

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

# AN SFG-BASED METAFUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH LESSON PLANS AND THE GAP IN FUNCTIONAL KNOWLEDGE

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## ABSTRACT

It is believed that teachers in secondary education prioritise correctness in grammar instruction and, in doing so, often overlook the functional potential of language, which is used to negotiate social meaning. The paper aims to investigate the language instruction gap in high school general English language classes by examining the extent to which lesson plans incorporate Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) as a resource for meaning-making (Schleppegrell, 2017). The analysis in this paper applies Halliday's (1994) metafunctional framework and Nunan's (1995) analytical outline in order to investigate a corpus of ten lesson plans and their corresponding materials through a qualitative coding scheme. The findings reveal that the main instructions remain dominated by prescriptive rules that treat language as a static object. The analysis indicates that, despite learner-centred classroom management, the interpersonal resources of Mood and Modality remain teacher-controlled, limiting learners' ability to actively participate in the meaning-making process. The paper concludes that SFG can contribute to bridging the instruction gap by transforming grammar from a set of restrictive rules into a dynamic, functional resource for successful communication.

**Keywords:** Systemic Functional Grammar, lesson plan analysis, metafunctions, instruction gap, communicative competence



MAP EDUCATION  
AND HUMANITIES

Volume 7

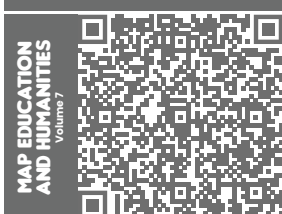
ISSN: 2744-2373 / © The Authors.  
Published by MAP - Multidisciplinary  
Academic Publishing.

Article Submitted: 10 March 2026  
Article Accepted: 19 April 2026  
Article Published: 20 April 2026



Publisher's Note: MAP stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

<https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2026.7.13>



## HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Bujak A., Avdagić K. (2026). An SFG-Based Metafunctional Analysis of High School English Lesson Plans and the Gap in Functional Knowledge.

MAP Education and Humanities, 7, 13-20. doi: <https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2026.7.13>



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## 1. Introduction

Linguists have contemplated and discussed different ways of grammar instruction in the field of English language teaching for a very long time now, and it seems that the topic itself is a source of inexhaustible opposing views and varying approaches. At one point in time, it was strongly believed that comprehensible input was sufficient for language acquisition to take place (Krashen, 1982; Prabhu, 1987), and the role of grammar instruction was minimised. However, after a while, it has been suggested that listening alone would not suffice, and proposed that the learner's attention should be drawn to specific forms to avoid and prevent learner fossilisation (Andrews, 2007; Snyder, 2008).

There was a need to square the circle, and as a result, new methods and new questions emerged. Linguists suggested different approaches, being implicit, explicit, incidental, systematic, proactive, and reactive, etc. This perpetual debate around the choice of grammar instruction came down to what is known as the traditional vs functional approach to language teaching (Derewianka & Jones, 2010). Succinctly put, these different approaches and language descriptions refer to both form and function. Whereas traditional approaches focused on rigid structure (Ulfiana et al., 2025), frequently neglecting the transition from theory to practice, functionally oriented linguists shifted the focus toward the communicative end-goal of language. Thus, despite their respective methodologies, both approaches failed to bridge the gap between form and meaning (Derewianka & Jones, 2010, p.7).

The imminent outcome of such a discrepancy manifests in the form of an instructional language gap, which creates and develops a disproportion "between what is taught and what is learned" (Nunan, 1995, p.135). In this context, Allwright (1984) challenges language educators to critically examine the reasons learners do not necessarily learn what teachers intend to teach. A major challenge lies in deciding whether language assistance should be implicit or explicit, and in determining the type of metalanguage required in language teaching (Coffin, 2010). Traditional grammar focuses primarily on structure and rules, whereas the functional approach prioritises the speaker's intention and the practical application of language.

M.A.K. Halliday's systemic functional grammar acts as a middle ground between these two perspectives. Though its main orientation is the functional use of language, it treats grammatical

structure and meaning as equally important, since they work together (Derewianka & Jones, 2010). Grammar frameworks, to a great extent, depend on what educators want the grammar model to do for them and their students. There is a major burden, nowadays, on instructors to go beyond syntactic precision and to prepare their students for complex, real-world communication. In this regard, SFG seems to be of interest to practitioners because it functions as a comprehensive system for teaching language as a whole, rather than a disconnected series of grammar exercises. (Derewianka & Jones, 2010).

