

EXPLORING STUDENT AGENCY THROUGH TRANSITIVITY ANALYSIS IN EFL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' RECOUNT TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative descriptive study examines how 33 EFL high school students in Semarang construct their agency through language in recount texts written about their shared classroom learning experience. Guided by Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) Systemic Functional Linguistics transitivity framework and Van Leeuwen's (1996) Social Actor Representation theory, a total of 327 clauses were analyzed across two phases: transitivity parsing and agency identification. Findings reveal that mental processes were the most dominant process type (f=125), followed by relational (f=94), material (f=58), verbal (f=44), existential (f=4), and behavioral (f=2) processes. In terms of agency, activation (f=220) substantially outweighed passivation (f=103), indicating that students primarily positioned themselves as active, conscious experiencers—particularly as Sensers in mental clauses—despite being materially passivated as recipients of the teacher's instructional actions. This “split-domain agency” pattern reveals a form of hidden agency that surface-level grammatical analysis alone would overlook. The findings contribute to the understanding of student-centered learning and highlight the value of combining transitivity analysis with social actor representation in uncovering EFL learners' agentive voices in written texts.

Keywords: EFL, Recount text, Student Agency, Transitivity Analysis, Writing Skill

INTRODUCTION

Writing plays a significant role in learning success (Faradina et al., 2021). The process of writing is considered more complicated than other skills because it requires a set of competencies that students must master to produce a single piece of writing (Brown, 2001, p. 335). Therefore, when writing, right spelling, punctuation, word choice, and grammar are important (Elsie et al., 2020). English has become one of the formal subjects in the 2013 curriculum to facilitate students, even though it acts as EFL (Isadaud et al., 2022; Fadiarachmanda, 2024; Mulyanti et al., 2022). A recount text is one of the genres that retell a past event (Martin J. Rose, 2008). Beyond technical accuracy,

writing a recount is also an act of self-representation, yet this dimension has received little scholarly attention. Sometimes, EFL students had problems when producing a recount text by applying the linguistic features, such as specific participants, time, and place circumstances, conjunctions, and past tense (Gerot & Wignell, 1995). Students frequently struggle to apply these features accurately when composing recount texts (Cahyaningrum et al., 2018).

Studies applying transitivity analysis within Halliday's Systemic Functional framework have demonstrated its value for uncovering how language constructs meaning. However, transitivity research in EFL writing has predominantly focused on grammatical accuracy and text quality (Elsie et al., 2020; Faradina et al., 2021) rather than on what writers' process choices reveal about how they position themselves within their own narratives. The social dimensions embedded in students' linguistic choices thus remain underexplored.

Research on student agency in EFL learning has largely relied on psychological or sociological approaches, examining motivation, participation, and classroom behavior (Brown, 2001). These perspectives treat agency as attitude or observable behavior, rather than as something constructed through language itself. Few studies have examined how agency is linguistically realized in students' written texts using an SFL framework.

This gap is particularly significant in recount text writing, where students narrate personal experiences and inevitably position themselves as participants in processes. Whether students construct themselves as active agents or passive subjects carries implications for understanding student identity and for supporting student-centered learning (Faradina et al., 2021). Yet no study has specifically examined how transitivity patterns in EFL recount texts construct student agency in this way.

The aim of this study is to analyze the construction of student agency in EFL students' recount texts by utilizing Halliday's transitivity system to uncover whether students represent themselves as active or passive subjects in their learning journey. The findings are expected to achieve the research aim and demonstrate that there is "*no neat fit*" between grammar and social reality, thereby revealing "*hidden agency*" in the students. The result may help students be more active in class, help the teacher create a comfortable class atmosphere, and support student-centered learning. Based on the issue above, this research addresses the following research questions, namely what types of process realized in EFL students' recount texts? and How do these transitivity realizations construct students' agency?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transitivity, as characterized by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), is a

clause system that includes process, participants, and circumstances. The use of a verb in a clause is the essential aspect of transitivity (Utami et al., 2022). In transitivity, processes are divided into six parts: material, mental, verbal, relational, behavioral, and existential (Halliday, 2014). In transitivity, the structure of language can produce certain meanings and ideologies that are not always explicit for the reader. In other words, transitivity analysis is an SFL that helps analyze the relationship between meanings and words (Mulyanti, 2022).

