

## AN ANALYSIS OF THEMATIC PROGRESSION STRATEGIES IN ACADEMIC IELTS SAMPLE ESSAYS

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**Abstract:** *Among the four language skills of English assessed by IELTS, academic writing, especially required for Task 2 of the IELTS academic module, is considered the most difficult by many test-takers in their efforts to gain high scores. From the perspective of Functional Grammar by M.A.K. Halliday, it can be claimed that thematic progression plays a crucial part in producing a cohesive and coherent piece of writing. With this foundation, the research presented in this article is aimed at investigating the thematic progression patterns employed in 20 academic IELTS sample essays from books published by Cambridge University Press and IELTS official websites with the band score of 9 written by highly successful test-takers with a view to identifying what element in an English clause to be selected as Theme and how the information in a clause is effectively distributed in light of Functional Grammar. It is hoped that the findings of this research can help to raise awareness of prospective IELTS test-takers about salient thematic patterns of sample IELTS academic essays whereby they can make good use of fruitful strategies to highly accomplish the IELTS Academic writing task 2.*

**Keywords:** *Writing, Theme, Patterns, Thematic Progression, IELTS Essays*

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### Introduction

The matter of thematic progression which underlies discussions of what has been called *Theme* and *Rheme* in light of Functional Grammar is of great significance to linguistic research into language in use and application to improve practical skills of language. Its thorough understanding provides insights into, not only the meaning but, the function of a text or a discourse for the purpose of achieving communicative effects as well. As Halliday & Matthiessen (2014, p.133) states, "...by analyzing the thematic structure of a text clause by clause, we can gain an insight into its texture and understand how the writer made clear to us the nature of his underlying concerns." Accordingly, this article is aimed at investigating the theme choice and thematic development employed in IELTS sample essays from a functional linguistic perspective in order to shed some light on the nature of theme as the ground for a

successful text development, and effective theme and rheme pairings in high-scoring IELTS academic writing, thereby enabling IELTS candidates to make good use of thematic strategies to achieve success in IELTS writing essays.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Previous Studies***

Theme and Rheme are two terms representing the way in which information is distributed in a clause. The notion of theme and rheme has been a matter of great concern for language researchers and educators such as Danes (1974), Garvin (1964), Brown & Yule (1983), McCarthy (1991), Firbas (1992), Berry (1995, 1996), McCabe (1999), Green et al. (2000), Belmonte & McCabe (2001), Halliday & Matthiessen (1985, 1994, 2004, 2014). In terms of thematic structure and progression in writing, a great number of practical studies have been conducted. For example, Witt & Faigley (1981) indicated that students are able to write better when they develop the ability to use theme and rheme more effectively. Bloor & Bloor (1992) identified three common problems that inexperienced writers face due to the misuse of Theme and Rheme. Naderi & Koohestanian (2014) proved that thematic structure occupies a crucial position in making any written discourse successful and progressive. In addition, Fang (2015) claimed that one way of achieving textual cohesion and coherence in L2 writing is through thematic structure. Kang's (2016) research showed that the choice and ordering of themes can create textual meaning, establish interaction between readers and writers, and fulfil the social purpose of a discourse. The most recent research conducted by Gunawan & Aziza (2017) stated that although the choice of theme and rheme progression is constrained by the audience's culture, good academic texts share their characteristics across cultures.

Based on Halliday's framework, the main focus of this study is placed on good IELTS sample essays with a view to presenting a brief analysis of theme selection and thematic progression in light of his Functional Grammar. The findings of this research are expected to enable IELTS test-takers to take into account the salient thematic features of high-quality IELTS academic essays in order to figure out thematic strategies which assist the test takers in composing essays that meet the IELTS writing test requirements and result in higher scores.

### ***Theoretical Background***

#### ***Definition of Theme- Rheme***

Initiated by Mathesius (1939) and developed by many other linguists such as Garvin (1964), Danes (1974) and Firbas (1992), the Prague School of Linguistics described *theme* as "that which is known or at least obvious in a given situation, and from which the speaker proceeds in his discourse." Halliday & Matthiessen (2014, p.89) defines *theme*, which is placed in the initial position, is given information serving as 'the point of departure' for the clause or which locates and orients the clause within its context. The given information refers to the information which has already been mentioned somewhere in the text, or is predictable from the immediate context. While the remainder of the message in a clause in which *theme* is developed is called the *rheme*, that is to say, *rheme* typically contains unknown or unpredictable information. As a result, *theme*, the first element of the clause, plays an important role in the way the text is organized; it is this, in fact, which constitutes what has been called the 'method of development' of a text (Fries, 1981).

