CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1.0. Background

This study began with a need to answer certain practical questions that involve teaching college students to write proper essays. This is the core problem for this thesis. This fundamental need led to another, which is the necessity to find a suitable grammatical description of language that could be used to identify language resources and its organization utilised in the process of writing a well-formed piece of exposition. (A theory that could connect grammatical resources with the larger purpose of writing skills.) The fundamental need could only be met by a linguistic description of language that holds dearly to the philosophy that language is primarily a functional tool of communication. Thus, conventional structural description and cognitively inclined theories such as transformational grammar are found to be unsuitable for the purpose of this research. The employment of systemic functional linguistics as the theoretical framework of this research is based on two major strengths of the theory. A comprehensive method of describing linguistic resources and a systemic theoretical explanation that connects language resources for the purpose of genre production make systemic functional linguistics (hereby SFL) a suitable framework for this research among the many other frameworks available. This theoretical framework and the objective plus the obstacles of the research would be discussed in the rest of the sections below.
1.2.0. Research Problem

Writing essays or expository discourse is an important part of learning how to write or of mastering the skill of writing. Knowing this fact, the local education ministry has already placed considerable emphasis in this area where assessment examinations are concerned. Almost all of the assessment exams from the lower secondary to the upper secondary require students to master the skill of writing expository essays. This appears to be the right move by the ministry. Yet, such a move has created another problem that the current linguistic scenery in Malaysia, especially concerning the Malay language, could not solve.

1.3.0. The Cause of the Problem and the Solution

The problem, stated earlier as the research problem of this thesis, is caused by inadequate linguistic description that could not be used to produce a reasonable level of competence and understanding for students to learn what are the language resources available to him or her in order to compose a meaningful and well-formed exposition. Many have criticised the traditional grammar that focuses on the structural descriptions of language, which according to its critics are insufficient for the purpose of building an understanding to increase the competency of a student in the process of writing an exposition (Christie and Unsworth, 2000; Thompson, 1996; Azhar, 1993). This criticism is also levelled against the more cognitively inclined transformational grammar, of which, the main study is to discover how the language system works in ways that could reflect the working and functioning of the human brain (Pinker, 1994 & 1997).
To these critics of structural and transformational grammar, the over preoccupation of main stream linguistics with such theoretical views of grammar, which greatly influence policy makers in language teaching has bound students into the process of learning the mere structural nature of language that is devoid of any functional knowledge that could help the students to produce the exposition required by the language curriculum. What the students are taught are prescriptive rules for writing correct sentences and avoiding so-called wrong sentences that are unrelated to any context or social purposes (de Beaugrande, 1990:163). The very fact that expositions are genres, which are produced within a social context and with clear communicative purposes in society (Martin, 1989) creates a paradox that structural and transformational grammar could not solve. On one hand, the language curriculum requires the development of effective writing skills that are vital for social communicative purposes, but on the other, the curriculum enforced upon teachers the application of linguistic resources that could not be used to achieve that requirement. Thus, the logical solution is to change the current trend of linguistic inclination and replace it with one that is able to guide and instruct students to achieve the production of any genre through language resources that are made explicitly available by a new linguistic description (Hasan & Perrett, 1994). Naturally, a more functional approach to grammar is the obvious choice of selection.
1.4.0. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

