Arguments And Discussions: Teaching Academic English

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Abstract

In academic contexts writing is one of the most common academic activities where the students are asked to produce texts. The texts are liable to linguistic analysis. This paper addresses the analysis of two commonly produced academic texts: argument and discussion. The structures and grammatical realizations of the two texts are distinct. Based on the natures of the two text a teaching strategy is proposed to develop the students' skills in writing the two texts.

Key Words: *argument, discussion, academic English*

Introduction

Just like students in universities in other parts of the world, in Indonesia students are always required to express their ideas concerning with certain social phenomena or issues, which are done through the use of language either in written or spoken medium. Of the two media of language, writing is mostly used in academic situation. In academic contexts there are two common types of text that the students are asked to write on, they are argument and discussion. The purpose of writing this paper is to show that, with reference to systemic functional linguistic (SFL) theories, the two types of text are different each other in terms of their structures and grammatical realizations. This paper addresses two stages. Firstly, a brief description of SFL is presented. Then the theoretical model is applied to the two kinds of text (argument and discussion) to indicate their natures and to see how the two texts mean what they do. Finally the description of the two genres are applied to teaching.

Theoretical Model

A text can be studied from various perspectives. The two types of texts are analyzed with reference to SFL theories. SFL is developed by Halliday (1994), a British linguist, now living in Australia. New developments have occurred in the school of linguistics, which involves Martin (1985, 1992), Fawcett & Young (1988), Couture (1986) and many other systemicists. The model used here is one that is developed by Halliday, Martin and other systemicists.

According to this school of linguistics language is a system of meaning and a system of linguistic form and expressions to code or realize the meaning. The system of meaning is dependent on context, typically social context; hence it is stated that language is a social phenomenon. Thus, learning a language is learning the systems of meaning; to be more precise learning how to mean in the social context. Conveying

meanings means doing something that is doing some functions. System is defined as a set of choices, one of which can be realized in linguistic forms with reference to context.

Language is a social semiotics that operates with two aspects: meaning and forms; meaning is realized by form which, as far as language is concerned, is comprised of phonology/graphology, lexicogrammar, and (discourse) semantics. The relation between meaning and form is biunique (i.e. there is no one-to one relation), that is to say that one meaning is not necessarily realized by one form only or the other way around one form does not necessarily cone one meaning only. Thus, one meaning can be coded by many forms and one form may code a number of meanings. The range of forms realizing a meaning vary from the usual or most typical one to the unusual one. The common form is called **unmarked** whereas the uncommon one as **marked**. As an exemplification, somebody who would like to ask someone to open the door (i.e. doing function) may express his meaning by using several forms in the lexicogrammatical aspects as seen in the following examples.

Figure 1: Realization of Meaning

'Meaning'	Form	Lexicogramma tical Aspects
'asking someone to open the door'	Open the door	Imperative
	Please open the door	Imperative
	I would like you to open the door	Declarative
	Can you open the door?	Modality
	You must open the door	Modality
	You are required to open the door	Declarative
	It is very stuffy in this room	Declarative
	If I were you I would open the door	Conditional

It can be seen in the figure that one meaning or function of 'asking someone to open the door' is coded eight forms of lexicogrammatical items. The choice of form depends on the context, to be precise social context, which specifically covers the context of situation, context of culture and ideology. Likewise the choice of meaning is dependent on the three kinds of context. Each of the three can be specified into subdivisions as elaborated below.

The context of situation (also known as **Register**) refers to the immediate situation surrounding the language use (text) where the variables of **field** (i. e. the social activities or topic under discussion), **tenor** (the relationship between participants) and **mode** (the channel of communication) determine both grammatical an lexical choices and therefore the language product or text. The implementation of context in the study of language (use) can be exemplified by a situation as someone writing a letter to a friend (tenor) about travel arrangement (field). The use of language in this register is different from another use with someone telephoning (mode) a travel agent (tenor) about travel arrangement (field). Although the field is similar in the sense that both texts are about travel arrangements the differences in tenor and mode variables result in different use of linguistic resource i.e. lexicogrammatical items.

