

Unit of Study Teaching Report / Sora Goo

Executive Summary

This unit of study is designed to support university students majoring in Journalism at a university in Seoul, South Korea, who are preparing to work in international news press. These students, mostly third-year undergraduates, have taken journalism courses in Korean, but their exposure to English-medium journalism has been minimal due to curriculum limitation. While they are familiar with news writing in Korean, they lack experience with the structural and linguistic conventions of hard news, a widely used genre in professional journalism.

Their motivation comes from the growing demand in global media market for journalists who can write concise and objective news stories in English. This unit of study is grounded in a task-based, mixed-method needs analysis as recommended by Long (2005), combining Target Situation Analysis (TSA) and Present Situation Analysis (PSA) to identify the gap between students' current competence and the real-world demands of English-medium journalism. For TSA, authentic hard news texts can be analyzed to identify key linguistic features such as (1) passive voice, (2) nominal group, and (3) Theme-Rheme structure. PSA will draw on hypothetical student writing samples to observe common challenges with tone, objectivity and concise expression. Additional insights can be gained from feedback from journalism instructors and professionals. This analysis will triangulate data from student writing samples, authentic news texts and expert feedback to form a solid foundation for course design.

The central genre for this unit is hard news, a functional text whose purpose is to inform the public with factual, current, and objective information (Cotter, 2010). As White (1997) notes, hard news is the dominant genre in global journalism, understanding its structure and linguistic features is essential for the students who aspire to be in the international news discourse community and meet professional standards.

Using Systematic Functional Linguistics(SFL) genre-based approach (Martin & Rose, 2008), the course will explicitly teach students each stage and specific linguistic features of hard news such as passive voice for backgrounding agents and nominal groups. These features will be taught and practiced across a three-week-genre-based cycle following the Sydney School's Teaching and Learning Cycle (Rothery, 1996). Student engage in a sequence of genre-based activities: deconstructing model texts, joint constructing, and independent hard news writing. This report outlines the LSP context and presents an instructional guide that shows how genre theory can be

applied to provide journalism students with the linguistic tools to write professional hard news article in English.

Unit of Study (Instructional Guide)

Week 1: Joint Deconstruction – Understanding the Hard News Genre

◆ Activities & Instructional Tips:

- Read and discuss on their own

Ask students to read a model text (Appendix 1) carefully and guide them to identify and discuss social purpose of each stage of the text. Encourage them to consider how each stage contributes to the overall purpose of the genre and what kind of interaction it builds with the readers.

- Identify the Function of each stage using SFL genre-based approach

Guide students to annotate genre stages and concentrate on its social functions of each stage, labelling its name (headline, lead, main event, secondary event and prospect). The five-stage structure of hard news is based on Van Dijk's model of news discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1983). Teachers can handout a worksheet that prompt students to identify the stage and its function as outlined in Table 1. Also, teachers can ask a question like "What is the function of each move?" so that the students can be clearly aware of the purpose of each move and the structure of hard news.

Table 1

	Stage	Functions
1	Headline	Summarizes the main event concisely to capture readers' attention.
2	Lead (News summary)	Presents key facts using the 5W1H principle (What, Where, When, Who, Why and How).
3	Main Event	Describes the central conflict and main developments, explaining actors and outcomes.
4	Secondary Event	Provides detailed and localized impacts of the conflict
5	Prospect / Aftermath	Suggests possible future developments or provides updates.

- Introduce Theme-Rheme Concept and its Function

Explain the definition and the relation for Theme-Rheme. Emphasize that the Theme typically presents the known or given information—often the actor or key topic—enabling readers to quickly identify the central focus of the sentence. In contrast, the Rheme carries the new or important information, adding depth to what has already been established (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). Practice how to distinguish Theme and Rheme in a sentence on the model text. Make sure that Theme delivers the signification actor or event, enabling readers to immediately identify the key information, whereas Rheme highlights the essential new information involved with the figure or event.

Understanding the Theme-Rheme structure is essential for analyzing hard news writing, as it shows how journalists strategically organize information to prioritize key facts and guide reader focus efficiently. As Halliday and Matthiessen (2013, p. 89) explain, the choice of Theme allows the writer to organize the message strategically, enabling rapid comprehension of key facts.

- Identify key linguistic choices : passive voice and nominal group

Guide students to identify key linguistic resources in the model article (Appendix 2). After identification of linguistic choices, activate class discussion on how these choices reflect hard news values such as objectivity, density and mutual tone.

Then lead students to understand the functions of each feature as shown in Table 2. Also, teachers can encourage students to discuss the linguistic features used in the model text, focusing on how they serve the purpose of each move.

