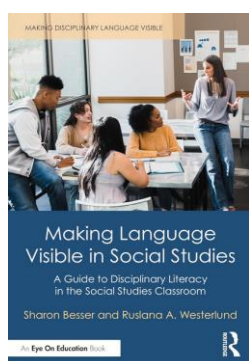




Book Review. *Making Language Visible in Social Studies: A Guide to Disciplinary Literacy in the Social Studies Classroom*, by Sharon Besser and Ruslana Westerlund

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Elih Sutisna Yanto
Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang

Suwarno
Politeknik Negeri Batam



Making Language Visible in Social Studies: A Guide to Disciplinary Literacy in the Social Studies Classroom by Sharon Besser and Ruslana Westerlund is a comprehensive guide for K-12 social studies teachers, especially those working with multilingual learners, but its approach is also applicable to teachers at university level. While the main focus is on secondary school teachers, those working in higher education settings, such as teacher training programmes, will also find the findings valuable. The book is most useful for teachers with varying levels of familiarity with genre-based teaching approaches and language strategies. This can be particularly useful for political science, geography, or citizenship teachers, as these subjects require students to engage deeply in disciplinary language to construct explanations, arguments, and analyses. The book emphasizes the value of explicit language teaching and draws on the systemic functional linguistics (SFL) framework to make students engage with complex social science material. SFL, developed by Halliday (1985), views language as a social resource for communicating meaning in a context. The theory stresses how language fulfils different social purposes, and

focuses on three key metafunctions: ideational (content), interpersonal (interaction with the audience), and textual (cohesion and organization).

In this book, SFL provides a framework for understanding how language serves the specific needs of the social studies disciplines. By teaching students a language specific to a discipline such as history or geography, SFL helps students learn the content and the language necessary to express the discipline. This approach promotes student literacy by making language features explicit and showing how they create meaning in the social studies texts. From this perspective, Besser and Westerlund bring a wealth of experience as educators and researchers. With more than 25 years of experience in curriculum design and teacher education, Besser has focused much of her research on multilingual learners and their engagement in disciplinary literacy, especially in systemic functional linguistics. Westerlund, an educational consultant and researcher, has a strong background in disciplinary literacy through the SFL, where she has worked extensively with teachers to support multilingual learners in accessing and mastering academic content. The two authors have collaborated on several classroom-based projects and workshops aimed at integrating language and content learning, and their combined expertise is reflected in this practical and theoretical approach of this book. Understanding their backgrounds will allow readers to appreciate the depth of research and experience that informs the methodology presented in this book. They provide educators with valuable tactics to help students acquire the language skills necessary for reading, writing, and critical thinking in the social studies curriculum. Below is a chapter-by-chapter summary designed to provide readers with a clear, thoughtful, and concise understanding of the text's structure, critical arguments, and contributions to the field.

The opening chapter lays the foundation by explaining the importance of making language visible in social studies classrooms. The authors argue that the ability to engage with and write discipline-specific texts is critical to students' success. The book focuses on strategies to support multilingual learners in the social studies classroom, but its principles can be applied to all students. Multilingual learners often face additional barriers in mastering both language and social studies content, as they must develop academic language skills while engaging in a complex subject. This book provides teachers with tools and strategies to bridge this gap, in particular by making the linguistic elements of the social studies texts more visible and accessible to students. However, the proposed pedagogical strategies can be applied universally to benefit all students who must be explicitly taught the language and literacy skills required in social studies. For multilingual learners,

mastering the academic language of social studies is particularly important, as they must navigate the subject's content simultaneously with their second language. In social studies, the challenge is greater, as the subject often involves complex vocabulary, specialised language structures, and abstract concepts. Understanding and using this specialised language is essential for students to engage successfully in the text and make well-argued arguments. This book argues that language conveys content and is a fundamental tool for critical thinking about social and school subjects. Explicit language instruction in the content area helps multilingual learners access critical disciplinary literature and thus supports their academic achievements. In geography, for instance, students learn to use spatial thinking, to interpret data maps, and to explain environmental or demographic trends. This book encourages teachers to make these disciplinary ways of thinking explicit by teaching the specific language structures and genre-forms used in each discipline. The aim is to get students to think critically, engage in meaningful discussions, and produce informed analysis, just as professional researchers do in these fields.

Chapter 2 addresses the specific language features required for constructing explanations in social studies. Using examples such as the impact of US boarding schools, especially in the late 19th and early 20th century, were institutions designed by the US government to assimilate native American children into the American mainstream. These schools often sought to suppress native languages, cultural practices, and traditions by promoting English and Western values. This historical practice is essential for the text, as it illustrates the cultural and linguistic loss experienced by many of the native American communities and serves as a model for students to engage in complex social-studies content through language. A brief note on this topic would be a valuable background for a broader, international audience. In Chapter 2, the authors explain how to strengthen students' abilities to write explanations, emphasizing causal, consequential, and factorial explanations. Teachers are encouraged to move beyond generic outlines and instead provide specific genre-based structures that reflect the thought process in social studies. The chapter emphasizes teaching students how to articulate cause-and-effect relationships using extended noun groups, complex sentences, and causal connectors.

Chapter 3 focuses on shifts to social science arguments. The authors describe how argumentation in social studies differs from other disciplines and outline different types of arguments, such as interpretation, criticism, and discussion. The text introduces balancing perspectives and explains how to help students construct two-sided arguments using structured reasoning and evidence. The authors provide practical guidance for moderating the intensity of claims through language choices,

including modality and attribution. Reading the chapter will enable teachers to develop strategies to teach students to write nuanced arguments that consider alternative viewpoints and avoid polarization.

