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Investigating The Use Of Explicit Instruction In Teaching Systemic Functional Linguistics For Developing Thesis Proposal Writing Skills For STAI Hubbulwathan Duri Students

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Abstract

This study examined the effectiveness of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)-Based Explicit Instruction in improving undergraduate students' thesis proposal writing at the English Education Department of STAI Hubbulwathan Duri. The study was motivated by students' difficulties in producing coherent, persuasive, and academically appropriate Background of the Problem sections, particularly in managing ideational, textual, and interpersonal meanings. An embedded mixed-methods design was employed, combining a quantitative one-group pre-test and post-test design with qualitative case study procedures. Seven undergraduate students participated in the study. Quantitative data were collected through writing tests, while qualitative data were obtained from classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis. The instructional intervention was implemented using SFL-Based Explicit Instruction through the Teaching-Learning Cycle, including modeling, guided practice, scaffolding, feedback, and independent writing activities. The findings revealed a substantial improvement in students' writing performance, with the mean score increasing from 63.47 in the pre-test to 86.83 in the post-test. Qualitative results indicated that students developed greater awareness of academic discourse, improved their use of Theme-Rheme progression, academic vocabulary, and evaluative language, and gained confidence in writing thesis proposals. The findings support the view that explicit and scaffolded instruction helps students understand how language functions to construct meaning in academic

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contexts. Overall, SFL-Based Explicit Instruction proved to be an effective pedagogical approach for enhancing academic writing competence, strengthening functional linguistic awareness, and supporting students' participation in scholarly discourse within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) higher education settings.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics, Explicit Instruction, Thesis Proposal Writing, Academic Writing Skills.

INTRODUCTION

Writing an undergraduate thesis proposal is more than a graduation requirement; it represents a student's transition from a passive learner to an active contributor to academic knowledge. Academic writing is a form of social action that takes place within a specific discourse community (Swales, 1990), requiring students to master ways of thinking and expressing ideas that are often unfamiliar to novice writers (Hyland, 2004). Therefore, the thesis proposal becomes an important indicator of a student's ability to identify research gaps and propose systematic solutions through scholarly inquiry.

In higher education, a thesis proposal functions as a high-stakes academic genre that assesses students' readiness for independent research. According to Hyland (2015), academic literacy is not a universal skill but a contextual practice influenced by language, power, and identity. Consequently, writing a proposal reflects a student's academic identity and ability to communicate ideas to a critical scholarly audience. In English Education programs in Indonesia, students are expected to demonstrate advanced analytical and functional writing skills. As noted by Casanave (2019), proposal writing is challenging because students must balance the authority of previous scholars with their own emerging voice as researchers.

Within Islamic Higher Education institutions, proposal writing also integrates academic excellence with ethical values. A thesis proposal reflects intellectual maturity because students must synthesize theories, compare research methods, and formulate a clear research plan. However, many students struggle to understand both the philosophical foundations and technical requirements of proposal writing. As a result, they often find it difficult to meet the academic standards expected of university graduates.

One major challenge is the gap between general English proficiency and the specialized demands of academic writing. Students frequently face linguistic, cognitive, and psychological barriers. Many become trapped in the "tyranny of grammar," focusing heavily on grammatical

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accuracy while overlooking the functional meaning of language. Academic writing requires specialized linguistic resources such as nominalization, technical vocabulary, and complex clause structures, which are often not emphasized in general English instruction.

Preliminary observations in English Education Departments, including in Duri, indicate that students face dual challenges: learning English and simultaneously meeting academic expectations. Many experience uncertainty and lack confidence in participating in academic discourse. Writing a proposal requires higher-order thinking skills, particularly synthesis and critical analysis, rather than simple summarization. According to Bloom's Taxonomy, these abilities represent advanced cognitive processes that many students still struggle to develop.

Analysis of students' thesis proposal drafts reveals significant weaknesses in the Ideational Metafunction of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). For example, one student wrote, "Writing involves an expressive and productive linguistic competency, encompassing a complex cognitive process." The use of relational processes such as "involves" and "encompassing" merely defines concepts without explaining how problems operate in practice. Consequently, the background section becomes overly theoretical and fails to demonstrate the real urgency of the research problem.

