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INTERPERSONAL MEANING IN TEACHER-STUDENT TALK: A SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates interpersonal meaning in teacher-student talk in an Indonesian junior high school EFL classroom from a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) perspective. The study focuses on how mood structures and modality choices are used to enact interpersonal roles, relationships, and power distribution during classroom interaction. A qualitative research design was employed, with data collected through classroom observation and audio recordings of English lessons in a Grade VIII class at SMPN 1 Pematang Siantar. The recorded interactions were transcribed and analyzed based on the interpersonal metafunction of SFL, particularly mood types and modality values. The findings reveal that classroom interaction is predominantly teacher-dominated. The teacher frequently uses declarative, interrogative, and imperative moods to explain content, elicit responses, and manage classroom activities. High-modality expressions are commonly employed by the teacher to convey authority and obligation, while students tend to use low modality and produce minimal responses. These patterns reflect unequal interpersonal roles and reinforce an Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) interaction structure. The study highlights the importance of teachers' linguistic choices in shaping classroom interaction and suggests that greater awareness of mood and modality use may support more balanced and interactive EFL classrooms.

Keywords: interpersonal meaning; teacher–student talk; Systemic Functional Linguistics; mood; modality; EFL classroom

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INTRODUCTION

Classroom discourse has long been a central concern in educational research, particularly in studies that examine how language functions as a medium for teaching and learning. Teacher–student interaction is not merely a vehicle for transmitting subject knowledge; it also plays a crucial role in constructing and negotiating social roles, power relations, and participation structures within the classroom. A substantial body of research has consistently highlighted the dominant role of teacher talk in shaping classroom interaction, influencing the extent to which students are able to participate actively and develop communicative competence.

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, the role of classroom discourse becomes even more critical, as interaction takes place in a language that is not the first language of the participants. This condition often creates additional challenges related to comprehension, confidence, and opportunities for meaningful participation. Previous studies have frequently identified the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) pattern as a common organizational structure in classroom interaction, where the teacher initiates discourse, students respond, and the

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teacher provides evaluation or feedback. While this pattern supports classroom control and instructional efficiency, several scholars argue that it may limit students' agency and reduce opportunities for extended interaction and negotiation of meaning.

To examine how such interactional patterns are linguistically realized, many researchers have turned to Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as an analytical framework. Proposed by Halliday and further developed by Matthiessen, SFL views language as a resource for making meaning in social contexts and emphasizes three metafunctions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. This study focuses on the interpersonal metafunction, which concerns how speakers enact social roles, express attitudes, and manage interpersonal relationships through grammatical choices. Within this metafunction, mood system and modality are central, as they reveal how speakers give information, demand responses, express obligation, and negotiate authority in interaction.

Empirical studies have demonstrated the relevance of SFL in analyzing teacher–student talk. For example, found that teacher talk frequently employs declarative, interrogative, and imperative mood types, along with modality expressions that reflect authority and classroom management functions. Other studies similarly indicate that mood choices and modality values are closely connected to classroom roles, power relations, and patterns of participation. However, much of the existing research tends to focus on identifying dominant mood types or interaction patterns without providing an in-depth analysis of how interpersonal meaning is systematically constructed in naturally occurring classroom discourse.

Despite the growing body of literature on classroom discourse and SFL, research that specifically examines interpersonal meaning in naturally occurring teacher–student talk in EFL junior high school classrooms remains limited. In particular, there is a lack of studies that integrate detailed grammatical analysis of mood and modality with an interpretation of their interpersonal implications for classroom interaction. This gap indicates the need for further research that moves beyond surface interaction patterns and explores the underlying linguistic resources that shape interpersonal relations in the classroom.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the realization of interpersonal meaning in teacher–student talk from a Systemic Functional Linguistics perspective. The objectives of this study are: (1) to identify the types of mood structures and modality used in teacher–student interaction, (2) to analyze how these linguistic choices construct interpersonal roles and power relations in the classroom, and (3) to interpret the implications of these interpersonal meanings for classroom interaction in an EFL context. Based on these objectives, the research questions are formulated as follows:

1. How is interpersonal meaning realized in teacher–student talk in the classroom?
2. What mood types and modality values are dominantly used by teachers and students?
3. How do these linguistic choices reflect and shape interpersonal relationships in classroom interaction?

