

Systemic functional linguistics and ESAP teaching materials: integrating emic and etic perspectives

Debora Catavello 

Centre for Academic Language and Development, University of Bristol, Richmond Building, 105 Queen's Road, Clifton, BS8 1LN, Bristol, UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)-informed approach to designing teaching materials for an English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) provision. By helping students understand the relationship between text and context, this approach raises their awareness of disciplinary writing expectations. A key aspect of this approach is the integration of emic and etic perspectives by including ethnographic research in the creation stage of the teaching materials. This ethnographic investigation helps contextualise the pre-instructional linguistic analysis of successful student submissions, with both types of analysis (contextual and linguistic) informing the materials and teaching activities. The paper first explains the importance of the SFL notion of *register* in this approach to materials design and the relevance of the contextual variable *field* to ESAP practice. It then provides an example of how this approach was implemented in developing materials for a workshop attended by students on an MA in film and television.

1. Introduction

Writing is an essential tool for learning; a tool that poses a few challenges to both the novice and the expert writer, and more so in the case of disciplinary writing. Writing in the disciplines is said to be a “source of conceptual troublesomeness” (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 11), to encompass “a defamiliarizing process whereby students learn to speak with a somewhat different voice” (Coffin & Donohue, 2012, p. 2) and to involve a great deal of “tacit knowledge” (Husain & Waterfield, 2006, p. 27). The responsibility for making this tacit knowledge overt lies with teachers (Elton, 2009), among these English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) practitioners. ESAP tutors are tasked with clarifying disciplinary writing expectations to ensure that the bases for achievement are visible to students (Davies et al., 2006; Jessop & Tomas, 2017; Monbec & Ding, 2024).

This paper rests on the premise that ESAP material writers should act as “mediators” between theory and teaching (McGrath, 2002, p. 221), thereby avoiding the use of materials misaligned with research (Harwood, 2005; Tomlison, 2022; Walková, 2025). Thus, this paper intends to respond to recent calls for greater “theorisation” in EAP (Monbec, 2018: A92; Monbec & Ding, 2024) by offering insights into how ESAP practitioners can draw on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) when designing teaching materials. In doing so, this paper aims to address the gap recently identified by Bell (2024, p. 9) who, noticing that research in EAP has focused extensively on the “what” as opposed to the “who” and “how” of EAP practice, advocates for more research into “the nature of EAP practitioners and their approaches to pedagogy”.

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E-mail address: debora.catavello@bristol.ac.uk.

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To fulfil this need for greater theorisation and more research into EAP pedagogy, this paper will focus on the application of SFL to ESAP practice. The relevance of SFL to ESAP lies in its social-semiotic approach to the study of language (Halliday & Hasan, 1989) that aims “to make explicit the relationship between text and context” (Coffin & Donohue, 2012, p. 65). This paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how an SFL-informed pedagogical approach can support students’ access to disciplinary contexts by raising their awareness of disciplinary writing expectations. This paper will also explore how SFL can benefit ESAP tutors and course designers by increasing their sensitivity to disciplinary literacy requirements and the language choices that are “privileged and expected” in a field (Duff, 2010, p. 175). To this end, I will first explain the significance of the SFL notion of *register* for ESAP practice before illustrating how SFL can inform the design of teaching materials with a case study from the discipline of film and television. I will conclude by arguing that SFL provides the ESAP practitioner with the theoretical underpinnings needed to substantiate their practice.

2. Theoretical underpinnings

2.1. Context and language: inferring one from the other

Within an SFL perspective, the language choices an individual makes simultaneously construe and enact a context (Halliday, 1998, p. 186; Hasan, 2009, p. 13). The interdependence between language and context should be of particular concern to ESAP practitioners if they want to help students understand “how a text relates to the social context within which it is located” (Halliday, 1999, p. 10). Such understanding requires the analysis of disciplinary texts with the aim of foregrounding the disciplinary knowledge students are acquiring (Martin, 2013, p. 24). Pedagogically, a context-based view of language is useful when raising students’ awareness of why academic language is not arbitrary but a consequence of “contextual factors [that] impact on text production” (Lillis, 2008, p. 368). As Hyland (2018, p. 388) points out:

“It largely falls to EAP teachers to help students look at writing in a different way, seeing linguistic forms as not merely arbitrary, instrumental and autonomous, just something to ‘get right’, but as fundamental to disciplinary communication and to thought itself.”

SFL provides the analytical tools to move away from teaching academic language prescriptively towards a pedagogy that sees language as a system of choices. Within this view, language development consists in “an increased ability to discern the most effective and appropriate” choices for the communicative needs of a situation (McCabe, 2021, p. 4).

The fact that a text is inherently tied to a context (Lillis, 2008, p. 375; Hasan, 2009, p. 12; Matthiessen, 2015, p. 1) has clear implications for the teaching of disciplinary writing. If language cannot be separated from context, then language and content should not be taught and/or assessed separately (Monbec & Ding, 2024, p. 33). More importantly, a language in context perspective brings into view *knowledge* practices alongside *linguistic* ones, allowing the analysis of both in relation to students and assessors’ dispositions and expectations (Maton & Chen, 2019, p. 36). ESAP practitioners in collaboration with subject lecturers should strive to align these expectations to help *all* students, not just international students (Bell, 2025, p. 10), become members of their academic community.

But how can ESAP tutors help students expand their linguistic repertoire? A popular approach is Genre-based pedagogy where the analysis of high and low-scoring assignments is a central element (Caplan, 2019; Chan, 2018; Cheng, 2008, 2015; Curtis et al., 2025; Johns, 2016; Swales, 1996; Wette, 2014). This approach involves the use of student texts as “exemplars” - defined as “carefully chosen samples of student work which are used to illustrate dimensions of quality and clarify assessment expectations” (Carless & Boud, 2018).

