



The Realization of Thematic Progression in the Essays of English Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

This study focuses on the realization of thematic progression, the problems concerning the thematic progression, and the coherence of English undergraduate students' essays in one of the private universities in Lubuklinggau. The researchers investigated ten argumentative essays written by the third-semester students by employing descriptive qualitative with written discourse analysis. The researchers used documentation and interview as the instruments. This study used Eggins' theory (2004). This study revealed that the students mainly realized the thematic progression patterns in their writing, although they did not have a proper thematic progression insight. The students applied Theme reiteration, zig-zag pattern, multiple-Rheme pattern, and split Theme in the thematic progression. Meanwhile, the problems concerning the thematic progression were the problem of brand-new Theme, empty Rheme, incomplete clause, and confusing selection of textual Theme. Brand-new Theme mainly occurred in students' essays, in which they carried forward the new information that did not relate to the preceding clause. Ten students' argumentative essays were more coherent in terms of coherence as they had already employed various thematic progression patterns and were not monotonous in one pattern only. To sum up, although theoretically, they lack an understanding of thematic progression, they have practically applied the various thematic progression patterns and made their essays more coherent.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the crucial skills to be mastered by university students. Zemach and Rumisek (2006) propose writing as an essential part of university study. In a university study, the students are demanded to write good academic writing. One way is to determine Theme-Rheme and thematic progression to provide the information flow in their writing. Theme and Rheme are the basic organizational form of a clause as a message.

Theme and Rheme are crucial components in constructing a coherent text (Eggs, 2004). The Theme is the starting point of the clause, while the Rheme is the resting point of the clause. Theme and Rheme are applied in the thematic progression patterns examination. Thus, the students need to comprehend the Theme and Rheme within the clause before employing thematic progression patterns.

Thematic progression is the configuration of Theme and Rheme within the text to provide the information flow. Paltridge (2012) states the thematic progression refers to how the Theme of a clause may pick up or repeat a meaning from a preceding Theme or Rheme. The determination of thematic progression can assist students in organizing the information within a clause. In line with Halliday and Hasan (1976), Theme and thematic progression determination will help students organize the information within a clause and make a coherent text.

Additionally, the use of thematic progression patterns can help the students to produce a coherent text and contribute to the cohesive development of a text. Fitriati and Yonata (2017) emphasize that ordering new and old information correctly has already shown a coherent text in the thematic progression terms. As supported by Sharndama and Panamah (2013), thematic progression contributes to a text's cohesive development.

Several studies (Lestari et al., 2019; Yunita, 2018; Gunawan & Aziza, 2017; Utomo et al., 2020) focusing on the thematic progression revealed the same results. They showed Theme reiteration, zig-zag pattern and multiple-Theme

patterns in the written texts. Meanwhile, Pangestu et al. (2019) only found two patterns: zig-zag pattern and Theme reiteration in the texts.

Besides, Marfuaty and Wahyudi, (2015); Al-Bazzaz and Al-Shajlawi (2018) proposed that a simple linear Theme was frequently used in the texts. Next, the studies that emphasized constant Theme pattern was the most pattern used in the texts (Patpong, 2013; Rahmawati & Kurniawan, 2015; Dewi et al., 2019; Chen & Shuo, 2018). Meanwhile, Undayasari and Saleh (2018) and Hendrawan et al. (2021) argued that zig-zag pattern was commonly applied in the texts.

In addition, based on the preliminary study conducted on the students' essays in one of the private universities in Lubuklinggau, some clauses did not show the thematic progression. The researchers found new information that did not relate to the previous clause in students' essays. Those problems led us to explore the thematic progression, the problems concerning the thematic progression, and the coherence of students' essays viewed from the thematic progression.

Then, this study raised three research questions: (1) how is the realization of the thematic progression in the essays of English undergraduate students in one of the private universities in Lubuklinggau? (2) How are the problems concerning the thematic progression in one of the private universities in Lubuklinggau? (3) How is the coherence of English undergraduate students' essays in one of the private universities in Lubuklinggau?

METHODS

This current study used descriptive-qualitative with written discourse analysis. This study investigates the thematic progression using Eggs (2004) as the leading theory, the problems concerning the thematic progression using Bloor and Bloor (1999) as the leading theory, and the coherence of students' essays viewed from the thematic progression used by the students.

