

Exploring Thematic Progression of EFL Students' Argumentative Essays

Ghada Haji^{1*}

¹Higher Institute of Business Administration of Sfax, Tunisia

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Abstract: This paper aims to investigate the thematic progression patterns in students' argumentative essays produced by Tunisian EFL learners. The data originated from 27 academic essays written by second year Business English students were collected, investigated and interpreted employing a qualitative approach with descriptive analysis relevant to thematic progression patterns based on the theory proposed by Bloor and Bloor (2004). The preliminary results suggested the students' predominant use of the constant pattern which implies that they are successfully able to ensure smooth information flow in their writings. Besides, the thematic analysis revealed the presence of the linear pattern, which proved the writers' ability to maintain the essays' cohesion by introducing new information and making a Rheme to become the Theme of the next clause. However, the results demonstrated the low presence of the split-rheme pattern and the total absence of the derived theme in the students' argumentative essays, which indicates their limited writing skills in creating, developing, and connecting complex clauses. This study intends to provide contributive insights that may help EFL and ESL instructors as well as curriculum designers to enhance the students' textual coherence as well as their academic writing proficiency.

Keywords: argumentative essays, coherence, thematic progression patterns, SFL

INTRODUCTION

Mastering the intricacies of academic writings is commonly deemed one of the crucial milestones for English as a Second Language and English (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Proficiency in generating coherent arguments does not only demonstrate linguistic competence but also reflects the ability to interact critically with various perspectives and effectively communicate one's thoughts. An argumentative essay is an academic genre where the writer indicates his perspective on a particular topic to the reader (Ozdemir, 2018). Students' ability to write argumentative essays can be assessed based on their mastery of numerous aspects. Grammar skills promote clarity and proper expression, while mastering the structural principles of argumentative writing helps in the effective organization of ideas (Wang, 2007). Indeed, many students struggle with consistency in their writing, especially when it comes to language, syntax, mechanics, and

*Corresponding author: hajjighada89@gmail.com

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punctuation (Styati & Rodliyah, 2021). Limited vocabulary may hinder their capacity to communicate ideas precisely, while grammatical faults can disrupt the flow of their sentences and impede comprehension. Further, mechanical flaws such as spelling and capitalization, as well as punctuation errors, may detract from their writing's clarity and consistency.

However, it is worth mentioning that introducing effective argumentative essays extends beyond mere syntactic, grammatical, and morphological accuracy. Indeed, mastery of basic concepts of academic writing such as coherence, cohesion, and unity is highly required for creating texts that convey a well-structured, cohesive, and coherent message to the readers. Schmitt (2002) and Ostrom & Cook (1993) emphasize the relevance of these foundational characteristics in good writings, asserting that coherence plays a key role in guiding readers through the text and enhancing their understanding. By mastering unity, cohesion, and coherence, writers can improve the overall quality and impact of their writing, ensuring that their message reaches readers successfully. Besides, these elements assist writers in maintaining a logical flow of arguments while avoiding readers' confusion or misinterpretation. By incorporating these fundamental aspects into their writing, students may be able to create a more engaging and persuasive piece of writing that effectively conveys their intended message. Accordingly, addressing these essential aspects with targeted instruction and practice can help students improve their coherence and overall writing proficiency.

Coherence in writing, defined as the logical connection and flow of ideas, is critical for effectively persuading readers. Accordingly, evaluating students' abilities across these dimensions suggests valuable insights about their ability to write successful, persuasive academic texts. One fundamental aspect contributing to the coherence and persuasiveness of argumentative writings is thematic progression. Thematic progression refers to the logical organization and development of ideas within a text, guiding readers through the argument in a clear and cohesive manner. By mastering thematic progression, EFL learners can enhance the overall effectiveness of their argumentative essays and better convey their thoughts and opinions to a wider audience.