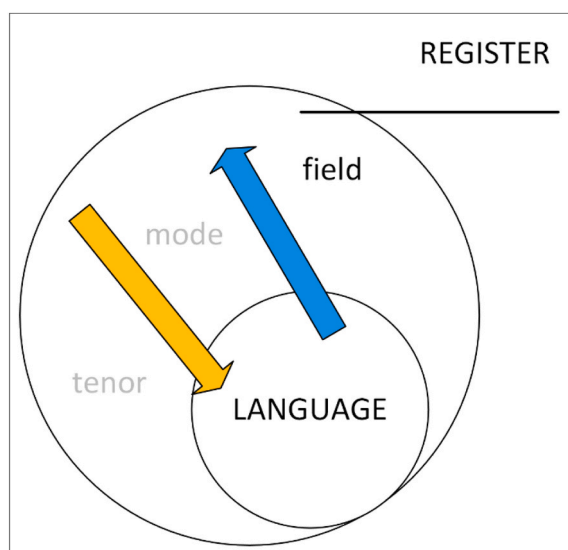


Fig. 1. Language and register: text analysis ‘from below’ and ‘from above’ (based on Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

- or 'student samples' (i.e. both low and high-scoring submissions). These student texts inform the "pre-instructional linguistic analysis" (Schulze, 2015, p. 118), eventually feeding into syllabus and classroom materials design.

The SFL core notion of *register* is useful to analyse student samples. Matthiessen (2019, p. 19) defines register as "a functional variety of language resonating with a setting of contextual values". These contextual values are *field*, *tenor* and *mode* (Fig. 1). *Field* refers to the subject matter, *tenor* to the role of language in constructing relationships between interlocutors, and *mode* denotes the role played by language in organising communication into a coherent whole (Halliday, 1999). Field and tenor are each dependent on the other; and they, in turn, rely on mode for their actualisation (Halliday, 1998, p. 185). These contextual variables can combine in different configurations, and a given situational configuration triggers a set of meanings known as register (Halliday & Hasan, 1989, p. 38). As shown in Fig. 1, register is realised in wording (i.e. 'language'). What this means for ESAP practice is that once we have mapped out the configuration of field, tenor and mode in relation to a particular assignment (i.e. 'the register of the assignment'), we can then anticipate the most effective and appropriate language choices that are likely to be made in a successful text. And, if we have access to high-scoring samples, we can explain *contextually* the language choices made by successful student writers. Our modus operandi can thus be 'from below' (how does language create register?) or 'from above' (how is register realised in language?) (cf. Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) as indicated by the yellow and blue arrows respectively in Fig. 1. Halliday (Halliday & Hasan, 1989, p. 34) suggests conducting both types of analysis, the linguistic and the situational, and then focusing on how they relate to each other. These analyses can vary in their level of detail and, ideally, all three contextual variables should be analysed since any text would always display these three kinds of meaning (Hasan, 2009, p. 370). However, it might be more practical to prioritise one variable in the initial stage of the analysis, with the focus subsequently shifting to the others as needed (Matthiessen, 2015, p. 52). In the context of ESAP instruction, it is clear that all register variables are important elements of disciplinary discourses, and students need to master all three sets of meanings to succeed. However, since ESAP is driven by a desire to investigate "what [disciplinary] knowledge looks like from this linguistic point of view" (Martin, 2013, p. 24) and field realises the "resources for constructing specialised and formal knowledge of discipline area" (Humphrey et al., 2010, p. 109), an approach to text analysis that focuses on field only *initially* is, to some extent, justified. Thus, the sample analysis presented in this paper is limited to field.

2.2. Contextual analysis: emic and etic perspectives

The approach outlined in Section 2.1 can be operationalised by adopting an ethnographic perspective on academic writing. Linguistic ethnography aims to understand the practices of a particular social group and places emphasis on the "social particularity of knowledge" (Shaw et al., 2015, p. 7) and narrowing "the gap between text and context" (Lillis, 2008, p. 335). Linguistic ethnography and SFL appear to share the same premise: the study of (academic) language needs to be sensitive to its context. Linguistic ethnography thus presents itself as an ideal research paradigm when we want to foreground disciplinary knowledge in ESAP instruction, and SFL can significantly contribute to this endeavor by providing the analytical tools to investigate how language realises the meanings valued by the members of a disciplinary community. In trying to make the tacit knowledge around disciplinary academic writing overt, the ESAP tutor acts as a linguistic ethnographer to whom, from their vantage point of an outsider, things stand out. The ESAP tutor's insights thus complement the insiders' perspectives (i.e. disciplinary experts) who often "lack an explicit awareness of their own textual strategies" (De Beaugrande, 1993, p. 19). This interplay lies at the core of the approach to designing ESAP materials presented in this paper.

The specificity of disciplinary writing requires an approach to writing instruction that sees the ESAP practitioner collaborating with disciplinary experts. Coffin and Donohue (2012) use the terms "etic" and "emic" respectively to describe the perspective of each expert

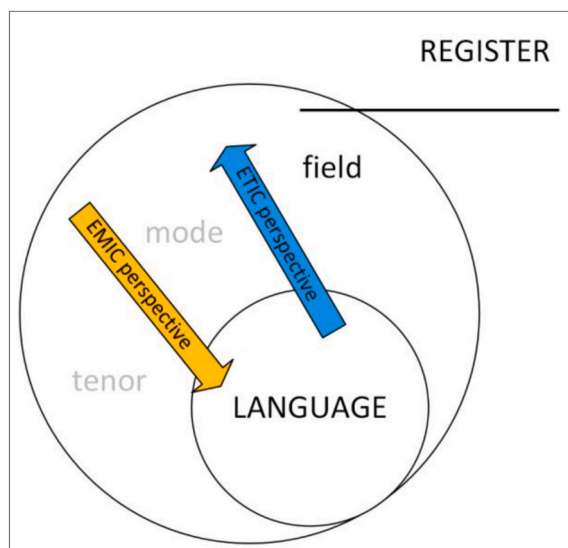


Fig. 2. Emic and etic perspectives (based on Coffin & Donohue, 2012).

(Fig. 2): while the disciplinary expert provides an “emic” perspective, that is an insider’s point of view into the discipline, the ESAP practitioner contributes an “etic” view from their vantage point as an outsider. Both perspectives are equally important. On the one hand, emic understandings are key to identifying what is valued within a particular disciplinary context (Lillis, 2008, p. 360). To access emic perspectives, the ESAP practitioner should collect “documentary data (e.g. institutional and tutor guidelines), students’ and tutors’ textual data (e.g. written assignments with tutor comments and marks)” (Coffin & Donohue, 2012, p. 70). Whenever possible, he or she should also interview the disciplinary experts and prompt them to “describe their own registers and how they use them” (De Beaugrande, 1993, p. 18). In fact, a key aspect of linguistic ethnography is the use of a wide range of data sources (Lillis, 2008, p. 362), of which Table 1 gives examples relevant to ESAP instruction. On the other hand, etic perspectives (grounded in SFL) are also needed because disciplinary experts often have no experience of teaching academic writing and, while it may be evident to them that a student has not met expectations, they tend not to have the linguistic knowledge to explain precisely why. This might be why they often give vague feedback comments (Caplan, 2019, p. 2) and language advice that focuses on basic accuracy concerns and not the kind of “linguistic discourse analytical focus that characterises EAP” (Tibbetts & Chapman, 2023, p. 31). In this sense, SFL helps the ESAP instructor understand “*linguistically* what was clearly apparent to the content instructor” (Caplan, 2019, p. 2, emphasis added).

