

ANALYZING YOUNG LEARNERS' ORAL NARRATIVES THROUGH SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS

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Abstract

Oral narrative ability plays a pivotal role in children's language development, yet studies in EFL settings have seldom examined how young learners construct meaning through functional and curriculum-based perspectives, and drawing on Halliday's three metafunctions, namely, ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The study analyzes the oral presentations of six 9-10-year-old young learners in a private primary school in Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia, completing a classroom narrative assignment titled "A Day in My Life". The data consisted of audio recordings of students' storytelling, which were transcribed and analyzed using metafunctional categories: process types, mood structures, modality, and thematic organization. The analysis reveals how children's language choices reflect emerging narrative competence, social identity, and classroom positioning. While most narratives followed predictable patterns with material processes and simple themes, some learners exhibited agentive voice, evaluative stance, and interpersonal variation. This qualitative inquiry demonstrates how the combined application of SFL can uncover subtle layers of meaning in children's oral narratives, yielding pedagogical insights for narrative instruction and deepening understanding of language development in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Identity, Metafunctions, Oral Narrative, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Young Learners.

INTRODUCTION

In language education, understanding how learners use language to construct experience, express identity, and engage with others is essential for effective teaching and learning. Within this context, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), conceptualizes language as a meaning-making resource, realized through three simultaneous metafunctions: ideational (representing experience), interpersonal (enacting social relationships), and textual (organizing discourse). This framework allows educators and researchers to analyze how language functions in authentic communication, particularly in educational contexts where learners are developing both linguistic competence and social identity.

In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly among young learners, storytelling has been widely acknowledged as a developmentally appropriate and pedagogically rich activity (Bond et al., 2020; Brilianti & Sugirin, 2024; Ginting et al., 2024; Ollerhead & Pennington, 2024). It allows children to structure their experiences, express emotions, and interact with an audience all within meaningful communicative contexts. While existing literature has examined children's narratives from the perspectives of cognitive development, fluency, or genre structure, very few studies have investigated how young EFL learners realize SFL metafunctions through oral storytelling. Even fewer have focused on

primary-aged children (ages 9-10) in Indonesian classrooms, where English is a foreign language and often taught with limited exposure to authentic communication tasks.

This study positions storytelling as a key genre for examining how children begin to mobilize linguistic resources to perform identity, express agency, and engage in classroom discourse (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Himawan et al., 2025; Maghfiroh et al., 2025). It implements the SFL metafunctional model to explore how six Indonesian young learners construct meaning during a task titled “A Day in My Life”. In doing so, the research highlights children’s use of process types, mood, and modality, and textual cohesion that contribute to their expressive power in English, despite limited grammatical range.

In addition to its linguistic focus, this study is situated within a pedagogical framework informed by the Child-Friendly Teaching Model (CFTM) developed by Senowarsito et al., (2018). CFTM is built on three pillars, namely, pillars-provision, protection, and participation; and encourages learning environments that are safe, inclusive, and emotionally supportive. In such contexts, learners are empowered to speak, reflect, and engage as active participants in their learning. This is particularly important when children are asked to share personal experiences in a second language; the classroom environment must enable risk-taking and authentic expression.

To date, no existing research has simultaneously applied Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and the Child Friendly Model to analyze oral storytelling by young EFL learners in an Indonesian classroom. While previous studies have examined narrative structure, language development, or child-friendly pedagogy independently, this study is the first to integrate SFL metafunctional analysis with CFTM-informed classroom practices. It, therefore, offers a novel interdisciplinary contribution, bridging linguistics theory and child-centered pedagogy to provide a deeper understanding of meaning-making in young learners’ oral English narratives.

The study addresses the following research questions: (a) How do young EFL learners realize ideational meanings in their oral narratives?; (b) How do they express interpersonal meanings, including stance, agency, and evaluation?; (c) How do they organize their narrative textually, using thematic structures and cohesion?; (d) In what ways does a child-friendly teaching environment support the emergence of narrative competence?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The present study draws on the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to investigate young learners’ meaning-making through oral storytelling. This section reviews the foundations of SFL, its application in narrative analysis, and prior studies concerning language development, identity construction, and pedagogical context among young EFL learners.