Theme and Rheme are fundamental components in creating a coherent text (Eggin, 2004). Indeed, in systemic functional linguistics (SFL), they are considered important concepts for understanding how information is structured within clauses or sentences. The Theme denotes the starting point or information provided in a clause or sentence. It determines what the sentence is "about" and frequently serves to provide context or background information (Halliday & Mathiessen, 2014). Yet, the rheme stands for the new or informative part of the clause or sentence. It typically follows the theme and conveys the clause's main point or message (Mathiessen, 2020). Thematic progression is commonly regarded as the configuration of theme and rheme in the text to provide appropriate information development. According to Paltridge (2012), thematic progression refers to how a clause's theme may pick up or repeat the meaning of a previous theme or rheme. The identification of theme-rheme patterns may assist students in organizing their ideas within a clause or a sentence. Halliday and Hasan (1976) averred that determining the theme and thematic development will assist students in organizing their arguments within a clause and,

thus, producing a cohesive narrative. In fact, understanding thematic progression can also help students maintain cohesion and coherence in their writings by ensuring that their thematic progression flows logically from one clause to another and from one paragraph to another. By recognizing how themes and rhemes are interconnected, students can enhance the clarity and effectiveness of their communication.

According to Bloor and Bloor (2004), thematic progression may be embodied in four major forms namely the Constant Theme pattern, the Linear Theme pattern, the Split Theme pattern and the Derived Theme pattern. In the Constant Theme pattern, the writer uses the Theme from the preceding sentence as the Theme for the following clause and it is commonly known as Theme Reiteration (Bloor & Bloor, 2004, p.88). This thematic pattern is generally used to focus on particular subjects presented in preceding clauses, allowing for a more in-depth exploration and development of those subjects. By maintaining continuity through Theme reiteration, the writer can effectively guide the reader's attention and enhance coherence in the text. As a result, the ideas offered in Rhemes must be expanded upon in the following phrases. This pattern is particularly applicable in descriptive or narrative literature. The second progression pattern is the linear Theme Pattern, which is also known as the zigzag pattern. It consists mainly in choosing what was presented in the first Rheme as a Theme in the second clause (p. 89). Consequently, the writer can investigate and develop any potentially useful information presented in the text. This approach is particularly relevant in argumentative writing, as it allows for a clear and logical progression of ideas. By following the linear Theme Pattern, writers can effectively structure their arguments and engage readers more effectively.

As for the Split Rheme pattern, writers tend to present double information in the Rheme of the first clause. Then they select the two parts of information as Themes in the second and third clauses, creating, as such, a more complex thematic structure in the text. This allows for a deeper exploration of the relationship between the themes introduced in each clause. This pattern appears to be closely comparable to the Linear Theme pattern. Yet, the distinction is that in Linear Theme, the Theme in the third sentence is chosen from the second clause rather than the first (Bloor & Bloor, 2004, p. 89). Eggins (2004) referred to this pattern as the Multiple Rheme pattern. The final pattern is Derived Theme, which is typically present in longer and more complex writings. If the Split Rheme expands points introduced in the Rheme of the first sentence, the Derived Theme expands points picked as Themes in the first clause as Themes in the subsequent clauses (Bloor & Bloor, 2004, p. 91). The themes of the second, third, and fourth clauses are derived from the theme of the first clause. The derived theme pattern is typically found in longer and more complex writings, where the constituents' relationship is mainly semantic rather than grammatical. This Theme-Rheme development allows for the expansion of points introduced in the Rheme of the first sentence to be further developed in subsequent clauses.

The significance of investigating the thematic development in written discourse lies in its ability to reveal the intricate pattern of text structure, coherence and arguments flow (Halliday, 1968, 1985; Downing, 2001). Besides, it offers profound insights regarding how ideas are organized, interconnected and transferred in a text, thereby enhancing our language usage and rhetorical strategies (Danes, 1974). A number of empirical investigations have

been conducted on the key role of Theme-Rheme structure in English discourse coherence applying different models in a wide variety of genres. Maharani et al (2022) offered a study that analyzed the realization and the problems of thematic progression observed in undergraduate students' academic essays in an Indonesian private university based on Eggins (2004) framework. The obtained results indicated that although the writers succeeded, to some extent, to apply various thematic patterns in their essays, they displayed noticeable thematic problems related to coherence and coherence, which may be attributed to their lack of an appropriate understanding of thematic progression development. In the same vein, Jannah et al (2023) conducted descriptive qualitative research to investigate the type of thematic progression patterns mostly applied in the EFL participants' argumentative essays and how these patterns contribute to the text's argumentation development. The results showed that the Constant pattern appeared to be the most frequent in the data analyzed compared to the other patterns. This study may provide valuable insights concerning the significance of implementing thematic progression patterns in ESL and EFL classroom reading and writing courses to offer a better understanding of a well-structured information flow. Meanwhile, Pavavijarn (2022) investigated the thematic development observed in EFL writings proficiency variable. A corpus of 21 essays was examined and classified into high-score and low-score essays. The preliminary findings revealed that there was a noticeable variation between both group of students in terms of the use of the thematic patterns in their essays. Indeed, the high-score essays comprised a wider variety of theme-rheme patterns which enhanced textual cohesions and coherence, whereas the low-score essays lacked the use of multiple patterns the fact that affected the general structure and thematic development of the text.

