

# Promoting ESL Students' Critical Thinking Skills Through a Transitivity Analysis of Authentic Materials

Ender Velasco

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*Using authentic materials in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom can develop students' critical thinking (CT) skills, expose them to more realistic English, and support their motivation. Carrying out text analyses of authentic materials in the ESL classroom can also help students become more critical in their approach to reading. Grounded in systemic functional linguistics (SFL) concepts, this paper puts forward a series of text analysis tasks, so ESL teachers can introduce their adult students to the concepts of transitivity and intentionality found in opposing newspaper articles dealing with conflict. Overall, these analyses show how the active voice can highlight the semantic value of intentionality via material processes, and how writers use strategies such as passivization and fronting of items in clauses to emphasize the responsibility for wrongdoing when reporting news. The analyses also show that context is important in determining degrees of intentionality, and intentionality can be attributed to the material processes of human actors portrayed as non-human actors. Understanding these concepts can help adult ESL students become better critical readers/thinkers.*

*Utiliser des matériaux authentiques dans la classe d'anglais langue seconde (ALS) peut développer la pensée critique (PC) des étudiants et les exposer à un anglais plus réaliste et soutenir leur motivation. Effectuer des analyses de textes de matériaux authentiques dans la classe d'ALS peut aussi aider les étudiants à devenir plus critiques dans leur approche de la lecture. Enraciné dans les concepts de la linguistique systémique fonctionnelle (LSF), cet article présente une série d'exercices d'analyse de texte, de façon à ce que les enseignants d'ALS puissent présenter à leurs étudiants adultes les concepts de transitivité et d'intentionnalité qu'on retrouve dans des articles de presse contradictoires qui traitent du conflit. Dans l'ensemble, ces analyses montrent comment l'utilisation de la voix active peut mettre en lumière la valeur sémantique de l'intentionnalité par l'entremise de processus matériels, ainsi que la façon dont les écrivains utilisent des stratégies comme la passivisation et la mise en avant d'éléments dans les propositions pour accentuer la responsabilité d'actes répréhensibles quand ils font un reportage. Les analyses montrent également que le contexte est important pour déterminer les degrés d'intentionnalité et que celle-ci peut être attribuée aux processus matériels des acteurs humains dépeints comme des acteurs non-humains. Comprendre ces concepts aide les étudiants adultes d'ALS à devenir de meilleurs lecteurs ou penseurs critiques.*

The value of using authentic materials in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom is highly regarded (Gilmore, 2007). There are even guidelines on how to adapt classroom materials to make them more authentic (Mishan, 2005). Using authentic materials in the classroom can develop ESL students' critical thinking (CT) skills (Davidson, 1998; Hashemi & Ghanizadeh, 2012; Thompson, 2002) and enhance their language acquisition and cultural awareness (Beresova, 2015). When chosen appropriately, authentic materials can also expose students to more realistic English in the classroom, foster students' sense of achievement, and support their motivation (Watkins, 2014).

There are clear examples of how ESL teachers can work with authentic materials in their classrooms, particularly in relation to analyses of authentic newspaper articles. About 13 years ago, Saraceni (2008) put forward a framework to raise ESL students' awareness of the semantic value of the grammatical system of transitivity through the analysis of short texts, as a means of getting students to become more critical in their approach to reading. Transitivity is the study of "what people are depicted as doing and refers, broadly, to who does what to whom, and how" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 104), which explains the semantic value of a clause in relation to participants, processes, and circumstances (Bloor & Bloor, 2013).

Saraceni's (2008) framework specifically aimed to engage ESL students with sentences in authentic texts and reflect on questions such as: "Are the verbs transitive or intransitive?", "Do the verbs refer to intentional or unintentional actions?", and "Are the actors and goals human or non-human?". However, little has changed since his proposal, and the role of transitivity as a meaning-making system is still missing from mainstream ESL materials. This can be evidenced by carrying out a simple search of the word "transitivity", and its lemmas, in the content pages of several current adult ESL coursebooks, using the AntConc software.