Systemic Functional Linguistics: Theoretical Foundations

Developed by Michael Halliday, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) views language not as a set of rules but as a system of choices used to create meaning in context (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). SFL departs from traditional structuralist or generative models by focusing on how language functions to achieve communicative purposes. Central to SFL is the notion of three metafunctions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Each metafunction reflects a distinct purpose of language use.

The ideational metafunction concerns the representation of experience and logical relations in how speakers encode processes, participants, and circumstances in their discourse. The textual metafunction enables the organization of discourse, managing information flow and cohesion through thematic structure and reference. These metafunctions operate

simultaneously in all instances of language use and are realized through grammatical systems such as transitivity, mood, and modality, as well as theme and rheme. According to Metekohy Marshall Eirence, (2021), in Halliday's model, grammar is not autonomous. It is inherently social and meaning-driven. Language is shaped by its function in social contexts and by the speaker's communicative goals.

SFL is also deeply concerned with contextual parameters, particularly field, tenor, and mode, which correspond to what is being talked about (field), who is involved (tenor), and how the communication is taking place (mode) (Hoang, 2021). Together, these elements shape the register of a text, which in turn guides linguistic choices. In classroom-based language use, particularly in student-generated narratives, these contextual dimensions become essential to interpreting how learners construct meanings using limited but purposeful language resources.

While early SFL scholarship emphasized adult or written texts such as political discourse, scientific explanations, or literary genres, subsequent research extended its application to spoken texts, including children's speech, classroom talk, and second language development (Daiute, 2018; McGannon et al., 2025). Notably, Mushtaq et al., (2021) emphasized the value of SFL in education, linking linguistic knowledge with pedagogical goals. Their work encouraged scholars to examine how different genres and modes of discourse could be scaffolded through functional language instruction.

Oral Narrative Competence, Identity, and SFL in Young Learners

Oral narrative competence is widely recognized as a crucial marker of language development in both first and second language acquisition (Gardner-Neblett, 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2025; McIntyre et al., 2024). Constructing a narrative requires children to organize events chronologically, establish characters and settings, maintain referents, and achieve coherence—tasks that require both linguistic and cognitive effort (Banks, 2024; Vinchristo, 2022). In EFL classrooms, storytelling is not only a language activity but also a means for children to make sense of their world, share experiences, and construct meaning through language.

In the context of English as a foreign language, oral storytelling becomes a window into learners' developing linguistic repertoire and their emergent identities as users of English. Through narrative, young learners begin to position themselves socially and emotionally (Marschall Eirence, 2021). These identities are enacted through linguistic choices, including the selection of processes (who does what to whom), the use of modality (degrees of certainty and obligation), and evaluation (attitude and judgment). SFL's interpersonal and ideational systems make these dimensions visible in the structure of the clause.

Although many studies have focused on grammatical development or narrative structure in second language learning, no research to date has systematically applied Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to analyze how children construct meaning through oral narratives. As cited by Mushtaq et al., (2021), they provided foundational work in this area by examining how young children used transitivity and thematic structures in narrative contexts. Their findings demonstrated that children's clause-level choices revealed their evolving understanding of agency and experience.

This line of inquiry has also intersected with research on identity in language learning. Identity is not fixed but constructed through discourse. As learners narrate personal experiences, they reveal how they see themselves and how they wish to be seen. These self-positionings can be traced linguistically through mood choices, pronoun use, stance-taking, and evaluative expressions. Even young learners, when given opportunities to narrate, use language to express agency, emotion, and belonging. Such findings align with sociolinguistic views of language learning as social participation (Rehner & Lasan, 2023; Adnan et al, 2024).

In Indonesian EFL contexts, these dimensions are underexplored. Studies often remain at the level of vocabulary size or fluency metrics, leaving untouched the deeper discursive and interpersonal work children are capable of performing (Parsazadeh et al., 2021; Spencer & Petersen, 2020). Yet, when placed in supportive environments and prompted with relevant narrative tasks, even 9-10-year-old young learners begin to make intentional choices that reflect their understanding of experience, their stance toward others, and their emerging voice in English. In these moments, oral storytelling becomes a powerful tool for both language development and identity expression.