Though the above-mentioned studies have provided insightful findings regarding the thematic progression patterns by EFL students in different contexts, there are still certain deficiencies in particular aspects. In fact, they are based on a limited number of data and a limited number of participants, which may significantly narrow-down the generalizability and reliability of the obtained results to specific contexts. Therefore, future research should aim to address these limitations by incorporating larger sample sizes and diverse data sources to ensure more robust and comprehensive findings. Additionally, exploring thematic progression patterns in various proficiency levels and language skills could provide a more holistic understanding of how EFL students utilize this linguistic feature in their writing. It is also worth mentioning that the variation of essay topics could have affected the students' choice of themes and thematic progression patterns. Further, the final results and the coding of thematic progression patterns are still questionable, to some extent, as they should have been conducted by at least two experts to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the final findings.

Despite the fact that a wide variety of studies have been conducted on Tunisian academic genres, thematic progression research on argumentative essays has not gained sufficient attention. This gap in the literature highlights the need for further investigation into how thematic progression is utilized in Tunisian argumentative essays to enhance understanding of their rhetorical structures and persuasive strategies. Accordingly, in order to close the gap, the purpose of this study is to explore thematic progression in EFL

argumentative essays produced by undergraduate Tunisian Business students and analyze how it contributes to the overall effectiveness of their arguments. By shedding light on this aspect of academic writing, this research aims to provide valuable insights for educators and students seeking to improve their writing skills in the Tunisian context

METHOD

The current study applies a qualitative with descriptive research method to analyze and describe the types of thematic progression patterns in students' argumentative essays based on Bloor and Bloor 's (2004) framework. Creswell (2009) defines qualitative research as an approach which aims at investigating and understanding the meaning individuals attribute to social or human problems. Indeed, this approach allows for an in-depth examination of the complexities and nuances of the writers' argumentative essays, offering valuable insights regarding their thematic development and writing style.

Additionally, this approach is coupled with a descriptive statistical technique that seeks to quantify the frequency and the distribution of the most commonly used thematic progression patterns by Tunisian students. Besides, this research followed the methodology applied by Hawes and Thomas (1997) in which the researcher determined the "progression type between each pair of consecutive independent clauses" (p. 37) to allow an easier classification and quantification of the data used. Accordingly, using a mixed-method research approach may provide more comprehensive insights into both the qualitative characteristics and the quantitative types of thematic progression patterns employed in the students' argumentative texts.

1. Data description

The corpus of the present research consists of 27 argumentative essays, as it is illustrated in Table 1, written by undergraduate Tunisian students enrolled in second year Business English discipline in the academic year 2023-2024 and taking part in 'Academic Writing' course. The class consists of 31 students from whom only 27 were selected to be part in this research. They were both male and female students with the age ranging from 20 to 26 years. The participants were assigned to write an argumentative essay about the following topic: 'Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, remote working has become increasingly popular in Tunisia, and many businesses are considering implementing more remote employment contracts. To what extent can remote working be efficient in Tunisia?'. No writing instructions or guidelines were provided for the students.

Table 1. Data description

Total number of essays	27
Total number of words	20254
Average of length	750
Range	672 – 1120

2. Data analysis

After the data collection, the procedures for data analysis were initiated. The first step begun with a close reading of the argumentative essays. Then, they were chunked into separate clauses, main and subordinate. Indeed, the thematic progression analysis of the

genre under investigation considers the “independent clause together with all hypo-tactically related clauses and words that are dependent on that independent clause” (Fries, 1995, p. 49). Later, the Theme and Rheme boundaries of each clause were drawn and classified so as to indicate the prevalent thematic progression pattern used in the students’ essays. Interestingly, Theme and Rheme identification relied on Halliday and Mathiessen’s (2014) approach of thematicity which suggests that “Theme extends from the beginning of the clause and up to (and including) the first element that has a function in transitivity” (p. 89). In the next step, the thematic progression patterns were identified, calculated and tabulated in separated tables for an easier data analysis and interpretation. At a final stage, the frequency and the use of thematic progression patterns present in the corpus were analyzed, interpreted and discussed relying on Bloor and Bloor’s (2004) model to investigate to what extent EFL Business English students succeeded in maintaining an appropriate argument flow throughout their essays and relating the main point (Theme) to the supporting details of each clause.