The context of **Culture** refers to values and attitudes, which operate within a particular community and motivate the use of language. A particular cultural aspect has shaped knowledge of achieving particular goals or social process. In other words culture has determined how a goal in interaction is achieved. Thus, culture has determined stages to go along to a certain goal in a particular use of language. The

stages are shared by members of the community. The share knowledge of the stages in achieving a goal or social purpose is termed as **Genre**. Different cultures have different stages in achieving a genre (Coffin 1991, lecture). For example, in Indonesia when the sales encounter genre is performed, for instance in buying dress at the market, the stages involved are very likely to be **Request for Permission to ∧ Bargain ∧ Bargaining ∧ Final Negotiation ∧ Pay ∧ Farewell** (where ∧ means 'followed by'). In Australia on the other hand the stages that one has to pass through are different. The stages of Service encounter are more likely to be **Statement of Intention ∧ Exchange of Information (e.g. size, material, and price) ∧ Exchange of Money for Goods ∧ Farewell**. The structures or stages of a genre are called **schematic** or **generic structures** (Martin & Rothery 1981)

Ideology refers to the body of ideas which is characteristic of a particular society or subculture (Poyton 1985: 17). It can be said that ideology refers to a social construct, which specifies what one, as a member of society, should and should not do. Ideology in any text is built in the text. Any field of text be it sciences, metaphysics as well as political ideologies of various kind implies anything about their status and reliability as guides to reality. Ideology and genre are intimately related in any culture. Martin (1985: 35-36) claims that in western liberal capitalistic society ideology is commonly realized in some kind of opposition or dichotomy. When an n issue is staged there will be two sides of the society who view it in dichotomy: for and against (protagonist or antagonist). An issue such as *Should Australia mine uranium?* is faced to those who are for: **Protagonist** and those who are against: **Antagonist.** The two types of ideology will be realized in an exposition genre with different use of language. It can be said that no use of language is independent on context.

ARGUMENT AND DISCUSSION

Language use is not separated from its social context. Consequently, learning language should be conducted in the context of language use. This means that language should be learnt both in the context of language use and language learning. In this paper the teaching of English is exemplified as the teaching of writing.

Arguments and discussions are two types of genres commonly written by students in academic context are argument and discussion. The theoretical model already discussed previously will be applied to the two types of genres to see how they mean what they do.

The social function that a writer conveys in an argument (also called exposition) is to argue or maintain that an idea (or thesis) is accurate, right or correct. This kind of genre divides into two versions, one in which the writer persuades that the thesis is to be held or accepted (this type is also known as Analytical Exposition) and the other one in which the writer persuades the readers to do what the thesis recommends. It may be the case that each stage of the genre (the schematic structure) is coded by one paragraph. If this is followed the structure and its paragraph realization can be summarized as the following figure 2.

Figure 2: Schematic Structures of Argument

Schematic Structures		Realized by
(definition) thesis	(statement of issues)	paragraph 1

argument 1 elaboration (supporting evidence/example)		
argument 2 elaboration (supporting evidence/example)		paragraph 2 paragraph 3 paragraph 4
argument 3 elaboration (supporting evidence/example) argument n… elaboration (supporting evidence/example)		paragraph n…
Conclusion	Summary/paraphrase/implication (opinion/recommendation/final comment)	paragraph 5

(…) = Optional

Each stage of genre may be realized by a paragraph. When a stage is represented by a paragraph, the paragraph is comprised of, as it usually does a topic sentence, (a number of) supporting sentences and a conclusion. If this is the realization, there is a sub-conclusion within a larger conclusion within the genre. However, the realization is not necessarily so made; the whole genre may be coded by a single paragraph.

One typical function of an argument is that the writer argues for one side of an issue in the dichotomy of ideology: either 'for' or 'against' side. In contrast, the function of the writer in the discussion genre is to argue for both sides: Protagonist and Antagonist sides. In addition a discussion may also refer to many aspects of phenomena as perceived by the writer. The schematic structure of a discussion genre is presented in Figure 3

Figure 3: Schematic Structures of Discussion

Schematic Structures		Realized by
Introduction	(statement of issues)	paragraph 1
	(definition)	
	thesis	
Body	argument for (1,2,3…n) elaboration (supporting evidence/example)	paragraph (1-..n)
	argument against (1,2,3…n) elaboration (supporting evidence/example)	paragraph (1-..n)
Conclusion	Summary/paraphrase/implication	paragraph
	(opinion/recommendation/final comment)	

There are some characteristics of language use in academic writing of which the most important ones are the use of passive voice, nominalization and grammatical metaphor. Argument and Discussion genres may share common characteristics in the

feature of language forms. However, the two genres may show differences in other features of language use such as the use of cohesive devices, thematic development, etc. In order to show the differences two texts representing the two types of genre are presented in the following. The texts are based on the issue of *Should people stop smoking?*

TEXT 1: ARGUMENT

The number of smokers is increasing. This is surprising since campaign on antismoking is going on. The risks caused by smoking are disastrous not only to the smokers but also to the non-smoker around known as the passive smokers. It is argued that smoking should be stopped for two main reasons.

