of the language use of History by deploying a detailed analysis of History text from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics (SFL). With the findings of the linguistic challenges of History texts in English at DU, the study generates some pedagogical implications for the English Medium of Instruction (EMI) History teaching and learning in the tertiary level setting.

Keywords: Genre analysis; Lexico-grammatical analysis; Content teachers; Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL); English medium of instruction (EMI)

Introduction

In fact, learning History through English is one of the major challenges for learners of English as Foreign Language (EFL). As a result, learners find it difficult to understand the language used to present History in prescribed texts. Without understanding, learners will not be able to follow because "History is not what you thought. It is what you can remember" (Sellar & Yeatman, 1930). Apart from this, the language used in the academic disciplines is quite different from everyday language. It is not just because the words are different but because the grammatical choices that realize the text of advanced literacy and the way that grammar is deployed are different from the English language that students learn as they use in everyday life registers (Schleppegrell). Moreover, teaching/learning process requires a language as a medium, a language in which both teachers and the students are required to be competent. Otherwise the two parties would not be able to exchange subject content knowledge.

Purpose Statement

The primary purpose of this research is to select 17 topics from the contents of World History 1500-1900 I (Hist: 1102) prescribed in Myanmar universities under the Department of Higher Education (DHE). After that, the language features at word level, sentence level and text level of the selected history texts are analysed through the theoretical frameworks of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) by Halliday (2004), Genre Analysis by Rose (2012) and Historical Discourse by Coffin (2006) to identify linguistic features for non-native students studying History by in the English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) context.

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Rationale

A number of researches by the Myanmar Historical Research Department focused on academic discipline. A few scholars investigated linguistic challenges of learning history in higher education sector in Myanmar and local studies have yet to be carried out in the field of EMI in tertiary education. Moreover, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, there has not been any research related to learning History in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in Myanmar. It has become necessary for researchers and practitioners to analyse linguistic challenges of learning history in English. The current study will emphasize the linguistic challenges faced by the history specialization students at the tertiary level in learning History in English.

The Medium of Instruction at a University (MoI)

Medium of instruction (MoI) is understood as the oral and written language used by teachers in delivering lectures on the content subjects. However, MoI policies of a country are closely related to social, economic, and political forces that shape its education system. As a result, these policies do not only affect in adopting the language of instruction but also a wide range of important and broad issues like globalization, migration, labor policy, elite competition, and the distribution of economic resources and political power (Tollefson & Tsui, 2003).

To enhance the foreign language learning, it has become increasingly popular to use a second language as the medium of instruction. In this case, English is used as medium of instruction for content subjects. The benefits of this programme can be seen in North America and Europe. Moreover, Stoller (2004) also describes that content and language create a symbiotic relationship; that is, the learning of content contributes to the learning of language and a mastery of language gives learners easier access to content. Based on above programmes in different contexts, using L2 as the MoI provides a favourable teaching/ learning environment not only for L2 learning but also for content learning.

Ho and Ho (2004) discuss in their study that three factors, namely economic, political, and educational, affect the choice of medium of instruction in schools. In particular, the economic factor is the dominant one for most of the time, while educational factor has the least influence. However, the political factor can also become dominant after the change of sovereignty in former colonies of Western countries.

In Myanmar, choosing a medium of instruction in higher education sector is also influenced by political issues because Myanmar was colonized by the British in 1885. It regained its national sovereignty in 1948. English medium of instruction in Higher Education level depends on the role of English in a country. Since 1920 when the Rangoon (Yangon) University was founded until the sixties, English was the medium of instruction at the tertiary level (Myo-Myint, 1992). The Rangoon University Act Enquiry Committee of 1936 first examined the question of vernacularisation of instruction in university. This question was later studied, once again by the University Organizing Committee in 1947. It was ten years after Independence, in 1958, that the policy on the medium of instruction was announced by the Minister of Education. It stated that, at the university level, Myanmar became the medium of instruction for all academic disciplines. The changeover was introduced from Intermediate Part A in June 1960. However, this came to an end with the enactment of the University Act in 1964. After 1964, Myanmar became the medium of instruction, and English language studies and English language teaching was scaled down. However, the change in medium of instruction at tertiary level occurred again in 1981. The English proficiency programmes were implemented as an objective of education (Han-Tin, 1990).