The data sources in Table 1 can be processed in a number of ways depending on the aims of the teaching materials the ESAP practitioner is designing. A useful approach would be to start broad by looking at documentation that clarifies the disciplinary skills and knowledge students are expected to acquire (e.g. QAA benchmark statements, unit handbooks and unit intended learning outcomes). This can then be followed by an investigation into assessment expectations by consulting assignment briefs and marking criteria. Whenever possible, ESAP practitioners should also discuss students’ needs and writing expectations with disciplinary lecturers as well as observing lectures and consulting reading lists. With a better understanding of what knowledge is valued in the discipline, the ESAP practitioner can then focus on the etic perspective.

2.3. Linguistic analysis: field and the system of transitivity

The next stage of the analysis focuses on the ‘etic’ perspective by considering context ‘from below’ (blue arrow in Fig. 2) to address the question ‘how does language create register?’. Priority in the text analysis is given to the registerial variable field (i.e. ‘the subject matter’) which is realised at clause level through the system of *transitivity* (Thompson, 1996, p. 78). There are both methodological and practical reasons why starting at clause level makes sense. Matthiessen and Teruya (2023, p. 344) point out that an initial focus on clauses will ensure that no lexicogrammatical considerations will be neglected in the analysis. The practical considerations relate to the fact that ESAP practitioners are often only allowed to include short extracts from complete student submissions in their teaching materials (or at least this was the case for the workshop materials discussed in this paper). Moreover, while a pre-instructional linguistic analysis of longer stretches of discourse is advisable, asking students to read long samples in a workshop might not be always feasible or desirable. It is likely that a focus on a whole text would require a series of workshops, which was not an option in the case study discussed below since each workshop was designed to be self-contained.

In an ESAP context, transitivity analysis aims to explore how language construes the kind of knowledge that is valued within the discipline. This analysis requires “an interpretation not only of the text itself, but also of its context”, with context here referring to both the “particular assessment task students are working on” and “the broad educational and epistemological practices” of their discipline (Moore, 2007, p. 56). A transitivity analysis involves identifying the processes (verbal groups), participants (nominal groups and adjectives) and circumstances (adverbial groups or prepositional phrases) in a clause (Eggins, 1994). Table 2 illustrates this approach with examples taken from the student sample that will be discussed in detail later.

The identification of the process is usually the starting point of a transitivity analysis because the process constitutes the nucleus of the clause (Martin & Rose, 2003, p. 70; Matthiessen & Teruya, 2023, p. 375). Halliday’s typology of processes construe three main realms of experience: the physical world (doing), the world of abstract relations (being) and the world of consciousness (sensing). Concerned with constructing our experience of the physical world, material processes bring about some “change in the flow of events” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 224) with the source of this change or doing usually being construed as a participant: the Actor. Material processes might also involve another participant “to which the process is extended” (ibid: 226): the Goal. When a material process involves both an Actor and a Goal, the clause can be in either the ‘active’ or ‘passive’ voice. As shown by examples (a) and (b) in

Table 1
Examples of data sources on the emic perspective.

Sources of emic information
● Interviews with disciplinary experts ● High and low-scoring student submissions ● Marker’s feedback ● Assignment briefs ● Marking criteria ● Unit handbooks ● Intended Learning Outcomes ● QAA benchmark statements ● Reading lists ● Lecture recordings and slides ● Lecture observations

Table 2

Transitivity analysis with examples from student sample (and traditional grammar labels in brackets).

PARTICIPANT (nominal group)	PROCESS (verbal group)	CIRCUMSTANCE (adverbial phrase)
<i>Only diegetic sound</i>	<i>is used</i>	<i>in the scene</i>
PARTICIPANT (nominal group)	PROCESS (verbal group)	PARTICIPANT (adjective)
<i>The sound of this sequence</i>	<i>is</i>	<i>unnoticeable</i>

Table 3, the student sample that will be discussed in detail later features several ‘passive’ material clauses where the Actor is omitted, and the Goal is mapped on to the Subject. This means that the Goal is given responsibility for the action and is construed as the point of departure of the clause whereas the Actor, in this case the filmmaker, is left out and their agency is erased from the text, a point to which we shall return later in the analysis.

As exemplified in excerpts (b) and (c) in **Table 3**, processes in academic writing are often abstract doings. In this context, material processes “do not necessarily represent concrete, physical events” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 243) and participants are often inanimate entities (e.g. ‘sound’, ‘sensation’, ‘silence’). The key reason behind the high occurrence of inanimate nominal groups in academic discourse is twofold: they enable writers to generalise about social processes, away from individuals or groups of people, while also aiding in the organisation of a text by condensing ideas (into nouns) to be “picked by [...] and carried through the text” (Humphrey et al., 2010, p. 125). In addition, the use of abstract nominal groups (some of which consist of nominalizations) gives scientific texts the quality of being both semantically dense and highly technical (Humphrey et al., 2010; Martin, 2017). This semantic density is possible because nouns can be pre- or post-modified. For example, *sound* in example (a) is pre-modified by the adjective *diegetic*, with such combination resulting in the use of a technical term. The use of terminology in a text contributes to organising knowledge in specialised ways since terms can be arranged in taxonomies (Halliday & Martin, 1993, p. 96; Halliday, 1998, p. 197). Halliday believed that “the union of nominalisation with recursive modification of the nominal group” (Halliday & Martin, 1993, p. 33) marked the birth of scientific writing.

