

**Booked reviewed:**

Christie, Frances. 2012. *Language Education Throughout the School Years: a functional perspective* (Language Learning Monograph Series). Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. ISBN-10: 1118292006; ISBN-13: 978-1118292006.

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This volume, *Language Education throughout the school years: a functional perspective*, by Frances Christie, is one of eight volumes published so far in the Language Learning Monograph Series published by Wiley-Blackwell as a supplement to the journal *Language Learning*. In introducing this volume, current series editor Mary Schleppegrell suggests it is a profound development in using functional grammar to describe and assess students' challenges and expectations across their school years, and I will echo her assessment of its significance in this review.

Prior to this publication, Frances Christie had made a pivotal pedagogical contribution to systemic functional linguistics and educational linguistics over 30 years of educational research. This volume draws on all her previous studies and cogently represents the view that systemic functional linguistics can be a welcome "model" and a "solid basis" for "tracing developmental change in language and literacy across the years of schooling, planning curriculum and pedagogy for the school years, enabling teachers to provide appropriate support at the different stages, and anticipating potential learning difficulties" (p. 2). In particular, the book extends work Christie first introduced with Bev Derewianka in 2008 in *School Discourse: Learning to write across the years of schooling*. That work described students' writing development throughout primary and secondary school in subject English, history and science, with detailed descriptions of lexico-grammatical resources implicated in students' development. In this volume, Christie further develops her proposal of four phases of language development across the years of schooling. She draws on her own projects, together with other major projects in the field, to explain in detail how students' meaning potential is developed during each phase within different subject areas. She also has drawn from other studies in the field to demonstrate significant uses of functional grammar and genre-based pedagogy in actual teaching and learning activities.

This banquet on educational linguistics and systemic functional linguistics starts with a basic introduction to systemic functional theory of language, and a brief introduction to the research discussed in the book, based on actual examples of student writing. In this introduction, Christie also attempts to demonstrate how particular grammatical features in students' writing develop gradually across the years of schooling. For example, when Christie presents the logical metafunction and clause interdependencies as part of the functional theory of language (pp. 18-22), she shows that students' linguistic literacy develops from being able to write simple clauses linked by *but* or *and* to the use of clause complexes, often with dependent clauses of time linked by *when*, and then to clause complexes with dependent clauses of reason linked by *because*, *so*, together with their mastery of non-finite clauses of purpose, and then to a grasp of a full range of dependent clauses by successful learners in late childhood to adolescence. Both introductory moves are likely to be helpful particularly to teachers and other educational practitioners who do not have a background in systemic functional linguistics and who have not yet had opportunities to read much of the impressive range of research on which she draws.

Since Christie has primarily focused on learning English as a mother tongue, readers whose interests are in English second or foreign language education may wonder if this model of language development is applicable to the needs of English L2 children. Yet, as discussed in this book, an on-going study being conducted by Emilia and Christie on junior secondary students of English in Indonesia suggests students in that project are following a similar development trajectory with Christie's result for L1 children in Australia. So researchers in second language education will also find this book informative and stimulating.

In the following four chapters of this volume, Christie chooses sample texts to present language development in students' writing in all four identified phases, including registerial progression and lexico-grammatical feature development. These are considered in three different subjects, i.e. English, science and history. Christie explores this progression in detail and discusses how development in language reflects students' cognitive abilities moving from commonsense, everyday knowledge to uncommonsense, abstract knowledge. The challenge to students' cognition of more subject-specific literacy towards the later years of secondary school is also addressed. In each phase, suggestions for teachers' intervention are provided to discuss how teachers could better help students to meet the challenges.

Using the subject of science as an example, we can see Christie's approach clearly. I will present the main language development in students' writing in the subject of science in Christie's four proposed phases, respectively: 1) early childhood, 2) later childhood to early adolescence, 3) mid-adolescence, 4) late adolescence to adulthood.

She proposes that students in primary school start to engage in science learning through classroom talk with teachers, in order to have a shared basis for learning, constructing scientific knowledge together. Then the finished written text based on classroom talk is a written procedural recount about nature. An example is analyzed to show the use of exophoric reference, the type of thematic patterning (e.g. Theme of one sentence is often retrieved from the Rheme of the previous one). Christie notes that early writing by some successful writers can involve the use of Marked Themes in clause complexes in the form of dependent clauses of time.