Independent clauses were opted to be the optimal unit of analysis in the current research in which Theme and Rheme features were not investigated with regard to dependent clauses, including embedded ones. Fries and Francis (1992) argued that focusing just on independent clauses allows for a better comprehension of text growth and thematic progression because the structure of dependent clauses, including their thematic aspects, is generally influenced by independent clauses. This allows for a more focused analysis of how themes and ideas progress throughout a text without the potential confusion introduced by examining dependent clauses. Such an approach is consistent with standard procedures in text-based research, as demonstrated by previous works such as McCabe (1999) and Williams (2009).

3. Validity and reliability

Since the identification of thematic progression patterns can be subjective and, as Oliver (2010) argued, validity is a primary requirement for all types of research, two experts in SFL and pragmatic strategies were consulted to ensure the validity and reliability of the preliminary results. The first expert, a full professor from Tunis's Faculty of Social and Human Sciences and an ex-MA supervisor, was graciously invited to examine the coding of Theme and Rheme in the participants' argumentative essays. Identifying the theme progression patterns yielded an 86% agreement rate. There were also some variations that were discussed and decided upon. The second expert, a full professor from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Sfax, Tunisia, examined the reliability of the EFL learners' identification and categorization of the thematic development strategies and checked the applicability of the model suggested by Bloor and Bloor (2004). The experts provided valuable feedback and convincing modifications in both phases, which were taken into consideration.

RESULTS

This section covers the major findings of thematic progression applied in Business English students’ essays. The essays were analyzed based on Bloor and Bloor’s (2004) model of

thematic progression which comprises four patterns, namely the Constant pattern, the Linear pattern, the Split-Rheme pattern and the Derived theme pattern. The students' noticeable mistakes on Language, vocabulary and punctuation were not taken into consideration and did not come into the study's ultimate concern. The thematic investigation of the corpus under study, as illustrated in Table 2 and Figure 1, revealed the unbalanced distribution of the four thematic progression patterns as the EFL Business English students employed the thematic progression structures in varying frequencies in their argumentative essays. The Constant theme pattern appeared to be the most predominant thematic pattern used by EFL students in their argumentative essays (81.85%), followed by the Linear theme pattern (13.86%). The analysis also indicated the lower presence of the Split Rheme pattern (4.27%) with the total absence of the Derived theme pattern.

Table 2. Thematic progression patterns' frequency

Essays	Number of clauses	Constant theme pattern	Linear theme pattern	Split Rheme pattern	Derived theme
Essay 1	26	13	7	6	-
Essay 2	32	24	8	-	-
Essay 3	19	13	5	1	-
Essay 4	59	46	13	-	-
Essay 5	33	27	6	-	-
Essay 6	28	17	9	2	-
Essay 7	34	24	8	2	-
Essay 8	33	29	4	-	-
Essay 9	21	20	1	-	-
Essay 10	34	32	2	-	-
Essay 11	11	11	-	-	-
Essay 12	28	27	1	-	-
Essay 13	13	11	2	-	-
Essay 14	24	15	6	3	-
Essay 15	16	13	3	-	-
Essay 16	14	12	1	1	-
Essay 17	20	18	2	-	-
Essay 18	23	21	2	-	-
Essay 19	25	21	-	4	-
Essay 20	16	12	4	-	-
Essay 21	28	25	3	-	-
Essay 22	22	20	2	-	-
Essay 23	37	34	3	-	-
Essay 24	20	18	2	-	-
Essay 25	19	19	-	-	-
Essay 26	24	24	-	-	-
Essay 27	19	09	-	10	-
Total	678	555	94	29	0
Percentage/ units	100%	81.85%	13.86%	4.27%	0%
Percentage/ essays		100%	81.48%	33.33%	0%

