

THEMATIC PROGRESSION IN ARGUMENTATIVE PARAGRAPHS: REALIZATION, PROBLEMS CONCERNING AND THE UNDERLYING CAUSES

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Abstract. The purpose of this research is to investigate the realization of thematic progression patterns in argumentative paragraphs written by freshmen majoring in English at a university in Hanoi, as well as to identify related problems and their underlying causes. To achieve this goal, the study collected and analyzed 10 paragraphs written by 10 freshmen in their end-of-course test, using a qualitative approach with descriptive analysis. The study utilized Halliday's (2004) Theme system and Thematic progression (TP) patterns based on Daneš's three-pattern system (1974), along with additional ideas from Aziz (1988), Eggins (2005), Lautamatti (1987), Mauranen (1996) Newsham (1977), and Simpson (2000). The findings show that the most commonly used TP pattern is Motivated New Theme (MN), followed by Rheme-Theme (R-T), Theme-Theme (T-T), Extended Rheme-Theme (ERT), Extended Theme-Theme (ETT), and Unmotivated New Theme (UN). The study also identified a key problem in the prevalence of Motivated Theme, leading to abrupt transitions. This problem is attributed to the overuse of textual themes, inappropriate adoption of marked themes, and non-linear development of ideas in students' writing. Therefore, the study suggests that teaching the connotation of thematic progression should be introduced at an early stage of English writing instruction. This would enable students to design the development of ideas, ensure inter-textual coherence, and establish logical relations in their academic paragraphs. Such an approach would help these freshmen produce more semantically and structurally coherent essays in their subsequent academic years.

Keywords: theme-rheme, thematic progression, TP patterns, paragraph, coherence, problems.

1. Introduction

Thematic progression is a crucial aspect of effective academic writing, as it ensures the logical development of ideas and the coherence of the text as a whole (Carter T [1]; Paltridge, [2]). Therefore, it has been extensively studied by many researchers. However, despite its significance, many students struggle with understanding and implementing thematic progression, particularly in the context of paragraph construction.

Many researchers in their research papers have claimed that students seem to produce effective academic writings, including academic essays, academic papers, and academic abstracts when Theme-Rheme is used effectively in their writings (Witte & Faigley, [3]; Chiang, [4]). However, there is a notable lack of studies that focus on the use of Theme-Rheme in paragraph writing, particularly among freshman students. This gap in the literature has motivated the authors to conduct a study to investigate the thematic progression patterns employed by freshman students in their argumentative paragraphs, as well as identify related problems and underlying causes.

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To achieve this aim, the following research questions were formulated:

- (1) *What is the realization of thematic progression in freshman students' argumentative paragraphs?*
- (2) *What are the primary problems concerning thematic progression in these texts?*
- (3) *What are the underlying causes of these problems?*

2. Content

2.1. Literature Review

There have been a significant number of research papers on the use of Theme-Rheme progression in EFL learners' academic writing performance worldwide.

In China, Wang [5] chose to analyze a sample composition by a Chinese tertiary student. The findings revealed that the examined text featured insufficient Thematic progression, especially the cross-referential TP, which made it a stream of disconnected ideas. Meanwhile, constant progression was overused, and there were some misused cases of Theme and Rheme. After the student was instructed to apply the same analysis procedure and rewrote the text, the textual cohesion was significantly improved. Wei [6] stood out with quasi-experimental research on 90 participants, including both EFL learners and native speakers. It is noticeable from the findings that Chinese students committed a number of significant thematic problems while writing English essays. Also, overuse of marked Themes and, more seriously, unmotivated Theme hindered their ability to use TP patterns properly.

In Thailand, Arunsitrot [7] examined Thai EFL learners' writing, focusing on thematic selection, pattern, and progression problems, and found that textual themes were used more frequently than interpersonal themes, and multi-themes were used more frequently than simple themes. Three patterns were identified, including constant, zigzag, and split rheme patterns, which resulted in five problems such as brand new theme, empty rheme, empty theme, overuse of constant progression, and confusing selection of textual themes.