Transitivity is well known as the analytical system in the concept of a clause as a representation for digging into the meaning of a clause in a text (Gerot & Wignell, 1995). Transitivity could make a clause understandable to the reader because they will know the specific process in a clause (Utami, Munawwaroh, Dinata, 2022). The central aspect of transitivity is the process (Thompson, 2004). Material process is a process of doing bodily, physically, and materially (Halliday, 2014; Gerrot & Wignell, 1995). Process is the main element. The entity who or which one does something is the actor. Last but not least, goal is the entity which may be done. Mental process is a process of sensing (Halliday, 2014; Gerrot & Wignell, 1995). In *Making Sense of Functional Grammar* (Gerrot & Wignell, 1995), there are three types: affective or reactive (feeling), cognitive (thinking), and perceptive (through the five senses). The main point in mental process called as senser (experiencer) and phenomenon. Verbal process is a process of saying (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Gerrot & Wignell, 1995). The participants in this process called as sayer, recipient, verbiage, and target. The sayer is the one who produces the utterance while the recipient is the one to whom the verbal process is addressed. The receiver is the one to whom the verbalization is addressed. Target is one acted upon verbally. Range or verbiage is the name of verbalization itself. Relational process establishes an identity or assigns a quality (Halliday, 2014; Gerrot & Wignell, 1995). Relational processes are divided into two types, identifying and attributive processes. In attributive, there are carrier and attributive. In identifying, there are token and value. Behavioural process is a process of physiological and psychological behavior (Halliday, 2014; Gerrot & Wignell, 1995). Behavior is the only one obligatory participant. In behaviour processes, range names the behaviour enacted. Existential processes are processes of existence (Halliday, 2014; Gerrot & Wignell, 1995). Existential processes are expressed by verbs existing: be, exist, arise, and the existent can be a phenomenon of any kind.

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Student agency has been introduced to the teachers as a material to learn since 2019 (Wirastuti, 2021; Listyarini, 2021). Agency is used to involve students in giving words, choices, and ownership, boosting their motivation to learn and making them more independent and responsible in their learning. In navigating unfamiliar educational contexts, student agency serves as both an objective and a mechanism to empower learners (Warnby, 2024). When writing, students sometimes cannot be themselves. A quiet student may be a talkative student in their written text, or vice versa. It can be seen by the combination of transitivity and student agency (Leeuwen, T. V., 1996). There is no neat fit between sociological and linguistic categories, and if Critical Discourse Analysis, in investigating, for instance, the representation of agency, ties itself in too closely to specific linguistic operations or categories, many relevant instances of agency might be overlooked (Leeuwen, T. V, 1996, p. 33). In social Actor Representation (Leeuwen, 1996), representations are divided into activation and passivation. When social actors are represented as the active and dynamic forces in an activity, it is called activation. When they are represented as undergoing the activity or as being at its receiving end, it is called passivation.

Previous studies already include extensive transitivity research across many genres and levels. Not just that, the research is already underway in both qualitative and quantitative research. For example, (Faradina & Emilia, 2024; Mohammad et al., 2025; Dianita, 2023; Elsie & Suarnajaya, 2020; Rosmayanti et al., 2021; Fadiarachmanda, 2024; Mulyanti & Wati, 2022; Kemal, 2024; Septianti tenth& Kurniawan, 2023; Areni et al., 2023; Utami et al., 2022; etc.). In student agency research, some researchers are beginning to explore it further because agency is a hot topic. For example, DeCoursey & Mohr, 2026; Warnby, 2024; Wirastuti et al., 2024. In transitivity itself, there is already research about the errors, tenses, and grammar rather than providing the agency from the transitivity. In student agency, there is a focus on the student themselves rather than the student's written text. The research is limited to transitivity and student agency. Because of that, research on the transitivity analysis of student agency in

recount text becomes the novelty for this research. Halliday (2014) and Gerot & Wignell (1995) usually used the theory of transitivity. This research also uses those theories and Van Leuween (1996) to help uncover the student agency.