### ***Types of Themes***

According to Halliday & Matthiessen (2014), *theme* typically occurs at the beginning of a clause and provides the settings for the remainder of the message - *rheme*, which provides new information about the point of the departure. *Theme*, therefore, is not necessarily a nominal group; it may also be some other class of group or phrase such as an adverbial group or prepositional phrase. Halliday & Matthiessen (2014, p.112) also stated that theme of a clause is the first group or phrase that has the experiential function of being either participant, circumstance, or process. *Theme* is classified into two distinctive types: namely *simple theme* and *multiple theme* on the basis of their internal structure.

*Simple Theme*: A simple theme is formed when the theme of a clause consists of just one single structural element (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p.92). It means that in this type, only a topical theme occupies the thematic position. Topical theme can be identified when the first constituent of the clause to which a transitivity role such as Actor, Behavior, Senser or Circumstance can be attached; that is, the theme of a clause ends with the first constituent that is either participant, circumstance, or process. This type covers nominal groups, prepositional groups or adverbial groups.

*Multiple Theme*: A multiple theme is made when other elements such as interpersonal and/or textual themes occur before the topical theme in the clause.

*Interpersonal theme* can be identified when the first element of the clause to which a Mood label can be assigned. This type, revealing something of the attitude of the speaker and reader, consists of Finite Verbal Operator (*do, does, did...*), Modal/ Comment Adjunct (*probably, evidently, honestly...*), and Vocative (*direct addresses such as personal names*).

*Textual theme* which is a theme linking a clause to the rest of the discourse includes Continuative (*yes, no, well...*), Conjunction (*or, nor, because...*) and Conjunctive Adjunct (*for instance, in other words, actually ...*)

From the above division of themes, we can see that in Halliday & Matthiessen's point of view, *theme* is divided into 3 different types namely *topical theme, interpersonal theme, and textual theme* corresponding to the three-metafunctional structure of the clause. Topical theme is obligatory in each clause while textual and interpersonal themes are optional. The typical ordering of elements in such multiple themes is *Textual Theme^ Interpersonal Theme^ Topical Theme*.

Below is an example to illustrate the thematic structure of the clause.

Well	but	then	surely	Jean	wouldn't	the best idea	be to join in
Continuative	Structural	Conjunctive	Modal	vocative	Finite	Topical	Rheme
Textual			Interpersonal			Experiential	
Theme							

(Adapted from Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p.107)

### ***Thematic progression***

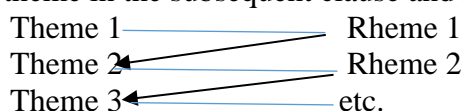
The flow of information in a clause from theme to rheme is of great importance in achieving communicative effectiveness in a discourse as thematic progression might be viewed as the

skeleton of the plot according to Danes (1974, p.114). It is, therefore, necessary for the writers to know where to place information and how to organize relevant information into themes so as to keep the reader informed of the topic and how to distribute information efficiently and smoothly in order to maintain the focus of the discourse. If writers fail to control the flow of information from theme and rheme, their texts are difficult for a reader to follow because there is no clear signpost to guide the reader, who; therefore, cannot easily follow the progression of an idea or argument (Wang, 2007).

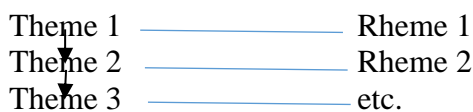
As early as 1974, Danes used the term ‘thematic progression’ to refer to the connection between subsequent clauses and previous themes - rhemes in relation to the whole text and the themes of each clause in a text are not randomly selected, but rather patterned. Thus, thematic progression is concerned with the way themes relate with each other and with rhemes in organizing a text.

When theme and rheme are considered on a larger scale of the whole discourse, the link between theme-rheme structures can be expressed in three main patterns according to McCarthy (1991).