In Arabs, Albogobeish and Sedghi [8] explored the thematic progression patterns used in research article abstracts written in English by Arabic Literature research writers. The results showed two thematic progression patterns used by the writers, linear and constant, with the constant pattern being used more frequently. Additionally, a miscellaneous pattern was identified in the research article abstracts.

In Vietnam, Le [9] conducted research employing the theoretical framework of Theme-Rheme and thematic progression. The collected data interestingly discovered the fact that the problems of "brand new Theme" and "empty Rheme" were the most common, leading to a disconnection in the overall meaning, in other words, little ineffective cohesion. The introduction of Theme-Rheme and thematic progression resulted in the same outcome - considerably better cohesion. Vu [10] also compared English argumentative writings composed by Vietnamese students to those of native expert writers. The analysis revealed similar issues related to the misuse of Theme-Rheme and thematic progression. In more detail, it was discovered that the ESL writer participants were over-reliant on textual links, more likely to make 'abrupt switches in topical Themes' and more. These factors, as concluded by Vu, ESL argumentative texts are more disconnected, harder to follow, less persuasive, and less well-supported.

N.V. Thang and N.T.M. Tam (11) also conducted a case study that investigated the realization of thematic progression (TP) patterns and their effects on text quality in online IELTS Writing Task 2 samples by Vietnamese learners. The study found that Simple Linear Progression (SLP) was the most frequently employed pattern in the corpus, followed by Constant Progression (CP), Split Rheme Progression (SRP), Split Theme Progression (STP), and Derived Hypertheme

Progression (DHP). The analysis also showed that proper employment of TP overall is a contributing factor to the coherence and cohesion of the text, with each pattern exerting different effects. Problems related to the lack of TP, inappropriate theme positioning, and the overuse of the theme “It” and “There” were also reported in the corpus.

While there have been numerous studies on Theme-Rheme progression in EFL learners' academic writing performance, there are few focusing on that in paragraph writing, particularly among freshman students. To fill that gap, this study aims to investigate the thematic progression patterns employed by freshman students in their argumentative paragraphs and identify related problems and underlying causes. The goal of selecting this level is to raise students' awareness of thematic progression, which contributes to more coherent texts and helps them build a solid foundation for producing well-organized and coherent essays, reports, or thesis papers in future academic years at university.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

2.2.1. Theme and Rheme

According to Halliday and Matthiessen [12], theme is the starting point of the message that sets the context for the rest of the information and initiates the semantic journey. Despite being defined based on position, theme involves more than just occupying the first position. In contrast, the rheme is the remaining part of the message that develops the theme and generally conveys unfamiliar or new information.

2.2.2. Types of theme

As elaborated in Halliday [12], Eggins [13], and Emilia [14], the theme is categorized into three different types, which are topical, textual, and interpersonal themes.

The topical theme can be defined as the first element in the clause that expresses certain representational meanings linked to transitivity roles, such as actor, behavior, sensor, carrier, or circumstance. Although it is usually the first nominal group in the clause, it can also consist of other elements such as adverbial groups, prepositional phrases, or embedded clauses. It is important to note that a clause may only have one topical theme. Despite being called topical, this element does not always describe the topic of the discourse, as it can refer to place, time, attitude, show an example, or even begin with a rhetorical question. In other words, it can be said that the topical theme always acts for a *participant*, *circumstance*, or *process*. (Halliday [12])

If the topical theme functions as the subject of the clause, it is referred to as an *unmarked topical theme*, while a topical theme that is not the subject is referred to as a *marked topical theme* (Gerot & Wignell, [15]; Halliday & Matthiessen, [12]). Marked themes are noteworthy because they stand out and draw attention to a particular group or phrase, but are also used to build coherence and facilitate understanding in the text (Butt et al., 2000) [16].

