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Ideational Ahead, Textual Behind: Metafunctional Knowledge Among Pakistani Undergraduate ESL Learners and Its Implications for SFL-Based Reading Pedagogy

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Abstract

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) has been proposed as an increasing basis for teaching academic reading, on the premise that learners who can recognize how texts construe experience, enact relationships and organize messages are better equipped to interpret them. Before designing such training, it is crucial to find out what learners know about the three metafunctions, and where that knowledge is weakest. A descriptive correlational methodology was employed to explore the metafunctional knowledge of BS English undergraduate learners at a major institution in Pakistan. A total of 31 examination scripts answering a question on Halliday's three metafunctions were marked using a four-point scale (0 to 3) for each metafunction. The scores were analyzed using descriptive statistics, competence bands, Friedman and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests, and Pearson and Spearman correlations, with a qualitative analysis of the responses. Ideational knowledge was the highest ($M = 1.94$, 64.5%), followed by interpersonal ($M = 1.61$, 53.8%) and textual knowledge ($M = 1.42$, 47.3%), and differences among the three were significant ($\chi^2(2) = 15.44$, $p < .001$, Kendall's $W = .25$). Eleven learners got the greatest score for the ideational metafunction and one for the interpersonal and none for the textual metafunctions. The three subscales were strongly intercorrelated ($r = .665$ to $.696$, $p < .001$). The qualitative analysis showed a recurring confusion of the textual metafunction with mode. SFL-based reading education should focus on the textual metafunction and explicitly distinguish it from mode, and the impact of such instruction on reading comprehension remains to be evaluated experimentally.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics, Metafunctions, Metafunctional Knowledge, Textual Metafunction, Reading Comprehension, ESL, Pakistan.

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1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is generally acknowledged as one of the most significant skills for learners of English as a second language (ESL) as the academic success at university is largely dependent on the ability to extract, interpret, and evaluate meaning from disciplinary texts (Grabe, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2019). However, note that many ESL learners with sufficient vocabulary and sentence level grammar still have difficulties with academic texts, as comprehension at this level requires the reader to recognize how meanings are distributed across clauses, how the writer's stance is encoded and how information is organized across a whole text (Alderson, 2000; Purcell-Gates et al., 2007). Traditional reading education has been criticized for its tendency toward focussing on vocabulary, grammatical precision and literal comprehension questions, leaving learners without an explicit understanding of how language produces meaning in context (Rose et al., 2007).

Such an account is given by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Halliday's (1994) model suggests that each clause simultaneously performs three metafunctions: the ideational metafunction which construes experience in terms of participants, processes and circumstances; the interpersonal metafunction which enacts social relations and stance through mood and modality; and the textual metafunction which organizes the message through theme, rheme and cohesion (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). It has therefore been argued that learners who are taught to analyze texts through these three lenses may be enabled to move beyond decoding toward a fuller interpretation of what a text represents, how it positions its reader and how it hangs together (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2008; Schleppegrell, 2013).

Increasingly, research has indicated that SFL-informed teaching is related to the enhancement of reading comprehension in EFL contexts (Aidinlou, 2012), and that learners' metafunctional competence is correlated with their critical reading ability (Thamrin & Maulana, 2015). Nevertheless, the design of effective instruction for a given population presupposes a clear diagnosis of what learners already know, since instruction pitched at the wrong level, or distributed evenly across metafunctions that are unevenly understood, is unlikely to be efficient (Nagao, 2017; Rose & Martin, 2012). While the pedagogical case for language-based reading instruction is well established internationally (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2008; Palincsar & Schleppegrell, 2014), there is little diagnostic evidence in the Pakistani university context where SFL is often introduced to BS English students through discourse analysis and functional grammar courses.

