The Role of Systemic Functional Grammar in the Expansion of Nominal Groups

El papel de la gramática sistémica funcional en la expansión de sintagmas nominales

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This study presents the expansion of nominal groups in a systemic functional grammar class of an English language teacher program in 2016 at a Colombian public university. The participants were six student teachers. Nominal groups were first considered in a document written by the students before being exposed to the principles of systemic functional grammar and then in a revised version after the exposure to it. The study shows initial improvements in the enlargement of nominal groups between the two written productions and provides insights into the enormous potential for structural and meaningful expansion and the complexity of nominal groups. The gained awareness may become a cognitive framework for students to produce complex nominal groups in academic productions demanded in their studies and in the exercise of their professional practice.

Key words: English language, nominal group, pre-service teacher education, systemic functional grammar.

Este estudio presenta el desarrollo de sintagmas nominales en una clase de gramática sistémica funcional en un programa de formación de docentes de inglés en 2016 en una universidad pública colombiana. Los participantes fueron seis estudiantes. Se revisaron los sintagmas nominales insertos en un documento escrito por los estudiantes antes de ser expuestos a los principios de la gramática sistémica funcional y en una versión revisada después de ser expuestos. El estudio muestra cambios iniciales en la expansión de los grupos nominales de los participantes y augura el potencial que la gramática sistémica funcional puede brindar en la expansión y complejización de la estructura y significado de los sintagmas nominales en los productos académicos solicitados en sus estudios y en el ejercicio de su práctica profesional.

Palabras clave: educación de profesores en formación, gramática sistémica funcional, lengua inglesa, sintagma nominal.

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Introduction

The incorporation of grammar in the study of a foreign language is a topic that deserves attention as it becomes important knowledge necessary to perform well in personal and professional scenarios. In the specific context of second/foreign language teacher education, Svalberg (2015) points out: "Grammar courses aim to equip student teachers with declarative knowledge about grammar (KAG) they can subsequently draw on, explicitly or implicitly, in their own teaching" (p. 529). The declarative knowledge about grammar that student teachers need to handle can be taught and learned following different conceptions of language. There are structural grammars, functional grammars, and pedagogical grammars (Tomlin, 1994). They differ in their orientation. Structural syllabuses have traditionally emphasized the teaching of form over meaning. Functional grammars "analyze grammatical structure, as structural grammar, but it also analyzes the entire communicative situation: the purpose of the speech event, its participants, its discourse context" (Nichols, 1984, p. 97). Pedagogical grammars are "explicit descriptions of grammatical structure and use in a simple and straightforward manner" (Tomlin, 1994, p. 143) to improve the teaching instruction.

The current study adopts a functional perspective on grammar based on the work of linguist Michael Halliday. For him, language is not simply "a collection of rules and labels for grammatical categories" but "a resource for making meaning through which we interactively shape and interpret our world and ourselves" (Halliday as cited in Derewianka, 2012, p. 129). The systemic functional grammar (SFG) model of language builds on the grammatical categories understood in traditional grammar but transcends its focus on form and places meaning and use "as central features of language" (Bloor & Bloor, 1995, p. 2). Another important difference between SFG and traditional grammar is that the former operates at different levels or ranks, from the level of the discourse to the level of the morpheme while "the traditional view of language is a fixed body of knowledge at a sentence level" (Svalberg, 2015, p. 529).

The present research centers its focus of attention on the rank of group, a constituent below the clause level and above the word in the rank scale. The nominal group is of particular importance because it answers the question: What is the text about? Dare (2010) defines the nominal group as that group of words built up around a key noun. Examples of nominal groups can be single nouns as *knowledge* or *grammar*, a more complex combination like *the knowledge* or *a grammar*, or even more complex as "*declarative knowledge about grammar (KAG) they can subsequently draw on, explicitly or implicitly, in their own teaching* (Svalberg, 2015, p. 529). The nominal group in academic settings is usually a complex structure that carries a lot of information in a package. Therefore, the nominal group takes a leading role in the creation of information that responds to the needs of participants in different contexts or areas of knowledge because of the possibilities it offers. The understanding and handling of the nominal group in SFG equips the writer with the facility to communicate for different purposes and contexts (Aguirre-Muñoz, Chang, & Sanders, 2015) as well as to deal with different interlocutors in different fields of knowledge effectively. This understanding will also ease the writing task of different types of texts considering that "writing is difficult for students who are learning English, as they often struggle to express what they really want to say (Schleppegrell & Go, 2007, p. 529).

The research presented in this paper aims to respond the following research questions:

- What are the characteristics of the nominal groups in students' written productions before being exposed to the principles of systemic functional grammar?
- How are the principles of systemic functional grammar evidenced in students' nominal groups in written productions?

Theoretical Tenets

The theoretical bases for the understanding of this study are an overview of the traditional approach used to teach grammar, an introduction to the principles of SFG, and the theory behind the nominal group.