The description of grammar in any language needs to take account of the context that produces it. There are many linguistic approaches that take into consideration this particular notion. The field of sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, conversation analysis and pragmatics are some of the major examples. All of these fields have their own merits. The selection of SFL as the major theoretical framework in this research is mainly due to the factors stated in section 1.1.0 above. The fundamental premise of SFL, which is the complete interconnectedness of the linguistic and the social, creates a sound theoretical framework for relating grammar to how language is used socially (Christie & Unsworth, 2000). This interconnectedness is accomplished through the theoretical concept of context, metafunctions, and grammatical system. In SFL, the concept of context is divided into two types, the context of situation, which is termed register and the context of culture, which is described through the notion of genre. The context of culture is explained with the concept of genre, which is defined as staged and purposeful social processes (Martin, 1997). Genres are staged because the entire social practice or process of doing something is always accomplished in stages and unless each step is fulfilled, there will always be a sense of incompleteness. Thus, in SFL genres are realised through schematic or generic structure. Each type of genre is understood as having a core generic structure but at the same time, variations are generated through the potential possessed by any generic structure, which is known as the generic structure potential (Christie & Unsworth, 2000).
All situations are understood to be characterized by particular values of contextual variables. These contextual variables are known as field, mode and tenor. The entire system of contextual variables is assigned under the notion of register, which gives us the understanding of the context of situation. Each of these contextual variables is related to one dimension of the metafunctions, which mean generally as dimensions of meanings. The contextual variable of field is related to the ideational meaning that reveals how we represent our experience of reality. Mode is connected to textual meaning that shows how messages are presented and used as texts in social context. The contextual variable of tenor is linked to interpersonal meanings that exhibit the social relations of the text. Each of these metafunctions or dimensions of meanings construes a particular reality. Ideational meanings construe reality whereas interpersonal meanings construe the social reality of the text. Textual meanings on the other hand construe semiotic reality (Christie & Unsworth, 2000). Dimensions of meanings are often analysed at the discourse semantics level of SFL theory, which is a rung below the level of situational context (refer Table A below). Metafunctions are associated with particular grammatical systems at the lexicogrammar level. Each grammatical system is linked with a dimension of meanings. Ideational meanings are realized by the grammatical system of transitivity, whereas interpersonal meanings are realized through the grammatical structure of mood, and textual meanings are attained through the grammatical system of theme (Christie & Unsworth, 2000). It is through this connectivity from the genre level right down to the grammatical system of language that enables researchers to understand how grammar works functionally to realize any
type of language use. The reason why SFL is chosen for this research is because it is able to relate grammatical systems to actual writing and by doing so, the identification of the language resources for the formation of an expository genre is ascertained. At the same time, the availability of a comprehensive discourse and grammatical description further facilitates the research to identify these linguistic resources. Another factor that influences the choice of selecting SFL for this research is the fact that it has been used in the practical area of language teaching and curriculum development in Australia. In other words, it has been tested and effectively used before, which makes it all the more suitable for the practical goals of this research. Table A below shows the summary of the interconnectedness among the variables in the context of situation, metafunctions and grammatical systems.

Table A
Context of Situation, Metafunctions and Grammatical Systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contextual Variable</th>
<th>Metafunctions (meaning/semantics)</th>
<th>‘reality construal’</th>
<th>‘work done’</th>
<th>Grammatical System</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>field</td>
<td>ideational/experiential reality</td>
<td>representing our experience of reality</td>
<td>transitivity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tenor</td>
<td>interpersonal social reality</td>
<td>enacting our social relations</td>
<td>mood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mode</td>
<td>textual semiotic reality</td>
<td>presenting messages as text in context</td>
<td>theme</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Taken from Christie & Unsworth, 2000)
1.5.0. The Scope of Research

The scope of this research is only limited to the genre of exposition. The reason for such a limited scope is that of a practical one. As stated before, the purpose of this research is to uncover the linguistic resources available for the construction of an essay that students may use in their attempt to fulfil the requirement set by the local curriculum during the assessment exams. Thus, the limitation set upon this research is to meet this goal of identifying the language tools for the production of expository genre. There are other types of genres that students need to learn which can be researched in later projects but for this study an analysis of the expository genre is deemed sufficient.

1.6.0. The Corpus

The corpus of this research is also constrained to only a single text that has seven paragraphs and consists of around 700 to 800 words. The reason for this restriction is again a practical one as the framework of analysis in SFL is extensive and comprehensive where each clause and paragraph is analysed in five different ways at the discourse and lexico-grammatical level. The extensiveness of the framework and the time constrain make it not viable to further the research with a larger corpus of different genres. The text is a model answer prepared by a local writer to be used as a typical essay for the STPM examination. The choice of the text is made randomly without any premeditation, eliminating any biases. The question and the complete text can be referred to in Appendix 1.
1.7.0. An Overview of the Thesis

The thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter 2 discusses the concept of genre or similar notions in various linguistic or linguistically connected fields such as genre analysis, conversation analysis, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, psycholinguistics and communication. Each field views genre according to its purpose and the terms used for similar concepts also vary accordingly. Schemas, scripts, schematic structure may be very well related but each has its distinctive qualities of definition. The next chapter discusses the methodological framework of SFL used in this research. The methodological framework consists of analyses at the discourse semantics level with three different approaches. At the lower level of lexicogrammar, there are two more approaches to the study of Theme. Therefore, five different approaches at two different strata of language are utilised for the analysis of the corpus. In addition to these, two other analyses at the higher strata of context are found in Chapter 4. Chapter 4 displays, reviews, and discusses the findings of these multiple analyses in order to identify the linguistic resources engaged in the construction of the expository text. Finally, Chapter 5 generalises the results of findings, and discusses the limitations and the contributions plus the future implications of this research.