RESEARCH METHOD

Using text and image data, distinctive steps in data analysis, and diverse designs are the hallmarks of qualitative methods in research (Cresswell, 2017). This research employed a qualitative descriptive design to investigate and analyze the transitivity and students' agency as reflected in their recount text writing. Furthermore, the research provides a description and explanation of the phenomenon of words in clauses. The focus is not on measuring statistical variables but on uncovering the "hidden agency" and discursive meaning embedded in the students' written text.

Data Source and Data Collection

The data source of this research consisted of 33 written recount texts produced by EFL students from a single tenth-grade classroom at a state senior high school located in a rural district of Kota Semarang, Central Java. Purposive sampling was employed as the sampling technique, which involves selecting participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research purpose (Creswell, 2017). The criteria for participant selection were as follows: (1) the students were at the tenth-grade level and had received instruction in recount text writing as part of the *kurikulum merdeka*; (2) they had been taught directly by the researcher as student-teacher during a supervised teaching practicum, ensuring the researcher's familiarity with the classroom context; and (3) the students had direct, first-hand experience as the subject of their own recount narratives, meaning they wrote about events they personally participated in during the practicum period. These criteria ensured that the texts would naturally encode the students' experiential positioning—how they perceived themselves in relation to activities, events, and other participants in the classroom.

In terms of text characteristics, the 33 recount texts had a mean length of 116 words per text, with a mean of 10 clauses per text. The total corpus comprised 7,475 words, yielding 327 analyzable clauses in total. This range in text length reflects the natural variation in expressive output within a single intact classroom. Since this study focuses on meaning construction rather than grammatical accuracy, student variation was characterized by text length rather than proficiency scores or error frequency. Texts were accordingly categorized into three groups: long texts (more than 12 clauses, $n = 11$), medium texts (10-11 clauses, $n = 15$), and short texts (fewer than 9 clauses, $n = 7$). This grouping ensures that the dataset represents variation in expressive output, so that the findings reflect the full range of students' meaning-making and agentive positioning rather than being skewed by a particular subgroup alone. Although

the single-classroom design limits generalizability, the depth of contextual familiarity it affords is consistent with the goals of qualitative descriptive inquiry.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using two interconnected analytical phases grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The primary analytical framework was Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) transitivity system, which examines how human experience is encoded in language through the configuration of process types, participant roles, and circumstantial elements. Transitivity analysis is widely recognized as a tool for revealing how social actors are positioned—as agents, patients, or bystanders—within discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Thompson, 2014). The secondary framework was van Leeuwen's (1996) Social Actor Representation, used to classify participant roles into activation (where students are represented as agents initiating processes) and passivation (where students are represented as recipients or goals of processes).

The analytical procedure was carried out as follows:

Phase 1 – Clause Segmentation and Transitivity Parsing. All 33 texts were first segmented into individual clauses. Each clause was then analyzed according to Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) framework, identifying (a) the process type—material, mental, verbal, relational, behavioral, or existential; (b) the participant roles associated with each process (e.g., Actor, Goal, Senser, Phenomenon, Sayer, Carrier, Token); and (c) any circumstantial elements of time, place, manner, or cause. The coding was conducted manually and recorded in a structured coding table for each text.

To ensure the reliability of the coding process, inter-rater reliability procedures were employed. Two raters independently coded a random sample of 229 clauses (approximately 70% of the total 327 clauses) using Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) transitivity framework. The first rater was the researcher, and the second rater was the researcher's supervisor, an independent expert in Systemic Functional Linguistics. Both raters received the same written coding guidelines prior to independent analysis. Following independent coding, the results were compared and Cohen's Kappa coefficient was calculated to assess the level of intercoder agreement. The resulting Kappa value of $\kappa = .95$ indicated strong agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977), confirming that the coding scheme was applied consistently and that the classification of process types was reliable. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until full consensus was reached before proceeding with the full dataset analysis.

Phase 2 – Agency Identification. Following the transitivity parsing, the participant roles assigned specifically to the student-writers themselves were

extracted and examined across the full dataset. As van Leeuwen (1996) emphasizes, there is *"no neat fit"* between grammatical subjects and social reality; a grammatical subject does not automatically signal social agency. Therefore, agency was determined not solely by subject position but by the participant's functional role within the process—whether the student was encoded as an Actor in a material process (activated), a Senser in a mental process (internally engaged), or a Goal/Recipient acted upon by external forces (passivated). Patterns across the 33 texts were then interpreted to address the research questions regarding how transitivity realizations construct student agency.