Relational processes are another major type of processes in academic writing where meanings are often symbolic. Relational processes (**Table 4**) can be used to *characterise* an entity (‘carrier’) by ascribing it a quality (‘attribute’) or to identify one entity (‘identified’) as another (‘identifier’). This ‘identifying’ type is often used in academic writing to interpret evidence when proving an argument (Martin, 1992, p. 280) as illustrated by example (e) in **Table 4**. In this way, noticing relational processes in student samples can help ESAP practitioners understand disciplinary writing expectations such as the need to go beyond description by interpreting the effects of artistic forms in Film and TV assignments. Relational processes can also draw attention to the taxonomic knowledge that is often valued in academic writing (Matthiessen and Teruya, 2023: 380) as we shall see below when discussing the importance of the concept of *mise-en-scène* in Film and TV studies.

Mental processes are the third major category and are concerned with the world of consciousness (sensing). They involve two participants: the Senser, which is always a conscious being, and the Phenomenon. The mental processes relevant to the student text analysed in this paper (**Table 5**) are those belonging to the ‘perception’ subtype, usually realised by verbal groups such as *perceive*, *see*, *hear*, *notice*.

Matthiessen’s exploratory study on the frequencies of process types in a registerially varied sample of texts found that processes are “ordered into three frequency bands: • material, relational > mental, verbal > behavioural, existential” (2025: 9). This “frequency profile”, he suggests, can be used as “a frame of reference” to investigate texts from different registers to find out the extent and ways in which frequencies vary across registers (Matthiessen, 2025, p. 10). In academic discourse, for example, Ignatieva et al. (2021) found that while literature essays (in Spanish) seem to follow this order, geography and history essays do not. Essays in geography were found to include more relational than material processes, whereas in history verbal processes outnumber mental ones. This difference is explained by the researchers as mirroring the knowledge valued in each discipline: while geography seem to centre on “the construal of relationships between particular entities”, history relies more on “the integration of different voices – including the students’ and other authors” (Ignatieva et al., 2021, p. 30). In less traditional academic genres such as PhD student narratives on YouTube, the frequencies were more similar to the ones identified by Matthiessen: students were found to employ mostly material and relational processes (Alabdali and Alyousef, 2025, p. 342). The high occurrence of material causes was explained as students positioning themselves as active agents involved in concrete academic practices.

Table 3

Examples of materials processes.

PARTICIPANT: GOAL	PROCESS: MATERIAL	CIRCUMSTANCE
(a) <i>Only diegetic sound</i>	<i>is used</i>	<i>in the scene</i>
(b) <i>A sensation of separation between her and the others</i>	<i>is created</i>	
PARTICIPANT: ACTOR	PROCESS: MATERIAL	PARTICIPANT: GOAL
(c) <i>The silence</i>	<i>enhances</i>	<i>the “value-rich emotions, [...]”</i>

Table 4

Examples of relational processes.

PARTICIPANT: CARRIER	PROCESS: RELATIONAL (attributive)	PARTICIPANT: ATTRIBUTE
(d) <i>The sound of this sequence</i>	<i>is</i>	<i>unnoticeable</i>
PARTICIPANT: IDENTIFIER	PROCESS: RELATIONAL (identifying)	PARTICIPANT: IDENTIFIER
(e) <i>Everyone else but Cléo being in silence</i>	<i>confirms</i>	<i>their lack of emotional understanding of her</i>

Table 5

Example of mental process.

PARTICIPANT: SENSER	PROCESS: MENTAL (perception)	PARTICIPANT:
the audience	<i>hears</i>	<i>dialogue mainly by Cléo</i>

3. A case study from film & TV

3.1. Teaching context

The teaching materials discussed in this case study were designed for an academic language and literacy workshop part of the ESAP provision provided by the Centre for Academic Language and Development (CALD) at the University of Bristol. This provision is embedded in disciplinary units, so the students who attend CALD workshops are all on the same academic programmes, making the groupings disciplinary homogenous. In accordance with the Contextualised, Embedded and Mapped model developed by Sloan et al. (2013), the content of these workshops maps on to the subject unit assessments. This is possible because CALD ESAP course designers have access to the virtual learning environment (i.e. BlackBoard), where most emic data documentation is stored. This highlights the importance of collaborating with disciplinary colleagues who need to be aware of as well as trust the ESAP practitioner's ways of working in order to share the necessary documentation.

The materials discussed here were designed for a workshop titled 'Communicating your analysis and evaluation of films' which was the second of a series of three (Table 6). This workshop was embedded in the Screen Forms and Analysis unit which all MA students in film and television were required to take. The students (6) who attended Workshop 2 were all international, having moved to study at the University of Bristol from overseas. For half the group, English was an official language in their home country (India) while the rest spoke Chinese as their first language. A few of these students were new to the discipline of film and TV, having completed their undergraduate studies in a different field.

3.2. Data sources

This case study focuses on the analysis of the student sample in Table 7. This is the only student text that was provided as an example of what and how students were expected to write. In addition, the disciplinary lecturer's feedback in Table 9 was also shared with the workshop designer as an illustration of what students usually struggle with. These data sources were supplemented with an analysis of the Screen Forms and Analysis unit's Intended Learning Outcomes and assignment brief (Table 8) as well as a core unit reading from Week 3 titled "*Mise-en-scène: Film style and interpretation*" (Gibbs, 2002).

3.3. Contextual analysis: emic perspective

As explained in Section 2.2, the first step in the SFL-informed approach to materials design presented in this paper was to engage with emic data (Table 1) using an ethnographic lens. Table 8 presents both the ILOs and an extract from the assignment brief for the Screen Forms and Analysis unit.

As shown in Table 8, the development of students' analytical skills is one of the main ILOs of this unit, particularly their ability to identify the implications and effects of certain stylistic forms. This is reflected in the assessment brief which asks students to select and analyse a scene from a film. The brief also lists the specific features students should analyse (e.g. sound, cinematography, etc.) and

Table 6

Scheme of work for CALD academic language and literacy workshop.

Workshop	Focus	This session will help you to:
1	Critical Reading	● interact critically and selectively with texts ● use your reading to develop your argument in your writing
2	Communicating your analysis and evaluation of films	● use language to write about and reflect on films ● analyse and use academic language to communicate your analysis and voice
3	Focusing your response and structuring your argument	● focus your response to answer the question ● produce and communicate a coherent argument

Table 7

Extract from student sample with processes (in main clauses) in bold and participants in italics.

