

‘We Can Speak to the World’: Applying Meta-linguistic Knowledge for Specialized and Reflexive Literacies

Sally Humphrey

Abstract This chapter reports on the work of one teacher and her students in an urban multicultural high school as they applied their growing knowledge of language to access and deconstruct discourses of power across rhetorical contexts. Informed by Australian models of Critical SFL praxis (Martin JR, Rose D, *Genre relations: mapping culture*. London, Equinox, 2008; Macken-Horarik M, *Literacy and learning across the curriculum: towards a model of register from secondary school teachers*. In R Hasan, G Williams (eds) *Literacy in society*. London, Longman, pp 232–278, 1996a; Macken-Horarik M, *Construing the invisible: specialised literacy practices in Junior Secondary English*. Dissertation, University of Sydney, 1996b), as well as by international research in literacy education and sociology (Bernstein B, *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: theory, research, critique*. London, Taylor & Francis, 1996; Maton K, *Knowledge and Knowers: towards a realist sociology of education*. London, Routledge, 2014; Rose D, Martin JR, *Learning to write, reading to learn: Genre, knowledge and pedagogy in the Sydney school*. Sheffield, Equinox, 2012; Schleppegrell M, *The language of schooling: a functional linguistics perspective*. Mahwah, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004; Schleppegrell M, *The role of meta-language in supporting academic language development*. *Language Learning* 63(1):153–170. doi:[10.1111/j.1467-9922.2012.00742.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2012.00742.x), 2013), the chapter focuses on the crucial role of meta-language in expanding the critical social literacies of socio-economically and linguistically marginalized adolescent students.

Keywords Critical social literacies • Systemic functional linguistics • Genre pedagogy • Discourse semantics • Appraisal

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1 Introduction

The development of critical literacy is seen as fundamental to twenty-first century literacy pedagogies in contemporary international educational policy and research (Avila and Zacher Pandya 2012; Luke 2012). In Australia, research also continues to show that socio-cultural, economic, linguistic and political constraints impact many students in gaining access to academically valued literacies (Teese and Lamb 2009; Caro et al. 2009). This ongoing social inequity has fueled renewed interest in critical practices characterized as redistributive social justice (Fraser 1997), which foreground ‘the more equal distribution and achievement of literacy practices’ (Luke 2012, p. 5). Informing much of this practice is the semiotic theory of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), which is widely acknowledged as a resource for interrogating and/or modeling language in context (Jewitt 2008), and for invigorating ‘critical literacies and multiliteracies in fundamental ways’ (Morgan and Ramanathan 2005, p. 158).

In Australia, critical takes on SFL-informed genre pedagogies have come to be known as critical social literacy (CSL) pedagogies (Christie 1991). CSL approaches are concerned predominantly with how to support culturally and linguistically marginalized students towards control of the genres needed to participate fully in academic and civic life. This chapter, along with several in this volume (e.g. de Oliveira and Avalos, Brisk and Ossa Parra, Khote) draws on the Teaching and Learning Cycle (TLC), an influential genre-based model for writing designed by Rothery and colleagues (Callaghan and Rothery 1988; Rothery and Stenglin 1995). It was informed by research on oral language learning, which showed that parents and other caregivers constantly model and expand children’s linguistic repertoires (Halliday 1993; Painter 2000). While other chapters focus in the TLC across contexts, including the primary level and teacher development, this chapter focuses on a version of the TLC designed for secondary contexts of learning, which extends the goal of the instructional cycle to include a critical orientation to disciplinary knowledge and discourse. To achieve this goal, it moves through three main steps that focus in each step on context and genre: Deconstruction, Joint Construction and Independent Construction.

Crucial to building and applying specialized and reflective knowledge through the TLC is a metalanguage, i.e. a language to talk with students and colleagues about language and how it is used (Hammond and Miller 2015; Jones and Chen 2012; Love 2010; Schleppegrell 2013). Such a metalanguage includes linguistic terminology as well as a language for connecting linguistic selections to their context (de Silva Joyce and Feez 2012). Further, for the purpose of redistributing discursive resources to marginalized groups (Martin 1999), a metalanguage needs to empower students to evaluate the impact of linguistic choices on particular audiences. Such a metalanguage can enable students to take an active and critical role as readers and thus see writing as more than ‘a process of learning to create a particular script for the teacher’ (Schleppegrell and Moore, Chapter “[Linguistic Tools for Supporting Emergent Critical Language Awareness in the Elementary School](#)”, this volume).

In supporting students through the three steps of the TLC, teachers can avail of SFL metalanguage to help explain both the discursive features of genres (e.g. modality use in persuasive essays) and also the effects of these features on an audience in a particular context. In using an SFL-informed metalanguage and the TLC, CSL educators support students in appropriating powerful uses of language in disciplinary, critical and transformative ways (Macken-Horarik 1996a, b; Humphrey and Macnaught 2016; Macken-Horarik and Morgan 2011). Because of their success in schools, the Australian CSL pedagogies have generated a wave of interest in critical SFL praxis internationally (e.g., Achugar et al. 2007; Brisk 2015; Byrnes 2006; Coffin 2006; Gebhard et al. 2008; Harman and Simmons 2014; Schleppegrell 2004, 2013).

Despite evidence of the success of CSL, however, there is growing recognition that teachers need to have significant expertise to engage students productively in critical literacy practices for the twenty-first century. This expertise includes: knowledge of students' existing cultural and linguistic resources; knowledge of the expanded literacy repertoire needed to productively engage with high stakes curriculum and assessment tasks; and knowledge of how to mediate specialized curriculum content in ways accessible to all learners. In this chapter I report on the implementation of CSL pedagogy in one Australian secondary school serving a population of students from low SES and multilingual backgrounds. Building on the foundational work provided in previous reports of this project (Humphrey 2013, 2015; Humphrey and Macnaught 2016), I focus on the role of a shared metalanguage that supported students to compose in a range of disciplinary and high stakes genres and engage in reflexive analysis of academic and civic discourse.

2 Research Context

The case study in this paper is part of a longitudinal design-based intervention with all teachers of an urban multicultural secondary school in Australia. Over ninety seven percent of students at this school, referred to here as Metro, come from language backgrounds other than English, and the school receives substantial government funding due to the high proportion of students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. Research in Australia and elsewhere has shown that the cognitive strengths of multilingual students position them well to achieve in schooling (Cummins 2000; Thomson et al. 2013). However, because of higher academic literacy demands in the middle and secondary school years, those learning English as an additional language (EAL/D) and those from low SES backgrounds may face particular challenges. EAL/D learners, for instance, who interact fluently with peers and teachers in the oral mode are often assumed to have already developed curriculum literacy capabilities by their teachers and may not be provided with opportunities to learn and practice the specialized academic language which is needed to access and compose discipline texts (Christie 2012; Schleppegrell 2013).

