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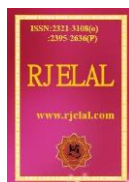
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## THE NECESSITY OF APPLYING FUNCTIONAL-SYSTEMIC GRAMMAR IN TEACHING GRAMMAR IN EFL CLASSES

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### Abstract

This article aims to approve the necessity of teaching and learning English grammar in ELT in Vietnam. The article includes the following factors (1) analyzing the strengths and weakness of a short piece of student writing using a functional – systemic grammar framework, (2) making suggestion for teaching – learning plan to assist the student writer to develop his or her writing, (3) giving reflection on how the writer’s attitude to teaching grammar.

**Keywords:** Student’s writing, Teaching and learning English grammar, Functional grammar, Non-native English learner, Vietnam

### Introduction

The competence for communicating is really important for learners in EFL classes in Vietnam. A lot of them are getting difficulties in speaking and writing English because they feel worried too much about their chaos of using structures (grammar) to express their ideas or thoughts and make it sense. Grammar often tends to be taught in less systemic way than other aspects of language, or it is taught as a parallel syllabus with students doing traditional grammar exercise as supplementary work or homework (Joyce, 2001:54). Meanwhile, language is context – sensitive. In the absence of context, it is difficult to recover the intended meaning of a single word or phrase. This is true of words taken out of the context of sentences. It is also true of sentences taken out of the context of texts. (Thornbury,1999:69). So, in the fact that students generally find it difficult to communicate fluently in social contexts through writing since the context and situation are not taken into account when grammar is taught. This paper, therefore, is analyzed to see

the strengths and the weaknesses of the student’s writing based on functional grammar, to prepare an appropriate teaching- learning plan to develop students’ writing abilities, and to provide an example of essential aspects of connecting grammar and communication in teaching.

### 1. Analyzing student’s writing

Student’s writing is a recount letter. He is a first – year student who is at an intermediate level of a general English course. When doing the writing as a homework assignment, he and all the students in the class were not given any instructions or model because I want to know their ability in using grammar and proper words to produce a piece of writing on their own and I could also see their strengths as well as weaknesses and get a proper plan for teaching.

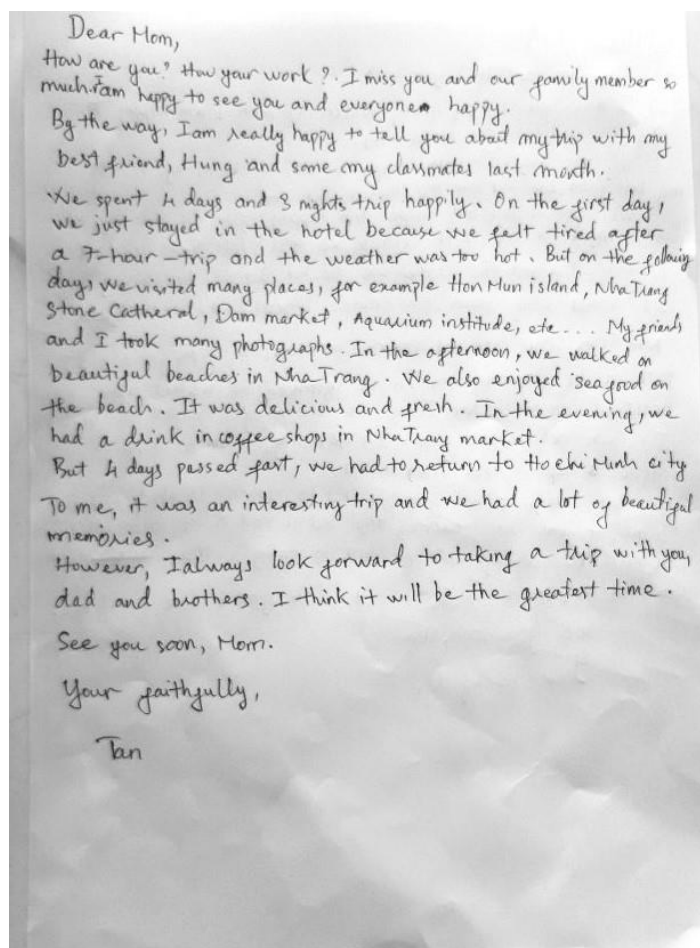
Take a look of the writing, the student did it rather well in terms of the overall structure and the purpose of the text - type. Obviously, the student fulfilled the purpose of writing a recount – telling

what happened and a sequence of events and evaluating their significance (Butt et al 2001: 9).

