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# A Systemic Functional Linguistics-Based Literature Review Approach to Analyzing Material Processes, Textual Metafunctions, and Argumentation Features

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### ABSTRACT

This study employs a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)-based literature review approach to analyze how material processes, textual metafunctions, and argumentation features shape meaning-making across academic, student, and corporate discourse. Findings reveal that material processes play a central role in representing actions and events, whether in student essays, corporate annual reports, or pedagogical research, highlighting how texts construct activity, progress, and empirical procedures. Textual metafunctions, particularly theme–rheme organization and cohesive devices, structure information flow and influence the coherence of arguments. Argumentation features show varied levels of sophistication: student writing reflects limited argumentative control, corporate discourse uses persuasive and ideologically driven strategies, and academic studies demonstrate balanced reasoning. Across contexts, linguistic choices shape clarity, coherence, and persuasive power. The analysis underscores SFL’s value as an analytical framework for understanding how discourse constructs knowledge, frames ideology, and supports rhetorical goals, while also identifying areas where writers require further development in thematic progression and argumentation.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Language operates as a meaning-making resource that shapes how ideas, experiences, and arguments are constructed within academic discourse. Through the linguistic choices that writers make, texts not only convey information but also position readers, build logical relations, and construct particular interpretations of reality.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) offers a robust theoretical foundation for examining these functions, viewing language as a system organized around the social purposes it serves. Its ideational, interpersonal, and textual dimensions allow researchers to analyze how linguistic choices encode actions, structure information, and build reasoning. By applying these functional

perspectives, SFL provides deeper insight into the organization, communicative goals, and argumentative strategies present in scholarly writing.

Within the ideational metafunction, material processes play a central role in representing activities, events, and participants. These processes refer to actions or events that occur in the physical world and are frequently found in EFL textbooks and academic articles, where they help describe actions and events to convey information effectively (Darong, 2023; Miranda, 2022). In academic writing, material processes are especially important for describing research procedures, experiments, and analytical steps. Verbs such as *apresentar* and *analisar* are commonly used to indicate actions that structure the development of scholarly arguments (Miranda, 2022).

Textual metafunctions, meanwhile, organize language in ways that create coherent and cohesive discourse. This includes the management of theme–rheme structures and cohesive devices, which together ensure the smooth and logical flow of information throughout a text (Yu, 2024). These textual choices help writers guide readers, emphasize key points, and maintain clarity across complex academic arguments.

Argumentation features further demonstrate how language is used strategically to persuade, inform, or position readers within a discourse. In various genres including political discourse argumentation often involves deliberate linguistic manipulation. For example, material and relational processes may be selectively used to distort or misrepresent facts, while engagement techniques can create the illusion of balanced argumentation in disinformation contexts (Ayomi et al., 2025). Such patterns highlight the importance of examining not only what is said but how linguistic resources are mobilized to achieve rhetorical goals

This study adopts an SFL-based analytical approach to investigate material processes, textual metafunctions, and argumentation features as they appear in academic texts. By integrating these three dimensions, the analysis aims to uncover the linguistic patterns that contribute to meaning-making, coherence,

and knowledge construction. This approach provides a systematic foundation for understanding how academic discourse functions as a tool for presenting research, shaping interpretations, and participating in broader scholarly conversations.

## **II. RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative literature review method grounded in the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Qualitative research is defined as an iterative process that enhances understanding through closer engagement with the studied phenomenon (Aspers et al., 2019). Qualitative methods are utilized across various disciplines, including social sciences and medical education, to address complex questions that quantitative methods may not adequately answer (Kemparaj & Chavan, 2013). The research involves selecting and analyzing scholarly works that discuss material processes, textual metafunctions, and argumentation features within various discourse contexts. Data are collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and relevant linguistic studies published within the last ten years.

The analysis follows an SFL-based coding procedure. First, material processes are identified through the examination of verbs and clause structures representing actions, events, and participants. Second, textual metafunctions are analyzed by mapping theme rheme patterns, cohesion devices, and information flow. Third, argumentation features are examined by identifying claims, supporting evidence, logical relations, and engagement strategies.

