



The Dynamics of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) Interpersonal Metafunction in Understanding Students' Desires in Indonesian Language Learning

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze teachers' linguistic strategies in understanding the desires of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 8 Denpasar using a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach. The primary focus of this study is the interpersonal metafunction of language, specifically within teacher-student interactions during the learning process. The method employed is a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design, utilizing data collection techniques such as participatory observation, interviews, and documentation. The results indicate that students' desires are often not stated explicitly but are instead expressed through indirect utterances, such as questions, complaints, or emotional expressions. Teachers who possess linguistic sensitivity and implement communication strategies based on interpersonal metafunctions encompassing mood, modality, and residue are able to respond to such utterances empathetically and functionally. The strategies utilized by teachers include affirmation, light humor, emotional validation, and reflective questioning. This study concludes that the application of SFL in classroom communication practices can strengthen interpersonal relationships, create a supportive learning environment, and encourage active student participation. The findings of this research are expected to serve as a guideline for teachers in understanding students' needs and desires within the pedagogical.

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Introduction

Language is a system of sound or speech symbolization used in daily human communication (Revita et al., 2023). For humans, language has two roles, namely as a medium of thought and as a medium of communication. Language plays a very important role as a medium of educational communication in conveying messages (learning content). In the learning process, the active role of teachers is needed in understanding students' desires. Nurhidayah (2017) states that students' desires are equated with interest, which means a strong tendency and enthusiasm toward something. Language serves as the primary tool for conveying and understanding students' desires. At times, a teacher may not fully understand the desires of their students. This problem certainly has an impact on the learning process, making it less effective and preventing the achievement of learning objectives.

In learning, communication is the process of delivering messages and transferring knowledge from educators to students (Yasin, 2019). In the learning process, educators are required to have the ability to build good communication relationships with students in order to support students' understanding, openness, and comfort. One important aspect of this relationship is interpersonal communication, namely two-way communication that is personal in nature and involves emotions, empathy, and the active involvement of both parties (Effendi, 2003). In the context of learning, interpersonal communication is the key to creating a learning environment that is dialogical, democratic, and oriented toward students' needs.

In the learning process, students act not only as recipients of information but also as individuals with needs, expectations, and desires that must be understood and accommodated by teachers. Students' desires vary according to the characteristics of each learner, such as enjoyable learning methods, topics of interest, ways of delivering material, and emotional needs in the form of support and recognition. However, not all students' expectations are expressed directly; often, their desires are implied through their attitudes, questions, comments, or even their silence. Therefore, teachers need to understand linguistic concepts in order to capture and comprehend messages that are not always conveyed explicitly. Communication problems between teachers and students can hinder learning comprehension. In this regard, linguistic studies have an important role. Linguistic studies are needed to reveal effective communication strategies for understanding students' desires.

A linguistic approach, particularly through Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), is developed by teachers in order to understand students' desires and needs. SFL strategies include examining students' speech acts in terms of language metafunctions. Thus, the study of teachers' communication practices from the perspective of SFL becomes crucial in bridging the understanding of students' desires within the context of classroom learning. This study is based on the need for a deeper understanding of SFL communication practices in learning. Language implementation becomes a tool for identifying and responding to students' needs effectively. Through this study, it is expected that communication patterns can be identified that are not only functional but also empathetic and humanistic.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study research design. The purpose of qualitative research is to understand the condition of a context by directing attention to a detailed and in-depth description of the portrait of conditions within a natural context, concerning what actually occurs according to the reality in the field of study (Fadli, 2021). This approach was

selected because the main focus of the study was to explore and describe in depth the forms of students' utterances that represent their desires, as well as the teachers' linguistic strategies in understanding and responding to those utterances through the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The case study was chosen because this research focused on the learning situation in Class VIIIA of SMP Negeri 8 Denpasar as a single case unit examined intensively and contextually, and the data were collected by the third author, who served as the teacher in that class.

Results and Discussions

This section discusses the forms of students' utterances that imply particular desires. These utterances are analysed to identify how students convey intentions, expectations, or requests, either directly or indirectly, in the communication process.

1. Clause 1

Clause 1 was obtained from the observation of Indonesian Language learning in Class VIII A of SMP Negeri 8 Denpasar on May 22, 2025, during periods 1-3.

Teacher : "Who has not completed the assignment that I gave yesterday?"

Student (Juna) : (silent for a moment) "Ma'am, I have not finished it. Forgot to do it."