According to Thompson [17], less marked options for topical themes may be preferred by developing writers with limited resources, while the use of more marked themes is typically found in academic writing and is indicative of a writer's ability to produce dynamic text. Marked topical themes can impact the development of information in argumentation by arranging arguments in a meaningful way (Nwogu & Bloor [18]), but it is more important for students to ensure that their selected theme is effective. The ineffective progression of topical themes can result in confusion for readers who are not provided with orientation or signposts (Butt et al., [16]).

According to Bloor & Bloor [19] **The interpersonal theme** is often used to foreground the writer's position or viewpoint and is characterized by the use of modal or adjunct terms to commit to truth, correctness, certainty, strength, attitude, or evaluation. It can be expressed through modal/comment, adjunct, finite/verbal operator, in yes/no interrogative, mood, polarity,

vocatives, or personal names (Emilia, [14]). Its occurrence in texts can signify the writer's effort to express their own angle of judgment on the issue being discussed.

The textual theme serves as a linking function between the clause and its context, highlighting the logical structure of the unfolding text and its analysis, criticism, and discussion (Emilia, [14]). It is typically realized through continuatives and/or conjunctive adjuncts and conjunctions, with conjunctive adjuncts being more flexible in their placement within a clause (Gerot & Wignell [15]).

2.2.3. Thematic Progression and TP Patterns

Concerning Thematic Progression (TP), the present study adopts the definition put forward by Paltridge [2] as the working definition. In accordance with this definition, TP is the way in which the theme of a clause may pick up, or repeat a meaning from a preceding theme or rheme.

This research employs the categorization of TP patterns which was substantially extended from Daneš's basic three-pattern system [20], incorporating additional ideas drawn from Aziz [21], Eggins [13], Lautamatti [22], Mauranten [23], Newsham [24], and Simpson [25]. It now comprises six types of TP pattern, namely, *Rheme-Theme (RT)*, *Theme-Theme (TT)*, *Extended-Rheme-Theme (ERT)*, *Extended-Theme-Theme (ETT)*, *Motivated-New (MN)* and *Unmotivated-New (UN)*. These patterns are generated and categorized by Vu [10].

Table 1. Categorization of TP Patterns

TP Patterns	Definition	Example
<i>Rheme- Theme (RT)</i>	A part of the Rheme of the immediately preceding unit of analysis is reused as the topical Theme of the current unit.	The vast majority of these activities required little or no <i>literacy skills</i> . In some senses, <u>literacy skills</u> were arguably less important in the agricultural age than they are now.
<i>Theme- Theme (TT)</i>	The topical Theme of the immediately preceding unit of analysis is reused as the topical Theme of the current unit.	<u>Small children</u> don't take learning a language as hard work but as something to discover. <u>They</u> can avoid the negative influence of their mother tongue.
<i>Extended Rheme-Theme (ERT)</i>	A part of a previous Rheme is reused as the topical Theme of the current unit of analysis. However, it is <i>not</i> repeated as a Theme immediately but after a number of intervening units.	The vast majority of these activities required little or no <i>literacy skills</i> . There are many exceptions, though. In some senses, <u>literacy skills</u> were arguably less important in the agricultural age than they are now.
<i>Extended Theme-Theme</i>	A previous topical Theme is reused as the topical Theme of the current unit of analysis. However, it is <i>not</i> repeated as a Theme immediately, but after a number of intervening units.	<u>Small children</u> don't take learning a language as hard work but as something to discover. This activity may even be one of their favorites. <u>They</u> can avoid the negative influence of their mother tongue.
<i>Motivated New Theme</i>	A totally new topical Theme, unrelated to previously established Themes and Rhemes, is introduced in the current unit of analysis. However, the entire unit is still implicitly linked to the main idea of the paragraph.	<u>Almost all talents of art</u> were discovered when they attended artistic hours at school. <u>You</u> will never know you have it if you do not give it a try.
<i>Unmotivated New Theme</i>	A totally new Theme, unrelated to previously established Themes and Rhemes, is introduced in the current	<u>Almost all talents of art</u> were discovered when they attended artistic hours at school. Some singers such as Britney Spears and

	unit of analysis. In addition, the entire unit is <i>not</i> logically and semantically linked to the main idea of the paragraph	Taylor Swift became famous in their teenage years.
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(Cited from Vu's, [10])

