

# Understanding the Structure of Texts

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## Abstract

This paper considers how an understanding of textual structuring can help teachers solve practical problems in the language classroom. More specifically, it explores gaps in the way that course books approach the teaching of reading in college reading instruction and proposes techniques for addressing these issues with reference to the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) notions of Genre and Genre Structuring. Taking the example of one popular reading strategy, that of reading for the “main idea” in a text, it demonstrates how a Genre analysis might be applied to identify main ideas and to analyze the principles by which texts are structured internally at the paragraph level. It concludes by offering several options for further research aimed at improving teachers’ and students’ awareness of the principles of structuring that underlie English text.

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**Key terms:** Genre, Communicative Purpose, Schematic Structure, Textual Structuring

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## 1. Introduction

This paper considers how an understanding of textual structuring can improve reading instruction in college English courses. At present, reading course books typically offer only vague explanations of how texts are organized overall or at different levels or “layers” of structure. In many college reading courses, for instance, second language learners are directed to decode texts by identifying structural elements such as “main ideas” and “topic sentences”, yet few course books provide clear definitions of what these terms mean and even fewer explain how they are realized linguistically. This paper aims to resolve such issues by proposing a framework for analyzing texts based on Systemic Functional (SFL) notions of Genre and Genre Structuring. Under the now well-established notion of Genre, texts are seen as serving overarching communicative purposes such as reporting, arguing or explaining and are staged and conventionalized in their structure. Typically, such staging is managed over entire texts; however, this paper proposes that genre structuring can occur over much shorter spans, for instance, over one or more paragraphs. What this means is that the “main idea” of a paragraph and where it is located within the text may vary according to its communicative purpose. Thus, written texts can be seen as collections of smaller scale texts which vary in their purpose and structure. Examples of such structuring from college texts will be presented to demonstrate these principles along with a number of simple activities that can help second language readers identify different types of structures and improve their overall comprehension of English texts.

## 2. The Problem of the Main Idea

Reading to find the “main idea” or “main point” of a text is a popular strategy in many college course books. Consider the excerpt in Example 1 below from a well-known text by Kirn and Hartmann (2007, p.7):

STRATEGY: Recognizing the Main Ideas

- The main idea tells the main point, or idea, about the topic. Sometimes one or two sentences of a paragraph tell the main idea.
- The main idea is often found in the first sentence of a paragraph, but not always.
- The main idea can also be in the middle or at the end of the paragraph.
- The other sentences in the paragraph usually give supporting details for the main idea.

Example 1: Strategy for recognizing main ideas in a paragraph

When instructing learners in the use of this strategy, however, the following questions invariably arise:

1. I cannot find the main idea in this paragraph. Where should I look?
2. What is the difference between main idea, main point and topic?

Reviewing the course book and the teacher’s manual for the text mentioned above, no clear answers to these questions can be found. Example 2 below provides an overview of what some other popular course books have to say about identifying the main idea of a paragraph.

Book	Strategy for Identifying the Main Idea
Haugnes, N. & Maher, B. (2004). <i>North Star Reading and Writing (Low Intermediate)</i> . New York: Longman.	None
Cassriel, B & Martineses, M.T. (2010). <i>Academic Connections 1</i> . (New York) Pearson Longman.	You can usually find the main idea in the title or in the first or last sentence of the paragraph
Rogers, B. (2005). <i>World Class Readings 1</i> . Boston: McGraw Hill.	Main idea sentences are not too specific. Main idea sentences are not too general. The main idea sentence sums up the passage exactly. No more and no less.
Gramer, M & Ward, C.S., (2011). <i>Q: Skills for Success Reading and Writing</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press.	The main idea is usually given in the first sentence. This is called the topic sentence.
Hartmann, P. & Blass, L. (2007.) <i>Quest 1 Reading and Writing</i> . Boston: McGraw Hill.	A main idea is a complete sentence that says something about the topic.
Day, R.R. & Yamanaka, J. (2007). <i>Cover to Cover 1</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press.	Every paragraph has a main idea. This is the most important thing the writer wants to say. The main idea is often near the beginning of a paragraph.
Douglas, N. (2009). <i>Reading Explorer 1</i> . Boston: Heinle/Cengage Learning.	The main idea is what the passage is mainly about.