It is important for ESL students to understand transitivity concepts such as intentionality because, as Saraceni (2008) puts it:

transitivity ceases to be solely about verbs that can or cannot take direct objects but becomes a linguistic framework to express ideology ... In order to show how transitivity conveys the idea of intentionality, suitable texts need to be selected and these are likely to deal with controversial topics. This is because the very nature of intentionality entails the fact that someone may have done something wrong to someone else or to something. (p. 166)

Encouraging ESL students to use text analysis techniques in the classroom is seen as something positive (Cots, 2006). Although it has been found to be challenging in terms of the level of teachers' engagement with students' positions and academic voices (Pessoa & De Urzedá, 2012), getting ESL students to employ such techniques promotes their CT skills (see Hobbs et al., 2014; Liaw, 2007). Therefore, considering all the above, there seems to be a need for more frequent use of text analysis tasks linked to authentic materials in the ESL classroom, so teachers can introduce adult students to transitivity concepts and help them become better critical readers/thinkers.

The structure of this paper is twofold. First, theory behind systemic functional linguistics (SFL) is briefly introduced to give background to the concept of transitivity, the influence of SFL on ESL, and the value of transitivity analyses. Second, a series of practical text analysis tasks are outlined, whereby adult ESL students can be introduced to the concept of transitivity and the notions of intentionality and passivization (i.e., the use of the passive voice), part of the discourse of conflict found in authentic newspaper articles.

## Theoretical Background

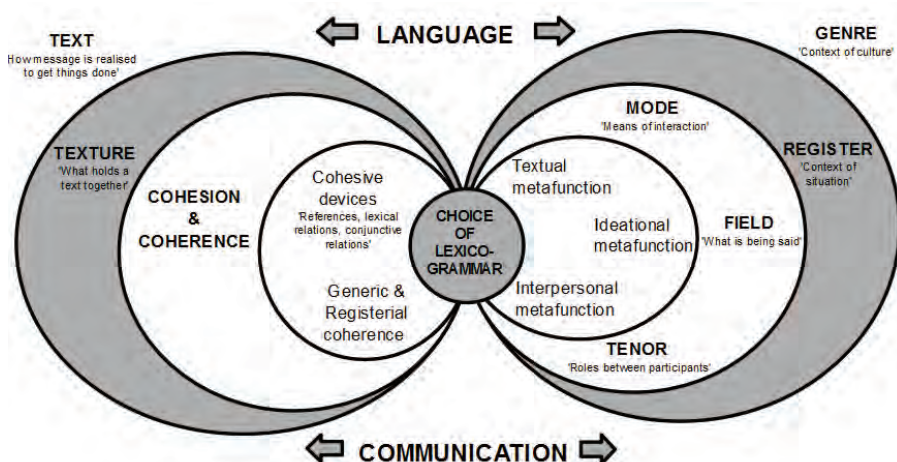
### *SFL*

SFL is a language model which explains how the "context of culture" and the "context of situation" affect people's choice of lexis and grammar in texts when they communicate with each other (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). The "context of culture" refers to genres, or how groups of people with things in common go about communicating with each other in a staged, goal-oriented way through texts, while the "context of situation" refers to register variables, or how interaction between members of these groups takes place (Martin, 1984). A text, whether written or spoken, is what people use to convey messages and get things done (Paltridge, 2011). Texts are said to have texture, that is, they are coherent in relation to specific genres and registers, but they are also held together by cohesive devices (Eggs, 2004).

SFL sees language as a meaning-making system centred around three semantic functions or metafunctions. In other words, any utterance or text expresses meaning in relation to our ability to organize language in texts to express ideas (textual metafunction), our perceptions of the world and how we experience it (ideational metafunction), and our roles, feelings, attitudes, and judgements when we interact with others (interpersonal metafunction) (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). In SFL, these three metafunctions are in turn realized by three register variables, namely: mode or means of interacting, field or what is being said or talked about, and tenor or roles between participants (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Figure 1 shows a visual representation of this model.

Specific analyses of grammatical systems can be carried out in order to understand how these three metafunctions work in texts (Egins, 2004). For example, the textual metafunction is realized through theme patterns, the ideational metafunction is realized through the transitivity system, and the interpersonal metafunction is realized through mood patterns.