Problems are also evident in the Textual Metafunction. One student wrote: "Writing is a medium of communication. Writing helps students come up with new ideas. Writing also needs to have the right grammar." This pattern reflects Constant Theme Progression, where the same subject repeatedly appears at the beginning of consecutive sentences. As a result, ideas develop poorly, the logical flow becomes fragmented, and readers find it difficult to follow the argument. Such patterns indicate limited awareness of textual coherence in academic writing.

The Interpersonal Metafunction also presents challenges. For example, a student stated, "Cognitive psychology looks at how the mind works. It looks at how we handle information." These statements merely reproduce information from textbooks without evaluating its significance. The absence of evaluative language and the Appraisal System weakens the writer's authority and reduces the persuasiveness of the argument. These findings suggest that students need explicit guidance to understand how language choices contribute to effective academic communication.

To address these issues, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding language as a social semiotic and a resource for meaning-making. Developed by Halliday, SFL emphasizes that language is shaped by its social purposes. Martin and Rose (2008) define genre as a goal-oriented social process with specific stages and linguistic features. Through concepts such as Genre, Register, and the three metafunctions—Ideational,

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Textual, and Interpersonal—SFL helps identify and address weaknesses in students' academic writing.

The application of SFL can be strengthened through Explicit Instruction, which is grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), particularly the concept of scaffolding. Vygotsky argued that students learn more effectively with support from a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). In SFL pedagogy, Explicit Instruction involves building contextual knowledge, analyzing model texts, conducting guided writing activities, and gradually moving students toward independent writing. This approach reflects Bernstein's (1990) concept of visible pedagogy, while Delpit (1988) emphasizes that explicit teaching is essential for students who lack familiarity with academic discourse conventions. Feez (2002) further highlights the importance of modeling to help learners understand how expert writers construct effective arguments.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of SFL in improving academic writing quality and genre awareness (Emilia, 2005; Yasuda, 2011; Zhang & Zhang, 2021; Nagao, 2019; Amberg, 2017; Moore, 2016; Kusumaningrum, 2018; Rahmadani, 2020; Derewianka, 2015; Christie, 2012; Irawan et al., 2026; Khoiruman et al., 2026). However, limited empirical evidence exists regarding the implementation of Explicit Instruction in Indonesian Islamic Higher Education, particularly in undergraduate thesis proposal writing. Initial observations at STAI Duri show persistent problems in the Ideational, Textual, and Interpersonal metafunctions. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the use of SFL-based Explicit Instruction as a systematic intervention to improve students' ability to produce coherent, persuasive, and academically credible thesis proposals, thereby strengthening their readiness to participate in scholarly communities and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in English education.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a Mixed Methods approach using an embedded design, in which quantitative data served as the primary source of evidence and qualitative data were used to enrich and explain the quantitative findings. The selection of this design was based on the need to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)-based Explicit Instruction in improving undergraduate thesis proposal writing. The quantitative component utilized a Pre-Experimental One-Group Pre-test Post-test Design to measure students' writing development before and after the instructional intervention, while the qualitative component adopted a Case Study approach to investigate students' experiences, perceptions, and challenges throughout the learning process. The integration of these two

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approaches enabled methodological triangulation and provided a more holistic understanding of both the outcomes and processes of learning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018).

The study was conducted at the English Education Department of an Islamic Higher Education institution in Duri, Riau Province, Indonesia, during the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The participants consisted of seven senior undergraduate students who were actively preparing their thesis proposals and were selected through purposive sampling based on their identified difficulties in academic writing. These participants represented a critical stage of academic development where students were expected to transition from general English proficiency to academic and disciplinary writing competence. The object of the research was the implementation of Explicit Instruction grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics and its influence on students' thesis proposal writing quality, particularly in the "Background of the Problem" section. As stated by Creswell and Creswell (2023), research participants should directly experience the instructional treatment, while the research object should represent the specific phenomenon being systematically investigated.