The sound of this sequence is unnoticeable compared to other elements. Only **diegetic sound is used** during the scene: *the audience hears dialogue* mainly by Cléo, as well as the sound effect of her moving around in the room while the pianist and the writer remain silent. *The lack of non-diegetic sound* **makes this scene stand out** from the previous parts of the film, during which her movement is always rhythmically accompanied by music. Therefore, *this scene appears to be more realistic and emotionally chaotic*. However, *the silence enhances the "value-rich emotions, especially profound feelings of love and intimacy, and forms of wonder that verge on my mysticism"* (Brook 2008, p.3). *Everyone else but Cléo being in silence* **confirms their lack of emotional understanding of her**; as their silence is being pierced through by Cléo's voice, *a sensation of separation between her and the others is created*, pushing her urge to leave the room.

Table 8

Examples of documentary data used in the case study.

Screen Forms and Analysis unit: Intended learning outcomes

- To be able to apply established terms and approaches to the textual analysis of screen media
- To articulate and interrogate the potential implications of different stylistic formations
- To distinguish between different approaches to stylistic analysis
- To be able to present a clear and well-structured argument evidenced through close textual analysis
- To understand the implications of different styles, genres and forms for close textual analysis

Screen Forms and analysis unit: assignment brief (extract)

Analyse how sound, cinematography, mise-en-scène and editing combine to create a particular impression (meaning, affect [emotion], implication, etc.) or way of seeing. Consider:

- What do we see and hear?
- What effect is achieved?
- What perspective are we encouraged to adopt?

You should then explain how each formal element contributes to this effect or way of seeing, and how they work together.

One option is the formalist method: discuss each element in turn (e.g. sound then editing then cinematography, etc.), one paragraph per element, followed by a concluding paragraph that explains how they work together.

An alternative option is the 'expressive criticism' approach, in which you progress sequentially through the sequence or moment, evoking how it unfolds, integrating analysis of each formal element into an evocative close account.

Table 9

Marker feedback on mid-scoring submission.

"Able to employ critical analysis and judgement. The essay starts and finishes very strongly, with some good, at times very good analysis. There is a noticeable dip in the middle where too often the essay offers narrative description rather than formal analysis. As the essay develops, however, the analysis becomes stronger and stronger."

what the focus of the analysis should be: the effects the analysed stylistic forms create. From a linguistic point of view, it is interesting to notice that the brief does not mention the people who would normally work on a film set; for example, the filmmaker is not referred to. Instead, the brief uses the passive voice: 'what effect is achieved?' and 'what perspective are we encouraged to adopt?' rather than 'what did the filmmaker try to achieve?'. These language choices contrast with the language of more popular genres such as film reviews in the press where mentions of directors, actors and screenwriters are frequent, thereby pointing to the academic nature of the assignment and the need for students to learn new ways of writing about films (Coffin & Donohue, 2014, p. 86). The brief also makes use of inanimate entities as subjects: 'sound', 'formal element'. These observations are already quite insightful when ESAP tutors want to understand what and how their students are expected to write. However, lecturers' feedback also provides useful emic insights. Table 9 shows a comment left by the marker in a student submission: the marker praises the students for showing good analytical skills in places but laments that the essay dips into 'narrative description rather than formal analysis' towards the middle. Although, intuitively, an ESAP tutor might guess why the marker is seeing this as problematic, a more theoretically grounded answer is needed, which is exactly what an SFL-approach affords via the contextual variable *field*.

Field realises the "resources for constructing specialised and formal knowledge of discipline area" (Humphrey et al., 2010, p. 1109). Acquiring these resources to conduct a film analysis (rather than a description) involves developing "a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing" films (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 1). These new meaning-making processes are referred to as *threshold concepts* in some educational literature and are said to be accompanied by an extension of the student's language (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 374). In this sense, an assignment should require students to show mastery of disciplinary threshold concepts, for which the student's knowledge and language must co-evolve. Consulting the literature on threshold concepts as well as research on the nature of disciplinary knowledge can be the ESAP practitioner's way into understanding the rationales behind disciplinary writing expectations. Although time-consuming, this is an important step towards developing practitioners' agency and knowledge-base.

In this case study, the threshold concept of *mise-en-scène* and the approach known in the art as *formalism* were the conceptual tools

that helped explain the reasons behind the marker commentary in Table 9. A look at the unit reading list revealed that the students in this case study had in fact encountered the term ‘mise-en-scène’ in one of the core readings in Week 3 where it was defined as “the contents of the frame and the way that they are organized” (Gibbs, 2002, p. 5). As Donohue (2012) explains in his study of student writing in Film studies, mise-en-scène is a concept that students are asked to apply in the taxonomic film analysis genre which is key to film students’ development. In this genre, the taxonomic structure of the text manifests itself in paragraphs that each deal with a different element of the mise-en-scène (Coffin & Donohue, 2014, p. 92), thereby evidencing the student’s analytical skills. A central process to taxonomic film analysis is the use of technical vocabulary to express decontextualised meanings: students are expected to show their ability to label concrete elements of the film using accurate terminology. A paragraph would often start with decontextualised meanings which are then exemplified contextually “through a description or recount of film material” (Coffin & Donohue, 2014, p. 104). Another key feature of this genre is the omission of “the film-viewer and film maker from the making of meaning” (Coffin & Donohue, 2014, p. 113).

The other concept that helped contextualise the lecturer’s feedback in Table 9 is what, in art criticism, is known as *formalism*. This is a concept which is alluded to in the following paragraph from the assignment brief (Table 8) which suggests a possible way of structuring the writing:

*One option is the **formalist** method: discuss each element in turn (e.g. sound then editing then cinematography, etc.), one paragraph per element, followed by a concluding paragraph that explains how they work together.*

Formalism maintains that the real subject of visual art is the form, that is “the play of striking arrangements of lines, colors, shapes, volumes, vectors and space” (Carrol, 2013, p. 87) rather than “its narrative content or its relationship to the visible world” (Tate, n.d.). This explains the following extract from Table 9 where the marker is lamenting an excessive dip into narration to the detriment of formal analysis:

*There is a noticeable dip in the middle where too often the essay offers **narrative** description rather than **formal** analysis.*

At the same time, the formalist approach in film and TV studies is usually “associated with a constructivist view of meaning” (Thomson-Jones, 2008, p. 137) whereby the audience’s role in interpreting and comprehending the film is crucial. This explains the inclusion of the following questions in the assignment brief (Table 8) prompting the students to consider the film from the viewer’s perspective:

- what do **we** see and hear?
- what perspective are **we** encouraged to adopt?

