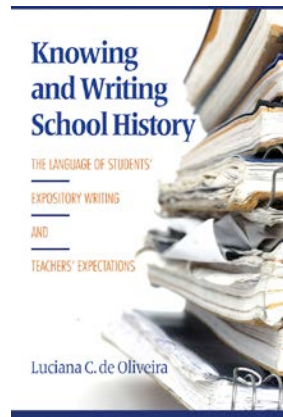


Book Review



Knowing and writing school history: The language of students' expository writing and teachers' expectations. Luciana C. de Oliveira. 2011. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc. 152 pp. Paperback. **ISBN-13:** 978-1617353369. US \$45.99.

Review by
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What constitutes successful writing in history at the middle and high school level? What do teachers expect? How do students perform? How might we improve students' writing in history? In *Knowing and Writing School History: The Language of Students' Expository Writing and Teachers' Expectations*, Luciana C. de Oliveira offers a response to these questions. Recognizing the discipline of history's potential for improving students' writing skills, she approaches this task through systemic-functional linguistics, an approach that examines how language is used in various settings and under various circumstances. Drawing on this theoretical framework, de Oliveira examines how students use written language to demonstrate their historical understanding, and she calls for the creation of professional development experiences that will assist teachers in using linguistic constructs to improve their students' history writing.

This research monograph is based on a qualitative study the author conducted with the History Project at the University of California, Davis. Part of the renowned California History-Social Science Project, the History Project provides professional development for California's history teachers, and its literacy program emphasizes discipline-specific literacy strategies. De Oliveira's study consists of three sets of data drawn from two Sacramento school districts. The author distributed questionnaires to teachers who were History Project participants, conducted interviews with teachers, and analyzed student writing examples in history at grades 8 and 11. The questionnaire sought information on the role of standards in teaching, the teachers' understanding of the role of writing in history, and the teachers' classroom assessment practices; de Oliveira subsequently interviewed four of the 44 questionnaire respondents (two 8th grade teachers and two 11th grade teachers) two times each. First using a semi-structured format and then incorporating a discourse-based interview, she sought answers to specific questions and then focused on the teachers' responses to selected 8th and 11th grade writing samples. The student samples (twenty-four 8th grade essays

and thirty-nine 11th grade essays in all) represented the work of native English speakers and English Language Learners in districts where a significant number of the ethnically diverse student body qualify for free/reduced lunch.

De Oliveira bases her work on an understanding that history is a literate discipline and that academic literacy is a second language for all students. Drawing upon research in history education as it pertains to students' development of historical understanding and research that unites disciplinary concepts with linguistics, de Oliveira draws attention to significant gaps that exist between what teachers expect in regard to student writing in history and the writing practices that students demonstrate. She notes that much research in history education focuses on organizational patterns used by students when writing, and she recognizes recent research trends that draw attention to promoting evidence-based interpretation by students when engaged in both disciplinary reading and disciplinary writing. De Oliveira posits that applying a functional linguistics perspective to analysis of student writing in history calls attention to different genres ("staged and purposeful social processes through which a culture is realized in language," p. 23), promoting a learner pathway in history writing from recount to account, explanation, and finally, argument.

In order to make her case with regard to the importance of recognizing the linguistic features that students have at their disposal and how teachers' understanding of these features might enable them to assist emerging writers in history, de Oliveira offers a detailed analysis of several pieces of student work. After summarizing the writing assignment posed to students and providing an overview of what teachers anticipated would constitute a well-crafted response, de Oliveira demonstrates how systemic-functional linguistics can add to our understanding of students' understanding of history as demonstrated through their writing. The author includes four sample texts written by 8th graders and three sample texts composed by 11th graders. After including the students' original work, she analyzes the writing samples based on their linguistic constructs, noting students' use of theme/rheme progression. Explaining theme as "the element that comes first in a clause" and rheme as "the remainder of the message" (p. 55), she notes, by definition and by example through text analysis, how themes show "the writer's point of departure for the clause" and relate the clause to other parts of the text and how "themes function as cohesive elements within a text and play a major role in the organization of a text as a message" (p. 56). De Oliveira also notes examples of student elaboration in texts, and she offers a comparison of language resources available for writers at the 11th grade level versus 8th grade writers in history.

De Oliveira's work will be useful for advanced undergraduates in content methods courses and for individuals seeking ways to engage practicing history teachers in professional development activities related to writing. While the complexities of linguistic analysis might overwhelm readers new to this way of thinking about text, de Oliveira's clear explanations and numerous tables provide her audience with a path toward understanding the potential that this approach might hold for history teachers. Concise explanations that translate linguists' macro-theme, hyper-theme, theme, and

rheme into language history teachers understand – an essay’s thesis statement, paragraph, and sentence clauses – invite history educators to consider how close attention to students’ sentence structure might enable them, as teachers, to better understand how students are organizing their historical thinking and how to best offer advice with regard to writing in the discipline.

Although de Oliveira conducted her research prior to the adoption of the Common Core Standards, their approval in English Language Arts/Literacy by 46 states makes her study even more relevant and timely. The Common Core’s emphasis on disciplinary literacy (i.e., reading and writing in history/social studies), compels history teacher educators to consider the extent to which middle and high school history teachers in their programs are prepared to teach discipline-specific reading and writing practices in their classrooms. Along a similar vein, practicing history teachers must examine their understanding of disciplinary literacy and their ability to guide students in acquiring these skills. In *Knowing and Writing School History*, de Oliveira does not suggest that teachers should abandon disciplinary frameworks as they consider student writing. Rather, she suggests that pairing disciplinary concepts with an understanding of sentence structure might enable history teachers to move beyond simply writing “more detail needed” and “explain” on students’ essays.

When history teachers ask their students to “take a stance” and “make an argument” in expository writing, they must consider the extent to which these students – both native speakers and English Language Learners – possess the linguistic resources to be able to tackle the assignment. De Oliveira recognizes that work remains before the complex linguistic understandings outlined in her book can be translated into practices that can be used on a daily basis by history teachers not schooled in linguistics. When history teachers strive to teach students how to consider multiple perspectives, recognize causation, and work with evidence as they write, they must also take into account how students provide clues about their historical understanding in the sentences they construct. De Oliveira offers novice and experienced teachers new ways to consider their students’ writing, and through systemic-functional linguistics, she makes a valuable contribution to disciplinary literacy.

About the Reviewer



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