

AN ANALYSIS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' FORMAL ESSAY WRITING PERFORMANCE BASED ON HALLIDAY' SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze undergraduate students' formal essay writing performance using Systemic Functional Linguistics theory. This study employed a qualitative research design, embracing the characteristics of a case study. The data were obtained from collecting samples of students' formal essay writing. The finding revealed 192 clauses found in six undergraduate students' formal essay writing, and those clauses were analyzed in the three sections. They were transitivity process, mood, and theme. There was six transitivity process found in undergraduate students' formal essay text. There were material prprocessesmental processes, relational processes, behavioral processes, verbal processes, and existential processes. The material process was used dominant by the students. There were three mood types found in the undergraduate students' formal essay texts. The first was indicative declarative, the second was interrogative, and the last one was imperative. Drawing from the mood findings, the declarative mood was the most dominant among the other two moods.

Keyword: Writing, Formal Essay Text, Systemic Functional Linguistics

INTRODUCTION

Among other skills, writing is considered the most challenging skill, especially in English as a foreign language (Fareed et al. 2016). At the university level, one of the subjects that students should be mastered is formal essay writing. Essay writing subjects serve as a way to assess students' understanding of specific ideas and students' ability to explain and argue these to answer a given question. Furthermore, students must have a rich vocabulary; mastering the grammatical structure and familiarizing text structures are crucial in producing an appropriate formal essay writing.

EFL students are struggling in constructing successful formal essay writing. When writing formal essays, they struggle with grammar, cohesion, coherence, paragraph organization, diction, and spelling problems (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017). The struggle in coherence and cohesion is due to a lack of reading, first-language transfer, and low writing practice (Belkhir & Benyelles, 2017).

As a result, research into how grammatical factors interact with other linguistic and non-linguistic elements is required to form better-written text. To produce a better-written text, it would be necessary to investigate how grammatical features interact with different linguistic and non-linguistic elements. Furthermore, Walker

(2010) claims that SFL can be used to identify the problems faced by EFL students in their writing and help students to write better texts.

Hence, it is crucial and necessary to analyze their writing performance, especially in formal essay writing. The way they use the language and construct the sentences – whether it is grammatically, coherent and cohesive or not and how they create the mode and build the theme in their formal essay writing performance. Thus, Halliday (1994) has introduced a tool to analyze writing performance using Systemic Functional Linguistics theory.

According to Meyer (2008), Systemic Functional Linguistics is a valuable tool to evaluate and expose the characteristics of a successful academic text. Numerous scholars also claim a practical, effective framework for analyzing texts when assessing students' writing to make students' writing more easily understood and improve university students' writing skills (Mathiesen et al., 1992). The multitude of meanings in Systemic Functional Linguistics makes it particularly useful as a foundation for developing a literacy program.

Several studies contributed to the discussion of SFL as the references for this study. The first research was conducted by Pramono (2018). He found that students face challenges in using impersonal pronouns to generate a more objective, e sense and the use of proper structure to show plurality in writing exposition text. The second study was conducted by Arigusman (2018). He reported some problems in students' Narrative text. The issues are limited in structural knowledge, incorrect use of modal word order and inappropriate verb use, wrong process type, lack of vocabulary mastery, the absence of to be in some nominal sentences, incorrect use of WH-for adjective clauses, unsynchronized clauses, inability to maintain the starting point of the clauses, and failure to carry over theme from the previous sentence. The third study was conducted by Potradinata (2018). He discovered students' problems in writing descriptive text, such as the inability to adjust the social function of the text, difficulty writing the descriptive text with a chronological schematic structure, and filling the text with appropriate language features such as the use of inappropriate specific participant and inappropriate tense. These studies analyze the students' writing using Systemic Functional Linguistics of the Senior High School students on exposition, narrative and descriptive texts. This is aligned with Afrianto and Soemantri (2014) and Eripuddin (2016), who analyzed undergraduate students' essays.

Relate to those facts, the major point to be highlighted in this current study is analyzing students' writing performance in higher-level education and the level of writing genre, which is essay writing, in this case, is, formal essay writing. Thus, in this current study, the writer attempts to analyze undergraduate students' formal essay writing performance using Systemic Functional Linguistics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Formal Essay Writing

Anderson (2001) defines an essay as a short formal piece of writing dealing with a single topic. Essay writing is an essential part for university students. It increases understanding and helps the learning process because it pushes students to clarify, short out ideas and information, analyze source material, and exercise critical

judgment. It also develops writing skills such as the ability to structure an argument and the capacity to write logically, coherently, and persuasively.

