



FROM MATERIAL TO RELATIONAL: WHAT MOOD AND TRANSITIVITY REVEAL ABOUT EFL STUDENTS' RECOUNT AND REPORT WRITING

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Abstract

This study explores the realization of mood and transitivity systems in Indonesian EFL students' recount and report writings using the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The study aims to describe the grammatical patterns that characterize each genre and to identify how students use language to construct meaning. The data were obtained from ten texts written by five eleventh-grade students of a vocational high school in Bandung, consisting of five recounts and five reports. Each text was analyzed clause by clause to identify mood types, process types, and thematic structures. The findings reveal that declarative clauses dominate both genres, showing that students primarily use language to provide information. In recount texts, material processes are most frequent, representing sequences of actions and events, whereas report texts are dominated by relational processes, expressing classification and description. Thematic analysis also shows that topical themes are frequently used to maintain coherence. These results indicate that students' grammatical choices are consistent with genre purposes, yet their variation in clause construction remains limited. The study suggests that explicit teaching of SFL-based writing can enhance learners' awareness of how language functions to convey meaning in different text types.

Keywords: Mood, Transitivity, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Recount Text, Report Text, EFL Writing

INTRODUCTION

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday (1994) and later refined by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), views language as a resource for making meaning within social contexts. Unlike formal linguistic theories that focus on syntax, SFL investigates how linguistic choices realize three metafunctions of meaning: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational metafunction represents human experience through processes, participants, and circumstances; the interpersonal metafunction enacts social

roles and relationships through mood and modality; and the textual metafunction organizes information into coherent messages (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Thompson, 2014).

Within this framework, grammatical analysis extends beyond correctness and focuses on how language functions as a semiotic system (Eggins, 2004; Martin & Rose, 2008). SFL has therefore become a powerful tool for examining written discourse, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, where learners must learn not only vocabulary and grammar but also

how language choices construct meaning in specific genres (Emilia, 2014).

Mood System and Interpersonal Meaning

The mood system in SFL expresses interpersonal meanings how speakers and writers interact with their audience. A clause is composed of Subject and Finite elements that form the Mood block, determining whether a clause is declarative, interrogative, or imperative (Halliday, 1994). Declarative clauses typically provide information, interrogatives demand information, and imperatives demand goods or services. These grammatical configurations signal the writer's stance, degree of assertiveness, and engagement with readers (Thompson, 2014; Martin & White, 2005).

In academic and informational genres, the declarative mood overwhelmingly dominates because writers primarily aim to inform rather than to command or inquire (Eggins, 2004; Ravelli, 2018). Studies on EFL learners' writing consistently confirm this pattern. For instance, Yang, Ramírez & Harman (2007) found that Chinese university students relied heavily on declarative clauses in expository essays, revealing limited interpersonal variation. Similarly, Jelimum, Suarnajaya, and Adnyani (2020) reported that Indonesian EFL learners used mostly declarative clauses in narrative texts, indicating an emerging awareness of informational exchange rather than interpersonal negotiation. This reliance on declarative structures suggests that while learners can convey information, they often struggle to employ modality and interactional strategies, features that mark advanced academic writing (Hu & Li, 2018).

Transitivity System and Ideational Meaning

The transitivity system represents how language encodes experience — actions, perceptions, relationships, and states of being through process types. Halliday (1994) identifies six main processes: material (doing, happening), mental (sensing, thinking, feeling), relational (being, having), verbal (saying), behavioral (behaving), and existential (existing). The distribution of these process types reflects the writer's cognitive orientation toward experience (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Fontaine, 2013).

In recount or narrative genres, material processes tend to dominate because such texts represent sequences of human actions and events (Eggins, 2004; Knapp & Watkins, 2005). Conversely, report and expository texts typically rely on relational processes that define, classify, and describe entities objectively (Martin & Rose, 2008). Research has demonstrated that EFL learners' control of transitivity patterns correlates with their ability to achieve genre purposes. For example, Agustina and Suarnajaya (2021) showed that material processes comprised over half of students' narrative clauses, while relational and mental processes appeared less frequently. Similarly, Emilia and Hamied (2015) found that students' report texts were dominated by relational clauses, which were used to define concepts and generalize knowledge.