For example,

Teacher: We learned the definition of the Theme and Rheme and its functions in hard news. It helps the writers to put more important message at the front so the readers can grasp the information fast. Then think of passive voice. You know, we can shift the place of subject and object in a sentence by using this. What effects can be brought by this?

Student: Maybe focus on the result or affected people? Because when you use passive voice, the damaged people or the outcome comes first.

Teacher: Right, then how does using passive voice help fulfill the key features of hard

news, like...

Student: Having neutral tones? Because we can hide who did this. And they can focus on just what happened by hiding the agent, which makes the sentence sounds more impersonal.

Teacher: Great point. That's why journalists often choose passive voice: it helps them highlight the event rather than the actor, especially when the actor is unknown, sensitive, or politically charged. This supports the objective tone expected in professional reporting.

Table 2. SFL-Based Linguistic Resources

Feature	Function in News
Passive Voice	Maintain objectivity by backgrounding agents
Theme–Rheme	Structure information flow (known → new)
Nominal Group	Condense complex actions into dense noun forms for efficiency

Source: Halliday and Matthiessen (2013)

Week 2: Joint Construction – Writing Leads with SFL linguistic resources

◆ Activities & Instructional Tips:

- Guide Language Construction: Passive Voice and Nominal Group

1) Teaching Passive Voice

There are five instances of passive voice in the model text. Guide students to analyze them using a SFL lens as outlined in table 4 and discuss how passive voice shifts reader focus and maintains neutrality. You may also prompt students to rewrite passive sentences to active sentences to see how the shift affects meaning and emphasis. For example, changing “Three people were injured” to “A Ukrainian drone injured three people” highlights the agent and its responsibility.

Table 4

Context	SFL Function (Experiential /	Explanation
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	Interpersonal / Textual)	
1) Three people were injured... 2) Two of the people were injured...	Experiential & Interpersonal	Focuses on the victims rather than who caused the injury, helping backgrounding the agent (the drone attacker). Sets impersonal tone by avoiding direct attribution.
16 were downed over...	Experiential & Textual	Allows the sentence to start with the outcome, along with Theme-Rheme structure to make the number 16 significant.
Until several crucial conditions were worked out.	Experiential & Interpersonal	Shows the process in a neutral way while putting distance from who did the work for impersonal tone.
A blaze... that was sparked by Russian drone attack.	Experiential	Describe the result (fire) rather than the cause.

Halliday and Matthiessen (2013) explain that a function for using the passive voice is “to make the agent either late news, by putting it last... or implicit, by leaving it out” (p. 349). This choice allows writers to background the agent and bring the Medium into focus by making it Theme, eventually contributing to the objective tone of hard news reporting. By removing the agent from the clause, the possibility for putting explicit blame is reduced, which aligns with the strategic neutrality often required in journalistic discourse. (Almahameed et al., 2022, p. 1200)

Have students rewrite active voice sentences into passive one to achieve a more objective tone. For example, convert “*Ukrainian forces attacked a village*” into “*A village was attacked by Ukrainian forces*”. Then, encourage them to omit the agent entirely (“*A village was attacked*”) to help them experience how passive voice contributes to avoiding putting responsibility on agents, emphasizing outcomes, and maintaining objectivity. This practice helps students internalize key conventions of journalistic writing.

2) Teaching Nominal Group

Nominal group helps condense complex information into dense noun forms for efficiency required in hard news writing. For example, “their months-old foothold in the western Russian

region of Kursk” packed details of ownership, duration, the object, and spatial location into a single grammatical unit.

Following Halliday and Matthiessen’s (2013) framework, this group contains:

- a Deictic (their)
- an Epithet (months-old)
- a Thing (foothold)
- an embedded prepositional phrase (in the western Russian region of Kursk) functioning as a Qualifier.

The embedded prepositional phrase functions as a Qualifier within the group, providing additional specific information about the head noun (foothold). In this example, it situates the foothold geographically, enhancing information density and precision of hard news.

It is also effective to introduce students to the elements of a nominal group (Table 5), helping them to understand the function and typical ordering of each element. After that, you can guide them to identify nominal groups in an actual news text and break each one down into its component element. This task will help them develop their analytical skills.

Table 5. Elements of a nominal group

Element	Definition	Function
Deictic	A word that points to or specifies which entity is being referred to.	Identifies or determines the noun (ownership, definiteness, proximity).
Numerative	A word that indicates quantity or order.	Specifies the number or sequence of the noun.
Epithet	An adjective or phrase that describes a quality, state, or evaluation of the noun.	Adds descriptive or evaluative information about the noun.
Classifier	A word that categorizes the noun into a class or type.	Narrows down or specifies the noun by type, origin, purpose, etc.
Thing	The core noun that the nominal group is about.	Represents the central entity or concept being described.
Qualifier	A phrase (often a prepositional phrase) that provides additional	Adds more specific information such as location, time, manner, etc.

	details about the noun.	
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Source: Halliday and Matthiessen (2013, p. 364)

- Joint-Construction of a Lead Sentence with Theme-Rheme & Nominal Group

Step 1: Present 5W1H-based factual input

(e.g., What: a military strike, Where: near Kiev, When: early morning, Who: Russian forces, How: missile attack, Result: 12 civilians killed)

Teacher: In hard news writing, we often begin the lead sentence with the date and news agency name, like "March 16 (Reuters)" to give immediate context. Why do you think that is?