Teachers at Metro reported that prior to the intervention, most of their EAL/D students were well able to demonstrate curriculum learning in the oral mode and to engage in considered and well-reasoned discussion of issues in their broader communities. However, they were less confident in curriculum writing tasks and performed poorly in the persuasive writing task of the standardized National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy, (NAPLAN), a test given to all Year 7 and Year 9 students in Australia. A particular concern of a number of teachers was that students whose NAPLAN scores in persuasive writing in Year 7 were relatively high, and whose curriculum writing was of a relatively high standard, showed little growth on the NAPLAN measures in the subsequent 2 years. One important aim of our Metro project, Embedding Literacies in the Key Learning Areas (ELK), therefore was to support EAL/D students within mainstream subject classes to develop a sufficiently powerful literacy repertoire for high stakes assessment contexts.

A CSL focus within subject English was also motivated by teachers' concern to incorporate students' civic literacy repertoires into the curriculum (Humphrey 2010). This concern was most immediately occasioned by riots involving some students at the school in response to the opening of an anti-Islam film in city cinemas. Teachers were invested in supporting their many Arabic students in the school to develop a powerful rhetorical and discursive repertoire to speak back to this display of racism, through what Muslim community leaders called 'the route of rationality, education and negotiation' (Yasmeen 2012).

To support the development of teachers' expertise, our focus in the ELK project was to provide SFL-informed professional development learning to the teacher community. This included whole school and faculty-based workshops, as well as collaborative program development and team teaching opportunities with school-based and academic mentors. Although not all teachers were in a position to take up team teaching opportunities on a regular basis, Sarah, the focal teacher of curriculum English in this paper, was fully committed to extending her own knowledge and welcomed me and other mentors and researchers into the classroom on a regular basis to model instructional methods, to team-teach, and to regularly record and provide feedback on classroom interactions.

Previous reports of the ELK project have discussed design principles of the ELK project (e.g. Humphrey and Robinson 2012; Humphrey 2013, 2015) and findings of growth in standardized and curriculum writing in Sarah's multilingual classroom over the first, 18-month stage (Humphrey and Macnaught 2016). For example, in the NAPLAN writing assessment, Sarah's class achieved significantly higher growth than expected from Year 7-Year 9. In fact, the growth reached almost twice that of students from schools of similar demographic profiles in the state. As illustrated in our previous report, this growth, and similar growth found in reading and writing for curriculum assessment can be attributed to a large degree to the scaffolding practices of their teachers and by effective use of SFL-informed metalanguage in instruction.

This chapter explores how Sarah, with the help of academic mentors, built and used a metalanguage with her students across 2 years of subject English, both to respond productively to the pressures of a high stakes testing regime and to engage confidently in critical analysis of a range of persuasive texts.

3 Foundational Understandings

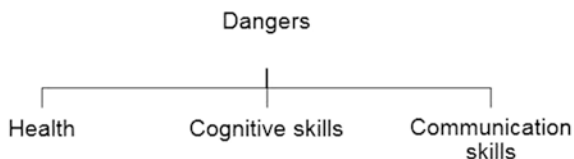
The design and implementation of the ELK project was informed by social semiotic and pedagogical models inspired by SFL and by complementary perspectives from critical literacy and social realist theories (Bernstein 1996; Maton 2014).

3.1 SFL Metalanguage for Enacting Critical Social Literacies

Systemic functional linguistics provides teachers like Sarah in the ELK project with abundant resources for supporting students' critical social literacies. Persuasive texts which enact multiple roles and perspectives and which are produced for unfamiliar audiences are particularly important contexts for developing such resources. Genres such as exposition, known also as argument (Brisk 2015), have been found to be highly valued both for demonstrating high stakes specialized writing and for critique (Martin 1985; Coffin 2006). Resources for composing expositions have been described by SFL theorists in terms of their overall purpose and structure; register variables of tenor and field; and the particular linguistic features that realize these variables. For example, the analytical exposition genre, a type of persuasive genre valued for demonstrating knowledge across a number of curriculum areas, functions to negotiate propositions about the way things are (Iedema 1997). In composing this genre, students are expected to take up an authoritative tenor, as expert, in relation to an expert audience (typically a teacher or marker).

When writing effective analytical expositions, students need to develop a coordinated sequence of logical arguments to support their main points. The SFL model provides descriptions of logical connections that afford students and teachers with metalanguage to think about how to expand ideas *between* clauses through conjunctions (e.g. because), and to expand ideas *within* clauses through verbs and nouns (e.g. causes, the cause). To develop the analytical structure, multiple individual arguments need to relate logically as 'parts' (e.g. impacts, reasons, consequences) to the 'whole' text. The way of grouping and relating these parts builds on Kress & Van Leeuwen's visual grammar and has been conceptualized in school contexts as an analytical framework (Humphrey 2013). Figure 1 shows a simple analytical framework developed to support students to break down the negative impacts of mobile phone use on children into topic areas, in response to a question '*Are mobile phones dangerous for children?*'

Fig. 1 Analytical framework to show part/whole relations between topics



In crafting written analytical texts, students need to learn how to combine logical and experiential meanings with textual choices at a discourse semantic level to foreground key information for the reader. For example, in the outline view of an analytical exposition developed from the framework shown in Fig. 1, the Macro-Theme functions to signal how the information is logically grouped in the opening stage with Macro-New functioning to summarize this information in the final stage. The Macro-Theme is related to subsequent Hyper-Themes of each paragraph, which in rhetorical theories are referred to as topic sentences. Crucially, the signaling work of these higher level or MacroTheme and New choices requires ideas to be condensed so that they can be referred to across the text. Abstract nouns are very important for this rhetorical function, including nouns that are formed from other parts of speech through the process of nominalization (e.g. *emit* [verb] -*emission* [noun]). Abstract nouns are italicized in Text 1, which was used to support student understanding of how to develop cohesion in their persuasive texts.

Text 1

Outline view of analytical exposition showing higher level Theme choices.

Macro-Theme

- Mobile phones can have a negative *impact* on children's *health* and lead to a *decrease* in children's *ability* to think and communicate.