Figure 1  
Language and Communication in SFL, Based on Martin (1992, 1997)



### *Influence of SFL on ESL*

Even though SFL evolved from Halliday’s own interest in how languages realize meaning, its origins also involve a desire to improve the quality of language teaching, in particular the teaching of English (Halliday & Hassan, 2006). SFL theory has directly influenced ESL methodology (Burns & Knox, 2005), ranging from the teaching of grammar (Feng, 2013; Jones & Lock, 2011) to wider approaches such as communicative language teaching (CLT), content-and-language-integrated-learning (CLIL), and English for academic purposes (EAP) (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In Australia, SFL has heavily influenced genre-based pedagogy (see Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Joyce & Feez, 2012; Rose & Martin, 2012), a framework based on a three-part cycle that involves deconstruction, joint construction, and independent production of text genres (Martin, 1999; 2006). Subsequently, SFL has had a direct impact on the teaching of ESL writing and verbal communication in other contexts

such as North America (Gebhard et al., 2010), Asia (Cheng, 2008), and Latin America (Velasco, 2016).

However, the implementation of SFL-based pedagogy in ESL has also received some criticism and there are some views that find this pedagogy difficult to understand, arguing that it is “a veritable maze, very messy and complex” (Bourke, 2005, p. 93). Other authors explain that “in mainstream ELT, with some exceptions, such as the notions of ‘coherence / cohesion’ and Theme-Rheme / Given-New structures (Alonso Belmonte and McCabe, 2004), SFL descriptions have been virtually absent” (Gledhill et al., 2015, p. 4).

Teaching ESL students to carry out transitivity analyses in the context of newspaper articles can overcome the “difficult to understand” argument against SFL, because other than being authentic (and therefore stimulating), it can also aid students’ development of CT skills. If appropriately contextualized, transitivity can be of great value for both ESL teachers and students.

### *The Value of Transitivity Analyses*

In their quest for better CT skills, ESL students should be aware of the role transitivity plays in how writers and speakers perceive the world and express ideologies. For instance, an analysis of transitivity can highlight how agency and responsibility may be purposely backgrounded, and wrongdoing may be lessened in texts through the frequent use of the passive voice (Van Dijk, 2000). It can show how power may be concealed through the frequent use of certain pronouns such as *we* and *us* used in speeches to imply a sense of empathy (Fairclough, 2000). It can emphasize how processes are represented in various ways, by either downplaying or stressing them, depending on their syntactic position in clauses (Van Dijk, 1991). A transitivity analysis can also convey the idea of intentionality in texts that deal with controversial topics, and help us avoid ideological bias (Saraceni, 2008).

The next section of this paper will outline a series of practical text analysis tasks, whereby adult ESL students can be introduced to the concept of transitivity and the notions of intentionality and passivization, part of the discourse of conflict found in authentic newspaper articles.

## **Practical Text Analysis Tasks**

### *Aim and Audience*

Based on Saraceni’s (2008) framework, the aim of these text analysis tasks is to enable ESL teachers to introduce their students to the concept of transitivity and the notions of intentionality and passivization, found in authentic newspaper articles. The session can be used with adult ESL students in monolingual and multilingual contexts, whose level of English is at B2 (or

higher) according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). It is assumed that these learners are already familiar with the concepts of active and passive voice. The length of the session is about 120 minutes and the suggested newspaper articles are shown in Table 1.

### *Materials and Lesson Plan*

The suggested newspaper articles have been purposely chosen because they deal with a current conflict (i.e., the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict) and show how opposite sides (i.e., the Azerbaijani and Armenian press) report events in written media.

