Exploring textual meaning-making in Indonesian EFL learners' writing: A systemic functional perspective

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Abstract

Drawing on the framework of theme systems in systemic functional linguistics, this study aimed to explore the students writing in textual meaning-making. The explanation text was the genre of the sample. The students wrote about different topics. Then, the researcher focused on content, organization, vocabulary, and grammar. The data were collected from 3 secondary students' writing tasks in Temanggung, central Java. Functional text analysis was used to analyze the data including, the Ideational, interpersonal, and textual themes system. The results represent that the students exaggerate the use of certain types of theme systems. for example, in the case of the topical theme. The analysis accounted that several students use this way but ignore the others. Most nominal groups appear in the clause and have fewer modalities. The textual theme is dominant in this paper and ideational (for instance, the use of conjunctive and continuative) is median, and the Interpersonal theme (modality) is the lowest. In summary, introducing the modality systematically and providing more contexts for learners to practice it is highly recommended in such a context.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics, Textual meaning-making, Theme system.

INTRODUCTION

Language is the basic concept of interaction and communication and plays a vital role in our lifetime. Language is crucial for transmitting information, commodities, and services in any interaction. Through language, people gain semiotic meaning. Cited by Halliday (1975); Language is structured to make three kinds of meanings simultaneously. This semiotic complexity allows ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning. Thus, in Systemic functional linguistics, language is a semiotic system, a conventionalized coding system, and an organized set of choices. Textual meanings are meanings that express the language's relationship to its environment, including both the verbal environment—what was previously said or written (co-text) and the non-verbal, situational environment (context). These meanings are realized through theme patterns and cohesion.

Gerot,L & Wignell. P (1994) described the textual meaning as a sweater. Two sweaters might be made using the same pattern, with wool of the same type. But one is knitted using large, loose stitches. This is like spoken language. The other is knitted finely, with close stitches. This is like written language. Both garments are made of the same materials and services to keep their owners warm. But the texture of each is different. Textual meaning is realized through the theme rheme and cohesion in a text. A text consists of sentences and paragraphs that have linked each other to create a significant meaning. To achieve that, they need to develop unity and coherence in every clause. In textual metafunction, a clause is analyzed into theme and rheme. Textual Meaning which makes the language contextually relevant is realized in the lexicogrammar through sentence structure and the use of textual means (cohesion and coherence). In the textual meaning, we can find the use of cohesive devices that serve as a concept of cohesion and coherence.

Cohesion and coherence constructed the textual meaning through theme and rheme. According to Derewianka (2016), the Theme is the first element that appears in the clause or sentence that signals how the text will be developed. In English, as in many other languages, the phrase is organized as a message by assigning a special to a part of it. An element in the clause is pronounced as a subject, then combined with the rest to form a message. The theme is linked as the 'glue' that structures and binds the ideational and interpersonal meanings. Martin (1992: 12) argues that the choice of what comes first is "a textual resource systematically exploited" to effect different patterns.

Halliday and Matthiessen (2013) designed the concept of writing as meaning-making that originated from the systemic functional linguistics theoretical lens. There is a Repression of

understanding texts from a meaning-making perspective. Exploring the meaning-making in students is not easy and has strong pressure, particularly for L2 students. Thus, of all skills in English proficiency, writing meaning-making is the most difficult one. Writing an essay in a second or foreign language is challenging for the majority of students. Lack of grammatical proficiency and inability to string together clauses or phrases into an effective paragraph or essay are some of the causes. One of the most important aspects of writing skills is creating coherent, cohesive compositions. A mastery of cohesive devices that can bring the concepts generated in the writing together into one logical line of thought is necessary for coherent and cohesive writing. Writing for meaning refers to using diverse and organized combinations of lexicogrammars and resources to make it meaningful (Ryshina-Pankova and Byrnes 2013). The study of young foreign language learners developing their L2 competence and expanding their L2 register repertoire provides a valuable opportunity to examine writing from the perspective of meaning-making (Ryshina-Pankova and Byrnes 2013).