2.2.4 Problems concerning Thematic Progression

The problem of brand-new theme

According to Bloor & Bloor [19], the problem of brand-new theme is extremely common in the work of inexperienced writers, who put new information in theme position. It means that there will be new theme(s) that are not connected to the previous theme or rheme. An example of brand new theme:

'*Exams* are the results of cramming. *Most of them* are tests of memories, working under pressure, not ability. *Teachers* would teach students exam techniques.' (Wang [26]).

It can be seen that *exams* are the theme of the first two clauses but the third clause introduces a new and unrelated theme about teachers. This can cause confusion and disrupt the flow of the text.

The problem of inappropriate use of marked Topical Themes

Halliday [27] discusses the issue of marked topical themes and their effects on written communication. He focuses on the use of postposed cleft sentences, which are a type of marked thematic structure that can be disruptive when used inappropriately in the middle of a text. A cleft sentence is a complex sentence structure that is used to emphasize a particular part of a sentence by using a form of the verb "to be" and a relative clause. For example, instead of saying "*John gave Mary a book,*" one could say "*It was John who gave Mary a book*" or "*It was a book that John gave to Mary.*" These sentences are considered marked because they draw attention to a particular part of the sentence and can disrupt the flow of information if used inappropriately. Halliday argues that the use of marked topical themes, such as postposed cleft sentences, should be carefully considered in written communication to ensure coherence and clarity.

The problem of overuse of constant theme pattern

Arunsirot [7] states that this problem occurs when the writers put the same theme over several clauses. In this case, the writers tend to provide more explanation for the theme instead of developing the rheme. Therefore, the rheme is not further explained. This problem will cause the text to be read like a list. An example of a paragraph that overuses a constant progression pattern:

'First of all, the Reader's Digest was written by *Nudee Vanessa Race*. *She* is an expert at mind and brain. *She* graduated neuroscience from Harvard University. *She* is smart, cheerful, and intelligent. And *she* is considered as a genius (Arunsirot, p.171) [17].

In the example, it can be seen that the second, third, fourth, and fifth clauses share the same theme *she* which refers to *Nudee Vanessa Race*. It can also be seen that there is no further development for the rheme of the clauses. As a consequence, the paragraph seems to be like a list.

The problem of confusing selection of textual theme

According to Arunsirot [7], this problem arises when the writers have difficulties and make a mistake in selecting the textual theme, especially conjunctive adjunct/conjunction. This problem will lead to unconnected clauses. For example:

"It also gives me good and the best way to be happy in our life. The story is full of beautiful and interesting words. *However*, it can teach us about how to live and survive with the truth".

(Arunsirot [17])

In the example, it can be seen that all the clauses provide the same relation of information, which is about additive relations. It happens because the clauses tell about what has been given

by the story. However, in the third clause, the writer puts an inappropriate conjunctive adjunct *however* which shows an adversative relation. In this case, the writer should put a conjunctive adjunct that shows additive relation, such as *moreover* or *in addition*.

The problem of the excessively motivated new theme (brand-new theme)

The prevalence of motivated new themes (brand-new themes) can pose a problem in effective communication. As discussed by Halliday and Christian Matthiessen [28], the theme acts as a “lead-in” to the clause, creating continuity and serving as a “launching pad” for what comes next. While new thematic material can be introduced at intervals, it must be threaded into the developing context without disrupting the coherence of the text. In the case of inappropriate use of brand-new themes, the coherence of the text is disrupted, making it difficult for readers to follow the argument.

