

AN ANALYSIS OF INTERPERSONAL MEANING IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' DISCUSSION ESSAYS

MARISA DWI PUSPITASARI¹, SRI WULI FITRIATI², YULIATI³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Negeri Semarang

¹marisadwipuspitasari14@students.unnes.ac.id, ²SriWuli.Fitriati@mail.unnes.ac.id, ³yuliati@mail.unnes.ac.id

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Abstract

Interpersonal meaning plays a crucial role in academic writing, particularly in discussion essays that encourage students to present arguments and engage readers. However, research on these texts remains limited. This study aims to analyze interpersonal meaning in eleventh-grade students' discussion essays through the system of mood and modality in Systemic Functional Linguistics. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method by analyzing 14 essays at the clause level. The results indicate that the declarative mood is the most dominant, with 404 positive clauses and 30 negative ones, while the interrogative and imperative moods are used sparingly. Regarding modality, modalization was more dominant than modulation. This indicates that students tend to express their opinions cautiously. Overall, students' understanding is quite good, but their application still needs improvement.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics, interpersonal meaning, mood system, modality system, discussion essay

INTRODUCTION

Language is the primary tool of communication that humans use to convey ideas, express opinions, and build social relationships. In Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), language is not merely viewed as a set of rules, but as a means of constructing meaning. One key aspect of this theory is interpersonal meaning, that is how speakers or writers use language to interact and express their attitudes or views. According to Halliday & Matthiessen (2014), interpersonal meaning can be observed through the use of mood and modality. These two elements allow the writer to provide information, ask questions, give commands, and indicate the level of certainty or attitude toward a statement. Therefore, understanding this aspect is crucial in writing English as a foreign language (EFL).

However, in practice, many EFL students still struggle to use interpersonal meaning appropriately in their writing. When writing discussion texts, for example, students are required to present arguments, consider the ability to use a variety of sentence structures and to express opinions clearly. However, students tend to use only simple declarative sentences and rarely utilize a variety of modal verbs. As a result, their writing becomes less engaging and less effective in conveying arguments. This indicates that although students have mastered the grammatical aspects, they still struggle to use the language functionally in everyday communication.

A number of previous studies have analyzed the interpersonal meaning in various types of texts. Harahap (2021) investigated interpersonal meaning in dialogues in textbooks and found that mood plays a significant role in shaping interactions. Meanwhile, Ramadhani & Samsi (2023) analyzed procedural texts and found that declarative sentences were more frequently used. Another study by Sari et al. (2021) focused on news texts, whereas Warouw

(2022) examined language use in social media communication. The results of these various studies indicate that interpersonal meaning is an important aspect found across various text types.

In addition, several other studies have also expanded the examination of interpersonal meaning across various types. Firnawati & Samsi (2024) and Shaumiwaty et al. (2024) analyzed interpersonal meaning in report and advertisement texts, showing that use of mood and modality plays a role in conveying information and influencing readers. Luthfiyati et al. (2024) studied classroom interactions and found interpersonal meaning in political and religious discourse. Another study by Van (2024) also demonstrates how mood is used in literary works to realize interpersonal meaning.

Furthermore, studies on students' writing have also been conducted by several researchers. Vasya & Samsi (2025) as well as Pratama & Areni (2025) found that students still face limitations in utilizing interpersonal resources, particularly regarding the use of modality. Sinaga et al. (2026) also demonstrated that interpersonal meaning in film dialogues reflects specific communicative functions. Additionally, research by Sumari (2024) indicates that interpersonal meaning can be found in various text forms, including slogans and speeches. Research by Yuliawati et al. (2024) also emphasizes the importance of meaning analysis in deeply understanding texts.

Even though many studies have been conducted, there is still a gap in research. Most studies focus on genres like narrative, procedure, and news texts. Very few studies analyze discussion essays written by senior high school students, especially in the Indonesian EFL context. This selection of high school students, particularly those in eleventh-grade, is based on academic considerations and students' cognitive development. At this level, students have developed more advanced critical thinking skills and are beginning to be introduced to various types of argumentative texts, including discussion essays. Furthermore, in the English language curriculum in Indonesia, high school students are expected to be able to compose texts that are not only informative but also argumentative and evaluative. Therefore, high school students are considered the appropriate subjects for analyzing interpersonal meaning, as they possess sufficient linguistic and cognitive resources to express their attitudes, opinions, and positions through the system of mood and modality. In addition, the use of both mood and modality together in discussion essays has not been widely explored. Therefore, it is important to study this area to better understand how students use language in argumentative writing.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze interpersonal meaning in discussion essays written by eleventh-grade students. The objectives of this study are: (1) to identify how the mood system is realized in the discussion essays, and (2) to examine how modality is used in the discussion essays. This study differs from previous study, in that it focuses on discussion essays as the object of analysis, thereby broadening the scope of studies on interpersonal meaning in students' academic writing.