Traditional Methods to Teach Grammar

The tenets of the traditional grammar are the parts of speech: verb, noun, article, adverb, adjective, pronoun, preposition, conjunction, article, and interjection. Their labelling and the learning of rules for their combination have been the main concerns for teachers who follow the traditional grammar orientation. Traditional grammar teaches discrete grammatical structures in decontextualized contexts with mechanical practice. A grammar topic can possibly be developed this way: a presentation of a grammar structure, a provision of simple, concise explanations of the grammar structure under consideration, examples, and practice through exercises. The exercises are usually included in a textbook "at the level of individual sentences and often using unauthentic language" (Derewianka, 2012, p. 143).

How can language taught in a traditional way help in the improvement of writing? Derewianka (2012) asserts: "The research evidence indicates that traditional grammar taught in traditional ways does not improve students' writing" (p. 139). The words from Hillocks (as cited in Derewianka, 2012) are very powerful:

> If schools insist upon teaching the identification of parts of speech, the parsing or diagramming of sentences, or other concepts of traditional school grammar (as many still do), they cannot defend it as a means of improving the quality of writing. (p. 140)
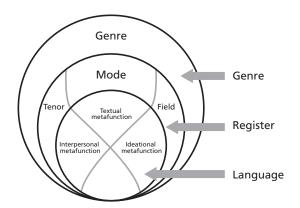
Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG)

In contrast to traditional grammar in which "there is an occasional nod towards meaning" (Derewianka & Jones, 2010, p. 6), as when it is said that a noun is a person, place, an animal, and so on, SFG takes into consideration the communicative situation including its intention, its context, and its participants (Nichols, 1984).

Nichols' purpose of the speech event can be connected to Bloor and Bloor's (1995) concept of genre, "a type of text identified by its communicative purpose and its conventional form" (p. 224). Martin (1986) places genre in the outermost layer of the SFG model of language (Figure 1) and understands it as a situation of context. Dare (2010) asserts that within this context "there are patterns in the way we produce meaning" (p. 19). Genre is a categorization of texts that depends on external criteria dictated by the context, the users, and the use of a text typical of a discourse community (Lee, 2001). In everyday contexts, people interact to achieve different social purposes like greeting, thanking, informing, inviting, discussing, and so on in different public and private spheres. In academic contexts, on the other hand, students have to use language to comply with academic purposes that include, among many, the provision of descriptions, narrations, comparisons, exemplifications, and explanations.

Figure 1. Genre, Register, and Language (Adapted From Martin, 1997, p. 8)

Register is in the central layer of the model and is associated with the organization of situation or immediate context and defined by linguistic characteristics (the innermost layer). The SFG model of language understands the concept of register as the language produced based

on the choices the language offers the users according to the situation. Halliday and Hasan (1985), Christie and Derewianka (2008), and Derewianka and Jones (2010) identify three key features in any context of situation: the field, the tenor, and the mode.

The field refers to the subject-matter (Derewianka, 2012), in other words, to what the text is about. Bloor and Bloor (2007, p. 183) inform us that the field can provide information about the "happenings" or "goings-on" represented by who does what, to whom, for whom, when, how, and why. It is the representation of real or imaginary worlds. Field is connected to the ideational metafunction proposed by Halliday. Tenor refers to the users of a language who fulfill their intentions in a particular context sticking to socially stated forms. Derewianka (2012) states that "such matters as how the status, level of expertise, age, ethnic background, and gender of the participants can have an impact on the language used" (p. 132). In English teaching, the tenor occurs under the concept of audience: the person or people to whom texts are addressed. Halliday's interpersonal metafunction is associated with the concept of tenor.

The mode refers to the channel of communication used to transmit the message. It can be oral or written, a combination of the two, or visual and multimodal texts. The textual metafunction is closely connected to the mode as language organizes the text itself (Bloor & Bloor, 1995) for the formation of coherent and cohesive texts (Christie & Derewianka, 2008). "These metafunctions occur simultaneously in every sentence, providing different layers of meaning." (Derewianka & Jones, 2010, p. 10) See Figure 1 for a visual understanding of the relationships between genre, register, and language.

Let's exemplify the concepts previously presented with a story called *Jasper's Beanstalk* by Butterworth and Inkpen (1992). It is a book for children in which Jasper, a lovely cat, found, planted, watered, dug, raked, and sprayed a bean and waited for the product of his effort: a beanstalk. In terms of the sfg model of language, the genre is a children's story whose communicative function is to narrate an event. The happenings or goings-on are all the actions carried out by Jasper on the bean in an animated animal context devised for children, the audience, who enjoy the story through the visual language of images that accompany the story.

In conclusion, sfg as a model of language describes how a language works to make meaning (Derewianka, 2011). sfg describes the relationship between grammatical forms and their functions (Derewianka & Jones, 2010). These two authors assert that sfg is located in the middle of a line between form and function. Derewianka (2012) emphasizes that "the functional model includes most of the terms employed in traditional school grammars but differs from traditional grammar primarily in terms of the purpose for learning about language and the terminology needed to talk about the meanings being created" (p. 142). sfg views language as a resource within which there is "a complex web of systems or sets of choices according to functional purposes" (Gardner, 2010, p. 37).

