



Transitivity Processes And Genre Conformity In SMA IT Unggul Al Munadi Medan Recount Texts

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates transitivity processes in personal recount texts written by tenth-grade EFL students at SMA IT Unggul Al Munadi Medan and examines how those processes align with the linguistic features of the recount genre as defined within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). There have been many studies about transitivity in the writing of Indonesian students learning English as a foreign language. But no study has looked at all three parts of the transitivity system (the types of processes, the roles of the participants, and the circumstances) together. It also has not looked at the findings through the language features based on the types of writing that Martin (1992) and Gerot and Wignell (1994) established. A qualitative descriptive design was adopted by this study, and Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) Transitivity framework was applied to a corpus of 18 student-produced recount texts, giving rise to 329 annotated clauses. The data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) dynamic model. Findings show that Material processes dominate at 43.2%, followed by Relational (23.7%) and Mental (23.1%) processes, while secondary process types collectively account for 10%. Most texts fit into three categories based on how they use language. These categories are material process dominance, first-person participant configuration with a variety of roles, and temporal circumstantial groundedness. Though most texts generally fit into these categories, there are some exceptions. These exceptions include texts where mental processes replace material sequences, where participant diversity is limited to the self-referential "I," and where temporal grounding relies solely on vague sequential links. These findings suggest that students' writing difficulties are fundamentally ideational rather than grammatical, and that Genre-Based Approach instruction targeting experiential meaning choices would benefit EFL recount text writing in the Indonesian secondary

school context.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is considered to be one of the most cognitively demanding of the four language skills. It requires both linguistic competence and capacity to organize meaning coherently within recognized social forms (Richards & Renandya, 2002). In the Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, the Personal Recount occupies a central place in the Senior High School curriculum under Kurikulum 2013. This genre reconstructs the writer's past experiences in temporally ordered stages. It falls under the curriculum's English learning targets. Students are required to produce structurally and linguistically appropriate recount texts (Kemendikbud, 2013). A preliminary examination of student-produced recount texts at SMA IT Unggul Al Munadi Medan reveals considerable variation in how students deploy language to construct their experiential worlds. One student recounts a trip to Lake Toba and constructs the Record of Events through repetition of short material process chains with minimal circumstance and no elaboration from participants. A different one, retelling a lab tour, builds the same level almost completely using Mental Perception clauses like "I learned", "I comprehended", "I observed" in which 'I' functions monotonously as the sole Sensor with no outside Goals, Beneficiaries, or participant variety. These contrasting patterns raise a central question about what the Transitivity configuration of these student texts looks like and how far those configurations align with the linguistic expectations of the Personal Recount genre. Existing transitivity research on EFL student recount texts in Indonesia has documented process type distributions with reasonable consistency. Khasanah and Candraloka (2025), Senjawati (2016), Anugrah et al. (2024), and Prihantina (2023), for example, confirm material process dominance, which is typically 43–47% of total clauses. Yet, these studies have two significant limitations. First, none have analyzed all three components of the transitivity system: process types, participant roles, and circumstantial elements in combination. Second, these studies have not interpreted the observed transitivity process through the genre-based

linguistic features established within systemic functional linguistics. Accordingly, the field has data on which process types students select but doesn't have a systematic rationale for why students make these choices and how these choices align with the linguistic features requirements of the Personal Recount genre. Therefore, this study aims to: Identify and describe the full transitivity configuration realized in 18 student recount texts and examine how those transitivity processes correspond to the linguistic features of the personal recount genre as defined within the SFL genre-based approach.

Systemic Functional Linguistics

This study is theoretically grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which conceptualizes language as a socially structured system through which people construct and share meaning in social contexts (Halliday, 1978). At the core of SFL is the notion of the metafunction, which asserts that each clause simultaneously actualizes three distinct types of meaning. The ideational metafunction represents human experience of the world, the interpersonal metafunction represents social relationships, and the textual metafunction organizes discourse into coherent messages (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The present study focuses exclusively on the Ideational Metafunction as it is realized through the Transitivity system. The Transitivity system is the grammatical system through which the field of a text: what is happening, who is involved, and in what circumstances is constructed.