Table 1: Strategies for identifying the main idea in other course books

Understandably, such vague instructions confuse students and teachers. Furthermore, none of the texts listed in the table above provide any workable definition of the terms “main idea”, “topic” or “main point” nor do they provide any specific linguistic criteria by which students might be able to identify and locate them in the language. At least two issues arise, then, with the strategies just outlined: (1) the terminology used to describe the phenomenon in question (i.e. the “main idea” of a text or paragraph) is confusing and potentially misleading and; (2) it seems possible that the location of the “main idea” can vary, making it difficult to identify precisely. Each of these issues will be addresses in more detail below.

## 2.1 Terminology

Returning to the strategy in Example 1 above, the course book in question explains that:

(i) The main idea tells the main point, or idea, about the topic. Sometimes one or two sentences of a paragraph tell the main idea. However, on closer examination, the notions of “point” and “idea” would appear to be slightly different. Consider the meaning of the following questions:

What is your point?

What is your idea?

In the case of “what is your point?” we might expect the response to involve some kind of justification of an opinion or argument, purposes that are typically associated with exposition texts. In the case of “what is your idea”, however, some form of description or explanation might be anticipated. What this suggests is that the “main idea” of a paragraph may vary depending on the writer’s communicative purpose. In terms of the strategy outlined above, then, it would be more helpful to separate the notions of “idea” and “point” and propose that a paragraph (or a text for that matter) could be organized according to whether it presents an idea or a point, depending on the writer’s communicative purpose.

## 2.2 Location

The second issue mentioned above concerns the other parts of the strategy outlined, as follows:

- (ii) The main idea is often found in the first sentence of a paragraph, but not always.
- (iii) The main idea can also be in the middle or at the end of the paragraph.
- (iv) The other sentences in the paragraph usually give supporting details for the main idea.

In the case of strategy (ii), the notion that a main idea can be found at the beginning of a paragraph seems plausible, since this is consistent with what is already known about the method of development in English text, i.e. that it is prospective and what comes later in a text develops from what comes before it. Strategy (iii), however, is more problematic. Considering the method of development just outlined the question of how a text might be structured around a main idea which occurs in the middle or end arises. If a main idea occurs in the middle of a paragraph, for instance, what comes before it and after it? What kind of text-compositional principles might be at work in such texts? Again, the course book in question is silent on such issues. No clear explanations are provided in the course book itself or in the teacher’s manual which accompanies it.

Strategy (iv) above is less problematic; it seems plausible that the other sentences in a paragraph serve in some kind of supporting role by expanding or elaborating on the “main” idea, and by doing so, contribute to the coherence of the text. The question remains, however, as to how the other sentences might be organized to perform these kinds of functions if the main idea comes at the middle or end of a paragraph. How does a sentence support the main idea if it precedes it, rather than follows it, for example? As with the other strategies outlined above, the course book does not provide teachers and students with any guidelines on how to respond to such questions.

## 3. Possible Solutions

Reviewing the other textbooks mentioned in Example 2 above and the literature on textual development in English, very few studies offer any answers to the issues just raised. While some studies, such as Thompson (1994) or Flowerdew (1992) investigate the structure of certain parts of some texts, such as the introductions or definition sections of research articles, few investigate how texts are structured at the individual paragraph level. One possible solution, however, might be found in the work on Genre and Genre Structuring in SFL. In the SFL approach to genre, texts are seen as having an overarching purpose which governs the sequence and organization of subsequent sentences or parts of the text. These genre structures emerge in the culture over time and become conventionalized; that is they are recognized and used by writers or speakers in that culture. So genres are a resource for construing cultural meanings and are realized in the language via various discourse-level and lexicogrammatical resources. Martin (1992, p.505) defines genres in this way as ‘staged, goal-oriented social processes.’

