

# Teachers as Language Detectives: SFL as a Tool For ESL Teachers

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## Abstract

This teaching tip introduces the “Teachers as Language Detectives” strategy. The purpose of this strategy is to assist in-service teachers in analyzing the academic language demands of the texts used in their teaching. By analyzing these texts for linguistic demands, they can inform their instruction and ensure that their lessons adequately and explicitly address these linguistic features with their students.

## Description of the Teaching Tip

The Teachers as Language Detectives (TALD) activity was created to help teachers develop metalinguistic awareness of the way language works within the disciplines they teach (e.g. mathematics or history). Teachers typically possess a solid command of traditional grammar, and know how to read and write in discipline-specific ways, but may struggle to make those discipline-specific language uses visible to their students. For instance, teachers of science know that the passive voice construction is expected when reporting research results or that employing nominalized forms deemphasizes agency to allow scientists to present neutral and fact-focused work (Schleppegrell, 2004), yet their instruction may not emphasize the connection between this language use and the expectations of the science profession (de Oliveira, 2017).

With this challenge in mind, the TALD activity was developed to guide teachers’ text analysis to reveal these discipline-specific language uses and help teachers translate that linguistic knowledge into instruction.

## Theoretical Basis of the Activity

Systemic functional linguistic (SFL) theory influenced the



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construction of the activity. SFL considers language as a systematic pathway of choices that language users make as they simultaneously respond to and construct contexts. In other words, language users make language choices based on the situation that they are in and the available linguistic resources of their culture, and conversely construct contexts by drawing on those available resources. In schools, students are expected to participate in a number of academic genres, such as explanations, discussions, arguments, and narratives and use language in particular ways when engaging in these genres. Thus, it is the responsibility of teachers to make that academic language use within these school-related contexts visible to their learners. The TALD activity helps in a small, but significant way to support that language awareness in teachers and subsequently students.

### How It Works

The TALD activity is designed for teachers. Basic knowledge of SFL theory is required to understand the terminology of the TALD worksheet; however, teachers can conduct their analysis as they learn about SFL. In fact, it may be more effective to do so because they immediately have a context and application for applying new terms related to SFL theory. To get started, teachers identify a text they will use with their students. In this case, a text is any form of coherent and meaningful stretch of language that students encounter in the classroom such as: textbooks, short readings, novels, videos, movies, or dialogues. Once they have identified a text to analyze, they begin by examining the field of the text. The field is a register variable that is concerned with what is going on in the text and who is involved in this action. The activity calls for teachers to examine the processes, or the action words of the text that are helping to construct a social reality either internally or externally. Questions teachers can consider to determine the processes and understand their role in helping the text accomplish its purpose include: What is happening in the text? Are these processes material in that can they actions that be viewed externally? Or are they primarily mental processes which show what is happening internally, such as thoughts and feelings. There can also be questions that look at the tense of the action. Is the action happening now as typically found in the genres of argument or informational text or in the past as in the description occurring in a narrative genre?

The next register variable that teachers analyze is *tenor*. Tenor usually depends on who is involved in the text and the relationship between the reader and writer that is constructed by particular language choices. For instance, within a science text, the author may wish to convey a certain sense of authority regarding his/her subject matter. To do so, they may rely on linguistic resources such as specialized technical vocabulary or use primarily declarative sentences to convey meaning. Conversely, a writer may wish to make a connection with his audience and may use such techniques such as adding questions that directly address the reader and engage the audience, a linguistic move that is not typically expected in academic science texts.

In this section of the TALD worksheet, teachers are also directed to look at appraisal resources. Appraisal is a linguistic resource that helps language users show their thoughts, judgment, and evaluation, of a particular event or phenomenon (White, 2015). For instance, scientists or mathematicians may make linguistic choices that construct a neutral appraisal value. Historians may do the opposite as they express their opinions on controversial events in an historical timeline.

The last register variable we ask teachers to examine is the Mode. This variable concerns the language choices we make depending on the channel of communication. In other words, if face-to-face having a conversation or giving an informal talk, language users make language choices that reflect spoken discourse. Linguistic indicators of spoke discourse may include, hedges, stops and starts, and pronoun use that indicates a shared frame of reference (e.g. "Look at this." When the referent "this" is known to the speakers). In formal academic writing, language choices are going to rely on linguistic features such as logical connectors to make text coherent, repetition to emphasize an important point, and nominalizations to deemphasize agency and help create coherence in the text.

### How It Might Help?

All this linguistic analysis is interesting to linguists, but not helpful to teachers unless we address its applications to our teaching context. How may what we learned from our SFL analysis of texts within this activity influence our teaching and our students' learning? The activity will potentially reveal

many aspects of language in use. The key is to look at the language patterns that emerge from the analysis. Does the analysis reveal specific patterns, or repeated ways of meaning making that may be challenging to students? At this point, a teacher's professional expertise and knowledge of their students remains vital. The teacher must determine which language patterns to teach explicitly within the lesson. For instance, if analysis of a science text reveals that passive voice, technical vocabulary, and nominalized forms are common and essential to meaning making in the text, then explicit instruction that guides students on how to pack and unpack nominalizations may form the focus of instruction (Schulze, 2015, 2016). In conclusion, the TALD activity is designed to guide teachers in analyzing academic texts found in school contexts and supporting teacher lesson preparation by bringing the focus to the particular ways academic language is used within those texts. By using this activity, teachers can enhance the linguistic focus of their instruction and ultimately, support their learners in increasing their control of academic language in school contexts.

For materials to try in your class, see the [Appendix](#).

## References

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