Moreover, the instrument of this study employed documentation and interview. The interview was used to support the data analysis

toward the thematic progression and the problems concerning thematic progression. Then, ten students were interviewed in this study. The researchers chose them based on the number of the data source.

Furthermore, the data source was argumentative essays written by English undergraduate students in the third semester. The students were asked to write an argumentative essay on “The advantages and disadvantages of online learning during the pandemic.” Then, the researchers took ten argumentative essays purposively because it was thirty per cent of the number of the argumentative essays.

Next, the procedures for analyzing the data: (1) reading the argumentative essays, (2) breaking them into clauses and numbering the clauses, (3) determining Theme-Rheme, (4) identifying and classifying the thematic progression, (5) drawing the thematic progression schema in the whole text, (6) calculating the thematic progression occurrence, (7) identifying and classifying the problems concerning the thematic progression, (8) calculating their occurrence, (9) stating the coherence viewed from thematic progression, (10) interpreting all the findings, and (11) concluding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Thematic Progression

The researchers present the first and secondary findings in the first research question in this study. The first finding refers to the data analyzed using the main theory proposed by Eggins (2004), while the secondary finding refers to data that is not included in Eggins’ theory but offered by McCabe (1999). The results are presented in Table 1 (TR: Theme reiteration, ZZ: zig-zag, MR: multiple-Rheme, ST: split Theme).

Table 1. Thematic Progression Results

Text	Number of Clauses	TR	ZZ	MR	ST
1	46	9	10	8	-
2	29	7	12	-	4
3	37	8	8	13	-
4	53	11	18	10	-
5	27	2	10	3	-
6	37	7	14	4	-
7	26	3	11	5	-
8	30	9	8	4	-
9	25	4	4	7	-
10	26	2	7	10	-
Total	336	62	102	64	4

From Table 1, most students already applied the thematic progression patterns: Theme reiteration, zig-zag pattern, multiple-Rheme, and split Theme in their writing.

Theme Reiteration

Eggins (2004) proposes Theme reiteration referring to a Theme in the following clause taken up from the previous Theme and linked to each other. Additionally, the use of Theme reiteration can make it text-focused. As Eggins (2004) supported, Theme reiteration is a primary way to keep text-focused. Furthermore, the students employed Theme reiteration. Then overall, they chiefly use Theme reiteration to stay focused on a topic. It can be seen below.

(15) **Some students** can master the material faster just by reading it. (16) But **some students** take longer to understand it. (17) **Some people** even need an explanation from their friends to understand the material being studied.

From the example above, the Theme in the 15th clause represents the same information in the Themes 16th and 17th. “Some students” in Theme 16 refers to Theme in the 15th clause. Then, “some people” in Theme 17th also refers to “some students” in the 16th clause. Three Themes are related to each other. When the researchers interviewed the student about this pattern, she said she wanted to stay focused on one topic, “some students”. In line with Yunita (2018), the use of Theme reiteration by the students makes

the text focus by repeating the same element as Themes.

Zig-Zag Pattern

Eggins (2004) emphasizes zig-zag pattern refers to when the Rheme of one clause is taken up as the Theme of the following clause. Based on the findings, a zig-zag pattern was the most frequent pattern realized in students' argumentative essays, but they do not know the function of a zig-zag pattern in the text. The examples of the zig-zag pattern are presented below.

(10) Starting from work even in the education sector should also be done at home. (11) **This** is the cause of learning activities in school replaced by learning online. (12) **It** is the main solution taken by the government to keep their learning process of teaching.

From the example above, the student uses a zig-zag pattern in her essay as the Theme in the 11th clause is carried from Rheme in the 10th clause. The Theme in the 11th clause, "this" refers to Rheme in the 10th clause. Then, the Theme in the 12th clause is also carried from Rheme in the 11th clause. Theme "it" in the 12th clause refers to Rheme in the 11th clause "learning activities in school replaced by learning online."

Moreover, based on the interview with the student, she used this pattern to stay focused. Then, she only followed the writing flow and wrote what she was thinking. It contradicts Eggins (2004), whose zig-zag pattern builds on newly introduced information to achieve cohesion in text, and it gives the reader a sense of cumulative development. A zig-zag pattern presents new information in the Rheme slot, but her reason is not similar to Eggins (2004) toward a zig-zag pattern.