## 2. Conceptual foundation and literature review

The value of grammatical inquiry lies in its capacity to provide models that foster "systemic, theoretically driven, comparative approaches to analysis" (Hart, 2014, p.5). These models equip researchers with the specialised terminology essential for rigorous analysis, enable a detailed examination of meaning, enhance analytical precision, and support the integration of quantitative methods when appropriate (Martin, 2000).

Systemic functional grammar is a theory that focuses on purpose and choice (Halliday, 1994). It is concerned with what speakers do and why they choose particular models of communication in specific communicative settings (Hart, 2014). The conceptual framework of SFG is functional in "three distinct although closely related senses: in its interpretation (i) of text, (ii) of the system, and (iii) of the elements of linguistic structures" (Halliday, 1994, p.39).

In contrast to the standard grammatical models that focus strictly on sentence structure, SFG attempts to demonstrate how language patterns operate across an entire discourse. In SFG terms, any text is a product of its environment, and it shows how the choice of words is a direct consequence of the activity at hand (Ideational function), the relationship between participants (Interpersonal function), and the medium of communication (Textual function) (Derewianka & Jones, 2010). According to Dare (2010), the SFG framework represents the most effective tool for understanding how language creates meanings. It is further argued that SFG provides a toolkit to navigate language, ranging from wide concepts to the fine details, where even the smallest grammatical structures are analysed not as isolated rules, but as deliberate tools used to create meaning (Derewianka & Jones, 2010).

Various studies in the field point out that SFG has been investigated as a solution to the instruction language gap. The findings indicate that SFG empowers educators to connect grammar to context and supports learners in bridging classroom instruction with real-world communication. According to Linares and Xin (2020), SFG has become a major framework in language education since it offers enabling tools for text analysis, classroom discourse, and literacy development. Though, successful implementation and application depend on teacher training and contextual adaptation. Numerous studies have been conducted in support of the aforementioned claims. Banegas (2021) investigates how teaching systemic functional grammar influences student-teachers' professional development, showing that it helps them connect linguistic theory with classroom practice. The author claims that teachers trained in SFG are more likely to design lessons that connect grammar to real-world language use, making learning more meaningful for students. Schulze (2015) argues that SFG provides teacher educators with powerful tools that help them in supporting English language learners in developing literacy across content areas. By learning SFG, teachers gain deeper insight into how texts are structured and how language choices shape meaning, enabling them to design language-focused instruction. In her paper, which treats teacher education in changing times, Gebhard (2010) argues that SFG offers a crucial framework for preparing teachers to meet the challenges of rapidly shifting educational demands in English language education. She claims that teachers who are trained in SFG can scaffold students' learning by making explicit the language features required for success in academic tasks. Fauzi and Putra (2022) argue that traditional grammar exercises are often inadequate in helping students to make meaning, and they propose the application of SFG principles to design exercises that connect grammar to real communication. Authors argue that by reconstructing exercises with SFG, learners might gain a better understanding of how language works in real communication, thus making grammar learning more engaging and purposeful. Schleppegrell (2013) discusses the importance of metalanguage, the notion which refers to terms and concepts used to describe how language works. It plays a crucial role in academic language development because it gives learners the tools to talk about language itself, making explicit connections between grammar, meaning, and contextual knowledge. Its importance manifests in the fact that the application of metalanguage in the classrooms helps learners understand how academic texts are structured and how language

functions in different subjects. Yadav (2025) argues that the functional approach closes the gap between instruction and learning outcomes by making language teaching more learner-centred and communicative. While traditional methods provide a solid grammatical foundation, functional approaches ensure that learners can actually use language in authentic situations. In her discussion on the functional approach to teaching, Burns (2016) concludes that functional approaches make grammar relevant, purposeful, and learner-centred. The approach helps in closing the gap between instruction and real-world language use. However, in due process, accuracy and fluency must be balanced, because grammar should complement, and not replace, traditional awareness of rules (Burns, 2016).

### 3. Methodology

The analysis in this paper encompasses ten lesson plans designed for the upper-intermediate (B2) level, aligned with the structure of the high school course textbook used in Travnik. The lesson plans include the following topics: (01) Past tenses – revision, (02) Gerunds and infinitives, (03) Past perfect simple and past perfect continuous, (04) Future forms, (05) Future continuous, future perfect simple and future continuous, (06) Comparative and superlative adjectives and adverbs, (07) Modal verbs of obligation, prohibition, and advice, (08) Third conditional, (09) Reported speech, and (10) The passive. The selection of lesson plans for this research was guided by the grammatical topics and units presented in the textbook.