The novelty of this study lies in its systematic application of SFL interpersonal analysis to naturally occurring teacher–student talk at the junior high school level, with a specific focus on mood and modality as core grammatical resources. By addressing this research gap, the study is expected to contribute to the development of SFL-based classroom discourse analysis and to provide pedagogical insights for improving teachers' awareness of interpersonal language use in EFL classrooms.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate how interpersonal meaning is realized in teacher–student talk in an EFL classroom. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth examination of naturally occurring classroom interactions and the grammatical resources teachers and students use to construct social roles, express attitudes, and manage interpersonal relationships. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL),

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particularly its interpersonal metafunction, is used as the analytical framework, focusing on mood types and modality as core linguistic tools.

The participants of this study consist of one English teacher and a class of thirty seventh-grade students from a junior high school. They were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that the interactions analyzed are representative of typical EFL classroom communication. Prior to data collection, the teacher and students, as well as the students' guardians, were informed about the study, and their consent was obtained to ensure ethical compliance.

Data were collected through classroom observation and audio recording of naturally occurring interactions. Two classroom sessions, each lasting 40–50 minutes, were recorded to capture authentic teacher–student talk. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim, with attention to pauses, overlaps, and stress, to preserve the interactional features necessary for analysis.

The data analysis followed the principles of SFL, focusing on how interpersonal meaning is linguistically realized. First, clauses in the transcripts were examined to identify their mood types—declarative, interrogative, or imperative—to determine how teachers and students initiate, respond, or manage classroom interactions. Next, modality expressions were analyzed to assess degrees of obligation, probability, and inclination, revealing how authority, politeness, and interpersonal relationships are negotiated. Finally, the patterns of mood and modality were interpreted in relation to classroom roles, power relations, and participation structures, and the findings were presented descriptively using transcript excerpts and tables to illustrate dominant patterns.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, triangulation was applied by cross-checking observation notes with audio transcripts, and peer debriefing with an SFL expert was conducted to validate the interpretations. Additionally, rich descriptive examples were provided to enhance credibility. Ethical considerations were strictly followed, including participant consent, confidentiality, and anonymization of data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Realization of Interpersonal Meaning in Teacher–Student Talk

The analysis of classroom interactions revealed that interpersonal meaning is systematically realized through mood structures and modality choices. the interpersonal metafunction of language is concerned with enacting social roles, establishing authority, and negotiating relationships. In the observed EFL classroom, teachers frequently employed declarative moods when providing explanations, giving instructions, or conveying factual information. For example, statements such as *"Open your books to page 12"* or *"We learn about past tense today"* function not only to deliver content but also to establish the teacher's authority and guide the learning process.

Interrogative moods were often used to prompt participation and check comprehension, consistent with (Hasanah et al., 2024) IRF (Initiation–Response–Feedback) model, which highlights the role of teacher questions in eliciting student responses. Examples include *"Who can answer this question?"* or *"Do you understand the rule?"* These interrogatives allow students to respond while maintaining the teacher as the initiator of discourse.

Imperative moods appeared in classroom management contexts, such as directing behavior (*"Sit down, please"* or *"Work in pairs"*). According to Eggins (2004), imperatives combined with modality expressions can signal authority, control, and obligation, reinforcing the teacher's hierarchical role in the classroom.

Dominant Mood Types and Modality Values

Quantitative observation indicated that declarative moods were the most frequently used by the teacher, followed by interrogatives and imperatives. Students mainly used declaratives when responding to teacher questions, showing limited opportunity to initiate talk.