Multiple-Rheme Pattern

Multiple-Rheme pattern refers to Rheme in the previous clause that has the number of pieces of information, and they are taken up as a Theme in the number of subsequent clauses (Eggins, 2004). The students also used multiple-Rheme patterns in their writing to explore and explain more the information from the preceding Rheme

to the next Theme in detail. The examples below show multiple-Rheme patterns.

(27) First, technological advances have a major impact on the development of education. (28) **Educators** use it to facilitate the teaching and learning process and improve the quality of education. (29) **Students and teachers** have very broad access. (30) **Learning and finding materials** can be done more quickly, easily, and effectively. (32) **Students and teachers** are required to be sensitive to current technological developments.

From the example above, Rheme in the 27th clause distributes several topics into Themes in clauses 28, 29, 30, and 32. Rheme in the 27th clause talks about *a major impact on the development of education*. Those are explained in Themes 28, 29, 30, and 32. The Theme in the 28th clause expresses the effect on an educator. The Themes in the 29th and 32nd clauses talk about the impact on students and teachers.

Meanwhile, the Theme in the 30th informs the effect on learning and finding materials. Here, the student does not use the ordinal numbers to express each Theme distributed from Rheme in the 27th clause. Although the student does not use it, each Theme in clauses 28, 29, 30, and 32 refers to Rheme in clause 27. They are part of the topic in Rheme 27.

These examples include multiple-Rheme because the students took up pieces of information in the previous Rheme, and then she represented each of them as Themes in subsequent clauses. As supported by Eggins (2004), the multiple-Rheme pattern refers to Rheme in the previous clause with the number of pieces of information, and they are taken up as Themes in subsequent clauses.

In addition, when the researchers interviewed the student about this pattern, she used this pattern to explain the major impact in detail. In line with Yunita (2018) the use of multiple-Rheme is to develop the texts well according to the preceding plan before writing those ideas in the text.

Split Theme

Split Theme refers to the Theme in the previous clause that has several pieces of information. Then, they are taken up as Themes in the following clauses (McCabe, 1999). Split Theme is only found in Text 2. Besides, the students' reason for split Theme is quite the same as the use of multiple-Rheme, but the difference is the students explain in detail the information in Theme position to Theme in the following clauses. The examples of split Themes in Text 2 are shown in the next paragraph.

(13) The advantages of online learning in this pandemic is to make it easier for learning processes long distance. (14) **Then students and teachers** begin to learn technology how to use learning applications. (17) **In other, parents** are easy to monitor children's learning activities at home.

From the examples above, the Theme in the 13th clause contains more than one idea. Then, the idea is developed in Themes 14 and 17. It is included a Split Theme. The Theme in 13 represents the advantages of online learning. Then, they are produced in Theme 14 and 17 by the student. McCabe (1999) emphasizes split Theme refers to a Theme containing more than one idea, and those ideas are developed in different subsequent clauses. Besides, when the researchers interviewed the student's reason for this pattern, she said that she used this pattern to explain more about the advantages or disadvantages in the following clause.

Further, when the researchers interviewed the students related to their thematic progression insight, they mostly did not know the thematic progression. It is unfamiliar to them. Meanwhile, when the researchers analyzed the students' essays, they subconsciously realized the thematic progression pattern. Even though they lack the thematic progression insight, they subconsciously apply it in their writing.

The Problems concerning the Thematic Progression

The problems concerning the thematic progression refer to the students' failure to control the information flow in the text and deal with

Theme and Rheme in the clauses. Bloor and Bloor (1992) propose three common problems resulting from the misuse of Theme and Rheme. From three problems, this study revealed two problems in thematic progression: the problem of brand-new Theme and empty Rheme.

On the other hand, the researchers also found new problems that are not mentioned in the theory of Bloor and Bloor (1992). They were the problem of confusing selection of textual Themes and the problem of the incomplete clauses.