Transitivity Analysis

The Transitivity system models human experience through three interrelated components: Process, Participant, and Circumstance. The Process, as defined by the verbal group, is the semantic core of the clause and determines the type of event, state, or relation being described. Six process types are identified by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014): Material (doing, acting, happening), Mental (sensing, feeling, thinking), Relational (being, having), Verbal (saying), Behavioral (physiological-psychological behaviors), and Existential (existing). Each process type projects a characteristic set of Participant roles: Actor and Goal in Material processes; Senser and Phenomenon in Mental processes; Carrier and Attribute or Token and Value in Relational processes; Sayer, Verbiage, and Receiver in Verbal processes; Behaver in Behavioral processes; and Existent in Existential processes. Well, circumstances are basically the adverbial and prepositional elements that make a clause more specific by giving more details about the conditions like the time, location, how it is happening, the reason, etcetera under which the process occurs. Together, these three components serve as the full transitivity configuration that forms the analytical foundation of this study.

Genre-Based Approach

The Genre-Based Approach (GBA), developed within the SFL tradition by Martin (1992) and Martin and Rose (2008), is a way of defining genre as a staged, goal-oriented social process. Through this process, communities achieve shared communicative purposes. Each stage has its own particular linguistic requirements. The experiential core of the genre, the Record of Events, is expected to consist of a succession of material processes. These processes are representations of physical, goal-directed actions grounded by temporal and locative circumstances. Mental or relational processes become the dominant type in this stage when material processes are substituted. The activity sequence that defines the genre's social purpose is replaced by a perception sequence or relational description, leading to a transitivity configuration that does

not align with the genre's linguistic requirements (Martin, 1992).

Thus, to examine the manner in which the transitivity configurations present in the student texts are related to the linguistic character of the genre, this study relies on three features derived from the SFL genre literature (Gerot & Wignell, 1994; Martin, 1992; Martin & Rose, 2008). The first feature is material process dominance. Since the social purpose of a recount is to retell past events, material processes must dominate the record of events stage. The second feature is first-person participant configuration with role variation. First-person pronouns "I" and "we" are expected to occupy the actor and senser roles. Likewise, genre-appropriate writing requires variation in goals, phenomena, beneficiaries, and secondary actors that connect the writer to the wider world. This variation prevents a narrow and self-referential view of experience (Martin, 1992; Eiggins, 2004). The third feature is temporal circumstances as chronological grounding. Since the personal recount is structured by chronological sequence, temporal circumstances are the linguistic realization of the genre's chronological logic. Temporal circumstances must be specific enough to allow a reader who did not share the experience to locate the retold events in real time (Martin & Rose, 2008). These three features serve as reference points for the genre-oriented discussion in the findings section.

METHOD

Participants / subject / population and sample

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design, examining naturally occurring written language rather than experimentally manipulated data (Creswell, 2014). The data corpus consists of 18 Personal Recount Texts written in English by tenth-grade students of SMA IT Unggul Al Munadi Medan during the academic year 2025/2026, produced as part of a classroom writing assignment aligned with the recount text competency under Kurikulum 2013. The participants attended Class X at this Islamic-based senior high school in Medan, North Sumatra. Students wrote freely about personal past experiences of their own choosing, resulting in a diverse range of topics including travel, accidents, school events, health incidents, and interpersonal experiences. All participant names were anonymized in accordance with research ethics principles; each text is identified by its sequential number and the writer's initials only.

Instruments

The primary instrument of data collection was the researcher herself, consistent with the epistemological positioning of qualitative inquiry in which the researcher functions as the main analytical tool (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To guide the analytical process systematically, the researcher developed: (1) a clause-by-clause annotation protocol for identifying and labeling each clause according to its Process type, Participant roles, and Circumstantial elements following Halliday and Matthiessen (2014); (2) a Transitivity annotation coding sheet recording all identified process tokens in tabular form; and (3) a classification grid mapping Participant role distributions against process types across the 18 texts. No external elicitation instruments such as questionnaires or tests were employed, as the analytical focus is exclusively on the language of the texts.

Data analysis procedures

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), comprising three concurrent components. In the Data Condensation phase, each text was first read holistically before clause-by-clause annotation commenced. Clauses presenting process type ambiguity (e.g., borderline Material/Relational or Mental/Behavioral), structural incompleteness, or illustrative redundancy relative to clearer instances elsewhere in the corpus were retained in frequency counts but set aside from the primary analytical illustration. In the Data Display phase, findings were organized into two parts corresponding to the two study objectives: Transitivity process distribution with representative examples per process type, and a genre-oriented discussion organized around the three linguistic features described in the theoretical framework. Conclusion Drawing and Verification proceeded in two stages: first identifying patterns of Process distribution, Participant configuration, and Circumstantial density; then examining how those patterns relate to the genre's expected linguistic features through triangulation across multiple texts.