Table 2 below, compiled from Martin & Rose (2007b), Eggins & Slade (1997), Droga & Humphrey (1998), and Callaghan (1989), summarizes the various genre types identified in the SFL literature. The table shows from left to right, the genre

type, various sub-types of the genre, the overarching social purpose of the genre and the schematic structure of the genre, that is, the configuration or sequence of “elements” which constitute the genre with each element typically formed by one or more clauses (or in some cases by minor clauses, exclamations etc).

Genre	Sub-type	Social Purpose	Schematic Structure
Report	Descriptive	Describe and classify a phenomenon	Classification ^ Description
	Taxonomic (Classifying)	Classify phenomena as parts/wholes or as types	General Classification [with definition] ^ Description
Factual Description/ Information Report	Classifying	Describe the characteristic features of people, places, objects	Identification ^ Description
		Classify and describe phenomena	General statement ^ Description [in parts]
Explanation	Sequential	Explain how/why things come about	ID of phenomenon ^ Sequenced Explanation ^ Extension
	Factorial	Explain multiple causes	Outcome ^ Factors
	Consequential	Explain impacts and consequences	Input ^ Consequences
	Conditional	Explain conditions and effects	Condition ^ Effect
Discussion		Look at an issue from a range of perspectives before making a judgment	Issue [Statement + Preview] ^ Sides [Point + Elaboration] ^ Resolution/Recommendation [Summary + Conclusion]
Exposition		Persuasive texts that argue a case for a certain point of view	Thesis [Position + Preview] ^ Arguments [Point + Elaboration] ^ (Reiteration of Thesis)
Recount (Factual)	Historical	Recounts historical periods in phases or episodes	(Background) ^ Record of Events ^ (Deduction)
	Autobiographical	Recounts one’s own life story in episodes	(Orientation) ^ Record of Events ^ (Reorientation)
	Personal	Recounts an event in one’s own life (serially)	(Orientation) ^ Record of Events ^ (Reorientation)
	Biographical	Someone else’s life story	(Orientation) ^ Record of Events ^ (Reorientation)

Table 2: Genre types in SFL

Comparing the genre structuring outlined above with the kind of structuring observed in course book readings, some

interesting similarities can be observed. In the course book mentioned above, for instance, the kinds of texts found in the reading activities closely resemble in their structure the genre types identified in the SFL literature. It is possible to observe, for example, numerous instances of paragraphs which come across as Reports or Explanations. Consider the following examples from a reading activity (text) provided in Kim and Hartmann (2007). Individual paragraphs of the text are shown in the left column and possible genre types in the right column.

Text of Reading Passage	Possible Genre Types
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>International Students</b></p> <p><b>Introductions and Definitions</b></p> <p>A All around the world, there are <b>international</b> students at <i>institutions of higher education</i>. The definition of an <i>international student</i> is “a <u>post-secondary student from another country</u>.” The meaning of <i>post-secondary</i> is “after high school.” Another phrase for international students is “foreign students.” The word <b>foreign</b> means “of a different country or culture.” Even so, some people don’t like the word <i>foreign</i>. Instead, they use the phrase “international students.” For an institution of higher education, they say “university,” “college,” or school.</p>	<p>Descriptive Report (Definitional) <u>Classification</u> ^ <u>Description</u></p>
<p><b>Where International Students Attend School</b></p> <p>B <u>International students leave their home countries. They go to school abroad</u>. One meaning of the word <i>abroad</i> is “in a foreign place.” Probably, the country with the most students from abroad is the United States. Canada, Great Britain, and some other European countries also have a lot of students from other countries. But more and more, international students <b>attend</b> colleges and <b>universities</b> in the <b>developing nations</b> of Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Developing nations are countries without a high level of industrialization or technology.</p>	<p>Information Report <u>Identification</u> ^ <u>Description</u></p>
<p><b>Why Students Attend School Abroad</b></p> <p>C <u>Why do high school and college graduates go to colleges and universities far from their homes?</u> Undergraduates are postsecondary students without college degrees. Often, undergraduates want the <b>experience</b> of life in new cultures. Maybe they want to learn another language well. Many students want degrees in business, engineering, or technology. These subjects are not always available in their home countries. Some <b>governments</b> and companies send their best graduate students and workers to other countries for new knowledge and <b>skills</b>. And some international students from expensive <b>private</b> schools at home save money through study abroad programs, especially in developing nations.</p>	<p>Factorial Explanation <u>Outcome</u> ^ <u>Factors</u></p>
<p><b>Why Universities Want Foreign Students From Other Countries.</b></p> <p>D <u>Why do institutions of higher education want international students?</u> Students from other countries and cultures bring internationalism to the</p>	<p>Factorial Explanation <u>Outcome</u> ^ <u>Factors</u></p>