All data are interpreted through descriptive qualitative techniques to reveal patterns, similarities, and differences across the reviewed studies. The SFL framework serves as the analytical lens for synthesizing findings and drawing conclusions about how linguistic resources contribute to meaning-making in academic discourse.

### **III.RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

#### **4.1 Structural Weaknesses and Metafunctional Choices in Students' Exposition Texts Based on SFL Analysis**

The analysis of the student's exposition text, based on the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework, reveals several key issues across the experiential, textual, and interpersonal dimensions that collectively affect the coherence and argumentative strength of the writing. Experientially, the text demonstrates a near absence of material processes, with relational and mental processes dominating the clauses. Examples such as "Indonesia has 34 provinces" and "social media is place for people stay connected and together" show that the student focuses on describing states and identities rather than presenting concrete actions or dynamic sequences of events. This lack of material processes results in arguments that remain descriptive instead of persuasive, as they are not reinforced by action-based or consequence-driven evidence. Textually, the writing frequently employs personal themes such as "I" and repeatedly uses "social media" as a topical theme, yet it fails to incorporate reference pronouns like "it" to maintain cohesive flow. Thematic progression shows attempts at theme reiteration and occasional zigzag patterns, but the inconsistency in promoting rhymes into themes causes disruptions in information flow.

These breaks weaken the development of logical connections, especially since the student also struggles with employing appropriate internal and causal conjunctions. Argumentatively, the text lacks the expected structure of an analytical exposition, as it is written in a single paragraph without a clear thesis, distinct arguments, or a reiteration that reinforces the writer's stance. Claims are presented without elaboration or supporting evidence, as seen in statements such as "social media can make you have much connection," which are left undeveloped. Although modal verbs like "can" and "must" appear, indicating some awareness of stance-taking, they do not meaningfully enhance persuasion due to the weak structural foundation of the argument. These findings highlight broader gaps in the literature, particularly the limited number of studies that quantify material processes

in student writing and the need for comparative corpus-based analyses of theme–rheme patterns across proficiency levels. Moreover, existing research seldom examines the quantitative relationship between transitivity patterns and argument strength. The current analysis underscores the pedagogical importance of training students to use material processes more effectively, apply consistent theme–rheme progression, utilize pronouns for cohesion, and build complete argumentative structures using thesis, claim, evidence, warrant, and reiteration supported by appropriate conjunctions. Overall, the findings provide a clear picture of how linguistic choices across the SFL metafunctions influence the clarity, cohesion, and persuasiveness of student academic writing.

#### **4.2 Material Processes, Thematic Structuring, and Argumentation Strategies in Corporate Discourse**

In the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), material processes represent actions or events that "do" or "happen," and the data presented in Piga (2024) show that such processes overwhelmingly dominate the ideational meaning construction of corporate annual reports. In ExxonMobil's report, 83% of ideational grammatical metaphors (IGMs) consist of nominalized material processes such as reduction, mitigation, improvement, and hard work, while Petro-China demonstrates 74% material nominalizations including growth, promotion, investment, and production. This dominance performs important semantic functions, notably by emphasizing the company as an active agent engaged in positive and progressive actions such as reducing emissions, improving efficiency, or fighting poverty.

Rhetorically, nominalization simplifies complex information and creates an impression of concrete action even when specific details such as the precise percentage of emission reduction are omitted. SFL literature suggests that nominalization in material processes shifts the interpretive focus from "who does what" to "what is achieved," making it a powerful discursive strategy for constructing an image of efficiency, action, and progress in corporate communication.

The textual metafunction further reveals how nominalizations are strategically placed to shape the organization and coherence of the text. Many IGMs appear in thematic positions such as climate change, scientific progress, and economic stability which frame the direction of the discourse and guide readers toward specific corporate priorities. Lexical cohesion is achieved through repeated nominal groups: ExxonMobil frequently reiterates themes like “emission reduction” and “efficiency improvement,” whereas Petro-China repeatedly emphasizes “economic growth,” “prosperity,” and “industrial revitalization.” Through nominalization, clauses become more compact, aligning with Fairclough’s concept of “easification,” which involves simplifying structure for greater readability and persuasive effect. SFL literature indicates that such thematic placement of nominalizations directs readers’ interpretations, allowing the companies to control information flow and advance ideologically shaped messages.