Firstly, smokers risk heir lives. A heavy smoker may smoke ten packets of cigarettes daily and when he smokes he pumps large quantity of nicotine into his lung. The nicotine causes respiratory diseases even lung cancers. In this way the smoker endangers his life.

Secondly, the smokers also bring harm to non-smokers and the surroundings. In public places such as office, bus people sometimes inhale polluted air. The finding of a study indicates that the passive smokers suffer as much as the active ones do when they inhale polluted airs in closed public places.

In conclusion, due to the risks caused by smoking it is suggested that smoking should be banned at least in public places.

TEXT 2: DISCUSSION

The number of people who smokes is increasing. This is alarming since campaigns on antismoking have been going on. Whether people should stop smoking is arguable in terms of pros and cons. This essay addresses smoking cigarettes with reference to those who agree and those who do not.

It is a fact that the government obtains billions of rupiah as revenue from tobacco consumption. If smoking is banned the government revenue will decrease. Another consequence is that the unemployment rate may increase to the people losing their jobs from the cigarette companies or tobacco farming.

On the other hand, smoking causes pollution and endangers the smokers and passive smokers' health. Smoking may cause diseases such as cancers, coughing and respiratory disorders.

In summary, smoking brings both advantages and disadvantages. One should think of the good and bad sides of smoking before trying to smoke.

The two texts are taken from students' essays. Though some differences in the use of language use are not clear one striking feature that highlight the difference is the use of cohesive devices showing internal structures of the texts. Whereas argument makes explicit use of cohesive devises: *firstly, secondly, then* etc, the discussion makes use of *on the other hand*. This is just one simple difference between argument and discussion genre. In the actual use of language there are differences in the lexicogrammatical items.

TEACHING ACADEMIC TEXTS

Since language is a system of meaning the syllabus of academic writing should be functionally based. That is to say that the syllabus should be a functional one. In the syllabus the designer should consider including lists of functions or meaning rather than linguistic forms. The functions are selected and graded on the basis of the students' needs. This means that just before teaching the materials the teacher or lecturer should conduct a thorough need analysis on the basis of which the syllabus is made.

In teaching academic writing students learn best by analyzing models of language use or text (being relevant to their needs) before writing one of their own. In other words, the students need to be made aware of the way in which information is structured as well as the way in which meaning is coded by lexicogrammatical items. This technique provides them with a clear idea of the features of a particular genre in the target culture. This is then the basis, on which they can model and construct their own texts.

The methodology is learner-oriented in that it aims at involving the whole learners at each stage of the lesson. However, at the initial stage of teaching the teachers are required to give considerable input. For example, the first text the students write might be co-written with the teacher. The next stage may be devoted to a group activity where 5-6 students work together to discuss the production of a genre. Finally, the student as an individual should be sufficiently and confidently able to write a text. This approach, thus, guides the students from a state of wholly dependence to independence.

Activities are designed to stimulate students' interests and to involve them in intellectual and linguistic processes, which are challenging. They may vary, therefore, in both types and pace throughout the lesson. Some activities are designed as group works some as pair work and some other for teacher-whole class discussions. The activities should involve teachers and students in elicitation, text analysis and text reconstruction. The text can be teacher-student negotiated, group negotiated or independently constructed texts. In this way the focus is both on process and product.

Assessment of the students can not be done by using objective test in the forms of multiple-choice. The students should be asked to write there own texts and the texts are then matched to a number of criteria against which they are evaluated. The criteria should cover the characteristic of a good text such as cohesive devices, coherence, lexicogrammatical items, etc. In this way the subjectivity or judgement can be minimized.