Table 1  
Outline of Tasks and Materials

<b>Time</b>	<b>Aim</b>	<b>Task</b>	<b>Materials</b>
5min	to activate schemata	Students discuss current international conflicts between countries they may be aware of	Pictures and questions provided by the teacher
15min	to read for specific information and set a context	Students read the first newspaper article about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and answer comprehension questions given by the teacher	Text 1. "Armenia-Azerbaijan: What's behind the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?" from <a href="https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54324772">https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54324772</a> © copyright bbc.com news 2020
30min	to focus on meaning (and form) of target language	Teacher introduces the concepts of transitivity, intentionality and passivization from the language found in the articles	Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4 shown below

60min	to allow students to carry out a transitivity analysis	Students carry out intentionality and passivization analyses of two newspaper articles showing conflict between countries	Text 2. "Armenian armed forces fired cluster ammunitions against civilians in Goranboy district" from <a href="https://www.news.az/news/anama-armenian-armed-forces-fired-cluster-ammunitions-against-civilians-in-goranboy-district">https://www.news.az/news/anama-armenian-armed-forces-fired-cluster-ammunitions-against-civilians-in-goranboy-district</a> © copyright news.az 2020
		Teacher provides students with feedback once they have carried out their transitivity analyses	Text 3. "Azerbaijan resumes missile strikes against Artsakh's major cities" from <a href="https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1030630.html">https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1030630.html</a> . © copyright armenpress.am 2020 Table 5 and Table 6 shown below
10min	to reflect on own learning	Students discuss results from analyses, their usefulness, and the application of transitivity analyses to their own contexts	Questions provided by the teacher

*Transitivity, Intentionality, and Passivization*

Through the header "Armenian armed forces fired ammunitions against civilians in Goranboy district" reported by the Azerbaijani newspaper in Text 2, teachers can introduce their students to the basic sentence structure terminology used in transitivity analyses. Table 2 shows an overview of this terminology.



Table 2  
Terminology Used in Transitivity Analyses

<b>PARTICIPANT or ACTOR</b>	<b>PROCESS</b>	<b>GOAL</b>	<b>RECEIVER</b>	<b>CIRCUM- STANCE</b>
Armenian armed forces (+human)	fired (intentional)	ammunitions (-human)	against civilians (+human)	in Goranboy district
<i>who/what is involved</i>	<i>what is happening</i>	<i>who/what else is involved</i>	<i>who/what is the indirect beneficiary of process</i>	<i>when/ where/how it happens</i>

Participants in material processes can be human or non-human. Also, notice that material processes can carry different degrees of intentionality. When an ACTOR is human, the PROCESS is intentional, whereas when an actor is inanimate, the PROCESS is unintentional (Saraceni, 2008). For example, “fired” is an intentional process, since “Armenian armed forces” is a human actor. However, this is not always the case, because sometimes context can also determine the degree of intentionality. For instance, in a sentence like “civilians died,” while the ACTOR is human, the PROCESS is unintentional. That is, “civilians” may not have had the intention to die. Sometimes, a non-human ACTOR can also carry a degree of intentionality, as seen in the header of Text 3 “Azerbaijan resumes missile strikes against Artsakh’s major cities”. Although “Azerbaijan” is a non-human ACTOR (i.e., a country), it is the people that run it who seem to have the intention of harming others through the intentional PROCESS “resume missile strikes.”

In Table 2, “civilians” function as the RECEIVER or indirect beneficiary of the material process, something Bloor and Bloor (2013) call the “recipient” (p. 115). At this point, teachers can introduce different types of processes and their participants, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3  
Various Process Types, Meanings, and Participants

<b>PROCESS</b>	<b>MEANING or SYNONYM OF</b>	<b>PARTICIPANTS</b>
material	physical actions	actors
verbal	saying	sayers
mental	thinking and feeling	sensers
relational	being and becoming	tokens
existential	there is, there are, there was, etc.	existent



Another key aspect at this point is to show how responsibility can be downplayed or shifted by varying the structure of sentences with material processes. The same header used in Table 2 could be reported by the Armenian newspaper in different ways, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4  
Example of Downplayed Responsibility from Active to Passive Voice

<b>ACTOR</b>	<b>PROCESS</b>	<b>GOAL</b>	<b>RECEIVER</b>	<b>CIRCUM- STANCE</b>
Armenian armed forces	fired	ammunitions	against civilians	in Goranboy district
<b>GOAL</b>	<b>PROCESS</b>	<b>ACTOR</b>	<b>RECEIVER</b>	<b>CIRCUM- STANCE</b>
Ammunitions	fired	by Armenian armed forces	against civilians	in Goranboy district
Ammunitions	fired		against civilians	in Goranboy district
<b>RECEIVER</b>	<b>PROCESS</b>			<b>CIRCUM- STANCE</b>
Civilians	fired against			in Goranboy district