Generic Structure of Formal Essay Writing

Langan (2010) and Connelly (2013) agreed that a formal essay has three main structures: an introduction paragraph, a body paragraph, and a conclusion paragraph.

a) Introduction Paragraph

The introduction paragraph introduces and arouses readers' interest in the essay topic. It can be included in a thesis statement as well as general comments. A thesis statement presents and states the essay's main ideas, which can be mentioned of its subdivisions of the topic or subtopics systematically. In contrast, general statements write the background material of the issue that can be structured from general idea to specific thought.

b) Body paragraph

The body paragraph has one or more paragraphs, each with the main sentence, supporting sentences, and perhaps an ending sentence. The thesis statement can be supported using specific facts, observations, personal experiences, statistics, and quotations.

c) Conclusion Paragraph

The conclusion paragraph indicates the end of the essay, summarizes the main points, and leaves readers with the writer's final opinions. The conclusions should also be clear, going no doubt in the reader's mind about what you believe; you should also explain why your conclusions are essential and crucial.

Linguistic Features of Formal Essay Writing

The formal essay genre presents linguistic features that describe disciplinary knowledge. It is supported by Woodward-kron (2002), who argued that this is accomplished through naming, defining, and taxonomizing. The naming and describing of a phenomenon mean that technicality is built up in the discourse. Wignell, Martin, and Eggins (1993) refer to technicality using terms with a specialized field-specific meaning. Numerous terms have a common with technical terms of the field in the ordinary sense, such as nature, education, etc. Naming phenomena and assigning the area-specific meaning is intrinsic to establishing specialist taxonomies. Taxonomizing is the process of writing thoughts, concepts, and ideas in a systematic manner or order. Wignell et al. (1993) defined a taxonomy as an orderly, systematic classification of some events based on super-ordination or composition. Language features mean analyzing language, as it helps the reader understand what the writer is saying. The writer usually uses different language to convey the message. Furthermore, as explained above, using techniques such as naming, defining, and taxonomizing is essential in writing a formal essay to make the reader easy to understand the context of the formal essay.

Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic Functional Linguistics was introduced first time by Michael Halliday in the early 1960s. According to Halliday (1994), Systemic Functional Linguistics provides a theory of language based on purpose and choice. He further adds that the main purpose of systemic functional linguistics is to serve as a resource for human

beings to produce meaning; so, text is a process of creating meaning in context. That is why language is referred to as a "system of meanings". Meanings in systemic functional linguistics are expressed according to three broad metafunctions: ideational, Interpersonal and textual (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

The ideational metafunction is concerned with objects in the world (actual or imagined). It has to deal with acts, events, and states (called processes), such as run, occur, and be; participants in those processes, such as he, she, man, car, and weather; and the circumstances in which those processes occur, such as how, when, and where (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). The interpersonal function concerns interpersonal interactions in both spoken and written texts (in terms of how the writer interacts with the reader). The textual metafunction is concerned with how text is put together and what gives it texture.

They further explain that the metafunctions are linked to, or realize too, elements in systemic functional linguistics, the context of the situation. These elements are referred to as contextual parameters. Thus, conceptual meanings realize the field of discourse (the purpose of communication and what it is about), interpersonal meanings realize the tenor (the relationships between the participants in the text). Textual meanings realize the mode (how the language is organized and functions in the interaction, for example, whether it is written or spoken).

METHOD

This study aimed to analyze undergraduate students' formal essay writing performance based on Systemic Functional Linguistics theory. Based on the aim of the study, this study belonged to a qualitative research design. In relation to the qualitative method, a descriptive-qualitative was employed. Based on Bailey's (2009) characterization of research design, this research is in terms of discourse analysis because it investigates the underlying meaning of what people say and how they say it, whether in face-to-face conversation, documents, non-verbal interaction, or images. This research was in line with descriptive-qualitative since it was analyzing students' text using Systemic Functional Linguistics. SFL is a practical and powerful tool for analyzing the text (Banks, 2002).

The writer assigned formal essay writing to the undergraduate students as the data instrument for this study. Then the formal essay writing was analyzed using Halliday SFL theory (1985, 1994) by analyzing the field, tenor, and mode. The field centred on transitivity processes, namely material, relational, mental, verbal, behavioral, and existential processes. As for the tenor, the writer only focused on analyzing the mood, namely indicative declarative, indicative interrogative, and imperative. While for the mode, the writer concentrated in analyzing the theme, namely marked topical theme, unmarked topical theme, textual theme, and interpersonal theme.

Participants

Six university students were purposely chosen as the study participants. Dillon and McKnight (1990) stated that the number of participants (six participants) for research in this area (systemic functional linguistic) is considered adequate. The participants were chosen from two categories of score levels, A and B. Three participants were from score A, while the other three participants were from score B. This was done

considering that their different discipline experience and knowledge may influence the way they write the formal essay text.