The perspective of meaning-making is in line with functional grammar which views language as a resource for making meaning both spoken and written. The grammar attempts to identify how language is used and so focuses on texts and contexts. They are anxious not only about the structures of text but also about how these structures construct meaning. The study of writing in meaning-making is strongly related to genre-based writing as part of systemic functional Linguistics. Ryshina-Pankova (2011) stated that writing studies for meaning and teaching writing by teaching how the meaning can be focused on the aspects such as genre (Harman 2013), Grammatical metaphor (Liardet 2013), and cohesion. Yet, few have observed the textual meaning-making for instances in theme and rheme.

Examining the theme and rheme progression or textual meaning is essential for the student's language development. It is proven by wang (2007) explained that teaching cohesive and coherent elements can be effectively focused on developing students' theme and rheme and also textual metafunction. These findings indicate that paying attention to theme will be very useful in helping students communicate their ideas successfully. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) also support that Specified in terms of the listener/reader's network of meaning, accepting meaning when it reaches the level of cohesion. Moreover, Using different types of attitudinal resources in L2 writing could be a sign of progress (Painter 2003), lead to higher L2 writing scores (Swain 2010), and help students reason successfully (Ryshina-Pankova and Byrnes 2013). A better understanding of attitudinal resources could help in the development of ELT materials and assessments, for example by assessing curriculum objectives (Chen 2010), building solidarity with readers (Coffin 2006), and central role in learning from L2 learners (Dewaele and Pavlenko 2002).

Previous studies with a different framework regarding theme, rheme, and textual metafunctions have been spread. Sitagang,(2018) in her research conclude that through learning theme students can create a cohesive text in their assignment with correct structure in grammatical cohesion and Lexical cohesion. Furthermore, she said that there are significant scores while teaching coherence and cohesion by using textual metafunction both theme and rheme. Caffarel, Martin, and Matthiessen (2004) claim that the process of interpreting a text comes from the textual metafunction produced and interpreted by the reader. Hence, they are convinced that these resources "are the units organized to guide the process of text production and interpretation" (p. 635). In addition, they elaborate on the possible dimensions of the textual metafunction as (i) thematic, (ii) newsworthiness, and (iii) specificity. (p. 637). This argument is supported by Emilia (2014, p. 25) states:

> "Language is said to be systemic because it offers options or a set of choices for making meaning. For example, the tense system offers choices for making meaning, and so do the systems of conjunction, of person, number, voice, or theme."

However, there has been some research on cohesion. Studies of cohesion often focus on cohesive ties as part of creating textual cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Yet, in accordance with Stotsky according to Wang (2007, cohesive linkages alone are insufficient to produce a coherent text. According to Witte and Faigley's 1981 study (cited by Mellos, 2011), students produced better papers. Ventola (1992) argued that text-linguistic study can provide crucial details about cohesion

and coherence. The theme and rheme are two ways that cohesiveness and coherence might be developed.

Halliday (1985) stated textual clauses promote the construction of messages and structures, while Theme/Rheme is the basic form of the clause of a text. Christie and Derewianka (2010: 20) define the Theme as a signal to the reader about what they talking are and they define Rheme as the provider of new information. The theme at the beginning of the text covers the general information and is followed by a rheme to give detailed information. Eggins (2004) believes that without the textual metafunction, ideational and interpersonal meanings cannot be expressed coherently. She also analyzes in detail the structure of the subject as one of the two constituent elements of the textual metafunction. Halliday, & Matthiessen, (2014, p. 106) classified the theme into three major systems: topical, interpersonal, and textual.
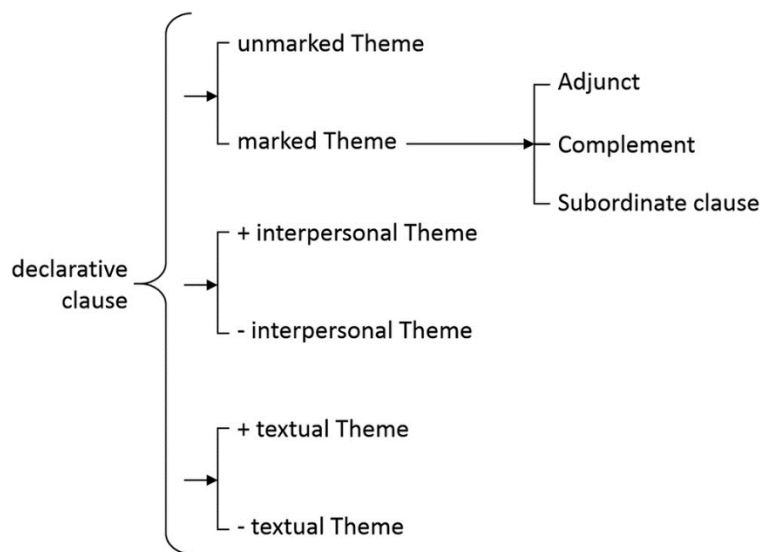

