Reverberating Words and GED 2014 Academic Writing Instruction: Reflecting on a Functional Linguistics-Based Approach to Grammar Foregrounding the Social Concept of Identity

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Abstract: As adult literacy GED programs are increasingly tasked with serving the educational needs of both young and older adult students in a knowledge-based economy, there is growing interest in how to make these programs more effective and efficient, especially at helping students develop the academic writing skills needed to pass the new common-core aligned GED 2014. However, in the attempt to make these programs more efficiently effective, the promotion of prescriptive GED writing pedagogies, based on an autonomous view of literacy, is likely. The long-term goal of this reflection study is to learn how to thoughtfully develop a framework - based on a functional linguistics approach to grammar that foregrounds the social concept of identity - that can produce alternative GED writing pedagogies, promoting more socially-just effective practices within adult literacy programs and helping to ensure that adult literacy students have access to empowering academic writing curricula.

Issues Addressed

Although adult literacy programs predate public schooling, these programs have historically been marginalized within the educational system; however, as adult literacy programs are increasingly tasked with serving the educational needs of both young and older adult students in a knowledge-based economy, there is growing interest in how to make these programs more effective, especially at helping students develop academic writing skills. Starting next year, adult literacy programs will begin to prepare students for the GED 2014, a revised version of the exam based on Common Core Standards which will measure "career- and college-readiness (GED Testing Service, 2013). Although the exam is undergoing numerous changes, one of the greatest changes is its new focus on academic writing – a change reflecting the increased national focus on improving writing skills "in a global information economy that continually raises the bar for what counts as literacy" (Juzwik et al., 2006, p.453). While the current version of the exam assesses writing only in its Language Arts Writing section through multiple-choice grammar-based questions and a narrative essay prompt (Gillespie, 2007), the 2014 version of the GED will test evidence-based, analytic writing in both the Language Arts section as well within the Science and Social Studies sections (GED Testing Service, 2013).

However, this Common Core Standards makeover with its new emphasis on academic writing does not presume the adoption of more academically challenging and socially just adult literacy pedagogies. Instead, as the GED Testing Service (part of the nonprofit American Council on Education) merges with Pearson (a for-profit educational testing company), it may be likely that more commercialized, script-based materials – based on an autonomous view of literacy – will be adopted by GED instructors, possibly continuing to send cognitive "deficit" messages to GED students and making their "second-chance" at an education unproductively similar to their "first-chance". This may be especially true in writing instruction, which may be reduced to superficial culturally irrelevant grammar and skills-based instruction.

The goal of this paper is reflect on how to develop an academic writing instructional framework within GED programs that promote tools to encourage meaningful student participation. One possible framework to explore is grounded within a functional linguistics approach to grammar that foregrounds the social concept of identity.

Contextualization

Often, GED preparation classes are overly reliant on remedial educational pedagogy and test-taking strategies, making GED preparation classes less likely to serve as authentic educational pathways for students; this is especially true in GED writing classes which tend to focus on skill and drill decontextualized grammar exercises, conveying to students "a very restricted model of the composing process" (Rose, 1983, p.109). Russell (cited in Gillespie, 1998), for example, in her interviews with GED writing students, found that students' strong beliefs about the importance of mechanics was possibly interfering with their writing development. When she asked a student to describe what makes someone a good writer, the student answered "Knowing how to punctuate things. And not having to have so many mistakes on a paper and everything just being fine the first time" (p.5).

Because of the restricting possibilities inherent in a decontextualized-grammar-based GED class, some GED instructors choose not to teach grammar, hoping to "transcend the deluge of skills exercises" by focusing on meaning over form (Shafer, 2004). Yet, there are problems with "dethron[ing]" form and "crown[ing]"

meaning (Myers, 2003, p.55). Powerful academic writing depends on a writer's grammatical choices, and not teaching students to define and identify grammatical elements may be another way to constrain GED students, constraining their ability to use academic writing to express their intended meanings as well as to make new meanings (Micciche, 2013). "Meaning does not flow from knowledge of syntax and lexis, but the ability to express meaning [in academic context] does" (Myers, 2003, p.55).

One possible solution to address this grammar-teaching dilemma - on the one hand, relying on grammar instruction and basic skills remediation, "which comes from socially constructed deficiency assumptions about students' work" (Sanchez & Paulson, 2013, p.117), may further marginalize GED students; on the other hand, choosing not to focus on grammar may also further marginalize GED students by not giving them access to and the power to affect the academic Discourse community – is to incorporate a functional linguistics approach to grammar. A focus on grammar that is functional focuses on language in-use. Instead of presenting grammar as a set of rules about what is correct or incorrect, a functional linguistics approach presents grammar as meaning-making (Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004; Scheleppegrell, 2007).

In particular, functional grammar emphasizes syntactic morphological knowledge, the understanding of how a derivational suffix changes the part of speech of a word (Kiefer & Lesaux, 2012, p.521). For example, because academic writing often focuses on abstract concepts, academic writers need to be able to turn verbs into nouns (nominalization). Through the use of morphologically related words (e.g., *colonies, colonial, colonists, colonize, colonization*), students are able to maintain thematic coherence across paragraphs as they subtly foreground, background, and nuance concepts in service of their intended message. Rather than completing isolated grammar exercises, students come to understand how they can harness word forms and syntax to communicate their ideas more effectively without "continu[ing] to confine students to the impoverished meaning carried out by the conventional rules of language" (Reither, p.144). Syntactic morphological knowledge also allows students to understand and experience the invention in sentence making. As Shaughnessy (1970) explains: "There is a kind of carpentry in sentence making, various ways of joining or hooking up modifying units to the base sentence" (p.7). Instead of feeling afraid of making mistakes and having "everything [on paper] just being fine the first time, students can experience "how to mess with sentences;" students can become "sensitive to the questions that are embedded in sentences, which, when answered, can produce modifications within the sentence or can expand into paragraphs or an entire essays" (Shaughnessy, 1977, p.4). Ultimately, helping students understand how to syntactically play with words brings them closer to being able to express their intended meanings, while allowing them to experience writing as "knowledge transforming" (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987), which, ultimately, makes academic writing worth doing.