1. Constant theme pattern

It is the first type of thematic progression introduced in Bloor and Bloor's (2004) framework, where the theme of the first clause is generally retained to be the same in the following clauses throughout the text. It was the most commonly frequent compared to the other three types. It appeared in 555 units, that is it covers approximately 81% of the patterns

used in the data under investigation in which the same theme is focused along the order of a series of subsequent clauses to develop diverse ideas and information of one subject in a range of clauses. Indeed, Bloor and Bloor (2004) averred that the constant theme pattern occurs when “a common Theme is shared by each clause” (p. 82). Students tend to keep the same theme in all the clauses all through one paragraph, or they opt to change it in one or two units and then they reuse it relying on referents or personal pronouns. Eggins (2004) asserted that by using this pattern, the writers’ texts may appear more focused as they explain and discuss different information about one topic. Additionally, Bloor and Bloor (2004) stated that this type of thematic progression is commonly frequent in the description, explanation and discussion of factual information that centers around one specific thing or conception.

The thematic analysis of the data at hand revealed that this pattern consists in retaining the same theme which is essentially ‘remote working’. It is deployed by EFL students over successive sentences and clauses attempting to propel the text forward while keeping the reader’s focus on the same subject. This strategy was skillfully used by students to develop an appropriate flow of arguments that contributes to the informativeness, unambiguity and persuasion of the students’ essays on the one hand and consolidates the readers’ conviction on the other. Interestingly, by applying the constant Theme Rheme pattern, the majority of students attempted to avoid any possible digressions and maintain all clauses revolving around the major theme mentioned in the topic sentence. This pattern can be illustrated in the following extract.

Extract 1:

Remote working can be really beneficial to most companies in Tunisia. It helps employees feel more comfortable during their working hours. Besides, it offers a more flexible and motivating working schedule. [Essay 3]

As such, it can be deduced that the constant pattern is a writing technique which reinforces the text’s coherence by reusing the introduced theme, resulting in a stagnant and static writing style (Enkvist, 1974 as cited in Jing, 2015; Eggins, 1994). In other words, in this context, this concatenation of information may be considered as an effective way for creating cohesion in the text. Additionally, the skillful use of this thematic pattern is a crucial component of a harmonious as well as a persuasive discourse. Nonetheless, the thematic investigation of the analyzed essays proved that using one subject for the whole discourse yielded, in a number of cases, to redundancy and boredom as it appears like there is no end or purpose for the text, leading, therefore, to a thin development of textual message (Ping, 2007).

As can be seen from Extract 1 the writer opted to maintain a strong and consistent thematic focus on the main topic theme ‘remote working’ to draw the reader’s attention to the newly introduced supporting arguments in the rhemes (Nwogu, 1991). Hence, s/he attempts to present a well-structured essay in which the controlling ideas support the main idea introduced in the topic sentence, the fact that adds conviction to text.

Extract 2:

The remote working has become one of the most methods in several fields such as education, business, management etc. Online working has become increasingly

popular leading to efficient working conditions. This working strategy made a huge progress in Tunisia. [Essay 17]

It can be inferred from Extract 2 that the writer states successive ideas but with no clear elaboration between the clauses which results in a less coherent and outward-expanding week essay. However, a good essay is supposed to be based on a ‘clustered’ shape to reinforce the textual coherence. The students’ disproportionate use of the Constant Theme pattern affects the essays’ organizational structure and thematic development. Indeed, by employing this pattern, writers did not explore their arguments in depth as they tend to focus on one specific idea or participant resulting in consecutive series of unrelated statements about the central theme, thus creating discontinuity in the essays. As such, students who basically relied on the Constant pattern proved to be unable to develop their arguments and push the discourse forward. Accordingly, their texts will appear in the form of a simplistic style, that is a mere listing of information which needs more expansion and elaboration. More interestingly, the unskillful employment of the Constant or Reiteration pattern may create a certain clumsiness in the discourse that may distract the reader’s attention.