2.3. Methodology

2.3.1. Subjects of the study

10 end-of-term exam papers were randomly chosen by the researchers. In this final examination, students were expected to produce an argumentative paragraph of 150-180 words in response to the following question: *Does online learning outweigh learning in traditional classrooms?* These students, at the time of writing, were English majors in the second academic term of their freshman year at a university in Hanoi and were assumed to reach B1 level according to the CEFR framework. During this 15-week term, essential features of paragraph writing were introduced, including the general paragraph outline, the development of ideas in the body, useful languages, and some common problems in terms of grammar, lexis, cohesion, and coherence. Students’ writing practices and the teacher’s feedback were also part of the syllabus.

2.2.2. Analytic procedure

Initially, all three researchers thoroughly reviewed a range of documents and studies related to the topic of theme-rheme for a better comprehension of the theory. For the second stage, 10 end-of-term exam papers were randomly collected, photocopied, and returned to the Faculty’s office. To analyze these papers, the researchers adopted Halliday’s framework on the Theme system; the categorization of TP patterns substantially extended from Daneš’s basic three-pattern system [20], incorporating additional ideas drawn from Aziz [21], Eggins [13], Lautamatti [22], Mauranen [23], Newsham [24] and Simpson [25]. Throughout this process, the three researchers engaged in collaborative analysis to simultaneously examine the 10 papers for calculating the sample cases of theme-rheme progression (TP) patterns and TP repetition types, with the intention of ensuring the consistency of their findings. Finally, an analysis of the whole corpus was carried out and conclusions were drawn.

2.4 Findings and Discussion

2.4.1. The Realization of Thematic Progression in students’ texts

2.4.1.1. The types of Themes

When examining the frequency of use of the different themes, the results showed that Topical Themes were the most common (125), making up 58.08% of all theme choices. Textual Themes had the second-highest frequency (62), accounting for 31.31%. Interpersonal Themes were used the least (11), making up only 5.55%.

Table 2. The types of Themes

Types of Theme		Texts										
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total
Topical	Marked	2	1	1	0	2	4	5	4	2	6	27

	<i>Unmarked</i>	7	4	18	10	5	10	10	9	8	17	98
Interpersonal		01	01	01	02	01	01	01	01	1	1	11
Textual		8	6	9	4	4	8	8	6	5	4	62
Total		18	12	29	16	12	23	24	20	16	28	198

Additionally, the study revealed that unmarked Topical Themes (98) were more common than marked Topical Themes (27), with 78.4% and 21.6% respectively.

There are some features in this finding that need further discussion: the high proportion of textual Themes; the significant number of marked Topical Themes in certain texts and the relatively consistent use of Interpersonal Themes in the whole corpus.

The prevalence of *Textual Themes* over Interpersonal Themes in this finding is in line with previous research by Vu [10], whose contrastive analysis revealed that Vietnamese ESL learners have a higher frequency of textual themes in their writing than native writers. These occurrences of textual Theme evidence that the students are aware of using linking devices to create a cohesive and coherent text. Their overuse; however, leads to certain problems which will be more closely analyzed in the following parts.

Concerning the number of *marked Topical Themes* in written texts, Vu [10] indicates that the use of Marked Themes can lead to either disruption of thematic continuity or maintenance of thematic continuity. The results in our current study, however, lean forward toward the former. The majority of unmarked Topical Themes (25 out of 27) are improperly used, resulting in abrupt transitions in the flow of information in almost every text written by freshmen.

The data analyzed in this study revealed that while the use of the *interpersonal theme* was present in all texts, it only accounted for a relatively small proportion of its overall usage (11 out of 198). Interestingly, its use was primarily observed when the learners expressed their opinion from the outset of their paragraphs. Evidently, this suggests that the students did not use this thematic structure to modulate or emphasize their writing. However, it should be noted that the occasional use of interpersonal themes in opinion paragraphs may be acceptable given that it is a feature that is more commonly found in spoken language (Egins [13]).

