

A Systemic Functional Linguistics-Based Analysis of Students' Problems in Writing Exposition Text

Satrio Aji Pramono*

English Education Department, School of Postgraduate Studies
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia
Bandung, Indonesia
*satrioajip@upi.edu

Abstract—Among various texts taught in secondary schools, exposition text is considered one of the most challenging texts to be learned by students. Informed by Systemic Functional Linguistic theory, this study seeks to investigate what problems encountered by students in writing exposition. To achieve that, a sample of students' writing therefore was purposively taken to be analyzed using SFL Framework. The results of the analysis identified several challenges encountered by students in writing exposition text including the use of impersonal pronoun to create more objective feeling and attitude toward the issue being discussed and the use of proper structure to show plurality. In term of textual metafunction analysis, the challenges are in the form of the use of proper conjunctions (including internal and causal conjunction) to create strong connections between clause and the proper organization of Theme-Rheme in thematic progression.

Keywords—*exposition writing; metafunction; Systemic Functional Linguistics; writing problem*

I. INTRODUCTION

As children go to school, they will inevitably encounter various kind of texts. They start learning stories-related texts in primary school [1]. As they grow up, the texts they are engaged with will be more complex. In secondary schools, texts even become the central of language learning. Texts are taught – using text-based approach – to students with the aim of improving their competence in using language, enabling them to achieve various communication purposes in different contexts, both orally and in written form [2].

One of text types the students of secondary schools should master – receptively and productively – is exposition text. Exposition text is taught so as to facilitate students' in broadening their insight on different subjects in a global scale [2]. In line with it, Bizzel argues that the ability to compose argumentative text (including exposition), can help advance students' critical thinking which can eventually lead the students to be powerful as well as competitive individuals [3]. While students are required to master exposition text in secondary schools, it is not an easy task to write a good exposition text especially in their second language. Among various types of text taught at school, exposition is considered challenging one since it is more cognitive demanding [4]. Crowhurst mentions that many students find it problematic to

introduce cases and generalizations which support their claims [4]. As Crowhurst describes it, compositions start and end rashly; reasons often do not go into detail; some students respond with unexpected kinds of writing i.e. description, report, narratives [4]. In specifics, the problems lie on various grammatical issues, such as a lack of nominalization which is needed to 'pack' information [1], misuse of cohesive devices resulting text incoherence and undeveloped compound-complex sentences [5,6].

Given the situation mentioned above, there is an urgency for EFL teachers to facilitate students to master exposition text. Therefore, informed by Systemic Functional Linguistics framework as a way of analyzing text based on the context and meaning, this paper seeks to reveal the problems found in student's exposition text writing.

A. The Nature of Exposition Text

Among various types of text taught at school, exposition is considered challenging one since it demands more cognitive process [4]. Because of its complexity, this type of text is set to be introduced in senior high school, focusing on how a point of view presented by a writer is supported by arguments. Basically, there are two kinds of exposition: Analytical Exposition and Hortatory expositions [7,8]. The main function of expository text is to take a position on some issues and justify it [9]. If a writer is arguing simply to justify a position, his writing is called Analytical Exposition; if he is arguing that some sort of action should be taken, the text belongs to Hortatory Exposition [1,9]. A writer presents an Analytical Exposition text by creating argument to justify a position. For instance, a politician writes an argument telling the importance of taking certain policy. Hortatory Exposition has stronger effect; persuading that something is important to be done. This type of text exists in sermons, essays, and others. In this study, the main focus is on the first type of Exposition text i.e. Analytical Exposition.

Generally, Analytical Exposition has basic chronological structure or stages namely thesis statement, arguments, and reiteration [10].

The first stage is thesis statement. In this stage, the topic of a discourse is introduced and writer's position and proposition are advanced. Hyland suggests that potential structure of this

stage may involve some discourse moves including gambit (attention seeker), information (where writers put definition, description, or classification), proposition (where certain position is furnished), evaluation (positive or negative comments), and marker (where writers mark following direction) [11].