FINDINGS

Transitivity Process Type Distribution

The Transitivity analysis of the 18 student recount texts yielded a total of 329 annotated clauses distributed across all six process types recognized by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). Table 1 presents the full process type distribution across the corpus.

Table 1
Distribution of Transitivity Process Types Across the Full Corpus of 18 Student Texts

No.	Process Type	Total Clauses	% of Total	Texts Present	Texts Absent
1	Material	142	43.2%	17 of 18	T9
2	Relational	78	23.7%	18 of 18	—
3	Mental	76	23.1%	18 of 18	—
4	Behavioral	13	4.0%	7 of 18	T1,T2,T7,T8,T9,T10,T11,T12,T13
5	Verbal	10	3.0%	6 of 18	T1,T2,T3,T5,T6,T8,T10–T16
6	Existential	10	3.0%	9 of 18	T3,T7,T8,T11,T12,T13,T16,T17
	Grand Total	329	100%		

Material processes constitute the single largest category with 142 instances (43.2%), confirming an overall orientation toward action-based narration. Relational processes (78 clauses, 23.7%) and Mental processes (76 clauses, 23.1%) appear at nearly equal and substantial sub-dominant frequencies, indicating that a considerable portion of experiential meaning-making in these texts proceeds through evaluation, attribution, and inner perception rather than physical action. This near-parity of Relational and Mental processes alongside Material dominance is theoretically significant: it signals a structural tension between the genre's expected action-based field and the perception-and-evaluation-based fields that several texts actually construct. The three secondary process types—Behavioral (13 clauses, 4.0%), Verbal (10 clauses, 3.0%), and Existential (10 clauses, 3.0%)—are considerably less

frequent, collectively contributing approximately 10% of the total. Verbal processes appear in only 6 of 18 texts, reflecting the genre's predominantly action-and-perception-based field rather than one structured around communicative exchanges. Existential processes, marked by the *there* construction, appear in 9 of 18 texts, typically at moments of scene-setting in the Orientation stage.

Participant Role Configuration

Across all selected texts, the Actor role in Material process clauses is realized without exception by first-person pronouns, with singular 'I' dominant in individually narrated texts and 'we' or expanded forms ('my family and I,' 'my friends and I') appearing in texts narrating shared activities. The Goal role—the entity acted upon—is present in the majority of transitive Material clauses and is realized by a diverse range of nominal groups including concrete objects, abstract entities, and events. Critically, however, participant diversity varies considerably across the corpus. Texts such as T7 (R.A.N.), T13 (M.H.S.), and T16 (M.F.M.) construct fields in which the Actor 'I' interacts with named, specific Goals and Beneficiaries, and in T10 (A.Z.), non-human entities ('floodwater,' 'the water level') occupy the Actor role, constructing an experiential world that extends beyond the writer's self-referential perspective. By contrast, T2 (N.I.) and T12 (M.R.H.) realize participant configurations in which 'I' operates without specified Goals or Beneficiaries across successive clauses, producing a self-enclosed experiential field.

In Mental process clauses, the Senser role is universally realized by 'I' across all 18 texts. The Phenomenon accompanying the Senser varies in type: externally realized Phenomena (e.g., *I saw a very beautiful view*, T14) contribute to an outward-facing field, while self-referential Phenomena (e.g., *I was traumatized*, T11) and abstract Phenomena (e.g., *I didn't know what to do*, T18) contribute to an inward-facing one. Sub-type analysis reveals that affective Mental processes—encoding emotional states such as sadness, happiness, pride, and fear—are the dominant Mental sub-type and are concentrated in the Reorientation stage, where they serve the evaluative function expected by the genre. When affective processes spill into the Record of Events stage and displace Material sequences, however, they produce a Transitivity configuration that departs from the genre's expected linguistic profile.