The Nominal Group in SFG

Constituency is a very important tenet of the sfg model of language. It is concerned with the structural organization of the clause in various parts (Bloor & Bloor, 1995). The hierarchy of grammatical constituents is composed of sentence, clause, word, and morpheme. "Each of these ranks refers to a unit of meaning" (Bloor & Bloor, 1995, p. 6). A sentence is made up of clauses, a clause is made up of groups, groups are made of words, and words consist of morphemes. An example of a sentence from *Jasper's Beanstalk* is: On Thursday, he (Jasper) dug and raked and sprayed and hoed it (the bean). This sentence is composed of four clauses. Let's analyze the clause *On Thursday, he dug it*. The existence of a clause determined by the presence of a verbal group. This clause can in turn be analyzed in terms of groups: *On Thursday* is a prepositional phrase, *he* and *it* are nominal groups and *dug* is a verbal group.

The present study centers its attention on the nominal group understood as a group of words built up around a key noun (Dare, 2010). This key noun answers the question: what are you talking about? This is labelled as the head of the nominal group. In addition to its head, the nominal group may have premodifiers or postmodifiers or both. "Building up information before and after the key noun within the same nominal group is a pattern typically seen in written language" (Dare, 2010, p. 21).

The nominal group can be analyzed at two levels within the ideational metafunction of the SFG model: the logical and the experiential functions (see Table 1). "The dependent element in the logical function of the group is the modifier (the other—the dominant element—being the head). It is subclassified as Premodifier or Postmodifier, according to its position in relation to the Head" (Bloor & Bloor, 2007, p. 284). The logical function is concerned with the relationships among ideas.

Table 1. The Ideational Metafunction in the Nominal Group

Logical function	Premodification				Head	Postmodification
Experiential Function	Deictic function	Numerative function	Epithet function	Classifying function	Thing	Qualifying function
Language	Referrers	Exact and inexact quantifiers	Adjectives and participles	Nouns	Noun	• Prepositional phrase • Finite clause • Nonfinite clause

The experiential function is largely connected with content or ideas (Bloor & Bloor, 1995, p. 9) and is realized by different functions in premodification: deictic (connected to the provision of references), numerative (linked to the identification of quantities), epithet (associated with factual or subjective characteristics) and classifier (related to a system of subclassification). The thing is the "key experiential item in a nominal group and typically conflates with the Head. It is typically realized by a noun" (Bloor & Bloor, 2007, p. 289). The qualifier is another experiential function of the nominal group that is located in postmodification position. It is realized by finite clauses, nonfinite clauses, and prepositional phrases.

The study of the nominal group has caught the attention of different academics. Fang et al. (2006) illustrate "the ways nominal expressions expand the amount of information in a clause, establish and maintain reference, and enable information to be distilled and further expanded" (p. 247). Schleppegrell and Go (2007) explore the analysis of noun phrases in the identification of the topic of a text because they permit the writer to "use articles, modifiers, and other language resources to characterize and describe the grammatical participants in the text" (p. 532). Understanding the nominal group can trigger the lexical competence of students, from "vocabulary in everyday contexts, to a growing number of school contexts (Year 1)" (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2012, p. 30) to "vocabulary typical of extended and more academic texts and the role of abstract nouns, classification, description and generalisation in building specialised knowledge through language (Year 7)" (ACARA, 2012, p. 73).

A previous classroom study carried out by Whittaker (2010) in two secondary CLIL classrooms in Spain shows the awareness SFL offers students regarding the handling of the nominal group. She found how the students started

to use the nominal group to carry a lot of the meaning in a more condensed way by placing more emphasis on the causes and less on the causers by the inclusion of prepositional phrases with very rich nominal groups. They also wrote "heavily modified nominal groups which allow information to be placed in different positions in the clause" (Whittaker, 2010, p. 35). Dare (2010) reports a classroom study in which an English literature student at senior secondary school level had problems with the formulation of abstract ideas. "After some serious and systematic work around the nominal group among other linguistic work, the student built up her ability to operate in a more academic, written register required by this particular educational context" (p. 23).

Method

The present research is framed within the case study methodology. A case study is defined as an inquiry that studies a phenomenon within its real-life context. The "unit of study or case may be a single individual, a small number of individuals, or a particular classroom or community" (Hubbard & Power, 1993, p. 153). Case studies represent the study of the distinctiveness and complexity of a particular case in order to arrive at the understanding of its activity in important circumstances (Stake, 2010). The phenomenon under investigation for the present study is the nominal group and is the result of the incorporation of the SFG language model in a real life context; that is, the grammar of an English language teacher education program.