This section has illustrated how the investigation of the emic perspective through the analysis of documentary data such as ILOs, assignment briefs and marker’s feedback can reveal some important assessment and writing expectations. In the case study, this contextual investigation, which revealed the importance of formal analysis, was followed by the textual analysis of the student sample reported below.

3.4. Transitivity analysis: etic perspective

According to the material design process outlined in Section 2, once the analysis of expectations using documentary data such as assignment briefs and marker feedback is completed, the next step is to infer, through the lens of the contextual analysis, the language choices that are likely to feature in a successful submission.

On the left-hand side, Table 10 shows some of the notes taken when conducting the situational analysis in this case study, while on the right are inferences about the language choices that are likely to be encountered in a high-scoring submission. For example, in answer to the question ‘what do we see and hear?’ in the assignment brief, we can expect the sample to include mental processes of perception, and Sensors and Phenomena as participants. Because students are asked to identify the effects *created* by certain stylistic

Table 10
Notes on inferring language choices from the situational analysis.

Situational analysis (emic)	Transitivity analysis (etic)
● Focus on seeing and hearing ● Focus on effects of certain artistic choices (cause & effect) on emotions/ways of seeing ● We = audience = student = writer ● Passive (“is achieved”): filmmaker not foregrounded	Processes: ● Mental: perception - ‘sensing’ ● Relational - ‘being’ ● Material - ‘doing’ Participants: ● Sensors & Phenomena ● Actors/Carriers/Identified: ‘formal element’ (implied = filmmaker) ● Goals/Attributes/Identifiers: feelings

choices on emotions, material processes are also likely to feature in the sample. Since the filmmaker is never mentioned in the assignment brief, we can expect the sample to align with this choice and, therefore, to have feelings and elements of the *mise-en-scène* as Actors and Goals. Furthermore, since the focal point of the analysis is effects on emotions, instances of relational processes with Attributes and Identifiers referring to emotions or affect are also likely to appear in actual samples.

As mentioned above, while the textual analysis starts with a focus on field/transitivity only, the other two register variables (i.e. tenor and mode) might also come into the picture and shed useful light on the requirements of the assignment. For example, to assess the extent to which a student submission focuses 'on the effects of certain artistic choices on emotions' (Table 10), the ESAP practitioner might want to extend the analysis to tenor and mode.

The observations in Table 10, however, are only predictions whose accuracy must be checked by analysing actual student samples (e.g. Table 7). The following sections aim to do this and have been structured following the three questions posed in the task brief (Table 8):

- 'What do we see and hear?'
- 'What effect is achieved?'
- 'What perspective are we encouraged to adopt?'

3.4.1. 'What do we see or hear?'

Starting with the (emic) expectation set in the assignment brief that the analysis should focus on 'what we see or hear', the sample in Table 7 fulfils this expectation in several ways. First of all, the whole paragraph centres on the sound effects as indicated by the very first participant and a few of the following ones:

- i. The sound of this sequence
- ii. Only diegetic sound
- iii. The lack of non-diegetic sound
- iv. The silence

These participants are all inanimate nominal groups, which is a typical feature of academic writing since nouns play a key role in distilling technicality as well as describing and classifying phenomena (Humphrey et al., 2010). Nouns can in fact be pre- or post-modified by classifiers and qualifiers. For example, in the student sample, 'sound' is classified as 'diegetic' and 'non-diegetic' which demonstrates the student's ability to use technical terms in context.

The second way in which the expectation set by the assignment instructions are met in the sample is through the use of the mental process 'hear' in the following clause:

The audience **hears** dialogue mainly by Cléo Of interest here is that this clause provides evidence in support of the statement made in the preceding clause - '*Only diegetic sound is used during the scene*'. This is a common pattern in academic writing, particularly in argumentative texts, where most participants are abstractions (i.e. diegetic sound) and people (i.e. audience) tend to appear in clauses where the writer is providing examples to support an argument (Martin & Rose, 2003, p. 89). What is also interesting is that by placing the formal analysis in the first clause and the narrative content in the second, the student writer is foregrounding the analysis and backgrounding description, in line with the assessment expectations.

3.4.2. 'What effect is achieved?'

Another key (emic) expectation set by the task brief is that the analysis should discuss how formal elements in the film scene create certain effects. To meet this requirement, the student sample makes use of material processes: 'use', 'create', 'make', and 'enhance'. As explained above, materials processes bring about "change in the flow of events" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 224), which in the sample analysed consist in changes in the viewer's experience and interpretation of the film generated by sound design choices. This is illustrated in the following examples:

- a. *The lack of non-diegetic sound* **makes this scene stand out** from the previous parts
- b. *The silence* **enhances** the "*value-rich emotions* [...]"
- c. *as their silence is being pierced through by Cléo's voice, a sensation of separation between her and the others is created*

In examples (b) and (c), the effects created by the auditory style of the scene concern emotions, which is something the task brief explicitly mentions (Table 8), whereas example (a) brings an element of comparison into the analysis.

Interestingly, some of the material processes in the sample are in the passive voice ('is used', 'is created'). The individuals on the film crew who would have been responsible for the sound design are never mentioned, and instead all the participants in the main clauses are inanimate. Erasing the agency of conscious subjects in this way contributes to making the overall aesthetic of the scene the focus of the analysis, thereby assigning the responsibility for creating effects to the formal elements of the film. This is in line with the assignment brief where it is the formal elements who 'work' together as shown in the excerpt below:

You should then explain how each **formal element** contributes to this effect or way of seeing, and how **they work** together.

Table 11

Examples of relational processes.

PARTICIPANT: CARRIER	PROCESS: RELATIONAL (attributive)	PARTICIPANT: ATTRIBUTE
(a) <i>The sound of this sequence</i>	is	unnoticeable
(b) This scene	appears to be	more realistic and emotionally chaotic
Subject	Finite Predicate	Complement
PARTICIPANT: IDENTIFIED	PROCESS: RELATIONAL (identifying)	PARTICIPANT: IDENTIFIER
(c) <i>Everyone else but Cléo being in silence</i>	confirms	their lack of emotional understanding of her

3.4.3. 'What perspective are we encouraged to adopt?'

