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Language Function in Classroom Practice: An SFL Study of Teacher and Student Discourse in Elementary School

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A B S T R A C T

This study aims to analyze language functions in the interaction between teachers and students in an elementary school classroom by using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach. The main focus of the research is on the three metafunctions of language according to Halliday, namely ideational, interpersonal, and textual, which represent how meaning is constructed in the learning context. The research method used is descriptive qualitative, with data in the form of transcripts of teacher and student verbal interactions obtained through observation and recording of teaching and learning activities. The results of the analysis show that the ideational function is seen from the teacher's use of material and relational processes in giving instructions and explaining concepts, while students respond with simple sentence structures that reflect actions or conditions. The interpersonal function is seen in the teacher's strategy of building supportive social relationships and encouraging student participation through communicative tone, modality, and invitation. Students show active interpersonal responses although they are still limited. Meanwhile, the textual function is reflected in the teacher's ability to arrange information coherently and the use of discourse markers to maintain coherence, as well as the internalization of discourse structures by students. This study concludes that language in classroom practice not only functions as a communication tool, but also as an effective pedagogical tool in shaping understanding, social relations, and learning structures. This finding is expected to be a reference for teachers in designing classroom communication that is more meaningful and supports the development of students' language skills.

A R T I C L E   I N F O

I. INTRODUCTION

Verbal interaction between teachers and students is one of the key components in the teaching and learning process that takes place in the classroom. Through language, teachers convey subject matter, give instructions, build rapport, and manage the learning atmosphere (Sudharsono, 2024). On the other hand, students use language to respond to questions, express opinions, or express their confusion and understanding of the material. According to Almaghfiroh et al (2024), especially at the primary school level, the role of language is becoming increasingly important because it not only functions as a means of communication, but also as a means of shaping students' thinking skills, concept development, and emotional growth. Iskandar (2024) states that language becomes the main medium in shaping social interactions, building self-confidence, and creating positive pedagogical relationships between teachers and students. Therefore, understanding how language is

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used in classroom interactions at the basic education level is an important step to improve the quality of early learning.

In the context of learning, language has a central role as a link between teaching objectives and the process of student acceptance. The language used by the teacher determines the extent to which material can be conveyed clearly, how instructions can be understood effectively, and how feedback is given to guide students in learning (Suardi, 2021). The choice of words, intonation, and sentence structure used by the teacher greatly affects student engagement as well as the emotional atmosphere in the classroom. On the other hand, the language used by students not only indicates their level of understanding of the lesson, but also reflects their active participation and interpersonal relationships with their teachers and peers (Adlani, 2023). Thus, language serves as the main bridge in creating meaningful, communicative and collaborative learning.

To understand how language plays a role in the learning process, especially in the interaction between teachers and students, an approach is needed that is able to explain the function of language contextually. One of the relevant approaches is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) developed by Michael Halliday (1978). Yasa (2021) also added that SFL views language not just as a means of communication, but as a system of meaning used to represent experiences, build social relationships, and organize messages in a cohesive manner. This approach highlights three main metafunctions of language, namely ideational (describing experiences and the surrounding world), interpersonal (building relationships between speakers and listeners), and textual (organizing the flow of information in a text or utterance). In the classroom context, these three functions can be identified in teacher and student utterances, whether in the form of material explanations, question and answer interactions, or learning instructions. Through SFL studies, researchers can reveal how language structures reflect the social roles of each participant, as well as how pedagogical meanings are dynamically constructed in classroom practices.

Although the Systemic Functional Linguistics approach offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing language in a social context, studies on classroom discourse using this approach are still limited, especially at the primary school level. Most research in education tends to focus on student learning outcomes, the effectiveness of teaching methods, or the use of learning media. Meanwhile, linguistic aspects of classroom interaction, especially how language is used to shape meaning, social roles, and communication structures in the classroom, often go unnoticed (Angraini, 2014). In fact, analyzing the function of language in teaching practices can provide important insights for teachers in designing communication strategies that are more targeted, inclusive, and support active student involvement. Therefore, studies that highlight how teachers and students construct meaning through language are needed, so that learning practices in primary classrooms can be improved in a more contextualized and communicative manner.

Seeing the lack of functional linguistic studies in the classroom context, especially at the elementary school level, this research is very relevant to be carried out. This research is important because it can provide deeper insights for teachers, prospective teachers, and educational practitioners regarding how language functions in shaping the dynamics of learning in the classroom. By understanding the functional role of language in building meaning, establishing interpersonal relationships, and composing messages effectively, educators can design communication patterns that are more focused and support student learning success (Albani, 2024). In addition, the results of this study are expected to serve as a foundation for the development of language-based learning strategies, which not only focus on the delivery of material, but also pay attention to the quality of verbal interactions between teachers and students. Thus, this study contributes to improving the quality of basic education through the utilization of contextual and applicable linguistic approaches.

