

Research Article

# A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF THEMATIC PROGRESSION IN ACADEMIC ESSAYS WRITTEN BY ENGLISH MAJORS AND IELTS CANDIDATES

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## Abstract

Thematic progression refers to how themes relate with each other and with rhemes to construct a text. The present study explores what kinds of thematic patterns were deployed in IELTS essays in the light of Functional Grammar. 30 IELTS essays written by English-majored students at Quang Nam university and 30 sample essays with band scores of 7.0-7.5 were selected as data for text analysis. The descriptive and comparative methods as well as qualitative and quantitative approaches were used to give a detailed description of thematic progression based on McCarthy (1991)'s model with a view to identifying similarities and differences between two group essays. The findings reveal that three types of thematic patterns: constant, linear, and derived were realized in the essays, of which the writers displayed a greater tendency towards employing constant patterns. However, it is noticeable that there were significant differences regarding the use of linear patterns and derived patterns traceable to the level of language proficiency of the writers. It is hoped that the findings of the study will provide insights into the nature of thematic progression, whereby IELTS test-takers can make good use of thematic patterns for completing their IELTS essays successfully.

## Keywords

*Theme; thematic progression; constant pattern; linear pattern; derived pattern*

## 1. Introduction

Thematic progression represents the way themes relate with each other and with rhemes in organizing a text. From the perspective of Functional Grammar, it can be claimed that thematic progression occupies a crucial position in producing a cohesive and coherent text. Therefore, thorough understanding of thematic progression will shed light on both

the meaning and the role of a text or a discourse for the purpose of attaining communicative outcomes.

The present study identifies what kinds of thematic patterns are deployed in academic IELTS essays written by successful test-takers and English-majored students at Quang Nam university in the light of Functional Grammar and then makes

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a comparison between two different levels of performance to identify similarities and differences between two group essays. The findings of this study are expected to enable IELTS test-takers in general and English-majored students at Quang Nam university in particular to take into account the prominent thematic patterns of academic IELTS sample essays, whereby they can apply thematic strategies effectively to create a cohesive and coherent piece of writing.

In pursuit of the objectives of the study, based on the best access to relevant documentation, the study investigates academic IELTS sample essays taken from the textbooks and relevant IELTS websites with band scores of 7.0-7.5 and those written by English-majored students, focusing on thematic patterns. The selected data are divided into two categories: Data 1, written by English-majored students, and Data 2, with 7.0-7.5 band scores, which are equivalent to level C1 on the CEFR. 7.0-7.5. By analyzing the thematic patterns within these essays, the research seeks to explore how various writers, with different proficiency levels manage theme and rheme development to achieve coherence and effectiveness in their writing, contributing to a deeper understanding of thematic patterns to create a well-organized and meaningful text.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Previous Studies

Within the realm of academic writing, the analysis of thematic progression has garnered significant attention from language researchers and educators. Notably, there has been a growing body of studies related to Theme-Rheme employment in academic writing (Alyousef & Alsharif, 2000; Ebrahimi & Ebrahimi, 2012; Gunawan & Aziza, 2017; Hajar & Kurniawan (2023); Hawes, 2015; Jalilifar, 2010; Jusoh et al, 2022; Naderi and Koohestanian, 2014; Susilowati et al, 2022; Trung & Quynh (2018); Wang, 2007; Yani et al, 2019). Particularly, Syharizal et al (2018), for example, examined thematic progression in the students' writing based on the theory of Bloor and Bloor (2014) and found that the pattern of constant theme was the most dominantly used by the students, followed by the linear theme and split theme. Derived theme was the least frequently used by the students.

By applying Eggins (2005)'s theory as the theoretical framework, Purba and Pasaribu (2021) explored thematic progression in the students' descriptive texts. The findings indicated that three types of thematic progression, namely reiteration or constant pattern, zig-zag or linear pattern, and multiple patterns or split rheme pattern were deployed in the students' writing. It is noticeable that the constant pattern was most dominantly used by students while linear pattern and split rheme pattern were less commonly employed. From the findings, it is obvious that the students tended to use simple

thematic progression in writing descriptive text due to their low level of knowledge in grammar and thematic progression.