From an argumentative perspective, features of reasoning and persuasion also emerge through the combined use of process selection, thematic structuring, and nominalization. Petro-China frequently constructs its ethos through quantitative arguments such as reporting RMB 3.4 trillion turnover or RMB 180.36 billion net profit which function to reinforce credibility and economic authority.

In contrast, ExxonMobil employs sustainability-focused narratives, drawing on IGMs like risk mitigation, net-zero, and greenhouse gas reduction to portray itself as environmentally responsible. ExxonMobil also uses nominalizations as justification strategies, attributing challenges or performance stagnation to external forces such as economic uncertainty and future challenges, in line with Bhatia’s theory of “justification discourse.” Moreover, nominalization enables generalization that obscures agents and details, making it easier for readers to accept claims without scrutiny—an effect Fairclough describes as “manipulative generalisation.” Through these linguistic mechanisms, the argumentation in both texts aligns more closely with promotional discourse than with neutral informational reporting.

Synthesizing the analyses of material processes, textual metafunctions, and argumentative features demonstrates culturally distinct discursive patterns. ExxonMobil constructs a narrative of proactive environmental responsibility: material processes highlight its commitment to climate-related action; textual metafunctions position sustainability as the central theme; and argumentative strategies depict the company as innovative, responsible, and future-oriented. Conversely, Petro-China emphasizes economic productivity and national development: material processes foreground industrial growth, textual metafunctions center on themes such as growth, prosperity, and production, and argumentative strategies characterize the company as a stable engine of national economic progress.

Overall, the SFL-based literature review reveals that material processes are dominant across both reports, reflecting the centrality of action-oriented messaging in corporate promotional discourse. Textual metafunctions are strategically employed to frame corporate ideologies and steer reader interpretation, while argumentative features differ based on cultural context ExxonMobil foregrounding sustainability and global responsibility, and Petro-China prioritizing economic performance and national development. These findings underscore how linguistic choices serve not only to convey information but also to construct persuasive corporate identities within their respective socio-cultural environments.

#### **4.3 SFL Linguistic Analysis in Student Writing: Material Processes, Textual Metafunctions, and Argumentation Features**

Using a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)-based literature review approach, the analysis of the data in Yulianawati & Faizah (2022) can be explained through three key dimensions: material processes, textual metafunctions, and argumentation features. These linguistic aspects reveal how student writers build ideational meaning, organize textual flow, and construct argumentative structures within academic essays.

First, the analysis of material processes shows that students predominantly rely on this process type, which in SFL represents actions or

events that describe what happens or what is done. This dominance aligns with the nature of academic essays, where writers are expected to explain real events, describe changes, or present observable developments, such as issues related to post-pandemic educational transitions. Material processes such as change, improve, adapt, and develop help students convey concrete actions relevant to their topics. According to SFL theory, heavy reliance on material processes reflects a focus on factual descriptions and action-based narratives, which is typical of novice academic writers and consistent with previous findings in SFL-based writing research.

Second, the textual metafunction particularly the organization of Theme and Rheme illustrates how students structure their essays to create coherence. The data indicate that students mostly employ unmarked topical themes, typically beginning clauses with grammatical subjects such as students, teachers, or education systems. This produces straightforward sentence structures and a linear progression of ideas, making the text easier to follow. Additionally, students make use of textual themes such as therefore, however, and in addition to signal logical relations between clauses. However, the data also reveal some weaknesses in thematic progression, where themes are not consistently maintained across sentences, resulting in occasional breaks in coherence. This aligns with existing SFL literature, which notes that novice writers often struggle to maintain cohesive thematic development in academic writing.