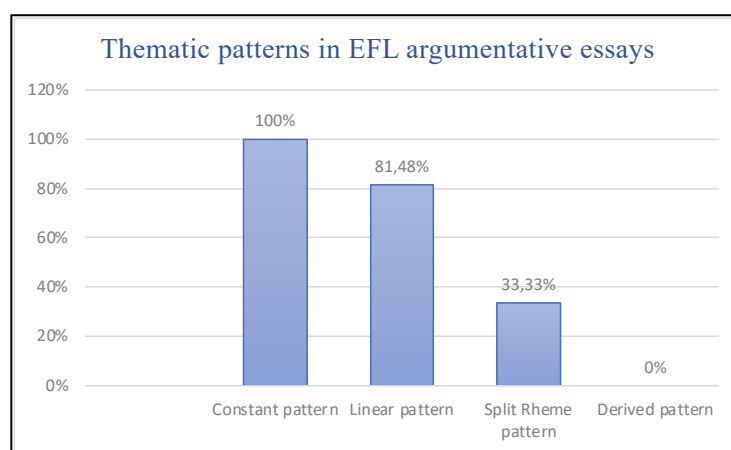


Figure 1. Thematic patterns in EFL argumentative essays

The writers’ reliance on a ‘safe’, constant writing style may be explained by the fact that students seem obliged to apply the same topic continuously which makes the essay in need of further information development (Wang, 2007). Indeed, the thematic examination of the collected data has revealed that the majority of the essays lacked arguments’ explanations, elaboration and examples to extend on their ideas. This may also stem from the misbelief that EFL learners share the same knowledge about the basics and characteristics of a ‘good’ argumentative essay. Indeed, the data analysis indicated that, when writing their essays and during the brainstorming activity the majority of students tend to include a greater number of arguments and information in their essays without appropriate selection and further elaboration. Whereas, the quality of a good essay has more to do with the relevance and the substantiation of ideas rather than the number or the quantity. Another significant factor that may explain this extensive use of the Constant pattern could be the students’ unawareness of the significance of applying a considerable variety of thematic patterns to enrich their writings and to draw the readers’ attention. Accordingly, providing

explicit instructions on the proper use of thematic progression patterns is highly crucial for the students' text development.

2. *Linear pattern*

The linear theme pattern consists in using the Rheme of the first clause to be the theme of the subsequent clause (Bloor & Bloor, 2004). This pattern was applied by 81.48% of students. However, contrary to its preceding, this pattern represents only 13.86% of the TPs of the total units analyzed argumentative essays. Butt (2000), as cited in Triana et al. (2018), argued that the use of this pattern offers a significant focus on the development of specific information or subject presented in the previous clause.

Both Linear and Constant thematic progression patterns are most commonly used in the students' writings to confer cohesion on the texts. Danes (1974), as cited in McCabe (1999), assumed that the Linear structure is proved to be the most frequent of the thematic patterns and it enhances the text's cohesion by maintaining a thematic as well as logical link between the Rheme of the preceding clause and the theme of the subsequent one. Indeed, the noticeable use of the Linear structure indicates that writers succeeded to maintain a relationship in the different clauses to imply cause and effect, develop ideas and improve paragraph cohesion and offer a considerable grammatical unity to the text. This thematic progression pattern is considerably required in academic writings, more particularly in argumentative writings, where good essays are supposed to display an elaborated development of complex arguments (Eggins, 2004).

Thematic progression investigation of different types of genre proved that this pattern confers coherence on the essay as well as it helps in providing cumulative development to the writings (Eggins, 2004) by building the arguments of the text on newly introduced Themes or topics. In fact, it can be inferred from Extract 2 that by using the Linear or Zig-Zag pattern, Business English students succeeded to establish a clear path on the content of the essay and guide their readers to a logical flow of argumentations far from any possible divergence. Some students employed the Linear structure relying on relative pronouns (this, that, these etc.), personal pronouns (they, it) or conjunctions (but, so, if etc.) to broaden the information mentioned in the Rheme of the previous clause or to link it with the next clause. This may be best illustrated in the Extracts below.

Extract 3:

*Remote working can offer several job opportunities in different fields for many unemployed people. **This** will lead to more economic and social development for the country. [Essay 13]*

Extract 4:

*Workers will not have the chance to deal directly with their co-workers and customers. **That** will not help them improve their professional experience and communication skills. [Essay 24]*

Though giving a considerable priority to the Linear pattern offers a more academic impression on the text, it appears to be problematic in certain cases. Indeed, lower level students who lacked a sufficient awareness of the effective use of thematic progression patterns failed to encode a discernable logical link between the clauses and fell in the trap of

redundancy, essentially claiming ‘this means’, ‘this is because’, ‘this can be explained by’ etc.