As well as mental and material processes, the student sample includes instances of relational processes: 'is', 'appears to be' and 'confirms' (Table 11). However, these instances fulfill slightly different (emic) expectations. In (a) and (b), the relational processes are of the attributive kind (see Section 2.3), and the entities being described, the Carriers, are the 'sound' and the 'scene' respectively. While (a) and (b) are similar in that the Attribute in both is a quality, the two differ in the "domain of attribution": (a) concerns the "outer/material experience" whereas (b) relates to the "inner experience" or, in other words, "the semiotic domain" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 272). Therefore, (a) and (b) can be said to address two different prompts in the brief: the material experience is triggered by the prompt 'what do we hear or see?' while the inner experience relates to the question 'what effect is achieved?', with the effect here being a semiotic one. This explains an additional difference between (a) and (b), the analysis of which requires shifting our focus from field to tenor (see shaded row in Table 12). Within this register variable, modality is an important system that allows writers "to argue about the probability or frequency of propositions" (Eggins, 1994, p. 95). From the perspective of probability, the use of the finite modal operator 'appears to' weakens the claim in (b), whereas the use of the polar form 'is' gives the statement in (a) more certainty. This choice might be explained considering the different nature of the knowledge (i.e. outer versus inner) discussed in each clause: (a) concerns outer/material experience (i.e. the sound), which can arguably be observed, while the attribute 'emotionally chaotic' in (b) relates to inner experience (i.e. emotion/attitude).

As for excerpt (c), this is the relational clause that addresses the prompt 'What perspective are we encouraged to adopt?'. What is interesting here is that this clause stands in sharp contrast to other main clauses where the participants are all inanimate nominal groups. The grammar of the Identified, with the use of Present Participle ('being in silence') in a nominal group with conscious beings ('everyone', 'Cléo'), suggests that this Participant is perhaps better understood as being part Actor, enacting a material process, and part Sensor, enacting a mental process (see Behavioral clauses in Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 301). In other words, the Identified in (c) appears to stand at the crossroads between narration (material) and analysis (perception). In this sense, the inclusion of conscious beings in (c) is explicable if one reads 'what perspective' in the question 'what perspective are we encouraged to adopt?' (Table 7) as 'which character's perspective?'. The grammar of the Identifier, however, contributes to placing the relational clause in (c), overall, closer to the analysis end of the analysis-narration continuum. Interestingly, the student is here using an "incongruent" (Halliday & Martin, 1993, p. 263) form by choosing to nominalise the verb 'understand': 'their lack of emotional understanding' as opposed to 'that no one emotionally understands her'. In this sense, 'confirms' here is the link joining the two 'halves of the assignment': form/narration, on the one hand, and content/analysis, on the other.

Overall, the transitivity analysis of the student sample described in this section has revealed the student's ability to treat the film as "an object of study rather than an experience of entertainment" (Coffin & Donohue, 2014, p. 90). This was a key aspect of the assessment genre, a taxonomic film analysis. The language choices discussed in this section thus show that the student is complying with the demands set by the "particular assessment task" as well as "the broad educational and epistemological practices" of their discipline (Moore, 2007, p. 56).

As mentioned earlier, however, other register variables might draw the analyst's attention while analysing transitivity. In this respect, a more comprehensive analysis of the sample in Table 7 would involve shifting the attention from field to mode by considering thematised participants. Being the initial element of a clause, Themes in SFL are said to serve "as the point of departure of the message" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 89). The use of abstract nominal groups as thematised participants in the student sample (i.e. 'the sound of this sequence', 'only diegetic sound', 'the lack of non-diegetic sound' and 'the silence'), and in scientific writing more generally, serves to organise the text by unfolding a thematic structure: "the new information presented in preceding Rhemes is picked up through" nominalizations in subsequent sentences (Halliday & Martin, 1993, p. 268). This mechanism is shown in the examples below:

- a. Rheme (*while the pianist and the writer remain silent*)
- b. Theme *The lack of non-diegetic sound*
- c. Theme *However, the silence*

To conclude this section, the case study has so far described a *modus operandi* for the design of ESAP materials that integrate emic and etic perspectives. As we have seen, the first step consists in conducting a contextual analysis with the aim of gaining some insights

Table 12

Students brainstorm in response to the question ‘what is the difference between narration and analysis?’

Narrative description writing	Formal analysis writing
Formal (audience)	Formal (audience)
Superficial	Depth
Content = what's happening in the film (plot >> narrative)	“breaking sth down into its components”
	Apply certain tools/theories/methods
	Theory >> key concepts, classification/taxonomy
	>> tools: camera angles, mise-en-scène (lighting, costumes)
	Form (e.g. formalism)

into disciplinary knowledge practices. These insights then inform the transitivity analysis of actual student samples. Together, these analyses lead to a more nuanced understanding of how disciplinary knowledge practices manifest themselves linguistically. While this case study has presented only a small sample of what could be included in the analysis, a more comprehensive analysis, using a wide range of student samples as well as longer stretches of discourse, would lead to more interesting insights and enable the analysis to reach a certain degree of confidence that the features analysed are indeed salient. How these insights can be translated into classroom activities is the focus of the next section.

3.5. Workshop activities

In the classroom, students are taken on a journey in some respects similar to the process described in Sections 3.3 and 3.4. This process is not dissimilar to the Deconstruction stage of the teaching/learning cycle which aims to model and establish a specific genre as the goal for the entire cycle (Martin & Rose, 2005).

The starting point of the workshop is the emic perspective. However, while in the pre-instructional text analysis the source of this perspective is the subject lecturer (via the analysis of documentary data), an important source of the emic view in the classroom are the students. Although students are not as inside the discipline as their lecturers, drawing on their evolving understanding of the disciplinary area is an important aspect of ESAP teaching. This is clearly not always possible, especially with postgraduate students who have completed their undergraduate studies in a different discipline. Nonetheless, asking seemingly simple questions at the start of the workshop such as ‘what is your understanding of the terms narration and analysis in the context of the assignment?’ is one way of assessing the extent to which students are familiar with disciplinary expectations. As can be seen from the students' answers in this case study (Table 12), some disciplinary insights already emerged in this stage of the lesson: formalism and mise-en-scène. Similarly to the Deconstruction stage of the teaching/learning cycle, this activity starts “where students are at, in order to open up the field and context of the genre” (Martin & Rose, 2005, p. 3).

This initial brainstorming activity is then followed by a discussion of excerpts of marker feedback. This discussion should raise students' awareness of some important emic expectations, which contributes to positioning ESAP practitioners' work with students not only as support with academic writing but as a concerted effort to make “the basis of achievement” visible to students (Monbec & Ding, 2024, p. 79). In the case study, for example, the discussion of the marker commentary in Table 9 drew students' attention to the need for the essay to strike a fine balance between narration and analysis, warning them against including excessive description. This first stage of the workshop, which brings together the students' perspectives and the marker's expectations, aims to contextualise the subsequent analysis of a student sample.