These findings are in line with the previous studies by Arunsirot (2013) and Kuswoyo and Susardi (2017). Arunsirot (2013) revealed the problem of empty Theme, the brand new Theme, empty Rheme, confusing selection of textual Theme, and the overuse of constant progression. Meanwhile, Kuswoyo and Susardi (2017) found the problem of brand new Theme, double Rheme, empty Rheme, empty Theme, overuse of constant Theme pattern, confusing selection of textual Theme, the problem of an incomplete clause, errors in choosing topical Theme, unneeded textual Theme, and double textual Theme.

The problems of the thematic progression results are shown in Table 2 (BNT: brand-new Theme, ER: empty Rheme, IC: incomplete clause, CSOTT: confusing selection of textual Theme)

Table 2. The Problems concerning the Thematic Progression Result

Text	BNT	ER	IC	CSOTT
1	15	3	1	-
2	3	1	2	-
3	6	1	-	1
4	13	2	-	-
5	11	-	-	-
6	10	1	1	1
7	2	4	1	-
8	7	-	-	1
9	8	1	-	-
10	5	1	1	-
Total	80	14	6	3

From Table 2, the problems in Theme and the thematic progression that occurred in

students' essays were brand-new Themes, empty Rheme, incomplete clauses, and a confusing selection of textual Themes. The problems found are explained in the following paragraphs.

The Problem of Brand-New Theme

A brand-new Theme problem refers to the students carrying forward the new information in the Theme in the following clause and is not related to the prior information (Bloor & Bloor, 1992). This problem frequently occurred in students' argumentative essays. It is almost found in students' essays. They put the new information in Theme in the following clause that was not linked to the previous one.

Based on the interview related to this problem, the students stated that they did not focus and pay attention to the previous clause, whether it already linked up with each other. Additionally, they thought that the information connected, but it was not linked with the prior information. The examples below show the problem of a brand-new Theme.

(6) As for the excess of this learning system, the study times are shorter (7) because there is no need to go to school and be distracted by late students. (8) Teachers provide only a variety of links to do video study or even a material explanatory video link.

From the examples above, Theme in the 7th clause does not refer to Theme and Rheme in the 6th clause. Clause 6 discusses "as for the excess of this learning system, the study times are shorter", while Theme in the 7th clause expresses the word "there", which is not related to the preceding clause. Then, it is continued in Theme in the 8th clause represents *teachers* as the topic, whereas the 7th clause does not discuss anything about it, but the 7th clause informs "because there is no need to go to school and be distracted by late students". So, that is hugely unrelated to each other. These problems above include the problem of a brand-new Theme because the Theme in the following clause is not linked up with the preceding clause.

The Problem of Empty Rheme

The problem of empty Rheme refers to the information in Rheme which is not further

developed in the following clauses. This problem was found in several students' essays. The students represented the information in Rheme, and it has several pieces of information, but that information was not further developed in the following clause. As Bloor and Bloor (1992) supported, the problem of empty Rheme refers to Rheme that is not further developed.

Based on the interview on this problem, the students mainly stated they only write the clauses following what is on their minds at the time without considering whether it is related to the preceding clause or not. The following paragraph shows examples of empty Rheme problems.

(7) Here we will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of online learning. (8) I believe that everything has advantages and disadvantages.

The example above shows Rheme in the 7th clause represents the advantages and disadvantages of online learning, but Theme in the 8th clause represents the topic "I". In this example, the student does not develop and explain the advantages and disadvantages of online learning. Hence, these examples include the problem of Empty Rheme. Moreover, this finding is similar to Herdiawan (2017). He also revealed an empty Rheme problem in his study.

Incomplete Clause

The problem of incomplete clauses occurred in this study. This problem happened because the students wrote the incomplete Theme or Rheme in the clauses. This problem can disturb the information flow Theme and Rheme in the preceding and following clauses. Kuswoyo and Susardi (2017) stated that an incomplete clause occurs when there is an element that does not exist in a clause. This problem can disturb the flow of the previous and following Theme and Rheme in the clauses. An incomplete clause example is presented below.

(16) Due to the difficulty of looking for quotas.

Based on the example in the 16th clause, the student writes an incomplete clause. She only writes the topic in Theme without explaining further information in the Rheme slot. In clause 16, she writes “due to the difficulty of looking for quotas” as the topic. Then, she does not explain what happened “due to the difficulty of looking for quotas” in Rheme. This problem can influence the information flow in the following clause. When the researchers interviewed the student about this problem, she did know the specific reason as she only wrote based on what was on her mind at the time.