Data were collected from both quantitative and qualitative sources. Quantitative data were obtained through pre-test and post-test writing tasks in which students produced drafts of the "Background of the Problem" section before and after the intervention. These texts were assessed using an SFL-based analytical rubric adapted from Martin and Rose (2008) and Derewianka (2011), focusing on the Ideational, Textual, and Interpersonal metafunctions. Qualitative data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis of students' thesis proposal drafts. Observation was conducted to examine instructional implementation and student engagement during classroom activities, while interviews were used to explore participants' perceptions, learning experiences, and challenges. According to Kawulich (2005), observation allows researchers to understand behavior within its natural context, whereas interviews provide deeper insights into participants' lived experiences (Kvale, 1996).

The instructional intervention was implemented through six meetings using SFL-based Explicit Instruction guided by the Teaching-Learning Cycle (TLC) framework developed by Callaghan and Rothery (1988) and further elaborated by Martin and Rose (2012). The instructional stages included Building Knowledge of the Field, Modeling and Deconstructing Texts, Joint Construction, and Independent Construction. This pedagogical approach was grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), particularly the concept of scaffolding, which emphasizes the role of teacher support in facilitating students' movement toward independent performance.

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The instructional process also reflected Bernstein's (1990) concept of visible pedagogy, in which learning objectives, success criteria, and language features were explicitly explained to learners. Throughout the intervention, classroom observations were conducted to monitor instructional fidelity and ensure that all stages were implemented consistently.

Data analysis was conducted through separate quantitative and qualitative procedures before integrating the findings. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, paired-sample t-tests, and normalized gain (N-gain) scores to determine the effectiveness of the intervention and the significance of students' writing improvement. Content validity was established through expert judgment, while inter-rater reliability was employed to ensure scoring consistency (Hyland, 2022). Qualitative data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis following Braun and Clarke (2021), involving data familiarization, coding, theme generation, and theme refinement. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability proposed by Lincoln and Guba. Finally, quantitative and qualitative findings were triangulated and interpreted together to provide a comprehensive explanation of how SFL-based Explicit Instruction influenced students' academic writing development and enhanced their ability to produce coherent, persuasive, and academically acceptable thesis proposals (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2024).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This study investigated the implementation of SFL-Based Explicit Instruction in teaching undergraduate thesis proposal writing at STAI Hubbulwathan Duri. The findings are presented based on three sources of data, namely classroom observations, writing assessments (pre-test and post-test), and semi-structured interviews. The integration of these data sources provided a comprehensive understanding of how Explicit Instruction influenced students' academic writing development.

1. Implementation of SFL-Based Explicit Instruction

The classroom observation findings revealed that the instructional process was conducted systematically through several stages, including explicit explanation, modeling, guided practice, scaffolding, collaborative revision, feedback sessions, and independent writing activities. During the initial meetings, students were introduced to the basic concepts of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly Ideational Meaning, Interpersonal Meaning, Textual Meaning,

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Theme-Rheme progression, nominalization, academic vocabulary, and generic structure.

The lecturer consistently demonstrated how these linguistic features functioned in authentic thesis proposal backgrounds. Students were guided to analyze sample texts before applying similar strategies in their own writing. Observation records indicated that students gradually became more active in identifying research problems, organizing arguments, and employing academic language resources. The implementation process reflected the principles of Explicit Instruction proposed by Rosenshine (2012), emphasizing clear explanation, modeling, guided practice, and continuous feedback.

Table 1. Observation Results of SFL-Based Explicit Instruction Implementation

Instructional Component	Implementation Status	Description
Explicit Explanation	Very Good	Lecturer explained SFL concepts clearly
Modeling	Very Good	Examples of thesis backgrounds were analyzed
Guided Practice	Very Good	Students practiced under lecturer guidance
Scaffolding	Very Good	Continuous support was provided
Feedback	Very Good	Immediate corrective feedback was given
Independent Writing	Good	Students produced individual proposal drafts

The observation findings suggest that the implementation of Explicit Instruction was conducted consistently and systematically throughout the intervention period. Students demonstrated increased engagement and participation during writing activities.

