

From Textual Function to Writing Competence: A Review of EFL Writing Research Based on Systemic Functional Linguistics

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Received: 23 March 2026 Revised: 26 April 2026 Accepted: 29 April 2026

Abstract

The objectives of this paper are: 1) to implement SFL-informed instruction to develop writing competence, 2) to apply SFL constructs to assess writing and informed feedback, and 3) to investigate changes in learners' conceptions of writing, authorial identity and self-efficacy. This research used a systematic review of 25 studies (2015–2025) as the basis for systematic analysis that applied Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to EFL writing pedagogy, assessment, and learner cognition. Drawing on SFL's three metafunctions as analytical lens, the review synthesized research on instructional practices, assessment approaches, and shifts in students' writing beliefs. The selection of studies for this review was guided by the aims of the present research and informed by established criteria for reviewing genre-based and SFL-oriented writing studies in EFL contexts. To ensure relevance and coherence, only publications that explicitly examined the application of Systemic Functional Linguistics to writing pedagogy were analyzed.

The analysis revealed that SFL-informed genre pedagogy consistently enhanced learners' control over discourse-level and meaning-making, re-oriented assessment from error correction to functional effectiveness, and reshaped learners' conceptions of writing as a socially situated process. The review also identified methodological and contextual limitations in the existing literature and outlines directions for future research.

Keywords: EFL writing, systemic functional linguistics, textual function, writing competence

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Introduction

The development of students' writing competence in English as a foreign language (EFL) has long faced a persistent challenge: even when learners demonstrate relatively accurate control of grammar and vocabulary, their texts often remain weak in argumentation, reader engagement, and discourse coherence (Hyland, 2019). This gap highlights that writing competence involves more than producing error-free sentences; it requires the ability to construct effective meanings across clauses, paragraphs, and whole texts in ways that are functional and appropriate to communicative purposes (Christie & Derewianka, 2008).

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides a theoretically principled response to this challenge by conceptualizing language as a meaning-making resource shaped by social context (Halliday, 2004). Rather than treating writing as the accumulation of forms, SFL foregrounds how writers select linguistic resources to enact meanings in discourse. Within this framework, writing is interpreted through three complementary meta-functions: the ideational meta-function, which construes experience and logical relations; the interpersonal meta-function, which enacts stance, evaluation, and writer-reader relations; and the textual meta-function, which organizes information flow and cohesion into coherent texts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013; Foley, 2012). Because these meta-functions operate simultaneously, SFL is particularly productive for EFL writing pedagogy and research: it connects micro-level linguistic choices (e.g., transitivity patterns, modality, evaluative language, Theme-Rheme organization) with macro-level discourse goals such as argument strength, authorial voice, and genre effectiveness.

Over the past decade, applied linguistics research has increasingly drawn on SFL, especially SFL-informed genre pedagogy and the Teaching and Learning Cycle (TLC), to support EFL writers' development. However, the relevant studies remain distributed across diverse publication venues and are often synthesized only partially, with many discussions focusing primarily on genre pedagogy while giving less systematic attention to how SFL is used to (i) evaluate writing development and

feedback practices and (ii) reshape learners' writing-related beliefs and agency. As a result, the field still lacks a consolidated account that organizes the literature through the internal theoretical architecture of SFL itself, namely, how the ideational, interpersonal, and textual meta-functions are operationalized in EFL writing instruction, assessment, and learner cognition.

To address this gap, the present paper provides a systematic review of SFL-based EFL writing research published between 2015 and 2025. Using SFL meta-functions as theory-driven lens for synthesis, the review examines how prior studies view: (1) the implementation of SFL-informed instruction to develop writing competence, (2) the application of SFL constructs in an assessment of writing and informed feedback, and (3) the investigation of changes in learners' conceptions of writing, authorial identity, and self-efficacy. By mapping research trends and identifying recurring limitations and underexplored areas, this review aims to clarify the current state of SFL-informed EFL writing research and proposes directions for future inquiry.