The current study aims to fill in this vacuum by investigating the metafunctional knowledge of undergraduate ESL learners who had previously been exposed to SFL, with a goal to informing the design of a follow-up SFL-based reading intervention. Four research questions are answered (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014):

1. To what extent are learners able to define and exemplify the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions?
2. Do learners' levels of knowledge differ significantly across the three metafunctions?
3. To what extent is knowledge of one metafunction associated with knowledge of the other two?
4. What patterns of understanding and misunderstanding characterise learners' treatment of each metafunction?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Systemic Functional Linguistics and the Metafunctions

SFL regards language as a social semiotic, that is, a resource for meaning-making in context rather than a set of rule-governed forms (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Hasan, 1989). Grammatical choices are seen as choices among meanings, and the clause is the place where three kinds of meaning are realized at the same time (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The ideational metafunction is realized primarily through the transitivity system in which processes of various types (material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential) are associated with participants and circumstances. The interpersonal metafunction is realized through mood and modality, in which speakers and writers take on roles, make demands and offers, and modulate their commitment to propositions (Eggins, 2004; Thompson, 2014).

The textual metafunction, in contrast, deals with the organization of the message, and it is realized through thematic structure, where the Theme is the point of departure of the clause and the Rheme is its development, and through cohesion, by which reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical relations bind clauses into a text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Note that the metafunctions are different from but systematically related to the three register variables of field, tenor and mode that describe the context of situation: field is associated with ideational meaning, tenor with interpersonal meaning and mode with textual meaning (Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Eggins, 2004). This intimate association between mode and textual meaning is particularly relevant for the present study, since, as will be shown, the two were often confounded by learners.

2.2 SFL and the Teaching of Reading

The didactic application of SFL has been most thoroughly developed in the genre-based and Reading to Learn traditions, in which teachers guide learners through the deconstruction of model texts before joint and independent building (Rose & Martin, 2012; Rose et al., 1998). Similarly, Fang and Schlepppegrell (2008) advocated functional language analysis as a way to enhance disciplinary reading, and Schlepppegrell (2013) claimed that a common metalanguage enables teachers and learners to discuss directly about how meanings are formed in the texts they read. Moreover, Palincsar and Schlepppegrell (2014) argue that this kind of explicit focus on language and meaning is especially crucial for English learners who are faced with challenging academic texts.

Encouraging results have been documented in empirical investigations in EFL settings. Aidinlou (2012) showed that Iranian EFL learners taught by an SFL-oriented reading framework outperformed a control group who were taught conventionally. In a small-scale study of five Indonesian undergraduates, Thamrin and Maulana (2015) reported a positive correlation between learners' metafunctional competence and critical reading. Similarly, Nagao (2017) observed that eleven Japanese EFL authors who did not control interpersonal resources such as modality at first, began to use them appropriately following prolonged SFL-based education. Thus, interpersonal meaning may need to be explicitly and extendedly taught.

Also, investigations of instructional materials have begun to look at how the metafunctions are realized in the texts that learners read. Darong (2023) analyzed EFL textbooks and found that material processes were predominant. Aulia et al. (2025) evaluated the realization of textual metafunction in Indonesian and Samoan textbooks and identified topical topics and zigzag thematic progression as predominant. It is claimed, therefore, that the metafunctional resources to

which learners are exposed may be unevenly distributed and that their knowledge of the metafunctions may be uneven correspondingly.

2.3 The Research Gap

These studies provide a basis for SFL-based reading instruction, but note that relatively few have directly and separately investigated the learners' own metafunctional knowledge for each metafunction, instead inferring it from textbook content or measuring it on very small samples (Darong, 2023; Thamrin & Maulana, 2015). In addition, there is no evidence of the metafunctional knowledge of Pakistani undergraduate learners and the specific beliefs that may hinder their use of SFL as a reading tool have not been recorded (Schleppegrell, 2013). The present study seeks to fill these gaps by measuring learners' knowledge of each metafunction separately, determining whether the three differ and covary, and analyzing the qualitative quality of learners' errors.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized a descriptive correlational design that included both a quantitative scoring of the learners' replies and qualitative examination of their content (Dörnyei, 2007; Cohen et al., 2018). The design was used because the purpose was to describe the current level and structure of the learners' metafunctional knowledge, and to explore the interrelations among its components, not to assess the impact of an intervention, which is a different phase of the broader research project.