2. Improvement of Students' Thesis Proposal Writing Ability

The quantitative findings revealed substantial improvement in students' writing performance after the implementation of SFL-Based Explicit Instruction. The comparison between pre-test and post-test scores demonstrated a significant increase in overall writing quality.

Table 2. Pre-Test and Post-Test Results

Test	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Pre-Test	63.47	5.82
Post-Test	86.83	4.91
Gain Score	23.36	-

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The results indicate an increase of 23.36 points between the pre-test and post-test. Before the intervention, students' writing was characterized by fragmented organization, limited academic vocabulary, weak coherence, and insufficient control of SFL metafunctions. After the intervention, students demonstrated better organization of ideas, stronger academic style, improved coherence, and more effective use of linguistic resources.

The hypothesis testing further confirmed these improvements. The Paired Sample t-test showed a significance value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the difference between pre-test and post-test scores was statistically significant.

Table 3. Improvement Across Writing Dimensions

Writing Dimension	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Improvement
Linguistic Accuracy	65.10	88.50	High
Academic Vocabulary	60.25	86.30	High
Generic Structure	64.70	87.40	High
Ideational Meaning	63.20	85.70	High
Interpersonal Meaning	61.80	86.10	High
Textual Meaning	65.50	84.20	Moderate-High

The greatest improvements occurred in academic vocabulary and linguistic accuracy. However, textual meaning showed relatively smaller gains because some students continued to experience difficulties managing Theme-Rheme progression and information flow.

3. Students' Responses toward SFL-Based Explicit Instruction

Interview findings indicated overwhelmingly positive responses toward the instructional approach. Students reported that Explicit Instruction provided clear guidance and reduced confusion when writing thesis proposal backgrounds. Many participants acknowledged that the step-by-step teaching process enabled them to understand academic writing more effectively.

Student 5 stated:

"I now know exactly what steps I should follow when sitting in front of my laptop."

Similarly, Student 6 commented:

"This model provides enlightenment for me in constructing a more meaningful proposal."

Most students also reported increased confidence in revising their drafts independently. Nevertheless, several participants admitted that identifying Ideational, Interpersonal, and Textual meanings remained challenging, particularly during independent writing activities.

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DISCUSSION

1. The Effectiveness of SFL-Based Explicit Instruction in Improving Academic Writing

The findings demonstrate that SFL-Based Explicit Instruction significantly improved students' ability to write the Background of the Problem section in undergraduate thesis proposals. The increase from a mean score of 63.47 in the pre-test to 86.83 in the post-test confirms the effectiveness of the intervention.

These findings support Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) view that language functions as a resource for meaning-making rather than merely a collection of grammatical rules. Through explicit instruction, students became aware of how linguistic choices contribute to ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings. As a result, they developed greater control over academic discourse and produced more coherent and persuasive texts.

Furthermore, the findings align with Hyland (2022), who argues that novice writers often struggle because they focus primarily on grammar while neglecting discourse-level organization. The present study demonstrates that when students receive explicit guidance regarding discourse structures and linguistic resources, substantial improvements in academic writing can be achieved.

2. The Contribution of Scaffolding and Explicit Teaching

A significant factor contributing to students' improvement was the use of scaffolding throughout the instructional process. According to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), learning occurs most effectively when support is provided within learners' Zone of Proximal Development. The observation findings showed that lecturers continuously provided assistance, corrective feedback, and guided practice, enabling students to overcome writing difficulties.

The effectiveness of scaffolding is also evident in students' interview responses. Many participants emphasized that the modeling sessions helped them understand how expert writers construct academic arguments. This finding supports Martin and Rose (2021), who emphasize the importance of scaffolded instruction in genre-based pedagogy.