It is obvious that the student wanted to inform the reader with the event that he had taken part into by his choice of declarative mood. That is "I'm happy to tell you about my trip to Nha Trang with my best friend, Lan and some my classmates last week." The student also provided enough information about *who*, *where*, and *when* in the recount. Besides, he also made the cohesion in the writing through conjunctions such as "but", "and" and "however" in order to express her series of information. And he used mainly the active voice in his writing in order to emphasize the actor.

Take a look on the student's writing, it's clearly that the student knows how to present a letter. He divided the letter into three parts: Greeting, Body and Closing, and gave the information in each part correctly. (Greeting: "Dear Mom", "How are you?" "How your work?"; Body: Telling about her trip; Closing: See you soon...).

The structures in the writing are suitable to his level. Moreover, the student was aware that the information was about an event which had already taken placed, consequently, he made use of the **finites** which encode the past tense in the writing properly such as "felt", "enjoyed" "was", "took" for telling her last trip.



In the writing, he also made use of material, mental and relational process verbs to give information and express feeling. It is obvious that she used the resources of language rather well to inform the reader some useful information about the event (Joyce and Burns 2001: 119)

Moreover, the student did a good job in making mention of circumstances, namely circumstance to set the story in place such as *Nha Trang*, *Nha Trang Stone Cathedral*, *Aquarium Institute* or *Hon Mun island*. And series of events in the story were set in time such as *on the first day*, *on the following day*, *in the afternoon*, *in the evening*.

We can say that the student understood the purpose of the writing to the reader and make full use of it (Joyce and Burns 2001: 119). In addition, all the verb groups: "took a lot of photographs", "enjoyed sea food" or "visited many places" and preposition phrases: "in the hotel", "on the beach", "with my best friend" are put together to construct effective single clause sentences. There is no doubt that he was able to fulfill her purpose in the writing and had control of the necessary grammatical resources for this text type (Joyce and Burns 2001:119). The student also used suitable structures to let the reader know "How was his trip?", "where did he visit?" or "how does he feel?" such as "*I took a trip to Nha Trang*", "*The weather was too hot.*", "*it was an interesting trip*", "*I miss you and all our family member so much*". In a less general manner, there is also no doubt that this is a quite formal writing.

Besides, the **cohesion** in the text was achieved through using additive and contrasting conjunctions such as *and*, *but*, *however*; and the use of pronouns to refer back to previously mentioned participants or process in the text; for example, the pronoun "*we*" in the text refers back to "*I*", "*Lan*", "*classmates*" or "*it*" refers back to "*seafood*" also made the text more cohesive.

From the above development of the analysis, it can be said that the student generally has received considerable explicit grammar instruction. He has been able to access grammar rules when doing the writing activity. The student also demonstrates good skill in producing the complex structure typical of formal academic.

However, here the weakness of the writing is the use of lexical that is achieved just through the repetition, but not through synonymy, hyponymy or other kinds of lexical cohesion. Such as in order to prevent the repetition and not make readers bored, the word "happy" in line 2 could have been exchanged by the word "wish". Some words are not put in the right place. They didn't match with the meaning of the paragraph such as the conjunction "however" in line 17, or the verb "walking on" in line 10 is inappropriate well in the situation of the sentence. It could have been replaced by the word

"strolled" and the word "fast" in line 14 by "quickly" or "promptly".

Furthermore, putting the word "faithfully" in the closing part of the letter is a wrong way because it's just sued in a formal letter with the greeting is "Dear Sir or Madam,"

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## **2. Suggested teaching and learning plan**

From basic principles for grammar teaching, we know that no class of learners is the same. Differences are elicited between not only their needs, interests, levels but also the beliefs, attitudes and values. All of these variables can in turn create differences in learners' motivation and attitudes toward language learning in general and the acquisition of academic skill in particular (Celle – Murcia, 2001: 235). Therefore, for the success of classroom, we want to satisfy the many different students in front of us, teaching to their individual strengths with activities designed to produce the best results for each of them, yet we also want to address our teaching to the group as a whole (Harmer,2001:48).

One of the important and key factor for success of a lesson is that the lesson should be designed depending on the weakness in the students' text. This not only helps the students to learn key and important grammar points but also remember them longer and more thoroughly. Through the above analysis of a piece of student writing, I did identify the following weakness: vocabulary, compound nouns, conjunctions and text type. These seem to be important grammar point for students at intermediate level and for most second language learners. However, I think overcorrection should be avoided at any cost. The first reason is that teachers will undermine students' confidence. Secondly, overcorrection fails to focus students on genuine errors. The last and also the most important reason

is that teachers who are in favors of constant fail to realize that mistakes are a natural and important part of learning. Therefore, in the below suggested teaching and learning plan, I would like to look at compound nouns, vocabulary and text type. It does not mean that I ignore other mistakes, but I would correct them in other ways or I would teach my students these grammar points some other time maybe.