METHOD

This study employed a case study design. This design was chosen because the study aimed to describe and interpret in detail how interpersonal meaning was realized in students' discussion essays. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate as it allowed the

researcher to explore linguistic features meanings embedded in written texts within their natural educational context.

The sources of data were discussion essays written by eleventh-grade students at a private bilingual senior high school in Semarang. The participants in this study were all 14 students in a single class. This number is relatively small because the study was conducted at a private school, where class sizes are typically limited. Additionally, the school's educational system separates boys and girls into different classes. Furthermore, in English classes, students are divided into two groups, namely core and extended, based on their English proficiency levels. This study focused on one class, namely the girls' extended class. The discussion essays produced by students as part of their English writing assignments. A total of 14 discussion essays were selected as research data. The fourteen discussion essays analyzed in this study were selected using purposive sampling. This selection was based on several criteria, namely: (1) the essays were written by eleventh-grade students as part of a formal learning assignment, (2) the essays were written in English, (3) the essays followed the general structure of a discussion text, and (4) the essays contained a sufficient number of clauses for analysis. This technique was chosen to ensure that the analyzed data is truly relevant to the research objective, namely examining the realization of interpersonal meaning in students' argumentative texts.

The data in this study consist of qualitative linguistics data focused on clauses. All clauses found in the essays serve as data sources, as in Systemic Functional Linguistics, interpersonal meaning is realized at the clause level. The research instrument in this study is the researcher themselves, as is common in qualitative research. In the analysis process, the researcher utilized a theoretical framework from Systemic Functional Linguistics, specifically the concept of interpersonal meaning proposed by Halliday & Matthiessen (2014) and Eggins (2004), as a reference for analyzing the system of mood and modality.

Data collection for this study was conducted using the documentation method. The essays were obtained directly by the researcher while conducting teaching practice at the school. The data were then systematically organized and arranged prior to analysis. Since the data were derived from students' written assignments in the classroom, they fall under the category of secondary data.

Data analysis was conducted in several sequential stages. In the first stage, all essays were collected and organized neatly to prepare them for analysis. The second stage involved reading the entire text thoroughly to ensure that the data aligned with the research objectives and met the criteria for discussion texts. Third, the text was broken down into clauses, which served as the primary units of analysis.

Next, each clause is coded and classified based on the interpersonal meaning framework. The analysis focuses on the mood system, namely declarative, interrogative, and imperative, as well as the modality systems, which includes modalization (probability and usuality) and modulation (obligation and inclination) along with their modality values. After that, the analysis results are presented in the form of descriptions and tables to show the frequency and distribution of the data. The final stage is to interpret the findings by referring to interpersonal meaning theory to explain how that meaning is realized in the students' essays and to answer the research question.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis, it was found that the realization of interpersonal meaning in discussion essays by eleventh-grade students had been achieved. The findings are presented based on the two research objectives, namely the analysis of the mood system and the modality system.

Mood System

Findings related to the first research objective, regarding how the mood system is applied in discussion essays, show that students predominantly use the declarative mood in the discussion essays they write. A total of 404 positive declarative clauses and 30 negative declarative clauses were identified, making the declarative mood the most dominant type. In addition, 9 interrogative clauses and 10 imperative clauses were also found, although the numbers were relatively small. This indicates that students primarily functioned as conveyors of information, with limited efforts to engage readers through questions or provide instructions through imperatives.

Modality System

Findings related to the second research objective, regarding how modality is used in discussion essays, indicate that the use of modality is more prevalent than modulation. In the modality category, there were 52 clauses expressing probability and 22 clauses expressing usuality. Meanwhile, in the modulation category, 13 clauses indicated obligation and only 4 clauses indicated inclination. These results indicate that students tend to express their opinions cautiously and not too assertively, using more expressions of probability than expressions indicating obligation or strong personal attitudes.