Student: I think it tells the reader when and who is reporting right away. It shows formality and credibility.

Teacher: Exactly. It's a genre convention. So, let's try building our lead sentence starting like that. What could go into the Theme position after that? Time? Result? Location?

Step 2: Guide Theme-Rheme construction discussion

Teacher: What happens if we put time at the first? How about result?

Compare "March 16 (Reuters) – Early in the morning, 12 civilians were killed in a missile strike near Kiev." Vs "March 16 (Reuters) – 12 civilians were killed in a missile strike near Kiev early this morning."

Student 2: I think putting the result first makes the story more impactful. So I'd choose the second one.

Teacher: Good. That's often done in hard news to prioritize the key facts.

Step 3: Prompt nominal group expansion

Teacher: Now, let's make that sentence denser using nominal groups. Suppose the civilians were women and children. How can we express that compactly?

Student: Maybe like this:

"March 16 (Reuters) – 12 unarmed civilians, including women and children, were killed in a missile strike near Kiev early this morning."

Teacher: Great. Let's add more precision. Can we specify who conducted the strike and where the forces were located—all within a noun group?

Student: How about this:

"March 16 (Reuters) – 12 unarmed civilians, including women and children, were killed in a missile strike by Russian military forces stationed along the northeastern border near Kiev early this morning."

Step 4: Explore the Meaning and Function of Passive Voice

Teacher: Now, let's look at the grammar here. We used passive voice in this sentence: "12 unarmed civilians, including women and children, were killed..." Why do you think we chose passive voice instead of saying "Russian forces killed 12 civilians"?

Student 1: Maybe to focus on the victims?

Teacher: Exactly. In Systemic Functional Linguistics, we say the passive voice puts the Medium, the affected participants, in the Theme position. This makes the outcome or the victim the starting point of the message.

Teacher: Let's test that. How would this sound in active voice?

Student 2: "Russian military forces stationed along the northeastern border killed 12 unarmed civilians, including women and children."

Teacher: How is that different?

Student 3: It feels more direct... maybe even a bit blaming?

Teacher: Yes. That's a great observation. Passive voice, especially in journalism, can help maintain neutrality. It also gives flexibility, sometimes the agent is unknown or left out for diplomatic or safety reasons.

Week 3: Independent Construction

◆ Activities & Instructional Tips:

- Hard News Article Writing : Using Genre and SFL language resources independently

Based on a provided news brief (5W1H + a few factual details), students will individually write a full hard news articles (5-6 sentences), including

- 1) Appropriate genre staging : Lead-Main event-details-prospect
- 2) At least two passive constructions with Theme-Rheme structure in mind
- 3) At least two nominal groups with three or more elements.

Russia, Ukraine continue air attacks with ceasefire prospects uncertain

By Reuters

March 16, 2025 3:00 PM GMT+9 • Updated 2 months ago



[1/4] Firefighters work at the site of an apartment building hit by a Russian drone strike, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Chernihiv, Ukraine March 16, 2025. REUTERS/Maksym Kishka [Purchase Licensing Rights](#)



March 16 (Reuters) - Russia and Ukraine continued aerial attacks on each other, inflicting injuries and damages, officials said early on Sunday, as the fate of a proposed ceasefire to the three-year-old war remained uncertain.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday he supported in principle Washington's proposal for a 30-day ceasefire with Ukraine but that his forces would fight on until several crucial conditions were worked out.

Both sides have since traded heavy aerial strikes, and Russia moved closer on battlefield to ejecting Ukrainian forces from their months-old foothold in the western Russian region of Kursk.

The Russian defence ministry said on Sunday that its air defence units destroyed a total of 31 Ukrainian drones over Russian territory.

Of those, 16 were downed over the southwestern region of Voronezh, nine over the territory of the Belgorod region and the rest over the Rostov and Kursk regions, the ministry said on the Telegram messaging app.

In a Ukrainian drone attack on the Russian border region of Belgorod, three people were injured, including a 7-year-old, regional Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said earlier on the Telegram messaging app.

Two of the people were injured after a drone hit their house, sparking a fire in the Gubkinsky district of the region, while the other person was injured in a drone attack on the village of Dolgoye, Gladkov said.