<p>classroom and campus. They bring different languages, customs, ideas, and opinions from many places. Also, educational institutions need money. <b>Tuition</b> is the fee or charge for instruction. Private schools are colleges and universities not supported by government money. They charge high tuition. International students are not <b>citizens</b> or <b>immigrants</b>. (One definition of <i>citizens</i> and <i>immigrants</i> is "legal members of a nation or country.") International students pay full tuition and fees to state or government schools. And all students away from home have to spend money for housing, food, recreation, and other things. For these reasons, many schools and groups of schools want students from other countries</p>	
<p><b>Conclusion and Summary</b>                  E For different reasons, many high school and college graduates want or need to study abroad. For other reasons, many nations want or need students from other countries and cultures on their college and university campuses.</p>	

Table 3: Genre structuring in a course book text (Chapter 1, Interactions 1 Reading)

In the case of paragraph A it is possible to observe a paragraph which is overarchingly concerned with defining the term *international students*. I use the term “overarchingly” here because the text of paragraph A is mainly concerned with defining the term *international students*, although the text also provides definitions of other related terms as well. As the example shows, the phenomenon to be defined is identified at the beginning of the paragraph in the first sentence (see term highlighted in bold), and the subsequent sentences provide a definition of this term and other terms related to the definition. This type of organization, in which something is identified and then defined closely resembles the Descriptive Report genre identified in the SFL literature, so it is possible to see this paragraph as some form of definitional “Report” which is governed, in its sequence and structure, by this overarching communicative purpose. In the same way, paragraphs B, C, and D resemble, in their purpose and structure, Reports (see paragraph B above) and Explanations (see paragraphs C and D).

A second example of this kind of structuring is presented in Table 4 below, from another popular course book series authored by Haugnes & Maher (2004). As in Table 3 above, the text of the reading is shown in the left column and the possible genre types are shown in the right column.

Text of Reading Passage	Possible Genre Types
<p><b>SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER (SAD)</b>                      1 <u>People who have Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) get depressed during the fall and winter.</u> SAD seems to be much more common in some places than in others. For example, in the United States, less than 1 percent of the people in Florida, a southern state, have SAD, but 10-30 percent of the people in Alaska, a northern state, have it.</p>	<p>Descriptive Report (Definitional)                      Classification ^ Description</p>
<p><b>Symptoms</b>                      2 <u>The symptoms of SAD are almost the same as the</u></p>	<p>Descriptive Report</p>