Research Objectives

1. To implement SFL-informed instruction to develop writing competence.
2. To apply SFL constructs to assess writing and informed feedback.
3. To investigate changes in learners' conceptions of writing, authorial identity and self-efficacy.

Research Methods

This research utilized a qualitative research method in which documentary qualitative method that involved the systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of existing data sources—such as public records, diaries, photographs, and reports—to evaluates phenomena, understand historical context, or support research arguments. It acts as a form of archival inquiry to study events, individuals, or social trends through documented evidence (ResearchGate, 2017).

Criteria for Selection

The selection of studies for this review was guided by the aims of the present research and informed by established criteria for reviewing genre-based and SFL-oriented writing studies in EFL contexts (Liu, Ismail, & Ahmad, 2024). To ensure relevance and coherence, only publications that explicitly examined the application of Systemic Functional Linguistics to writing pedagogy, assessment, or related learner outcomes in EFL settings were considered. Eligible studies were required to include EFL learners as participants or to address pedagogical practices directly relevant to EFL writing instruction. Accordingly, publications were screened for the presence of at least one of the key terms Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), writing, or EFL in their titles, abstracts, or keywords.

To maintain accessibility and consistency in analysis, only studies published in English were included in the review. While this language restriction may limit the representativeness of the findings, it reflects both the reviewer's language background and the dominant publication language of international applied linguistics research. In addition, the review focused on literature published between 2015 and 2025 in order to capture recent developments and contemporary research trends in SFL-based EFL writing.

Both theoretical and empirical studies were included, provided that they were published in peer-reviewed academic journals or scholarly books. This decision was made to allow for a comprehensive synthesis of conceptual discussions, pedagogical models, and classroom-based evidence. Unpublished master's theses, doctoral dissertations, and conference proceedings were excluded, as these sources often vary in methodological rigor and accessibility and may not have undergone formal peer review. Applying these criteria, a final corpus of 25 studies was identified as the basis for systematic analysis in this review.

Research Results

SFL and EFL Writing Instruction

Systemic Functional Linguistics provides a robust theoretical foundation for EFL writing instruction by foregrounding explicit connections between linguistic form, meaning, and communicative purpose. Among the 25 studies reviewed, 22 primarily examined instructional practices, most of which adopted an SFL-informed genre-based approach.

A substantial body of research indicates that the SFL-informed Teaching–Learning Cycle (TLC) can systematically enhance EFL learners’ writing competence. Empirical findings consistently show improvements in learners’ control over both macro-level genre structures, such as the functional stages of argumentative and expository texts, and micro-level linguistic resources, including evaluative lexis, transitivity choices, and thematic progression (Nagao, 2019; Alshehri, 2024). These pedagogical principles build on earlier foundational work in genre-based literacy education (Martin & Rothery, 1980; Christie, 1988; Derewianka, 2003). The central strength of this approach lies in its explicit articulation of why particular linguistic choices are effective for achieving specific communicative purposes within given genres, rather than treating writing as the mere reproduction of formal patterns.

Recent studies further demonstrate the flexibility of SFL-informed pedagogy when integrated with other instructional frameworks. For example, Zhang (2021) combined SFL with drama-based pedagogy, enabling students to engage in embodied exploration of social issues before translating these experiences into persuasive written texts through SFL analytical tools. Similarly, Yasuda (2017) integrated SFL with task-based language teaching to design genre-oriented tasks that simultaneously attend to meaning, form, and communicative function. Such pedagogical integrations extend traditional writing instruction, enrich the TLC model in EFL classrooms, and promote deeper cognitive engagement in writing.

SFL and EFL Writing Assessment

Beyond instructional design, several studies have employed SFL as an analytical framework for assessing student writing and informing feedback practices.

In these studies, assessment is re-conceptualized as an evaluation of meaning-making effectiveness rather than a narrow focus on linguistic accuracy.