Figure 1. Adapted from (Halliday, & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 106)

Gerot,L & Wignell. P (1994) Elaborates that the Topical is divided into two Marked and Unmarked branches. While the unmarked reminds us of the usual theme, the marked theme reminds the unusual theme. While interpersonal Theme consists of Modal adjuncts vocatives, Finite, or Wh-elements. In the interpersonal theme, the elements happening before the topical theme are also thematic. The textual Theme relates to the clause in its context. It serves conjunctive, continuatives, and structural themes.

Thus, the research accommodates two research questions that guided the investigation of this study:
(1) How do students deploy the Theme system in Explanation texts?

METHODS

Research Design

To answer this research questions, this research was guided using qualitative case study data design. Since the primary aims of the research questions are to observe, analyze, describe, and interpret the deployment of textual theme in students' explanation texts. Qualitative research was used to indicate the research design to find meaningful descriptions of a certain phenomenon through textual analysis and interpretation (Creswell, 2014).

Site and Participants

The participant of this research was the local students of Temanggung. There are three students in the ten grades of Senior High School in Temanggung in the academic year 2021/2022. aged thirteen to fourteen girls and boy students. The participants were purposefully selected based on their knowledge of the genre of the text. The students are chosen because they have learned recount text

in the previous grades whereas the structure is almost the same with explanation text. The Students understood the structure, language features, and aims of the text. In this research, they received 2 meetings in English every week. The duration of every meeting is 80 minutes which consists of theory and practice. Besides learning grammar and structure, they also get vocabulary practice in every meeting. So, most of the instruction focused on grammar and vocabulary learning.

Instruments

Document analysis and class observations were conducted to collect information related to the students' writing skills in Explanation texts. To make sure the information, the class observations are processed through face-to-face meetings. The document analysis is the result of students work in the end of the terms and has been evaluated by the teacher. While the class observation is attended by the teacher and researcher to know the process by which students write their text.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The researcher collected 3 writing tasks over the entire school year with different topics. The genre of the text is the explanation. The researcher focuses on the final test to enable exhaustive and manual data analysis. Three steps were conducted to analyze the data. The researcher adopted the following procedures in choosing the random. First, I choose three texts from the student's work and then analyze the textual team, specifically its theme analysis. The theme analysis covered ideational, interpersonal, and textual themes. After that, I analyzed the text to check the four parts cues in English. There is content, organization, vocabulary, and grammar. Then, the researcher concludes the presented in percentage form.

All the classifications of theme were identified in the explanation text written by the students. Ghadessy (1995: 20-22) clarified Ideational and interpersonal meanings can be built through Textual meanings in the form of information that can be shared with speakers and listeners, supporting the exchange of meanings in a text. The textual meaning is classified into theme and rheme that include both Experimental or ideational Theme, Interpersonal theme, and textual Theme. Later, qualitative findings from a different perspective are produced. Findings and Prominent features related to the distribution of themes in the student's writing are acknowledged.