The next stage is argument. As the core of analytical exposition which build and makes this genre different from others, argument stage comprises a set of reason which typically support the proposition introduced in the thesis stage. This stage is characterized by some features, including the use of listing signals to ensure cohesiveness of the text and transition signals which indicate relationship between sentences or paragraph. Another feature is proposition restatement which is done to remind or reemphasize the topic. Claims are made to support the proposition cogency, and these claims are typically supported by several evidence.

The last part of an analytical exposition is reiteration. In some other books, this term is called conclusion. In this part, the writers sum up their position [9]. The writers reiterate what has been delivered in the previous stages rather than just reviewing or summarizing the idea. Typical markers used in this stage are therefore, to conclude, to sum up, etc. The writers may refer to the claims and relate it to the topic of argument to show the conclusion or restate the proposition. Providing prospective focus sometimes is done by writers in this stage.

Regarding linguistic features of a genre, Exposition text typically has several features, including the use of generalized participants, connectives structuring the arguments and logical connectives, timeless present tense, and variety of process types [1,8,10].

B. Exposition Text under Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) Perspective

As stated in the beginning of this paper, the curricula of English subject in Indonesia demand students to be able to read and write various genres to succeed in primary and secondary school. Genre itself is defined as different types of text which enact various types of social contexts [1]. Butt et al. state that when texts have the same purpose, they will also share the same structural elements which are obligatory and optional, and this will make them as the same genre [12]. In other words, there will be set of rules or characteristics which make each text type different in some ways but similar in other ways or in other words, each text will have certain features which differ from other texts. As stated before, SFL argues that all natural languages – in this context, genres – have metafunctions. Therefore, to know how Exposition text is constructed from SFL's point of view, analyzing three metafunctions of an authentic Exposition text is worth conducting.

Interpersonal metafunction, according to Emilia concerns how language serves to establish social relations [8]. Interpersonal meaning of a text can be seen from how a writer creates relationship with the reader and expression he makes toward the subject matters. Interpersonal metafunction of a text can be realized by the Mood, a component of a clause formed by the combination of Subject and Finite, and Modality, the degree of validity of a proposition given by the writer.

1) *Mood*: When people interact, they tend to exchange meaning [13]. While there is plethora of purposes of that exchange such as order, confirm, request, and describe, SFL limits those purpose into four fundamental purposes, namely giving and demanding information and giving and demanding goods and services. These speech roles are then labeled as statement, question, offer, and demand respectively. These basic functions are typically associated with certain grammatical structures: statements are expressed by declarative clause, questions are expressed by interrogative clause, and demands are expressed by imperative clause. These grammatical structures will represent mood choice taken by the writers: declarative mood, interrogative mood, or imperative mood. As the social purpose of Exposition text is to persuade the listener or reader that there is a case that, certainly, needs to get attention by giving arguments, Exposition text is typically written in declarative form. Besides using mostly declarative clause, there is also tendency that analytical exposition presents impersonality. According to Schleppegrell, analytical exposition aims at persuading the reader that certain idea is well formulated without expressing feeling and attitudes explicitly and hence lack of interaction of interlocutors [4]. The use of first personal pronoun is very common in beginner writer's work, while experienced writers tend to avoid its use to sound more objective and less authoritative.

2) *Modality*: Modality plays a significant role in writing since it helps a writer adjust the degree of validity of his proposition. This can be done in three ways: using modal finite, mood adjunct, and interpersonal grammar metaphor. In SFL, Modality itself is classified into two forms including modalization and modulation. The former deals with probability and usuality which occurs in the context of giving and demanding information. The latter deals with obligation and inclination. The degree of these two forms of modality informs modal commitment of the writer.

Since analytical exposition is constructed mainly by claims made to support a proposition, modality seems to occur frequently. Modality shows position of the writer and the readers [14]. Furthermore, modality is used by the writer to adjust the validity of his proposition as well as to lower or raise the degree of authoritativeness by using either modal finite, mood adjunct, or interpersonal grammar metaphor.