First thing in my plan, a model piece of writing belonging to this text type will be showed to students to help them get to know about this text type and practice the reading skill as well.

12 May 2005

Dear Classmates,

*Thank you very much for the cards I received from you during my staying in the hospital. They really gave me much comfort and encourage to stand up again.*

*The accident occurred on a Sunday evening while I was going back to the university from home by bicycle. It was a dark night and the lights beside the road were weak. There was a big hole on the road and no warning board around. I dropped down in the hole and broke my left leg.*

*I was sent to the hospital. The doctor put my leg in plastic splints and I could not do anything but lying in bed all the time. At the time, I received your cards, which comforted and encouraged me a lot. I shall always remember it with feelings of the greatest gratitude. Three weeks later, the plastic splints were removed from my leg. Then I came back home to have a rest in order to let my leg recover entirely. I began to practice walking with crutches. At the beginning, I could hardly walk. Day by day, I practiced and practiced, and gradually I could walk one step, then two steps without the help of the crutches.*

*According to the conditions now, I guess I could go back to the university in two weeks. After leaving the university for so long, I really miss it and I especially miss all of you.*

*With my best wishes.*

*Yours sincerely,  
Tom Wang*

Writing Strategies for the IELTS TEST

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Students would be asked some questions to explore the purpose and the context of the text. This process would also be taken orally. Then some questions which help the students to explore the overall organization would be made (Table 2) so that they could find out the structural elements or stages of the text by themselves because it is much easier to produce an appropriate text when you know its structure (Butt et al 2001:9).

#### **Questions about the purpose and the context of the text**

1. What kind of text is it?
2. Who wrote it, for whom?
3. What is it about?  
(Butt et al 2001: 269)

#### **Questions about the overall organization of the text**

1. Can you identify stages in the text?
2. Can you describe the function of each stage?  
(Butt et al 2001: 269)

In the student's piece of writing analyzed above, although he included enough the structural elements of a recount type, he had very little awareness of the type of letter so that he cannot write an appropriate greeting or closing. Therefore, this is time to remind the structural elements of a recount letter to students. They are the greeting, introduction, the record of events and final summing up and closing of a letter. A grasp of the stages and the purpose of a recount letter would help them to write correctly and effectively.

The student would be asked to look over the letter and find out the difference between the greeting and the closing in each letter. The student will do it orally. After getting the student's answer, I will present the way how using the greeting and the closing, (Table 3)

| GREETING                | CLOSING         |
|-------------------------|-----------------|
| Dear Sir or Madam,      | Your faithfully |
| Dear Mr, Mrs, Ms...     | Yours sincerely |
| Dear classmates, Mom .. | Love..          |

According to Joyce and Burns, one aspect of teaching students to write recounts is to prepare them for the grammatical features of the written text type (Joyce and Burns 1999:86)

The first grammatical feature of writing a recount is the use of the simple past tense. Therefore, I would review the simple past tense and get students to do some exercises using simple past tense.

Choose the correct form of the verbs in brackets.

1. I (send) \_\_\_\_ a letter to my sister last week.
2. In 1997, Tom (have) \_\_\_\_ a chance to visit his grandparent in Australia.
3. Mary and her parents (take) \_\_\_\_ a trip to a suburb by bicycle two years ago.
4. While they were swimming at the beach, some strangers (steal) \_\_\_\_ all their belongings and (disappear).

Then I would teach them how to use compound nouns by getting them do some exercises.

Rewrite the following sentences.

E. g:

- We caught the train at Saigon station. The train started at 20.30.
- We caught the 20.30 train at Saigon station.
- We had a long trip. It took us 8 hours to get to Nha Trang.

We had an 8-hour trip to Nha Trang.

1. We caught the bus at the bus stop near our house. It started at 7.30.
2. We often go to school by bus. The bus often starts at 6.30.
3. We spent 24 hours on the train. It was a long trip.

