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The Role of Grammar and Context in Meaning-Making: A Literature Review from an SFL Perspective

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A B S T R A C T

This literature review examines the interdependent roles of grammar and context in meaning-making from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Drawing on studies across educational and linguistic settings, the review highlights that grammar functions as a system of meaning choices realized through the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. Evidence from previous research shows that students' texts are dominated by material processes, indicating a descriptive rather than analytical orientation, while the limited use of mental and relational processes reduces evaluative and conceptual depth. Context defined through field, tenor, mode, and genre strongly shapes grammatical choices and influences how meanings are constructed, negotiated, and interpreted. The synthesis reveals that inadequate integration of grammar and context in instructional practices leads to texts that lack cohesion, criticality, and rhetorical effectiveness. Overall, the review affirms that meaning emerges from the dynamic interaction between grammar and context, and that SFL offers a comprehensive framework for understanding this relationship.

A R T I C L E I N F O

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is a semiotic system that serves to construct, convey, and negotiate meaning across various social contexts. Within the tradition of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), language is not viewed merely as a set of grammatical rules but as a meaning-making resource that speakers employ to achieve specific communicative purposes. Therefore, understanding how grammar and context operate simultaneously becomes essential in analyzing the process of meaning-making in texts. The interpersonal metafunction focuses on how language is used to build and maintain social relationships. This is closely connected to context, as meaning is constructed through interactions within particular social settings (Cheng, 2023). Grammar, within the SFL perspective, plays a crucial role as the organizational structure of meaning through three main metafunctions:

ideational, interpersonal, and textual. These metafunctions enable speakers to represent experience, construct social relationships, and create coherence and information flow within a text. SFL follows the tradition of Malinowski and Firth, emphasizing the importance of context in interpreting meaning. Language is viewed as a social semiotic system in which meaning is always connected to the context in which it is produced (GONG & CHANG, n.d.).

However, grammar never operates in isolation. The meaning that emerges from grammatical structures is always influenced by the social and situational contexts that frame itwhat SFL identifies as the context of culture and the context of situation. In SFL, grammar is not merely a set of rules but a resource for creating meaning. This is reflected in its functional diversity and stratified organization, which allows for the enactment of social relations and the construction of experience (Webster, 2015).

The relationship between grammar and context makes meaning analysis in SFL both holistic and functional. This means that linguistic structures are understood not only in terms of their form but also in relation to the social functions they serve. The concept of lexico-grammar in SFL highlights the interdependence of grammar, register, and genre in meaning-making (Menéndez, 2016). Previous studies have shown that integrating grammar and context provides deeper insight into how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and interpreted across various types of texts, ranging from academic discourse to everyday interaction.

As a literature review, this study aims to examine comprehensively the role of grammar and context in meaning-making through the lens of SFL. By reviewing relevant scholarship, this study is expected to offer a more systematic understanding of the functional relationship between linguistic form and social context, while also strengthening theoretical insights into how language operates as a meaning-oriented system.

II.RESEARCH METHOD

The research method used in this study is a literature review with an analytical–critical approach based on the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework to trace, identify, and synthesize previous studies concerning the relationship between grammar, context, and meaning-making. A literature review is a critical and systematic examination of existing scholarly works related to a specific research topic. It functions to synthesize knowledge, identify research gaps, and provide contextual grounding for new studies, making it a fundamental component of academic writing, especially in theses and dissertations (Hazari, 2023; Samish, 2023). This process involves a comprehensive search across various databases and sources to ensure completeness and relevance (Ebidor & Ikhide, 2024).

Sources were collected from journal articles, academic books, conference proceedings, and research reports obtained from databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, DOAJ, Google Scholar, and national journal portals. The inclusion criteria consisted of studies on SFL, metafunctions, register, situational context, research on the relationship between grammar and meaning, publications from the past 10 15 years (except for classical Hallidayan works), and literature in both English and Indonesian. Sources that were not credible or not relevant were excluded. The selection and evaluation of literature followed simplified PRISMA stagesidentification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion with assessments focusing on relevance, alignment with SFL theory, methodology, key findings, and contributions to the understanding of the relationship between language and social context.