Hyper-Themes

- The most important *danger* of mobile phones to children's *health* concerns *the emission* of *radiation*, which could lead to cancer.
- It is also possible that *use* of mobile phones could have *an effect* on children's *ability* to think and concentrate.
- In addition to *the effects* on *cognitive skills*, scientists have also raised *concerns* about *the impact* of mobile phones on *the communication skills* of children and teenagers.

Macro-New

- *the evidence* above suggests that *concerns* about the *effects* on *health* as well as *the effects* on children's *thinking* and *communicative skills* need to be taken seriously.

Analytical frameworks can inform linguistically robust graphic organizers to support reading as well as to plan writing. Brisk and Ossa Parra in this volume also describe the use of SFL informed graphic organizers by teachers in deconstructing temporally structured recount genres.

In addition to supporting student understanding of textual organization and its connection to the logical and experiential meanings of a written text, SFL metalanguage proved crucial for talking about interpersonal meanings to teachers and students at Metro. Specifically, the discourse semantic system of Appraisal provided language to discuss and interpret how explicit and implicit values in a text construe ideological positioning. Appraisal consists of three systems: Attitude, Graduation

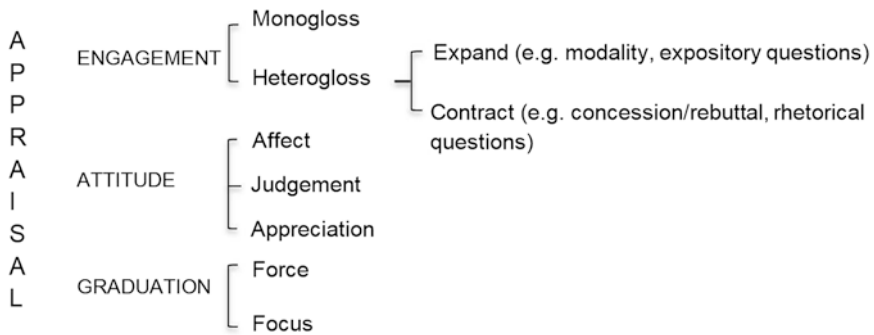


Fig. 2 Appraisal systems (Adapted from Martin and White 2005)

and Engagement, which are shown in Fig. 2. This figure is adapted from Martin and White's (2005) overview to include the more delicate systems of Engagement, informing the textual analysis that Sarah and her students conducted (i.e. systems of 'Expand' and 'Contract').

Schleppegrell and Moore (Chapter "Linguistic Tools for Supporting Emergent Critical Language Awareness in the Elementary School", this volume) report on teachers' use of Attitude and Graduation systems to develop children's critical language awareness in the context of response to literature. Choices from these systems are also crucial for developing strong persuasive arguments; however, it was the Engagement system that became an increasingly important source of metalanguage for teachers and students at Metro. The Engagement system includes resources that are termed 'dialogic' because they are concerned with how diverse perspectives, including the writer's perspectives, are brought into the text. Heteroglossic choices provide options for engaging with these perspectives: through expanding space for dialogue via resources such as modality; or through contracting dialogic space via resources such as concession/rebuttal structures and some forms of rhetorical questions. A concession/rebuttal structure, which is more technically known as counter expectancy (Martin and White 2005), is shown in the following example.

While mobile phones have many important functions, the use of these devices by children needs to be monitored.

In this example, the concession is made through the italicized concessive clause, which initially expands dialogic space, and the following independent clause, which functions to rebut or 'defeat' the expanding clause and thus to position the audience to the writer's own view. The SFL-informed metalanguage to describe the work of language systems such as Appraisal provides teachers and students with a visible way of naming and playing with an orchestration of voices in their argumentative writing. Such linguistic dexterity can support adolescents in participating 'most agentively in their social and economic futures (Hull and Stornaiuolo 2010, p. 85). Through the ELK initiative at Metro, Sarah and her students were supported to see and appropriate patterns within the Engagement system when deconstructing texts as well as when jointly and independently writing.

3.1.1 Expanding SFL Models of Context for Critical Social Literacy

A further feature of SFL-informed CSL is its focus on innovation, redesign and subversion of genres (e.g. Kress 2003; Martin 1999, 2002). To support Metro teachers in the ELK initiative in moving towards these practices, we drew from Macken-Horarik's (1996a) expanded SFL model of academic register that includes three cultural domains: everyday, specialized and reflexive. These domains can be characterized in terms of the different kinds of learning and literacy that they afford (e.g. functional, reproductive, critical); and, in semiotic terms as particular privileged clusterings of social purposes, social activities, social relationships and semiotic functions. The term 'reflexive' is drawn from linguistics and refers to semiotic activity that turns specialized and everyday knowledges in on themselves. Figure 3 is an adapted version of Macken-Horarik's model, incorporating relevant understandings from the two versions she has designed (Macken-Horarik 1996a, b).

In our project, an important feature of Macken-Horarik's model illustrated in Fig. 3 is that critical literacies in the reflexive domain develop from a cumulative knowledge building. This develops through interaction with the specialized language and knowledge of the discipline as opposed to developing directly from everyday uses of language. In other words, students need to grapple with new disciplinary concepts before they can move to reflexive processes about the concepts. Such a relationship is also inferred between Hasan's (1996) 'action' and 'reflection' literacy that is discussed by Schleppegrell & Moore in Chapter "Linguistic Tools for Supporting Emergent Critical Language Awareness in the Elementary School", this volume.

3.2 Critical and Social Realist Perspectives

The developmental pathway to critical social literacies proposed by Macken-Horarik is supported by critical and civic literacy research involving EAL/D learners, as well as through productive dialogue with social realist studies of learners from low SES backgrounds (e.g. Bernstein 1990).

A number of new literacy theorists argue that a critical pedagogy needs to be embedded in young peoples' 'own modes of responding to and producing all manner of texts and artifacts' (Millard 2006, p. 251). While linguistic and rhetorical patterns associated with the everyday domain have been found to assist students to build specialized knowledge in a range of discipline contexts (Maton 2013) and to provide a powerful voice for EAL/D students to participate in community based activism (Humphrey 2010), there is a growing body of research that highlights the dominance of everyday language and dilution of specialized discourse in EAL/D and low SES classrooms (Darling-Hammond 2006; Freebody 2010). Such reductive literacies limit students' communicative repertoire to the 'here and now of me and you' (Macken-Horarik 2014, p. 10).