FINDING

This section presents the findings of the research, along with the interpretation and discussion conducted on 33 EFL high school students' recount texts, comprising 327 clauses in total. The analysis follows two phases. First, transitivity analysis based on Halliday and Mathiessen's (2014) framework. Second, student agency identification based on Leeuwen's (1996) social actor representation theory, classifying participant roles into activation and passivation.

Process Types in EFL Students' Recount Texts

Table 1. Distribution of Process Types

No.	Process type	Frequency (f)	Activation	Passivation	Rank
1	Mental	125	108	12	Most dominant
2	Relational	94	57	34	.
13	Material	58	24	44	.
4	Verbal	44	31	10	.
5	Existential	4	1	2	.
6	Behavioral	2	1	2	Least dominant
Total		327			

Mental Processes

Mental processes were the most dominant type of process, occurring across all the texts. Halliday and Matthiesen (2014) define mental processes as processes of sensing involving *a senser* and *a phenomenon*, subdivided into *affective, cognitive, and perceptive* types (Gerot & Wignell, 1995). Based on the data analysis, affective mental processes were particularly pervasive, as students consistently encoded their emotional responses to the learning experience:

- (1) *"I was really happy with that information."* (Student A)
- (2) *"I really enjoyed being taught by Ms. Shahnaz."* (Student B)

(3) “*I started to like English.*” (Student S)

Cognitive mental processes also appeared frequently, indicating the students’ reflective and metacognitive engagement:

(4) “*I realized about my confidence.*” (Student T)

(5) “*I really understood the material.*” (Student D)

The dominance of mental processes is consistent with the genre conventions of recount, which foreground the narrator’s subjective evaluation of past events (Gerot & Wignell, 1995).

Relational Processes

Relational processes second ranked, (f=94), appearing predominantly as attributive constructions that assigned qualities to the teacher or the student-self. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) describe relational processes as processes of being, involving a *carrier-attribute* or *token-value* configuration. The students extensively deployed these processes to describe the teacher’s character:

(6) “*She was kind, friendly, and humble.*” (Student E)

(7) “*Ms. Shahnaz was kind and patient with us.*” (Student F)

Beyond description, several students used identifying relational processes to construct a more intimate relational identity: “she was not only my teacher, but also my sister.” (Student X) and “I considered her as my sister” (student G). these clauses transcend the formal institutional category and indicate that the students perceived the learning relationship as deeply personal—a dimension of experience that relational processes are uniquely suited to encode (Gerot & Wignell, 1995).

Material Processes

Material processes ranked third (f=58). As processes of doing and happening, it involves an *actor* and an *optional goal* (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Based on the data, material processes primarily narrated concrete classroom events, with the teacher occupying the actor role in the majority of instances:

(8) “*She also gave an example based on her true story.*” (Student I)

(9) “*She would teach them one by one patiently.*” (Student M)

(10) “*I studied English in an enjoyable way with Ms. Shahnaz.*” (Student L)

The asymmetry in actor roles—teacher-dominated—is further discussed in the agency analysis below

Verbal processes

Verbal processes ranked fourth (f=44), primarily encoding the teacher’s communicative action as *sayer*. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) describe these as processes of saying, involving *sayer*, *receiver*, and *verbiage*:

(11) “*She often explained the material in an easy way to understand.*”

(Student B)

(12) “She told us that she would be finished her task” (Student C)

(13) “I always answer her questions when she asked a question”

(Student J)

The teacher’s dominance as sayer confirms that students perceived the classroom's communicative sphere as primarily teacher-led, while example (13) shows instances where students also positioned themselves as communicatively agentive

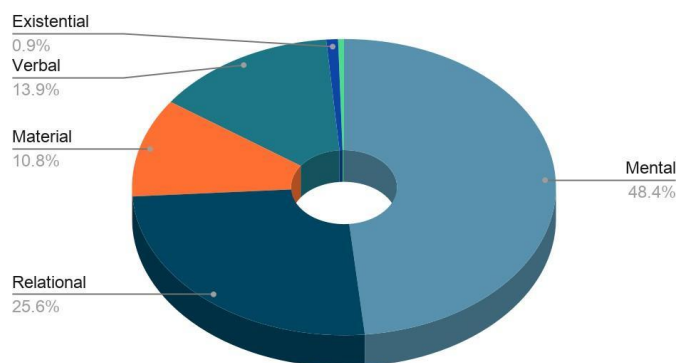
Behavioral and Existential Processes

Both process types contribute little to the evaluative and reflective content that characterizes recount writing (Gerot & Wignell, 1995; Halliday, 2014). Their low occurrence confirms that the students’ texts were genre-appropriate, consistently foregrounding psychological experience and relational description over existential statements or physiological behaviours.