CONCLUSIONS

SFL is a theory on the study of language. This study places language as a social phenomenon, which is studied, in social context. The social context shape language use. Based on this theory language learning should be based on the context. In academic situation argument and discussion are two kind s of genres commonly written. The two genres can be best described by reference to SFL theories. By knowing the description in teaching English, then it is easy for the teachers to design the syllabus. The teacher can also plan strategies in teaching the students to produce the two texts. In addition to this, the teacher can also design means of evaluation. One of the main things that should be considered is that language is a means of doing things

in social context or doing function in social contexts. Therefore, the best way of learning English by asking the students to learn to mean or o function in the social context.

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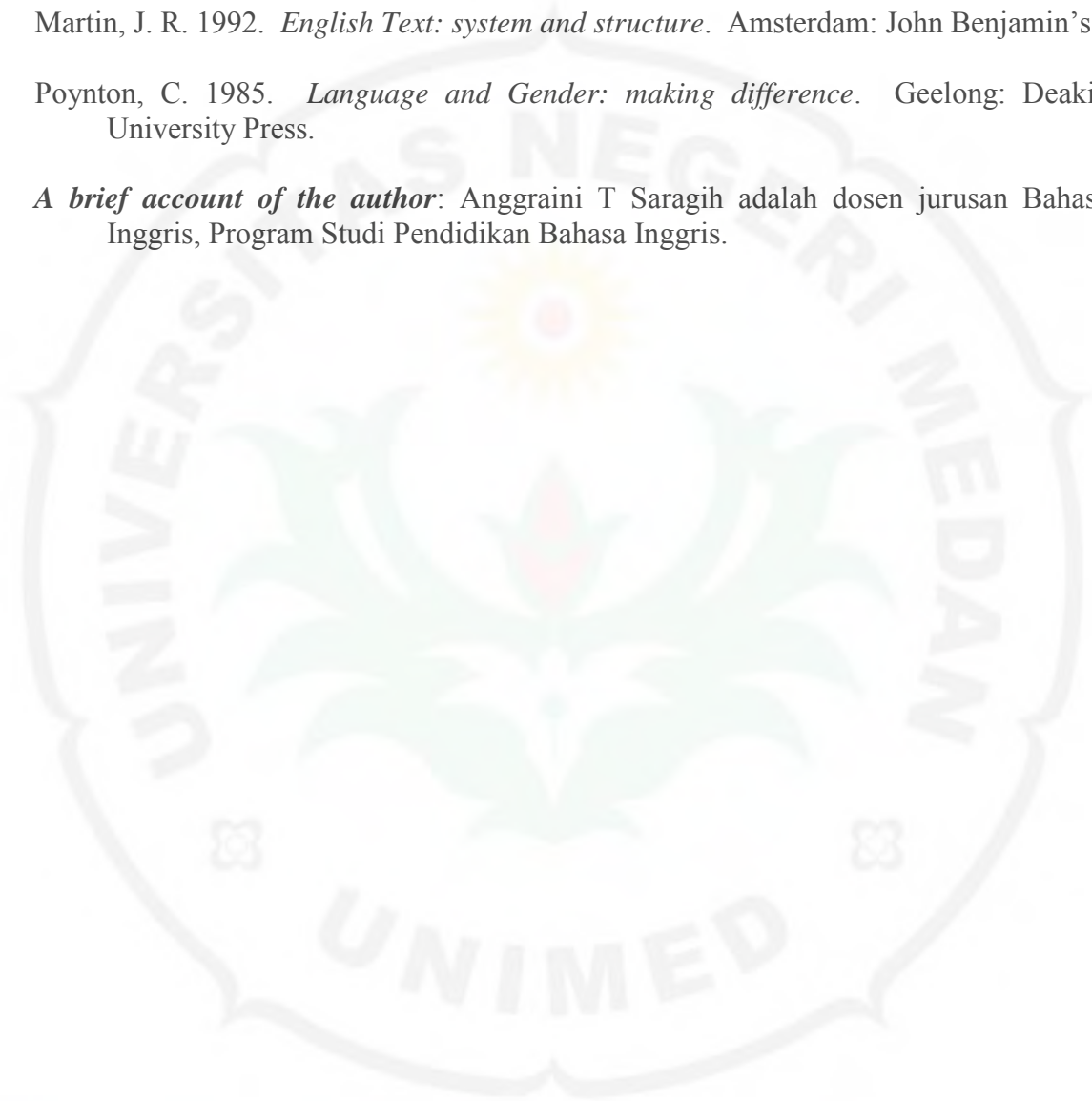Fawcett, P. R & D. Young 1988. *New Developments in Systemic Linguistics*. London: Pinter.

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