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In terms of modality, the study found that teachers often used high obligation modal expressions (e.g., must, have to) for enforcing rules, and moderate inclination modals (e.g., can, should) to encourage participation. emphasized that modality in classroom discourse reflects authority, obligation, and interpersonal positioning. Students, in contrast, mainly used low-obligation modals (e.g., can, may, maybe), reflecting their position as learners responding to teacher prompts.

Construction of Interpersonal Roles and Power Relations

The interplay of mood and modality constructions demonstrates the teacher's authority and the students' position as respondents, consistent with explanation that language choices construct social roles and power relations. Interrogatives allow students some participation, while declaratives and high-obligation modality reinforce the teacher's control.

However, moments of extended student responses, using declaratives combined with positive modality (e.g., "I think it could be this way"), suggest co-construction of meaning and shared negotiation of knowledge. such interactions reflect a shift from hierarchical to more dialogic classroom discourse, which can enhance student agency and learning engagement.

Implications for Classroom Interaction

These findings indicate that teachers' awareness of mood and modality choices can directly affect classroom dynamics. Strategic use of interrogatives and moderate modality can foster student engagement and communicative competence, while overuse of declaratives and high-obligation modals may limit interaction. This aligns with the studies of (Christie, n.d.), who argued that teachers' language shapes participation structures and students' opportunities to negotiate meaning in classroom talk.

Integrating SFL-based interpersonal analysis into professional development can help teachers balance authority and student participation, enhancing both teaching effectiveness and students' language learning experiences.

Tabel 1. Distribusi Mood Types dalam Teacher–Student Talk

Mood Type	Teacher Example	Student Example	Description
Declarative	"Open your books to page 12."	"I read the answer."	Used by teachers to provide information and instructions; students use it to respond.
Interrogative	"Who can answer this question?"	"Is it past tense?"	Used by teachers to elicit student participation; students rarely initiate with this mood.
Imperative	"Sit down, please."	-	Used by teachers to manage classroom behavior and maintain control.

Table 2. Use of Modality in Teacher–Student Talk

Modality Type	Modal Expression	Teacher Function	Student Function	Description
High Obligation	must, have to	Establish rules or obligations	-	Indicates teacher authority and classroom control.
Moderate Inclination	can, should	Encourage student participation	Express ability or possibility	Facilitates teacher–student interaction.
Low Obligation	may, maybe	-	Provide suggestions or	Used by students when giving

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			tentative opinions	opinions or guesses.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the realization of interpersonal meaning in teacher–student talk in an EFL junior high school classroom from a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) perspective. The findings indicate that interpersonal meaning is systematically constructed through mood types and modality expressions in classroom discourse.

Declarative moods were predominantly used by teachers to provide information, instructions, and explanations, reinforcing their authority and guiding the learning process. Interrogative moods functioned to elicit student participation and check understanding, consistent with the IRF (Initiation–Response–Feedback) model proposed by (Pastoor, 2007). Imperative moods were employed for classroom management, signaling control and maintaining discipline.

In terms of modality, high-obligation expressions (e.g., *must, have to*) reflected teacher authority, while moderate inclination modals (e.g., *can, should*) encouraged participation and negotiation of meaning. Students mainly used low-obligation modals (e.g., *may, maybe*) to express tentative opinions or possibilities, showing their position as respondents in the classroom hierarchy.

The study also shows that mood and modality choices shape interpersonal roles and power relations in the classroom. While teachers dominate discourse, opportunities for co-constructing meaning emerge when students respond with declaratives and positive modality, fostering interaction and communicative competence.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of teachers' awareness of language choices in classroom interaction. Strategic use of interrogatives and moderate modality can enhance student engagement, support participation, and promote a more interactive and dialogic learning environment. This study contributes to the development of SFL-based classroom discourse analysis and provides pedagogical insights for improving teacher–student interaction in EFL settings.

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