

**DEVELOPING LITERACY IN UNDERGRADUATES OF LEVEL ONE  
ENGLISH PROFICIENCY- APPLICATION OF THE ‘READING TO LEARN’  
METHODOLOGY**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study was conducted as a preliminary investigation, to analyse the effects of the Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) based literacy training entitled ‘Reading to Learn’ when applied on students of very low English proficiency in a local university. For this, a class of undergraduates of level -1 English proficiency standard was selected. The action research method involved reflecting on collected data on the students’ English literacy level and taking remedial action to improve it. After implementing one cycle of ‘Reading to Learn’ most students were able to comprehend authentic English factual texts, analyse such texts for their sentence level meaning, sentence level organization, paragraph meaning and produce factual writing displaying reading comprehension and understanding of sentence organization. With language support from the teacher and peer support these students were able to follow and complete up to 83% of the methodology tasks. However these students could not achieve independent reading and writing targets within the period of this study. Thus it was concluded that more research was needed to exploit this methodology to develop English literacy in undergraduates with level-1 English proficiency.

**Key words:** Developing english literacy, Undergraduates, Systematic Functional Linguistics, Reading to Learn, Action research

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is common knowledge that university education requires a high degree of reading and writing. Research has shown that successful graduate study (where English is the medium of instruction) requires English language proficiency (Wang et al., 2002). Thus when it comes to achieving academic success in the English medium, undergraduates who do not possess the literacy skills as specified by Rose (2003) such as the ability to read complex academic texts with high level of understanding, to critically analyse such texts, structure essays appropriately and demonstrate their mastery of a subject are at a clear disadvantage. This disadvantage is most pronounced in the students of very weak English proficiency, or of level-1 proficiency according to the English proficiency levelling system used in most of the government universities in Sri Lanka. This research makes this particular group its focus in view of future English Medium Instruction (EMI) developments that may arise in the Sri Lankan university system.

To help these students face their language challenges, this study selected the Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) based methodology 'Reading to Learn' (Rose 2005). This methodology was selected because of the parallels observed between the methodology and the kinds of language challenges the subjects of this study would face in an English medium context. These parallels arise mainly due to the pedagogy's SFL view of language and the education theories behind it. The similarities between the subjects of its past implementations as well as success observed through the past implementations in developing English literacy were additional reasons for the selection.

The pedagogy operated on the assumptions that reading is a main mode of learning. Students collect information from course related readings and need to produce texts of the sorts they have read (Rose 2005). Students in higher education have to deal with authentic subject related texts, be it text books, lecture hand-outs, research papers, or journals and such like. A student with underdeveloped English literacy will find the language in such texts to be challenging. Considering the fact that Systematic Functional Linguistics insists on 'studying actual instances of language that have been used (or are being used) by speakers or writers... authentic texts' (Bloor and Bloor 2004), a pedagogy based on Systematic Functional Linguistics matches with the students' need to tackle the English language in the form authentic stretches of language (Bloor and Bloor 2004).

Moreover, the SFL based 'Reading to learn' pedagogy draws on the educational theory of 'Zone of Proximal Development' also known as ZPD (Vygotsky 1962) and Brunner's Scaffolding theory. ZPD refers to the interval between what one is able to achieve alone or using ones independent capabilities and what one learns and achieves with guidance from more knowledgeable persons (Wood and Wood 1996). Scaffolding is the support provided to a learner to achieve tasks above his or her own abilities (Sternberg and Williams 1998). These theories which back 'Reading to Learn' relate to what the subjects of this study require in their endeavour to carry out reading and writing tasks beyond their individual English language capabilities. They would need adequate assistance to reach skill levels that are above their own.

The problem of this study is the underdeveloped English literacy (reading and writing) evident in Level 1 students. Thus the aim of this study is to examine one methodology to examine its benefits for an undergraduate of 'level-1' proficiency in developing reading- writing skills in English for academic success.