3.2 Participants and Data

The data comprised examination scripts of undergraduate BS English students who had been taught Halliday's metafunctions (Dörnyei, 2007) in a Discourse Analysis course at a public sector institution of Pakistan. The thirty-two scripts were collected via purposive sampling with a special item on the three metafunctions. The study questions required that some education in SFL terminology had been given to the learners and it was decided that this should be the case. One script did not include a response to the question and was therefore eliminated, giving a final sample of 31 scripts ($N = 31$). All the scripts were transcribed in full before coding, and the names and roll numbers were replaced by respondent codes (R01 to R31) randomly allocated and not in relation to the size of the score.

3.3 Instrument

As there was no published instrument to score the accuracy and depth of learners' knowledge of each metafunction independently, a coding scale was devised for the study (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Each metafunction was rated separately on a four-point scale from 0 to 3, as indicated in Table 1, allowing for the computation of a composite score out of 9, yet also allowing for the comparison of the three metafunctions. The criteria were directly derived from the constituent elements of each metafunction in Halliday's framework: participant, process and situation for the ideational metafunction; mood and modality for the interpersonal metafunction; and theme, rheme and cohesiveness for the textual metafunction.

Table 1: *Metafunctional knowledge coding scale (applied separately to each metafunction)*

Score	Criterion
0	The metafunction is absent, or the definition offered is linguistically incorrect.
1	The metafunction is named but not accurately elaborated; its constituent system (transitivity, mood or theme and rheme) is not correctly described.
2	The relevant system is correctly identified in terms recognisable from Halliday's account, but no clause-level example is supplied.
3	An accurate definition is combined with a self-generated or correctly analysed illustrative clause.

Content validity was ensured by deriving each criterion directly from the source theory, and internal consistency of the three subscales was estimated by Cronbach's alpha of .85 (Cohen et al., 2018). However, note that all scripts were coded by one rater and hence inter-rater reliability could not be evaluated; this constraint is referred to in Section 6.

3.4 Data Analysis

The analysis was carried out in five phases (Field, 2018). First, the mean, standard deviation and % of maximum attainable score were calculated for each metafunction and for the composite score, and the distribution of scores at each scale point was also obtained. Second, the subscale scores are ordinal and come from the same learners. Differences among the three metafunctions were examined with Friedman test and followed by Wilcoxon signed-rank tests with Holm adjustment for multiple comparisons. Third, the composite scores were categorized into low (0–3), moderate (4–6) and high (7–9) competence ranges. Fourth, Pearson's r and Spearman's ρ were calculated to assess the correlations between the three subscales as a check of the ordinal nature of the data. Fifth, the replies were analyzed qualitatively to characterize the patterns of comprehension and misunderstanding behind the scores.

Similar responses scoring zero across all subscales were given by two participants (R03 and R07). As a sensitivity check, all analyzes were redone with one of the two omitted ($N = 30$). The independence of these two findings could not be demonstrated from the scripts alone (Field, 2018).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The scripts were secondary data obtained in the normal course of evaluation and no additional expectations were placed on students (Cohen et al., 2018). All identifiable information was removed before to analysis. The key linking codes to scripts was stored separately by the researcher and no individual can be identified from the results given here. Institutional authorization for the anonymized scripts to be used for research purposes was granted by the Department of Applied Linguistics, Government College University Faisalabad [insert approval reference].

4. Results

4.1 Level of Knowledge of Each Metafunction

The descriptive statistics of the three metafunctions and the distribution of the scores on each point of the scale (Field, 2018) for the composite score are in Table 2.