Table 1. SFL Analysis of the Interpersonal Metafunction of Language

Clause	Mood	Residue	Interpersonal Function
"Ma'am, I have not finished it."	Subject: I Finite: have not Mood: Negative declarative	Predicator: finished	Expressing personal information; a form of honest acknowledgment
"Forgot to do it."	(Subject and Finite are implicit) Mood: Negative declarative	Predicator: forgot Complement: to do it	Conveying a reason elliptically; showing a humble attitude

The use of the address term "Ma'am" followed by the subject "I" interpersonally functions to show respect and appreciation for the teacher's authority before conveying negative information. The acknowledgment "forgot to do it" gives the impression that the student is not making excuses or defending himself; this indicates a willingness to take responsibility for the negligence. This utterance is delivered humbly and non-defensively. It can be concluded that Clause 1 shows that the student has a high level of interpersonal awareness. The student conveys personal information (not having completed the assignment) honestly and politely without defending himself. The teacher needs to recognize the good intention implied in this linguistic structure by responding empathetically in order to create positive two-way communication in the classroom. The interpersonal function of Clause 1 is that the student honestly conveys that he has not completed the assignment without blaming anyone.

In Clause 1, the teacher can provide a response in the form of a reflective response by suggesting ways to help the student avoid forgetting again.

Example response : "Next time, try writing it down in your assignment notebook so that you will not forget again."

Function : Providing a solution while fostering independent learning.

Impact : Increasing the student's self-awareness regarding assignments.

2. Clause 2

Clause 2 was obtained from the observation of Indonesian Language learning in Class VIII A of SMP Negeri 8 Denpasar on May 22, 2025, during periods 1-3.

Student (Gangga) : “Ma’am, why is my daily test score low? This is Indonesian Language, you know. Since Grade VII, Gangga’s Indonesian Language score has been 90.”

Teacher : “It’s okay, dear. Maybe you need to study harder.”

Table 2. SFL Analysis of the Interpersonal Metafunction of Language

Clause	Mood	Residue	Interpersonal Function
“Ma’am, why is my daily test score low?”	Subject: my daily test score Finite: (implicit) Mood: Interrogative	Predicator: low	Expressing confusion and dissatisfaction politely; a form of questioning as an expression of desire
“This is Indonesian Language, you know. Since Grade VII, Gangga’s Indonesian Language score has been 90.”	Subject: (referring to the subject) Finite: (implicit) Mood: Declarative	Adjunct: since Grade VII, Gangga’s Indonesian Language score has been 90	Emphasizing past academic reputation; a form of subtle self-defense regarding the current result

Based on Halliday’s theory of the interpersonal metafunction, the student’s utterance implicitly conveys certain expectations and desires. The choice of the word “why” indicates an attempt at negotiating meaning, suggesting that the student perceives a discrepancy between the score obtained and his self-perception as a high-achieving student. The emphasis expressed in the statement, “This is Indonesian Language, you know. Since Grade VII, Gangga’s Indonesian Language score has been 90,” reinforces the student’s interpersonal position as an individual with a positive academic identity. The desire implied in the student’s utterance is recognition of the consistency of his previous academic performance, as well as the possibility of a re-evaluation of the test result, which he feels does not reflect his actual ability. The utterance demonstrates the student’s sense of surprise and dissatisfaction with a learning outcome that does not align with his established academic identity.

The teacher’s strategy in responding to the student’s utterance can begin with the use of a positive declarative mood to create a calm atmosphere and acknowledge the student’s feelings. For example, the teacher may say, “I understand how you feel, Gangga. Your previous scores have indeed been good.” This strategy functions to build an open and non-judgmental interpersonal relationship. In responding to Gangga’s utterance questioning his Indonesian Language daily test score, “Ma’am, why is my daily test score low? This is Indonesian Language, you know. Since Grade VII, Gangga’s Indonesian Language score has been 90,” the teacher should apply linguistic strategies that are both empathetic and functional.

Furthermore, the teacher may use median modality such as “maybe” or “try” to encourage the student to reflect on the learning process without creating pressure. For example, “Maybe the questions on yesterday’s test were a little different. Did you have the chance to study all the materials?” This question opens a space for dialogue and supports the development of the student’s metacognitive awareness. The teacher also needs to validate the student’s academic identity by expressing appreciation for his previous achievements. Statements such as, “You have always performed well in this subject. This score does not mean that you have failed,” will help strengthen

the student's self-confidence and demonstrate that the teacher recognizes his efforts. These strategies not only help manage the student's emotions but also create a collaborative and supportive learning environment and enhance the overall effectiveness of the learning process.

3. Clause 3

Clause 3 was obtained from the observation of Indonesian Language learning in Class VIII A of SMP Negeri 8 Denpasar on May 23, 2025, during periods 4-6.

Student (Andra) : "Ma'am, since this morning we have been taking tests; there have been two subjects. We are very tired. Please don't teach today, Ma'am! Just let us watch TV."