Recent corpus-based studies have also highlighted how process distribution reflects disciplinary thinking. Yu (2022) analyzed Chinese university students' scientific reports and found a systematic preference for relational clauses, suggesting the students' awareness of

scientific discourse conventions. This supports the pedagogical potential of SFL in helping EFL learners understand how grammatical choices construct disciplinary meanings (O'Halloran, Tan, & Wignell, 2019; Ravelli, 2018).

Theme-Rheme Structure and Textual Meaning

The theme-rheme system realizes textual meaning by organizing information flow within the clause. The theme functions as the point of departure of a message, while the rheme carries new information (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Thematic progression contributes to coherence by connecting clauses logically (Eggins, 2004; Fries, 1995).

Different genres favor different types of themes. Recount texts typically use topical themes with personal pronouns (e.g., I, My family) to foreground the narrator's experience, while report texts use unmarked topical themes (e.g., The elephant, A volcano) to establish objectivity (Martin & Rose, 2008; Ravelli, 2018). Studies such as Emilia (2014) and Taboada (2006) have shown that EFL learners often use repetitive or linear thematic progression, which ensures coherence but limits textual sophistication. Improving learners' awareness of theme-rheme organization is therefore essential for developing advanced writing competence (Wu, 2018; Qiu & Huang, 2020).

A growing body of research applies SFL to examine students' writing development in EFL contexts. Emilia (2014) demonstrated that explicit instruction in transitivity and theme improved Indonesian students' argumentative essays. Faradina and Emilia (2024) analyzed student recount texts and found that learners were able to use material and mental processes

appropriately, though with limited thematic variety. Jelimum et al. (2020) revealed that material processes dominated narrative texts, while declarative clauses were used almost exclusively. Agustina and Suarnajaya (2021) reported similar findings in narrative data from vocational students.

In a broader context, Fang and Wang (2011) investigated writing across school levels in Australia, showing that students' control of transitivity and theme develops gradually as they progress through the curriculum. More recent studies (e.g., Ravelli, 2018; Yu, 2022; Li & Huang, 2023) emphasize that grammatical choices not only realize meaning but also construct disciplinary knowledge and identity in writing.

However, most prior research has focused on a single genre, such as narrative or exposition, or on academic contexts involving university students. Few studies have compared mood and transitivity systems across two different student-generated genres (e.g., recount and report) within the same EFL group. This gap underscores the need to explore how vocational students manipulate grammatical resources across genres, as such analysis can reveal their genre awareness and meaning-making potential (Emilia & Hamied, 2015; O'Halloran, Tan, & Wignell, 2019).

In summary, the literature establishes that SFL provides a robust framework for understanding how grammar realizes meaning in student writing. Studies have shown consistent patterns in the dominance of declarative mood and material or relational processes, depending on the genre. Nevertheless, comparative research involving vocational high school learners and two distinct genres—recount and report—remains scarce. Such investigation is crucial

because vocational students often learn English for both academic and professional purposes, where mastery of genre-specific grammar determines communicative success.

Therefore, this study builds upon prior work by analyzing and comparing mood and transitivity systems in vocational students' recount and report texts to uncover how linguistic resources reflect their genre understanding and writing development.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as proposed by Halliday (1994) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). The qualitative descriptive design was chosen because this research aimed to describe linguistic phenomena as they naturally occur in students' writing rather than to test a hypothesis or establish causal relationships. Specifically, the study focused on analyzing the linguistic features that realize ideational and interpersonal meanings in students' texts through the examination of mood and transitivity systems. The SFL approach provides a detailed explanation of how language functions to express experience and interaction; therefore, it is highly suitable for investigating how students construct meaning through grammar in different genres.

In this research, SFL was not used as a teaching model but as an analytical lens to understand the students' written language. The qualitative approach also allowed the researcher to interpret the data more deeply and identify patterns that might not be captured through quantitative procedures alone.