In order to carry out the envisaged investigation, the study adopted a qualitative approach, integrating Nunan's (1995) concept of the instruction gap with Halliday's SFG. In the paper, the instruction gap is perceived as a failure of the lesson plan to bridge the gap between formal grammar instruction and the functional meaning-making required by the student. The study analysed ten upper-intermediate (B2) lesson plans drawn from Gateway (2nd Ed.) Teacher's Book for B2 level, authored by David Spencer.

The criteria used in the analysis involved tripartite distinction at the ideational, interpersonal and textual strata ranging from low, over medium to high. The high severity gap indicates a significant mismatch (focusing on form), and low indicates a successful bridge to functional meaning-making (students negotiate meaning). For example, at the ideational level in LP (*Lesson plan*) 01, the severity is *high* because students begin the class with a

dialogue but end up with rule matching and fill-in-the-blanks exercise, whereas in LP 03 it is *medium* since in the beginning of the lesson students are encouraged to use the past tenses to practice retelling stories. At the interpersonal level in LP 10, the gap severity is *high* because the focus is completely on the individual work and the use of the correct verb forms. However, in LP 07, students work together and compare answers in pairs before checking them in open class. At the *textual level* in LP 01, the gap severity is *high* because students complete sentences with the correct verb forms and name tenses, but do not work on the development of any meaningful text. Further details on each aspect of the individual lesson plans are provided in Table 1.

### 3.1. Aim of the paper

The paper aims to combine Nunan's (1995) concept of the instruction gap with Systemic Functional Grammar to investigate how lesson plans succeed or fail in aligning teaching intentions with learner outcomes. While the topic has been researched abroad, it has not, to the best of the authors' knowledge, been studied in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Nunan (1995) identifies several important elements that contribute to the language instruction gap or the mismatch between what teachers intend to teach and what learners actually acquire. He identifies the following elements:

1. a mismatch between instructional objectives and actual learning outcomes
2. focus on form over function
3. learner-centeredness vs teacher-centeredness
4. experiential vs prescriptive learning
5. institutional constraints.

Using the SFG tools, the instruction gap will be investigated across Ideational, Interpersonal, and Textual metafunctions.

### 3.2. Research questions

In this paper, the instruction gap is perceived as a failure of the lesson plan to bridge the gap between formal grammar instruction and the functional meaning-making required by the student as stated by Nunan (1995).

Rq 1 – At the ideational level of investigation do lesson plans conceptualize grammar primarily as a set of rules, rather than as a resource for representing experience?

Rq 2 – At the interpersonal level of investigation, how do the lesson plans position the learner in relation to the language?

Rq 3 – At the textual stratum, do the lesson plans fail to help students organise their thought into a coherent text?

### 3.3. Data analysis

The study analysed ten upper-intermediate (B2) lesson plans focusing on core grammatical structures (tenses, modals, conditionals, reported speech and the passive). Each lesson plan was inspected to determine how it overcomes or fails to overcome the gap between instructional intent and functional acquisition. The scale used in evaluation ranges from low, over medium to high in respect to whether the lesson plan fails, somewhat succeeds in or overcomes the gap between instructional intent and functional acquisition.

The first lesson plan portrays a classic instruction gap. It heavily prioritises identifying and naming tenses and prescriptive rules. The lesson treats grammar as a set of rules – Nunan's prescriptive element – rather than a resource for representing the world. The organisation of the lesson plan is highly teacher-centred. The student's speech function is primarily providing correct alternatives rather than negotiating meaning. The textual analysis shows that there is no instruction on how to organise these tenses into a coherent text.

The second lesson plan shows a complex interaction between formal instruction and functional use. The lesson starts with grammar rules, which is a prescriptive approach where language is seen as a system of restrictive rules rather than a way to encode experience. The gap is observed in a heavy reliance on grammar rules to solve problems. However, at one point, in exercises 2a and 2b, there is a move toward the experiential focus. Students are encouraged to use the target grammar to represent real-world circumstances. The lesson plan does not encourage the development of any wider texts because students are practising Gerunds/Infinitives as isolated grammatical units.

The third lesson plan begins with a highly experiential opening and demonstrates a strong bridge between experiential function and