Although adopting a functional approach to grammar may help to solve the grammar-dilemma, it also may be problematic because it does not encourage students to reflect on how they negotiate their identities as academic writers. Proponents of a functional linguistic approach acknowledge that students bring a range of linguistic repertoires into the classroom; however, they seem less likely to consider how these linguistic repertoires may influence students' perceptions of themselves, as well as impact students' decisions to participate in literacy practices, especially academic writing.

Academic writing "is not simply a replacement of some practices by others. It is a process . . . which requires deep emotional commitment and involvement on the part of the language user" (Cook-Gumperz, 1993, p.338). Lillis (2001) explains that students' sense of identity significantly influences "what writers (don't) write and (don't) wish to write in academia" (p.48). Students have many different selves – selves with sometimes conflicting voices – which, if not addressed, may interfere with their understanding and completion of writing assignments (Lea, 2004). The question of identity seems particularly important when it comes to vocabulary and grammar instruction, for accepting another "set of grammatical paradigms, rhetorical practices, and usage conventions" has identity and ideological implications (Cook-Gumperz, 1993, p.338). As Gee (1996) explains, language use is connected to power "often in the service of privileging certain types of literacies and certain types of people" (p.46). Purcell-Gates (1993), in her case-study of Jennie, a white woman attending adult literacy classes in Appalachia, illustrates what may occur when a student's primary discourse is marginalized from the dominant Discourse (Gee, 1996). Despite many years of adult literacy grammar instruction, Jennie continued failing year after year "trying to memorize rules, trying to memorize terms like adverb and pronoun" because "none of these words, these rules, these linguistic terms were hers . . . and thus she could not succeed because her words were never acknowledged and affirmed, never allowed" (as cited in Gillespie, 1998).

Theoretical and Methodology Approaches

Because of the importance of considering identity and literacy, identity should be foregrounded within a functional linguistic approach to academic writing in a GED program. The diagram below is a start of what this framework may look like. It depicts how when a word and its forms are taught within an academic writing class to help students eventually build an academic essay, that word and its forms also have an impact on a student's language, which impacts his/her discourse, ultimately impacting his/her identity.

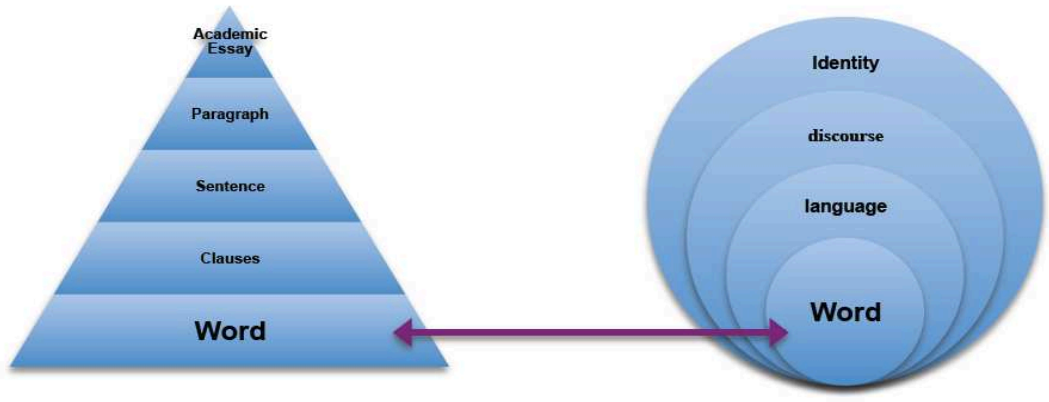

Figure 1. Reverberating words in GED 2014 writing instruction

Based on this emergent framework, questions can be developed to help more effectively develop academic instructional writing tools. For example:

- Based on the idea of a "reverberating" learned academic word, what might a curriculum intervention look like? What tools might be developed and why? How might these tools be studied within the theoretical framework?

The Credibility and Usefulness of the Study for Raising New Questions and Prompting New Possibilities

With the introduction of the new and privatized GED 2014, it is likely that adult literacy education will be further commodified and focused on measurable skills-acquisition, continuing to link literacy to the needs of a postindustrial economy; in addition, it is also likely that adult literacy programs will remain underfunded and continue to lack trained, professional instructors (Gillespie, 2007). Because of this, adult literacy students and their needs as learners may be further backgrounded within some GED programs. The long-term goal of this reflection study is to learn how to thoughtfully develop a framework that can produce student-centered instructional tools that promote effective practices with adult literacy programs, helping to ensure that students have access to empowering academic writing curricula.

The Relevance of the Theme for the Conference

In exploring why and how to develop an academic writing instructional framework grounded in a functional linguistics approach to grammar that foregrounds the social concept of identity, this reflection acknowledges that learning involves participating in different practices, encouraging all levels of educational programs – especially adult literacy programming - to respect the becoming of their students in these practices.

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