When a writer creates a clause, he also represents his experience about the world [13]. One way to understand how clause are used to represent entities of the world is by using transitivity analysis. As a clause may contain participant (s), process and circumstance(s), transitivity describes how those parts are organized by a writer in order to achieve certain goal. Different types of process will involve different types of participant and thus yields different meaning. In total, there are six types of process in transitivity analysis, namely material, mental, behavioral, verbal, relational, and existential.

Various types of process exist in exposition text. Different types of process are used differently by a skillful writer to convey meaning: verbal process is used to construe other

representation to promote credibility; material process is used to build aspect of the field [8], and so forth. However, according to Gerot and Wignell, one of types of process which commonly exists in exposition text is relational process [10]. Relational process enable writer to create evaluation. Furthermore, it enables the writer to link two structures which incorporate the writer's analysis [4]. Nominalization is another important feature in writing exposition text, since it will enable the writer to encode events and quantify, classify, describe, or evaluate those encoded events. One of ways to maintain the focus is using nominalization. Nominalization also enables a writer to highlight a thesis, present arguments, and summarize conclusions.

To organize any text into a coherent whole, writers need to keep their readers well informed about where they are and where they are going. This is expressed by Theme and Rheme [10,12]. Theme signposts what the clause is going to be about. Theme basically looks backward based on what has been discussed before, while Rheme follows the Theme and gives information which was not mentioned before. There are several categories of Theme, including Topical or Experiential Theme, Interpersonal Theme, or Textual Theme.

Thematic choice along with cohesion in a text play an important part in building the text itself. To produce a cohesive Exposition text, the writer needs to identify the point of essay, establish and maintain a focus on a series of related points, and mark the structure of the argument as it develops [4]. Thematic choice also informs the role of language, type of interaction, medium, channel, and rhetorical thrust [12]. Experienced analytical exposition writer usually introduces new information for Rheme and then this new information is available as given information in the following Rheme. This is what Eggins describes as zig-zag theme pattern [15]. The more advanced writer will use thematic drift while beginner writer will employ a constant theme pattern.

Besides theme choice and theme patterning, cohesion is also essential in analytical exposition since it contributes to the flowing of the text. Typically, good exposition texts use internal conjunction to stage argument and causal conjunction to create reasoning [10]. Conjunctions are important to connect steps in arguments as well as linking logical steps of arguments in the whole texts [16].

II. METHOD

This study seeks to find out problems encountered by Grade XI students of a senior high school in Kota Bandung, West Java, in writing exposition text based on the analysis of Systemic Functional Linguistics. Therefore, a qualitative research methodology is employed in the form of case study. Case study is chosen since the focus of this study is to explain a circumstance or phenomenon [17]. Data of this study is an exposition text which is purposively selected from twenty-five students' writing, with the consideration that the chosen text represents other students' writings as well as problems they face in writing process. The chosen text is then analyzed under SFL framework, including its interpersonal, experiential, and textual metafunction.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Through schematic structure analysis, the information about to what extent the text has met its social function can be drawn. In this study, the sample text is in the form of analytical exposition text. The purpose of analytical exposition text itself is to persuade the reader or listener that something is the case. From the analysis, it can be seen that the student attempts to persuade the reader to agree upon the proposition of "social media brings people together". Since Exposition text requires the writer to provide arguments for one point of view, the student seems to have made some effort to provide supporting arguments for the proposition stated before. However, there is a lack of elaboration made by the student in providing support for the arguments.

In term of the structure, it seems that the student found it difficult to follow the generic structure of Analytical Exposition text. While Exposition text is constructed from three structures namely thesis, arguments, and reiteration whose ideas are typically distributed into at least three paragraphs, the sample text has only one paragraph. She starts with thesis statement in the first clause and then followed by supporting arguments in the same paragraph. While reiteration is important in an Exposition text, the student does not put reiteration or restatement of thesis at the end of the text letting the end part be a cliffhanger. In term of metafunction-related problem, there are several issues explained as follows.

