

A TRANSITIVITY ANALYSIS OF DESCRIPTIVE TEXTS BY SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: A GENDER-BASED COMPARISON

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menganalisis penggunaan tipe proses transitivity dalam teks deskriptif yang ditulis oleh siswa kelas XI EFL dan meneliti perbedaan makna berdasarkan jenis kelamin. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif deskriptif dengan melibatkan empat belas siswa (delapan perempuan dan enam laki-laki) dari sebuah SMA di Bogor, Indonesia. Data dikumpulkan melalui teks deskriptif yang ditulis secara individu dan dianalisis pada tingkat klausa menggunakan kerangka Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Klausa dikategorikan menjadi enam tipe proses: material, mental, relasional, perilaku, verbal, dan eksistensial. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa proses relasional paling dominan, diikuti oleh material dan mental, sementara proses verbal, perilaku, dan eksistensial muncul secara minimal. Siswa perempuan cenderung menggunakan lebih banyak proses relasional dan mental, mencerminkan fokus yang lebih kuat pada deskripsi atribut dan pengalaman internal, sedangkan siswa laki-laki menunjukkan proporsi proses material yang relatif lebih tinggi, menekankan tindakan yang dapat diamati. Namun, pola penggunaan transitivity secara keseluruhan serupa antar jenis kelamin, menunjukkan pengaruh konvensi genre lebih kuat dibandingkan perbedaan gender. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa tulisan deskriptif siswa lebih banyak menggunakan pola atribusi dan menekankan pentingnya strategi pembelajaran untuk mendorong deskripsi yang lebih kaya dan bervariasi.

Kata kunci: transitivity, Systemic Functional Linguistics, teks deskriptif, siswa EFL, perbedaan gender

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the use of transitivity processes in descriptive texts written by eleventh-grade EFL students and examines potential gender-based differences in meaning-making. A descriptive qualitative design was employed, involving fourteen students (eight females and six males) from a senior high school in Bogor, Indonesia. Data were collected through students' individually written descriptive texts and analyzed at the clause level using Halliday & Matthiessen (2014) Systemic Functional Linguistics framework. Clauses were categorized into six process types: material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential. The results revealed that relational processes were the most dominant, followed by material and mental processes, while verbal, behavioral, and existential processes occurred minimally. Female students tended to use more relational and mental processes, reflecting a stronger focus on describing attributes and internal experiences, whereas male students showed a relatively higher proportion of material processes, emphasizing observable actions. However, overall patterns of transitivity use were similar across genders, indicating the influence of genre conventions over gender. The findings suggest that students' descriptive writing relies primarily on attributive patterns and highlight the need for instructional strategies that encourage richer and more varied descriptions.

Keywords: transitivity, Systemic Functional Linguistics, descriptive text, EFL students, gender differences

INTRODUCTION

Writing is an essential skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, as it enables students to express ideas, experiences, and knowledge through meaningful and structured language use (Hyland, 2003). Unlike receptive skills, writing requires learners to actively

construct meaning, organize ideas, and make conscious linguistic choices. In secondary education, students are expected to produce various genres of texts as part of their academic development. One of the fundamental genres introduced at this level is descriptive text, which focuses on describing people, places, or objects

by highlighting their characteristics, qualities, and attributes. As a genre, descriptive text provides a valuable context for examining how students use language to represent experience and construct meaning.

Developing descriptive writing skills allows students not only to convey factual information but also to express impressions, perspectives, and personal evaluations of the entities being described. However, many EFL students tend to rely on limited grammatical patterns when producing descriptive texts, often focusing on surface-level attributes without exploring more varied ways of construing experience (Emilia, 2014; Rohmat et al., 2018). This tendency suggests that students' writing should not only be evaluated based on correctness but also examined in terms of how meaning is constructed through language choices (Jaelani, A., Umam, A., & Rahmawanti, M. R., 2023).

From a functional linguistic perspective, language is viewed as a resource for making meaning rather than merely a system of grammatical rules. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday, emphasizes that language simultaneously performs multiple metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational metafunction, particularly its experiential component, concerns how human experience is represented in language. This representation is realized through clauses that encode actions, events, states, and relationships by means of processes, participants, and circumstances (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Within this framework, the clause functions as the central unit of meaning, making it a crucial focus for analyzing students' writing.

The experiential meaning of a clause is realized through the transitivity system. Transitivity analysis examines how different types of experiences are expressed grammatically through six process types: material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential processes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Within this perspective, transitivity provides a powerful framework for examining how writers encode experience through grammatical choices. Bloor & Bloor (2004) argue that transitivity patterns reflect how speakers and writers conceptualize reality, making them a valuable analytical tool in text analysis. In educational contexts, transitivity analysis has been widely applied to explore

learners' meaning-making strategies and their control of clause structures (Thompson, 2014).

Each process type reflects a particular way of construing experience, such as actions and events, internal thoughts and feelings, or relationships between entities. Previous studies in EFL contexts have demonstrated that transitivity analysis can reveal students' dominant grammatical patterns as well as their preferred ways of representing experience in writing, particularly in descriptive texts (Eggs, 2004; Emilia, 2014). By analyzing transitivity patterns, researchers can gain insights into how students conceptualize and organize meaning in their written texts.

