

The Role of Referencing and Substitution in Improving Thematic Progression - Implications for ESL Writing Classes

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Abstract: *This discussion explores the application of referencing and substitution in ESL writing classes to enhance coherence and thematic progression. Referencing helps link ideas and maintain thematic continuity, while substitution reduces redundancy and adds variety to language use. Effective instruction and practice in these techniques improve the flow and clarity of student writing. By incorporating practical exercises, peer reviews, and feedback, educators can address common writing challenges and help students develop polished, engaging texts.*

Keyword: *Referencing, substitution, thematic progression*

1. Introduction

Mastering referencing and substitution is essential in ESL writing classes to enhance coherence and thematic progression. Referencing ensures thematic continuity by linking ideas across sentences and avoiding repetition, making the text more readable and logically structured (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Substitution helps vary language use while maintaining the focus on central themes, preventing redundancy and enriching the text (Eggins, 2004). Effective application of these techniques improves the flow of student writing, making it clearer and more engaging. By integrating instruction, practice exercises, and feedback, teachers can help students develop these skills, enhancing both their writing fluency and their ability to produce polished texts (Martin & Rose, 2007; Thompson, 2004). Practical activities like peer reviews and genre-specific exercises ensure that students apply referencing and substitution in meaningful contexts, addressing challenges such as ambiguity and overuse (Fries, 1994).

2. Definitions of key terms

2.1. Thematic progression

Thematic progression refers to the way information is structured and developed throughout a text, focusing on how themes (what the sentence is about) and rhemes (what is said about the theme) are organized across sentences and paragraphs. This progression helps create coherence and logical flow by guiding the reader through the development of ideas. According to Halliday (1985), thematic progression is a key element in textual cohesion, as it links the content of successive clauses, ensuring that new information (rheme) builds on or relates to

previously introduced themes.

Several key patterns of thematic progression have been identified in linguistic research:

Constant Theme Pattern: In this pattern, the same theme is repeated across multiple sentences or clauses, while the rheme varies. This creates a sense of stability and focuses the reader on the theme while introducing new details or explanations in the rheme. For example: The environment is a key concern today. The environment faces threats from pollution, climate change, and deforestation. This pattern is common in expository and descriptive texts where the author emphasizes a central topic (Eggins, 2004).

Linear Theme Pattern: In the linear pattern, the rheme of one sentence becomes the theme of the next. This creates a forward-moving progression of ideas and is often used to develop arguments or explanations logically. For instance: Climate change leads to rising sea levels. Rising sea levels threaten coastal communities. This pattern promotes idea development by building on previously introduced information (Danes, 1974).

Split Rheme Pattern: In the split rheme pattern, a single rheme is divided into multiple elements, and each element becomes the theme of subsequent clauses. This allows for a more detailed exploration of specific aspects of the information presented. For example: The company's success can be attributed to two factors: effective leadership and innovative strategies. Effective leadership has driven the company's vision, while innovative strategies have given it a competitive edge. This pattern is effective for elaborating on complex ideas by breaking them down into sub-themes (McCabe, 1999).

Derived Theme Pattern: In the derived theme

pattern, the themes of several sentences or clauses are derived from a central overarching theme, which may not be explicitly stated but is inferred. For example: Sustainable practices are vital for environmental health. Reducing emissions helps combat climate change. Conserving water ensures the availability of resources for future generations. Here, each theme is related to the concept of sustainability, creating coherence through shared implications (Fries, 1994).

2.2. Referencing and its role in thematic progression

Referencing plays a crucial role in thematic progression by helping to establish cohesion and link ideas throughout a text. Referencing ensures that these connections are clear by pointing to previously mentioned or yet-to-be-mentioned information, allowing readers to follow the development of ideas without unnecessary repetition.

2.2.1. Definition and classification of referencing

Referencing refers to the use of linguistic elements like pronouns, determiners, and demonstratives to refer back to (anaphoric reference) or forward to (cataphoric reference) something in the text. Anaphoric referencing is more common in writing, where words like *he*, *she*, *it*, *this*, and *that* link current sentences to previously introduced themes. In contrast, cataphoric referencing looks forward to what is about to be mentioned. Both types of referencing are integral to maintaining thematic continuity (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

2.2.2. Referencing and thematic progression patterns

Referencing interacts with various thematic progression patterns to ensure that themes and rhemes are logically connected across sentences.

Constant Theme Pattern: In this pattern, the same theme recurs across several clauses, and referencing helps to sustain the focus on that theme. For example, in a paragraph discussing climate change, referencing devices like *it* or *this* issue can maintain the focus on the theme without repeating the full term. Referencing ensures that the text flows smoothly, allowing new rhemes to be introduced while keeping the theme intact.

Linear Theme Pattern: Here, the rheme of one sentence becomes the theme of the next. Referencing plays a key role in helping readers track the transition from one theme to another. For example, “The government has introduced new policies. These policies aim to reduce carbon emissions,” where *these policies* refers back to the rheme of the previous sentence, allowing the new sentence to progress

naturally from the previous one.

