



Theme and Thematic Progression in EFL Students' Writing: A Systemic Functional Linguistics Analysis

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ABSTRACT

A key component of writing that seamlessly integrates into language events is the use of theme and thematic progression. Observing themes is valuable for identifying the writing challenges faced by English learners, while incorporating thematic progression into writing lessons can help students achieve greater coherence in their texts. The present study aims to investigate the dominant patterns of theme and thematic progression in the writing of EFL college students at Universitas Pembinaan Masyarakat Indonesia (UPMI), Medan. A qualitative approach was employed since the study primarily focuses on descriptive elaborations of students' writing assignments. Data were collected through purposive sampling, involving twenty-one undergraduate students from the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education (FKIP) at UPMI who were enrolled in academic writing classes. Both classroom observations and semi-structured interviews served as the instruments for data collection. Data analysis consisted of several stages. First, the students' pre-writing assignments were reviewed and categorised into three levels: low, middle, and high achievers. These texts were then analysed using the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly the theory of theme systems and thematic progression. Subsequently, the students' post-writing assignments were examined and compared within the same categorisation. The findings reveal a significant relationship between students' writing performance and the application of the SFL framework. High- and middle-achieving students demonstrated the ability to construct coherent messages within clauses, effectively employing theme systems and thematic progression to produce larger texts characterized by cohesion and coherence. This suggests that explicit attention to thematic progression in writing pedagogy can play a crucial role in improving the academic writing skills of EFL learners, particularly in the Indonesian higher education context.

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1. Introduction

Writing as one of productive skills generally is recognized as a difficult task by EFL students (Rosa, 2007). One of the main students' problem encounter in writing includes difficulties in producing a coherent (Haji, 2023). Coherent text can convince the evaluator of its suitability for the objective programme. Knowing whether a student's writing is coherent or inconsistent is a great asset to teachers, professors, and language teachers. It helps them to decide whether a student should receive enrichment or not (Jalilifar, 2010;

Wei, 2016). However, it is not easy to achieve since they must have a tool to evaluate students' writing (c). Theme and Thematic progression are useful as analytical tool to examine the problems in students texts, such as the areas where students suffer from a lack of writing coherently, and cohesively at the sentence, paragraph, and essay levels.

The cohesive and coherence of college students' essays also can be figured out through theme and rheme due to writing requires good knowledge of grammar, expression and secondary skills such as coherence, cohesion and unity. It is further supported by (Gunawan & Aziza, 2017) that English learners struggle to organize cohesive and critical composition through proper writing styles and well-organized ideas. As Halliday (1994) stated, coherence is —the internal resource for structuring the clause as a message, including the notions of Theme and information. Cohesion is an important aspect of discourse analysis as it creates coherence (Indriani, 2012).

Regarding cohesion and coherence in educational texts, it can be applied using Systematic Functional Linguistics or SFL. SFL is used to interpret meaning in a social context. This means that SFL views language as a resource in which people establish what it means to interact with others in certain cultural and situational contexts. SFL theory is in which the people literally set up the building knowledge, experience and culture (Emilia, 2014). SFL highlight in which language has three function (Emilia & Hamid, 2015). The three functions in language which is mentioned in SFL theory is interpersonal function, ideational function and textual function. Interpersonal function or tenor is about social relation, ideational function or field is about language which construct the language, then textual function or mode is about the context which constructed by the language (Emilia & Hamid, 2015). In the textual function, it investigates how the language construct the cohesive and coherence in a text.

The studies of thematic progressions reside in students' works has been clearly classified in Indonesia (e.g., Gunawan and Aziza, 2017; Emilia, Habibi and Bangga, 2018; Muroda, Madjid and Jati, 2018) and outside Indonesia (e.g., Black, 2014; Alyousef, 2015; Wei, 2015). In Gunawan and Aziza's study (2017) which investigated the theme choice along with its thematic progression in parts of undergraduate theses, the results revealed that the dominant theme was topical, and as for thematic progression the iteration pattern dominated. The present study provides an instructional package in Thematic Progression for Chinese EFL students by examining theories in Systemic Functional Grammar and reviewing relevant literature (Jing, 2015). The activities in this instructional package are designed to build students' meta-knowledge of coherence and thematic progression in order to give students more grammatical resources to improve the coherence of their writing, help them become aware of how information and ideas should flow in a text so that it could be easily understood by the reader. In addition, students would apprehend which thematic progression patterns are valued in English writing and have the opportunities to apply this knowledge to improve their writing.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theme And Rheme

Mostly, the EFL learners feel challenged in writing due to the fact that creating cohesive and coherence in a text is not easy. It can be investigated through the thematic progression in a text in which the theme and rheme in a text is constructed.