Moving to the second phase of late childhood to early adolescence, Christie notes that students in this phase begin to face the distinctive subject specialism. Students begin to master "subject-specific literacies", especially in the subject of science to explore the nature of the world systematically and effectively. Students have to expand their emergent ability to handle abstract qualities and values. To explain this challenge and development, she uses a written text explaining the human digestive system by a Year 8 student to illustrate her linguistic ability of presenting abstractions. The writer achieves a growing control of thematic patterning and endophoric references to build coherence in the text. The text includes extensive grammatical metaphor, which shows her ability to pack information quite densely into language. For example, when she explained the role of nutrients in the digestive system, she wrote: "The nutrients that are absorbed from your food are used for growth and tissue maintenance, or burnt off as energy" (p. 100).

In the third phase of mid-adolescence, students have to master more challenging "subject-specific literacies". Christie notes that mid-adolescence is now widely recognized as a critical period for educational development in the UK, Australia and in the USA. To explore development in this period and to describe major developments in 'scientific language' during this phase she introduces an interesting text by a Year 10 student, a report on hemophilia. In this text the student demonstrated his good control of Marked Themes to unfold the whole text. The student also demonstrated his knowledge of this field by using technical language. He made considerable use of relational processes to introduce technical language.

For example, when he introduced hemophilia at the beginning of his text, he wrote: “Hemophilia is a genetically linked blood disease that mostly affects males” (p. 141). He also used relational process to illustrate the cause: “Hemophilia is a hereditary disease in which there is a defective gene that causes the owner of this gene to be unable to clot efficiently” (p.142). Interpersonally, although the writer successfully detached himself from the field and from the potential readers, as indicated by the non-appearance of his identity in the text, he also used interpersonal features effectively, as for example in his use of modal adverbs such as *generally*, *usually*, to present his evaluation and judgment.

In the last phase, the last few years of secondary school, students’ particular challenge is to learn how to report scientific experiment or investigation to explore methods of building scientific meanings in this transitional period to tertiary learning. Hence, in the texts studied during this period, difficult technical language is often accompanied by images, diagrams and graphs. Christie’s example text for this phase is a report of an experiment in what she calls a ‘demonstration genre’ that is typical in late secondary school and undergraduate studies of science. The text is worded like a procedure accompanied by one diagram, one table and one figure. The grammatical structure of this text is actually relatively simple. For example, the text is relatively free of grammatical metaphor. However, technical lexis is extensively used to present the technicality of a scientific experiment, and it is this technicality in scientific language, foregrounded in the example of writing of the Year 10 student, that Christie argues students find “arcane” and “intimidating” (p. 137). Christie also argues that ‘multiliteracy’, abilities to read images and to relate images to the linguistic text, needs to be enhanced to enable students to better comprehend multimodal scientific texts in this last phase of secondary school.

In the final chapter, Christie outlines an overall trajectory in language development through the school years. She has characterised the overall movement as movement “from the simple and congruent to the less simple and noncongruent; from the familiar and commonsense knowledge of life toward the less familiar, uncommonsense areas of knowledge that the school subjects represent; from meanings and discourses that are elemental and of the immediate context toward meanings and discourses that are abstract and of more distant contexts” (p. 189). This comprehensive work on systemic functional linguistic description of students’ writing across the school years will serve as a significant reference for curriculum development in language education. Christie makes functional grammar accessible for students and teachers without an SFL background, so the book is likely to be truly

beneficial for many practitioners in language education. However, all the detailed analysis presented in this book is based on sample texts selected by the author, so whether these sample texts are sufficiently representative enough will need to be verified by subsequent studies. Other tasks remaining within the field are more empirical studies involving both qualitative and quantitative analysis of students' writing in their school years.

**Reference:**

Christie, Frances., & Derewianka, Beverly. 2008. *School Discourse: Learning to Write across the Years of Schooling*. London and New York: Continuum.