Derived Theme Pattern: In texts with a more complex structure, referencing helps manage derived themes, where multiple clauses draw on a central idea. For instance, if an essay begins with the general theme of sustainable development, the use of references like *this concept* or *such an approach* can help introduce related themes like renewable energy or emission reductions without breaking the flow of ideas. Referencing in this context provides cohesion while allowing for the expansion of multiple sub-themes (Fries, 1994).

2.3. Substitution and its role in thematic progression patterns

Substitution is a cohesive device that plays a key role in thematic progression by replacing previously mentioned words or phrases with simpler alternatives, helping to avoid repetition while maintaining clarity and coherence. In thematic progression, substitution ensures that themes and rhemes remain connected across sentences and paragraphs, allowing for the smooth development of ideas and the logical flow of information.

2.3.1. Definition and classification of substitution

Substitution occurs when a word or phrase is replaced by another word that serves as a stand-in for the original element. It is typically used within the same text to prevent redundancy. Substitution can happen at the nominal, verbal, or clausal level:

Nominal substitution: Replaces a noun or noun phrase with words like *one*, *ones*, or *same*. For example, “I have a red pen. Do you need one?”

Verbal substitution: Replaces a verb phrase with the word *do*, as in “She plays soccer, and I do too.”

Clausal substitution: Replaces a clause with words like *so* or *not*. For instance, “If you think it will rain, I believe so.”

Substitution generally operates within short spans in a text and helps connect different parts of the text without excessive repetition (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

2.3.2. Substitution and thematic progression patterns

Substitution contributes to thematic progression by maintaining coherence between themes and rhemes without directly repeating the same words or phrases. By replacing words or phrases, substitution keeps the reader’s attention on the progression of ideas while avoiding redundancy.

Constant Theme Pattern: In this pattern, substitution allows for different expressions of the same theme, thus avoiding monotony. For example,

in a paragraph discussing environmental policies, the first mention could use these policies, and later sentences might substitute with the same. This keeps the focus on the theme while introducing new rhemes, contributing to thematic development.

Linear Theme Pattern: In this pattern, substitution can effectively manage the shift from rheme to theme by avoiding unnecessary repetition of the exact terms. For example: “Renewable energy sources reduce carbon emissions. These sources are crucial for sustainable development.” In the second sentence, these sources substitutes for renewable energy sources, ensuring a smooth thematic link between the two sentences (Eggs, 2004).

Split Rheme Pattern: By using substitutions, writers can prevent unnecessary repetition while elaborating on subthemes. For instance: “The government’s strategy includes renewable energy and waste reduction. The former focuses on solar power, while the latter involves recycling programs.” Here, the former and the latter substitute for the specific elements of the previous rheme, enabling clear thematic progression without repeating the full phrases.

3. Suggestions for applying referencing and substitution to improve thematic progression in ESL writing classes

3.1. Explicit instruction and explanation

Start by clearly explaining referencing and substitution, including their types and functions. Use simple definitions and examples to ensure understanding. Referencing includes pronouns and determiners, while substitution involves replacing repeated words with terms like *one* or *so* (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

Use model texts to illustrate how referencing and substitution are used effectively. Analyze these texts with students to show how these techniques contribute to thematic progression (Eggs, 2004).

3.2. Thematic progression activities

Teach students to identify themes and rhemes in sentences and paragraphs. Provide exercises where students analyze texts to find how themes progress and how references and substitutions contribute to this progression (Martin & Rose, 2007).

Have students rewrite paragraphs or essays to incorporate referencing and substitution. For instance, ask them to take a passage with repetitive language and improve it by using these techniques to enhance coherence and thematic development (Eggs, 2004).

3.3. Integration into writing Assignments

Assign writing prompts that specifically require the use of referencing and substitution. For instance, ask students to write a paragraph on a given topic, ensuring they use referencing and substitution to maintain coherence and avoid redundancy (Thompson, 2004).

Encourage students to develop their essays or reports with clear thematic progression. Provide feedback on how well they use referencing and substitution to link themes and manage the flow of ideas (Martin & Rose, 2007).

3.4. Peer review and collaboration

Organize peer review activities where students evaluate each other’s use of referencing and substitution. Create checklists or criteria for assessing the effectiveness of these techniques in maintaining thematic progression (Thompson, 2004).

Engage students in group writing tasks where they collaboratively produce texts, focusing on the application of referencing and substitution. This can help them see different approaches to using these techniques and learn from each other (Martin & Rose, 2007).

3.5. Feedback and revision

Provide specific feedback on how students use referencing and substitution in their writing. Highlight strengths and areas for improvement, and offer suggestions for enhancing thematic progression (Fries, 1994).

Conduct workshops where students revise their drafts with a focus on improving referencing and substitution. Guide them through the revision process, emphasizing how these techniques can enhance their writing (Martin & Rose, 2007).

4. Conclusion

Applying referencing and substitution in ESL writing classes involves a combination of instruction, practice, feedback, and contextual application. By integrating these techniques into writing activities, teachers can help students improve their thematic progression, enhance coherence, and develop more polished and effective writing skills

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