For instance, Zhang (2021) applied SFL-based criteria to assess students' argumentative writing by examining their deployment of genre-appropriate linguistic resources. This approach shifts evaluative attention from surface-level errors to how effectively writers construct ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings. Similarly, Zhang and Zhang (2023) analyzed students' use of engagement resources to evaluate dialogic positioning and persuasive strength at a micro-discursive level.

SFL has also been applied to the design of formative feedback. Chen (2022) demonstrated how teacher-written feedback grounded in SFL principles can help learners understand the relationship between linguistic choices and communicative purposes. Such feedback encourages students to revise their texts strategically by managing meaning in context, thereby fostering greater metalinguistic awareness and self-regulation in writing development.

SFL and EFL Students' Writing Cognition and Beliefs

A smaller but conceptually significant body of research has examined how SFL-informed instruction influences learners' writing-related cognition and beliefs. These studies suggest that SFL pedagogy can prompt a fundamental shift in how learners conceptualize writing and their own authorial roles.

Longitudinal qualitative research by Zhang (2019) indicates that sustained exposure to SFL-based instruction leads learners to move away from viewing writing as the accumulation of grammatically correct sentences or the imitation of model texts. Instead, students increasingly perceive writing as a purposeful process of selecting linguistic resources to construct meaning in socially situated contexts. This shift from a product-oriented to a meaning-oriented view of writing constitutes a crucial internal mechanism supporting long-term writing development.

Relatedly, Nagao (2022) found that SFL-based instruction is positively associated with learners' writing self-efficacy. As students acquire meta-functional knowledge to analyze both exemplar texts and their own writing, they develop a sense of control over language as a meaning-making resource. This heightened

agency contributes to increased confidence and sustained engagement in writing tasks.

In addition, SFL-based pedagogy has been linked to the development of critical thinking skills. Zhang (2019) reported that SFL-informed online resources, combined with guided teacher mediation, supported learners' ability to analyze, evaluate, and regulate the relationship between language and content. These findings suggest that SFL pedagogy not only enhances writing performance but also reshapes learners' cognitive engagement with texts.

Research Discussion

The findings of this review suggest that

1. Systemic Functional Linguistics functions not merely as a set of analytical tools but as a comprehensive framework that reshapes how writing is conceptualized, taught, and evaluated in EFL contexts. Across the studies published between 2015 and 2025, three interrelated contributions consistently emerge: the use of SFL to enhance writing instruction, its role in reframing assessment and feedback practices, and its influence on learners' writing-related cognition and beliefs. Taken together, these strands demonstrate that SFL offers a coherent response to persistent challenges in EFL writing, particularly the gap between sentence-level accuracy and discourse-level effectiveness.

At the pedagogical level, SFL-informed genre-based approaches have shown strong potential for supporting learners' development of meaning-making competence beyond formal correctness. By explicitly linking linguistic choices to communicative purposes and genre stages, such approaches enable learners to gain conscious control over both macro-level discourse organization and micro-level grammatical resources (Nagao, 2019, 2020, 2022; Alshehri, 2024; Cheng & Chiu, 2018; Chen, 2022). In contrast to cognitively oriented or process-based writing models, which often prioritize strategies or stages of composing, SFL foregrounds the functional relationship between language and context, thereby explaining why particular linguistic choices matter for achieving rhetorical goals. Moreover, studies integrating SFL with task-based and drama-based pedagogies illustrate

that SFL is not a prescriptive or closed system but a flexible theoretical resource that can enrich diverse instructional ecologies and promote deeper learner engagement (Yasuda, 2017; Zhang, 2021).

2. In the domain of assessment and feedback, the reviewed studies indicate that SFL provides a viable alternative to error-focused evaluation practices that have long dominated EFL writing classrooms. Meta-function-based analysis allows teachers and learners to diagnose weaknesses in meaning construction, stance-taking, and textual organization rather than simply identifying grammatical inaccuracies. Such an approach supports formative assessment practices that emphasize revision, self-regulation, and strategic language use. Importantly, SFL-informed feedback aligns assessment criteria with instructional goals, reinforcing the view of writing as purposeful meaning-making rather than error elimination. However, the literature also suggests that the effective implementation of SFL-based assessment requires substantial teacher expertise and assessment literacy, an issue that remains underexplored in current research.