Data analysis was conducted through SFL-based content analysis by categorizing findings according to the three metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, textual), examining the relationship between grammar and situational and cultural contexts, and evaluating the role of grammar in meaning construction across various texts. The analysis employed both inductive reasoning to identify thematic patterns and deductive reasoning to confirm theoretical alignment. All analytical results were then synthesized into thematic narratives describing grammar as a system of meaning choices, the influence of context on grammatical realization, and the interaction between the two in shaping

meaning within the functional–systemic framework.

III.RESULT AND DISCUSSION
4.1 Interaction of Grammar and Context in Meaning Making within Students' Exposition Texts

The literature review from (Yuliawan & Shomary, 2024) Grammar in the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is understood as a system of meaning choices rather than merely a set of formal rules. The grammatical choices made by students are clearly reflected in the patterns of the transitivity system as part of the ideational metafunction. The data show that material processes dominate with 543 occurrences (57.14%), indicating a tendency among students to use linguistic forms that represent concrete actions, physical activities, and observable events.

This dominance makes students' exposition texts more factual-descriptive, where information is presented directly without analytical depth, resulting in meanings that are informative but cognitively less exploratory. Furthermore, relational processes appear in 149 clauses (19.7%) and function to classify, identify, and assign attributes to concepts. These grammatical choices support the fundamental purpose of exposition texts, which is to explain and elaborate on a topic.

However, mental processes appear far less frequently only 112 clauses (16.1%) which indicates limited expression of students' thoughts, judgments, and reflections. The scarcity of mental processes leads to texts that lack an argumentative line of reasoning, which ideally characterizes exposition.

Beyond grammar, context also plays a significant role in shaping meaning. In SFL, context includes situational context (field, tenor, and mode) as well as cultural context (genre). From the perspective of field, the topics chosen by students revolve around themes such as education, nature, economics, and the environment. These themes inherently demand the use of informative, descriptive, and fact-based language, aligning with the dominance of material processes. From the viewpoint of tenor, the relationship between students as writers and their teachers or general readers reveals several challenges affecting text quality, including difficulties in constructing arguments, limited understanding of exposition structure, insufficient feedback, and a tendency to rely on external sources without internalizing the information. This social context makes their texts literal, less exploratory, and lacking in personal evaluation. In terms of mode, exposition texts as monologic written discourse require strong cohesion, coherence, and an appropriate schematic structure thesis, arguments, and reiteration.

However, the data indicate that students still face difficulties with spelling, punctuation, cohesion, coherence, and the use of conjunctions, resulting in texts whose meanings are less organized. Meanwhile, at the level of cultural context, the exposition genre whose purpose is to persuade readers through logical argumentation is still not fully understood by students. This is evident from the limited use of mental processes, the dominance of material processes, and weak argument structures, indicating that the social function of exposition texts is not yet fully realized.

The integration of grammar and context illustrates how both simultaneously shape meaning. The dominant use of material processes is indeed consistent with the factual demands of the field, but the lack of mental processes causes the texts to be informative without argumentative depth. In addition, tenor which reflects the learning conditions and student–teacher interactions and mode which requires mastery of structure and cohesive devices limit students' grammatical choices, resulting in unstable cohesion, less precise lexical choices, and inconsistent text structure.

Ultimately, the interaction between grammar and context reveals how students represent their experiences through language: they tend to view phenomena as events that need to be described factually, rather than as ideas that require critical analysis or conceptual classification. As a result, the meanings constructed are more descriptive than evaluative. Overall, this analysis affirms that grammar functions as a system of choices that determines how meaning is constructed in exposition texts. Context further shapes students' grammatical choices through the demands of genre and the

conditions of the learning environment. The interaction between grammar and context produces meanings that are informative yet not fully argumentative, indicating the need to strengthen students' understanding of the exposition genre, diversify their grammatical choices, and improve their mastery of text structure so their ability to represent meaning can develop more effectively.

4.2 Grammar Context Interaction in Meaning-Making within Students' Texts

The literature review from (Budi et.al., 2025) Grammar in the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is understood as a system of meaning choices used by speakers or writers to construct messages according to their social purposes. The article shows that the application of Systemic Functional Linguistics in Indonesian language learning enables students to understand the relationship between linguistic forms and the meaning functions of texts.