Table 1. Writing topic for the data set

Identity	Topic	Details
Students 1	Global Warming	Talk about how the process occurs
Students 2	Coronavirus	Explain the history of coronavirus
Students 3	Flood	Elaborate on the causes and effects of flooding

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. The overall employment of Theme

The deployment theme in the student's work is identified well. The students overall did their writing in line with the teacher's instruction. Based on the result, the students understand the explanation text and the generic structures. They can identify the language features, aims, and Structures in a systematic form. On the whole text, the researcher found 81 clauses that accounted for 55% of the Ideational theme, 12,4 % for the interpersonal theme, and 32% for the Textual theme. The findings mention that the dissemination of the theme was prevalent.

The data indicates, based on the 81 clauses identified, that the students preferred using the ideational theme or topical theme, especially in unmarked theme to interpersonal and textual in their writing. Of all the topical theme they deployed in their writing, the number of unmarked theme is the most salient than others. The students chose the unmarked topical theme because it was the easiest and most familiar. The unmarked topical theme consists of nominal groups and embedded clauses. While marked topical theme consists of adverbial, prepositional, and complement as a theme.

Figure 2 describes the deployment of the themes in each student. Each shows the percentage of the type of theme used in the explanatory text they write. If we look at the data chronologically, we can see the significant differences in the dissemination of students 1, students 2, and students 3 writing tasks. While students 2 and 3 had a high percentage, student 1 was a relatively low one.
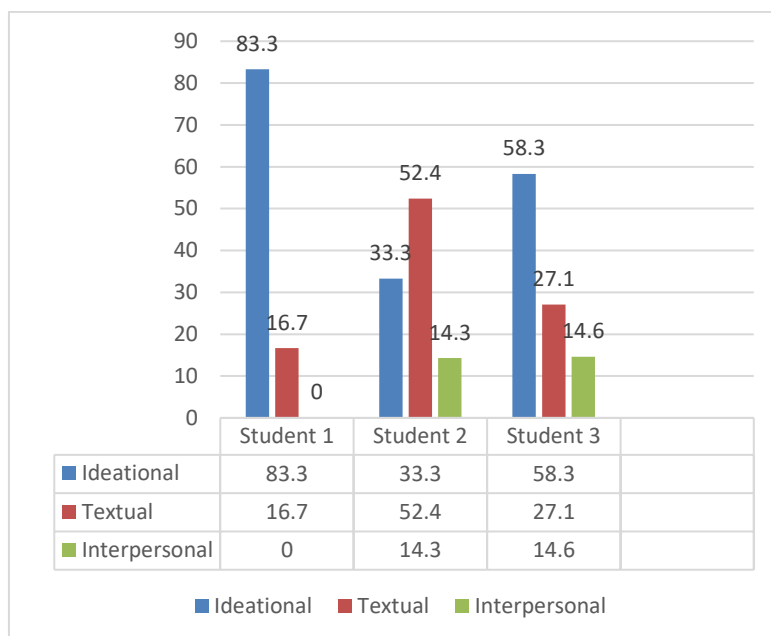
Figure 2. Overall deployment of theme in each student's writing texts

4.2. Ideational or Topical Theme

The analysis of the topical theme was significant. From 81 clause, all the topical theme is the unmarked theme. They prefer to use an unmarked theme because the nominal group is familiar with nouns. In the unmarked group case, the topical theme is also the subject. Whereas the marked topical group, the theme is not the subject. The term marked is used because it stands out. It attracts attention because it is not what we normally expect to find.

4.3. Textual Theme

Textual Themes relate the clause to its context. Textual themes can involve continuative and or conjunctive adjuncts and conjunctions. The line between conjunctive is often a fine one. Conjunctive are freer to move a clause while conjunction is well restricted to being at the beginning (Gerot, L & Wignell, 1994). The conjunctions tend to provide a textual theme within a complex clause and are structural. Conjunctive adjuncts, on the other hand, tend to (but do not always) join text outside of clause complex. They tend to have more of a text-organizing function.