Data collection and Analysis

The data were collected from the students' formal essay text. The unit analysis of systemic functional linguistics is the text because the available meaning potential of language is realized in units no smaller than text. The formal essay text consists of three structures: introduction paragraph, body paragraph, and conclusion paragraph under the topic "*The Change of Educational Environment after Covid 19 Pandemic*". The writing task should be based on their opinion and supported by valid evidence to support their opinion on the topic discussed. The undergraduate formal essay texts were broken down into clauses for analysis because the compositional hierarchy of English in grammar usually starts from a clause (Halliday, 2004).

The data were analyzed to answer the research question by adopting the analysis technique from Katawazi et al. (2021), namely script analysis and descriptive statistics. The data were analyzed using the following steps:

1. The data in the form of formal essay texts were read and broken down into clauses, then classify them into transitivity processes, namely material process, relational process, mental process, verbal process, behavioral process, an existential process.
2. The tenor was analyzed by determining the mood used in the texts into three categories: indicative declarative, indicative interrogative, and imperative.
3. The mode was analyzed by finding out the theme that was used in the undergraduate students' formal essay writing. The themes were classified into marked topical theme, unmarked topical theme, textual theme, and interpersonal theme.
4. After all the data were analysed, the percentage of the result (text analysis) from the field (transitivity process), tenor (mood), and mode (themes) was summarized and represented in the form of table and graphs
5. Last, the frequency of the result (descriptive statistics) from the field (transitivity process), tenor (mood), and mode (themes) in all texts that students wrote was displayed statistically in detail through bar graphs.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Based on the current study's finding, there were 192 clauses found in six undergraduate students' formal essay writing, and those clauses were analyzed in the three sections. They were transitivity process, mood, and theme. The following is the result of the findings that were discussed further in the discussion. The discussion section began with the transitivity process, the following section began with mood and the last section was the theme.

In the first section, related to the ideational meaning of field of the context of situation, the field must be realized or encoded in linguistic forms in a text through the transitivity system in order to be quantified (Halliday, 1994). According to the findings of the transitivity process, it was found out that there were six transitivity process that found in undergraduate students' formal essay text. There were material process,

mental process, relational process, behavioral process, verbal process and existential process.

In the material processes, it was found out that material process was in the highest process that occurred in the undergraduate students' formal essay text. In this case, the students were able to define what is happening or will/might/has happened in regard to change of educational environment after Covid 19. The students were able to express their idea regarding to the issue or topic given for their formal essay task. According to Halliday (1994), encode the world of happening or doing, those elements are particularly relevant to the essay writing task in this case was formal essay writing. Hence it was not surprising that this field marker had the highest proportional use in this academic text types. Furthermore, this result was comparable with study done by Rahayu (2015), who found that the material process was used dominant by the students.

As for the relational process, it was the second most frequently used by the undergraduate students in their formal essay writing. Due to the issue or topic of the formal essay writing task, it was not surprising that this process was used to such an extent. The students used this type of process clearly in their texts, they did this to add weight to their opinions or arguments regarding to the change of educational environment after Covid 19. This result also was comparable with study done by Rahayu (2015), who found that the relational process was the second highest among the rest of processes in academic text written by the students.

Meanwhile, mental processes which were used to depict intellectual or sensory processes like opinion or belief, mental process were came in the third place of all field markers employed. The students might have used these once again due to the nature of the assigned task, which required them to persuade readers of their thoughts or beliefs, as well as support their opinions or arguments about the change of educational environment after Covid 19 (Butt, et al. 1995). The data, on the other hand, implied that the tone of these undergraduate students' formal essay texts was extremely subjective. Moreover, some academics in Bennett's (2009) study indicated that subjectivity in academic writing (essay text types) is becoming more accepted, the level of subjectivity in the current data suggests a lot of naiveté.

Following that, for behavioral processes, these processes were utilized to create arguments in the students' formal essay texts, particularly when depicting the behavior of persons who had to adjust with the educational environment after Covid 19. Due to the issue or topic to this type of marker might explain it, why it was relatively used in low proportional. The formal essay writing trope was more complex, so existential processes did not occur frequently in the texts. While this could be a result of the issue or topic, it was more likely that undergraduate students rarely used this types of process to support their opinions or arguments in writing formal essay. A study conducted by Mulyaningsih (2013) was also in accordance with this finding. She found that students were rarely used behavioral and existential process in their academic texts and existential processes were only found in five out of nine academic texts written by the students. It was indicated that behavioral and existential process was not usually used in academic text types. In the same way, the infrequent used of verbal process could be due to the task type, but it could also be due to the writing conditions, such as writing an essay in limited time without access to references.