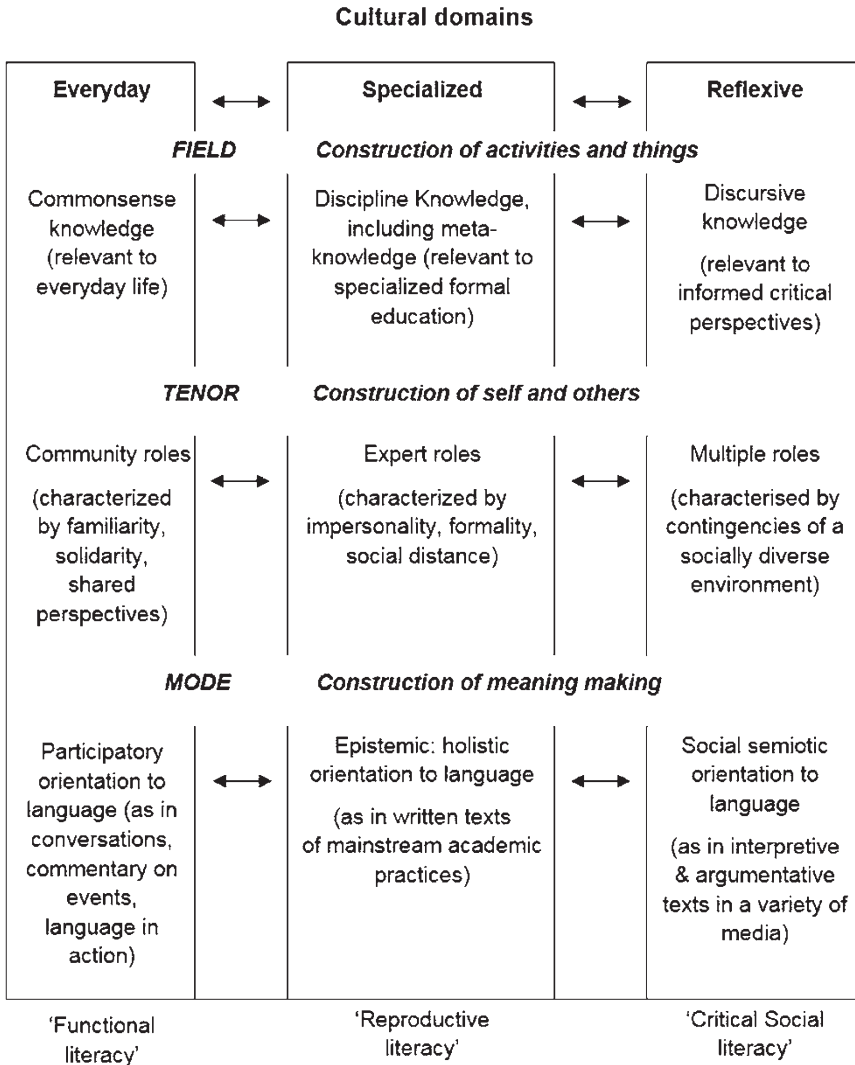


Fig. 3 Articulating features of three domains (Adapted from Macken-Horarik 1996a, b)

Bernstein's (1996) studies of the speech patterns and habits of children from lower and higher SES backgrounds provide particularly valuable insights into the consequences of pedagogies that do not attend sufficiently to specialized forms of literacy. Bernstein found that, when confronted with school-based tasks, children from low SES backgrounds in his studies did not typically reach for the more specialized linguistic resources they may have developed in their discipline learning. His research, and the extensive SFL research which has supported it (e.g. Hasan 2009), indicated that language patterns valued in texts for school learning were

more evident in the literacy habits of families from higher SES backgrounds. This suggests that children from low SES backgrounds may not expect to use these patterns when confronted with tasks that did not explicitly require them to do so. Interestingly, in Bernstein's studies, children from higher SES backgrounds who were considered 'lower ability' still typically paused and considered the demands of questions more often than the children from lower SES backgrounds. Bernstein's research has been represented as promoting a view of children from low SES backgrounds as deficient. However his findings in fact open space for considering how the invisible practices of middle-class oriented 'authentic pedagogies' (Kalantzis and Cope 2012), and the decontextualized assessment tasks which are ubiquitous in high stakes standardized literacy tests limit opportunities for low SES students to achieve. Bernstein's studies delineated how low SES students were well able to use specialized language patterns and thus to access and demonstrate curriculum learning when the expectations and success criteria of tasks were made explicit to them.

Recent collaborative studies among social realist and SFL researchers (Martin 2013; Maton 2013) have drawn on Bernstein's theory of knowledge structure to conceptualize the building of specialized literacies and cumulative knowledge. These researchers found that with low SES and EAL/D students, teachers' classroom talk was marked by repeated waves of concrete examples and simplified explanations to unpack abstract and technical concepts. There was far less talk to support students to repack these concepts to create 'high stakes' texts that showed their 'mastery of pedagogic subjects' (Maton 2013, p. 9). Maton's (2013) metaphor of semantic waves describes classroom activity which builds cumulative knowledge by firstly moving 'down the wave', i.e. unpacking 'high stakes' dense and abstract language before moving once more 'up the wave' to support students to 'repack' understandings in the specialized language of the discipline (see also Ramírez, Chapter "Paraphrastic Academic Writing: Entry Point for First Generation Advanced Bilingual College Students", this volume, for discussion of semantic waves). Our ELK initiative supported students' semiotic understanding through the SFL-informed professional development with the teachers. Analysis of Sarah's critical SFL praxis with her 8/9 English class over 2 years provides further evidence of this pathway in action.

4 Data Collection and Analysis

Data used to analyze the development of CSL in Class 8/9 English was collected across four 6–10 week teaching and learning cycles from Feb 2012–Nov 2013. Each instructional cycle focused on a particular rhetorical sphere and style of persuasive writing, complementing the focus on narrative and text response genres in other units across the two academic years. Sarah, in collaboration with colleagues and academic mentors, carefully designed the cycles to integrate content from English

curriculum strands of language, literacy and literature, to include topics of interest and cultural relevance to the students and to promote critical engagement with a range of literary genres and modes. From a linguistic perspective, the selection of units of work responded to the need to explore a range of empowering genres as well as different fields, modes and tenor relationships relevant to subject English.

To report on the use of metalanguage by the teacher and students, we recorded and analyzed classroom dialogue from five English curriculum lessons across these four teaching and learning units. We also analyzed recordings of two small group discussions between the researcher and one group of six students who Sarah identified as high achieving, and thus, as discussed earlier, of particular concern to teachers. While all students in the class engaged in teacher-guided small group analysis within the scheduled deconstruction steps of the teaching learning cycle, texts selected for analysis by the extension group included an extended repertoire of linguistic resources. Analysis of a recorded interview with these six students was also conducted to provide students' perspective on their learning in relation to the instructional practices implemented in the project.