Based on the findings, the students are well-known in textual themes but sometimes they are erroneous in place of the conjunctive and structural ones. They should read the clause first before deciding to mention both conjunctive and structural. Figure 3 elaborates that they are preferred in structural than conjunctive or continuative. In structural, they report "*then, because, and*" to link the clause to another clause. Furthermore, in conjunctive they often use "*but, finally at first*" to move the texts. In the end, in the continuative which is the lowest textual theme in their students, they only get "*well* the beginning of a clause to make sure of the type of clause.

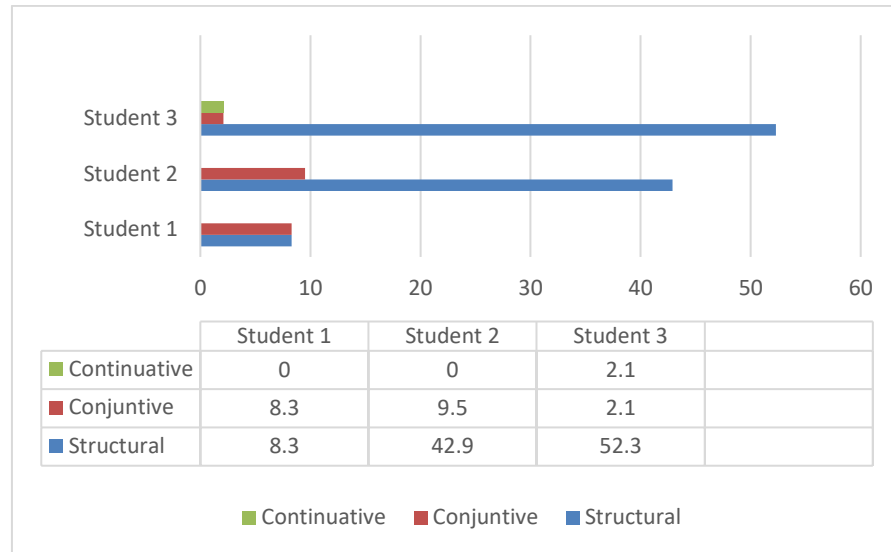|	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	
■ Continuative	0	0	2.1	
■ Conjuntive	8.3	9.5	2.1	
■ Structural	8.3	42.9	52.3	

■ Continuative   ■ Conjuntive   ■ Structural

Figure 3. The deployment of a textual theme

4.4. Interpersonal Theme

Based on Halliday (e.g., Halliday 1975, 1978; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004), The interpersonal metafunction presents the resources for speakers to enact roles and relationships; it works alongside the ideal metafunction provides speakers with the resources to construct their experiences of the world. Investigating the interpersonal meaning help the students to understand the meaning in general and language development. Interpersonal themes construct meaning through modal adjuncts, vocatives, and finite or Wh-elements. In this research, I am interested in implementing modality in explanation texts.
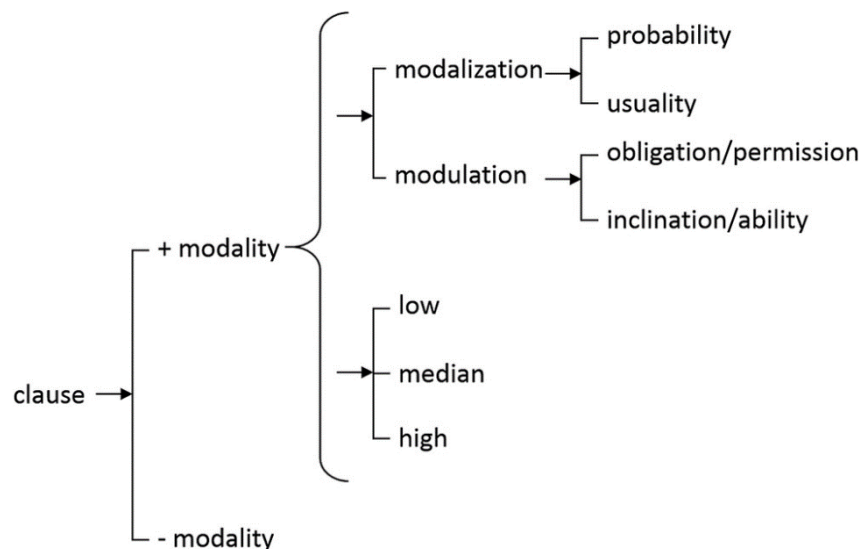
Figure 4. System of modality in systemic functional linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004)