Alexander Gusev, governor of Voronezh, said on Telegram that there was no immediate reports of injuries or damage.

The acting governor of the southern Russian region of Rostov said there were no immediate reports of injuries or damage reported there either.

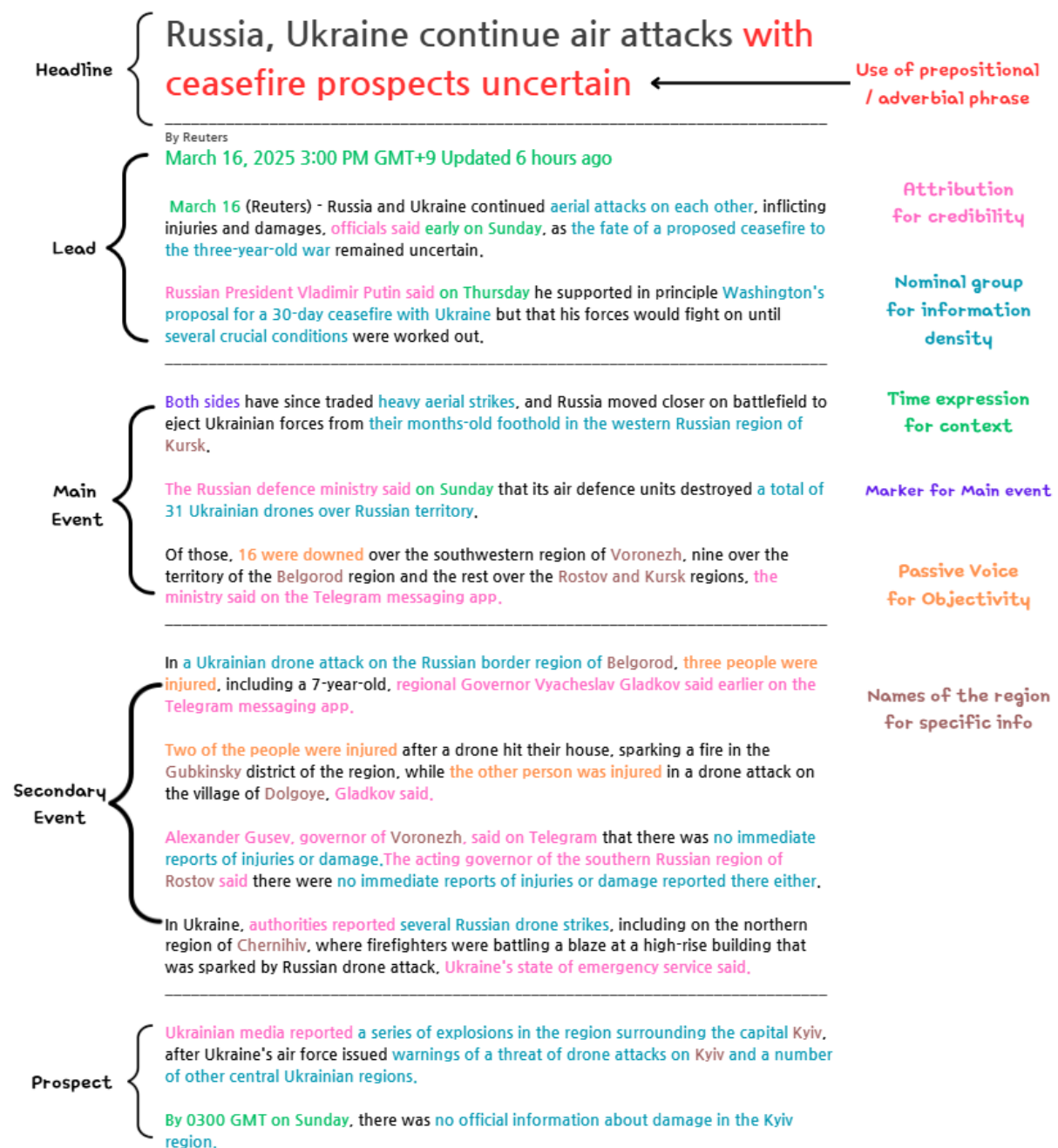
In Ukraine, authorities reported several Russian drone strikes, including on the northern region of Chernihiv, where firefighters were battling a blaze at a high-rise building that was sparked by Russian drone attack, Ukraine's state of emergency service said.

Ukrainian media reported a series of explosions in the region surrounding the capital Kyiv, after Ukraine's air force issued warnings of a threat of drone attacks on Kyiv and a number of other central Ukrainian regions.

By 0300 GMT on Sunday, there was no official information about damage in the Kyiv region.

Appendix 2

MODEL TEXT ANNOTATION ANALYSIS



Reference

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