Thaung- Htut (2013) stated that the EMI reintroduction at the tertiary level was reconsidered at the Education seminar on 11th, November, 1980 held by the State Council under the direction of the then President U Ne Win. On behalf of the Higher Education Committee, Dr. Maung Di, the Rector of the Arts and Science University of Yangon presented the Committee's recommendations. On the issue of the English medium of instruction at the universities, the committee recommended that for the postgraduate and Honours classes EMI should be adopted. The recommendation of EMI at such levels of learning aims at raising the standard of education by reading multi-disciplinary publication, including research journals in English. All these facts highlight the fact that in learning a new discipline written in

L2, the role of Medium of Instruction (MoI) has not received sufficient attention as a factor denying meaningful access to education in Myanmar.

History Discourse

Of all the academic content areas, History is challenging and linguistically demanding for EFL learners because historical concepts are typically construed in abstract vocabulary and complex language structures “quite different from the language through which everyday life is lived” (Mary J Schleppegrell, Greer, & Taylor, 2008,p.176; M. Schleppegrell & de Oliveira, 2006).Coffin (2009, p.xiii) emphasized that history discourse may be challenging for some students particularly those with low literacy levels. Nonetheless, an explicit focus on teaching the language of history can help overcome this language barrier (Schleppegrell et al., 2008).

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

Halliday and Matthiessen(2004) report that structure of language needs to be “interpreted as the outward form taken by systemic choices.” Language, in other words, is primarily conceptualized as a system of choices, a “meaning potential.” The approach to linguistic analysis of history texts adopted in this research draws on the theoretical frameworks of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) by Halliday (2004), Genre Analysis by Rose (2012) and Historical Discourse by Coffin (2006). Rose (2015) continues to highlight that it is very likely the analysis starts with the macro levels of register and genre to the bottom level linguistic knowledge to achieve authentic social goals. Hasan and Williams (1996) report **the generic structure** like the division/divisibility of the text into identifiable stages, each of which performs a distinct function in achieving the overall purpose(s) of the text.

Lexico-grammatical features indicate the kind of changes that occur in the grammar of written historical texts as one moves from relatively everyday/commonsense constructs of History to more uncommon sense/educational renderings. They are abstraction, temporality, causality and nominal groups. **Abstraction** means what participants and places in the text are referred to as singular , tangible entities, close to the lived experience of the writer, or, alternatively, in terms of their political or social roles, in a kind of ‘pseudo-objective’ semiotic space. **Temporality** is how, and to what extent the text uses grammatical resources to organise events into a time sequence. Resources for construing temporality are Circumstance of temporal location, enhancing clauses, conjunctions (e.g. next, then, after...) and phased Processes. **Causality** is how and to what extent the text uses grammatical resources to construct cause-and- effect links between things and events. The degree and kind of cause-and-effect is usually closely related with the occurrence of grammatical metaphor. Resources for occurring causality includes conjunctions (e.g. because, so, therefore...) and Circumstances (e.g. because of...) and through transitivity structures. The last one is nominal groups. **Nominal groups** are the relative complexity with which participants in the text, represented through nominal groups. They can vary from very simple structure to long and dense structure. Nominal group structure is closely associated with the use of grammatical metaphor. It can also indicate whether a text is ‘spoken’ or ‘written’.

Lin (2016) reports the SFL model of language strata and instantiation of meanings provides a theoretical framework to understand and design studies on learning, curricular and pedagogical issues.

The research, therefore, draws on the approach of meaning based theory of language, Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), as a theory that does not separately address language and content, but instead sees language as the realization of meaning in context, puts focus on content, helping teachers understand how language works to construct disciplinary knowledge and offers a way of going beyond general reading strategies to tackle a History text and unpack meaning clause by clause.

The aim of this study is to highlight the language features and linguistic challenges of the history texts for learners, find a better way to overcome these challenges and improve in teaching history at the tertiary level EMI in Myanmar. This study attempts to address the following questions:

1. What are the language features of the prescribed History texts in English that non-native earners have to learn?

2. What are the linguistic challenges faced by non-native students in learning History in English?

Text analysis using SFL

The selected History texts are classified by using genre analysis, register analysis and lexicogrammatical analysis to categorize the language features of the history texts. In analyzing History texts, the genre and register are based on the frameworks of Rose (2012) and Historical Discourse by Coffin (2006).