A. Interpersonal Metafunction

Interpersonal metafunction of a text reveals how students' take position in their writing. This can be analyzed through Mood and Modality System. Mood can be seen from how subject and finite are organized in a clause in a text, while Modality System can be analyzed by looking at how various devices, namely Modal Finite, Mood Adjunct, and grammatical metaphor are used to build meaning.

In term of the Mood, advanced writers of expository text frequently use statements as the speech function which aim at giving information as commodity to the readers. This statement is realized by declarative mood which is typically constructed in (but not limited to) the structure *Subject^{Finite}* [13]. Based on the analysis of the sample text, 17 out of 18 clauses are constructed in declarative mood. Clauses are started with subject first and then followed with finite, with one or some adjuncts precede them in some cases. From The use of declarative mood enables the writer to pass on information to the reader, which in this case is mostly her arguments toward the issue. However, not all clauses are well constructed. Some of clauses miss one or some elements in Mood, while some others comprise element redundancy. The following are the examples.

- | | |
|------------------|--|
| <i>Clause 2</i> | <i>Every people in the world must be want to have much friend.</i> |
| <i>Clause 12</i> | <i>Social media can make you have much connection with new people.</i> |
| <i>Clause 14</i> | <i>Sharing about anything (___)(___) so that (___) is can make you have much connection with new people.</i> |

From the above examples, the student seems to find difficulty in constructing proper sentences. Some clauses do not contain Finite and Predicator, whereas some other use more than one verb (as in clause 2). Furthermore, in term of plurality, she still finds it difficult to differentiate between “much” and “more” in term of its usage, resulting on the use of “much” as quantifier of a countable noun “friend” (in clause 2 and) and “connection” (in clause 12 and 14). The student also does not add “s” after those countable nouns to mark their plurality.

In term of Finiteness and tenses, all arguments are stated in the present time, indicating that the writer wants to express single modality of factuality or certainty [8]. There is no description of some act taken place in the past and therefore the student does not use any past tense form in her clause.

The relationship between the writer and the reader in this writing is relatively close, since the writer use first person pronoun “I” in the very beginning of the text to present her position in the issue and she frequently uses second person pronoun “you” to address the audiences which are the readers. This way of establishing interaction of interlocutors results in showing higher degree of authoritativeness of the writer. This way of using first- or second-person pronoun does not seem to become a problem for the students who is still practicing writing. To establish more objective stance, however, the students need to be trained to reduce the use of first- and second-person pronouns so that personal feeling and attitudes are not explicitly expressed in their writing. Furthermore, students need to get accustomed to the use of passive voice to avoid writer’s subjective view of the topic.

Regarding modality, some clauses use some instances of modality which are used to reflect possibility, as in social media can make you have much connection with new people; social media can make people stay close again; also social media can bring people find a new friend, certainty, as in every people must be want to have much friend, and usuality, as in but because of wide area sometimes people get problem. These show the students capacity to express writer attitude toward what she is saying. The student has successfully used modality in her writing to show careful judgement [8] which is typically needed in analytical exposition text.

B. Experiential Metafunction

One of significant lexicogrammatical features of analytical exposition text is the use of relational process in the text [10]. Based on the transitivity analysis of the sample text, two types of process appear: mental process and relational process. The student started his writing using mental process, as in “I am hundred percent agree about social media brings people together”. This opening shows how the writer perceives or feels about the issue. The use of mental process in the clause constructs thinking or opinion which is in line with the function of the clause - to introduce the issue. For the next clauses, the writer used combination between relational process and mental process. However, relational process was the most frequently used process which is used to construct clauses in the sample text. Specifically, the sample regularly used relational attributive process to assign quality of somethings which are

being talked about. The following clauses are the examples of how the student constructs a clause:

- Clause 7 *Indonesia has (Proc: Rel. At.) 34 province.*
- Clause 9 *Indonesia has (Proc: Rel. At.) a lot people.*
- Clause 17 *And social media is (Proc: Rel. At.) place for people stay connected and together.*

The use of relational process, especially attributive, enables the student to pass information, which is related to the topic, to the reader. Another classification of relational process called relational identifying process can be found in two clauses. While relational attributive processes are used to assign a quality of something, relational identifying processes are used to establish an identity, as in “So social media is the answer of the problem and Social media is place for sharing”. Here, the sample text used relational identifying process to offer solution for the issue being discussed.