The theme system related to the organization of information in each clause and, consequently, in the broader text (Martin 1992, as cited in Emilia, 2014). Textual meta-function describes components that give a text its coherence, like discourse markers, sentence connectors, and the notions of "Theme" and "Rheme" (Tyler, 2010).

The theme is the message written at the beginning of the clause in which this message expresses the overall understanding of the clause (Halliday, 1994; Gerot & Wignell, 1995; Lock, 1996; Wiratno, 2018). It usually includes shared or mutual knowledge from the immediate context, or it may contain well-known, outdated, or provided information that has already been mentioned in the text. While rheme is a part of the assembly of the new information that the text offers (Cummings, 2003). As the text develops, the themes make numerous connections to the Themes and Rheme of the sentences that came before them, highlighting and expanding on key ideas. The connection provides thematic progression patterns (Daneš, 1974).

The theme is classified into three, they are topical theme, interpersonal theme and textual theme. This typology of theme is constructed using textual meta-function. The topical theme is the first element in the clause that expresses some kind of representational meaning which realized in transitivity structure as a participant, a circumstance or a process. The textual theme is any combination of continuance, structural and conjunctive (Halliday, 2014). A continuance is one of a select few discourse signalers that indicate the start

of a new move, along with "yes," "no," "well," "oh," and "now." It indicates the start of a new move in a conversation and can also be a response or a transition to the next topic if the speaker is continuing. The interpersonal theme is any combination of vocative, modal, and mood-marking (Halliday, 2014). A vocative is any item used to address, usually a personal name. It can appear almost anywhere in the clause and is thematic if it comes before the topical Theme. Modal adjuncts mean probability, usuality, typicality, obviousness, opinion, admission, persuasion, entreaty, presumption, desirability, reservation, validation, evaluation, or prediction and appear before the topical Theme are considered modal themes. When a mood-marking theme comes before the topical theme, it can be a finite verbal operator; otherwise, it can be a WH-interrogative (or imperative "let's") if there isn't another experiential element before it.

2.2 Types of Themes Based on Textual Meta-function

2.2.1 Topical theme

There are three ways to express the topical theme: as a Process (verb), as a Circumstance (adverb), or as a Participant (subject and object) (Emilia, 2014). Emilia (2014) goes on to say that Topical Themes offer information on the topic issue. Topical Themes are required to appear in every finite clause, whereas Textual and Interpersonal Themes are optional (Leong, 2022). Additionally, topical themes come in two varieties: marked and unmarked. The unmarked topical theme refers to the first topical unit of a declarative clause serving as the sentence subject (Martin et al., 1997, as cited in Emilia, 2014).

2.2.2 Interpersonal theme

The interpersonal theme is used to express the writer's or speaker's subjective assessment of the meaning (or concept) under discussion (William, 1993, as cited in Emilia, 2014). Additionally, it serves to highlight the points of view that authors takes up (Droga & Feez, 2012, as referenced in Emilia, 2014).

2.2.3 Textual theme

By connecting the clause to its context, textual themes preserve coherence (Eggins, 1994). They are present in relatives, conjunctive, and coordinating and subordinating (structural conjunctions) (Martin et al., 1997, as cited in Emilia, 2014).

2.3 Thematic Progression

Cohesive and coherence is the important function in writing that can be obtained through thematic progression. Thematic progression gives the contribution to cohesive development of the text (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). It regards to the combination between theme and rheme. Hence, in thematic progression, theme creates the connection between previous message and following sentence which continue the information provided by the preceding sentence while the rheme develops and elaborates the information or idea initiated in the theme (Choung, 2017). Additionally, in the beginning theme and rheme need to collaborate each other in developing the text in order to create the next theme and rheme coherence and cohesive. Thus, thematic progression concerns the way that the texts develop the ideas they present.

In thematic progression is classified into three pattern, there are zig zag pattern, reiteration pattern, multiple theme pattern (Eggins, 2004). First, it is zig zag pattern in which the function is to achieve the cohesion in a text by establishing on newly introduced information. The theme of the zigzag linear pattern is taken from the rheme of the previous clause. It creates a coherent, rhythmic pattern in which the information is presented one after the other. Second, it is reiteration pattern which has the function to provide the text with a clear focus. The reiteration pattern is a writing technique wherein the theme from the preceding clauses is primarily repeated. By repeating prior information, this tactic appears to be effective in giving the text a coherent and cohesive effect; however, by maintaining the same content in the following clauses, the reader or listener may become bored. The multiple rheme pattern occurs when a rheme's information is discovered to be the themes of the clauses or paragraphs that follow.