As a starting point for the analysis of a student sample, the students in the case study were instructed to use different colors to highlight narrative description and formal analysis in the sample. This helped students ‘visualise’ the need to balance description and narration. To reinforce this teaching point, if low-scoring samples are also available, students can be asked to compare the portion of the text taken up by descriptive narration and analysis in more and less successful samples.

To achieve greater level of detail in the sample analysis, students should then be guided into understanding how the “more basic writing” function of narrative description is incorporated “into the more sophisticated” function of analysis (Humphrey & Economou, 2015, p. 49). Acting as a “literacy guide” in the Deconstruction stage, the ESAP tutor's role is to “authoritatively [make] visible the structure and purpose of the text” (Martin & Rose, 2005, p. 3) especially in those contexts where students' main interests lie outside the linguistic sciences. In the case study, this involved leading students into noticing some of the linguistic patterns discussed in Section 3.4. For example, using enhanced input (e.g. bolding words), students' attention was drawn to the use of inanimate nominal groups as thematised participants in main clauses, which was contrasted with the use of conscious beings in subordinate clauses. As explained earlier, this is a common pattern in academic writing where most participants tend to be abstractions, and people usually appear in clauses where the writer is providing evidence to support an argument (Martin & Rose, 2003, p. 89).

In the case study, the final part of the Deconstruction stage asked students to evaluate the sample by answering the following question: ‘what feedback would you give the student?’. This is an important step in the pedagogical approach presented in this paper which “gives [us] a basis to say something about the adequacy” of a text (Moore, 2007, p. 56). This, in turn, can help students develop feedback literacy skills such as their ability to give peer feedback.

4. Conclusion

A short questionnaire was shared with a small team of ESAP colleagues (4 respondents) after working with SFL for approximately twelve months (see [Appendix 1](#) for survey questions). While these practitioners were not involved in the case study presented in this paper, they all attended professional development sessions to learn about transitivity, which were facilitated by the author of this paper. Most of these practitioners commented on the value of SFL in demystifying academic writing as shown by the quotes below:

'I'm still getting to grips with transitivity but using this framework with some sample texts has helped to reveal useful language patterns that students can use to express their purpose.'

"I feel a shared SFL-informed metalanguage is emerging within our Insessional team".

However, implementing the approach outlined in this paper presents some challenges. The most important one is securing access to sources of emic information ([Table 1](#)), in particular student samples. Access to this content is a pre-requisite if course designers wish to transition from an EGAP to an ESAP approach embedded in disciplinary contexts. However, if access to this content is not available, then published texts such as research articles from the students' specific disciplines could replace authentic student samples (although this would not increase students' access to the occluded genre of university assignments). To gain insights into emic perspectives, consulting the literature on academic writing in the disciplines (e.g. [Nesi & Gardener, 2012](#)) could also prove useful. Other important sources of emic information are the Quality Assurance Agency Subject Benchmark Statements, which are "written by subject specialists [...] [and] are used as reference points in the design, delivery and review of academic programmes" ([QAA, n.d.](#)), as well as public university programme catalogues listing unit ILOs.

However, a more sustainable and fruitful strategy might require a shift in the relationship between disciplinary experts and ESAP practitioners. Some disciplinary experts conceptualise 'communication' or 'language' as something separate from 'content' or 'knowledge'. It is evident that an SLF-grounded language pedagogy is at odds with such view, so a discussion needs to take place where emic and etic perspectives come together for the benefit of the students. In this respect, an SFL-informed language pedagogy in ESAP seems particularly well-suited in ensuring the added value of an embedded language and literacy provision and in foregrounding the importance of the etic perspective, which might also help avoid ESAP practitioners feeling like "butlers" ([Raimes, 1991](#)). It should be noted, however, that in the case study discussed in this paper the relationship with the film and TV disciplinary experts was mostly mediated by access to the virtual learning environment and the assignment submission point from which samples of student writing with feedback comments were downloaded (with permission granted by the MA director). This (less-than-ideal) type of collaboration with disciplinary colleagues might resonate with other ESAP course designers, for whom it should be reassuring to know that the approach presented in this case study is still both feasible and valuable even when there is little personal contact with disciplinary experts (as long as emic data can be accessed). As for those ideal situations where disciplinary lecturers and EAP practitioners do collaborate, [Monbec and Ding \(2024: 132\)](#) propose a "Toolkit for Interdisciplinary Scholarship" which facilitates the recontextualisation of theory into practice.

To conclude, this paper has shown how SFL can inform ESAP practice. More specifically, this case study has illustrated how the SFL notions of *register* and *field* can help design ESAP materials even when direct access to disciplinary lecturer's knowledge and evaluations is not available. In doing so, this paper has responded to calls for greater theorisation in EAP by presenting a theoretically grounded approach to the design of ESAP teaching materials, which allows ESAP practitioners to take on the role of 'mediators' between linguistic theory and practice. Central to this approach is Halliday's social-semiotic view of language. This view helps develop "more nuanced ways of relating text to context" ([Lillis, 2008](#), p. 373) since language and context are "inherently united" and "co-evolve" ([Hasan, 2009](#), p. 357) in the same way students' language and knowledge do.

Declaration of competing interest

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Appendix 1. Survey for ESAP colleagues

1. Which of the following did you attend?

☐ SFL workshop 1 (transitivity)

☐ SFL workshop 2 (themes)

☐ summer reading circles

☐ Other

2. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	I strongly agree	I agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	I disagree	I strongly disagree
Using SFL in my practice has helped me demystify disciplinary academic writing for students	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel a shared SFL-informed metalanguage is emerging within our IS team	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I believe the sample analysis in our IS materials has improved as a result of our engagement with SFL	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I believe SFL has helped me develop more nuanced ways of relating text to context	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

3. Feel free to use this space to add any other thoughts relevant to the scope of my study (i.e. presenting a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)-informed approach to designing teaching materials for an English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) provision)

Enter your answer

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Debora Catavello is an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Lecturer at the University of Bristol, UK. Debora has worked within the field of EAP since 2017 and previously within English as a Foreign Language. Her main research interests include academic writing and research-informed materials development.