<p><u>symptoms of depression</u>. The biggest difference is that depression can happen at any time of year, but SAD happens only during the fall and winter months. SAD happens particularly in the far north and far south, where there is less light in the winter. The most common symptoms include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sleeping more than usual</li> <li>• Eating more than usual</li> <li>• Getting fatter or thinner quickly</li> <li>• Not having enough energy</li> <li>• Thinking about death</li> <li>• Not wanting to be with other people</li> </ul>	<p><u>Classification</u> ^ Description</p>
<p><b>Causes</b></p> <p>3 <u>Doctors aren't exactly sure about what causes SAD, but they are beginning to understand it better.</u> The cause of SAD might be emotional (for example, some people get depressed during the holidays because they miss their families); the cause might also be chemical. Scientists have found that some chemicals in our bodies are affected by bright outdoor light (more than 1500 lux). Bright light causes our bodies to make more of some chemicals and less of other chemicals. These chemicals affect our breathing, blood pressure, and body temperature.</p>	<p>Factorial Explanation</p> <p><u>Outcome</u> ^ Factors</p>
<p><b>Treatments</b></p> <p>4 <u>The three most common treatments for SAD are light therapy, psychotherapy and drug therapy.</u></p>	<p>Taxonomic Report</p> <p><u>General Classification</u> ^ Description</p>
<p>5 <u>Light therapy is becoming the most common treatment for people with SAD.</u> <i>[full text omitted for reasons of space]</i></p>	<p>Descriptive Report</p> <p><u>Classification</u> ^ Description</p>
<p>6 <u>Psychotherapy with a professional psychiatrist or psychologist is another common treatment for SAD.</u> <i>[full text omitted for reasons of space]</i></p>	<p>Descriptive Report</p> <p><u>Classification</u> ^ Description</p>
<p>7 <u>Certain types of drugs, called antidepressants, are also a common treatment for SAD.</u> <i>[full text omitted for reasons of space]</i></p>	<p>Descriptive Report</p> <p><u>Classification</u> ^ Description</p>

Table 4: Genre structuring in a course book text (Haugnes & Maher, 2004, pp.167-168)

As with the text from Kim and Kartmann's book (shown in Table 3), the text shown in Table 4 above is comprised of several paragraphs each of which resembles, in its structure and purpose, one of the genre types identified in the SFL literature. The

first, second and fourth paragraphs, for instance, can be categorized as forms of Reports (Descriptive and Taxonomic) and the third as some form of Explanation. This finding is consistent with research into genre structuring in texts which have more of an academic focus. Blackwell (2011), for example, in his study of genre structuring in academic lectures found that lectures are predominantly composed of Reports, Explanations and Expositions. Considering the academic focus and style of the two texts presented in Tables 3 and 4 above, it is not surprising that these texts are structured by the same kinds of genres, i.e. Reports and Explanations.

Additionally, it is possible to observe in the text presented in Table 4 above, a series of paragraphs which are concerned with describing the 'most common treatments for Seasonal Affective Disorder' (see paragraphs 4, 5, 6 and 7 for instance). In this instance the description of each treatment is elaborated via a single paragraph, with each paragraph resembling a Report genre in its structure and purpose. Thus it is possible to observe a genre which is made up of other genres "embedded" within its structure. This type of structuring closely resembles the phenomenon of "macrogenres" identified in the SFL literature (see for example Martin, 1994 or Martin and Rose, 2007a). The text in Table 4, then, is somewhat complicated in its organization, with varying levels or "layers" of genre structuring consisting of "higher-level" genres which are made up of other genres at "lower" levels of structure.

Returning to the earlier discussion of the issue of locating "main ideas" in paragraphs, some preliminary conclusions might be proposed. Firstly, it seems possible considering the examples just presented that the types of academic texts found in university-level reading course books may be organized as genres or macrogenres, i.e. genres that are made up of smaller-scale genres embedded within their structure. If we adopt this view, then it is possible to offer some explanations as to why the "main idea" of some paragraphs can be found in different locations within the paragraph, i.e. at the beginning, middle or end. Considering the analysis presented in Tables 3 and 4 above, it would seem possible to argue that the "main idea" is likely to be found at the beginning of the paragraphs in these texts since most of the paragraphs are structured as Reports and Explanations; genre types in which the phenomenon that is being described or explained is conventionally identified or 'classified' at the start. It is possible, of course, that some paragraphs may be organized around other purposes in which case the location of the "main idea" may vary, i.e. it may be found in a location other than the beginning of the text. I will return to discuss an example of this type of structuring later in this paper.