Research Gaps and Rationale

Although oral narratives have long been recognized as a valuable tool for language learning and development, research in this area has predominantly emphasized either structural analysis or surface-level language accuracy. There remains a striking absence of studies that critically examine how young learners, especially in underrepresented contexts like Indonesia, make meaning through oral storytelling. Most existing literature fails to capture how children's linguistic choices reflect deeper discursive processes such as stance-taking, self-positioning, or identity construction (Arrow, 2025; McGannon et al., 2025; Mohammed et al., 2025). This gap becomes even more apparent when viewed through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics, a largely underutilized framework in analyzing children's spoken discourse in EFL classrooms.

Furthermore, the pedagogical environment in which these narratives are produced is rarely taken into account. Studies may attend to features such as transitivity or cohesion, but they often isolate these elements from the classroom conditions, such as emotional safety, student-teacher rapport, or opportunities for participation that shape language performance. In Indonesian classrooms, where English is not used for daily communication and exposure to the target language is limited, the role of a supportive, child-centered teaching approach becomes essential. Yet, few studies have integrated insights from pedagogy, such as those offered by the Child-Friendly Teaching Model (CFTM), into the analysis of learner discourse.

This study addresses these two major gaps. First, it adopts a metafunctional lens to examine how young learners use English to express experience, negotiate interpersonal meaning, and construct coherent narratives. Second, it embeds this linguistic inquiry within a real classroom context informed by the CFTM framework. By analyzing narratives produced in emotionally supportive and inclusive classrooms, this study provides a holistic account of how language and pedagogy interact to shape young learners' narrative practices and identity expression.

METHOD

The data for this study were collected from the oral narrative performances of six young learners aged 9 to 10 years, enrolled at a private elementary school in Semarang. These individuals were purposively selected due to their demonstrated verbal expressiveness and readiness to engage in classroom-based oral narrative activities. Each young learner performed a brief oral presentation titled "A Day in My Life". Audio recordings were made during class and then transcribed. The study adopts a qualitative research design using narrative analysis through the SFL framework (Creswell, 2020; Hoang, 2021; Safitri et al, 2025). Transcripts were coded by: (1) Ideational meaning: process types, participants, and circumstances; (2) Interpersonal meaning: mood, modality, and evaluative stance; (3) Textual meaning: theme, rhyme, and cohesion.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of young learners' oral narrative revealed distinctive linguistic patterns across the three metafunctions of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), corresponding to the research questions. Each subsection highlights how the subjects realized meaning through ideational, interpersonal, and textual linguistic choices. Tables and interpretive commentary support the presentation of results to illustrate developmental patterns in oral narrative competence within a child-friendly pedagogical environment.

Table 1 shows that the majority of clauses produced by all participants involved material processes, indicating a strong reliance on action-oriented language. This pattern suggests that learners are primarily focused on narrating observable events and concrete experiences rather than exploring internal states or abstract concepts. Such a tendency reflects the developmental stage of young EFL learners, whose linguistic resources are often grounded in tangible, experiential meanings. In contrast, students E and F incorporated a greater number of mental and verbal processes, reflecting an emerging ability to represent cognition, emotion, and interaction within their narratives. These instances signal early indicators of experiential depth and narrative sophistication, suggesting that some learners are beginning to move beyond recounting events toward constructing more reflective and meaning-rich stories.

Table 1. Distribution Process Types by Subjects

Participant	Material	Mental	Behavioral	Relational	Verbal	Total Clauses
Student A	8	1	0	0	0	9
Student B	7	2	0	1	0	10
Student C	6	1	1	0	0	8
Student D	9	0	0	1	0	10
Student E	7	2	0	0	1	10
Student F	6	3	0	0	1	10

Table 2 highlights variations in the young learners' use of interpersonal resources. While most students rely merely on declarative clauses with minimal modality or evaluative language, Students E and F incorporate a richer interpersonal dimension. Their use of modal expressions like "always" or "thank you for listening" reveals attempts to engage the audience and project a personal stance. This development signals growing competence in expressing attitude, stance, and social presence.