Table 2: *Descriptive data and score distributions by metafunction (N = 31)*

Metafunction	M	SD	% of maximum	Score 0	Score 1	Score 2	Score 3
Ideational (0 to 3)	1.94	0.96	64.5	2	9	9	11
Interpersonal (0 to 3)	1.61	0.67	53.8	2	9	19	1
Textual (0 to 3)	1.42	0.72	47.3	4	10	17	0
Composite (0 to 9)	4.97	2.09	55.2				

Of the three, ideational knowledge was the greatest, followed by interpersonal and textual knowledge, and the composite mean indicated that the sample was only slightly above the midpoint of the scale (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). It is important to note the score distributions, which present a sharper contrast than the means alone: eleven learners (35.5%) attained the highest score for the ideational metafunction by providing an accurate definition and correctly analyzing a clause, whereas only one learner achieved the highest score for the interpersonal metafunction and none for the textual metafunction. Therefore, the capacity to show a metafunction via clause-level analysis, as opposed to defining it, was shown to be mostly within the domain of ideational meaning and no composite score above 7 was reported.

4.2 Differences among the Metafunctions

The Friedman test showed significant differences in scores among the three metafunctions, $\chi^2(2) = 15.44$, $p < .001$, with a minor to moderate influence (Kendall's $W = .25$) (Field, 2018). Pairwise Wilcoxon signed-rank tests with Holm correction revealed significantly higher ideational scores compared to interpersonal scores ($z = 2.36$, adjusted $p = .037$, $r = .56$) and textual scores ($z = 3.27$, adjusted $p = .003$, $r = .71$). The difference between the interpersonal and textual scores was in the expected direction, with six learners scoring higher on the interpersonal metafunction and one higher on the textual metafunction, but it did not reach significance ($z = 1.90$, adjusted $p = .058$) because 24 of the 31 learners obtained identical scores on the two subscales. To summarize, the statistics distinguish most clearly between ideational knowledge on one hand and interpersonal and textual knowledge on the other.

4.3 Distribution of Overall Competence

The distribution of learners across the three competence bands is shown in Table 3 (Cohen et al., 2018).

Table 3: *Distribution of learners by composite competence band (N = 31)*

Band	Composite score	n	%
Low	0 to 3	7	22.6
Moderate	4 to 6	14	45.2
High	7 to 9	10	32.3
Total		31	100.0

The largest group of learners fell within the moderate band, while almost a quarter fell within the low band, which indicates that the sample was heterogeneous in its existing knowledge despite shared instruction (Rose & Martin, 2012). Furthermore, the frequency distribution of composite

scores was uneven, with ten learners clustered at a score of 7 and a smaller group at the lowest scores, so that a substantial minority of learners appeared to have retained very little of the SFL content to which they had been exposed.

4.4 Relationships among the Metafunctions

The correlations among the three subscales are presented in Table 4 (Field, 2018).

Table 4: *Correlations among the three metafunctions (N = 31)*

Pair	Pearson r	95% CI	Spearman ρ
Ideational and interpersonal	.686	[.44, .84]	.648
Ideational and textual	.665	[.41, .82]	.622
Interpersonal and textual	.696	[.45, .84]	.672

Note. All coefficients $p < .001$.

All three were positive, moderate to large, and statistically significant and the Spearman coefficients were quite similar to the Pearson coefficients, suggesting that the associations are not sensitive to treating the ordinal scores as interval data (Field, 2018). It is argued that this pattern is consistent with Halliday's (1994) view of the metafunctions as realized simultaneously within the clause, so that learners who grasp one system tend to grasp the others. At the same time, the coefficients are well short of unity, indicating that a learner's knowledge of one metafunction cannot be inferred reliably from knowledge of another.