As in the study by Humphrey and Macnaught (2016), close qualitative analysis of metalanguage in classroom talk attended to identification of functional terminology and to the ways in which the teacher related linguistic patterns to the more abstract meanings of text and context (Schleppegrell 2013; Ellis 2006). In the following sections examples of this analysis are provided to describe how Sarah drew on SFL's metalinguistic resources to introduce and apply language for composing and evaluating texts, including evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of writers' rhetorical choices.

5 Findings

Findings from the analysis of data from Sarah's 8/9 English class over the first 2 years of the ELK project revealed a significant expansion of students' repertoires for engaging in CSL. While practices and language related to the everyday, specialized and reflexive domains of learning were woven into each unit and in fact each lesson, a major finding of the project was the shift over time from a focus on building specialized knowledge of 'how texts work', to applying that knowledge reflexively to inform critical perspectives. This shift was accompanied by significant growth in all students' control of a range of persuasive genres and a growing confidence to express their views. Before exploring this shift, I will provide an overview of the relevant fields of study across the 2 years, including the relationship of the texts selected for study to their contexts of use.

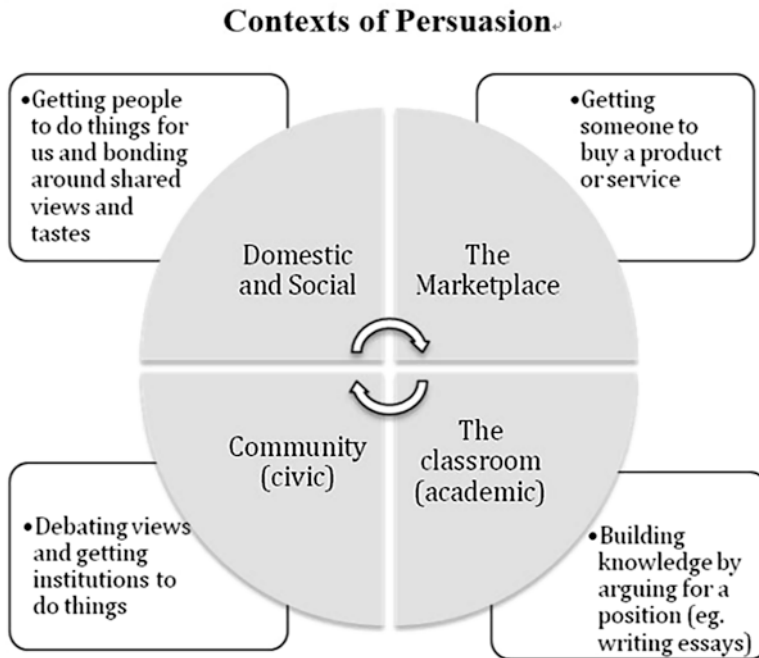


Fig. 4 Classroom slide showing contexts of Persuasion

5.1 *Establishing Curriculum and Cultural Contexts*

To explore with students the multiple contexts of persuasive discourse within the English curriculum, we expanded on SFL models of cultural context (e.g. Humphrey 2013; Macken-Horarik 1996a, b; McCormack 2004) to include four rhetorical spheres. Figure 4 shows a classroom slide, used throughout the instructional cycles, to contextualize the curricular goals and open discussion about the diverse social purposes, audiences and modes that would be realized through the teaching and learning activities related to persuasive discourse.

In addition to analyzing and composing a range of literary and response texts in English curriculum units across the 2 years, Year 8/9 English explored a range of persuasive texts within the academic, civic and marketplace spheres. Units designed for this exploration, including their contexts of use and literacy goals, were:

- *Survival* (Using media reports to argue for a position). Activities: reading/viewing survival news stories and writing analytical exposition in response to prompt ‘*Whose responsibility is it to rescue risk takers?*’.
- *Persuade Me!* (Persuading people to take action in the civic sphere). Activities: viewing and reading transcripts of political speeches; composing an extended persuasive text to present as a speech on an issue of importance in local community.

- *Selling the Hard to Sell* (Persuading people to buy in the Marketplace). Activities: viewing/reading image/text relationships in digital and print advertisements; composing a print media advertisement with problem/solution structure (verbal text and image).
- *Preparing for NAPLAN persuasion* (Persuading for high stakes school assessment). Activities: analyzing marking criteria and models; test practice with a variety of prompts representative of this test.

Sarah, like other teachers at Metro, used a variety of print and digital texts to support students' specialized and reflexive literacies across these units. These included examples of the genre targeted for writing, called model texts, that were typically composed by student writers, teachers themselves, or published sources in a range of media. SFL's metalanguage supported students to engage in critical as well as positive evaluation of the selected texts.

Criteria for selecting model texts focused on the value and relevance of the genre and register to high stakes discipline learning and the socio-cultural context, experience and interests of the learner groups. Texts that deployed a linguistic repertoire beyond that already evident in the independent writing of the students were critical for building a robust and applicable metalanguage toolkit.

5.2 Working with Persuasion in the Specialized Domain

The concept of the specialized domain was introduced to students in Year 8/9 English as the domain of building knowledge, including a knowledge of language to achieve in school and broader academic life. Writing in the specialized domain was therefore oriented towards genres that were most useful for building and demonstrating curriculum knowledge, such as the analytical exposition (e.g. Coffin 2006; Schleppegrell 2004; Love and Humphrey 2012).

The first of the persuasive writing units, *Survival*, provided a valuable context for the teacher to introduce foundational metalanguage for building students' understandings of analytical expositions. Students explored high profile news reports of contemporary disaster and survival stories in a range of media. While at first the students were interested primarily in the dramatic events of the disaster and rescue, their interest soon moved to issues such as risk taking and roles and responsibilities of those involved in rescue operations. Students participated passionately in discussion on the topic and negotiated the prompt question for one of their written assignments, *Should we rescue risk takers?*

An analysis of students' writing prior to the unit revealed that most were already familiar with the typical structure of the analytical exposition genre through Position, Arguments and Reinforcement stages. In the deconstruction step of the Teaching and Learning Cycle, Sarah built on their previous rhetorical knowledge to introduce important linguistic understandings about the logical development of ideas within the Arguments stage. As illustrated in the notetaking outline shown in

Table 1 Note-taking outline revealing analytical framework

<i>Analytical Framework for note-taking</i>		
<i>Arguments</i>	Evidence to support	Evidence against
Taxpayer responsibility		
Individual responsibility		

Table 1, Sarah led the class in grouping the responsibilities of rescuing risk takers into those related to the different ‘stakeholders’ of taxpayer or individual adventurer. This task was supported by the metalanguage analytic framework discussed earlier in the chapter (see Fig. 1).