Table 2. Interpersonal Resources in Young Learners' Narratives

Subjects	Mood Type	Modality Use	Evaluative Language
Student A	Declarative only	None	None
Student B	Declarative	"Can"	"Fun"
Student C	Declarative	"Must"	"Good"
Student D	Declarative	None	None
Student E	Declarative, minor	"Always," "Can"	"Amazing routine", "Hello guys"
Student F	Declarative	"Can," "Will"	"Nice day", "Thank you for listening".

Table 3 examines the textual features of students' narratives. Students A through D tend to use basic and repetitive thematic structures, such as "Then I went to School. Then I played with my friends. Then I ate lunch", indicating a linear and sequential discourse pattern. This reliance on simple temporal Themes suggests that their narratives are organized around chronological listing rather than cohesive development, a common feature at early stages of textual competence in EFL contexts. In contrast, students E and F employ a wider range of

Themes and cohesive devices, for example, “After that, I went to my grandma’s house”, or “Finally, I finished my homework”, along with meta-discourse markers like “This is my story”. These linguistic choices enhance the fluency and coherence and guide readers through the flow of ideas. Their use of varied thematic progression aligns with the textual metafunctions in SFL, demonstrating an emerging ability to manage information structure and construct more cohesive discourse.

Table 3. Thematic Progression and Cohesion Markers

Subjects	Theme Type	Cohesive Devices Used	Meta-discourse Phrases
Student A	Simple topical	“Then”, “After that”	None
Student B	Repeated topical	“Then”	“That’s it.”
Student C	Topical and marked	“Next”, “After that”	None
Student D	Simple topical	“Then”	None
Student E	Topical + textual	“First”, “After that”, “Finally”	“That’s all”, “Hello everyone”.
Student F	Varied (Topical, textual)	“Then”, “So,” “Finally”	“Thank you”, “This is my story”

The analysis shows that the three metafunctions in Systemic Functional Linguistics offer a valuable lens for understanding how young learners construct meaning in oral narratives. The predominance of material process indicates that most learners focus on recounting concrete actions and everyday experiences (Wael et al., 2025). This tendency reflects the developmental stage of young EFL learners, whose linguistic repertoires are still closely tied to tangible events rather than abstract or reflective meanings (Putri et al, 2024). The variation across students in interpersonal and textual choices suggests differences in confidence, communicative purpose, and familiarity with narrative conventions. Learners who used more mental and verbal processes demonstrated a stronger ability to express emotion, thought, and evaluation, which marks an early sign of narrative maturity and increasing control over meaning-making resources.

Viewed through the principles of the Curriculum-Based Functional Text Model, the findings highlight how the classroom context supports these emerging competencies. The principle of provision ensures that learners have access to linguistic input and narrative models. Protection refers to the safe and encouraging environment that allows children to experiment with language without fear of judgment (Nungki et al, 2025). Participation emphasizes the interactive dimension of storytelling, where learners engage with peers and teachers as co-constructors of meaning. Together, these conditions enable learners to use language not only to recount experiences but also to explore identity and express agency. The variations observed among learners therefore, reflect the dynamic relationship between linguistic development and the socio-pedagogical environment in which language learning takes place.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that young EFL learners are capable of producing meaning-rich oral narratives even when using simple linguistic forms. Through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), the analysis reveals how learners construct experiences, express interpersonal meanings, and organize their discourse within the constraints of their developing language systems. The findings show that material processes dominate the learners’ narratives, while variation in mental, verbal, and textual choices reflects differing levels of narrative awareness and expressive confidence. These patterns illustrate how linguistic development and identity expression evolve together in early language learning. Integrating the principles of SFL with the child-centered orientation of the Curriculum-Based Functional Text Model (Angelelli et al., 2023; Iverson, 2021) provides an effective approach

for fostering narrative competence in young learners. Practically, this integration suggests that teachers can enhance storytelling ability by explicitly modeling metafunctional meanings, encouraging reflection on language use, and creating supportive classroom environments that promote participation and self-expression. This research is limited by its small sample size and focus on a single school context, which may not capture the full range of learner diversity. Future studies could examine a larger population, include longitudinal observation, or explore multimodal aspects of narrative production (Creswell, 2020). Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into how SFL-informed pedagogy can help children develop both linguistic proficiency and a sense of voice in English language learning.

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