The importance of analyzing the development of a theme in a text is to know the development of the information exists there. Of course, there will be gaps during the implementation process according to the meaning of the text containing it. Take for example academic texts that tend to have zigzag or zigzag layouts linear topic model (Fries cited in Wang, 2007). This happens because it yields a complicated argument in which the following ideas are expansions of the ideas in the previous sentence. Further using thematic progression will help learners recognize patterns in the text highlight the beginning and end of the text's focus expressed with practical meaning organize clauses, paragraphs, and speech (Arancón, 2013). Another use of the theme progression is that it gives the text a coherent development that leads to coherence of the text (Butt, et. al.; 2006). With it, structurally and semantically, the text will be more coherent (Guan, 2015).

Certain studies have suggested thematic progression should be included in English writing lessons to help students write more coherently (Christie & Dreyfus, 2007; Wang, 2007; Wei, 2014). Wang (2007) asserted

that students should be taught how to organize new and old information to help improve cohesion and coherence in their writing, and that the theory of Thematic Progression was a useful tool for teachers to diagnose writing difficulties.

3. Method

This study used a qualitative research design within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Creswell, 2003). A descriptive-qualitative design was carried out in a natural setting (McMillan, 1992; Creswell, 2003; Silverman, 2005). It was decided that a descriptive qualitative study would be appropriate because the main goal of this study is to analyze, characterize, classify, and interpret data in order to identify how the writing of college students in theme system and thematic progression. In addition, the qualitative approach was conducted in this study since the elaboration was in words form not in number which the data was obtained in the form of field-note or interview (Creswell, 2003).

The source of data investigated was the students' writing assignment of argumentative essay. The participant of this study was college students in *Universitas Pembinaan Masyarakat Indonesia* totaling twenty students. All the name of the students was written in pseudonyms. The purposive sampling was conducted in this study since the research subject was chosen based on the criterion. Purposive sampling is the providing the important information by choosing the participants which can be set up by other choices (Taherdoost, 2018).

Interviews and observation served as the data collection tools. During the observation, the researcher made notes about the activities carried out by the students and teacher. In contrast, the lecturer was addressed in the interview. The questions concerned teaching SFL in writing, the students' writing skills and so on. The data collection for this study was done in a number of steps. The lecturer gave the students the topic and then instructed them to write a text. The lecturer did not cover the pre-writing task, or the role of SFL in writing, during the first meeting. Subsequently, the investigator gathered the documentation data, which consisted of the students' written assignments. The lecturer then went on to explain the purpose of SFL in writing.

4. Results

4.1 The Analysis of Theme System

The text is categorized as argumentative text since its social function is to persuade a reader to adopt a certain point of view or to take a particular action. Emilia (2005) states argumentative essay is relevant to the necessity to develop Critical-Thinking to explore EFL learners' potential. Furthermore, according to Knapp and Watkins (2005) puts it is a significant and powerful language process that is necessary for addressing a wide range of academic material and social participation. Hence it follows that an argumentative essay is undoubtedly one of essential school writing genres to efficiently develop writing skills and practice their textual knowledge. The identification of the text is based on the text's organization and language features. In terms of the text structure, the text consists of thesis, arguments and recommendation. The students' writing topic determined was about Students should Avoid ChatGPT. In addition, there exist three categories of themes: textual, interpersonal, and topical.

Table 1. Theme-Rheme Analysis of Student Writing

Cl	Textual	Interpersonal	Topical	Rheme
1			the use of chatgpt	is often misused by various parties.
2	sometimes		they	deliberately search for answers ...
3			It	can cause students to become less confident...
4	Therefore,		the use of technology	such as chatgpt should be limited by students.
5			Students	should spend more time

There was greater use of topical theme than textual theme and interpersonal theme in theme choice selection. Next, thematic progression was observed another learning gap. The Interpersonal Theme does not appear in student text 1. This result indicates that modalization and modulation are still rarely used by students.