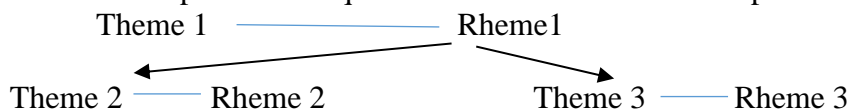
(1) Linear pattern: In this pattern, an element of rheme of the previous clause can function as theme in the subsequent clause and it may be described as follows:



(2) Constant pattern: In this pattern, several clauses can share the same theme but have different rhemes as follows:



(3) Derived pattern: In this pattern, elements of rheme of the previous clause can function as themes in separate subsequent clauses like a hierarchical pattern as follows:



## Research Methods

The aim of the article is to investigate the thematic progression strategies in order to identify the types of themes selected for thematic development in the high-quality IELTS sample essays in the light of Functional Grammar. In order to achieve this aim, different research methods were employed as follows:

The descriptive method was used to give a detailed description of *theme* in English. Qualitative and quantitative approaches were applied as the purpose of this research is to examine what elements are chosen as themes, and how the information is effectively distributed in the essays. The data of the study was 20 academic sample essays from books published by Cambridge University Press and IELTS official websites with the band score of 9, which had been written by highly successful test-takers, for this is a pilot study on a small scale where the primary focus was the theme choice and thematic progression of IELTS sample essays.

In order to have a clear analysis of theme and thematic progression used in the IELTS Task 2 essays, the essays were segmented into T-units because the T-unit is viewed as the most useful

unit for analysing themes in a text (Fries, 1994 as cited in Thompson, 2004, p.156). According to Fries (1994), a T-unit is a clause complex which consists of an independent clause together with all hypotactically related clauses and words which are dependent on it. In addition, minor clauses lie outside the scope of this study due to the fact that minor clauses have no thematic structure (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 127).

In terms of the length of the essays, it appears that there are 5600 words involving 311 T-units appearing in the total of 20 essays, of which the longest essay has 375 words and the shortest one consists of 253 words. The average words used per essay is approximately 280 words. In the IELTS writing Task 2, candidates are asked to write an essay of at least 250 words in response to a problem, an opinion or a controversial proposition.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Theme Choice*

In a theme-rheme structure, it is the theme that is the prominent element and a different choice of theme creates a different meaning (Thompson, 2004, p.143). The analysis shows that in the 20 sample essays, there are 491 themes, of which the most common types are topical themes with 311 instances, followed by textual themes with 144, occupying 29.3% and the smallest number belongs to interpersonal themes, representing 7.3%, as shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Distribution of Topical, Interpersonal and Textual Themes**

Type	Topical	Interpersonal	Textual	Total No. of themes
Number	311	36	144	491
Percentage	63.4%	7.3%	29.3%	100%

The total number of topical themes equals the total number of T-units analysed in the study. The findings indicate that a large proportion of topical themes found in the essays are often heavily modified nominal groups and dependent clauses. Below are some examples of the topical themes employed by the writers.

- (1) **The growth in the number of incoming tourists** leads to innumerable prospects in terms of local entrepreneurship and employment generation.
- (2) **If the number of parents choosing not to immunise increased**, there would be a similar increase in the risk of the diseases returning.

It is clear that interpersonal themes allow the writers to convey their personal judgement in order to establish interaction between the writers and the readers. For example, in the following extracts, the writers employ modal adjuncts such as '*perhaps*', '*I think*' to express their own view of the matter.

- (3) In conclusion, I think that music can have both positive and negative influences on people and society
- (4) Perhaps incentives can be offered to factories and companies to relocate.

However, the writers tend to employ few interpersonal themes in order to give their texts an impersonalised tone because academic writing is always formal in tone (Oshima & Hogue, 1991, p. 3); that is, the academic writing style is objective rather than subjective, formal rather than colloquial. Also, the impersonal tone is required in producing academic writings. As a

result, only a small proportion of employed interpersonal themes (36 instances) was found in the study.