Context

The current research took place with students from the English language teacher education program at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (Bogota campus). The grammar component is allocated six credits out of 140. It takes a regular student four years to complete the 140 credits. Grammar courses (I and II) are taught at the end of year two and the beginning of year three when students have been given important language

input in the written and oral communication courses (1, 2, and 3). When students take the Grammar I class, they are simultaneously taking the written and oral communication courses (Level 4). The present study centers its attention on the Grammar I class, which concentrates on the ideational metafunction that studies aspects such as the happenings and goings-on, the participants, and the inherent processes at clause level. The textbooks used had an SFG approach, namely Bloor and Bloor (1995) and Lock (1996), and the materials include authentic pieces of language from different genres.

Participants

The sample was composed of three women and three men from the Grammar I class in the second academic period of 2016. Two students were under 20, three students between 21 and 24, and one student was between 25 and 28. The six participants registered for Grammar I were at the end of year 2 and were taking the written and oral communication courses Level 4. They granted permission to use artifacts (1 and 2) and an analytical essay that accompanied Artifact 2.

Data Collection Instruments

The two basic data collection instruments were the artifacts and an analytical essay. Artifact 1 (submitted by Week 6 out of 16 weeks) was a selected composition from a period prior to the Grammar I class. Artifact 2 was the revised version of the selected compositions produced by Week 14 out of 16 weeks. The analytical paper was an essay that accompanied Artifact 2 and whose purpose was to have students reflect on the nominal groups in their data.

Artifact 1

Students were asked to select one composition from previous semesters. Five of the selected texts were written in 2016 (First semester) and one in 2015. Presumably the majority of the texts were written for the written

communication class 3 and 4. The genre of 50% of the texts corresponds to essays and 50% to short stories. The texts were chosen and submitted by Week 6 of the second academic semester of 2016 when the students had already been exposed to the concepts of the nominal group in SFG. Students were guided in the selection of the text through a series of prompts and were asked to consider texts that were 500 words long. Table 2 depicts the names of the submitted compositions.

Table 2. Names of the Compositions

Student #	Name of the composition
1	The Way Books Are Getting Boring Now
2	The Sixth Finger
3	Cannabis Legalization
4	Rescued
5	Is Culture Double-Edged? A "Colombia vs. Japan" Cultural Insight
6	The Black Cat

Artifact 2

By the end of Week 14 students were asked to submit the rewritten version of Artifact 1 applying the logical and experiential functions of the nominal group.

Analytical Paper

The analytical paper was an essay that had to include a discussion about the general structure of nominal groups, the characteristics of premodifiers in the nominal group, the characteristics of postmodifiers in the nominal groups, and the use of reference in the nominal groups with their respective examples.

Procedure

The compositions were identified with numbers from 1 to 6, corresponding to the six participants. Then, the twelve compositions were first analyzed in terms of simple or complex nominal groups. Later, they were examined in terms of their logical and experiential functions.

Analysis of the Nominal Groups

The twelve compositions were examined as they were submitted, including spelling and grammatical mistakes. The twelve writings were analyzed with the matrix shown in Table 3.

Table 3. General Criteria for the Analysis of Entry and Rewritten Compositions

Total number of words
Content words
Lexical Density Index
Average number of nominal groups
Average simple nouns
Average complex nouns

The total number of words is an initial technique used to measure the characteristics of texts and can be easily obtained by counting the words with the help of the counting of words tool available in the revision link of the program Word by Microsoft. The number of words is not necessarily an indicator of the complexity of a text though. The content words refer to lexical terms that have a "dictionary meaning, describable in terms of semantic features or its potential for referring to phenomena in real-world events, or imaginary ones" (Bloor & Bloor, 2007, p. 170) over the total running words. Following Fang et al. (2006), this research analyzed nominal groups as simple or complex. "Simple noun groups are nouns without modification, including pronouns (e.g., we, it) and proper names (e.g., Elvis Presley). All other noun groups are complex, some having multiple modifications" (p. 253). Content words were underlined. Simple and complex nominal groups were color-coded and then counted.

In a second moment, the complex nominal groups in both samples were analyzed taking into account the logical metafunction (see Table 4).

Table 4. Criteria to Analyze Complex Nominal Groups

NG with premodification
Head only NG
NG with postmodification
NG with pre and postmodification

Note. NG = Nominal group

In a third moment, each of the logical possibilities was analyzed taking into account the experiential metafunction in the nominal group exhibited previously in Table 1.

Results

Results are presented in the following way: Artifacts will be described according to the SFG model of language in terms of genre and register. Then, they will be contrasted in quantitative and qualitative terms under the title: Language Findings.