Second section, it was related to tenor of a text that expresses the relationships between its players, the writer and the reader (Halliday, 1985). The students utilized tenor to persuade readers to certain points of view on a topic (Butt, et al. 2000). Tenor was defined as the students' attitude conveyed through language, in this study tenor realized through mood. Based on the findings there were three mood types found in the undergraduate students' formal essay texts. First was indicative declarative, declaratives are used to make statements (Chaulker & Weiner, 1994) or more specifically to state or assert (Hurford, 1994). Second was interrogative, an interrogative word or clause is used to ask a question. The last one was imperative, imperative is used to give command (Brinton, 2000). Both questions and commands can be addressed to listeners or readers. Asking questions or giving commands to readers in texts causes the readers to feel engaged to the discourse (Hyland, 2005).

The marking of Mood in the FTM model denotes the sentential structure of the students' texts. Drawing from the findings of mood, declarative mood was the most dominant among other two moods. There were some considerations which made undergraduate students' formal essay writing used indicative declarative dominantly and did not used imperative or interrogative dominantly. First, the highest proportion in the used of indicative declarative mood was due to the mood type that cloud strengthens the texts appeal to the readers which referred to the purpose of formal essay text which had to give information or persuade the reader. Second, the extensive usage of declaratives which served as factual statements since the basic requirement of essay writing, may represent the genre structure, especially among these undergraduate students (Hatch, 1992). Despite the overwhelming usage of declaratives, one student did submit rhetorical questions, presumably to persuade the reader or to force interaction with the reader (Halliday, 1994). In line with this result, a study conducted by Arigusman (2018) which also analyzed mood of interpersonal meaning (Mode) in academic text done by students, the result showed that the most clauses written by the students were in declarative mood. Thus, it showed that the students put themselves as the information providers regarding to the topic or the issue given and the reader was the recipient.

In the last section, the finding was related to the mode. Mode is the symbolic structuring of the text, its status, and its role in the context, including the channel and also the rhetorical mode Halliday (1985). Mode in this study was released through theme. The theme is the starting point about which a student will write a clause (Halliday, 1994). Theme in this study is defined as the word or words at the beginning of a clause which become the most important idea that a student had in mind at the time. Based on the findings, the theme that found in the undergraduate students' formal essay text were unmarked (non-subject)/marked (subjects) topical, textual and interpersonal.

According to the findings in this study, unmarked topical theme was used the most frequently by the students. It was due to the fact that unmarked topical theme included simple subject which was commonly used by the students. A lot of undergraduate students started by using subject in the beginning of their clause, it was due to the students need to give clear statement regarding to issue or topic given about the change of educational environment after Covid 19. Furthermore, unmarked topical themes were used to connect ideas across clauses or sentences, it allowed the students to demonstrate ideas, build on them, or improve them via correlation, similarity, or

contrast, among other things (Halliday, 1994). Generally, the use of unmarked topical themes in the undergraduate student's text was correct. There were no problem in this case. It was supported by Arigusman (2018), who found that the dominant used of unmarked topical themes were appropriate used in this kind of academic text types.

Textual themes, on the other hand, connect sections of text (Halliday, 1985). The textual theme was the second highest among other themes, the highest used of the textual theme showed that the student was attempted to demonstrate the outcome of a previous statement. The comparatively high proportional use of textual themes showed that these aspects were strongly emphasized in the students' grammar classes, and this might have been due to the task's structure. However, many clauses organized by the student were not synchronous. The student was not able to maintain the starting point of the clauses, and they were failed to carry over theme from the previous sentence. Along with this result Arigusman (2018) research showed similar problem from the student that happened, it was due to the lack of structure knowledge of the text.

Subsequently, marked topical theme and interpersonal theme were the lowest percentages among other theme. Hence, it was due to the lack of the students in expressing their feeling, attitude, argument or opinion toward the issue or topic discussed regarding the change of educational environment after Covid 19. Therefore, the students did not really understand that they were needed to construct arguments relating to the change of educational environment after Covid 19 and to convince readers by expressing their own opinions or beliefs to justify these arguments (Butt, et al., 2012).

To sum up, the results showed that the functions (ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning) can be specified through what Halliday (1985) propose that there are three kinds of grammar, namely: transitivity is the grammar of experience, mood is the grammar of speech function, and theme is the grammar of discourse.

Conclusion

The study depicted that the formal essay writing of the students were analysed using Field, Tenor, and Mode (FTM) markers, which limited to the transitivity process, mood, and themes. There were 192 clauses found in six undergraduate students' formal essay writing and those clauses were analysed in the three section. They were transitivity process, mood, and theme. It was revealed that there were six transitivity process found in undergraduate students' formal essay texts, they were material, relational, mental, verbal, behavioral, and existential process. Meanwhile for the mood, it was demonstrated that there were three types of mood found in undergraduate students' formal essay texts, they were indicative declarative, indicative interrogative, and imperative mood. As for theme, it was revealed that there were four types of themes found from undergraduate students' formal essay texts. They were unmarked topical, marked topical, textual, and interpersonal theme.

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