Various studies reviewed, including those by Wachyudi & Miftakh, Harahap et al., and Yuliawan & Shomary, reveal that students interpret texts through transitivity analysis, particularly by identifying material processes that represent actions, mental processes that reflect thoughts or feelings, and relational processes that indicate identification and classification.

The literature indicates that student texts are generally dominated by material processes, reflecting a strong tendency to depict concrete events and factual information. Relational processes are used to explain concepts and connections between ideas, while mental processes appear far less frequently, suggesting that students' ability to express evaluations, opinions, or arguments remains limited. This condition results in meanings that are more informative-descriptive than argumentative-critical, demonstrating that students still perceive language primarily as a tool for conveying facts rather than as a medium for thinking and evaluating.

Beyond grammar, context also plays an important role in shaping meaning. In the SFL framework, context is understood through field, tenor, mode, and genre. Field, or the subject matter discussed in text-based learning such as recounts, expositions, or folktales shapes students' grammatical choices. Factual topics tend to elicit material and relational processes, whereas cultural narrative texts evoke more verbal and material processes. Tenor, referring to the relationship between students as writers and teachers or readers, also influences the linguistic forms used.

The article highlights that students still experience confusion in writing, teachers do not yet fully understand SFL, learning resources are limited, and students receive insufficient analytical feedback. These issues lead to the use of language that is more literal and less evaluative. In terms of mode, exposition texts and other text types require cohesion, coherence, and clear schematic structures. However, students show weaknesses in spelling, punctuation, the use of conjunctions, cohesion, and structural organization, which results in meanings that lack clarity and coherence.

At the cultural level, or genre, research shows that students' understanding of genre remains shallow. Consequently, exposition and argumentative texts often fail to achieve their rhetorical purposes. Genre ultimately influences the patterns of grammatical choices used to construct meaning.

The integration of grammar and context illustrates that meaning in students' texts is formed through the simultaneous interaction between the two. Grammar supports contextual demands when material processes are used for factual topics or when relational processes fulfill the requirements of exposition texts. However, the limited use of mental processes is influenced by low levels of critical thinking and ineffective teaching strategies. Conversely, context also constrains students' grammatical choices.

Conventional teaching methods restrict the variety of linguistic forms available to students, weak mastery of mode reduces cohesion and structural accuracy, and a less dialogic learning tenor prevents students from expressing attitudes, reflections, or evaluations. Overall, the representation of reality in students' texts becomes more descriptive than critical. Students tend to perceive the world as a series of concrete actions (material), rather than as objects of analysis (mental) or conceptual structures to be

classified (relational). As a result, the meanings they produce are predominantly informative without argumentative depth.

Based on the synthesis of the literature, it can be concluded that grammar functions as a system of meaning rather than merely a set of formal rules. The use of linguistic structures such as transitivity, theme-rheme, and modality demonstrates how students construct reality through language. Context also determines grammatical choices, as field, tenor, mode, and genre shape how students write and interpret meaning.

The interaction between grammar and context produces socially constructed meaning, although this meaning is not yet fully critical due to limited grammatical variation and insufficient understanding of genre. The implementation of SFL in instructional settings is not yet optimal due to constraints related to teachers and learning materials, indicating the need for enhanced teacher competence in teaching grammar-in-context effectively.

The article affirms that grammar and context have a strong interrelationship in meaning-making, and that SFL provides a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding this relationship. With improved mastery of grammar and contextual understanding, students can produce texts that are more coherent, meaningful, and aligned with their communicative purposes.

4.3 Grammar and Context as Interdependent Resources for Meaning-Making

The literature review (Moon et.all., 2025) Grammar as a system of meaning choices (meaning potential) in the SFL perspective emphasizes that grammar is not understood merely as a set of formal rules, but as a range of options used by speakers or writers to construct meaning according to social and contextual needs. The article shows that traditional learning in senior high schools still focuses on memorizing word forms such as the prefixes me-, ber-, ter-, and pe-wi thout relating them to their semantic and pragmatic functions in texts. As a result, students understand the form but are unable to connect it with the function in clauses or discourse. In SFL, meaning is realized through three metafunctions. From the ideational metafunction, the article indicates that students often struggle to understand the function of verbs and nouns in constructing experiential meaning. For example, students may recognize the word memasak ("to cook") as a verb, but do not understand that it functions as a process within the transitivity system.