Genre

If we consider the specific contexts of academic writing, we see that students write because they are required to do so. It is possible to say that the six original compositions and their versions correspond to student writing which is at the center of the teaching and learning processes in education. It fulfills different purposes such as assessment, learning, and entering a disciplinary community (Coffin et al., 2003). Three compositions are essays and the other three are short stories. An essay is a group of paragraphs about one subject. There are many different kinds of essays as the narrative, the descriptive, and the argumentative essays, among others (Fawcett & Sandberg, 2000). The essay *The Way Books Are Getting Boring Now* can be classed as an argumentative essay, specifically a problem-solution essay because the student presents the conflict between books and new ways of telling a story with advanced technology and a proposed solution. The cause-effect essay *Cannabis Legalization* unfolds the problematic situation of the recreational consumption of cannabis and its devastating effects. *Is Culture Double-Edged? A "Colombia vs. Japan" Cultural Insight* is a comparative essay drawing on similarities and differences between the Colombian and the Japanese cultures.

The short story is defined is a piece of literature that can be read in one sitting. "Because of its length, it has only a few characters and focuses on one problem or conflict" (Sebranek, Kemper, & Meyer, 1999, p. 342) and can also be classified as creative writing. Students write stories for entertainment and pleasure because they can use fields of personal, imagined, even fantastic experiences. They may retell a meaningful incident or a personal experience. One of the short stories recreates the story of a jar that contained two fingers in it left in a taxi. Another tells the story of two men who were shipwrecked because of a storm. The third is a version of the short story *The Black Cat* written originally by Edgar Allan Poe (1843). The texts selected by the students reflect the demands placed on them in the written Communication courses.

Register

Taking into consideration the situation of context understood as the local conditions that surround the text (Rojas-García, 2016), Table 5 presents a summary of the six compositions in terms of "'what's going on?' (the field or subject matter), who's involved?' (the tenor), and 'what channel of communication?' (the mode)" (Derewianka & Jones, 2010, p. 7).

We can deduce what the compositions are all about by giving an answer to the following questions: who does what, to whom, for whom, when, how, and why? The information presented in Table 5 provides a general answer to the question: What is the text about? Bloor and Bloor (2007) assert that in these answers students can represent "their real or imaginary worlds" (p. 107).

Table 5. Description of the Compositions Based on the Register

Title of the composition	Field	Tenor	Mode
The Way Books Are Getting Boring Now	The importance of books and reading	Participants The teacher: the expert The student: A scholar-in-training trying to achieve the right balance of assuredness, objectivity, and knowledge	Written texts
Is Culture Double-Edged? A "Colombia vs. Japan" Cultural Insight	Social and communicative aspects of Colombian and Japanese cultures		
Cannabis Legalization	The effects of the recreational consumption of cannabis		
Rescued	Two shipwrecked men in a storm	Participants The teacher: the expert The student: A scholar-in-training trying to achieve the right balance of creativity and language	
The Sixth Finger	A jar with two fingers in it left in a taxi		
The Black Cat	A man who hurt a black cat		

In the essay *The Way Books Are Getting Boring Now* the participants are the books and new ways of telling a story with advanced technology these days. The circumstances that surround this situation are the way people react and their expectations. The comparative essay compares Colombia with Japan and focuses on social and communicative aspects of both cultures, specifically friendships, relationships, and literacy at the moment of delivering messages to emphasize that birthplaces are a remarkably strong influence for each person's ways of thinking, acting, and saying things. The cause/effect essay *Cannabis Legalization* highlights the effects of the excessive consumption of cannabis for recreational purposes by adolescents. The effects are pulmonary disease, cognition and coordination and brain problems.

In the short story *Rescued*, two young men were sailing far from the shore when a storm destroyed their boat. They managed to arrive at a deserted island from which they were rescued some days later. *The Sixth Finger* (story) narrates the anecdote of Arthur, a taxi driver, who found at the end of his turn on a cold Wednesday night a jar in a paper bag. To his surprise, the jar contained two fingers floating in it. Arthur plays with the idea of who the owner of the jar is to find him or her and give it back. *The Black Cat* (story) recreates

Poe's story in which an intoxicated man cut out one of his pet's eyes with a pocketknife. We could classify the short stories as part of everyday topics and the essays as part of specialized topics.

Tenor, understood as the nature of the interpersonal relationships of the interactants and their roles they take up (Dare, 2010), is present in the students' compositions in three aspects: the level of formality, the level of objectivity or subjectivity, and the expert or novice language used. The language tends to be formal in the essays and more informal in the short stories. Students are more objective in the essays than in the short stories because essays require the combination of factual and personal information to make a point whereas short stories mostly reflect the subjective perceptions of the writers. Students have to show the tone of an expert while developing the essays while the writers of the short stories have to be creative.

As it is possible to verify, the mode of the compositions is the written one. It is possible to indicate that the medium employed corresponds to planned texts in which students had the chance to think and reflect what they were going to say and worked to produce texts that were coherent and cohesive. Students showed control of the organizational features of English.