Grammatical features are analysed through Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) mainly focused on sentence constituents and their meaning relationship, time markers/connectors, individual participant and abstract/ institutional participant because Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) state that this theory that does not address language and content separately, but instead sees language as the realization of meaning in context.

According to Freeman & Freeman (2009), in the academic vocabulary (Lexical level), three types of difficult words found in academic texts are subject-specific vocabulary (technical terms), general academic vocabulary (semi-technical terms) and signaling words (e.g. connectives). In analyzing academic vocabulary, subject-specific vocabulary and general academic vocabulary are classified based on the framework of **Gardner, Dee and Mark Davies (2013)**. To give an overview of all the research methods, the steps of analysis are shown in Table 1 below.

Table (1) Steps of Analysis

Contents	Steps
1. History Texts Analysis	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Choose the targeted set of History texts 2. Analyse the texts in terms of genre 3. Group the linguistic challenges at the lexical level into subject specific vocabulary, academic vocabulary and connectives 4. Calculate the number of temporal markers and causal markers in the selected History texts 5. Analyse the sentences according to their constituents and meaning relationships by underpinning systemic function linguistics (SFL) 6. Identify the text level of the chosen History texts

Table (1) shows the steps used in history texts analysis.

Table (2) Genre Analysis of the Selected History Texts of the First Year at Tertiary Level in Myanmar

Genre	Title of History text	Nos. of texts
Factorial Explanation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Origins of Feudalism 2. Revival of Trade 3. The Rise of Town 4. Emergence of Bourgeoisie 8. Development of National Economy 10. The Reformation in Germany 	6
Consequential Explanation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. The Italian Renaissance 	1
Historical Account	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. National Monarchy in England 7. National Monarchy in France 9. The Medieval Church 11. Background of Overseas Expansion 12. Portuguese Expansion in Asia 13. Portuguese Expansion in America 14. Spanish Expansion in America 15. Dutch Expansion in Asia 16. English and French Expansion in Asia 17. English and French Expansion in America 	10

Table (2) illustrates the classification of different genres in the History textbook and the number of texts in each genre. It is found that there are 6 genres for factorial explanation, 1 genre for consequential explanation and 10 genres for historical account.

Findings

Table (3) Linguistic Challenges of 17 History Texts

Text	Percentage of Subject Specific Vocabulary	Percentage of General Academic Vocabulary	Percentage of Temporality Markers	Percentage of Causality Markers	Percentage of Individual Participant	Percentage of Abstract/ Institutional Participant	Percentage of Compound Sentence	Percentage of Complex Sentence
Text 1	17.6%	16.72%	46.14%	22.07%	1.82%	2.90%	30.76%	7.69%
2	8.06%	8.99%	26.3%	26.3%	-	2.17%	15.78%	15.78%
3	10.64%	11.76%	-	27.8%	1.12%	5.32%	11.12%	44.48
4	13.68%	11.88%	20.01%	20.01%	2.88%	9.00%	13.34%	40.02%
8	5.8%	21.75%	5.88%	23.52%	0.29%	3.48%	35.28%	5.88%
10	5.32%	7.58%	35.7%	14.28%	4.56%	2.85%	32.13%	14.28%
5	6.24%	10.56%	48%	8%	3.36%	3.6%	12%	12%
6	10.15%	8.12%	52.36%	23.8%	2.03%	6.96%	19.04%	9.52%
7	16.56%	8.64%	53.9%	7.7%	4.56%	3.36%	23.1%	15.4%
9	5.46%	10.08%	54.21%	8.34%	4.62%	4.41%	16.68%	25.02%
11	3.78%	9.87%	45.5%	4.55%	0.84%	3.99%	22.75%	18.2%
12	8.74%	6.44%	60.9%	13.05%	3.91%	3.45%	43.5%	4.35%
13	3.52%	5.44%	39.92%	11.12%	0.64%	5.44%	16.68%	22.24%
14	6.09%	5.88%	42.35%	7.7%	3.37%	3.78%	26.95%	15.4%
15	4.5%	5%	50.04%	5.56%	-	7.5%	27.8%	22.24%
16	3.23%	5.95%	65.55%	6.9%	0.85%	9.01%	34.5%	10.35%
17	3.96%	8.36%	105.64%	5.56%	1.32%	7.04%	5.56%	22.24%