With regard to textual themes, a great number of employed textual themes indicates that clauses are joined to create a closer logico-semantic tie among themselves and bring fluency to writings. According to Eggins (2004), textual elements are elements which do not express any interpersonal or experiential meaning, but are doing important cohesive work in relating the clause to its context. It can be argued that the denser usage of textual themes implies more cohesion in the text. It is therefore necessary for IELTS test-takers to pay much attention to textual themes which involve the use of coordinating conjunctions such as *for, and, nor, but, or, yet* to indicate paratactic relationships or conjunctive adjuncts such as *in other words, for instance, to sum up, in addition, however, therefore, as a result*, which function as linkers between clauses, forming a logical relationship in their writings. Instances of textual themes are illustrated below.

(5) *On the one hand*, raising the awareness of people towards the dangers of unhealthy food can certainly yield some promising outcomes.

(6) *Firstly*, the importance of financial security cannot be undermined in the modern materialistic world.

As far as the simple and multiple dimension is concerned, it is interesting to find that the essay writers favour the multiple theme selection, which represents 52.1% of the total themes employed in the essays. The ratio in the study is much higher than that conducted by Naderi & Koohestanian (2014). The low frequency of multiple themes in their study may be attributed to the fact that Persian EFL learners do not have a good understanding of the nature of themes and thematic structures. It is shown that the beginning of clauses with simple themes is not academic enough at the level of academic writing and multiple themes are proved to play an important role in construing the writer's point of view and in helping the writer to organize the message and connect ideas in the text. Therefore, multiple themes are more appropriate for IELTS essay writing in order to indicate a high level of English proficiency.

**Table 2: Distribution of Simple and Multiple Themes**

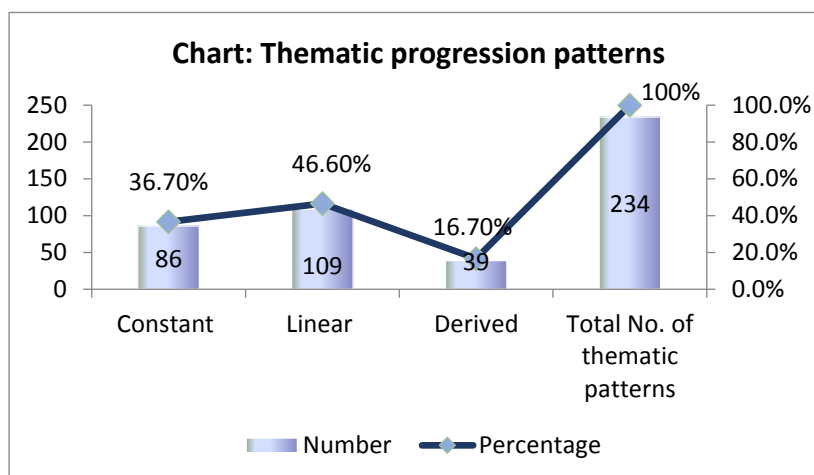
Type	Simple	Multiple	Total No. of themes
Number	149	162	311
Percentage	47.9%	52.1 %	100%

The display of multiple themes is found to be: Textual^ Interpersonal^ Topical. The following are some examples of the multiple Themes taken from the sample essays.

(7) *However, I believe* that **a combination of different education methods** would produce a more desirable result compared to a former prisoner holding a talk.

(8) *In brief, I think* **the importance of luck in determining goal attainment** is overstated, while there are much more significant factors to consider, namely hard work and determination.

## Thematic Progression



As can be observed in the above chart, it is apparent that the linear pattern is the dominant thematic progression strategy in the sample essays with 109 instances, making up 46.6%; the constant pattern is the second most common one employed in the essays with 86 cases, equal to 36.7 %, followed by the derived pattern (16.7%). The following excerpts exhibit each type of thematic progression patterns.

Excerpt 1. The constant pattern

- (1) *In addition*, **younger people** are often the most affected by globalization.
- (2) **They** follow fashions in clothes, music and social habits that are common among young people throughout the world.
- (3) *So*, **they** have become powerful consumers who influence big global markets today.

In the instance above, Themes 1, 2 and 3, taking the same element ‘*younger people*’ as the point of departure, are in the constant thematic progression pattern. The third person plural pronoun ‘*they*’ which is the theme of T-unit 2 is used as the theme of clause 3 to avoid repetition. The writer applies the same theme to keep the text focused in a sequence of clauses. However, it is found that the constant progression pattern is not much realized to a great extent in the essays, probably due to the fact that the overuse of the constant progression pattern makes the text appear simple, repetitive, and redundant like a list and the writer cannot go further to the ideas introduced in the text, according to Belmonte & McCabe (1998).