Turning to participant roles, the first participant role, as mentioned above, is that of Senser assigned to “I”. The presence of Senser may constitute an attempt from the writer to emphasize on personal opinion toward the issue. Instead of introducing the main topic, “social media” as the participant of the clause, the writer directly shows her personal stance by using first person pronoun to become the Participant of the clause. Since other clauses have a Relational (Attributive or Identifying) process and a Mental Process, the roles of Carrier, Token, and Senser frequently appear.

C. Textual Metafunction

Textual metafunction informs what the writer’s idea in his text on how the idea is organized. Furthermore, it shows where a clause in a text is coming from and where it is going to [10]. Textual meaning of a text can be analyzed by using Theme system analysis (or Theme-Rheme connection).

The sample text talks about arguments on the importance of social media. However, the first theme mentioned in the beginning of the text is not about social media; the sample text starts by using personal pronoun “I” as the Theme, emphasizing on the writer’s point of view and stance about the topic. Though, in term of theme selection, the Theme of clauses in the text are mostly about social media. Social media, the most discussed Theme, is mentioned 5 times in the text. However, the topical themes are not realized in the reference of pronoun. The absence of pronoun can be seen from the following example.

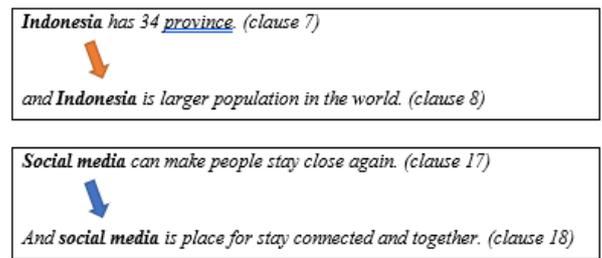


Fig. 1. The absence of pronoun.

Although repetition can be used to maintain cohesiveness in the text, the use of reference such as “it” will create more advanced writing.

To structure the text so that the clauses are connected one another, the sample text used the Zigzag Patterns and the Theme Reiteration. In the Zigzag patterns, an element which is introduced in the Rheme in the previous clause gets promoted to become the Theme of the next clause whereas in the Theme Reiteration, an element is just simply reiterated by the writer to keep a text cohesive and focused. The following are the examples of thematic progressions taken from the sample.

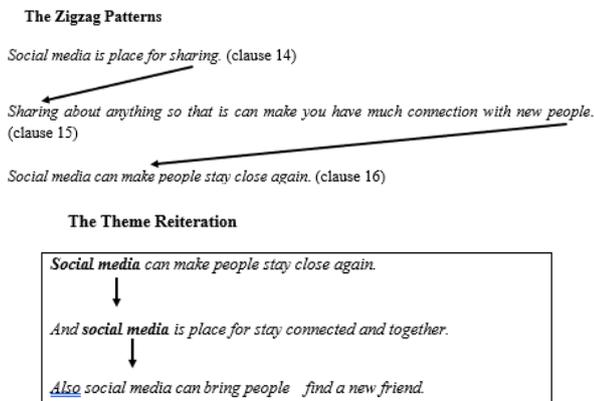


Fig. 2. Examples of thematic progressions.