In the modality aspect, this research focuses on the types of modalities argued by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004). There are three types of modalities Low, median, and high. The analysis result of students' texts indicated that they applicated the low modality in their texts, but some clauses used high and median modality in low percentages. They frequently add "*may and can*" to set up their writing task. In median modality like "*will or should*" the students scrimps to use it. And they are very rare to implement high modality such as "*must*".

<figure>
Interpersonal theme

1.4
4.8
22

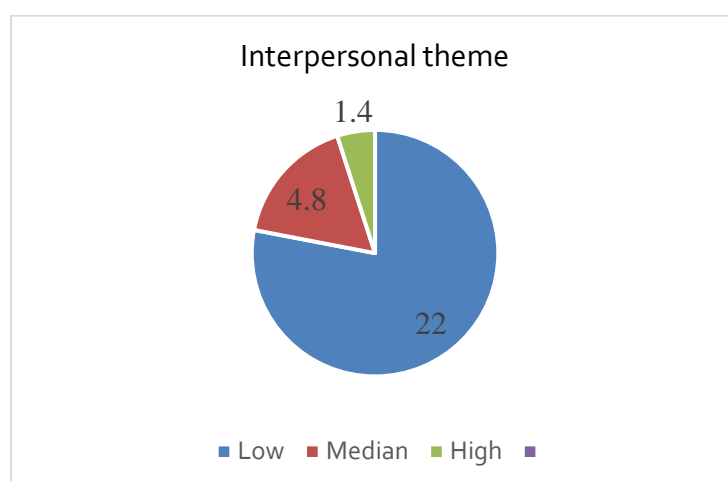Legend: ■ Low ■ Median ■ High ■
</figure>

Figure 5. The dissemination of modality in interpersonal theme

DISCUSSION

5. 1   The overall employment of Theme

Based on the result above, the figure showed that most of the students applied topical theme (unmarked theme) in their writing. 55% represent that half of the whole clause covers the topical theme, particularly in unmarked theme. The unmarked theme consists of a noun or embedded clauses. This happens because the noun is the subject of the sentence. Besides that, they also focus on an unmarked theme because the genre of the texts is an explanation that focuses on cause and effect, and some of the clauses use nouns to explain the content. That's why the topical theme is more dominant than others.

On the other hand, the interpersonal theme is the lowest. The students were strange with modality, vocatives, finite, or WH elements. For them, modality is only used as the verb or finite so it cannot be theme. Yet, some students already chose the modality in their text to confirm the facts of what they wrote. They chose *will and can* in the text and never used *must or ought to*. The students do not comprehend well how the obligation modal is used in the Explanation text. But, when we look at the textual theme, the number indicates that few students can encourage the Conjunctive or

structural element in their texts. They attach the contrast conjunction and be able to distinguish the correct use of conjunctions and structures in contextual explanatory texts. To sum up, In order to examine the distribution of themes in the text explanation, it is necessary to understand the modality so that it can be applied to future writing.

5.2 Ideational or Topical Theme

In the topical theme, the students use an unmarked theme throughout the whole of their text. I did not find the marked theme in the students' task. More than 75% used nouns as the subject and theme. In student 1 the theme starts with the explanation of global warming. She explains the unmarked theme with the noun as the subject in the text. In student 2, the theme develops a topical theme and is followed by modality as the interpersonal theme. He wrote the theme with various nouns and pronouns followed by modality to recognize the event. After that, the clause is built with the coronavirus question. The question uses the do or does question. Then, the last student also used nouns and finite as a theme in her text. She elaborated the text clearly and effectively. The topical theme is used as much as possible. This is the detailed explanations.