Chapter 4 introduces the teaching and learning cycle (TLC), a pedagogical model encouraging students' engagement with disciplinary genres. The cycle includes four stages. The first is building field knowledge, which provides students with basic knowledge of the subject to be studied. It includes teaching students' key concepts, vocabulary and context before they read or write about a subject. For example, when studying the impact of US boarding schools on Native American communities, students would first look at relevant historical events, cultural practices, and terminology related to the history and education of native Americans. Another stage, modeling and deconstructing the genre, refers to teachers giving students explicit examples of organizing and writing social studies texts, including deconstructing the mentor text to analyze its linguistic features, structure and content. For example, in analyzing the historical explanation, students would examine how the causal relationships are articulated, how the evidence is presented, and how the text is structured. Third is joint construction, which is collaborative, with teachers and students working together to produce a text or an analysis. Students actively build arguments or explanations, applying the knowledge and genre structures they learned in the lesson. For example, students could collaborate with their teacher on a history analysis paper, contributing ideas, selecting evidence, and discussing language choices. The last stage is Independent Construction. Finally, students use what they have learned to produce their writing independently, for example, an essay or a research paper. At this stage, students should use the genre structures, linguistic elements and disciplinary knowledge they have acquired to create a coherent and well-structured text. This phase promotes autonomy and reinforces skills acquired in previous phases. The authors explain how this cycle can be used in the social studies classroom and provide step-by-step instructions for each stage.

The final chapter examines the intersection of reading and language in social studies classrooms. It introduces a language-based approach to disciplinary reading in which students are taught to analyze the language features of social studies texts, such as how arguments are constructed and explanations are organized. This approach encourages active reading in which students engage critically with texts and identify important language patterns that reveal underlying disciplinary thinking. The chapter offers strategies to help students decode complex social studies texts and develop their reading comprehension and content knowledge.

This book is essential to educators who want to promote greater equity in the classroom by recognizing the central role of language in shaping students' access to and engagement with the content. Their approach encourages teachers to focus not only on what students know about social studies, but also on how they use their language to express and develop this knowledge. By emphasizing explicit language instruction alongside content teaching, the authors provide a framework to address the needs of diverse learners, especially those with multilingualism, who may experience academic language barriers. The book's approach is deeply rooted in the principles of equal education, which ensure that all students, regardless of their linguistic or cultural background, can participate fully in social studies. This focus on linguistic equity aligns with the work of scholars such as García and Wei (2014, pp. 78–89). It can be seen as part of a broader movement within the education sector to bridge the gap between content and language skills, thus promoting inclusiveness and academic achievement for all. The pedagogical vision presented by Besser and Westerlund places language at the centre of the learning process, especially in social studies classes. They argue that language is not only a means of conveying content, but is also crucial for students to engage with, understand, and create knowledge. The authors promote a more holistic approach to learning by including language instruction in the content areas, reflecting the interdependent nature of language and learning. This view is supported by the work of scholars like Schleppegrell (2004), who stressed the importance of academic language in the field of content, and Martin and Rose (2007), whose research on the structure of language in pedagogy showed how it helps students access disciplinary knowledge. In addition, the framework proposed by Besser and Westerlund is consistent with discussions on content-based literacy instruction, such as the ones presented by Fang and Schleppegrell (2010), which highlight the need for disciplinary literacy practices that link language development to content learning.

Although the book is rich in theory and practical strategies, it assumes a level of familiarity with genre-based pedagogy that some readers may still need to gain. Nevertheless, including authentic vignettes and example scripts throughout the chapters helps bridge this gap and provides concrete examples of how the strategies can be implemented in real classrooms. A significant drawback is that this book requires a certain amount of knowledge about SFL and genre-based pedagogy, which can be difficult for novice educators to meet. Teachers unfamiliar with language-based disciplinary literacy may find the book's theoretical depth a steep learning curve despite its abundance of practical strategies and theory. While the authors attempt to mitigate this through vignettes and example scripts, some

readers may still find it difficult to fully understand and apply the pedagogical approach without further basic knowledge.

While this book offers valuable theoretical insights into disciplinary literacy, a more thorough comparative analysis with similar works would provide a deeper understanding of its unique contribution to the discipline. For example, texts like *Teaching Disciplinary Literacy in Grades K-6* by Lupo et al. (2021) offer practical, research-based strategies that complement the theoretical framework presented in Besser and Westerlund's book. A brief historical overview of how disciplinary literacy has evolved, both in general and within the specific context of social studies, further contextualizes the book's place in the literature. In particular, genre-based instruction, which has been a cornerstone of SFL, could be more prominently highlighted to provide educators with concrete tools for research-informed practices. The book would benefit from emphasizing how genre-based strategies can be effectively implemented in the classroom, thereby enhancing its practical utility for teachers working with multilingual learners in social studies classrooms.

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ELIH SUTISNA YANTO

Elih Sutisna Yanto is a board member of the Exploratory Practice Indonesian Community (EPiC) and a teacher training and education faculty member at Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang, Indonesia. His research interests are language teacher professional development, Systemic Functional Linguistics in language education, and qualitative research in ELT.

elih.sutisna@fkip.unsika.ac.id
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0701-6454>

SUWARNO

Suwarno is an English lecturer at Politeknik Negeri Batam, Indonesia. His research interests include English for vocational purposes, critical discourse studies, systemic functional linguistics in language education, corpus linguistics, narrative inquiry, and sociocultural studies.

suwarno@polibatam.ac.id
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8639-6127>



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