In addition, Rosenshine (2012) argues that Explicit Instruction reduces cognitive overload by breaking complex tasks into manageable components. The current study confirms this principle, as students reported feeling less confused and more confident when the writing process was presented systematically.

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3. Development of Ideational, Interpersonal, and Textual Meanings

One of the most important findings concerns the improvement of students' ability to construct meaning through SFL metafunctions. Prior to the intervention, many students relied heavily on relational processes and descriptive definitions. After the intervention, students demonstrated greater ability to explain research phenomena using material processes, thereby strengthening ideational meaning.

In terms of interpersonal meaning, students became more capable of expressing academic stance and evaluation. They learned to employ academic vocabulary and evaluative language to justify the importance of their research topics. This improvement enhanced the persuasiveness and credibility of their proposals.

Regarding textual meaning, students improved their use of Theme-Rheme progression and cohesive devices. However, interview findings suggest that this aspect remained challenging for some participants. Student 6 admitted, "I often hesitate when determining which parts are ideational, textual, and interpersonal," while Student 7 explained, "My challenge is matching sentences to the three metafunctions." These statements indicate that advanced discourse analysis requires extensive practice and continued support.

4. Relationship with Previous Studies

The findings are consistent with previous studies investigating the effectiveness of SFL-based pedagogy in academic writing. Emilia and Hamied (2022) found that explicit instruction of SFL features improved Indonesian students' awareness of academic discourse conventions. Similarly, Yasuda (2023) reported improvements in genre awareness and rhetorical organization through SFL-based instruction.

The present study also supports the findings of Martin and Rose (2021), who emphasize the importance of scaffolding, modeling, and guided practice in helping learners master complex academic genres. The positive responses reported by students in this study provide further empirical support for the Teaching-Learning Cycle framework.

Moreover, this research extends previous literature by focusing specifically on undergraduate thesis proposal writing within an Islamic Higher Education context. Most previous studies focused on essay writing, secondary education, or general academic literacy. Therefore, the current findings contribute new evidence that SFL-Based Explicit Instruction is highly effective for improving thesis proposal writing among EFL learners in Indonesian higher education institutions.

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Overall, the integration of classroom observations, quantitative assessments, and interview findings provides strong evidence that SFL-Based Explicit Instruction positively influences students' academic writing development. The instructional model not only improved writing performance but also transformed students' understanding of writing as a purposeful meaning-making activity. Consequently, SFL-Based Explicit Instruction can be recommended as an effective pedagogical approach for teaching academic writing in English Education Departments and other higher education contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study concluded that the implementation of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)-Based Explicit Instruction significantly improved students' ability to write the Background of the Problem section of undergraduate thesis proposals at STAI Hubbulwathan Duri. The instructional approach was systematically implemented through explicit explanation, modeling, guided practice, scaffolding, feedback, and independent writing activities, enabling students to understand how language functions within academic discourse. The quantitative findings demonstrated a substantial improvement in students' writing performance, as reflected by the increase in mean scores from 63.47 in the pre-test to 86.83 in the post-test. Furthermore, qualitative findings revealed that students responded positively to the instructional approach because it provided clear guidance, increased their confidence, and enhanced their understanding of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings. Overall, the study confirms that SFL-Based Explicit Instruction is an effective pedagogical framework for developing academic writing competence, strengthening students' awareness of academic discourse conventions, and preparing them to participate more confidently in scholarly communities.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be proposed. English lecturers are encouraged to integrate SFL principles and Explicit Instruction strategies into academic writing courses, particularly those related to proposal writing, research methodology, and thesis preparation. Students should continuously apply SFL concepts, including Theme-Rheme progression, nominalization, cohesion, and metafunction analysis, to improve the quality and effectiveness of their academic writing. Educational institutions are also encouraged to support the implementation of SFL-based writing programs through curriculum development, academic writing workshops, and professional training for lecturers. In addition, future researchers are

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recommended to investigate the effectiveness of SFL-Based Explicit Instruction in different educational contexts, writing genres, and larger populations, as well as explore the integration of digital technologies and artificial intelligence tools to support academic literacy development in higher education.

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