3. *Split Rheme pattern*

According to Bloor and Bloor (2004), the Split Rheme pattern consists in using the Rheme of a previous clause, that has a number of pieces of information, as a Theme of the next clauses. The writers made use of this thematic pattern in their essays to develop and explain more the information mentioned in the preceding Rheme to the following Themes in more details. In this concern Wei (2016) argued that the Split Rheme pattern “scaffolds the content of longer stretch of texts” (p. 82) in the sense that it offers a well-organized progression of ideas which may not only effectively support the reader in grasping the main overview of the paragraph but also noticeably enhancing the essay’s coherence and cohesion. Wang (2007) and Jalifar (2010) argued that the high presence of the Split Rheme pattern determines the robustness of the students’ essays in the sense that the higher the number of this pattern is, the better the text is in terms of arguments development and elaboration. This pattern may be illustrated in the following extract.

Extract 5:

Remote working has offered numerous advantages for both employees and employers. Employees may benefit from the flexibility to have their own schedules and get rid of the daily commutes and the crowded means of transportation. Employers will be able to reduce the high costs associated with maintaining physical office spaces.

It is the least applied in the students’ argumentative essays. Around one third, that is 33% of the students used this pattern. However, with respect to the number of units displaying, this pattern is confessedly low as it did not exceed 4.27% of the total number of units. The scarcity of this pattern is expected as this type of thematic progression is generally associated with the writers’ proficiency and it may be significantly frequent in advanced students’ texts (Hawes & Thomas, 1997 as cited in Crompton, 2004), while the majority of the participants of the study are still in the intermediate level.

4. *Derived Theme pattern*

It is the last thematic progression pattern mentioned in Bloor and Bloor ‘s (2004) model in which the theme from one clause is derived from a hyper-theme within the text. In other words, the Theme in the next clause is clearly different however it refers to the same general theme mentioned earlier. This thematic progression pattern reinforces the text’s coherence and cohesion by establishing a hierarchical relationship between the general theme and the derived themes. In this respect, Eggins (2004) and Emilia (2005) averred that this pattern offers a well-structured method of textual progression in the sense that ideas can be derived from a broader definition to more specific ones in the subsequent sentences. Further, on the part of readers, the Derived Theme structure helps the reader to remember the main topic, hence sustaining their focus on the ideas (Hawes, 2015).

Interestingly, this pattern was never applied by any of the EFL participants and this may be attributed to two major factors. The first one could be related to the undergraduate students’ lack of proficiency in applying such a complex thematic development which

consists in using various themes while referring to one general theme in their argumentative writings. Whereas, the second reason may be explained by the generic nature of the argumentative text in which this pattern cannot be easily applied to display a proper and meaningful flow of arguments.

DISCUSSION

The overuse of the Constant thematic structure in the present study is almost in line with Jannah et al.'s (2023) research on EFL students' writings of argumentative texts. Applying an SFL thematic progression theory, they inferred that second semester students at the English Education department relied intensively on the use of the Constant theme pattern as a predominant thematic structure in their essays, in which they opted to use the same theme taken from the previous clause and repeat it in the next one. More importantly, in a different generic context and in an SFL based analysis of thematic progression patterns of English graduate university application essays, Haji (2023) deduced that the Reiteration, that is Constant, pattern is the most frequent thematic pattern employed by English graduate students applying for the Sociology discipline. She attributed the preponderance of this thematic phenomenon in the graduate students' personal statements to the generic requirements of the genre which needs to be highly informative about the applicants' academic credentials and relevant achievements.

It is also worth mentioning that the Linear pattern was most commonly present in the high-scoring essays where students proved a noticeable ability to elaborate and explore information and arguments by expanding the ideas introduced in the previous Rheme and this correlates with the generic requirements of the argumentative text. On the other hand, the low-scoring essays displayed an intensive use of the Constant pattern where students opted to focus on one specific theme or subject which makes the writing style redundant and progressively monotonous. These findings are consistent with the results obtained by Ashadi, Triyono and Pranowo (2023), Leong (2019) and Pavavijarn (2022) in their research on thematic development of academic essays. Interestingly, they inferred that the linear, or Zig-Zag, pattern was intensively present in advanced argumentative texts, whereas the constant, or Reiteration, structure was most commonly frequent in narratives (Februana, 2014; Setyarini & Narita, 2016; Safitra, 2013), descriptive and recount texts (Yunita, 2018), and news reports (Sharndarma & Panamah, 2013; Varela, 2014). These findings correlate with the ones obtained by Okta et al. (2023).