This shows how the responsibility for “the firing” can be gradually shifted by simply using passivization, that is, a passive construction in which the GOAL (i.e., ammunitions) is placed as the theme or main topic of the sentence. The positioning of “civilians” later in the clause makes them seem to function as language features that are not essential to the clause. Passivization also gives the flexibility of not having to mention the ACTOR (i.e., by Armenian armed forces), which clearly exemplifies how intentionality can be downplayed by manipulating the syntactic positioning of items in clauses within the grammatical system of transitivity.

Saraceni (2008) explains that “when a Process is done to someone/ something, the verb is used in a transitive way; when the Process is not done to anyone/anything, the verb is used in an intransitive way” (p. 167). The concept of transitivity can be introduced through the last sentence “Civilians fired against” in Table 4. By fronting “civilians” and placing them in the theme position of the sentence before the material process “fired against,” neither GOAL nor ACTOR is required, so the material process becomes intransitive. The absence of a GOAL (and ACTOR) in a sentence completely takes the “who/what else is involved” concept out of the picture. Strategies such as turning a transitive use of a material PROCESS into an intransitive one are

used by some writers to downplay the responsibility for any wrongdoing when reporting news.

### *Analyses of Intentionality and Passivization*

This section shows the analyses of intentionality and passivization in Text 2, “Armenian armed forces fired cluster ammunitions against civilians in Goranboy district” © copyright news.az 2020, and Text 3, “Azerbaijan resumes missile strikes against Artsakh’s major cities” © copyright armenpress.am 2020. These analyses are shown in Table 5 and Table 6, respectively.

Table 5  
Intentionality of Material Processes in Opposing Newspaper Articles

<b>Text 2</b>				
<b>ACTOR</b>	<b>PROCESS</b>	<b>GOAL</b>	<b>RECEIVER</b>	<b>CIRCUM-STANCE</b>
Armenian armed forces (+human)	fired (intentional)	ammunitions (-human)	against civilians (+human)	in Goranboy district
<b>Text 3</b>				
<b>ACTOR</b>	<b>PROCESS</b>	<b>GOAL</b>	<b>RECEIVER</b>	<b>CIRCUM-STANCE</b>
Azerbaijan (-human)	has started to carry out (intentional)	missile strikes (-human)	against Stepanakert (-human)	on September 27
Azerbaijan, directly backed by Turkey (-human)	unleashed (intentional)	war (-human)	against Artsakh (-human)	
Turkey (-human)	deployed (intentional)	mercenaries and terrorists (+human)		in Azerbaijan
Azerbaijan (-human)	has been massively and deliberately striking (intentional)	cities of Artsakh, particularly Stepanakert (-human)		

A closer look at the analysis of intentionality of material processes in Table 5 reveals that Text 2 only uses one pattern focused on the harm that human

ACTORS (i.e., Armenian armed forces) have caused to human GOALS (i.e., civilians), through the intentional process of firing ammunition. On the other hand, the focus of Text 3 is on the harm that non-human ACTORS (i.e., Azerbaijan and Turkey) have caused to non-human GOALS (i.e., Artsakh and its capital city Stepanakert), through intentional processes such as carrying out missile strikes, unleashing war, deploying mercenaries and terrorists, and striking. Although this text highlights the interaction between non-human ACTORS and GOALS, it can be assumed that it is human ACTORS and GOAL who are involved in the conflict; therefore, the interactions imply that there are government officials intentionally harming civilians. This shows how important context is in determining the degree of intentionality, and how intentionality can also be attributed to the material processes of human actors portrayed as non-human actors.

Text 2 only has one intentional material process, while Text 3 has four. Representation of actors in specific ways denotes ideologies about how people experience and see the world, so both texts exemplify how concepts such as intentionality and blame are reported by media involved on both sides of a conflict. Both texts show some degree of intentionality, but this is more marked in Text 3.