In addition to linguistic structure, students' writing may also reflect individual variation in meaning-making. Gender has often been considered a relevant analytical category in language studies, as previous research suggests that male and female learners may differ in their cognitive, affective, and expressive engagement with language. These differences may influence how learners choose to represent actions, attributes, and internal experiences in writing (Aini, 2021). In EFL contexts such as Indonesia, where exposure to English outside the classroom is relatively limited, classroom-based writing tasks become a particularly important site for observing students' language use and meaning-making strategies (Emilia, 2014; Rohmat et al., 2018). Examining gender-based patterns in transitivity usage may therefore provide insights into whether male and female students tend to prioritize different aspects of experience in descriptive writing.

Despite the increasing number of studies applying transitivity analysis to students' writing, research that specifically examines gender-based differences in the use of transitivity processes in descriptive texts written by senior high school students remains limited, particularly in the Indonesian EFL context. Many existing studies focus on identifying dominant process types without exploring how these patterns may vary across learner groups. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the types of transitivity processes used by male and female students in writing descriptive texts and to identify similarities and differences in their patterns of use. By doing so, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of students' grammatical choices and to offer insights for writing instruction from a functional linguistic perspective, particularly in supporting students

to develop richer, more nuanced descriptive texts.

METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative research design to explore how meanings were constructed in students' descriptive writing. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focused on examining linguistic patterns as they naturally appeared in students' written texts, without manipulating the research setting. This design allowed the researcher to describe language use in a detailed and contextual manner within an authentic educational environment.

The research was conducted in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context at a senior high school in Bogor, West Java. The school applies a boarding school system alongside formal secondary education, which encourages students to use English in daily communication. This environment provided opportunities for students to produce written texts that reflect relatively natural language use. The participants were fourteen eleventh-grade students, consisting of eight female and six male students. They were selected purposively because they had previously learned descriptive text writing as part of the school curriculum. At the time of data collection, no specific instruction related to the analytical focus of the study was given to ensure independent writing production.

Data were collected through document analysis of students' descriptive texts. Each student was asked to write a descriptive text about a person they loved during a single classroom session. The task was completed individually, and students were instructed to rely solely on their own English ability without using dictionaries, translators, or other supporting tools. The resulting texts were treated as research documents, allowing systematic examination of students' written language.

The data analysis was conducted at the clause level using the Systemic Functional Linguistics framework proposed by Halliday & Matthiessen (2014). Each text was segmented into clauses, and each clause was examined to identify its dominant type of meaning realization. The clauses were then classified based on their process types, and the frequency of each type was calculated. To address the gender focus of the study, clauses were coded according to the gender of the student who produced them, and the patterns were compared descriptively between male and female students.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A total of 215 clauses were identified from descriptive texts written by eleventh-grade EFL students and analyzed using the transitivity system within the Systemic Functional Linguistics framework. The clauses were classified into six types of processes, namely material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential processes. Table 1 presents the distribution of transitivity processes produced by male and female students.

Table 1

The Distribution of transitivity processes produced by male and female students

Type	M	F	Total
Material	32	49	81
Mental	4	22	26
Behavioral	1	0	1
Verbal	4	4	8
Relational	28	70	98
Existential	1	0	1
Total	70	145	215

The results indicate that relational processes were the most dominant, accounting for 98 clauses, followed by material processes with 81 clauses and mental processes with 26 clauses. Verbal processes occurred infrequently, while behavioral and existential processes appeared only marginally. This overall distribution reflects the communicative purpose of descriptive texts, which primarily aim to describe attributes, qualities, and states of being rather than to narrate actions or interpersonal interactions.

The dominance of relational processes suggests that students relied heavily on attributive descriptions to construct meaning. Within the SFL framework, relational processes function to establish relationships between participants and their characteristics, identities, or qualities, making them central to descriptive discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In students' texts, these processes were commonly realized through clauses describing physical appearance, personal traits, and general qualities of the described person. This finding aligns with previous studies that identified relational processes as the most frequent type in students' descriptive writing (Rohmat et al., 2018; Apendi & Mulyani, 2020). This tendency reflects the nature of descriptive writing tasks in EFL classrooms, which often emphasize naming and attributing qualities rather than encouraging students to explore more complex experiential meanings (Emilia, 2014; Nur & Emilia, 2020).

The prevalence of attributive relational clauses further indicates that students tended to select structurally simple clause patterns, which are more accessible for EFL learners at the secondary level. Identifying relational clauses, which require clearer distinctions between Token and Value, were less frequently observed. This suggests that although students were able to describe attributes effectively, they still showed limited control over more complex grammatical constructions. Such patterns reflect students' developing linguistic competence and their reliance on familiar grammatical resources when constructing descriptive texts.