**Table 1.**  
*Representation of the instruction gap.*

METAFUNCTION	Lesson plans	Gap Element	Severity	Evidence from the lesson plan
IDEATIONAL	01	Experiential vs prescriptive	High	Focus on matching sentences to grammatical explanations
	02	Experiential vs prescriptive	Medium	Transition from rule-matching to discussing revision techniques
	03	Experiential vs prescriptive	Medium	Starts with a story but moves to naming tenses and matching rules
	04	Experiential vs prescriptive	Medium	Test before you teach – starts with experience, but moves to rule completion
	05	Experiential vs prescriptive	Medium	Reordering sentences about 2050 vs completing rule boxes
	06	Experiential vs prescriptive	Medium	Transition from comparing countries to matching grammar rules
	07	Experiential vs prescriptive	Medium	Test before you teach – game rules vs correcting sentence errors
	08	Experiential vs prescriptive	Medium	Test before you teach vs technical focus on tense formulas
	09	Experiential vs prescriptive	High	Heavy focus on the completion of tense-change and word-change tables.
	10	Experiential vs prescriptive	Medium	Good real-world examples in warmer, but the focus is a fill-in exercise
INTERPERSONAL	01	Teacher vs learner-centred	Medium	Teacher-led vs student talk
	02	Teacher vs learner-centred	Low/Medium	High student engagement in interviews, but the final wrap-up is teacher-centric
	03	Teacher vs learner-centred	Medium	Teacher-led drills vs student-led interviews and stories
	04	Teacher vs learner-centred	Low/Medium	Includes peer discussion, but concludes with teacher-led grammar reference
	05	Teacher vs learner-centred	Low/Medium	Controlled practice shifts to student-to-student questioning
	06	Teacher vs learner-centred	Low/Medium	High level of pair work and class-based discussion
	07	Teacher vs learner-centred	Low	Students decide and negotiate the most useful information
	08	Teacher vs learner-centred	Low/Medium	Personalised closing activity vs. teacher-led rule presentation
	09	Teacher vs learner-centred	Medium	Pair work at the end, but dominated by the teacher-led rule presentation
	10	Teacher vs learner-centred	High	Entirely whole-class/individual work. There is no peer negotiation or choice

prescriptive rules, but in the main part, it suddenly shifts to identifying verb names and matching them to rules, thus creating the gap. The lesson assumes that mastering the /d/, /t/, and /ɪd/ pronunciation or the spelling of -ed is a prerequisite for, rather than a component of, meaning-making. The lesson plan is dominantly teacher-centred, but in the final part, some student agency is restored. However, the lesson plan fails to overcome the gap between formal tense formation and the functional meaning-making necessary for the development of a complex narrative.

The fourth lesson plan introduces future forms. It is possible to observe here the mismatch between the concept of the future and the instructional method. The lesson plan treats language as a set of prescriptive categories rather than a way to encode various types of future experiences. At the interpersonal level of analysis, students overcome the gap form vs function (activities 2 and 4b) by moving from passive identification of forms to expressing their own plans and negotiating meaning with their partners. But the lesson plan fails to provide specific instruction on how to organise different verb forms into a coherent narrative in line with Rq 3.

Experiential stratum of investigation shows that in the fifth lesson plan, there is a mismatch between the nature of tenses and the nature of the tasks. The lesson treats these complex tenses as puzzles to be solved rather than as a way to represent the logical sequence of future experiences. The activities are often reduced to morphological exercise (adding will have been / ing) instead of understanding the relationship between two future points in time. However, at the interpersonal level, the gap minimises (exercise 3c) because students have the opportunity to practice meaning negotiation with their peers. Overall, the lesson focuses on the clause level, failing to provide a useful instruction on how these tenses create cohesion within a narrative. The sixth lesson plan is designed to teach comparative and superlative adjectives. At the ideational level of analysis, it can be observed that instead of using comparison to talk about the way we represent our experience of the world, the lesson plan gives priority to the labelling of the categories. The interpersonal stratum overcomes the gap because students are given possibilities to make claims about their peers and the world. Again, at the textual level, it can be observed that the lesson does not provide instructions on how these forms help a student organise a coherent description beyond isolated sentences. In the seventh lesson, the instructional

can be seen in the fact that the lesson plan focuses on prescriptive tasks like answering questions and correcting errors. However, the gap minimises in the main part where students act as advisors and move from being subjects who are told what to do to agents who use language to influence others' behaviour. At the textual level, there is a gap because the lesson does not teach students to use modals to create a cohesive text thus confirming the third aim of this paper.

The instructional orientation in lesson plan number eight shows that grammar is often taught as a mathematical formula rather than a tool for expressing human experience. At the ideational level, the lesson focuses mostly on the prescriptive rules, like identifying the if clause and the main clause. At the interpersonal level, some agency is given to learners by encouraging them to write personalised sentences about their own past. The textual gap remains since almost all exercises focus on isolated sentences rather than on the larger narrative. The ninth lesson plan relies heavily on the prescriptive nature of language, requiring students to complete grammar rules showing how tenses and words change. At the interpersonal level, the gap narrows a bit because students are asked to report simple sentences to each other in pairs. However, the gap increases at the textual stratum because the lesson remains entirely at the clause level. The final lesson plan is mainly teacher-centred because the teacher tells, elicits, and provides all the words and feedback. At the experiential level, the lesson treats the topic as a mechanical rearrangement of words rather than a set of logical choices. The instructional aim is to learn about the passive forms, but it fails to explain why a writer would choose the passive over the active voice. At the textual level, the instructional gap is at its peak. The lesson focuses on finding mistakes in isolated sentences, and there is no reference to how the passive allows for better cohesion in a text.