In a similar vein, Rofiah et al (2021) analyzed thematic progression patterns utilized by the students in their recount texts. The results showed that all of the students employed more than one pattern in their writing, often combining constant, linear, and multiple theme patterns. However, linear pattern was the most dominant one as it provided students with an easier approach to completing their writing tasks while maintaining coherence.

Mahfuza and Al Hafizh (2023) undertook an investigation into types of thematic progression employed in the undergraduate students' writing thesis proposal based on the theory of thematic progression pattern by Eggins (2004) and Paltridge (2006). The findings revealed that three types of thematic progressions pattern including reiteration, zigzag and multiple patterns were employed by the students to make a coherent and cohesive proposals, of which reiteration pattern was most widely used by the students in their writing.

The most recent study, 'Theme-Rheme Pattern: Its Contribution to Cohesion and Coherence in The Students' Research Background' conducted by Suharsono et al (2024) examined how Theme-Rheme structures enhanced the overall clarity and organization of the students' research backgrounds of undergraduate theses, master's theses, and doctoral dissertations. The findings indicated that students utilized a variety of theme types in their research backgrounds. From the findings, the researchers recommended that students should take thematic structures into consideration so that they could strengthen their arguments, and convey their messages more effectively.

Realizing the crucial essence of thematic progression in academic writing, the purpose of this study is to uncover the thematic patterns deployed in academic IELTS sample essays with band scores of 7.0 - 7.5 and English-majored IELTS essays. The findings of this study are expected to enable IELTS test-takers in general and English majors in particular to take into account the prominent features of high-quality sample essays, and differences between high scoring and low-scoring essays in terms of thematic patterns so that they can reach the perceived and desired IELTS band score.

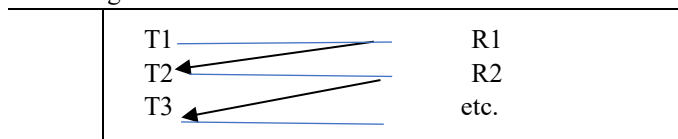
### 2.2. Theoretical Background

The relationship between subsequent clauses and previous themes - rhemes in relation to the entire text is referred to as "thematic progression" by Danes as early as 1974, and the themes of each clause in a text are not randomly selected, but rather patterned. Thus, thematic progression is concerned with the way themes relate with each other and with rhemes in organising a text.

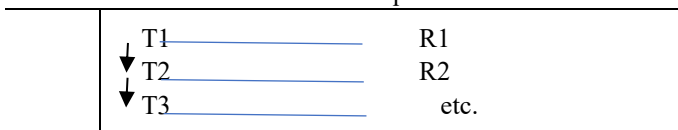
Emilia (2005) stated that thematic progression can improve a text's coherence and and cohesion.

According to McCarthy (1991), the connection between Theme-Rheme structures can be portrayed in three basic patterns when theme and rheme are viewed on a broader scale of the entire discourse. In this study, McCarthy (1991)'s model of thematic progression, which is a revised version of the model proposed by Daneš (1974), is preferred. Below is the definition of three patterns of thematic progression proposed by McCarthy (1991):

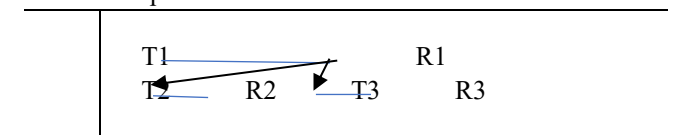
(1) Linear pattern: The rheme of the previous clause becomes the theme in the subsequent clause, as in the following extract:



(2) Constant pattern: The theme of the previous clause is the same as the theme of the subsequent clause.



(3) Derived pattern: Elements of rheme from the preceding clause serve as themes in subsequent clauses like a hierarchical pattern.



### 3. Methodology

The study employed descriptive approach, which aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of thematic patterns and theme types in 7.0-7.5 scored essays and those written by English majors, in order to disclose the prominent features in terms of thematic patterns employed in the sample essays. In this study, the data were written essays collected from two groups: 30 IELTS essays written by English majors, and 30 sample essays with scores ranging from 7.0 to 7.5.