Secondly, considering that the texts presented for analysis appear to be structured as genres or macrogenres and that the configuration of these structures is governed by their communicative purpose as SFL suggests, it may be possible to dispense with the notion of a "main idea" and give consideration instead to the "main purpose" of a paragraph, since the purpose is likely to determine the subsequent structure of the paragraph. This would give students and teachers a more reliable means of determining what the paragraph is about and where to find this kind of information. What this really means is that the organization of paragraphs, or whole texts for that matter, is not random. Text is organized at a discourse level by underlying principles and in the case of paragraphs the location of information within them is influenced by communicative purpose. In terms of the notion of "topic", it is possible to have students read and determine the "topic" of a paragraph, which can be done by exploring the "Field" of the text, i.e. by identifying lexical items which tell us the paragraph is about "international students" or "SAD" etc. However, to determine whether the paragraph is concerned with describing, explaining or evaluating these terms, an investigation of genre is necessary. To summarize then, it would seem more helpful to replace the term "main idea", which cannot be accurately defined, with "main purpose" in reading instruction, while continuing to use the terms "topic" to refer to the Field of a text and "main point" to refer to thesis or central argument of a text.

The only complication with conducting the type of analysis just outlined is that SFL studies of genre typically deal with genres that unfold over longer spans of text. As mentioned above, genres are seen as 'staged, goal-oriented social processes' (Martin, 1992, p.505) and the type of staging associated with genres in the SFL literature is managed over multiple paragraphs. It is not certain, then, whether the paragraph-length structures identified in Tables 3 and 4 above can be categorized as genres, at least



according to the SFL definition of the term. What we end up with then, are texts which might tentatively be categorized as “mini” Reports, Explanations, Expositions etc. since the paragraphs in question are limited in length and cannot really be seen as staged. This is not to say, of course, that these paragraph-length texts do not follow the same principles of structuring that are found in the SFL work on genre, just that they do not seem to have been reported elsewhere in the literature and await further investigation and categorization. What this paper argues for, then, is further analysis of the texts that are being used in college reading instruction from a genre perspective in order to deepen our knowledge of their underlying principles of structure, which will help us solve issues that arise when strategies such as reading for the “main idea” are employed.

#### 4. Other Types of Structuring

As mentioned above, the SFL work on genre also suggests some possible explanations as to why a “main idea” can come at the middle or end of a paragraph. In the genre types shown in Table 2, for instance, some types of genres such as Expositions can have an optional “reiteration of thesis” stage. In such cases, the “thesis” is re-emphasized or repeated at the end of the text. Note that this stage is optional, so some Expositions may have a reiteration stage and others may not. Again, however, this type of structuring has been observed across texts that are more developed than the paragraph-length texts which are the subject of this study, so it remains to be seen whether they can be applied to the analysis of shorter texts. Consider the following example of a paragraph which resembles an Exposition, i.e. it appears to be presenting a point of view, but is limited in length.

##### Similarities in Student Life

A *At colleges and universities around the world, students from other places live in student housing on campus, in apartments, or in the private homes of other people. They walk to school or get there by bicycle or by car. Sometimes they take **public transportation** like the bus or subway. They attend classes and take **quizzes** or tests or exams. They complete necessary course **requirements**. After years of study, they get **certificates** or college degrees. These are proof of completion of courses of study. Outside school, they have other interests and family or social lives. In some ways, life on the campuses of institutions of higher education is the same everywhere in the world.*

Example 2: Paragraph-length Exposition text (Kim and Kartmann, 2007, p.11)