As to the successful implementation of this pedagogy in developing English literacy in students, it is observed that the past studies were carried out with students who possessed underdeveloped English literacy. This aspect is common to a considerable number of undergraduates in government universities particularly the students of level-1 English proficiency. Since no study on the effects of this kind of pedagogy on local students had been attempted before, this study was undertaken to contribute new insights into the value and scope of SFL based literacy training.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study follows the action research methodology in carrying out this study. Action research is problem based and reflective, allowing one to examine the results of a process used or action taken in relation to addressing the identified problem (Wallace 2004). Further, it allows room to probe into problems one comes across in one's professional work (Haggarty and Postlethwaite 2003). The researcher, being an English teacher at the tertiary level, had experienced and witnessed poor English literacy in her work environment. Focussing on this problem the research follows the reflective cycle of problem identification, analysis of the problem, implementation of an action

to improve the problem and evaluation of the implementation.

The researcher chose to conduct the research with her own class of level-1 undergraduates. This class consisted of 31 undergraduate students of the Law Faculty. The instruments used in this research were two questionnaires, a pre-test, a post test and the written work collected from the students.

The first questionnaire was used to understand the students' experience and exposure to English as well as their perceived English literacy difficulties. The second questionnaire assessed the students' literacy difficulties according to certain linguistic concepts of SFL and the literacy skills taught by 'Reading to Learn.'

The pre-test involving the reading of an English text followed by a summary writing activity based on the read text was administered to identify and establish the suspected English literacy problems in the level-1 undergraduates. The post-test tested the students' understanding of the 'Reading to Learn' activities. It was also used to test the success of these activities in assisting the students to achieve the literacy targets. It also evaluated the effectiveness of the methodology in its ability to assist level-1 students to reach the final stage of 'Independent Writing.'

Written work done by the students for all the activities in the implementation process was collected to analyse the students' ability to understand the implemented methodology.

The application of the pedagogy began with a discussion of a selected English text together with its Sinhala translation. Through this discussion students were helped to understand any unfamiliar English words and access the overall meaning of the English text. In the 'Detailed Reading' stage activities were done to raise the students' awareness of meaning arrangements within the sentences. This involved a process of locating the main verb or verb phrase or 'Process,' and then identifying the other pieces of information contained in the sentences namely, the 'participants' and the 'circumstances'. These were identified by using 'wh' questions. The meanings of the above mentioned concepts were introduced and explained to the students through a hand out. These SFL concepts have been explained briefly in the diagram below using an example sentence.

Having identified and dismantled sentences into the meaning components, students were asked to reconstruct the original sentences and paragraphs

using the meaning components. This activity intended to raise awareness of sentence arrangement.

As the students had been successful so far up to identifying the SFL categories in sentences, the higher task of independent rewriting was advanced. Thus they engaged in note making and independent rewriting, where they isolate the key ideas in each paragraph and try to individually recreate a novel passage using the key ideas.

Due to the students' poor performance in the independent rewriting activity students were requested to carry out the rewriting activity jointly with the support of their peers. Students were provided supports in the form of collaborative group work, class discussion and language support from the teacher. There was an attempt to take them towards independent rewriting by gradually reducing the amount of support provided. For this class rewriting, group rewriting and individual rewriting activities were used.

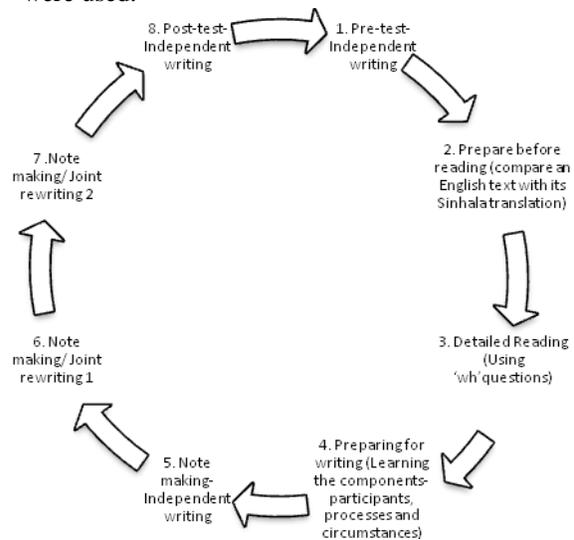


Figure 1: The first literacy cycle – the stages

### 3. RESULTS

In the pre-test, it was found that most or 57% of the students' reading text based writing fitted the, 'Weak' category and 24% to the 'Vey weak' and categories. 'Weak' summaries contained inadequate information, haphazard copying from the original text, they did not convey accurate complete ideas, there were attempts to use own words and sentences but with serious errors not conveying correct meaning. Also there was inaccurate information. Although the writing had a few parts which had been correctly copied and attempts to follow a logical order, there was no complete coverage of all the key

