

# Information Development in EFL Students Composition Writing

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**Abstract:** One way of achieving cohesion in text is through thematic progression, which involves the relationship between clauses based on the information contained in their themes and rhemes (Belmonte & McCabe, 1998). Taking this in mind, this paper was centered on scrutinizing the status of thematic progression patterns in EFL students' compositions. To this end, 180 compositions written by 60 students - 20 sophomores, 20 juniors, and 20 seniors- majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language based on three pictorial stories were analyzed using McCabe's (1999) model of thematic progression. The results illustrated significant differences between the three groups regarding their use of linear and constant patterns of progression. The number of applied linear and constant patterns by senior group was somehow quite more than the other two groups and on the other hand, most interestingly, the disposition of junior students to use these patterns was greater than sophomore students as well. Such a tendency could be justifiable in light of having previous academic experience that may be one of the factors which influence producing a more cohesive text applying such cohesive devices.

**Key words:** Theme; Thematic Progression; Cohesion; Composition Writing

## 1. Introduction

In the EFL writing classroom, we see that learners often write texts that consist of sentences which do not seem to connect together into a cohesive text. Traditionally, cohesion has often been neglected in writing texts, where sentences have been created, manipulated, and assessed in isolation. Only from the mid 1970s onwards, did it become progressively assumed in teaching writing that a coherent text is more than a series of grammatical sentences lined up one after another; rather, they interlace, each sentence building on the preceding ones while at the same time advancing the discourse. Nowadays, all general English course books and most reading and writing courses incorporate work designed to help learners grasp the cohesive devices of written English: discourse connectors, ellipsis, conjunctions, and so forth. However, writing instructors still come across EFL student compositions in which sentences, assessed in isolation, are grammatically correct but yet the overall effect is one of incoherence.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) argue that a text can not be regarded as coherent unless it fulfills two points. One of these two points is texture; the concept of texture is entirely appropriate to express the property of being a text. A text has texture and this is what distinguishes it from something else other than the text. As pointed out by Halliday and Hasan (1976), texture consists of structural and non-structural aspects. The former refers to inter-sentence or intra-sentence structures like theme/rheme structure, whereas, the latter refers to the cohesive ties between different elements in different sentences like references, substitutions, ellipses, and conjunctions. As with Halliday and Hasan (1976), Belmont and McCabe (1998) assert that one way of achieving cohesion in text is through thematic

organization and thematic progression, which involve the relationship between clauses based on the information contained in their themes and rhemes.

Halliday (1994, p.38) defines theme as the element in a particular structural configuration taken as whole, organizes the clause as a message; this is the configuration theme and rheme. Based on this definition a clause is made of two parts theme followed by rheme. Theme is the starting point for the message; it is the ground from which the clause is taking off. Theme helps us to know what the clause will be about and what is going to tell us. He also gave two examples to show the importance of theme in the meaning of the clause.

1. A halfpenny is the smallest English coin.
2. The smallest English coin is a halfpenny.

In the first sentence, theme is "*a halfpenny*" this means the writer wants to tell us about "*a halfpenny*" but in the second sentence, the theme is "*the smallest English coin*" this means the writer wants to tell us about "*the smallest English coin*".

The notions of thematic organization and progression have caught the eyes of many researchers during recent years. Most have addressed this issue across such different genres as different languages (Ventola, 1995; Jalilifar & Khedri, 2011); various disciplines (Whittaker, 1995; Ghadessy, 1999); within discipline (Martinez, 2003; Lores, 2004; Jalilifar, 2010); essay writing (North, 2005); and composition writing (Wang, 2007; Ebrahimi, 2008). Yet, despite a sustained interest in thematic organization and progression, little research has examined thematic progression in students' composition writings and its possible relation to their academic experience. One notable exception is Wang's (2007) study of the relationship

between theme and rheme in the academic texts and in improving the textual cohesion in students' writing.

This scarcity is felt more when it comes to thematic progression in Iranian EFL academic contexts. Therefore, bearing the important essence of thematic progression; the crucial role that it plays in writing cohesive texts; and also extremely low done studies in this area of research in mind, this study aims to scrutinize the status of thematic progression in Iranian students' composition writings and its possible relationship with students' academic experience.

The reasons behind putting thematic progression in focus are as follows: 1) thematic progression frequently links a clause to the proceeding clause (Hawes & Thomas, 1997), 2) it is a useful guide to the rhetorical path that the writer is following (Bloor and Bloor, 1995), and 3) it helps in creating cohesive text (Belmonte and McCabe, 1998).

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Corpus

The corpus of this study was 180 compositions written based on three pictorial stories by 60 EFL students. The students were 20 sophomores, 20 juniors, and 20 seniors majoring in Teaching English as Foreign Language (TEFL) in Abadan Islamic Azad University in Iran. Sophomore students have received 128 hours instruction on English language grammar. Junior students have received 32 hours instruction on paragraph writing beside the grammar instruction. Senior students have received 32 hours instruction on essay writing beside the instructions on the grammar and paragraph writing. To make sure about the homogeneity of the students within the three groups, they were given a test of homogeneity (Fowler & Coe 1976) and the average score of each group was above 70 percent.