From the examples, the student successfully constructed the Thematic Reiteration as thematic progression in her writing; repetition of elements (which in this case is social media) is done to keep the text cohesive and focused. However, in constructing the Zigzag pattern, the text does not appropriately follow the pattern. The writer properly constructed the Zigzag Pattern by promoting Rheme in clause 14 to become Theme in clause 15 but does not do the same thing to Rheme in clause 15. Instead of using Rheme of clause 15 as Theme in clause 16, the writer introduced a new Theme which is not mentioned in the previous clause. This issue also happens occasionally in the text. It means that the student seemed to find difficulty in maintaining thematic progression especially the Zigzag Pattern. While experienced writers of analytical exposition text use thematic drift, students need to be taught how to construct various thematic progressions including the Zigzag pattern.

IV. CONCLUSION

Teaching how to write an exposition text to students means training them not only to share their opinions as to something but also to engage them in a complex process which demands critical thinking. While learning this genre is beneficial for students for their future life, high cognitive demand in developing such genre creates challenges for students of secondary schools [4]. Informed by the Systemic Functional Linguistics, the analysis of the sample text reveals some challenges encountered by the student in writing an analytical exposition text including the use of impersonal pronoun to create more objective feeling and attitude toward the issue being discussed and the use of proper structure to show

plurality. Related to the textual metafunction analysis, the challenges are in the form of the use of proper conjunctions (including internal and causal conjunction) to create strong connections between clause and the proper organization of Theme-Rheme in thematic progression. In term of the text structure, lack of elaboration and the absence of reiteration are the issues found in the sample.

Although this study only involves one student’s writing as the sample hence generalization cannot be made, the results found in this study imply that writing exposition text can be a problematic task for the students and therefore it is suggested for EFL teacher to employ a particular strategy to assist their students in learning to write exposition text.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This study was supported by my lecturer and colleagues from Indonesia University of Education who provided insight and expertise that greatly assisted the research.

REFERENCES

- [1] J. R. Martin, and D. Rose, Genre relations: Mapping culture. London: Enquinox. 2008.
- [2] Kemendikbud. Silabus mata pelajaran sekolah menengah atas/madrasah aliyah/sekolah menengah kejuruan/madrasah aliyah kejuruan (SMA/MA/SMK/MAK). Jakarta: Kemdikbud. 2016.
- [3] E. Emilia, A critical genre-based approach to teaching academic writing in a tertiary EFL context in Indonesia, 2005. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/11343/39548>
- [4] M.J. Schleppegrell, The language of schooling: A functional linguistics perspective. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. 2004.
- [5] J. Chen, An investigation of EFL students’ use of cohesive devices. Asian Pacific Education Review, vol. 5(2), pp. 215-225. 2008.
- [6] E. Paskal, C. Sada, and S. Husin, Identification students’ difficulties in writing hortatory exposition among high intermediate level. Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pembelajaran, vol. 4(2). 2015.
- [7] B. Derewianka, and P. Jones, Teaching language in context. South Melbourne: Victoria Oxford University Press. 2012.
- [8] E. Emilia, Introducing Functional Grammar. Bandung: Pustaka Jaya. 2014.
- [9] B. Derewianka, Exploring how texts work. Newtown: Primary English Teaching Association. 1990.
- [10] L. Gerot, and P. Wignell, Making sense of functional grammar: An introductory workbook. Australia: Gerd Stabler. 1994.
- [11] K. Hyland, A genre description of the argumentative essay. RELC Journal. vol. 21(66), pp. 66-78. 1990.
- [12] D. Butt, R. Fahey, S. Feez, S. Spinks, and C. Yallop, Using functional Grammar: An explorer’s guide. Sydney NSW: Macquire University. 2003.
- [13] G. Thompson, Introducing functional grammar (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge. 2014.
- [14] P. Knapp, and M. Watkins, Genre text, grammar: Technologies for teaching and assessing writing. Australia: University of New South Wales Press Ltd. 2005.
- [15] S. Eggins, An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics. NY: Continuum. 2004.
- [16] J. R. Martin, and D. Rose, Working with discourse: Meaning beyond the clause. London: Continuum. 2003.
- [17] F.A. Hamied, Research method: A guide for first-time researcher. Bandung: UPI Press. 2017.