Participants and Data

The participants of this study were five students from the eleventh grade of a vocational high school (SMK) in Bandung, Indonesia. The students were selected purposively because they had already learned about recount and report texts in their English class. They were considered capable of producing simple written texts in English but still developing in terms of grammatical and genre competence.

Each student was asked to produce two types of texts, i.e. one recount and one report, as part of their regular classroom writing activity. The writing task was completed individually without direct teacher correction or peer editing before submission, so that the texts would reflect the students' authentic language ability. As a result, there were ten texts in total: five recounts and five reports.

The recount texts generally narrated personal or school-related experiences, while the report texts described particular objects or animals. These topics were familiar to the students, allowing them to focus on expressing ideas rather than struggling with content. All texts were typed and submitted in softcopy form for easier analysis.

To maintain research ethics, students' names and any identifying information were anonymized. In addition, consent was obtained from the school and the English teacher to use the students' writing for academic research purposes.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through several systematic steps following the procedures of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly the frameworks proposed by Halliday and

Matthiessen (2014). Each text was first segmented into clauses, which served as the basic unit of analysis. The analysis then focused on three main components: mood system, transitivity system, and theme-rheme structure.

Mood Analysis

Each clause was identified according to its mood type, such as declarative, interrogative, or imperative, to determine how students expressed interpersonal meanings in their writing. The distribution of these mood types was then compared between recount and report genres.

Transitivity Analysis

Each clause was analyzed based on its process type, including material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential processes. This analysis aimed to uncover how students represented actions, thoughts, relations, and experiences in their writing. Actors, goals, and other participants were also identified to provide a more complete picture of clause construction.

Theme-Rheme Analysis:

The initial part of each clause was examined to determine the theme, followed by the rheme, or the remainder of the clause. Themes were categorized as topical, interpersonal, or textual, depending on their function in organizing the flow of information.

After the analyses were completed, frequencies and percentages were calculated to illustrate the overall patterns across the two genres. These numerical representations were useful for comparing which mood and process types were most dominant in each text type.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study analyzed ten student texts that consist of five recounts and five reports produced by eleventh-grade

vocational students in Bandung, Indonesia. Each text was segmented into clauses and examined in terms of mood, transitivity, and theme-rheme structure following the framework of Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). Overall, the results reveal a clear distinction between the two genres in terms of linguistic realization.

In recount texts, the declarative mood dominated (approximately 95% of all clauses), followed by a few instances of imperative clauses embedded in dialogues. The material process was most frequent (around 57%), representing concrete actions and experiences. Mental processes accounted for about 17%, while relational, verbal, and behavioral processes appeared less frequently.

In contrast, report texts exhibited only declarative clauses, demonstrating the students' awareness of the impersonal and informative nature of the genre. The relational process was the most dominant (about 44%), followed by material (30%), behavioral (12%), and a few mental and verbal processes. These tendencies indicate that students adjusted their linguistic choices according to genre purposes—retelling personal experience in recounts versus describing phenomena in reports.

Mood System and Interpersonal Meaning

The dominance of declarative clauses in both genres reflects how students primarily used language to convey information rather than negotiate meaning. This finding is consistent with Halliday's (1994) claim that the declarative mood functions to exchange information, whereas interrogative and imperative clauses are used to demand information or action.

In recount texts, the frequent use of declaratives such as *I went to the market*, *We played football*, or *I felt happy* shows that students perceive recount writing as a personal narrative activity. They position themselves as narrators recounting events for the reader, not as interlocutors seeking interaction. A few imperative clauses appeared within dialogues (e.g., “*Don’t be late!*”), signaling attempts to reproduce spoken experience within the narrative frame.

In report texts, the total absence of interrogative and imperative clauses reinforces the objective tone typical of informational genres (Martin & Rose, 2008; Eggins, 2004). The use of declaratives such as *The elephant is the largest land animal* or *A volcano is a mountain that erupts* demonstrates students’ ability to adopt an authoritative voice appropriate for scientific description.