In subsequent instructional cycles, the shared metalanguage of the analytical framework enabled Sarah and the academic mentor working with her to make visible the complex relationships that are privileged in analytical exposition. Crucially, it also enabled talk about interactions among linguistic features (e.g., Macro and Hyper-Theme and abstract nouns and paragraphs), which are critical in co-articulating these relationships in expositions. For example, in the excerpt below from the 2nd of the four persuasion units, *Persuade Me!* Sarah (T) and the mentor (M) drew on this metalanguage to provide feedback and guidance on one student’s draft of the Position stage of a persuasive speech. Each student had volunteered to read their texts aloud, confident that the feedback they received would go beyond correction of errors and provide support in composing their final draft. The metalanguage developed with the class from the Survival unit is italicized throughout the excerpt, including the functional ‘bridging’ metalanguage used throughout the school to talk about SFL’s concept of Theme (e.g. ‘*preview*’ [Macro-Theme] and ‘*sentence starter*’ [Clause Theme]).

Text 2

Class discussion of student’s draft persuasive text.

S1: Good morning teachers and students of Metro high school. Today I am raising an important issue as a member of the community and as a student at Metro high school and that is, teachers not trying anymore at school. I will provide you with compelling arguments that will persuade you.

M: This is where we do our *text preview*, remember? We are telling the audience upfront what argument we are going to use. You have built your *analytical framework*, you know what arguments that you are going to use and you’ve actually labeled those arguments as *abstract nouns*, haven’t you. So it might be health, it might be lack of time, it might be educational benefits. You’ve got those abstract concepts as packages that hold your arguments. Later on you are going to *unpack* them, in your arguments, but just now you have to *preview* them. Tell your audience what you are going to argue later. A good *sentence starter* for this is going from what you said before, where you said you were going to provide compelling arguments. Just spell them out. List them! These arguments concern...lack of time.

S 2: Is this still in the first *paragraph*?

M: Yes, still in the first *paragraph*.

T: Depending on your *analytical framework* will depend on who it concerns...
Selem is doing global warming. So 'these arguments concern the local community, Australia as a nation and worldwide'. So you are *previewing* to your audience that 'hey, each one of those *paragraphs* is going to develop one of those ideas'. So let's do that now. Just one sentence.

At this stage of the lesson, the academic mentor dominates the classroom talk. However, Sarah also incorporates metalanguage that students already knew to elaborate on the linguistic functions. Through the SFL-informed professional training, Sarah was able to provide further examples of topics that might form an analytical framework based on her knowledge of another students' draft (Salem). She was able to make the crucial point that the linguistic choices depend upon the context (e.g. *who it concerns, your audience*).

5.2.1 Using the Metalanguage to Demystify Assessment Criteria

By far the most intense work for Sarah and her students in the specialized domain occurred in the last of the four units: *Preparing for NAPLAN persuasion*. Their choosing to focus on NAPLAN preparation was not surprising in light of the pervasive pressure at Metro to prepare students for this high stakes test. Indeed, teachers and researchers at Metro (who were exposed to Bernstein's research on language variation equity and social class in the ELK initiative) understood the challenges faced by high poverty and/or linguistically marginalized students in responding to the decontextualized persuasive writing prompts typical of NAPLAN. As reported in Humphrey and Macnaught (2016), teachers across all faculties were concerned to share with students the success criteria of highly valued responses to NAPLAN and to provide opportunities for students to use these resources in responding to practice prompts and also to achieve curriculum learning goals.

At least one of Sarah's Year 9 English classes was spent systematically 'teaching to the test' by assessing student drafts of NAPLAN practice tests against the marking criteria provided to teachers. While the marking criteria produced by the Australian assessment authority (ACARA 2011) included functional metalanguage, the SFL metalanguage developed through the ELK project enabled Sarah to provide targeted advice to students and, crucially, to discuss how the linguistic features related to particular contexts, thus building transferable knowledge.

For example, in the NAPLAN marking guide (ACARA 2011), the following criteria were provided for the top bands under the category of 'ideas':

- ideas may include benefits to the whole group (more than just personal); reflection on the wider world/ universal issues
- ideas may be elaborated by, e.g. - a range of issues both for and against the stated position; a refutation of other positions or opinions; explaining cause and effect

As is evident in the following excerpt, Sarah was able to be explicit about the types of ideas expected (reasons) and to relate them to the structure of analytical framework introduced in the *Survival* unit. The metalanguage in her feedback and guidance to students was informed by Macken-Horarik's linguistic perspective on cultural domains (*everyday domains, everyday experience; the here and the now*); and also by Maton's semantic wave metaphor, which was introduced to teachers in professional learning workshops. Sarah used this metaphor with her students as a shorthand to highlight textual movement towards abstract, general and technical ideas that was to be found in successful sample student writing for the high stakes tests. Text 3 below shows how Sarah talked with her class about the shift from an everyday to specialized register,

Text 3

Teacher's deconstruction of NAPLAN marking guidelines

T: So what are ideas? What are our ideas? Yesterday, when we looked at cars should be banned we needed unpack that, we needed to have ideas to talk about. We used the analytical framework to come up with our reasons. They're our ideas. So, all this is asking for is 'Can you have ideas and can the ideas not be about your limited everyday experiences of the here and the now and at school. Can you try and talk about ideas that are bit more generalized and deal with society a little bit more'? Yesterday, we could've talked about 'cars should be banned because my mum needs to drive me to school every day'. That's your everyday experience so let's reshape that into an idea like 'Cars should be banned because of the devastating environmental effects'. So, it's about 'taking it up the wave', right, remember we used that? Taking it up the wave.

As evidenced by Sarah's talk in Text 3, the students were supported in taking their writing up the semantic wave, moving into a more specialized discussion of issues. In the context of high stakes testing, this pedagogical approach supported the students in drawing more effectively from their existing repertoire of language resources to meet the expectations of the NAPLAN task, even when faced with challenging prompts that could have led them to produce underdeveloped responses. Sarah's students completed the NAPLAN test in May, 2013, as Year 9 students. As reported in Section 6.2 and more extensively in Humphrey and Macnaught (2016), Sarah's class achieved significantly higher annual growth than the normal trend at Metro from Year 7-Year 9.

In a follow up focus group interview with one of the research team who had not worked directly with the class, students reported that the analysis of model texts and guided writing/rewriting activities such as those described above were the most valuable in developing their confidence in high stakes writing assessment such as NAPLAN tests. In the next section I will briefly discuss the expanded range of linguistic knowledge and metalanguage used to engage students in more focused reflexive practices within whole class and small group extension activities.