4.2 Thematic Progression

4.2.1 Reiteration pattern

The reiteration pattern is the most frequent pattern applied by English graduate students applying for Sociology in their university application letters. It comprised 405 units over 449 TP clauses, which is 90.57%

of all the patterns used. This pattern occurs when the theme of the first clause is repeated, not necessarily with identical wording, as the same theme of the subsequent clause (Paltridge, 2006) to elaborate different ideas and information of one participant in a range of clauses. Indeed, in the reiteration theme pattern, “the same theme enters into relation with several different Rheme. The result of this type of TP is that the Themes in the text constitute a chain of (typically) co-referential items which extends through a sequence of clauses” (Fries, 1995). The high frequency of the reiteration theme may be explained by the applicants’ ability to keep the focus of their essays by reiterating the same theme of the clause in the following clauses. In the data under investigation, this pattern consists mainly in retaining the same theme “I” which is employed by the graduate students over several clauses and sentences to try to self-position themselves as perfect candidates for the target program. The thematic investigation of the graduate PSs revealed a heavy reliance on the first personal pronoun “I”, which is appropriate in the genre of PSs, as the most recurrent theme since this genre is meant to provide information that naturally centers around the applicants themselves. This thematic phenomenon contributes to the informativeness, argumentativeness, and ambiguity of the students’ writings, such characteristics are highly recommended by the admission committee members.

2.2.2 Zig-zag pattern

Surprisingly, this pattern was not as dominant as the preceding one in the Sociology PSs. Indeed, it comprised only 9.57% of the TP patterns in the application essays. In this thematic pattern, the element that is presented as the Rheme of the first clause gets promoted to be the Theme of the subsequent clause (Bloor & Bloor, 2004) to develop what was mentioned in the Rheme of the previous clause. The use of the zig-zag pattern in by some students carries certain significance. This thematic progression structure assists the students in smoothly composing their application essays by introducing new information to be elaborated, a fact that will enrich and strengthen the development of their texts’ fluency and coherence (Alyousef, 2015). More importantly, the zigzag thematic pattern might be employed in the data under investigation as a persuasive strategy to prove the student’s suitability to the target discipline. More proficient writers opted to use a highly argumentative and engaged writing style, where arguments are built in a persuasive structure, to achieve its communicative purpose on the one hand and as a means to retain the text’s cohesion on the other. This could be attributed to the candidates’ awareness in choosing the appropriate way to portray and “sell” their image to the evaluation committee members and effectively impress their audience. Indeed, by applying the zig-zag pattern, English students attempted to produce a more complex and fluid narrative pattern meanwhile avoiding the redundancy of the first-person pronoun as the focal Theme in their application essays.

2.2.3 Multiple-rheme pattern

According to Eggins (2004), the Multiple-rheme pattern refers to the Rheme in the previous clause that includes several constituents that are taken up as themes in the subsequent clauses. The thematic progression analysis of the data under investigation revealed that this pattern was absent, that is it was not used by any of the applicants in the Sociology PSs, which seems quite expected. Indeed, though this pattern offers a well-structured thematic development of the text which may convince the readers to align with the writers’ opinions, in such a genre, Sociology Master students shared the same tendency to adopt a plain, direct style based on the reiteration and zig-zag progression patterns to make their essays therefore understandable. This reveals the students’ awareness of the genre’s academic conventions and requirements, knowing that the selected participants got admitted and were already enrolled in the target program. More to the point, the absence of the third type of thematic progression pattern did not affect negatively or underscore the quality of the analyzed students in any aspect. Conversely, it was validly replaced by the intensive use of reiteration and zig-zag patterns to operate the same goal, which is to create a well-organized thematic pattern in their essays, to convince their readers of their suitability to the desired university.

5. Discussion

The three types of Themes (Topical, Interpersonal, and Textual Themes) are applied in students’ Recount texts. As illustrated in Table 1, the Topical Theme is the most frequent Theme used. It occurs 170 times or 67.2% of the total. This Topical Theme is broken-down into two parts, i.e. the marked Theme which occurs 39 times or 15.4% and the unmarked Theme which occurs 131 times or 51.8%. The finding of the high number of Topical Themes in students’ texts may indicate that student writers effectively orient the reader to what their texts are about. As one of the linguistic features of Recount text is to focus on what the text is telling, this may be the background of the dominant number of occurrences of the Topical Theme in students’ Recount texts. The following lists the numbers of themes that appear in the argumentative text:

Table 2. The Numbers of Themes in Students' Writing

Types of themes		Frequency	%
Topical	Marked	10	8
	Unmarked	64	51.2
Interpersonal		1	0.8
Textual		50	40
Total		125	100

The table illustrates the three different themes—topical, interpersonal, and textual. At 74 instances (60.15%) of the total, the topical theme has the highest frequency of any theme. There are two categories for this kind of theme: marked and unmarked. In the argumentative text above, the identified topical theme accounts for 8% of the total, while the unmarked theme makes up slightly more than half, or 51.2%. Less than 1% of the text's frequency is accounted for by the one frequency of the interpersonal theme. Finally, 50 times, or 40% of the total, the Textual Theme appears.