In terms of the length of the essays in the data, it is shown that there are 8,828 words and 8,439 words appearing in a total of 30 sample essays, and of 30 English majors' essays, respectively. The average number of words per essay is around 294 words for sample essays, and about 281 words for English-majored students' essays.

In SFL, the clause, "the central processing unit in the lexicogrammar" has received special status. Data 1 (English majors) consists of 972 clauses, of which there are 228 clause complexes, 267 simplexes and 168 embedded clauses while in Data 2 (7.0 -7.5 scored sample essays), there are 1,228 clauses

including 259 clause complexes, 205 simplexes and 365 embedded clauses.

In addition, a comparative method was used to identify the similarities and differences between essays at different proficiency levels in terms of thematic progression in the light of Functional Grammar. After the data categorization and analysis, the descriptive statistics were processed via the Microsoft Excel software in order to determine the frequencies of thematic patterns in the data, which facilitates the comparison between the two separate groups of data, thus drawing inferences and conclusions from the findings

### 4. Results and Discussion

Since thematic progression pattern employed in this study is thematic development pattern proposed by McCarthy (1991), therefore, there are only three patterns identified on the students' IELTS essays and sample IELTS essays, namely linear pattern, constant pattern and derived pattern.

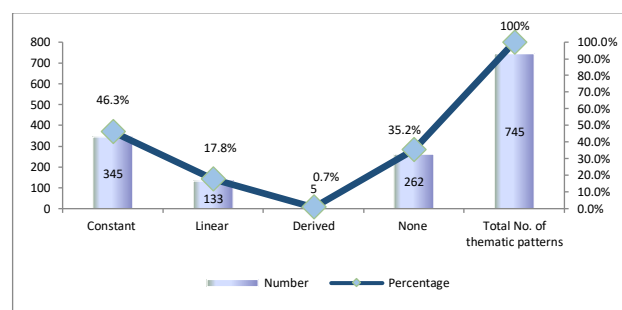


Figure 4.1. Thematic progression pattern (Data 1)

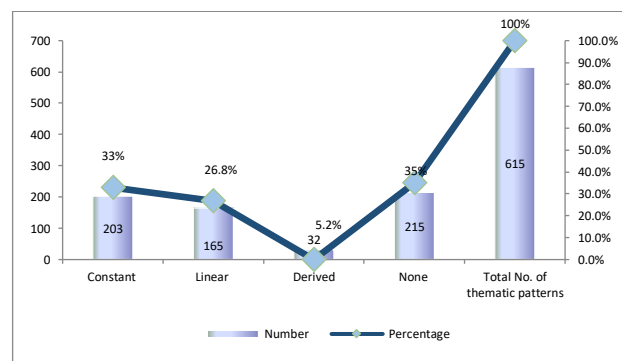


Figure 4.2. Thematic progression pattern (Data 2)

As shown in Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2, in both data, writers display a greater tendency towards employing constant patterns with 46.3% and 33% in Data 1 and in Data 2, respectively. The gained results are in line with Nwogu & Bloor (1991). However, it is likely that using constant patterns may produce simplistic, repetitive, and redundant paragraph

as constant progression is where the same theme appears in a series of clauses. Below are some examples for illustrations.

(1) The constant pattern

||| Secondly, **people** [[who addict to mobile and smartphone]] will become lazy in physical form and mind form. |||

||| **They** prefer lying somewhere [[to find or experience through small screens of the phones]] than trying to do it in real life [[by doing activities outside]]. |||

||| **Some people** lack skills || and become shy [[ to add or chat with everyone]]. |||

(Data 1)

(2) The constant pattern

||| **Children** are too young [[to understand]] [[why they are punished.]] |||

||| **They** are easy [[to link their mistakes to the unhappy experience after punishment.]] |||

||| However, **they** still do not know || why their parents are angry with them || and how to correct their behaviour || because **they** are not mature enough [[to reform themselves.]] |||

(Data 2)

(3) The constant pattern

||| For example, **children** are easily attracted to games, || so **children** play games regularly for a long time during the day. |||

||| As a result, **children** become lazy without any activities except to playing games, || which is harmful for human. |||

(Data 1)

(4) The constant pattern

||| **The old generation** brings the required knowledge because of their vast experience of industry. |||

||| **This generation** has seen cycles of ups and downs of a business during their career. |||

||| **They** understand the nuances of their industry ||and can even foresee a trend. |||

(Data 2)

In Excerpt (1), it can be seen that the pattern takes the same element *people* as the point of departure for all the clauses, and the rheme for each clause provides further information and explanation about the Theme. The use of the personal reference *they* does not imply a change in theme, but only to avoid repetition, which forms the pattern of parallel. It is obvious that the flow of information in the thematic pattern is iterative, focusing on *people*.