## 4. Results and discussion

The analysis and the data obtained show that a recurring trend in the findings is the interplay between the functional and prescriptive nature of language at the ideational stratum of analysis. Lessons mostly begin with an experiential warmer, but the main part of the lesson generally reverts to rule-matching exercises.

The analysis also indicates that the interpersonal gap was the most successfully bridged dimension across the research sample. Specifically, in lessons 02 and 07, the instructional

design surpassed simple repetition by implementing peer interviews and collaborative decision-making tasks. In line with Rq2, the analysis shows that Mood choices shape how learners are positioned in relation to the language. By avoiding passive repetition and stimulating active negotiation of meaning, the lesson plan demonstrates how interpersonal language structures promote learner agency and participation in the communicative process. Conversely, the data revealed a significant interpersonal failure in lesson 10. In this instance, the lesson remained rigidly teacher-centred, focusing almost entirely on the mechanics of auxiliary verb stress and morphological accuracy.

The most obvious instruction gap identified in the paper is a complete absence of the textual metafunction. While the analysed lesson plans are effective in teaching students how to construct a correct and acceptable sentence, they almost entirely ignore how those sentences should be put together to form a coherent piece of communication. The analysis revealed that in 90% of the materials, language practice was limited to isolated tasks, such as fill-in-the-blank exercises or rewriting incoherent, standalone sentences.

Across the ten analysed plans, Nunan's (1995) instruction gap manifests in three specific ways, each emphasising a gap between the lesson's structural design and its communicative potential. Firstly, even in lesson plans labelled as task-based, like lesson 05, the final stages constantly prioritise morphological accuracy over the actual meaning-making act. This inclination reinforces the idea that language is a performance of correctness rather than a tool for achieving a social or communicative goal which is in line with Rq1 of this paper thus confirming it. Secondly, the lesson plans frequently claim to teach speaking or communication, but the classroom activities mainly produce isolated sentences in a notebook as in lesson plans 07 or 08. And thirdly, the frequent reliance on grammar reference pages throughout the analysed lesson plans suggests that the institutional pressure to cover the syllabus often overrides pedagogical innovation. This necessity to refer back to the grammar box in the textbook forces the teacher to close the meaning-making window prematurely, prioritising the task of covering the rules over the time-consuming process of authentic language acquisition.

## 5. Conclusion

By applying Nunan's (1995) analytical outline to ten B2-level lesson plans, this paper investigates the language instruction gap through the lens of Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday, 1994). The investigation aimed to identify whether traditional grammar instruction successfully bridges the gap between formal accuracy and the functional meaning-making required by learners in real-world contexts.

The analysis revealed a consistent and systematic metafunctional imbalance. While lesson plans utilise experiential warmers, the core instructional time is dominated by prescriptive rules. This reinforces a view of language as a static object of study rather than a dynamic resource for encoding human experience. The study found that while lesson plans are increasingly learner-centred in terms of classroom management (pair work and group discussion), the Mood and Modality remain teacher-controlled. The teacher remains the primary knower, limiting the student's ability to use grammar to negotiate social power or express personal judgment.

The most critical finding of this study is the almost complete neglect of the textual metafunction. Grammar is treated as a clause-level phenomenon. Students are taught to form correct sentences, but they are not taught how to create cohesion within a larger discourse in accordance with the Rq 3 of the paper.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the mismatch between what is intended to be taught and what is actually learnt exists because traditional instruction often neglects the metafunctional purpose of language. By adopting SFG as an analytical and pedagogical tool, educators can overcome the instruction gap by virtue of transforming grammar from a set of restrictive rules into a powerful, functional resource for meaning-making.

## 6. Limitations of the study

In respect to the limitations of the study presented here, one of the obstacles that was encountered and could not be overcome is the inability to actually perceive the classes being taught in the classroom. Namely, teachers truly refrain from being observed and even when they are observed the situation is far from real. In such situations the lesson plan is very extensive and detailed and usually students are already prepared and motivated to participate in the learning process.

## 7. Suggestions for further research

The use of SFG principles is a rather interesting point and definitely requires more research. It would be excellent to replicate this research on a larger scale and include class observations and post-class interviews with both teachers and students to gain invaluable insights about their views of the usefulness of this method.

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