Based on the background and urgency of the research that has been described, the focus of this study is directed at how language is used in classroom interactions between teachers and students, especially at the elementary school level. To explore more deeply the meaning and function of language use, the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach is used as a theoretical basis. This approach allows researchers to examine the various dimensions of language functions reflected in conversations and verbal activities in the classroom. Therefore, the problem formulations proposed in this study are: How is language function used in the interaction between teachers and students in elementary school classrooms based on the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach? This question becomes the main key in exploring how language is not only a means of communication, but also a pedagogical medium that functions to build understanding, social

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relations, and information delivery structures in the teaching and learning process.

II. METHODS

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach (Moleong, 2002) with a focus on analyzing classroom discourse based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory developed by Halliday. This approach was chosen to explore the meaning of language used by teachers and students in classroom interactions, especially in the context of elementary schools. The main data in this study are transcripts of verbal interactions between teachers and students obtained through observation techniques and audio-visual recording during the teaching and learning process. The data were then carefully transcribed and analyzed using the framework of the three metafunctions of SFL: ideational (representation of experience), interpersonal (social relations), and textual (structuring messages in discourse).

This research was conducted in one of the public elementary schools which was purposively selected based on accessibility and context suitability considerations. Data analysis techniques include identification of linguistic structures in teacher and student utterances, categorization of types of linguistic processes, and interpretation of language functions based on the context of interaction. Data validity is strengthened through triangulation techniques by comparing the results of transcripts, field notes, and linguists' interpretations. With this method, the research is expected to be able to describe in depth how language functions as a pedagogical tool in building meaning and social relations in the classroom.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Classroom Learning Process

In classroom interactions in elementary schools, the ideational function stands out as one of the main aspects of language use by teachers and students. This function relates to how language is used to represent experience, convey information, and form conceptual understanding

in the teaching and learning process. Based on the data findings, the language used by teachers is dominated by material process, which is a type of process that shows real action or physical activity. Examples are seen in utterances such as "open the book", "do this exercise", or "look at page five". These sentences show the teacher's role as a director of learning activities and at the same time as a driver of students' actions. This material process shows that the teacher's language functions to control the flow of classroom activities and direct students' focus on learning tasks.

In addition to material processes, teachers also use relational processes, which are processes that explain the relationship between concepts or explain the nature of something. Sentences such as "a triangle is a flat shape", or "water is liquid" are clear examples of relational processes. This type of process is important in learning contexts because it helps students connect abstract concepts with reality or definitions they can understand. This kind of language strengthens the delivery of information and supports the systematic construction of knowledge. Not only that, teachers also often use mental processes, which reflect cognitive activities such as thinking, feeling or understanding. Utterances such as "do you understand?", "what do you think?", or "think about it again" show the teacher's efforts to encourage students to think critically, assess, and reflect on the material being learned. The use of this mental process shows that the teacher does not only act as a transmitter of information, but also as a facilitator who encourages an active thinking process in students.

Meanwhile, from the students' side, language use shows a simpler and more responsive pattern. The majority of students respond to teacher instructions with short sentences, using material processes such as "I have", "I did", or "I read earlier". These sentences show that students respond directly to teacher commands, although they do not yet show complex linguistic expressions. In addition, some students used existential processes, for example: "nothing", "not finished yet", which signify the existence or absence of a thing in the learning context. This shows that students mostly use language to report the state or result of the task, not to convey in-depth thoughts. Overall, the use of ideational functions in classroom interaction shows the teacher's dominance in directing and conveying information, while students play the role of recipients and implementers of instructions. However, the use of various types of processes by teachers also shows an effort to build a comprehensive learning experience in terms of

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knowledge, action and understanding. This shows the potential space for improving students' language skills, especially in encouraging them to use language to express thoughts and understandings in a more complex manner.

Besides representing experiences and information through ideational function, language use in classroom interaction also plays an important role in building social relations and interpersonal attitudes between teachers and students. This interpersonal function reflects how the participants in the discourse (teachers and students) express their social position, attitude, emotion, and build relationships in the learning context. Based on the data findings, teachers tend to use language with a firm yet supportive tone, signaling a balance between authority as a teacher and empathy as an educator. Sentences such as "Let's try it together" or "Good, you're great!" show how teachers not only direct, but also build motivation and emotional closeness with students. This kind of language creates a positive and inclusive learning atmosphere, where students feel valued and supported.