In Example (2), Theme 1, taking the element *children* as the point of departure, is the same as the third person plural pronoun *they* in Themes 2, 3, and 4, which indicates that the four adjoining clauses have the same theme but their rhemes are different. The writer uses constant pattern to make the point discussed in the text as the central attention.

In Excerpt (3), the theme *children* of the first clause is selected as the theme of the subsequent clauses (2) and (3) as

well, while in Example (4), *The old generation* is used as the theme of the clause in the constant thematic progression pattern. The writer reiterates the same element made theme to keep the text focused, creating cohesion.

Constant pattern is where the same Theme appears in a series of clause. The results reveal that the IELTS writers utilize reiteration patterns to make a consistent focus of their messages (Eggins, 2004). The tendency of employing constant patterns as the most prominent thematic progression is the most frequently used thematic progression pattern in the study. This is due to the fact that constant pattern is viewed as the easiest pattern among other patterns (Rakhman, 2013). However, constant pattern, a 'static' style (Enkvist, 1974) is boring to read, and also indicates "a text which is going nowhere" (Eggin, 2004).

The findings also indicate significant differences regarding the use of linear patterns and derived patterns. Linear patterns in the English-majored students' essays make up 17.8% of the total types of thematic progression, while in the 7.0-7.5 scored sample essays, linear comprised 26.8% of all the thematic patterns. This difference may be discussed based on the level of language proficiency of the writers. 7.0-7.5 scored sample essay writers use less constant patterns and more linear patterns to create a more argumentative texts. According to Enkvist (1974), Fries (1983), Belmonte and McCabe (1998), linear patterns provide more of a dynamic text which works well with explanation as it allows writers to add points always moving from the given idea to a new one. Hence, it is obvious that thematic progression of an academic writing should have high frequency of cross-referential links from the rheme of the clause to the theme of the next clause because the academic writing presents complex arguments in which each subsequent idea is a development of an idea in the previous clause, which makes the text more cohesive. Consider the following extracts from the data.

(5) The linear pattern

||| In addition, parents need to set good role models for their children;

||| thus, **children** can copy right behaviour from parents. |||

(Data 2)

(6) The linear pattern

||| Secondly, the mobile phone and smartphone help people [[relax, entertain by online shopping, online banking.]] |||

||| And **people** connect with many people all over the world via social networking website (Facebook, email, app..). |||

(Data 1)

(7) The linear pattern

||| Hence, not only does financial education pave the way for success, || but also it instills values [[that constitute key ingredients of a sound character]]. |||

||| [[**Instilling wise spending in the society**]] can impact positively on the economy of a nation. |||

(Data 2)

## (8) The linear pattern

||| **In a free market economy**, wages are proportionate to the value of a particular employee, worker or a hired person. |||

||| **Such value** is determined by that person's contribution to the establishment [[he is working for]].|||

(Data 2)

In Excerpt (5), the rheme *need to set good role models for their children* of the first clause becomes the topical theme *children* of the subsequent clause, emphasizing the cause-and-effect relationship between parental behavior and children's conduct. The thematic pattern effectively communicates the idea that parental behavior has a direct influence on their children's behavior, showing the writer's point of view and good control of the information in their writing.

In Extract (6), the rheme *help people relax, entertain by online shopping, online banking* becomes the theme of the subsequent clause. This kind of pattern offers new information in continuous progression in order to enhance cohesion in the text and gives the text what Eggins (2004) called 'a sense of cumulative development'. Therefore, this recurrence makes the writing more compact in structure, cohesive and coherent.