In contrast to topical theme, interpersonal theme has very little occurrence in the recount text. It only occurs once. The interpersonal theme, according to William (1993, as cited in Emilia, 2014), is to foreground the writer's judgment. Since the interpersonal theme is used more often in conversation, the small percentage of the theme in the argumentative text is considered to be normal (Eggins, 2004), since the argumentative text is in written language. It is in line with what Butt et al. (2000) said that the interpersonal theme is generally used in spoken texts to help sustain students' interaction. As for textual theme, it occurs 50 times or 40%.

The use of textual theme in the text is to maintain the connectedness of the text, relating the text to the context (Eggins, 2004; Halliday, 2014; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). It appropriately fulfills the role of the text, which is to tell the events in chronological steps (Derewianka & Jones, 2016). Therefore, it shows that the writer is highly capable of writing a cohesive and coherent text.

Different from the topical theme, the interpersonal theme is the rarest type of theme found in students' texts. The occurrences of interpersonal theme in the entire students' text is only 1 time or equal to 0.4% in the high achieving students' texts. This finding signals that the student writers rarely use modulation and modalisation in their texts (Emilia, 2005). The rare use of the interpersonal theme in students' recount text is acceptable since it commonly occurs in the conversation (Eggins, 2004). This confirms Butt et al.'s (2000) statement that the interpersonal theme is more often found in spoken texts for students to join and sustain their interaction. Meanwhile, the conversation or spoken interaction is rarely used in the recount texts, so this may be background of infrequent number of occurrences of the interpersonal theme in students' recount texts. On the other hand, the textual theme occurs 50 times or equal to 40% of the total. The total occurrences of textual theme evidences that the students are aware of the important role that the textual theme plays in creating a cohesive and coherent text. The following illustrates how many times each theme appears in the thematic progression:

Table 2. The number of occurrences in thematic progression in the students' argumentative essay

Types of themes	F	%
Theme reiteration	60	88.20
Zig zag	8	11.80
Total	68	100

Thematic progression indicates the strategies employed by writers to establish a connection between a clause's Theme and Rheme and the other clauses (Hawes, 2015). In this regard, the recount text contains the greatest number of instances of the Theme reiteration (60). It helps in keeping the text's social goal—relating a personal experience—front and center. Additionally, it shows that the writer is capable of understanding and even producing writings that are more difficult to read or write—that is, texts with more intricate structures. Butt et al. (2000) assert that improving one's capacity to read and write longer texts is greatly impacted by one's ability to use thematic progression to manage the mode's expression.

The table shows that there is correlation between the implementation of themes with the level of achievement. From the three groups of this study (high achiever, middle achiever, and low achiever), the high achieving students frequently produced more Topical Theme, Interpersonal Theme, and Textual Theme compared to the other two groups. It may be caused by the number of clauses made by high achieving students who tend to write longer texts than those of the other groups. Meanwhile, the middle achieving students produced more

Topical Theme and Interpersonal Theme compared to the low achieving students. It is probably due to the same reason, namely the number of clauses of middle achievers was greater than that of the low achievers. To conclude, The Topical Themes are the most dominant Themes occurring in students' Recount texts of all levels (67.2%), followed by Textual themes (31.4%). Meanwhile, the Interpersonal Themes are rarely used in students' Recount text (0.4%). This result supports the study of Safitra (2013), whose findings show that there were three types of Theme used by the students, namely Topical, Textual, and Interpersonal, in which the Topical Theme was the most frequently used.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that the use of systematic functional linguistics (SFL) in writing courses brings importance to Indonesian students' English writing process. It can be demonstrated by the difference in writing work between the pre-writing and post-writing stages. Students can build on the information within each clause to form larger texts by applying the thematic system. Students (high, intermediate, and low level learners) can convey the stated message using theme and rhyme. These students (middle and high school students) apply topical, textual, and interpersonal themes in their writing. They also adopted the subject variety consisting of three subjects in their complex clauses. On the other hand, many weak students still cannot apply the thematic system, so they have problems without topics in the clauses. This makes the text difficult to understand. Additionally, students can apply thematic progression in their writing. The use of zigzag patterns and repetition is used by intermediate and high level learners as introductions in their texts. For many models, all students (high, average, and low learners) applied it to clarify the problem. They can make the text more cohesive and cohesive through the use of thematic progression.

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