In the text above (by Kim and Hartmann, 2007) students are instructed that the underlined sentence is the “main idea” of the paragraph, demonstrating perhaps that “main ideas” can be found at the end of a paragraph. Comparing the structure of this paragraph with the genre types shown in Table 2, it seems unlikely that the text is a Report or Explanation, since in these genre types the phenomenon which is reported or explained is typically introduced at the beginning. In the case of the text shown in Example 2 above, however, the key element is found at the end and the preceding sentences seem to provide some kind of build-up towards the (point of) view which is expressed at the end (see underlined sentence). At least one reading course book makes mention of such structuring. The Timed Readings series, for instance, observes that ‘writers often put the main idea at the end of a paragraph when their purpose is to persuade or convince’ (Timed Readings, 2004, p.6). This is an interesting observation as it suggests that there is a link between purpose and structure and also suggests that the view being advanced in persuasive paragraphs is frequently found near the end. This is not inconsistent with the type of structuring observed in Exposition genres in SFL in which Expositions typically contain (optional) “reiteration of thesis” stages where the point of view being expressed is restated or reiterated for effect. At the paragraph level, however, it may not be possible to manage the type of staging needed for an Exposition genre to develop. Instead, it seems possible from the above example that paragraph-level expositions may have their own internal structure, in which a point of view is developed over a span of several sentences and then presented in a final sentence. As

mentioned earlier, only tentative conclusions on this type of structuring can be proposed at this point. Further research of expository paragraphs needs to be undertaken before any definitive conclusions can be reached.

Additionally, if college reading instruction is to include a focus on the purpose and structure (i.e. genre) of paragraphs, then a clear and simple methodology needs to be developed to assist students with identifying the purpose of texts by reference to the language used in them. Teaching strategies is useful, but unless they are anchored in the language used, students cannot reliably apply them to identify key meaning-making resources of texts. To my knowledge, no methodology yet exists for identifying the purpose of a text at a sentence or clause level. Some first steps towards such a methodology might include the following:

(1) Identify the types of processes that are employed. In SFL, the term process is used to refer to ‘expressions of happening, doing, being, saying or thinking’ (Butt, Fahey, Feez, Spinks & Yallop, 2000, p.50) and are realized in the grammar by verbal groups. One technique, then, might be to begin by underlining all the verbs in a paragraph, focusing on those verbs which recur and those which come first, since in many types of genres the phenomenon being described, explained etc or the thesis being presented comes near the beginning of the text. Consider the following paragraph from Table 3 above (verb processes underlined):

**International Students**

**Introductions and Definitions**

All around the world, there are **international** students at *institutions of higher education*. The definition of an *international student* is “a post-secondary student from another country.” The meaning of *post-secondary* is “after high school.” Another phrase for international students is “foreign students.” The word **foreign** means “of a different country or culture.” Even so, some people don’t like the word *foreign*. Instead, they use the phrase “international students.” For an institution of higher education, they say “university,” “college,” or school.

In the example above the most common process types are “be” verbs such as *is* and *are*. In SFL “be” verbs are categorized as *relational processes*. In SFL, relational processes are used to relate something to its identity or description (Butt et al, 2000, p.58). As the genre chart in Table 2 shows, descriptions are typically realized by Report genres. By applying this kind of methodology, then, it is possible to determine the purpose of the paragraph from the types of verbs used.

2. A second technique is to have students compile lists of lexical or grammatical words and phrases which frequently occur within texts of different purposes so that they can learn to recognize genre structures quickly, as follows:

Purpose	Co-occurring Words/Phrases
Describe	type, kinds of, for example, for instance
Define	is, are, means, meaning, definition
Explain	How? Why? cause, effect, solution
Persuade	argue, opinion, maybe
Discuss	In contrast, on the other hand

3. In connection with the above, we can also train learners to identify genre types by familiarizing them with the kinds of purposes and schematic structures of genres already established in the literature. As many of the paragraph-length texts presented for analysis in this study appear to be organized into the same or similar sequences as the genres identified in the SFL literature, it would seem useful to train learners to look for this kind of structuring in shorter texts. For lower level students, additional support

could be provided by including matching activities in which they compare the structure of selected paragraphs with a list of genre types.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper argues that college reading instruction can be improved by raising teachers' and students' awareness of the principles of structuring that underlie English text. By way of example, it demonstrates how issues with a popular reading strategy, that of reading to identify the "main idea" of a text might be addressed by adapting and applying techniques from established linguistic theories such as SFL. It also suggests several options for further research into the internal organization of paragraphs and the relationship between communicative purpose and schematic structure in English text, which teachers might well consider in order to improve their understanding of the language they are teaching.

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