The student 1
[1.1] Global Warming currently taking place
[1.2] The process begins
[1.3] Sunlight returning to the air

The student 2
[2.1] The Coronavirus may be
[2.2] This virus spread very quickly
[2.3] The coronavirus itself entered Indonesia

The student 3
[3.1] Floods are the most frequent natural disasters
[3.2] The cause of flooding
[3.3] Garbage is often

5.3 Textual Theme

Figure 3 is the result analysis regarding the textual theme in students' work. Based on the data students are more interested in using structural elements than conjunctive and continuative. For them, the structural is easy to apply. From 81 clauses there are 21 structural themes, 3 Conjunctive themes, and 2 continuative themes. In structural theme the students use the adverbial clause or the noun connector to link with the complex clause such as *however, due to, and, that, which.* These connectors develop the cause to build an effect in explanation texts. Whereas in conjunctive the students often write *but, at first, the next.* This conjunction is to move the different meanings in one clause to another clause. The last, the analysis showed the students only make one continuative in the text. They try to use *well* at the beginning of the clause to open the topic. You can see the result of the textual theme in each student.

Student 1
Structural
[1.1] where most of the heat is absorbed
Continuative
[1.2] Well, do you know how global warming occurs

Students 2

Structural	Conjunctive
[2.1] and spread to different regions	[2.1] But, Do you know
[2.2] that can infect the human respiratory	[2.1] At first, it was believed
[2.3] Then the virus	
[2.4] which can lead to death	
[2.5] However , there is no clear	
[2.6] Due to the coronavirus so far been	

Student 3

Structural	Conjunctive	Continuative
[3.1] which an area is inundated by	[3.1] The next factors	[3.1] Especially when
[3.2] as a result, the river flow		
[3.3] because the environment is		
[3.4] Even though we are		
[3.5] Because garbage can be		

5.4 Interpersonal Theme

As we can see from the sample and analysis, in the interpersonal theme the deployment is very small. Not all student, as the participants use modality or interpersonal them in their final task. The frequency of modal texts is still strange for the students. Some of them choose modality after the noun or topical theme to clarify that their text consists of obligation or inclination. The students have limitations in their knowledge about the importance of modality in the explanation texts. In Figure 5, the result announced that several students make low modality using potentiality (*may, can*). The low modality indicates that students still lack information and vocabulary, so they select the common one. Hence, the median and high score is not the high as the low modality. Only 1,4% of students apply the median modality *(should, will)*. On the other hand, the percentage of high modality is better than the median. There are 4.8% using high modality *(must, ought to).* These two modalities are rare to applicate because they contain obligation statements. Most students are still confused about how the modality is used in their text, especially in explanation texts.

Student 1
There is no modality.

Student 2
[2.1] The Coronavirus may be familiar to us
[2.2] the virus will continue to infect
[2.3] which can lead to death.
[2.4] collection of viruses that can infect

Student 3
[3.1] The arrival of floods can be predicted
[3.2] Other causes can arise
[3.3] water will pool toward the mainland
[3.4] Dams burst can occur
[3.5] It could also be because
[3.6] all parties must remain
[3.7] we can do to prevent flooding
[3.8] We can start with small things
[3.9] garbage can be a factor.

From the result above, the researcher found the data that the Indonesian students actually know and understand the text well, but they still lack knowledge about the use of modality in explanation text. The understanding of modality in senior high school does not the priority knowledge but additional information. therefore, the writing quality of the students is unsatisfied.

CONCLUSION

This study presented the results of a longitudinal study that indicates how the theme system, as proposed by M.A.K. In systemic functional terms, Halliday can be used as a textual source of meaning to examine learners' writing in relation to their partial mastery and use of the resources. Based on the findings and discussion, I have sketched the linguistic features in the written texts of these students in the theme system to represent the full landscape of their use of theme expressions in their writing. The overuse of topical theme in every student's task should be overcome to create

coherence in the clause. This is because the topical theme used nouns and pronoun as the theme or the beginning of the text.

