

○ J. JONES, ***FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR FOR ACADEMIC WRITING***

(SYDNEY, UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY LEARNING CENTRE.
2013. *TEACHERS COURSEBOOK*, PP.54; *STUDENTS COURSEBOOK*, PP.54; *EXERCISES AND ANSWERS FACT SHEETS*, PP.85)

Review by **Constance Ellwood** Honorary Fellow, School of Languages and Linguistics,
University of Melbourne

Three related books – a *Teachers Coursebook*, a *Students Coursebook* and a student's workbook, entitled *Exercises and Answers Fact Sheets* – share the main title, *Functional Grammar for Academic Writing*, and make up the materials for a university course on the clause level of academic writing from a Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) perspective. The content of the teacher and student coursebooks are identical apart from additional materials occasionally included in the teacher book to support the use of the books in class.

The claim of the course and, by extension, that of the three ring-bound books is to 'help students develop knowledge of the grammar of written English' (p.6) as a tool to help them in their studies. Such tools are certainly much needed in the current climate which sees many undergraduates and postgraduates enrolling without a serviceable knowledge of the sometimes arcane intricacies of written academic English. The course – whether credit-bearing or voluntary is not made clear – is offered as a series of five units, each of two hours.

The *Teachers Coursebook* begins with a three-part diagnostic text (presumably to be photocopied and given as a handout as it is not printed in either of the student books). Part A requires students to self-assess their understanding of a list of items described in terms of traditional grammar; for example, what a verb is and how articles operate. Part B offers five sentences whose errors are to be corrected and explained. The sentences are representative of common student errors and include issues with subject/verb agreement, verb group, and articles as well as an incomplete sentence. In Part C, students are required to label some parts of a sentence, again using traditional grammar terminology such as 'conjunction' and 'adjective'.

Following the diagnostic test there are five chapters or 'units', each dealing with an aspect of grammar from a functional grammar perspective. The first unit explains the basic tenets of SFG, namely its focus on the clause and the three metafunctions – ideational, interpersonal and textual – as well as the terminology used to describe how clauses are realised and the idea of language as composed of ranked constituents. The remaining four units look in turn at dependent and independent clauses (Unit 2), verbal groups (Unit 3), the nominal group (Unit 4) and grammatical metaphor (Unit 5). Each unit contains an explanation of the grammar

under discussion with examples and, using the symbol of a magnifying glass, indicates to students that they should now attempt a particular exercise in their workbook. The examples used have been drawn from a variety of disciplines – physics, biology, business and education – and as such are relevant and informative. In general, the explanations and examples are clear and easy to follow, due to the information being divided into numerous subsections and to the use of tables, boxes, colours, shading, bolding and highlighting. Similarly, the student exercises in the *Exercises and Answers Fact Sheets* book are easy to follow, with answers provided in the back of the book, along with what are called Fact Sheets, to which the student is directed at various stages in the course.

Fact Sheet 1 gives a two-page table of word classes in English from the perspective of traditional grammar. Fact Sheet 2 gives some examples of word class changes using morphemes. Fact Sheet 3 gives a basic overview of tense choices, using traditional grammar terminology. Fact Sheet 4 lists finite verbal operators and Fact Sheet 5, defining and non-defining relative clauses. While much of this information is useful for students, these fact sheets do not seem to relate closely to academic writing. For just a few examples, the word “shan’t” is included in the finite verbal operators, and the information on Fact Sheet 3 does not include or mention the more specific uses of tense in academic writing that have been discussed by, for example, Swales and Feak (2004). The only information available on some of the in-depth knowledge on tense use in academic writing is given in a comment in the coursebooks, “research findings are usually in past tense while research aims are in present tense” (*Teachers Coursebook*, p. 34, *Students Coursebook*, p. 32). However, the reader is then directed to the fact sheet where there is no mention of research findings or aims.

This uncertain focus on academic writing in the fact sheets is also evident in other ways in the books. Although the author makes the focus of the book clear on the first page, stating that it ‘does not address larger units of meaning such as paragraphs and longer texts’ (p.6), the title, *Functional grammar for academic writing*, is somewhat misleading; the very fine-tuned focus of the books on the “level of the clause” (p. 6) could perhaps have been more honestly included in the title. This narrow focus, along with the basic level of some of the information in the books and in the fact sheet, makes it unclear what type of student is being targeted.

Thus although the coursebooks mention in passing a variety of key features of academic writing, including the importance of considering ‘who we are talking/writing to’ (p.6), what they actually offer seems rather limited, particularly in the light of the complex understandings supplied by the wealth of research now available in the field of academic writing. The book appears to be handicapped by the need to explain and establish SFG terminology. Since it constantly falls back on traditional grammar terms, or uses SFG terms and traditional grammar interchangeably, it is not always clear why SFG has been called on at all. Some sections of the book – particularly the earlier units – may be of less interest to those who prefer to employ traditional grammar terminology or who prefer to see some more

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immediate relevance to academic writing. Nevertheless there are some useful exercises in the students' workbook which could be used to supplement teaching in any course, depending on its focus and the needs of the students. The units on the nominal group and on grammatical metaphor (Units 4 and 5 respectively) have, in my opinion, the most to offer in the sense that they both provide more in-depth coverage of their topics and deal with what are often key issues for students struggling with academic writing.

The books are somewhat marred by typographical errors. Some of these are merely confusing, such as the errors in bolding, shading or font style which are problematic because of the important role these features play in meaning-making in the book. However, some more serious errors could undermine students' confidence in the books. For example, it is not possible, in Part C of the diagnostic test, to correctly match the given terms with the features of the given sentence and in Unit 1 of the workbook, the word 'impacting' is described as an adverb and the word 'increasingly' is described as a preposition.

Nevertheless, given that the books appear to be closely linked to a particular course these typographical errors can be dealt with by teachers in class. So for those using an SFG approach in their teaching of academic writing or interested in running a course at this level to increase students' understanding of language, the books do make a contribution.

REFERENCES

Swales, J. M. & Feak, C. B. (2004) *Academic writing for graduate students: Essential tasks and skills: A course for nonnative speakers of English* (2nd ed.). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.