Language Findings

Quantitative Trends

This section will present and discuss the quantitative tendencies present in the entry and rewritten compositions. Table 6 presents a general comparison of both documents. The average number of words is higher in the rewritten data only by 59 words. The length of the compositions varied among the students. Three compositions fulfilled the criteria originally given, that is to say, more or less 500 words. Two surpassed the limits by two or three times, and one was inferior by 180 words. In the rewriting exercise, four compositions in general kept their original numbers but the longest one added 100 extra words. The second longest composition was dramatically reduced from 1047 words to only 145 words, which represents only 13.84% as compared to the original. The student expressed the reason for doing so in her analytical essay as follows:

> Since it is a very long text, I decided to choose the paragraph that, in my opinion, needed more improvement in terms of the nominal groups. (Student 6)

For comparative and analytical purposes, only the original paragraph was compared to the rewritten version.

Table 6. Comparison Between the Entry Data and Rewritten Compositions

General Criteria	Entry Data	Rewritten Data
Total average number of words	672	731
Total average content words	322	398
Average Lexical Density	46	54
Total average number of NGS	122	125
Total average simple NGS	35	36
Total average complex NGS	86	88

The average number of content words in the rewritten data is 19% higher. This number might not be very high but represents an initial effort on the part of the students to amplify the information presented in nominal groups as can be observed in the examples shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Examples of Amplified Nominal Groups

	Original NG	Modified NG
S1	…the disappointing rate of people who prefer anything but a book…	…the disappointing rate of people who prefer anything but a beautiful book…
S2	…any kind of object forgotten by a passenger…	…some crazy article forgotten by an absent-minded passenger…

The lexical density in the rewritten data increased by eight points, which demonstrated that students made an effort to make the text denser, a characteristic of written language. With respect to the nominal groups, it is evident that they did not increase significantly: on average only three additional nominal groups in the rewritten composition increased, with one additional simple nominal group and two complex nominal groups.

Numbers do not speak loud in the logical structure of the nominal groups. The average number of nominal groups with premodification, head-only nouns, and nominal groups with pre- and postmodification in the entry data is slightly higher than in the rewritten data. The rewriting exercise might have invited students to present information in a more condensed way.

Premodification. Table 8 shows examples of students' original and rewritten nominal groups. Rewritten nominal groups are more precise than the original in premodification.

Table 8. Examples of Nominal Groups that Reflect More Precision

	Original NG	Modified NG
s4	the small boat	the sailing boat
s2	the time	the pass of time

The numerical situation of nominal groups in regard to the experiential metafunction is not very different from the logical structure. The most recurrent structure written by students was: premodifier + head as stated by Student 2 from the analytical essay:

> In general terms, the structure of the nominal groups written along the text is quite simple is [*sic*] most of the cases the structure is Premodifier and Head.

There was however a slight decrease in the number of nominal groups with this structure in the revised versions. Students managed to increase the complexity of the nominal groups by adding epithets and classifiers to the original groups as observable in the following examples. A characteristic of the premodification of nominal groups in the short stories was the addition of describers while the essays tended to include classifiers (see Table 9).

Table 9. Examples of Original and Modified Nominal Groups with Added Functions

	Original NG	Modified NG
s1	this personal space	this small personal reading space
s4	the island	the small and deserted island
s7	the cat	the filthy black cat

The students reflected on the quality and length of nominal groups in premodification as evidenced in the following quotes from the analytical essays:

> The premodifiers I wrote were not very long. In addition, the majority of my premodifiers were composed of a deictic and an epithet: for some reason, I did not choose to build my nominal groups with a classifier. Perhaps I did not need them, but I believe the reason why

they are not a constant in my text goes back to my lack of grammar knowledge and my poor variety of nominal groups. (Student 1)

> I consider my general use of premodifiers to be good, in the sense of defining and making the "heads" of the nominal group more complex and unique, but they still need to be worked on and improved. (Student 5)

Head-only nouns. The head-only nouns were classified as abstract or concrete nouns. The term abstract refer to intangible things. If concrete, the entities refer to material/physical substances and thus are animate (human or animal) or inanimate (solid or liquid) (Morley, 2000). The essays contained a good number of abstract terms such as technology and reading from Student 1, cognition and learning from Student 3, and culture and love from Student 5. The short stories included concrete and familiar terms for readers. It is possible to assert that both concrete and abstract nouns provide a frame of reference by including the cultural context where the texts occur and in this sense provide outward pointing generic references.

Postmodification. The impact of the SFG model in the Grammar 1 class is more evidently perceived in the postmodification structure of the nominal group (see Table 10). In terms of the logical metafunction there is an increase in the number of nominal groups exhibiting each of the three given possibilities: Head + Finite Clause, Head + Nonfinite Clause, and Head + Prepositional Phrase.

Table 10. Average Number of Nominal Groups With Head + Postmodification, Logical Function

	Total Entry Data	Total Rewritten Data
Head + Finite Clause	1.5	1.7
Head + Nonfinite Clause	0.3	1.5
Head + Prepositional Phrase	2.3	3.2

Student 6 reinforces this idea with the following reflection:

> On the text, there can also be found more complex nominal groups which may have different structures in the position of the qualifier including cases of multiple embedding.