2.4.1.2. The employment of TP patterns

Table 3. The Occurrence of TP patterns

<i>Text</i>	<i>RT</i>	<i>TT</i>	<i>ERT</i>	<i>ETT</i>	<i>MN</i>	<i>Total</i>
1	6	1	1	-	2	10
2	3	-	-	-	3	6
3	4	2	-	-	11	17
4	4	2	-	1	2	9
5	1	1	-	1	3	6
6	3	1	1	-	10	15
7	6	-	1	1	6	14
8	3	-	2	-	1	12
9	3	-	1	-	2	6
10	10	2	2	1	6	21
Total	43	9	8	4	52	116

Table 3 shows the occurrence of Thematic Progression (TP) patterns in 10 different texts. The data reveals that the most commonly used TP pattern is Motivated New Theme (MN),

followed by Rheme-Theme (RT), Theme-Theme (TT), Extended Rheme-Theme (ERT), and Extended Theme-Theme (ETT). The table also shows that the number of MN patterns surpasses that of RT patterns. This finding is in contrast with the study conducted by Nguyen, V. T. & Nguyen, T. M. T. [11] which claimed that Rheme-Theme or Simple Linear Progression (SLP) was the most frequently employed pattern in the corpus. A contributing factor to this anomaly has been previously discussed in the article, namely the misuse of unmarked Themes and textual Themes. Other reasons will be discussed in the following part.

2.4.2. The key problems concerning Thematic Progression and the underlying reasons

The outcomes of the text analysis indicate that the majority of issues that have been previously pointed out by Bloor and Bloor [19], Arunsirot [7], and Haliday [27] appear in the paragraphs written by students. The prominent problems include the overuse of Textual Themes, the inappropriate employment of marked Topical Themes, as well as the excessive frequency of Motivated New Themes, with the last category being the most concerning.

2.4.3. The problems concerning textual Themes

A number of common problems concerning Textual Theme found in these paragraphs include *incorrect use of conjunctions*; *forced use of conjunctions* and *overuse of numerical markers*. Each of these problems will be elaborated below.

Incorrect use of conjunctions appears to be the most common problem related to textual Themes found in the freshmen' texts. Here are some examples:

1. First of all, e-learning may lead to less socializing time face to face which can reduce interaction and discussion among teachers and students. *As a result*, students may narrow their relationships, not want to widen their circle of friends too, and become introverted. (text 1)
2. First of all, as many hazardous pandemics such as Covid or Ebola could break out at any time, it is essential to protect students' health by studying online rather than studying at school. *For example*, recently, every school uses e-learning as an ideal method in order not to cause Covid virus for its students. (text 2)

In text 1, both sentences are discussing the impact of e-learning on social interaction among teachers and students. The second sentence amplifies the point made in the first sentence by specifying how reduced interaction can affect the students' willingness to widen their circle of friends and become introverted. The relationship between the two sentences is amplification rather than cause and effect. In such case, *As a result*, is improperly used. Similarly, in text 2, despite some slightly different phrasing, both sentences convey the same general message: e-learning is a safer option than in-person schooling during the time of a hazardous pandemic. *For example*; therefore, is not used correctly because the second sentence does not exemplify the ideas in the preceding one.

The second issue is the **forced use of conjunctions**. This refers to the cases in which (a) conjunctions are unnecessary due to the absence of a conjunctive relation between two adjacent units, or (b) the utilization of conjunction alone is insufficient in linking the ideas of these units, requiring bridge sentences instead. In both cases; however, writers tend to incorporate conjunctions in their writing, probably in an effort to establish surface cohesion. Several examples are provided below:

1. ..Students can not meet teachers and classmates (3), *so* they do not want to go out and meet people (4). (text 3)
2. ...First of all, e-learning has various conveniences such as no matter where you are, you can take any courses if you have the internet (2). *For example*, during the Covid-19 pandemic, everyone took advantage of e-learning through online classes (3) (text 5)

3. Few subjects need image, audio for studying (11). *So* you must use the computer to study (12). (text 6)

In text 3, there is no apparent conjunctive relationship between the two T-units (3) and (4) and *so* is solely a surface marker to suggest that the text is logically connected.