These findings support previous research. Jelimum, Suarnajaya, and Adnyani (2020) found that Indonesian EFL learners predominantly used declarative mood in narrative texts, reflecting limited interpersonal variation. Similarly, Peng & Bao (2023) reported that Chinese university students over-relied on declaratives in expository writing, signaling an early developmental stage in genre awareness. According to Martin and White (2005), novice writers often lack control over engagement resources, they inform rather than argue, and state rather than evaluate. Thus, while the students in this study demonstrate an understanding of genre-based tone, their interpersonal range remains narrow, showing a need for explicit instruction in mood variation and modality to strengthen writer-reader interaction.

Transitivity System and Ideational Meaning

Recount Texts

The recount texts were characterized by a predominance of material processes ($\approx 57\%$), which encode physical actions and experiences, as in *I walked to school*, *We practiced basketball*, or *My family visited Bandung*. This reflects the genre’s social purpose: to retell events in chronological order (Knapp & Watkins, 2005; Emilia, 2014).

The second most common process was mental ($\approx 17\%$), revealing students’ emotional and cognitive engagement—*I felt nervous*, *I wanted to help*, *I thought it was fun*. These expressions align with the interpersonal enrichment typical of personal recounts (Martin & Rose, 2008). Smaller proportions of relational processes ($\approx 10\%$) were used to describe settings (*The day was sunny*), while verbal and behavioral processes ($\approx 8\%$ combined) occurred in dialogue-like segments (*My teacher said*, *I laughed*). This distribution mirrors findings by Widya and Emilia (2019), who observed similar dominance of material clauses in student recounts, with mental processes adding reflective nuance.

From a developmental perspective, this pattern indicates that students successfully represent experience as dynamic action, though they still exhibit limited control over abstract or relational expressions (Christie & Derewianka, 2010). Such linguistic behavior suggests that the learners’ experiential meanings remain closely tied to personal, concrete contexts, a common feature of EFL writers at intermediate proficiency (Fang & Wang, 2011).

Report Texts

In contrast, report texts were dominated by relational processes ($\approx 44\%$), often used in attributive or identifying constructions such as *The cat is a domestic animal* or *A volcano is a natural phenomenon*. These clauses serve to classify, define, and describe, fulfilling the ideational function of the genre (Eggins, 2004). Material processes ($\approx 30\%$) describe observable behavior (*Birds build nests*, *Fish swim in water*), while behavioral processes ($\approx 12\%$) indicate habitual actions (*Elephants sleep during the day*). Smaller occurrences of mental and verbal processes ($\approx 7\%$ each) add limited cognition and communication, such as in *People believe that...*, *Scientists call it...*, though these remain underused compared to authentic academic writing.

This pattern reflects the scientific orientation of report genres, where language serves to construct general truths (Martin & Rose, 2008; Yu, 2022). The shift from material to relational dominance demonstrates that students recognize the difference between narrating actions and defining entities. However, their reliance on simple relational clauses (mostly *X is Y*) suggests a formulaic understanding of the genre, possibly influenced by textbook models (Emilia & Hamied, 2015).

Comparing both genres reveals that recount texts prioritize experiential flow, while report texts foreground conceptual stability, a distinction consistent with Halliday's (1994) principle that different registers privilege different process types.

Theme–Rheme Structure and Textual Coherence

Analysis of theme–rheme organization across the ten texts shows that students favored topical themes,

usually realized by the subject position. In recounts, personal themes (*I*, *My family*, *My friend*) dominated, producing a linear progression that maintains temporal coherence (*I woke up* \rightarrow *I went to school* \rightarrow *I studied hard*). In reports, unmarked topical themes (e.g., *The elephant*, *The volcano*, *The internet*) were used to foreground the phenomenon described.