The study also reveals that word sets such as tanam, menanam, penanam, and penanaman form an ideational meaning chain through changes in word class, while the distinction between the prefix di- and the preposition di is clarified through their functions as verbal processes and circumstantial elements of place. These findings reinforce the SFL principle that processes, participants, and circumstances work together to represent experience in texts.

In the interpersonal metafunction, the article highlights the importance of teaching modality markers such as harus (must), perlu (need to), dapat (can), and biasanya (usually) within exposition texts. In SFL, modality is understood as a resource for expressing attitude, levels of certainty or obligation, and the writer's positioning toward the reader.

Learning modality helps students understand how language is used not only to convey information but also to persuade, evaluate, or indicate stance. From the textual metafunction, the article demonstrates how cohesion is built through the repetition of morphologically related words, affixation that maintains thematic consistency, and the use of conjunctions and endophoric references. Thus, grammar functions to organize messages in a structured way, enabling the text to be coherent and easy to understand.

Beyond grammar, context in SFL which includes field, tenor, mode, and genre plays a crucial role in shaping meaning. The article shows that grammatical mastery alone is insufficient because meaning is produced through the interaction between grammar and its situational and cultural context. In terms of field, topics such as ornamental plants influence the use of material processes, derivative nouns, and modality, reflecting the principle that topic determines the type of processes in a text.

Regarding tenor, the limited dialogic relationship between teachers and students, along with teachers' insufficient understanding of SFL, causes students to use language literally rather than evaluatively or argumentatively. The lack of analytical feedback further prevents students from expressing attitudes or judgments. In the mode component, exposition texts require strong cohesion and coherence, yet students often struggle with spelling, punctuation, conjunctions, and theme rheme organization. This indicates that cohesion problems arise not merely from technical errors but from a limited understanding of textual function.

In terms of genre, the article asserts that students frequently fail to achieve the rhetorical goals of exposition texts because their understanding of genre is shallow and because grammar is taught separately from genre. Consequently, their grammatical choices do not support the communicative purpose of the text. The interaction between grammar and context becomes evident in how meaning is formed. Grammar supports contextual demands when material processes are used to explain facts, modality to express stance, and affixation to build cohesion.

However, context also constrains grammatical choices: field determines the type of processes, tenor influences modality and attitude markers, mode dictates cohesion and theme patterns, and genre shapes the structure and linguistic features of the text. Limitations in grammar arise not because students lack ability, but because the learning context does not provide sufficient space for exploring meaning. Teachers' limited understanding of SFL, the absence of contextual grammar teaching, and the lack of text-based instruction that incorporates morphology result in student texts that are shallow in meaning. The minimal use of mental and relational processes shows that students are not yet accustomed to producing critical, analytical writing.

Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that grammar functions as a system of meaning choices that shapes how students represent reality, while situational and cultural context determines the grammatical resources utilized. Meaning is constructed through the simultaneous interaction between grammar and context, and the SFL-based learning model is highly relevant for enhancing students' understanding of the relationship between linguistic form, function, and meaning. The limitations found in students' writing which tends to be descriptive rather than critical are the result of weak integration between grammar and context during instruction. Thus, the article provides theoretical and empirical evidence that SFL-based pedagogy can make grammar learning more meaningful while enabling students to construct meaning in a contextual and communicative manner.

4.4 Grammar as Meaning Potential: Insights from Al Jurjaniyy and SFL

The literature review (Nathir, 2021) Grammar as a system for constructing meaning is clearly reflected in the article comparing Al-Jurjaniyy's nazm theory with the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach. Both perspectives assert that grammar is not merely a set of structural rules, but a system of relations among linguistic elements that produce meaning. According to Al-Jurjaniyy, the arrangement of lafaz is not simply a collection of words but a sequence of choices shaped by the intended meaning a principle that aligns with the concept of meaning potential in SFL.