In Example (7), the rheme *instills values that constitute key ingredients of a sound character* of the second clause becomes the topical theme of the third clause, constituting chains of the argument. The findings reveal that the writers make use of linear patterns to create a logical flow, making it easier for readers to follow the argument. It is clear that this kind of pattern can enhance clarity and comprehension in writing.

In Example (8), the rheme *wages are proportionate to the value of a particular employee, worker or a hired person* of the first clause becomes the topical theme of the second clause, presenting the argument in a clear order, providing a structured and logical flow. The thematic pattern shows the way the writer organizes the information in which the following theme is taken from the previous rheme, ensuring that the readers can constantly follow their ideas in chains of the argument.

As can be seen from Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2, derived patterns seem to be neglected in both data, with 0.7 and 5.2% in Data 1 and in Data 2, respectively. The following are some examples of derived patterns in the study.

## (9) The derived pattern

(9a) ||| There are two following reasons [[to support for my opinion]]. |||

(9b) ||| Firstly, at school and university, [[what group A gains]] is almost entirely theory, theory and theory. |||

.....

(9c) ||| Secondly, as group A students are contributing less, ||| they surely get less benefit. |||

.....

(Data 2)

## (10) The derived pattern

(10a) ||| I completely agree with the above statement || as there are also **other essential things** [[to keep in mind]] || before appointing anyone. |||

(10b) ||| To commence with, **primarily the most important thing** is the theoretical knowledge of the eligible candidate [[which can be judged by conducting a written test]]. |||

.....

(10c) ||| Moreover, sometimes theoretical intelligence is not sufficient || so **practical performance** should also be tested || to check the capacity of an individual. |||

.....

(10d) ||| Further reinforcing my views, || **previous work experience** also plays an important role in [[perfecting the skills of an applicant]]. |||

.....

(Data 2)

As shown in Example (9), the rheme of the clause (9a) mentions two reasons which in turn becomes the theme of the subsequent clauses (9b) and (9c). The thematic pattern indicates that the method of development of the text is clearly planned.

Excerpt (10) is extracted from an essay about job interviews before offering a position to a person. The element *other essential things* is introduced in the rheme 10a, and each of the essential things becomes a theme in the subsequent clauses. That means the themes in the clauses are different; however, the themes are all related to the rheme *other essential things* in clause 10a, which helps in the development of a coherent and cohesive text.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study examines types thematic patterns used in English majors' IELTS essays and IELTS academic sample essays with band scores of 7.0 - 7.5, applying McCarthy (1991)'s model of thematic progression in English in order to analyze their distribution rates and identify their similarities as well as differences, thereby, shedding some light on the nature of thematic progression to enable IELTS writers to make good use of the prominent thematic patterns for completing their IELTS essays successfully.

The findings obtained from the analysis of thematic patterns show that that the three types of thematic patterns: constant, linear, and derived are realized in the essays, of which the constant pattern dominantly occupies the thematic progression used in the IELTS writing. The results of this study also indicate that more skilled writers use more linear patterns and derived patterns. The results align with those of



Belmonte and McCabe (1998), Wang (2007), Jalilifar (2010), concerning thematic progression employment in argumentative genre. One common problem is the overuse of constant pattern, which is considered problematic in argumentative type where linear progression is much preferred.

It is apparent that thematic progression has a great influence on the understanding and interpretation of the audience or the reader because it occupies a crucial position in producing a cohesive and coherent text. The writers must arrange Theme-Rheme in such a way that contributes to maintain the flow of information and create a coherent text as Wang (2010) states that appropriate use of theme and thematic progression contribute to coherence in English writing.

The study indicates that English majors' essays and 7.0-7.5 scored essays do produce various interesting similarities and differences and attribute these similarities and differences to their level of language proficiency and the nature of IELTS writing. Therefore, in order to improve the quality of their writing, IELTS writers are suggested to take thematic patterns into consideration. Particularly, by utilizing different type of thematic patterns, especially linear patterns and derived patterns, the writers are able to distribute information logically and effectively, making their argument more persuasive and coherent.

This study is expected to help IELTS test-takers in general, and English-major students at Quang Nam University in particular, take into account thematic patterns, thereby improving their ability to write academic IELTS essays more effectively and achieve higher scores in the IELTS writing test.

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