These embedded structures occur in a later stage of the literacy process. "The use of embedded clauses is characteristic of the registers of advanced literacy" as stated by Fang et al. (2006, p. 253).

Students in general find the construction of postmodification rather challenging. The postmodification with prepositional phrases is the option mostly employed by students. Student 3 indicates so:

> I tend just to create prepositional phrases. It makes me think that those are easier to form than finite or non-finite clauses, in my case.

Premodification + Head + Postmodification. The complexity of a nominal group can be measured in the length it can reach by the inclusion and combination of Premodification + Head + Postmodification. The structures that students made more use of in the two moments of the comparison were those that combined the deictic function with the thing and the qualifying element performed by the prepositional phrase. It is evident that postmodification realized by nonfinite clauses is uncommon. This is a topic that deserves more attention because it is a grammatical structure that is highly used in academic texts. The combination of the deictic function + the epithet function + the classifier function + thing + the qualifying function was scarcely used by students in the samples analyzed. This finding highlights the importance that must be given to the understanding and practice of these structures in search of tools that may surely contribute to the development of the academic language necessary to perform well in academic and professional settings.

Qualitative Trends

To illustrate how students developed their skills in representing experiential meanings, next the reader will be presented with two writing samples of Student 1 and Student 6. In the entry sample of Student 6, the text lacked detail in the narration of participants and circumstances. In the rewritten version, the main participant, the cat, becomes *the abhorrent animal* and *the brute beast*. The nominal group *my pocket knife* takes a finite postmodification resulting in *my pocket knife which was extremely sharp*. The already complex nominal group with nonfinite postmodification *the cat crying in pain* was rewritten as *the miserable black cat that was crying in what seemed to be unbearable pain*. It is possible to observe here that an epithet and a classifier were added in premodification. The nonfinite postmodification became a complex finite clause. The effort Student 6 made in the rewritten version to improve the nominal group by substitution, amplification, and paraphrasing is noticeable.

Excerpt 1: Entry Version, Student 6

One evening (60), I (61) came back home (62) completely intoxicated after I (63) had been drinking and the cat (64) was the one *who* welcomed me (65). As usual, after seeing the cat (66) I (67) felt angry and tried to catch it (68), however, the cat (69) was faster than me (70) and bit my hand (71) before I (72) could do anything (73). Blinded by my increasing anger (74) I (75) took my pocket knife (76) and in one swift movement (77) cut out the cat's eye (78). I (79) could only see the brutality of my act (80) after I heard the cat crying in pain (81). I (82) felt horrible and, in the days *that* followed that dreadful event (83), I (84) kept drinking and Pluto (85) started running away from me (86).

Excerpt 2: Rewritten Version, Student 6

One dark evening of July (1), I (2) came back to my beloved home (3) completely intoxicated after I (4) had been drinking and the abhorrent animal (5) was the one who welcomed me (6). As usual, after seeing that filthy black cat (7), I (8) felt angry and tried to catch it (9), however, the brute beast (10) was faster than me (11) and bit the hand

with which I intended to hold it [12] before I [13] could do anything [14]. Blinded by my increasing and boiling anger [15] I [16] took my pocket knife which was extremely sharp [17] and in one swift movement of the hand that the cat had not bitten [18] cut out the cat's glowing green eye [19]. I [20] could only see the great brutality of my unpremeditated act [21] after I [22] heard the miserable black cat that was crying in what seemed to be unbearable pain [23]. I [24] felt horrible and, in the long and distressing days that followed that dreadful event [25], I [26] kept drinking and Pluto [27] which now had only one eye [28] started running away from me [29].

The analysis of the entry and rewritten data of Student 1 indicates that the rewritten version contains five more nominal groups thanks to the expansion he made of the nominal group *stories* (11), into *fairy-tales* (12), *detective narrations* (13), and *science fiction fragments* (14), and of the nominal group *the power that they are still sharing with us* (29) with the apposition, *the humanity* (30). The student improved the description of an initial nominal group with the inclusion of a describer or classifier as in the following examples: *This entertainment* (13) became *The aforementioned kind of entertainment* (16) and *a book* (20) *a simple book* (24). The choices the student made included the selection of a different kind of lexis as is evident in the following examples: *anyone who appreciate them* (8) became *anyone who is able to appreciate them* (8), showing a nod towards the interpersonal function expressed by the semi modal verb and *a simple movie* (21) to *a mainstream movie* (25) giving a twist in meaning. The change of *that affirmation* (22) to *this statement* (26) shows a change due to the precision the student wants to achieve in an academic context. The expansion in the following examples occurs in postmodification showing the desire to make the nominal group more complete in meaning: *almost every book* (9) to *almost every book written to this date* (9) and *an influential lesson* (10) to *an influential lesson to any single of you* (10).