Teacher : "Dear, I still have a lot of material to cover."

Student (Andra) : "Aww, Ma'am, you're being so strict."

Table 3. SFL Analysis of the Interpersonal Metafunction of Language

Utterance	Mood	Residue	Interpersonal Function
"Ma'am, since this morning we have been taking tests; there have been two subjects. We are very tired. Please don't teach today, Ma'am! Just let us watch TV."	Subject: we (statement clause) Finite: have been, are, don't, let (varies between statement and negative imperative)	Predicator: taking tests, tired, teach, let us watch TV Adjunct: since this morning, two subjects	Explicitly expressing students' complaints and fatigue. Requesting leniency in an indirect manner (soft imperative). The address term "Ma'am" emphasizes respect while maintaining the interpersonal relationship.
"Dear, I still have a lot of material to cover."	Subject: I's material Finite: still have Mood: Declarative	Predicator: a lot	Conveying a reason for rejecting the student's request in a gentle and persuasive manner.
"Aww, Ma'am, you're being so strict."	Subject: (implicit "Ma'am") Finite: (implicit, emotional expression) Mood: Declarative	Predicator: being so strict (expressing annoyance and disappointment)	Expressing disappointment and disagreement with the teacher's response in an informal and emotional manner. Demonstrating familiarity and closeness in communication.

In the conversation between the student (Andra) and the teacher above, the realization of the interpersonal function of language is clearly evident, containing expressions of desire, negotiation, and subtle persuasive strategies. The student's utterance begins with a declarative form: "Ma'am, since this morning we have been taking tests; there have been two subjects." Interpersonally, this statement functions as a strategy for initiating a complaint that describes the student's physical and emotional condition (fatigue), while simultaneously serving as an argumentative basis for the request made afterward. Furthermore, the sentence "We are very tired. Please don't teach today, Ma'am!" displays a disguised imperative mood in the form of a polite appeal. The particle "ya" at the end of the sentence provides an interpersonal nuance that reduces direct pressure while still expressing a firm desire for the teacher to change the learning plan. The following sentence, "Just let us watch TV,"

reinforces the request, using a declarative form as if offering a casual suggestion, whereas functionally it constitutes a linguistic strategy to direct the teacher's actions.

The implied desire of the student, Andra, is to avoid serious learning activities and obtain relaxation as compensation for the previous workload. The utterance implies that the student feels entitled to receive a break because he has completed two examinations. The interpersonal function of language in this context shows that the student is not merely conveying a condition but is also attempting to influence the teacher's decision through emotional arguments and a casual approach.

In responding to the complaints of the student Andra, who feels tired because of taking examinations in two subjects and requests leniency from the teacher by watching TV, the teacher needs to employ communication strategies that are empathetic while simultaneously maintaining instructional authority. The teacher may begin by acknowledging the student's fatigue, for example by stating, "I understand that you are tired, dear," so that the student feels understood and recognized. Furthermore, the teacher may explain the importance of the material that needs to be delivered using gentle and persuasive language, such as, "There is indeed a lot of material, but it is important to learn it so that you are prepared for the examination." This approach maintains a positive and open dialogue without creating feelings of rejection or annoyance.

When the student responds with a disappointed expression such as, "Aww, Ma'am, you're being so strict," the teacher may respond calmly and with light humor to ease the tension, for example, "Hehe, I only want what is best for all of you." This strategy strengthens a close and comfortable interpersonal relationship between the teacher and the students while maintaining learning motivation. Through an interpersonal communication approach that is empathetic, validating, and solution-oriented, the teacher is able to manage classroom dynamics that are full of pressure while simultaneously enhancing the effectiveness of the learning process.

4. Clause 4

Clause 4 was obtained from the observation of Indonesian Language learning in Class VIII A of SMP Negeri 8 Denpasar on May 23, 2025, during periods 4-6.

- Student (Meyta) : "Ma'am, why are the test questions that you made so difficult? I felt like crying while answering them. Just wait until my score turns out low."
 Teacher : "Dear, none of my questions are difficult; perhaps you just have not studied yet."
 Student (Meyta) : "That's so mean, Ma'am."

Table 4. SFL Analysis of the Interpersonal Metafunction of Language

Clause	Mood	Residue	Interpersonal Function
"Ma'am, why are the test questions that you made so difficult?"	Subject: the test questions that you made Finite: are Mood: difficult Interrogative	Adjunct: why Predicator: so Mood: difficult	Expressing complaints and confusion in the form of a rhetorical question; implying a desire for the teacher to understand the student's difficulty.
"I felt like crying while answering them."	Subject: I Finite: (implicit, elliptical form) Mood: Declarative	Predicator: felt like crying Complement: while answering them	Expressing emotional fatigue and frustration; an explicit form of the student's psychological pressure.