information. 24 % of the students produced 'Very weak' text based writing with characteristics such as no logical flow, haphazard copying which did not convey meaning, extremely inadequate information and attempts to use own words but with serious errors not conveying correct meaning.

In the post test, the students did not perform well in the independent writing activity. They had difficulty in using the notes to create a meaning conveying paragraph. However there was a better performance in the joint rewriting and group rewriting and individual rewriting activities, particularly when the supports were provided at the very first activity and gradually removed. Where such support was available most of the writings were distributed between 'satisfactory' and 'very good' characteristics.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

With respect to the research questions of this study, the results of the implementation cycle show that the subjects were successful in grasping the SFL concepts and understanding the procedures of 'Reading to Learn.' The study intended to find out if the explicit teaching of sentence organization according to certain SFL concepts of language will help students to identify the meaning components of 'participant', 'process' and 'circumstances.' Also it intended to find if students can arrange the identified meaning components to reconstruct the original sentences and paragraphs. The successful performance of the students with respect to these areas shows that the methodology and linguistic concepts therein are easy to follow and understand.

The study also intended to see if the students are made able to finally produce a summary without extensive copying from an authentic text. Although students achieved this target with support, the time limit was not sufficient to see the students' development towards independent performance without support. Future research with a longer implementation period would provide insights with regard to this. In fact the partial success of this methodology calls for further exploration into its value for Sri Lankan undergraduates.

The study had to bring in some adaptations to the original methodology in order to cater to the local subjects. Whereas the original cycle used simplified English to provide access to difficult texts, the study employed a translation of the English text. Further extra exercises were included to ensure the students' grasp of the SFL concepts. Thus the methodology

may require modifications according to the subjects' characteristics.

#### 5. CONCLUSIONS

The pre-test writings of the students indicate that students do possess underdeveloped English literacy skills. The implementation cycle involved grammar concepts and teaching-learning steps that are different to mainstream language teaching in Sri Lanka. However, students had understood the new grammar concepts, and were able to use that knowledge to analyse the sentence structure in authentic texts. It is believed that the ability to access an authentic English reading text and the ability to demarcate the components of 'participant', 'process' and 'circumstances' and the ability to arrange them in forming meaningful sentences are important for reading factual texts with comprehension. Knowledge of such meaning components in English sentences could encourage students to produce similarly patterned or organised sentences in their own writing.

When it came to the final task of (in the post-test) of producing a meaningful novel text independently using the key ideas gathered from an authentic English text, the students failed. Yet, when similar exercises were attempted where adequate language support was provided by the teacher and peer support was available in the form of class discussions and group work the students were successful. Thus it can be said that the subjects of this study have successfully shown a growth in their English literacy from the pre- test abilities. The students developed from being unable to comprehend to being able to identify meaning components in sentences and meaning arrangement in sentences. Also the students who were initially unable to clearly identify the main ideas in a given text were now able to carry out what is called 'note making'. In addition the students, initially unable to create a meaningful version of a given text, by the conclusion of one cycle of the implementation had produced well sequenced, meaning conveying writings. Yet it must be added that most of these tasks were achieved with support as explained above. Thus it can be said that the subjects of this study have successfully shown a growth in their English literacy from pre-test abilities within a Zone of Proximal Development, reaching a higher level in the zone which is beyond their individual abilities with adequate support or 'Scaffolding.'

Finally it can be said that although the implemented methodology has potential to develop English

literacy in English language disadvantaged students like the level-1 subjects of this study, more research is needed to see how it can be exploited to take the students of this study to reach standards where they are able to fulfil the literacy tasks independently.

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