The table (3) summarizes the findings on the linguistic challenges of the 17 History texts in English. Texts 1, 2, 3, 4, 8 and 10 are of factorial explanation genres. Factorial explanation explains multiple causes for one effect. Text 5 is consequential explanation which explains multiple effects of one cause. Moreover, explanations are concerned with causes and effects. Therefore, it is found that a lot of causality markers are deployed more in these genres compared with historical account. According to Rose and Martin (2012), historical accounts do not simply chronical, they also explain why. Therefore, both a number of temporality markers and causality markers can be seen in these text types. Text 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17 are historical account genres which not only progress through phases, but also establish cause/effect relationships between events, both within and between phases.

Based on the findings of subject specific vocabulary and general academic vocabulary of History texts, it is noticed that the language used in History texts are totally different from the language we use in everyday interaction. It becomes a discipline-specific literacy demand subject for students.

After analysing genres of History texts, it is found that they are often organized according to time or cause (J. R. Martin, 2002) and analysing how the information is presented helps students understand how the events unfolded or about why they occurred. Verbs such as *cause*, *resulted in*, and *became* can establish causality and develop the historian's arguments, and prepositional phrases and adverbs often scaffold temporal meanings. Each text is analysed for the particular ways it develops the information presented in it. In the table 3, through text analysis, it is found that the number of temporality historical account genres consists of more temporality markers compare to the rest of genres. Moreover, explanation genres contain more causality markers than historical account.

After identifying the texts according to temporality and causality per text, the next step is to find out the participants in these events. The participants are classified according to personal/ individual participants and abstract/ institutional participants. As the table 3 reveals, it is found that the number of abstract / institutional participant exceeds that of individual participants in all texts except Text 13. In addition, historians do not always write the participants in past events as people. Instead, abstract participants commonly appear, presenting institutions, things, or ideas as actors.

Last but not the least, it is found that most of the sentences used in texts are complex and compound sentences from the sentence structure perspective.

Discussion

The findings on History texts analysis well addressed the research questions (1) and (2) “What are the language features of the prescribed history texts in English that non-native learners have to learn? and “What are the linguistic challenges faced by non-native students in learning History in English?”

The analysis of generic structure is regarded as effective and helpful for students because it makes relationship or connections in the text explicit to students, and it helps students develop knowledge of how texts are organized to achieve a purpose. Furthermore, an analysis of linguistic challenges of History texts in English can open our eyes as to why History texts are dense and abstract. Moreover, students and teachers can better recognize the language features of History text at word level, sentence level and text level.

On the whole, the current linguistic analysis of History discourse is constructive and contributes to the research field in several ways. Firstly, although studies have been conducted on the genre types and linguistic characteristics at first year level history textbook in a university in Myanmar, they are targeted at other tertiary levels teaching and learning to cope with EMI in Myanmar. Secondly, the previous researches of the Department of History at the Tertiary Level in Myanmar are mainly focused on their academic discipline rather than the method of teaching History in English. But, this analysis mainly highlights the language of History that students learn at a university. The text analysis of current study emphasizes teaching History in English. This study, therefore, may enhance EMI in a university in Myanmar.

Conclusion

Pedagogical Implications

In the first place, by doing an analysis of History texts through genre analysis, teachers as well as students can see the overall structure of academic History texts. In addition to this, the analysis of sentences deployed by Systemic Functional Linguistic analysis (SFL) help them understand the language features of the type of texts used by historians and how they present the information by selecting appropriate words to construct the texts. This knowledge can enhance students' critical thinking skills as they become familiar with the academic language of History content. As a result, students can become independent writers to organize the sentences into meaningful chunks. It also aimed to orientate the language of history not just about making students effective readers and writers of history, it is also about moulding into good historians (Veel & Coffin, 1996) . Apart from these implications, SFL may be a timesaving method for learning content subjects through English especially for social science subjects and may help students to overcome rote learning of these disciplines.

Research implications

Suggestions for further studies based on the findings and limitations of the present study are presented as follows: Firstly, replication research is needed to investigate challenges for students and teachers toward EMI courses from a wider range of study fields and from schools across different geographical areas of Myanmar. Secondly, classroom observation for investigations relevant to the process of English language and content subject learning would also be a good approach for evidence based research over a longer period of time than just analyzing History texts in English.

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