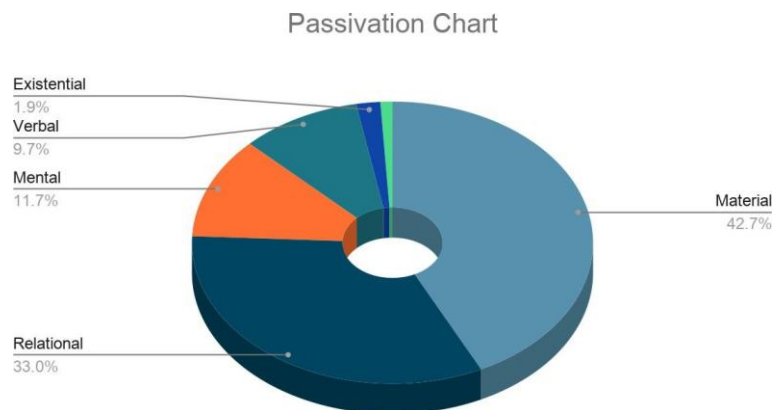
Student Agency: Activation and Passivation

The second phase of the analysis examined how the r-transitivity patterns construct student agency through Van Leeuwen’s (1996) Social Actor Representation Framework. Van Leeuwen (1996, p. 44) said that there is “*no neat fit*” between grammatical categories and social reality; therefore, agency cannot be read directly from grammatical subjects alone, but must be traced through the participant roles assigned to social actors across different process types. His framework distinguishes activation—where social actors are the active, dynamic forces in an activity—from passivation—where they are represented as undergoing or receiving an activity. Agency must therefore be traced through the full range of sociosemantic participant roles rather than through grammatical structure alone. Van Leeuwen (1996) establishes two principal categories: activation, which occurs when social actors are represented as “the active, dynamic forces in an activity,” and passivation, when they are represented as “undergoing’ the activity or as being 'at the receiving end of it.”

Activation Chart



Picture 1. Distribution of process in the activation chart



Picture 2. Distribution of process in the passivation chart

As shown in picture 1 and picture 2, activation ($f=220$) was substantially more frequent than passivation ($f=103$) across the dataset. The following subsections present the findings for each category.

Activation

Activation was the most prominent in mental processes ($f=108$) where the student's self was systematically positioned as the sayer — the active, conscious experiencer. Representative instances include:

(14) *"I felt happy."* [Activation — Mental; Sayer = I] (Student K)

Activation through relational processes ($f = 57$) was the second most frequent. Although the Carrier role is not inherently agentive in grammatical terms, activation in Van Leeuwen's (1996) framework extends beyond physical action to include any foregrounded self-positioning by the social actor. In these clauses, the students consciously ascribed positive internal states to themselves a deliberate act of self-representation that constitutes a form of hidden agency:

(15) *"I was very grateful to be able to learn English with Ms. Shahnaz."* [Activation — Relational; Carrier =I] (Student K)

Activation through verbal processes ($f=31$) occurred in clauses where the student-self was positioned as Sayer in communicative acts:

(16) *"I always answer her questions when she asked a question."*
[Activation
— Verbal; Sayer = I] (Student C)

Activation through material processes ($f=24$) was the least frequent among those categories. In the clause below, the student appeared as Actor in

concrete physical actions:

- (17) *"I studied English in an enjoyable way with Ms. Shahnaz."*
[Activation
— Material; Actor = I] (Student L)

Passivation

Passivation was most frequent in material processes (f=44). Students were predominantly positioned as the goal of the student-teacher's material instructional actions. The construction being taught by recurrence as the single most prominent passivation pattern across the dataset:

- (18) *"I liked being taught by Ms. Shahnaz."* [Passivation — Material;
Goal = I] (Student B)