Furthermore, in building interactions that encourage student participation, teachers also use a lot of modality elements, both certainty ("You can finish it") and possibility ("Maybe you need to try again"). The use of modality not only shows the teacher's assessment of students' abilities, but also a form of psychological support that can affect students' confidence in the learning process. This shows that teachers consciously shape their interpersonal role as facilitators who encourage students' learning progress through considerate language choices. Other interpersonal language strategies used by teachers are rhetorical questions and collective invitations, such as "Who knows?", "We can, right?", which aim to activate student engagement and build a sense of community in the classroom. Such utterances provide space for students to feel like they are an important part of the learning process, not just recipients of information. By using these forms of interaction, teachers direct learning towards a more dialogic and participatory direction.

Meanwhile, from the students' side, although the language style used is still simple, their responses show active interpersonal engagement. Sentences such as "I know, ma'am", or "I can, sir" show that students not only understand the instructions, but also express the ability or desire to be involved, albeit in a limited form of verbal expression. This shows that the interpersonal function in students' language is more focused on responding to and acknowledging the role of the

teacher, as well as establishing two-way communication that remains polite and appropriate to the social context of the classroom. Thus, the interpersonal function in classroom discourse not only shapes the structure of communication, but also creates a conducive, humane, and collaborative learning atmosphere. Teachers play an active role in building supportive relationships through language, while students respond with growing engagement as their language skills and confidence improve.

After seeing how language functions to build social experiences and relationships in classroom interactions, another important aspect that cannot be ignored is the textual function. This function plays a role in organizing the message coherently and contextually, so that the meaning to be conveyed can be received as a whole by the listener or reader. In classroom practice in elementary schools, teachers show a high ability to organize the flow of information with a systematic and directed discourse structure. The process of delivering material generally follows a sequential pattern, namely opening, explaining, giving examples, evaluating, assigning. This pattern helps students follow the learning process more easily, because the information is delivered gradually and logically.

In addition to the content structure, teachers also utilize discourse markers such as "well, next...", "now we will...", or "after this, pay attention", which function as signposts in oral communication. These markers play an important role in keeping the discourse smooth, preventing confusion, and signaling transitions between sections in the explanation. Through this strategy, teachers create oral texts that are not only informative but also easy to follow and understand, even by students with developing linguistic abilities. One interesting finding from the students' side is their tendency to imitate or repeat the sentence structure used by the teacher, either consciously or unconsciously. For example, students who answered with sentences such as "Now I want to read page two" or "Okay, I'm done" showed that they began to internalize the discourse patterns used by the teacher. This indicates an implicit language learning process through repeated exposure to correct speech models.

However, there are significant differences between the discourse structures of teachers and students. Teachers tend to use more complex and cohesive sentences, while students use simpler, limited and often fragmentary structures. This difference reflects the students' level of language

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development, which is still at the stage of building textual competence. Nonetheless, students' use of language indicates a progressive learning process, where they begin to understand the importance of organizing information in an orderly manner, although not yet fully fluent. Thus, the textual function in classroom discourse not only shows the teacher's skill in delivering material, but also shows how students learn to organize their utterances based on the patterns they hear. This confirms that classroom language practices are not only about content and social relations, but also include the skill of structuring effective and meaningful messages, which is very important in students' literacy development at the primary school level.

IV. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Based on the analysis of verbal interactions between teachers and students in elementary school classrooms using the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach, it can be concluded that language plays an important role in supporting the learning process through three main functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual.

The ideational function is seen through the use of various types of processes, especially material and relational processes, which are used by teachers to give instructions, explain concepts, and encourage students' thinking through mental processes. Meanwhile, students mostly use language in a responsive form with simple structures that reflect the actions and conditions they experience.

The interpersonal function is reflected in how teachers build social relationships with students through supportive tones, motivating word choices, and the use of participatory modality and invitation. Students also show interpersonal engagement, although in a limited form, but it already reflects active participation in learning.

The textual function can be seen from the teacher's ability to organize information coherently and clearly, as well as the use of discourse markers to maintain discourse cohesion and coherence. Students also show the process of internalizing the teacher's discourse structure although in the form of simple utterances, which reflects the development of their ability to better organize messages.

Thus, language use in classroom practice at the elementary school level not only functions as a means of communication, but also as a pedagogical tool that supports students' cognitive, social, and linguistic development. This study shows the importance of teachers' awareness in using language functionally and strategically, and the need to create more space for students to develop their language skills actively in meaningful contexts.

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