In text 5 the conjunctive relationship between the two sentences is cause-effect rather than exemplification. *For example*, therefore, is not needed and the writer would need a bridge idea to link these two sentences. They could be revised into: *First of all, e-learning has various conveniences such as no matter where you are, you can take any courses if you have the internet* (2). ~~*For example*~~, ***This flexibility proved to be particularly valuable during the Covid-19 pandemic*** ***when*** everyone took advantage of e-learning through online classes (3)

Similarly, in text 6, there is an abrupt transition between the 11th sentence and the 12th one because the sole use of conjunction *so* is not sufficient to produce a smooth and logical flow of ideas. To that end, bridge sentences are needed. They could be added like this: “*Few subjects require the use of images and audio for effective studying, but for these subjects, a computer is often necessary to access and engage with multimedia materials. Therefore, in subjects that do utilize multimedia, students may need to use a computer for the best learning experience.*”

Another problem found concerning Textual Themes is the **overuse of numerical markers**. Ten paragraphs chose to share the same template in which the supporting points for the controlling idea are introduced by using some common numerical markers as follows:

- *Firstly* or *First of all/ To begin with* or *The first reason is...* (then followed by the first supporting point)
- *Secondly* or *The second reason is...* (followed by the second supporting point and supporting details)
- *Finally* or *Last but not least...* (followed by the third supporting point and supporting details)
- *In conclusion* or *To sum up...* (following by concluding sentence)

This finding aligns with the study by Peichin Chang and Mengyin Lee [29], which showed that EFL writers might structure their text using a rigid template with overuse of textual themes such as ‘Firstly,’ ‘Secondly,’ and ‘Finally.’ This can result in a text that reads like a list of points rather than a coherent argument. Instead of tailoring the text to the specific communication purpose and audience, the writer may focus on filling in each available slot on the template without proper consideration of how each point is connected. This approach can result in a text that lacks coherence and overall integrity.

2.4.4. The inappropriate employment of marked Topical Theme

In his contrastive analysis, Vu [10] states that the use of Marked Themes can lead to either disruption or maintenance of thematic continuity, resulting in the production of either more RT patterns or MN patterns. Specifically, Ho found that, whereas MA writers tended to use marked Themes to generate more RT patterns, ESL students manifested a tendency to produce more MN patterns. The tendency of the latter group is supported by our findings, which are elaborated on in the following instances:

- As a consequence, it has bad effects on *students’ eyes* (6). For instance, ***because of the Covid-19 pandemic***, most students study online (7) and *their eyes* become worse (8). (text 3)
- First of all, e-learning has various conveniences such as no matter where you are, you can take any courses if you have the internet (2). For example, ***during the Covid-19 pandemic***, everyone took advantage of e-learning through online classes (3) (text 5)

- But the drawback of e-learning is that when you hold an electronic device in your hand, you tend to *entertain* more than study (14). For example, when **Wi-Fi is connected**, advertisements about a *wide range of games, and films* appear a lot (text 7)

In those texts, the marked topical themes *because of the Covid-19 pandemic, during the Covid-19 pandemic, and when wi-fi connected* do not maintain any explicit thematic connection with the previous sentences and generate MN transitions. The use of unmarked Themes, such as *their eyes* and *a wide range of games, films* would ensure that these texts had greater thematic continuity, with a higher number of RT patterns and fewer MN patterns. Although the usage of marked themes in ESL texts is not problematic themselves, this example shows that their use without consideration often disrupts thematic continuity, leading to more MN patterns and a less clear linear development

Despite the prevalence of inappropriate use, it is encouraging to note that there are two instances (out of a total of 27) where marked Themes have been used in a suitable manner as demonstrated below:

- Secondly, e-learning will make us lazy to *write* and think (6). **Instead of writing to the notebooks**, we can type them into the computer or iPad (text 8)

- I have to admit that sometimes I can't concentrate on *my online lesson* because I didn't need to turn on the camera. As a result, **after these classes online** I don't get any of knowledge from the lessons. (text 9)

These two excerpts demonstrate that the marked Themes "**Instead of writing to the notebooks**" and "**after these classes online**" are referentially linked to the rhematic components of the preceding sentences, thereby creating an RT transition. This, obviously, produces the smooth and logical flow of idea development.