“Just wait until my score turns out low.”	Subject: my score (implicit–implied warning/threat) Finite: later Mood: low Declarative	Adjunct: just wait, later Predicator: later Mood: low	An emotionally charged utterance and an indirect threat; showing strong disappointment and limited emotional control.
“Dear, none of my questions are difficult; perhaps you just have not studied yet.”	Subject: my questions, you Finite: are not, have not Mood: Declarative	Predicator: difficult, studied	Directly rejecting the student’s complaint; corrective in nature but less empathetic, which may lead to emotional resistance.
“That’s so mean, Ma’am.”	Subject: Ma’am (implicit – elliptical/emotional form) Mood: Declarative	Finite: – Predicator: mean	An expression of disappointment and spontaneous emotional protest; implying a feeling of not being understood by the teacher.

In this dialogue, the interpersonal function of language serves as a tool for emotional expression as well as an implicit negotiation strategy. The student Meyta’s initial utterance, “Ma’am, why are the test questions that you made so difficult?” uses an interrogative mood with the subject “Ma’am” as the party directly addressed, and takes the form of a rhetorical question laden with emotion and interpersonal tension. Although it is presented as a question, functionally this clause conveys a negative evaluation of the teacher through an assessment of the test questions, which are perceived as excessively difficult. This is not merely a request for information, but rather a form of complaint that functions as a strategy of emotional pressure. The following sentence, “I felt like crying while answering them,” is a form of explicit affective expression that indicates the student’s emotional burden. The inversion of the subject-predicator structure in “felt like crying I did” emphasizes the intensity of the personal feeling, while the subsequent clause, “Just wait until my score turns out low,” is a warning with a subtle threatening tone that reflects dissatisfaction and a perception of unfairness, while also implying fear of the final outcome.

In the interpersonal metafunction, the three clauses uttered by Meyta display a combination of negative emotions, evaluation of the teacher’s authority, and indirect expressions of desire, namely: the desire for the teacher to create easier questions and provide more favorable grades. The student is also indirectly requesting acknowledgment of the difficulties she has experienced.

In responding to the emotional utterances of the student Meyta, who complains about the difficulty of the test questions and expresses disappointment through statements such as, “I felt like crying while answering them,” and “Just wait until my score turns out low,” the teacher should avoid immediately denying or blaming the student. Although the teacher may intend to encourage learning responsibility, a response such as, “None of my questions are difficult; perhaps you just have not studied yet,” has the potential to worsen the situation because it demonstrates insufficient empathy. A more effective strategy is to begin the response by acknowledging the student’s feelings, for example, “I know that the questions were quite challenging today. It is okay to feel that they were difficult.” This expression builds a positive emotional relationship and creates a safe space for the student to be honest about her difficulties.

The teacher may then continue with a solution-oriented and supportive strategy, such as, “If you feel confused, we can discuss the questions together later. I will help you understand the most difficult ones first.” This approach avoids confrontation and transforms the atmosphere into a collaborative one. When the student reacts with an emotional statement such as, “That’s so mean, Ma’am,” the teacher may respond with light humor and empathy, for example, “Hehe, it is not because I am mean, but because I care. I want you to become even better.” This strategy not only reduces tension but also positively reinforces the purpose of learning.

The results of the study indicate that students’ desires are often not expressed explicitly, but rather through indirect forms of utterances such as questions, expressions of confusion, or even silence. Teachers who understand the interpersonal function of language are able to interpret these implied meanings and adjust their communication strategies to create openness and comfort. Mood becomes a primary linguistic instrument in building effective teacher-student relationships. Teachers who employ affirmative and empathetic strategies are more successful in establishing dialogue that accommodates students’ needs. These findings support Halliday’s (1985) view that language is not merely a tool for conveying information, but also a means of building relationships and expressing attitudes, emphasizing the important role of the interpersonal function in effective educational communication.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the clause analysis of communication between teachers and students in Indonesian Language learning activities, it can be concluded that the interpersonal metafunction is utilized by students to negotiate their desires with teachers through the use of modalization such as “may,” “can,” or “maybe.” Students’ desires generally focus on learning that is more contextual, enjoyable, and less monotonous. They desire learning activities that are interactive, creative, and provide opportunities for self-expression. This is evident in utterances that represent expectations for changes in teaching methods and variations in learning activities. Teachers play an important role in responding openly to students’ utterances, encouraging self-expression, and directing these utterances to become reflective input in the learning process. Supportive teacher responses further strengthen the interpersonal dimension of classroom communication.

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