4.5 Sensitivity Analysis

The pattern of results was the same when one of the two near-identical scripts (R07) was dropped (Field, 2018). The order of the means for the ideational ($M = 2.00$), interpersonal ($M = 1.67$) and textual ($M = 1.47$) metafunctions was maintained, the composite mean increased slightly to 5.13 (57.0%), and the correlations, although somewhat reduced, remained significant (ideational and interpersonal, $r = .625$; ideational and textual, $r = .612$; interpersonal and textual, $r = .640$; all $p < .001$). Therefore, we suggest that the main findings are not artifacts of the duplicated replies. The attenuation of the correlations suggests that zero scores at the bottom of the scale contribute to their magnitude.

4.6 Patterns of Understanding and Misunderstanding

The qualitative analysis of the responses clarified the character of learners' knowledge of each metafunction, and representative excerpts are presented in Table 5 (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Table 5: *Representative excerpts and coding decisions*

Respondent	Metafunction	Score	Excerpt	Rationale
R27	Ideational	3	“It includes participant, process and circumstance... For example: Ali is playing in the park (participant, process, circumstance).”	Transitivity elements are named accurately and mapped onto a self-generated clause.
R06	Interpersonal	2	“Interpersonal metafunction creates meaning by showing	Mood and modality are identified

Respondent	Metafunction	Score	Excerpt	Rationale
			relationship between speaker and listener. It is done by Mood and Modality.”	correctly, but no clause demonstrates them.
R21	Textual	2	“This involves the medium in which language is being conveyed. It could be in form of written or spoken text.”	The response describes mode rather than theme, rheme or cohesion.
R14	Textual	1	“It tells the reflection of devices and how the text have connectivity.”	Cohesion is gestured towards, but no device is named or illustrated.
R03 and R07	Interpersonal	0	“Tenor: We can describe that to say for function. Example: Shut the door.”	The response bears no traceable relation to the interpersonal system.

The most secure was the ideational knowledge: twenty learners identified transitivity as the system dealing with Participants, Processes and Circumstances properly, and eleven of them also analyzed a clause of their own into these aspects (Eggins, 2004). In general, learners could name mood and modality and describe the metafunction as relating to the relationship between speaker and listener, but very few could relate this to the analysis of a real clause, a pattern reminiscent of Nagao’s (2017) finding that control of interpersonal resources such as modality developed only through sustained and explicit instruction.

Textual knowledge was the least secure and it was found to be systematically, not randomly, weak. The most frequent error was the replacement of the register variable of mode, that is, the difference between spoken and written channels, for the textual metafunction proper, so that learners described the medium of a text rather than its internal organization through theme, rheme and cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Eggins, 2004). When cohesion was spoken to, it was often in very vague terms, such as ‘connectivity’, with no cohesive device being named or illustrated.

5. Discussion

Regarding the first and second research questions, it is found that the learners had overall moderate knowledge of the three metafunctions, yet this was significantly uneven with ideational knowledge significantly stronger than interpersonal and textual knowledge (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The most pedagogically significant finding of the study is the capacity to demonstrate a metafunction through clause analysis, which was almost entirely confined to ideational meaning, indicating that for interpersonal and textual meaning, learners’ knowledge had not progressed beyond the level of definition. Such an ordering is in line with Darong’s (2023) conclusion that material processes are more prevalent in EFL textbook texts. The current study enriches such materials-based analyses by providing an ideational advantage in learner output.

There are a number of possible causes for this asymmetry. On the other hand, the ideational meaning is arguably the most concrete of the three, as participants and processes closely map onto the familiar categories of subject, verb and object, whereas interpersonal and textual meanings require attention to stance and to the organization of discourse beyond the clause (Thompson,

2014; Fang & Schleppegrell, 2008). Alternatively, the imbalance may be a result of the distribution of instructional emphasis, as learners may have been exposed to more ideational than textual analysis in their course materials, a hypothesis highlighted by the prevalence of material processes in EFL textbooks (Darong, 2023). The present data do not allow to differentiate between these hypotheses and it is proposed that both may work simultaneously.