2.4.5. The prevalence of Motivated New Themes (brand-new Themes)

Table 2 clearly indicates that the number of MN patterns surpasses that of RT patterns. A contributing factor to this anomaly has been previously discussed, namely the misuse of unmarked Themes and textual Themes. Another factor will be elaborated on below.

According to Vu [10], one factor that contributes to a higher occurrence of MN patterns in ESL texts is believed to be due to the influence of the writer's first language (L1) since it is often seen in ESL essays. This is the issue of argument nonlinearity, where all relevant information is explicitly provided, but the writer presents their ideas in a way that does not follow a linear logical sequence, as is common in English texts. Instead of moving directly from point A to point B and finally to point C, the writer may begin at point B and then backtrack to A before proceeding to C. Alternatively, the argument may go from A to B, back to A, digress to D, return to B, and ultimately reach C. This kind of organization may give the impression to an English reader that the argument lacks coherence and fails to make a point. Since the text does not follow a linear development, it is less likely that the succeeding Themes will pick up on the preceding Rheme, decreasing the chance of an RT pattern and increasing the likelihood of other types of TP patterns, including MN. The following examples from ESL essays illustrate this phenomenon.

1. First of all, e-learning may lead to less socializing time face to face which can reduce interaction and discussion among teachers and students. As a result, students may narrow their relationships, not want to widen their circle of friends too, and become introverted. For example, during the covid-19 period, Vietnamese students have to learn from far and online; therefore, a number of them drop into depression because there is no one who can communicate and share their emotions and thoughts.

The order should be:

- **e-learning** may be lead to less socializing time face to face (B)

- reduce interaction and discussion among teachers and students (A)
- **students** may narrow their relationship, (D)
- do not want to widen their circle friends (C)
- become introverted (E)
- **during the covid-19 period**, Vietnamese students have to learn from far and online (E)
- **a number of them** drop into depression (G)
- there is no one who can communicate and share with them emotions and thoughts (F)

This finding supports the claim by M.A.K. Halliday and Christian Matthiessen [28] that while it is important to provide new information, this information must be threaded into the developing context, so it does not disrupt the coherence of the text. When brand-new themes are used excessively, it can make it challenging for readers to follow the argument of the article, and this can ultimately result in the loss of the reader's interest

In short, the factors including the overuse of marked Theme, implicit connections, and non-linear argumentation, could lead to a higher occurrence of MN patterns and a lower occurrence of RT patterns in freshmen's paragraphs. This can make it more difficult for native English readers to follow the text and understand its coherence, as it may appear more digressive and less focused.

3. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of thematic progression, it was observed that Textual Themes are preferred and often overused compared to Interpersonal Themes in the freshmen's texts. This overuse signifies students' awareness of the importance of linking devices for developing grammatical cohesion and coherence in academic texts. However, this overuse tends to make their writing sound less natural. The researchers also identified Motivated New Theme (MN) as the most commonly used Thematic Progression pattern, which led to abrupt idea development. The excessive frequency of this pattern along with the misuse of Textual Themes, and the inappropriate usage of marked Topical Themes are recognized as some key issues in these texts composed by freshmen. These problems were attributed to the overuse of textual themes, inappropriate adoption of marked themes, and non-linear development of ideas in students' writing. Therefore, the study recommends an early introduction of thematic progression connotation in English writing instruction to help students design their ideas effectively, ensure inter-textual coherence, and establish logical relations in academic paragraphs. This, in turn, can help the freshmen develop semantically and structurally coherent essays in their subsequent academic years.

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