This finding corresponds to Fries (1995) and Eggins (2004), who note that consistent thematic progression supports textual coherence. However, the lack of textual or interpersonal themes (e.g., *However*, *In addition*, *Interestingly*) shows limited rhetorical control. According to Wu (2018) and Qiu and Huang (2020), such cohesive devices are markers of advanced writing competence. Thus, while the students successfully organize information linearly, they need further training in thematic variation to achieve greater sophistication in text development.

Table 1. Comparative Interpretation

Linguistic Feature	Recount Texts	Report Texts
Dominant Mood	Declarative (occasionally imperative in dialogue)	Declarative only
Dominant Process	Material ($\approx 57\%$), Mental ($\approx 17\%$)	Relational ($\approx 44\%$), Material ($\approx 30\%$)
Theme Types	Personal (“I”, “My”)	Generalized (“The elephant”, “The volcano”)

Social Function	Retelling experience	Describing phenomena
Tone	Personal, reflective	Objective, factual

This contrast illustrates the learners' emerging genre sensitivity. They can differentiate between personal and informational purposes by adjusting grammatical choices accordingly. Yet, their limited variety in clause types, process types, and themes suggests developing rather than mature control of genre conventions (Christie & Derewianka, 2010).

Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

The findings indicate that Indonesian vocational students possess a functional awareness of genre-based writing, though still at a structural level. They can select appropriate process types and mood structures to achieve basic genre goals but lack diversity and complexity in their linguistic realizations. This limitation may stem from EFL pedagogy that emphasizes form and accuracy over meaning and function (Emilia, 2014; O'Halloran, Tan, & Wignell, 2019).

In SFL terms, their texts show control over field (content) and tenor (interpersonal stance), but limited mastery of mode (textual organization). This aligns with Fang and Wang (2011), who argue that learners at intermediate levels often understand genre purpose but not how linguistic resources interrelate across metafunctions.

Pedagogically, these results support the integration of SFL-informed writing instruction in vocational settings. Teachers can use *clause analysis* activities

to help students explore how grammar constructs meaning—for example, by comparing how a material clause (*Elephants eat plants*) and a relational clause (*Elephants are herbivores*) realize different experiential meanings. Such activities can bridge the gap between grammatical knowledge and functional literacy, enabling learners to write more consciously and effectively across genres (Emilia & Hamied, 2015; Ravelli, 2018). Furthermore, explicit discussion of theme–rheme and mood structures can raise students' awareness of textual flow and audience engagement—two critical aspects of professional communication in vocational contexts (Yu, 2022; Li & Huang, 2023). In the long term, this functional understanding can improve not only their academic writing but also workplace documentation skills, aligning with Indonesia's current vocational curriculum goals.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Indonesian vocational students employ the mood and transitivity systems in their recount and report writings through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The analysis revealed distinctive linguistic realizations across genres. Recount texts were characterized by declarative mood and material processes, reflecting students' tendency to express concrete actions and personal experiences. In contrast, report texts were dominated by relational clauses, representing factual classification and definition of phenomena.

These findings demonstrate that students possess a developing genre awareness—they can select grammatical resources appropriate to each text type. However, their limited variation in mood,

process, and thematic structures indicates that they still operate at a functional rather than rhetorical level of control. From an interpersonal perspective, the dominance of declarative clauses shows that students prioritize information delivery over negotiation or evaluation. Ideationally, their preference for material and relational processes reveals an understanding of action and description but limited capacity for abstraction. Textually, their reliance on topical themes supports coherence but restricts flow and sophistication.

Pedagogically, the results reinforce the significance of SFL-informed writing instruction for EFL learners, particularly in vocational education. Teaching students to analyze mood, transitivity, and theme can foster awareness of how grammar creates meaning across different genres. Such instruction helps bridge the gap between linguistic knowledge and functional communication, enabling students to write not only correctly but meaningfully.

Future studies could expand this research by including other genres (e.g., exposition, discussion), integrating corpus-based tools for quantitative validation, and exploring the relationship between linguistic features and students' cognitive or cultural backgrounds. Broader investigations may further reveal how SFL-based pedagogy can enhance academic and professional literacy in Indonesia's vocational schools.

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