Passivation through relational processes ranked second (f=34). In this clause, the teacher was the carrier of positive attributes while the students occupied the position of implicit experiencer or beneficiary:

- (19) *"Her lesson had very insightful and fun content."* [Passivation — Relational] (Student Q)

Passivation through mental processes (f=12) occurred in clauses where the student was positioned as a phenomenon of the teacher's mental or causative action:

- (20) *"She always made her students enthusiastic."* [Passivation — Mental; Phenomenon = Students] (Student M)

Passivation through verbal processes (f=10) positioned students as receiver of the teacher's communicative acts:

- (21) *"She told us that she would be finished with her ask."*
[Passivation — Verbal; Receiver = us] (Student A)

DISCUSSION

This section interprets the findings presented above in light of theoretical frameworks employed in this study: Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) transitivity system, the genre theory of Gerot and Wignell (1995), and Leeuwen's (1996) Social Actor Representation framework. The discussion is organized around the two research questions.

First, mental processes are the primary vehicle of student agency. The dominance of mental processes and their high frequency of activation establish that students exercised their agency predominantly in the psychological domain, positioning the self as a conscious *Senser* who feels, reflects, and evaluates. This confirms Van Leeuwen's (1996) argument that there is "no neat fit" between grammatical structure and social reality: the students' most significant agentic positioning occurred not in material clauses (where they acted physically) but in mental clauses (where they claimed ownership of psychological experience).

This is precisely the "*hidden agency*" that the present research aims to uncover—robust subjective agency operating beneath the surface of an institutionally structured classroom. This finding is supported by Warnby (2024), who similarly found that student agency in narrative writing is most visible in evaluative and reflective language rather than in the narration of physical actions.

Second, material passivation reveals the institutional grammar of the EFL classroom without signaling disempowerment. The high frequency of material passivation—particularly *being taught by* the teacher—confirms the teacher's dominance as the primary *actor* in concrete instructional activities. However, rather than signaling student disempowerment, this passivation is consistently framed as *beneficial* (Van Leeuwen, 1996): students repeatedly expressed desire and nostalgia for the passivated state, constructing it as a source of pleasure, identity, and relational meaning. This nuance would be invisible to a surface-level grammatical analysis, which underscores the analytical value of combining transitivity analysis with Van Leeuwen's (1996) social actor framework.

Third, the data reveal a split-domain agency structure. Students were materially passivated but psychologically activated—a pattern that accurately reflects the structural conditions of the secondary EFL classroom, where teachers control instructional actions while students' primary mode of participation is reflective and relational. Importantly, the students' writing demonstrates an implicit awareness of this structure: they did not attempt to claim material dominance, but they did consistently and confidently claim ownership of their psychological and relational experience. This finding aligns with DeCoursey and Mohr's (2026) argument that student agency is best understood as a set of domain-specific positions negotiated through language, and supports the view that recount writing is a productive genre for surfacing EFL students' otherwise invisible agentive voice.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the construction of student agency in EFL recount texts through Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) transitivity framework and van Leeuwen's (1996) Social Actor Representation. Analysis of 327 clauses from 33 student texts yielded two principal findings.

With respect to process types, mental processes were most dominant (f=125), followed by relational (f=94), material (f=58), verbal (f=44), existential (f=4), and behavioral (f=2). This distribution reflects students' orientation toward the psychological and interpersonal dimensions of their learning experience rather than physical narration.

With respect to agency construction, the analysis reveals a "split-domain" pattern: students were materially passivated—predominantly positioned as the Goal of the teacher's actions—yet psychologically activated, consistently

claiming ownership of their emotional responses and reflective thinking. Activation (f=220) substantially outweighed passivation (f=103), confirming van Leeuwen's (1996) argument that there is "no neat fit" between grammatical structure and social reality. Students' most robust agency operated beneath the surface of the institutionally structured classroom, constituting precisely the "hidden agency" this study set out to uncover.

These findings suggest that EFL teachers should recognize and amplify students' inner agency by designing more student-centered learning environments, as learners may be psychologically active even when they appear instructionally passive. Recount writing proves to be a productive genre for surfacing such agency. Future research could extend this framework to other text genres, larger participant groups, or a longitudinal design to trace how students' agentive positioning develops over time.

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