5.3 *Moving into the Reflexive Domain*

Although the ELK project was initiated to support marginalized students to access and produce high stakes literacies of the specialized domain, analysis of teaching and learning interactions also indicate that the shared metalanguage supported them to participate in critical analysis within the reflexive domain. While it is not possible to identify a clear line between building specialized knowledge and using that knowledge reflexively in students' talk, two clear shifts were identified.

The first shift towards reflexivity is evident in classroom interactions in which students not only used functional terminology to identify linguistic resources and talk about the effect of language patterns in their own or others' writing but also to engage in discussion of the effectiveness of the rhetorical choices. This use expanded the scope of metalanguage to include its evaluative as well as its explanatory function. An example of such use is shown in the excerpt from one whole class discussion (Text 4). In this excerpt the teacher and students assessed what type of language in a text was used to establish a relationship with the reader. The metalanguage they used was informed by SFL's Appraisal resources of expand and contract (Martin and White 2005). These dialogic functions are referred to with bridging metalanguage of 'opening and closing the door to other voices' (see Humphrey 2013; Humphrey and Macnaught 2016 for a full discussion of these resources and how they were introduced to students).

Text 4

Class discussion of analytical exposition – mobile phones

T: Remember yesterday we looked at that, starting with a rhetorical question. It reminded me of the discussion you had... when we started the paragraph with a rhetorical question and Saleh wanted to *shut it down* straight away.

S1 (Saleh, to S2): What a rhetorical question does is, it asks the reader the question to make....

S3: Make them think about it...

S2: Ponder.

S1: Yeah, to ponder but at the same time while you ask the question, you want to direct their thoughts in a certain...direction. So you don't want to be too broad.

S3: You can still ask a question without answering it!

S2: See I think this is too broad. "Are mobile phones a problem?" See our other ones were very direct in what we were asking them.

M: I think what you've brought up is a very good point but there are two kinds of rhetorical questions.

S3: You said that yesterday. The first type is just like *slamming the door shut* on them and the second type is just like *leaving the seed* in their mind, let them think about it. But I personally think that that is stronger.

In this excerpt the students exhibit a great deal of confidence in using the metalanguage to explain the rhetorical effect of language resources. In the opening moves, S1 and S3 explain the effect of rhetorical questions to a student (S2) who

had been absent from the previous discussion. This student was then able to seamlessly join in the analysis of the text, with which all students were familiar. Students also showed great confidence in evaluating the effect of a rhetorical question (e.g. *I think this is too broad*) and this confidence was maintained even when the mentor reminded them of a distinction in the function of rhetorical questions. S3 acknowledges the difference but then asserts his own personal opinion – (*But I personally think that that is stronger*) - an opinion informed, I would argue, by the extensive work that Sarah, the academic mentor and students spent supporting students in the specialized domain.

A further example of such reflexivity is evident in a small group discussion between a group of six higher performing students and the mentor. This extension activity was held during normal class time and occurred while other groups of students were also engaged in collaborative text analysis with the teacher. Deconstruction focused on a range of ‘expert’ civic and academic persuasive texts, which were composed in a range of rhetorical styles. One such text ‘*Can one piece of literature change the world?*’ was an essay written by a high achieving student who was 2 years older than the students in Sarah’s class. The introduction to this essay, shown as Text 5, was read aloud by a student in the group.

Text 5

Introduction to senior student’s essay

Can one piece of literature change the world? ... Literature has many forms and can do many things. It can make us cry, make us laugh, it can let us escape to a fantasy or awaken us from the illusions we had of the world around us, it lets us learn and understand the actions and values of our ancestors and share our own ideas with the generations to come, but can it change the world? Can simple words written down change the way the world works and thinks? History shows us that the answer is yes.

Analysis of Metro students’ talk with the mentor showed their growing interest in the rhetorical effect of linguistic choices and their confidence in evaluating that impact. When asked to give their opinion of the introduction, for example, one student responded with ‘*I’m quite intimidated by this...*’, to which the mentor replied, reassuringly, ‘*I think the writer wants you to be intimidated by that...*’.

In other instances, students, teachers and mentors struggled because of their lack of a shared metalanguage. At one point, for example, the mentor drew students’ attention to the writer’s use of grammatical parallelism, which is broadly understood by contemporary rhetorical theorists (e.g. Partington 2003) as a series of repeated structures (e.g. *It can make us cry, make us laugh, let us escape from a fantasy or let us awaken.*). This figure of speech was not included in the metalanguage ‘toolkits’ of ELK professional learning workshops, despite its crucial role in political and civic discourse (Partington 2003).

Text 6

Discussion of the impact of rhetorical resources

M: What's interesting is the next, okay. Look at this. 'Literature has many forms and can do many things', so they are now establishing that literature is broader than just fiction. 'It can make us cry, make us laugh, let us escape from a fantasy or let us awaken us from the illusions we might have from the world around us'. So what is she doing there?

S1: Concession?

M: Not yet. It's not concession, it's what you were talking about before S1.

S2: Power of three

M: Yeah that's right, the listing. That kind of building up of evidence just through the same grammatical form 'It can do this, it can do that, it can do that.' It's really quite a powerful strategy.

This excerpt illustrates some of the challenges of working with texts that use language patterns beyond those of the more controlled classroom models. Expanding students' literacy repertoire to civic sphere persuasion requires use of an expanded metalanguage, including rhetorical descriptions that are currently not sufficiently described in SFL models. Finding a shared and accessible terminology to talk with students about this meaning making is crucial in supporting them move beyond 'formulaic' patterns of persuasion and in engaging productively in critical analysis.

Despite the difficulty with terminology, however, the students began to talk among themselves about grammatical parallelism and its rhetorical effect in other texts they read in class. One text (see Text 7 below) that the students analyzed was an impromptu speech by a middle year student for a public speaking competition on the topic of 'No Surrender'. The relevant excerpts from the speech, which functioned to persuade the audience to do something about global warming, are provided in Text 7.

Text 7

Impromptu persuasive speech

There is absolutely no way we can surrender to global warming.

We can't just surrender and we can't ignore the problem. We can all help to solve the problem.

At home we can do something. Simple solutions. Turn off a light when you don't need it. Use a jacket instead of a heater. The election is next week. Vote for someone who you think won't surrender and will help to do something to stop global warming.

As Australia, as this nation, we need to do something. Sign the Kyoto Protocol. Cut down on carbon emissions and stop using dirty brown coal. Invest in greener sources of energy, such as wind power and solar energy.