The results of the analysis are presented in the table below:

Table 1. The Outcome of the Interpersonal Meaning Analysis

Category	Type	Sub-type	Total
Mood Types	Declarative	Positive	404
		Negative	30
	Interrogative		9
	Imperative		10
Modality Types	Modalization	Probability	52
		Usuality	22
	Modulation	Obligation	13
		Inclination	4

Discussion

Based on the findings of the interpersonal meaning analysis of the discussion essays, three types of mood were identified, namely declarative, interrogative, and imperative. Two types of modalities were also found which are modalization and modulation. The discussion essays focused on the importance of friendship, a topic highly relevant to the lives of eleventh grade students. The findings of this study focus on two main aspects in line with the research objectives: an analysis of the mood system and an analysis of the modality system.

In the mood system, three types of mood were found, namely declarative, interrogative, and imperative. Among these types, declarative mood is the most dominant, with a total 453 clauses consisting of 404 positive declarative clauses and 30 negative declarative clauses. According to Eggins (2004), declarative mood is used to provide information, which aligns with the purpose of discussion essays that aim to present arguments

and viewpoints to the readers. The use of positive declarative clauses can be seen in examples such as “Friendship is a vital aspect of human life” and “Friends provide emotional support during difficult times”. These clauses show that students use positive finite elements such as *is* and *provide* to assert their argument clearly. Meanwhile, negative declarative clauses are also found, as in “Friends are not that important” and “Not all friendships are beneficial”. The use of negative polarity marked by *not* indicates that students are able to present opposing viewpoints. This reflects the characteristics of a discussion text, which requires the writer to present both supporting and opposing arguments.

In addition to the declarative mood, there were also 9 clauses in the interrogative mood. Interrogative clauses are generally used at the beginning of an essay to capture the reader’s attention. For example, “Have you ever imagined living without friends?” is used as a rhetorical question aimed at engaging the reader. This indicates that students utilize the interrogative mood not to seek information, but to foster interaction.

In addition, the imperative mood was found in 10 clauses. The use of imperative clauses is typically associated with giving advice or recommendations, especially toward the end of the essay. For example, “Choose friends who are good for us” and “Let’s all make meaningful friendships,” which demonstrate the students’ efforts to influence the reader’s actions. This aligns with the view of Halliday & Matthiessen (2014), who state that the imperative mood serves to request action or offer advice.

In summary, the findings show that the mood system is realized in the students’ discussion essays, with declarative mood as the most dominant type. The variation of mood types reflects the communicative purpose of discussion texts, which is to present arguments, engage readers, and provide recommendations.

The findings regarding the dominance of the declarative mood in this study aligns with research conducted by Nurinayah (2021), who found that in students’ narrative texts, the declarative mood is the most dominant form because it serves as the primary means of conveying information. Furthermore, Pambudi et al. (2022) also showed that in interactions among EFL students, mood usage tends to be limited to simple forms, particularly the declarative mood, resulting in underdeveloped interaction patterns. In the context of learning, Febrianty & Rozelin (2024) revealed that teachers also more frequently use the declarative mood in the scaffolding process in the classroom, which indirectly influences students’ writing habits. This is reinforced by the findings of Yanto & Pravitasari (2023), which showed that EFL textbooks are also dominated by the use of informative forms, so that the input received by students contributes to the tendency to use the declarative mood in their writing.

In the analysis of the modality system, two main categories were identified: modalization and modulation. Modalization consists of probability and usuality. In the case of probability, there are 52 clauses that use low and median level modality. Meanwhile, usuality is found in 22 clauses with modality levels ranging from low to high. On the other hand, modulation is divided into obligation and inclination. In the case of obligation, there are 13 clauses that exhibit a high level of modality. In contrast, inclination appears in only 4 clauses with low and median levels of modality.

In terms of modalization, probability is expressed through several modal words. In low value, there is the word “*may*”. In the median value, there are the words “*can*” and “*will*”. For example, in the clause “Friendship can improve mental health”, this suggests that students

tend to present their arguments cautiously rather than making absolute claims. This is consistent with Halliday & Matthiessen (2014), who state that modalization functions to express degrees of probability in information exchange. While in the usuality type, in low value, there is the word “can”. Then, in the median value there are the words “often”, “usually”, and “sometimes”. In high value there is the word “always”. In the use of high value usuality, which can be seen in the clause, “friends are always the first solution to pour out our hearts”, the clause means that friends are always the first people we turn to when we want to pour out our hearts.