3. Research on learners' writing-related cognition and beliefs further indicates that SFL-informed pedagogy can trigger a fundamental shift in how learners conceptualize writing and their own authorial roles. As students move away from perceiving writing as the reproduction of correct forms toward understanding it as the design of meaning in a social context, they develop greater authorial agency, confidence, and responsibility toward readers (Zhang, 2019; Nagao, 2019). This cognitive reorientation appears to function as an internal mechanism that sustains writing development beyond short-term instructional gains. Nevertheless, existing studies in this area are limited in number and scope, often relying on small-scale qualitative designs, which constrain claims about the long-term and transferable impact of SFL-based instruction on learner beliefs.

Despite the growing body of evidence supporting SFL-informed approaches, this review also reveals notable limitations in the existing literature. Most studies are situated in higher education contexts in East and Southeast Asia, raising questions about the generalizability of findings across educational levels and sociocultural settings. In addition, many studies focus on short-term instructional interventions,

with relatively few longitudinal or mixed-methods investigations examining sustained writing development. Future research would benefit from broader contextual coverage, more rigorous comparative designs, and greater attention to teacher cognition and assessment practices in SFL-based writing pedagogy.

In sum, this review underscores the value of Systemic Functional Linguistics as a unifying theoretical framework that integrates instruction, assessment, and learner cognition in EFL writing. By re-conceptualizing writing as socially situated meaning-making, SFL provides both explanatory power and pedagogical direction. Continued empirical and theoretical work is needed to refine its application across contexts and to fully realize its potential in advancing EFL writing research and practice.

New Knowledge

Systemic Functional Linguistics functions not merely as a set of analytical tools but as a comprehensive framework that reshapes how writing is conceptualized, taught, and evaluated in EFL contexts. Across the studies published between 2015 and 2025, three interrelated contributions consistently emerge: the use of SFL to enhance writing instruction, its role in reframing assessment and feedback practices, and its influence on learners' writing-related cognition and beliefs. Taken together, these strands demonstrate that SFL offers a coherent response to persistent challenges in EFL writing, particularly the gap between sentence-level accuracy and discourse-level effectiveness.

At the pedagogical level, SFL-informed genre pedagogy consistently supports learners' development of writing competence by making explicit the relationship between linguistic choices, communicative purposes, and genre conventions. In assessment and feedback, SFL reframes evaluation as an examination of meaning construction, enabling more formative, diagnostic, and pedagogically aligned practices. At the cognitive level, SFL-based instruction facilitates a shift in learners' conceptions of writing, fostering greater authorial agency, self-efficacy, and critical engagement with texts.

Despite these contributions, the review also highlights limitations in the current literature, including the predominance of small-scale studies in Asian higher education contexts and a lack of longitudinal and comparative research designs. Future studies should expand contextual coverage, adopt more rigorous methodological approaches, and examine teacher cognition and assessment literacy in SFL-based pedagogy. Overall, this review underscores the value of SFL as a unifying framework that integrates linguistic theory, pedagogy, and learner development in EFL writing research and practice. It can also conclude that learning to write cannot be accomplished in a single setting. Thus, in order to successfully construct a relevant writing class, both teachers and students must continue active communication.

Research Suggestions

Policy Suggestions

There are needs to refine the applications across contexts and to fully realize the potential in advancing EFL writing research and practice.

Practical Suggestions

1. SFL should revise and re-frame evaluation as an examination of meaning construction, enabling more formative, diagnostic, and pedagogically aligned practices.

2. SFL should encourage the implementation of SFL-informed instruction and enhance assessment approaches to develop writing competence.

Suggestions for Future Study

In the future study, it should expand contextual coverage, adopt more rigorous methodological approaches, and examine, all together, teacher cognition and assessment literacy in SFL-based pedagogy.

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