Circumstantial Elements

Temporal Circumstances of Location are the most pervasive circumstantial type, appearing in all 10 selected texts and functioning as the primary mechanism of event sequencing. Their realizations range from precisely dated phrases ('on April 11', T14; 'on Saturday, 8 March 2025', T16) and time-of-day anchors ('early in the morning', T7; 'that night', T14) to sequential connectors ('after that', T13; 'finally', T10). Locative Circumstances appear prominently in spatially mobile texts, while Manner Circumstances add experiential texture by specifying how actions are performed ('carefully', T7; 'covered in blood', T11). Causal Circumstances appear with moderate frequency and are particularly salient in Mental process clauses, where they make the logical basis of emotional responses explicit. A recurring construction across multiple texts—*I felt [affective state] because [cause]*—functions as a genre-specific evaluative formula in the Reorientation stage, allowing students

to simultaneously report an inner state and ground it in an identifiable experiential cause.

Genre Correspondence

Table 2 presents an overview of how the observed Transitivity configurations in the selected texts relate to the three genre-based linguistic features established in the theoretical framework. Table 3 illustrates the contrast between aligned and departing instances for Feature 1 with representative textual evidence.

Table 2
Genre-Based Linguistic Features: Expectations and Observed Patterns

Linguistic Feature	Genre Expectation	Observed Pattern (Selected Texts)	Degree of Correspondence
Feature 1: Material Process Dominance	Material processes dominant across Record of Events; activity sequence realized through physical, goal-directed actions	Material dominant in 9 of 10 selected texts; T2 (N.I.) is the principal outlier with Mental processes displacing the Material sequence	Largely corresponding; T2 departing from expectation
Feature 2: First-Person Participant Configuration	'I/'we' as central Actor/Senser; diversity of Goals, Phenomena, Beneficiaries connecting writer to external world	'I/'we' universally dominant; participant diversity ranges considerably — high in T7, T13, T14, T16; restricted in T2, T12	Variable; T7, T13, T14, T16 corresponding; T2, T12 departing from expectation
Feature 3: Temporal Circumstances as Chronological Grounding	Rich Temporal Circumstances grounding events in specific chronological sequence; events locatable in real time	Temporal Circumstances present in all 10 texts; density and specificity vary — most precise in T14, T16; generalized in T12, T15	Largely corresponding at baseline; T14, T16 fully; T12, T15 partially

Table 3
Feature 1 – Material Process Dominance: Aligned and Departing Instances

Alignment	Representative Clause(s)	Transitivity Configuration	Genre-Feature Realization
Aligned	<i>Yesterday, my friend and I planned to climb one of the mountains in North Sumatra ... we climbed without leaving each other until finally we arrived at the camp area and we set up our camping tent there. (T17 – M.R.P.)</i>	Sustained chain of Material processes (planned, climbed, arrived, set up) with Actor = 'we / my friend and I' throughout	A succession of Material processes with consistent Actor realization constructs an action-based field characteristic of the Personal Recount, realizing the temporally ordered event sequence demanded by the Record of Events stage (Martin, 1992)
Departing	<i>I learned many things about biology, physics and chemistry tools. The functions, so I understood them better. I also saw</i>	Predominance of Mental processes (learned, understood, saw) with Material processes absent;	Mental processes displace Material processes as the dominant type, replacing the activity sequence with

	<i>many interesting experiments and unique equipment. (T2 – N.I.)</i>	Senser = 'I' throughout	a perception sequence that departs from the genre's core linguistic expectation of action-based event retelling (Martin, 1992)
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Concerning Feature 1, nine of the 10 selected texts construct their activity sequences primarily through Material processes, broadly reflecting the genre's core linguistic expectation. T7 (R.A.N.) shows the most pronounced Material predominance, with Material clauses constituting approximately 70% of its total clause count, realized through a dense sequence of action verbs across the Record of Events stage. T2 (N.I.) is the principal departure: with a single Material process clause among 11 coded clauses, the text constructs its field almost entirely through perception-based Mental processes, producing precisely the genre-immature pattern Martin (1992) identifies as the displacement of action by sensing. Concerning Feature 2, participant diversity is the most variable dimension across the corpus. Texts that position the writer within a relational network of Goals, Beneficiaries, and secondary Actors—including T10 where non-human entities occupy the Actor position—construct contextually independent fields that reflect the genre's autobiographical expectations. Texts where 'I' is the sole participant across all process types move away from this expectation. Concerning Feature 3, the analytically critical distinction is not between the presence and absence of temporal marking—all selected texts deploy some—but between calendar-anchored texts (T14, T16) that fully reflect the chronological feature and those relying on generalized sequential connectors (T12, T15) that produce a temporally diffuse field.