Third, from an argumentative perspective, the data reveal that students' argumentation relies primarily on declarative clauses, emphasizing statements and information rather than direct persuasion. This feature is appropriate for academic writing, which prioritizes factual and reasoned claims. Interrogative or imperative structures appear only rarely, and when they do, they function more as rhetorical devices than genuine questions or commands. Students tend to present information descriptively rather than employing more advanced argumentative strategies such as evaluative stance, justification, hedging, or nominalization-based abstraction, which are commonly found in expert academic writing. As a

result, their essays reflect a foundational level of argumentative competence, centered on presenting ideas rather than critically developing them.

Overall, synthesizing the analysis across the three SFL dimensions reveals that students' writing demonstrates a developing command of linguistic resources. The predominance of material processes indicates a descriptive orientation; the use of textual metafunctions shows an emerging but inconsistent ability to manage information flow; and the relatively simple argumentative structures highlight the need for further development in constructing cohesive and critically oriented academic arguments. Together, these findings demonstrate that while students have begun to master basic SFL-informed linguistic features, further improvement is needed in thematic coherence, abstract reasoning, and advanced argumentation strategies to reach higher levels of academic writing proficiency.

#### **4.4 Findings on the Application of SFL Metafunctions in Academic Text Analysis**

Using a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)-based literature review approach, the analysis of Green et al. (2024) shows that the studies reviewed consistently rely on material processes to describe the actions involved in both pedagogical interventions and the systematic review procedures. Material processes such as implement, deliver, measure, assess, and evaluate are used to represent the concrete steps taken within GT/SFL-based classroom programs, as well as the methodological actions performed by the researchers, including screening thousands of articles, selecting eligible studies, and calculating effect sizes. These linguistic choices position the research as active, procedural, and empirical, while also describing student outcomes through verbs such as improve, gain, and perform, even though the evidence supporting these actions remains inconsistent.

From the perspective of textual metafunctions, the article demonstrates clear thematic organization, with many clauses beginning with Themes such as However, In contrast, The studies, or The evidence, which help guide readers through comparisons, critiques, and shifts in evaluative stance. Recurrent topical

Themes like GT/SFL pedagogies, the intervention, and the participants contribute to cohesion, while cohesive devices—including conjunctions, reference chains, and lexical repetition—maintain clarity and coherence throughout the narrative synthesis. The argumentation features of the article reveal a strong, balanced argumentative structure in which the authors present a central claim that current evidence is insufficient to conclude that GT/SFL pedagogies improve student reading or writing outcomes, and support this claim with detailed methodological evaluations of each study, such as the reliability of measures, intervention fidelity, comparability of groups, and the presence or absence of controlled designs. Counter-arguments are acknowledged such as teacher reports of improvement and partial positive trends yet these are critically evaluated and dismissed as insufficient due to methodological limitations.

The article concludes by asserting that GT/SFL may be effective but that stronger, more rigorous empirical studies are required to confirm its impact. Synthesizing the analysis of material processes, textual metafunctions, and argumentation features shows that the article itself models strong academic discourse: it portrays research actions through material processes, constructs a cohesive evaluative narrative through thematic organization, and builds a logical, evidence-based argument regarding the current limitations of GT/SFL research. This SFL-based interpretation highlights how linguistic choices not only describe the research but also reinforce the authors' critical stance on the quality of the existing evidence base.

## CONCLUSION

This SFL-based literature review demonstrates that material processes, textual metafunctions, and argumentation features play a central role in shaping meaning-making and coherence across various discourse contexts. Material processes consistently highlight actions and events whether in student writing, corporate reports, or scholarly research revealing how texts construct activity, progress, and evidence. Textual metafunctions, particularly theme rheme organization and cohesive devices, determine the clarity and logical flow of information, while

argumentative features show how writers build claims, structure reasoning, and position readers. Across the analyzed studies, the findings indicate that effective academic and professional discourse relies on a balanced integration of these linguistic resources. However, the data also reveal gaps, such as students' limited mastery of thematic progression and argument development, as well as the inconsistent empirical foundations of GT/SFL pedagogies. Overall, this review confirms that SFL provides a powerful analytical framework for understanding how language constructs ideas, shapes interpretation, and supports persuasive or informational goals in diverse texts.

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