Using appropriate words in a writing makes the writing appealing and worth reading. So, teaching vocabulary is one of necessary steps in order to help students improve their writing and speaking skills. Stories are powerful contexts for teaching vocabulary. If learners are interested in a story, they will learn the vocabulary that they need to know in order to understand and retell it (Celce – Murcia and Olshtain 2000:88). For instance, I will teach the word “such as”. The following paragraphs taken from the textbook “**Impact**”

*Today there many products made of denim, such as bags, boots and ties. Even jewelry such as bracelets, necklaces, and hair decorations can be made from denim. Some designers re-used old jeans to create new fashion products, too.*

The third paragraph has two tokens of “such as”. Students will be asked to read the paragraphs and then discuss with their partner to find the meaning of the “such as”. Then they have to make their all sentences with the word “such as”. Finally, I will give them the explanation of the word and give some more examples and ask them to complete some following sentences to consolidate it.

[1] On the following days, they offered to take us to visit many interesting places in Nha Trang such as .....

[2] We also enjoyed a lot of seafood .....

[3] We went to Dam market, the largest and the most crowded market in Nha Trang, to buy some local souvenirs and specialties .....  
for our family members.

Or to introduce the word “stroll” to students I give them some examples in a certain context and ask them to guess the meaning of it.

“After dinner, we strolled along the beach. On the beach we saw some young couples strolled hand in hand. They all looked very happy”

**3. Reflection**

As we all know, grammar is a familiar but complicated field and it requires a lot of attempts in

order to master the grammar field. As a matter of fact, there are three types of grammar, namely traditional grammar, formal grammar, and functional grammar (Joyce 2001: 56). However, I myself see that I often only used the first two types when teaching grammar. When examining the focus of the three types of grammar, I recognized that, while traditional grammar mainly focus on rules of the language and is concerned with whether an instance of language is grammatical or ungrammatical, and formal grammar focuses on word classes within sentences and is concerned with the concept of an idea speaker and with separating grammatical sentences from ungrammatical sentences, functional grammar focuses on groups of words that function to make meaning, rather than on individual words and is concerned with what purpose the grammatical groups are serving in the construction of meaning (Joyce & Burns 1999). From that point, I see that in the analysis of a piece of student writing part, understanding functional grammar has significantly contributed to my assessing student achievement. In other words, I have been able to make insightful comments on the strengths and weaknesses in terms of the functional – systemic framework. This has played a very important role in helping me to develop explicit criteria for designing teaching and learning activities as elicited in the suggested teaching and learning part of this assignment.

Furthermore, my feedback on students' texts is completely different from before. I formerly felt error correction was a difficult task because I did not know decision-making about what to correct, when to correct, how to correct, how much to correct, as well. Therefore, I often corrected all student mistakes all the time without focusing any especial errors. Consequently, I could have underlined students' confidence and failed to focus students on genuine errors. More importantly, I did fail to realize that mistakes were a natural and important part of learning. In contradiction, I now, after studying system-functional grammar, usually highlight important mistakes to encourage my students to use the correct form to improve their performance. Furthermore, I become sensitive enough to tolerate

some errors, especially those that are evidence of learning taking place.

Each type of grammar obviously has its own strength. Traditional grammar helps us know the rules of language. However, it does not use real-life experience as its reference and often uses sentences for analysis that have been made up to obey the rules (Joyce & Burns 1999). Formal grammar focuses on word classes within sentences and is concerned with separating grammatical sentences from ungrammatical sentences. Nevertheless, it views grammaticality as separate from meaning. Functional grammar aims to identify what purpose the different items are achieving within sentences and within the whole texts (Joyce & Burns 1999). Thus, functional grammar can be a supplement for the shortcomings of traditional and formal grammar and must be seen as useful in language teaching. In a word, I can say that what I need now is to combine the three types of grammar in order to make my teaching more effective.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Grammar teaching has always been one of the most controversial and least understood aspects of language teaching (Thornbury 1999: ix). However, that grammar is extremely necessary for language teaching is undeniable because of the fact that language without grammar would be chaotic and it would be impossible to learn a language without drawing on grammar in some ways. Through the analysis of the student's piece of writing and the teaching – learning plan, we can see the importance of grammar in developing students' abilities in writing. Therefore, teaching grammar must be carried out in any language education program. The point is that, in order to teach grammar effectively, an appropriate approach must be carefully chosen with the perspective that grammar is used to construct meaning to serve particular social purposes. That is to say, the aim of teaching grammar is to teach students to use different varieties of language and to decide on how to use the systems of language according to context and according to purpose (Joyce & Burns 1999: 8), not just teach them make just grammatical sentences which obey perfectly the rules, the word classes

within sentences with little awareness of their meaning and the context in which they take place.

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