The Problem of Confusing Selection of Textual Theme

This problem occurs when the writers have difficulties and make mistakes in selecting textual Themes, particularly conjunctive adjunct/conjunction. It appeared in four students’ essays. The students have difficulty using proper conjunctive adjuncts and conjunction. They stated that they only used vocabulary that they knew without considering whether it was appropriate and connected to the preceding clause and the following clause.

It is similar to Arunsirot (2013) and Kuswoyo and Susardi (2017), who found that some students get difficulties finding the appropriate conjunctive to make text connectedness. The problems of confusing selection of textual Themes examples are shown below.

(6) And as a result, after almost 2 year this virus had spread to the world so many impacts occurred all of sector and especially in education sector (7) because we needed to do online learning which is there are so many advantages and disadvantages of it.

In this example, the student is confused in selecting a textual Theme. It is shown in the 6th clause to the 7th clause. The 7th clause discusses the effect of information delivered by the 6th clause. So, the proper conjunction used between the 6th and the 7th clauses is “so”, but the student uses the conjunction “because” to connect the 6th and the 7th clauses. It is not appropriate. This problem includes the problem of confusing the

selection of textual Theme as the student face difficulty in selecting proper conjunction.

As supported by Arunsirot (2013), the problem of confusing selection of textual Theme occurs when the writers have problems and make mistakes in selecting textual Themes, particularly conjunctive adjunct/conjunction. Then, when the researchers interviewed her about this problem, she expressed that she writes following what is on her mind at the time without considering whether she uses proper conjunction or not.

Based on the analysis, the problems concerning the thematic progression occur because the students lack comprehension of coherence concepts in several clauses and the students get difficulties organizing the flow of meaning. These statements are supported by students’ interview on the concept of coherence. In addition, another trigger causing the problems occurred in students’ limited vocabulary knowledge, so they only write whatever comes to their minds.

The Coherence of English Undergraduate Students’ Essays Viewed from Thematic Progression

In this study, the coherence of students’ argumentative essays is viewed from the thematic progression realized in students’ text. Table 3 shows thematic progression patterns recognized in the students’ texts (TR: Theme reiteration, ZZ: zig-zag pattern, MR: multiple-Rheme pattern, ST: split Theme).

Table 3. Thematic Progression Types Occurrence

Text	TR	ZZ	MR	ST	Number of Thematic Progression
1	9	10	8	-	27
2	7	12	-	4	23
3	8	8	13	-	29
4	11	18	10	-	39
5	2	10	3	-	15
6	7	14	4	-	25
7	3	11	5	-	19
8	9	8	4	-	21

9	4	4	7	-	15
10	2	7	10	-	19

From Table 3, ten students' essays already realized thematic progression patterns. Then, their essays are generally coherent. It is supported by Fitriati and Yonata (2017), who emphasize that ordering the new and old information appropriately have shown a coherent text in terms of thematic progression. Then, it is also supported by the students using the various patterns: Theme reiteration, zig-zag pattern, multiple-Rheme, and split Theme in each text which made their essays more coherent. From all essays written by the students, they wrote the information well. They delivered the information by applying various patterns, and it made the information further developed in the text.

In addition, the patterns used are not monotonous in one pattern only, but the students vary them in each text. It is in line with Zahra et al. (2021), the various thematic progression patterns appeared in almost every clause making the text more coherent.

CONCLUSIONS

The students who wrote ten argumentative essays realized four thematic progression patterns. Even though, theoretically, the students lack an understanding of thematic progression but have already employed thematic progression patterns practically in their writing. Besides, four problems concerning the thematic progression occurred in students' texts. Those problems arise because they still lack understanding of coherence, particularly in some cases in the clauses. It is caused as they only possess a basic coherence concept. In addition, the lack of vocabulary knowledge is one of the reasons those problems arise in students' essays. In terms of coherence, ten argumentative essays were frequently more coherent as they already utilized the various thematic progression patterns and did not focus on one pattern all the time. So, it made the readers readily grasp the information conveyed by the students and escape from the monotonous information delivered in the essays.

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