In the theme system, the students deployed numerous theme expressions in Ideational, textual, and interpersonal theme to express their ideas in the form of a textual metafunction. Students 3 and 2 wrote the whole kind theme and explained it appropriately. But, Student 1 missed the interpersonal theme or modality, and they only used topical and textual theme. The discussion concluded that the students prefer the textual theme because of the acknowledgment of the students. But, in modality, they lack information and understanding. By doing this, we as writing teachers and researchers should pass the entire theme system down to students to equip them with the full picture of theme characteristics (Gibbons, Markwick,1992) so that they can make the right choices to express themselves instead of overusing one Type of textual metafunction resource specifically in theme system.

As I mentioned in the literature review, most of the previous studies focused only on a topical theme (Ogrady,2017). Therefore, the knowledge from L1 textual meaning development shows, it is necessary for the students to develop the theme system of textual metafunction in order to produce appropriate texts. The findings and discussion express that the deployment of theme systems is relatively seldom used by students in ten grades of secondary school. However, it is essential for teachers to construct a pedagogical framework that includes ideational, textual, and interpersonal theme expressions that can draw on helping students build up the aspect of textual meaning in their explanation writing texts. The recognizing of genre-based texts is also important to students so they can differentiate each text based on the structure precisely.

This research recommends that the students' control of theme systems, mainly in interpersonal is limited. For example. The overuse of unmarked topical themes is obvious. The students are too dense to use the nominal group as a theme. This concept reminds the Safitra, (2013) mentioned, in narrative texts, the students overuse topical theme, and the most frequent category used is a nominal group (65.12%). Hence, language teachers are suggested to develop the topic for L2 student writing to ensure that the deployment of theme systems is included. Serving more different contexts and genres for students to learn and use different theme systems is necessary for such an issue, particularly in helping students to master different classifications of theme systems. Indeed, the textual theme including conjunctive, continuative, and structural, is also dominant in students' texts. This result is quite interesting for secondary students because it could improve the ability which involves the connectors. To overcome this problem, the teacher is recommended to inform their student about the function of each theme system.

Despite the in-depth analysis carried out in this study, the interpretation of the result should be alert. The participants are still lacking and not enough generalizations to be made. The number of samples must be larger to find out normal and credible findings. Different stages of students will produce different result analyses. In addition, the treatment is necessary to be tried because it helps the students to improve their writing, and the findings could be more insightful and meaningful. In this study, the time frame is still relatively short so the finding is limited. Individual students will desire their progress in writing tasks if reach the textual meaning-making. Future studies could take the ethnographic information into consideration, such as asking about the different genre texts and using interviews to strengthen the result for both students and teachers.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

As the researcher indicated in the literature review, most of the previous studies on textual meaning-making focus on the Students' difficulties di writing cohesion and coherence which contributes substantially to lower scores in examinations (Bamberg, 1983). However, to convey information effectively, writers must be able to control the flow of given and new information in developing the argument in the text. When teaching writing, a focus on the theme and rheme structure of a clause can provide astonishingly fast outcomes. When a teacher of language demonstrates to students how to combine new and old material in the right order, the students have gained a valuable tool for controlling the meanings of their work. In order to create coherent writing, the students might intentionally and strategically rely on this knowledge. If the selection of themes and thematic progression in texts are taken into consideration, the cohesiveness in students' compositions can be significantly increased.

A text must have a theme and rheme relationship for it to be cohesive. However, both the teaching of writing and the teaching of literacy can benefit from the knowledge gained from the

theme and rheme pattern. Students can learn how to read well by focusing on the opening paragraph, the topic sentence of each paragraph, and the theme of a clause by using the concept of theme. Typically, the opening paragraph introduces the reader to the topic of the writing and foretells the theme sentences of each subsequent paragraph. A topic sentence informs the reader of the purpose of a paragraph and frequently foreshadows the main ideas of the sentences that make up the paragraph. A clause's theme directs the reader to the message it contains.

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