Excerpt 2. The linear pattern

- (4) *However*, **the current generation gap** is the responsibility of both younger and older generations.
- (5) **Both** have to make efforts to understand each other//and a good starting point would be for families to spend more time together than they normally do today.

In this pattern, the rheme ‘*both younger and older generations*’ of the clause 4 becomes the topical theme of the following clause, constituting chains of the argument. This kind of patterns offers new information in continuous progression in order to achieve cohesion in the text and give the text ‘a sense of cumulative development’ (Eggins, 2004, p. 325). Therefore, this recurrence makes the writing more compact in structure, creating cohesion and coherence in a written text.

It is obvious that the high frequency of linear pattern realizations in the sample essays enables writers to attain cohesion in the text by building on newly introduced information, ensuring that

the readers can constantly follow them in terms of points of departure and catch what the passage is about.

Excerpt 3. The derived pattern

(6) **This essay** will illustrate some factors contributing to this problem // *and* will also elicit certain steps that can help the national authorities and individuals in controlling this growing demand for natural salt free water.

(7) *Firstly*, **population explosion** is the factor of utmost importance, which has led to the global surge in potable water requirement.

(8) *Secondly*, **increased pollution of natural fresh water reserves due to urbanisation and industrialization** has compounded this demand.

(\* *bold*= topical theme; *italic* = textual theme, *underlined* = interpersonal theme)

In the instance above, the element ‘*some factors*’ is introduced in the rheme 6, each of the factors is made *theme* in the subsequent clauses. That means the themes in the clauses are different from each other. In clause 7 the theme is ‘*population explosion*’ while in clause 8 the theme is ‘*increased pollution of natural fresh water reserves due to urbanisation and industrialization*’. In spite of their differences, the themes are all related to the rheme ‘*some factors*’ in the clause 6.

From the illustrating examples, it is clear that the appropriate arrangement of theme-rheme provides guidance for readers and enhances the cohesive development of arguments in writing.

### Conclusion

From the above analysis, we may come to conclusion that *theme* makes a great contribution to the organization of the ideas in a text, the reader’s interpretation, and construal of meaning. By examining the thematic development in the sample essays, we recognize the importance of theme selection in projecting the message and orienting how the message develops and how the information is logically arranged. Accordingly, in order to achieve higher scores in the IELTS writing exam, in addition to lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, the mastery of thematic progression, an essential component in composing a cohesive and coherent text is required. Although it may be quite easy to produce grammatically accurate text, it will be challenging to create a text which has a logical sequencing. It is therefore, knowing what element to be selected as a theme and how to distribute the information in the text to achieve effectiveness plays a crucial role because a successful or less successful writing can be identified from the use of theme and thematic progression (Bloor & Bloor, 1992; Wang, 2007). From the findings, it is proposed that IELTS test-takers should take the following strategies into account when writing academic essays. First, the candidates should subtly employ a few interpersonal themes such as modal adjuncts or mood marking elements in case they would like to make their opinion explicit on the content of the message and create interaction between writers and readers. Second, the candidates are recommended to use textual themes to express the logical relationship between two clauses of equal structural status or to relate one clause to another in a modifying or dependency relationship, thus enhancing the connectivity between different parts of their writings. Third, IELTS academic writing candidates it is suggested that the candidates deploy multiple themes in the writing, as multiple themes can provide structural resources to construe logical connections between experiential events and make the writing more academic.

To convey information effectively, the test-takers should employ different thematic progression patterns, namely the linear pattern, the constant pattern, and derived patterns to organize the



information in a text, particularly, high employment of linear patterns would be more appropriate as argumentative texts are characterized with high proportions of cross references from the rheme of one sentence to the theme of the next, providing more dynamic effect (Belmonte & McCabe, 1998).

To sum up, this study confirms that theme-rheme patterns serve as a valuable instrument for IELTS academic writing candidates to logically distribute information within a clause as well as a text. It is clear that writing with better awareness of thematic progression enables IELTS academic writing candidates to manipulate the flow of information effectively, producing more cohesive and coherent IELTS essays, thus achieving higher scores for their tests.

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