On the other hand, modulation is realized through obligation and inclination. Obligation is expressed through modal verbs such as “should” and “have to” which indicate high value obligation. For example, the clauses “We should choose friends wisely” and “We have to be careful in friendships” indicate that students provide recommendations or advice to readers. Meanwhile, Inclination is expressed through the words “may” in low value inclination and “will” in median value inclination, as seen in the clause “Friends will support each other”, which expresses willingness or tendency.

The use of modality in the students’ discussion essays shows that they are able to express their stance and attitude toward the propositions they present. However, the limited use of modulation indicates that students are less confident in expressing strong obligation or personal inclination. Instead, they tend to rely more on modalization to maintain a balance and neutral tone in their writing.

The findings regarding the dominance of modality in this study are also supported by Siregar et al. (2021), who state that EFL learners tend to use probability modality more frequently than obligation modality because it is safer and less binding. A similar finding was reported by Ningtyas et al. (2023), who demonstrated that the use of modality allows writers to express attitudes more subtly and indirectly. Meanwhile, Tan & Zhang (2022), in their study of advertising texts, showed that the use of varied modalities can enhance a text’s persuasive power. When compared to the results of this study, it appears that students have not yet fully mastered the use of modulation as a strategy to strengthen their arguments persuasively.

Overall, the findings indicate that interpersonal meaning is realized in the students’ discussion essays through both mood and modality systems. The dominance of declarative mood and modalization suggests that students focus on delivering information and presenting arguments, while still attempting to engage readers and provide recommendations.

The findings of this study align with several recent studies indicating the dominance of the declarative mood in various types of student texts. For example, research by Sari et al. (2021) and Ramadhani & Samsi (2023) found that the declarative mood is the most commonly used form because its primary function is to convey information. Furthermore, the results of this study are also consistent with the findings of Pratama & Areni (2025) and Vasya & Samsi (2025), which indicate that students still face limitations in utilizing interpersonal resources, particularly regarding modality.

Furthermore, the dominance of modalization in this study also supports the findings of Sinaga et al. (2026), who state that speakers or writers tend to use expressions of probability to maintain caution when conveying opinions. This indicates that EFL learners tend to avoid using overly strong restrictive forms, such as obligation, due to limitations in self-confidence or linguistic competence. On the other hand, the low use of modulation in this study indicates

that students are not yet fully capable of using language persuasively, as also found in the study by Luthfiyati et al. (2024) in the context of classroom interaction.

In a broader context, these findings are also relevant to the research by Ali (2024) & Tang et al. (2022), which indicates that the use of interpersonal metafunction in teaching significantly influences how students construct interactions and meaning in language. Furthermore, Adlington et al. (2025) emphasize that the effective use of interpersonal resources can enhance engagement and the quality of relationships in the learning process. This suggests that the limited use of modulation in this study is not only related to students' linguistic abilities but also influenced by the learning context and exposure to interactive and persuasive language use.

Thus, the findings of this study not only strengthen the result of previous research but also underscore that mastering interpersonal meaning, particularly in terms of modality, remains a challenge for EFL learners. This highlights the need for teaching strategies that focus more on developing students' ability to express attitudes, beliefs, and degrees of certainty in a more varied manner in their writing.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that interpersonal meaning has been realized in the discussion essays written by eleventh-grade students through the use of mood and modality. In terms of mood, the declarative form was the most dominant, with 404 positive clauses and 30 negative clauses, indicating that students primarily functioned as conveyors of information. The presence of negative declarative clauses also indicates that students are already capable of presenting opposing arguments, which is an important characteristic of discussion texts. Meanwhile, the use of the interrogative and imperative moods remains relatively limited, with only 9 and 10 clauses found, indicating that students are beginning to attempt to engage readers and offer suggestions, although not yet to the fullest extent.

In terms of modality, modalization was used more frequently than modulation, with 52 clauses expressing probability and 22 expressing usuality, while obligation accounted for only 13 clauses and inclination for 4 clauses. This indicates that students tended to express their opinions cautiously and generally, rather than definitively or in a personal manner. Overall, the students have demonstrated a fairly good understanding of interpersonal meaning. However, the limited various variation in mood and the low use of modulation indicate that these skills still need to be developed.

Based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that future researchers further investigate interpersonal meaning in different genres, educational levels, or contexts to provide a broader understanding of how interpersonal resources are used in EFL writing. Additionally, future studies could incorporate analyses of other metafunctions to produce a more in-depth examination.

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