Despite its significance in maintaining textual and semantic cohesion on the argumentative essay, the majority of students shared the same tendency to avoid the linear thematic pattern as it seems to be relatively complex and difficult for them as they were not able to develop more information in relation with a rheme of a clause to be elaborated. In this concern, Yani et al. (2019), argued that by employing the Split Rheme thematic pattern, the students need to establish a logical correlation between ideas that will be explored in more details in the themes of the subsequent clauses, which is quite challenging for most of them. Thus, this implies that more efforts should be devoted to text development and organization in ESL and EFL settings. In this respect, Jing (2015) introduced an instructional

model which serves to raise the students' meta knowledge about thematic progression patterns and textual coherence and cohesion in EFL and ESL reading and writing courses.

It can be inferred, however, that the majority of EFL Business English students managed, to some extent, to employ a variety of thematic progression patterns to present their essays in a well-structured-argumentative academic writing style. Meanwhile, the study revealed the presence of noticeable thematic progression problems where some students proved a considerable failure to maintain the information flow in their essays. Additionally, other students showed a remarkable misuse of the different Themes and Rhemes of the same paragraph which makes the writing style confusing in most cases.

The total absence of the derived theme pattern in this research is in line with other studies conducted on thematic development in EFL writings. Indeed, Keskin & DEMIR (2021) found that the derived hyper thematic progression pattern was never applied by any of the EFL participants in their argumentative essays, whereas the constant, linear and split progression patterns were used in varying frequencies.

The proper use of Theme and Rheme in all types of academic genres in general and in argumentative essays in particular plays a key role in maintaining coherence and cohesion in the text. In other words, writers are supposed to successfully manage the flow of information in the different clauses to guide the reader's orientation and help them smoothly follow the sequence of ideas and arguments.

CONCLUSION

This research has examined thematic progressions in 27 argumentative essays produced by EFL undergraduate Business English students. The thematic progression investigation of the current study, based on Bloor and Bloor (2004) analytical framework, revealed that the constant theme pattern was the most frequently employed thematic structure (81%), followed by the Linear pattern which dominated only 13.86% of the total number of patterns. With respect to the Split-Rheme pattern, it was the least applied by the EFL Business English students due to its complexity and it represented only 4.27% of the patterns used. Surprisingly, the Derived Theme was totally absent in the students' essays which signposts that due to their lack of proficiency, the participants opted for a clear and persuasive writing style.

It can be inferred that despite the noticeable lack of understanding of the major thematic progression patterns, the majority of students in this study managed to prove a successful development and elaboration of relevant arguments relying on three main patterns, namely the Constant theme, the Linear theme and the Split Rheme pattern. This sequence of ideas binds all the clauses together in terms of meaning and helps the reader to connect information and deduce the intended meaning of the students. Interestingly, the use of a variety of thematic progression developments highlighted the students' writing skills in dealing with different types of argumentative essays. This may be attributed to the significant role of the writing sessions in enhancing their composition skills and improving their abilities to confer cohesion and cohesion in their essays.

From a linguistic perspective, the current research offers insightful implications for corpus-based thematic progression patterns investigation. It has provided a significant

overview regarding the various thematic developments incorporated in Business English students' essays in an EFL, Tunisian setting. Indeed, it presented a better understanding of the variant thematic progressions that may shape a compact, successful argumentative essay. As such, the present study could be of valuable contribution for students by providing them a clearer understanding on the way they need to develop their argumentative writings by implementing an effective combination of thematic progression developments.

More interestingly, EFL and ESL instructors should consider implementing teaching Theme-Rheme and the thematic progression patterns in writing courses which would enhance the students' writings abilities and minimize the challenges they encounter in the argument's development. Indeed, more efforts should be devoted to essays' writing and organization in in ESL and EFL writing courses to raise the students' awareness of the text's coherence and cohesion and the successful use of thematic patterns to improve their academic writings' performance. Thus, they will certainly be more knowledgeable of the valued thematic progression patterns in the English language and the readers' expectations.

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