As a world, as planet earth we need to do something. We can't surrender. We need to work together and help others to get the resources they need. In a crisis time

like this, when global warming is such a huge problem, there is no way we can simply surrender.

In the discussion that followed, the mentor initiated analysis of the text through drawing attention to its analytical framework; even without an agreed upon terminology for identifying the rhetorical technique of parallelism, students were able to articulate the effect.

Text 8

Further discussion on effects of rhetorical resources

M: I thought what was really interesting here was her structure. Even though she has got an analytical framework, she's organized it around what we can do to stop global warming. ...Just look at that second paragraph – 'We can't just surrender and we can't ignore the problem. We can all help to solve the problem'. Now look, at each paragraph after that. 'At home we can do something!'

S.1: I see a gradual escalation from home to Australia as a nation to the world.

M: Look at the way, at home we can do something. That's a simple sentence, isn't it? 'As an Australian. As this nation, we need to do something'. She's repeated, she's rephrased it as 'As this nation'.

S3: It's repetition. In year 1 and year 2 and 3 we were taught don't use repetition. But now that we are older, we can use it, it's a tool that we know how to use.

M: Yeah. Notice what she does at the beginning of the sentence. She uses these sentence starters 'At home ...As Australia... As a world, as planet earth' to sort of alert us to her structure that she's got. That is quite an effective way of designing your sentences to do that rhetorical work, to do that escalating work at the front of the sentence. It hits you in the face doesn't it?

S1: Yeah and straight away, when you get this message of like, we can do something at home, we can do something.... When it gets to 'at home' I think of a few, and then when I get to 'Australia' I think of millions and when I get to 'the world', I think of billions. And so she's saying that as individuals, we can all do something to help.

This excerpt shows clear evidence of reflexivity, not least in S3's observation that the instruction he was provided in Year 2 and 3 was no longer sufficient. Indeed, in his observation he explicitly recognized and celebrated the empowerment of a linguistic resource (i.e. *it's a tool that we know how to use*). From a broader perspective on knowledge, the excerpt also provides evidence that the focus on language patterns within texts can open space for deeper comprehension of content. In the final comment, S1 worked through the message unfolding within the text, a message that was made more visible through earlier discussion of grammatical parallelism and Theme (sentence starters). Such findings from our ELK initiative can offer reassurance to content area teachers who are often concerned that a focus on language and literacy comes at the expense of disciplinary knowledge.

After more analysis of the rhetorical moves made in Text 7 and other texts in this deconstruction activity, the discussion returned to the rhetorical impact of the Position statement shown in Text 5 above. One student drew on his knowledge of

both the resources of Expand and Contract and of the graduating effect of the parallelism to comment on its overall impact of this stage.

You are really taking them along and you go through the door and then just slam it on them.

The ability of the student to extend the metaphor of 'opening and closing the door' indicates that this concept was understood and fully 'owned' by the student. As discussed in Humphrey and Macnaught (2016), analysis of 8/9 English students' writing in curriculum English over the first 18 months of the project revealed that the increased use of dialogic resources, including concession/rebuttal sequences, was an area of particular growth in students' literacy repertoire.

While the scope of this chapter does not allow for a discussion of findings about the students' engagement with the teaching and learning activities across all four of the units, responses such as those provided in the excerpt from one focus group interview below (Text 9) indicate that some students felt invested and empowered in the critical SFL praxis.

Text 9

Excerpt from focus group interview

I: After all that you've done, are you more confident, and I've heard it here today, are you more confident in using the metalanguage in the classroom?

S1: When we know it, we feel like we can go out and speak to the world!

S2: But it's different, 'cause when someone gives us a question we can use it now.

S1: We have an understanding of the concepts.

Not only did these students appreciate the empowering effect of the metalanguage for their specialized learning goals, but also for their civic literacy practices ('we feel we can go out and speak to the world!').

It needs to be said that these same focus group participants also reported that the instruction was at times overly repetitive and shared that they were more engaged when the 'expert' mentor participated in text analysis. This indicates a recognition by students that their full engagement in specialized and reflexive literacy practices depends upon the expanded metalinguistic knowledge of those who teach them. As with the teachers in Brisk and Osso Parra's study (Chapter "[Mainstream Classrooms as Engaging Spaces for Emergent Bilinguals: SFL Theory, Catalyst for Change](#)", this volume), the teachers at Metro did not relinquish their responsibility to support their students' language development and continue to systematically build and share their knowledge through ongoing professional learning.

6 Conclusion

As discussed above, students' development of critical social literacies at Metro was informed to a great extent by their learning and appropriation of an expanded linguistic repertoire and metalanguage in the specialized domain of learning. SFL

resources provided the students and their teacher with a shared metalanguage that they created to identify structural and functional linguistic patterns; explain the effect of these features in particular contexts; and confidently evaluate these linguistic effects from their own reader positions. In the professional development work at Metro and the academic mentoring of interested teachers, metalanguage was used systematically to make visible the rhetorical patterns in English curriculum texts over four units of work, including those produced in high stakes academic and civic spheres. Teachers like Sarah, invested in this SFL approach, were able to show students how to write and analyze the linguistic patterns in high stakes persuasive assessment tasks.

Practices such as ‘teaching to the test’ can be associated with the more reductive practices of genre-pedagogy, perhaps contributing to conserving rather than changing power relationships that marginalize learners from low SES and EAL/D backgrounds. However, the critical SFL praxis of the ELK project challenged Sarah and her colleagues also to integrate teaching and learning from the reflexive domain. Despite the challenges of working with texts with more diverse rhetorical repertoires, findings from the study indicate that students developed more reflexivity, including critical analysis. Our future research will include explorations of classroom practices that blurred the boundary between these domains of learning, including the role of ‘everyday’ situations and language patterns in building understandings of specialized and critical knowledge.

While developing metalinguistic knowledge has required a great commitment from already overstretched teachers, they have been supported by ongoing faculty-based professional learning with academic mentors and support in selecting and developing key resources needed to investigate and construct texts in particular learning contexts. Teachers at Metro, however, recognized that their students had been marginalized by teaching and assessment practices where expectations were not made visible, and further recognized that SFL metalanguage and the scaffolding teaching and learning cycle provided them with resources to redress this inequity. As more professional learning opportunities and resources become available to teachers at Metro and elsewhere over time, we expect that they will take a leading role in developing metalinguistic toolkits for the full range of specialized, critical and transformative literacy work of the curriculum, including those which require multi-semiotic affordances.

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