Material processes emerged as the second most frequent process type, indicating that students also incorporated elements of action to support their descriptions. Material clauses construe experiences of doing and happening and can add dynamism to descriptive texts by showing what the described participant does or is involved in. In the analyzed texts, material processes were often used to describe habitual actions or routines associated with the person being described. Similar patterns have been reported in earlier studies, where material processes functioned as complementary rather than dominant elements in descriptive writing (Apendi & Mulyani, 2020; Rohmat et al., 2018). This finding suggests that while students recognized the relevance of actions in supporting descriptions, they still prioritized static attributes over dynamic events.

Mental processes appeared less frequently, indicating that expressions of feelings, thoughts, and perceptions were not a primary focus in students' descriptive writing. When mental processes were used, they typically represented affection, admiration, or personal evaluation of the described person. The limited use of mental processes suggests that students tended to describe what could be externally observed rather than exploring internal experiences or subjective impressions in greater depth. Verbal, behavioral, and existential processes occurred only marginally, indicating that acts of saying, observable behaviors, and expressions of existence played a minimal role in the construction of meaning. Overall, these patterns suggest that students prioritized observable attributes and actions over internal experiences or interactional meanings.

When examined from a gender perspective, female students produced a higher number of clauses overall and demonstrated greater use of relational and mental processes.

This pattern indicates that female students tended to focus more on describing attributes, qualities, and internal experiences of the participants. In contrast, male students, although producing fewer clauses, showed a relatively higher proportion of material processes, suggesting a stronger emphasis on observable actions. These tendencies may reflect differences in how male and female students conceptualize and represent experience in writing.

However, despite these quantitative differences, the overall pattern of transitivity use remained similar across genders. Both male and female students relied predominantly on relational processes, followed by material processes, with other process types appearing only marginally. This finding suggests that genre conventions exerted a stronger influence on students' linguistic choices than gender differences. The descriptive genre itself encourages the use of relational clauses to describe attributes and states, which appears to shape students' writing regardless of gender. This result supports previous research indicating that genre plays a more significant role than gender in determining grammatical patterns in students' writing (Aini, 2021). Similar tendencies have also been reported in recent EFL studies, which suggest that genre constraints and task demands tend to shape learners' transitivity choices more strongly than individual factors such as gender (Peng & Bao, 2023).

From an instructional perspective, the findings of this study offer practical implications for the teaching of descriptive writing in EFL classrooms. The dominance of relational processes indicates that students have developed a basic ability to describe attributes and states of being; however, the limited use of other process types suggests that classroom instruction may not yet encourage students to explore a wider range of meaning resources. Therefore, teaching descriptive texts should move beyond presenting descriptions as lists of characteristics and instead emphasize how grammatical choices shape meaning. Teachers can explicitly model how descriptive texts integrate relational processes with material processes to represent actions and mental processes to express personal impressions, helping students understand that effective descriptions involve more than static attributes (Derewianka & Jones, 2016; Hyland, 2016).

In classroom practice, this can be implemented through guided writing activities that prompt students to describe what the subject

does and how the writer *feels or thinks* about the subject, in addition to physical appearance. The use of model texts and joint text construction can further support students in recognizing how varied process types contribute to richer and more engaging descriptions. During the revision stage, teachers may encourage students to review their drafts by identifying dominant process types and revising clauses to include a wider range of experiential meanings. Such instructional practices can help students develop more vivid and meaningful descriptive texts while strengthening their grammatical awareness in context (Hyland, 2016).

CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the use of transitivity process types in descriptive texts written by eleventh-grade EFL students and examined potential differences based on gender. The findings revealed that relational processes were the most dominant type, followed by material and mental processes, while verbal, behavioral, and existential processes occurred only minimally. This overall pattern indicates that students' descriptive writing primarily relied on grammatical resources used to represent attributes, qualities, and states of being rather than a wide range of experiential meanings.

The dominance of relational processes suggests that students tended to focus on describing observable characteristics of the objects being described. Although material and mental processes were also present, their lower frequency indicates limited variation in how students construed actions and internal experiences. This finding implies that, while students demonstrated a basic ability to construct descriptive texts in English, their writing still showed restricted depth and diversity in meaning construction, particularly in expressing personal impressions and contextual actions.

In terms of gender, the findings showed that female students used relational and mental processes more frequently, reflecting a stronger emphasis on attributes and internal experiences. Male students, on the other hand, demonstrated a relatively higher use of material processes, indicating a tendency to focus on observable actions. However, these differences were not substantial enough to suggest fundamentally distinct patterns of meaning-making. Instead, the similarities in transitivity use across genders indicate that genre conventions played a more significant role than gender in shaping students' grammatical choices in descriptive writing.

From an instructional perspective, these findings highlight the importance of strengthening descriptive writing instruction in EFL classrooms. Teachers are encouraged to guide students to move beyond simple attribute-based descriptions by integrating actions, feelings, and personal evaluations into their texts. Pedagogical practices such as the use of model texts, guided writing activities, and revision tasks focusing on grammatical choices may help students develop richer and more varied descriptive writing. Future research may involve larger participant groups or different educational contexts to further explore how instructional interventions can enhance students' ability to express diverse experiential meanings in EFL writing.

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