The article shows that syntactic arrangements ranging from the position of subject predicate, khabar structure, shart jaza', to the system of i'rab directly influence textual and experiential meaning. Thus, meaning cannot be separated from the grammatical structure used, consistent with Halliday's view that grammar is the realization of the metafunctions of language and serves as a systematic mechanism for organizing meaning.

The article further demonstrates how grammar within the SFL framework is realized through the three metafunctions. In the ideational metafunction, grammar is understood as a tool for representing experience through processes, participants, and circumstances. The article supports this by highlighting the use of the transitivity system to analyze how events, agents, and conditions are constructed in Qur'anic texts. By mapping grammatical forms to representations

of the world, it becomes evident that grammar plays a crucial role in constructing meaning about experience. In the interpersonal metafunction, the article underscores the significance of the speaker listener relationship (tenor) in shaping grammatical choices. In SFL, mood and modality become key resources for expressing attitudes, evaluations, and the writer's social positioning.

This demonstrates that grammar is never neutral, but always carries interpersonal value. Meanwhile, the textual metafunction governs the organization of messages. The article shows that the arrangement of verses, textual structure, and the management of theme rheme are essential elements in meaning-making. Grammatical cohesion structures the text and makes it understandable, illustrating the role of grammar in organizing the flow of information.

Beyond grammar, context is also presented as a fundamental element in meaning formation. Drawing on SFL theory, the article explains the three situational context variables field, tenor, and mode. Field, or the subject matter, determines the types of processes and lexico-grammatical structures used; for instance, discussions of the Day of Judgment, legal matters, or narratives in Qur'anic texts require different process types and structural patterns.

Tenor, referring to the relationship between the speaker and audience, influences the level of formality, structural choices, and style of delivery. The article asserts that maqam and the speaker listener relationship are key to interpreting meaning, consistent with SFL. Mode determines the nature of the language whether spoken or written the degree of elaboration, and the cohesion and organization of the text. The article shows that Halliday provides a systematic analytical framework for understanding mode in Qur'anic discourse.

The interaction between grammar and context is the core of meaning-making. The article's data reveal that grammar operates in alignment with context; linguistic structures cannot be interpreted without considering both linguistic and situational contexts. SFL maps the relationship between grammar and context through the metafunctions and the variables of field, tenor, and mode. The article also emphasizes that Halliday's theory is more flexible

and capable of accommodating the analysis of modern and complex texts, whereas nazm is more focused on the aesthetics and structural arrangements of classical Arabic literature. Nevertheless, both approaches agree that meaning never stands alone meaning emerges from the interplay between linguistic structure and its context.

Overall, the article is highly relevant to your research. Grammar is understood as a system of meaning choices that constructs experience, relationships, and messages. Context through field, tenor, mode, and genre determines grammatical choices, making it clear that meaning can only be fully analyzed when context is taken into account. Meaning-making is the product of the simultaneous interaction between grammar and context, in both Al-Jurjaniyy's theory and SFL. Thus, the article affirms that SFL is the most comprehensive approach for explaining the relationship between grammar and context in meaning construction, and its findings provide strong theoretical and empirical support for your research framework.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study affirms that grammar and context are interrelated and work together in constructing meaning. From the perspective of SFL, grammar is understood as a system of meaning choices realized through three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual, with each choice shaped by situational context (field, tenor, and mode) and cultural context (genre). The literature indicates that students' texts remain weak in mental processes, modality, thematic structure, and cohesion because the integration of grammar and context in teaching is still not optimal.

Contributing factors include teachers' limited understanding of SFL and the lack of text-based instructional strategies. This study also identifies a theoretical alignment between Al-Jurjaniyy's nazm and SFL, particularly in the view that meaning emerges from the relationship among structure, choice, and context. Overall, meaning-making is the result of integrating grammar as a system of choices with context as the determinant of language's social function. Grammar instruction therefore needs to be

directed toward function and context so that students' literacy skills and text quality become more coherent, argumentative, and aligned with communicative purposes.

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