Excerpt 3: Entry Version, Student 1

On the one hand, *books* [7] can be remarkably important for *anyone who appreciate them* [8]. Moreover, *almost every book* [9] can teach *an influential lesson* [10]. *Stories* [11] in general possess *that great power of entertaining anyone who is interested in them* [12]. *This entertainment* [13] is not only *a visual and audible one* [14], but also *an astonishing process that lets you experience millions of feelings* [15] while reading *some connected sentences* [16]. Thus, as you are more committed with *the reading process* [17], you are able to experience *the content in a better way* [18]. *The majority of people in the world* [19] agree that *a book* [20] is significantly more powerful and meaningful than *a simple movie* [21] and, perhaps, *that affirmation* [22] can explain *the reason* [23]. Furthermore, if *books* [24] have not completely been extinct it is thanks to *the power they are still providing for us* [25].

Excerpt 4: Rewritten Version, Student 1

On the one hand, *books* [7] can be remarkably important for *anyone who is able to appreciate them* [8]. Moreover, *almost every book written to this date* [9] can teach *an influential lesson to any single of you* [10]. Generally, *stories* [11], whether they are *fairy-tales* [12], *detective narrations* [13], or *even science fiction fragments* [14], possess *the great power of entertaining anyone who is interested in them* [15]. *The aforementioned kind of entertainment* [16] is not only *a visual* and *audible one* [17], but also *a magnificent process in which you experience millions of diverse feelings* [18] while you read *a group of sentences that are magically connected* [19]. Thus, as you are more committed with *the whole reading process* [20], you are able to experience *the full* content in a *better, almost magical way* [21] [22]. *The majority of people in the world* [23] agree that *a simple book* [24] is significantly more powerful and meaningful than *a mainstream movie* [25] and, perhaps, *this statement* [26] can explain *the reason*. [27] Furthermore, if *book*s [28] have not completely gone extinct it is thanks to *the power that they are still sharing with us* [29], *the humanity* [30].

Conclusions

The characteristics of the nominal groups in students' written productions before being exposed to the principles of systemic functional grammar are very similar to those exhibited in the rewritten versions: the nominal groups were numerous and varied (mixture of

simple and complex) with examples of all the possible logical structures of the nominal group.

After being exposed to SFG, it is possible to indicate that students kept many of their original nominal groups without making significant changes. They did, however, make some changes, especially when modifying the thing in postmodification with 10% more than when modifying the thing in pre and postmodification. It is interesting to note that students wrote less than 10% of new nominal groups.

The principles of systemic functional grammar are somehow evidenced in students' writing of nominal groups. It is possible to say that in premodification students made additions and changes in the original nominal groups by inserting describers and classifiers. Addition of postmodification occurred in a slightly higher degree, especially with prepositional phrases. The changes in postmodification occurred because of the addition of the referrer/describer/ classifier in the nominal group of a prepositional phrase, a change in the lexis of the original nominal group, a switch from finite clause to nonfinite clause and vice versa, a change of function as shown by Dare (2010, p. 23), and the addition of embedding in this order of occurrence.

With respect to the head-only nominal groups, it is possible to assert that they underwent modifications resulting in nominal groups that took pre- and postmodification in equal proportions together with a change of function within the clause. In some instances, students decided to include an explicit head to make information clearer.

Students made changes to their original nominal groups by incorporating or modifying lexis. In other instances, they chose to introduce changes in the deictic function by changing referrers; they also changed the function of the nominal group in the clause; that is to say, they moved nominal groups from subject position to complement position or the contrary. It is also important to mention that students also reduced information, showing their capacity to condense information and to give precision and detail to the goings-on or happenings, participants, and circumstances in their texts. The precision and detail of the nominal group contribute to the creation of meanings, including "specific, generic, abstract, and technical meanings" (Fang et al., 2006, p. 252).

Apart from gaining understanding and handling of nominal groups in the rewritten texts, the reflections made also speak of the metalanguage students were able to use in their analyses. This realization comes in line with Dare (2010) and Schleppegrell (2013) who assert that the provision of a metalanguage (a language for talking about language) will equip students with a robust understanding of how language works. Derewianka and Jones (2010) emphasize that SFG "offers a means of making language explicit to learners in the form of an accessible and flexible metalanguage" (p. 6). Dare (2010) indicates that metalanguage plays a critical role in understanding how texts work as it provides a "means for talking and reflecting on the language choices we make in any text" (p. 24). Schleppegrell and Go (2007) agree that the inclusion of SFG metalanguage facilitates the identification of meaningful chunks or whole grammatical constituents called processes, participants, and circumstances. In this way, it is possible to see in a more evident way the relationship between meaning and form.

To conclude, the knowledge about grammar (Svalberg, 2015) that students have gained with the incorporation of the SFG model of language will be of help at different levels. Student-teachers are better equipped to deal with the different fields, genre, and modes of their academic contexts and, in addition, they are nourishing the grammatical knowledge they will surely show in the development of their professional lives.

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