Regarding the third research question, the moderate to strong intercorrelations imply that learners who understood one metafunction also tended to understand the others. This finding is consistent with the theoretical claim that the metafunctions are co-realised within the clause (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). But it is relevant to point out that the correlations may be partly also due to general factors such as general engagement with the course or examination performance, rather than an intrinsic connection between the three kinds of knowledge. The attenuation found when a duplicated zero score was removed points to the influence of the lowest scorers on the coefficients. Moreover, the fact that the coefficients are substantially below unity suggests that the metafunctions are best seen as linked but separately teachable systems, a stance that is consistent with Eggins's (2004) description of their individuality inside the sentence.

Regarding the fourth study issue, it is claimed that the conflation of the textual metafunction and mode is a linguistically explicable error, not an arbitrary one. Mode is the register variable most closely tied to the meaning of a text. The two are often introduced together under the heading of context, and learners who have not been taught an explicit contrast between them are quite likely to confuse the channel of a text with its internal organization (Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Eggins, 2004). The error here may be partly terminological, in that some learners may have an intuitive sense of how texts cohere without a stable metalanguage for distinguishing that sense from mode. This is precisely the kind of metalinguistic resource that Schleppegrell (2013) identifies as central to academic language development.

There are several pedagogical implications. First, SFL-based reading instruction in this context should not treat the textual metafunction as a final or residual topic, but should give it substantial time and scaffolding, for example through the deconstruction, joint construction and independent construction cycle of the Reading to Learn tradition (Rose & Martin, 2012). Second, textual education could usefully start with an explicit action of disambiguation, contrasting mode, interpreted as the spoken or written channel, with subject, rheme and cohesiveness within one short text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Third, as much of the knowledge of interpersonal and textual systems was declarative, teaching should help learners go beyond naming systems to analyzing them in actual academic texts, as advocated in the language-based pedagogy for content-area reading provided by Fang and Schleppegrell (2008). Fourth, the sample is heterogeneous, suggesting that differentiated support will be necessary, as nearly a quarter of learners retained very little of the SFL content taught earlier (Rose et al., 2007).

6. Conclusion

The present study explored the metafunctional knowledge of Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners who had already been instructed in SFL and found their knowledge overall moderate but significantly uneven, with ideational knowledge as the strongest and textual knowledge the weakest (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). To summarize, learners were most confident in identifying what a phrase represented, were able to describe but seldom to demonstrate how a clause enacts relationships and frequently misjudged how a text is organized, most often conflating textual meaning with mode. The three knowledge types were positively correlated but not interchangeable. These results remained after excluding a duplicated response from the analysis.

The study offers diagnostic evidence from an under-studied setting and a particular and teachable mistake, the confounding of the textual metafunction with mode, that may be an obstacle to learners' use of SFL as a tool for reading (Schleppegrell, 2013; Eggins, 2004). Thus, it provides an empirical basis for prioritizing the textual metafunction in designing SFL-based reading instruction for this demographic.

There are a number of restrictions to acknowledge. The sample was small and from one course and one institution, so that the findings cannot be generalized to ESL learners as a whole; all scripts were coded by one rater, so that inter-rater reliability could not be established; and the data are responses to a decontextualized test item, so that they are measuring the learners' declarative knowledge of the metafunctions rather than their ability to apply that knowledge in reading an unfamiliar academic text (Alderson, 2000; Dörnyei, 2007). Thus, the study does neither provide evidence for reading comprehension itself, nor the effect of metafunctional education on it. Future research should therefore employ a second independent rater and report chance-corrected agreement; administer a standardized reading comprehension test that assesses ideational, interpersonal and textual comprehension separately; and evaluate an SFL-based instructional module in a quasi-experimental design with genuine pre-test and post-test data from experimental and control groups (Cohen et al., 2018; Aidinlou, 2012).

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

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