Text 3 clearly exemplifies how the active voice is used to realize the semantic value of intentionality and blame in texts. This particular use of the active voice is important in text analysis because it can help us understand how the system of transitivity is used to explain “who does what to whom, and how” (Machin and Mayr 2012, p. 104), and how writers resort to the ideational metafunction to organize and interrelate elements in specific ways to explain what is happening around them (Halliday & Hasan, 1985).

While the active voice can highlight the semantic value of intentionality in texts, there are other strategies that writers use to emphasize the responsibility for wrongdoing when reporting news. This can be appreciated in the analysis of passivization that follows.

Table 6  
Passivization in Opposing Newspaper Articles

<b>Text 2</b>		
<b>GOAL</b>	<b>PROCESS</b>	<b>ACTOR</b>
utilization of cluster am- munitions	is prohibited	by international con- ventions
exploded shells	were scattered	
resident of Goranboy district	was killed	

inspection exercises	[were] carried out	by ANAMA's specialists
exploded and unexploded bombs	were found	
these bombs	were included in the class of prohibited ammunition	Convention on Cluster Ammunition (CCM)
<b>Text 3</b>		
<b>GOAL</b>	<b>PROCESS</b>	<b>ACTOR</b>
three explosions	were heard	

A closer look at the analysis of passivization in Table 6 reveals that Text 2 employs more passive constructions than Text 3. Text 2 uses six passive constructions, while Text 3 only uses one. By frequently using GOALS as themes in sentences, Text 2 stresses the illegality of the actions carried out by the Armenian armed forces in relation to the utilization of prohibited cluster ammunition and bombs, the killing of a local civilian, and disregard for the inspections done by the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA). Moreover, by specifying ACTORS deemed as law regulators (i.e., international conventions, ANAMA's specialists, and Convention of Cluster Ammunition), Text 2 reinforces the illegitimacy of the actions carried out by the Armenian armed forces in three passive constructions.

Van Dijk (2000) argues that agency and responsibility can be purposely backgrounded in texts through the use of the passive voice and omission of ACTORS, in order to lessen wrongdoing. However, Text 2 seems to do the opposite, because it purposely uses passivization and inclusion of ACTORS to foreground agency and stress responsibility. For instance, sentences such as "Utilization of cluster ammunitions is prohibited by international conventions" and "Resident of Goranboy district was killed" use passive constructions to front items and make certain words seem more important than others. This is an example of how actors, processes, and goals can be downplayed or stressed depending on their syntactic positioning in clauses, as Van Dijk (1991) argues.

## Conclusion

This paper began by highlighting the value of using authentic materials in the ESL classroom, mainly as a way of developing students' CT skills, but also as a way of exposing them to more realistic English, fostering their sense of achievement, and supporting their motivation. Then, the paper also provided evidence to suggest that using text analysis techniques in the classroom, and

understanding concepts such as transitivity and intentionality, something originally proposed by Saraceni (2008), can help ESL students become more critical in their approach to reading.

The practical text analysis tasks put forward in this paper have hopefully shown ESL teachers how they can introduce their adult students to the concept of transitivity, and the notions of intentionality and passivization, found in authentic newspaper articles. The proposed newspaper articles deal with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and show how the Azerbaijani and Armenian press report events differently in their respective written media. Overall, from the text analyses presented here, it can be concluded that while the active voice can highlight the semantic value of intentionality in texts, writers also use strategies such as passivization and fronting of items in clauses to emphasize the responsibility for wrongdoing when reporting news. It can also be concluded that context is important in determining degrees of intentionality, and intentionality can also be attributed to the material processes of human actors portrayed as non-human actors. Understanding these concepts can help adult ESL students become better critical readers/thinkers.

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### *The Author*

Ender Velasco has 15 years of TESL experience, mainly in the United Kingdom and Colombia. He holds a Cambridge CELTA, a Cambridge Diploma (DTLELLS), and a MA in Applied Linguistics and TESOL from the University of Portsmouth, England. He has written for specialized TESL journals in Colombia, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. His research interests include teacher training, second language acquisition, and the application of systemic functional linguistics theory to the teaching of ESL writing.

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