DISCUSSION

The full-corpus Material process proportion of 43.2% aligns closely with comparable Indonesian EFL studies: Khasanah and Candraloka (2025), Senjawati (2016), and Anugrah et al. (2024) report Material dominance in the 43–47% range, and Prihantina (2023) reports 45.78%. This convergence confirms that, at the aggregate level, students are producing recount texts whose process selection broadly reflects the genre's action-based character. What prior studies have not addressed, however, is the structural tension within the corpus between this aggregate picture and the individual-text departures introduced by the near-parity of Relational and Mental processes. The combined Relational and Mental frequency approaches that of Material processes in the present corpus, indicating that a substantial proportion of field construction proceeds through evaluation and inner perception—a pattern that, when concentrated in the Record of Events stage rather than confined to the Reorientation, produces a field misaligned with the genre's social purpose.

The participant role findings introduce a dimension that prior studies have not examined. The observation that 'I' universally occupies the Actor and Senser roles is generically motivated and is not itself a marker of departure in a Personal Recount; the genre is, by definition, an autobiographical first-person text. The analytically significant distinction,

as Martin (1992) establishes, lies in whether the first-person participant operates within a relational network of Goals, Beneficiaries, and secondary Actors—producing a field that achieves context independence—or in a self-enclosed loop where 'I' does and feels everything without external relational grounding. The present analysis shows that this distinction is directly observable in the Phenomenon types accompanying Mental processes: externally realized Phenomena contribute to an outward-facing field, while exclusively self-referential Phenomena reinforce the inward-facing pattern that Eggins (2004) identifies as field underdevelopment. This finding extends the contribution of prior studies by demonstrating that Participant role analysis provides explanatory power that Process type frequency counts alone cannot deliver.

The circumstantial analysis confirms temporal dominance across the corpus but moves beyond presence/absence to examine specificity and density, a distinction with direct pedagogical consequence. The recurrent Mental + Causal Circumstance construction identified in multiple texts—*I felt [state] because [cause]*—represents a genre-specific evaluative formula that is generically appropriate in the Reorientation stage but becomes a departure from expectation when it replaces rather than follows a temporally grounded Material sequence. Senjawati (2016) noted the evaluative function of the Reorientation stage without identifying the specific Transitivity constructions through which it is realized; the present analysis fills that gap. The broader pedagogical implication is that students' writing difficulties are not primarily grammatical: they are ideational, rooted in Process selection, Participant role assignment, and Circumstantial density choices that produce a field misaligned with the genre's linguistic features expectations. This aligns with the Genre-Based Approach argument that effective writing instruction must make these experiential meaning choices explicit for learners rather than focusing solely on surface-level grammar correction (Martin & Rose, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The Transitivity analysis of 18 Personal Recount Texts produced by tenth-grade EFL students at SMA IT Unggul Al Munadi Medan reveals a corpus organized around Material process dominance (43.2% of 329 clauses), with Relational and Mental processes appearing at comparable and substantial sub-dominant frequencies (23.7% and 23.1% respectively), and secondary process types—Behavioral, Verbal, and Existential—performing peripheral textual functions. Participant roles are first-person-centered across all texts, with 'I' universally occupying the Actor and Senser positions, but meaningful variation exists in participant role diversity, ranging from texts with rich Goal, Beneficiary, and secondary Actor configurations to texts in which 'I' operates in a self-enclosed experiential loop. Temporal Circumstances dominate the circumstantial profile and are present in all texts, but their specificity and density vary considerably from calendar-anchored, contextually grounded fields to vaguely sequential, contextually diffuse ones.

Examined against the three genre-based linguistic features, most texts broadly reflect the expected profile of Material process dominance and temporal grounding at the aggregate level, though individually meaningful departures are observed across all three dimensions—

particularly in texts where Mental processes displace Material sequences in the Record of Events, where participant configurations remain self-referentially isolated, and where temporal grounding lacks the specificity required by the genre's context-independence requirement. These findings establish that students' difficulties with genre-appropriate recount writing are fundamentally ideational rather than grammatical, and underscore the value of Genre-Based Approach instruction that makes Transitivity choices—Process selection, Participant role assignment, and Circumstantial specification—visible and explicitly teachable. Future research may extend this three-component analytical framework to other genres mandated under Kurikulum 2013, incorporate the Interpersonal and Textual Metafunctions for a fuller register analysis, or adopt longitudinal designs to track the effect of functionally oriented writing instruction on students' Transitivity patterning over time.

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