### 2.2 Instruments and Materials

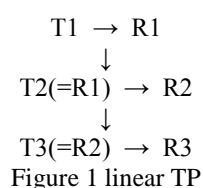
1) Three pictorial stories were applied for data gathering. The rationale for selecting these pictorial stories was to control students' writing by giving the same ideas to them for writing composition. Three stories were assigned in order to check the use of multiple theme in more than one context and to minimize the influence of single context on students' writing simultaneously; 2) To put the participants into appropriate levels, they were asked to take three homogeneity tests (Fowler & Coe, 1976). 3) To analyze the data, the revised Danes' (1974) model of thematic progression patterns suggested by McCabe (1999) was used for determining thematic progression patterns.

The notion of thematic progression was introduced by the Prague Linguist, Danes (1974, as cited in Downing, 2001, p. 5), in order to conceptualize the role of theme in text

organization and construction. Danes points out that the choice of themes of individual messages in a text is not a matter of chance-is not random and without structural connection to the text. Danes' model was developed by McCabe (1999). She developed a number of types of thematic progression (TP) that manifest differently in different genres including linear TP, constant TP (or thematic iteration), split theme TP, and split Rheme progression.

#### A) Linear TP

McCabe (1999) refers to this as the most elementary or basic thematic progression, where the item in the Rheme of first clause becomes the Theme of the subsequent clause, as represented in Figure 1.



Example: "On the other day, the mouse went to the shoemaker. The shoemaker accepted to sew his tail if the mouse brings him some sewing-cotton from the carpet maker. The carpet maker listened to the mouse's story and promised to help him".

#### B) Constant TP

In this pattern, the item in the theme of the first clause is also selected as the theme of the following clause, though not necessarily with identical wording. It is represented in Figure 2.

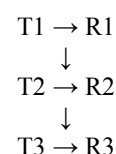


Figure 2 constant TP

Example: "The children saw the black feet of the wolf and feared, and they did not open the door. They told the wolf that you are not our mother".

#### C) Split Theme TP

This pattern is characterized as the thematic progression where the item in the theme of the first clause functions as a hyper theme, as an element from which the theme of the subsequent clauses is derived. It is represented in Figure 3.

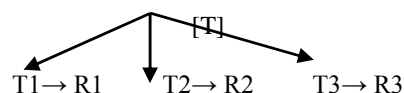


Fig.3

Example: "The mother and the child made a plan. She first found the wolf and tore his stomach, and the child brought some stones to fill the wolf's stomach".

#### D) TP with a split Rheme

In this pattern, the rheme of the first clause is split into two items, then each in turn being taken as a theme element in subsequent clauses. It is represented in Figure 4.

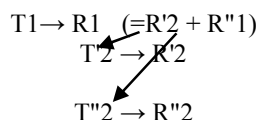


Figure 4 TP with a split Rheme

Example: "Once upon a time there was a goat that lived with her children. The goat wanted to go to buy some food. The children promised her that they won't open the door for the wolf".

### 2.3 Procedure

At first, 90 students, (30 by each group), were selected and set for homogeneity test (Fowler & Coe, 1976) based on their academic experience. At the same time, their scores on English language grammar, paragraph writing, and essay writing were collected from the examination department. Students whose score in the homogeneity test and their average score on their courses was also above 70 percent were chosen for this study. To have equal number of students in each group, the top 20 students from each level were selected.

Second, after meeting the homogeneity in the groups, three pictorial stories were given to students to narrate. The stories only included some pictures without any caption or description given by the researcher and supposed to be narrated in three sessions of 45 minutes. Finally, the gathered data were analyzed based on McCabe's (1999) model of thematic progression and in order to check the significance of the differences between the groups, Chi-square was run on the data.

One problem with text analysis is that there is always the danger of making mistakes in interpretation. To increase the reliability in the analysis, nine compositions from the corpus were also analyzed by an experienced researcher in applied linguistics and agreement was made on the method of analysis.

### 2.4 Unit of analysis

This study adopted t-unit as the basic unit of analysis. T-unit is defined by Fries (1994) as a clause complex which

contains one main independent clause together with all the hypotactic clauses which are dependent on it. The rationale behind this selection was that:

Analyzing theme at the level of t-unit rather than the individual clause makes it easier to focus on patterns of thematic development in large amounts of text, and can also be justified on the grounds that the thematic structure of a dependent clause is often constrained by the independent clause. (Fries & Francis, 1992 as cited in North, 2005).

## 3. Result and Discussion

### 3.1 Thematic Progression Patterns in Students' Compositions

All the t-units in the corpus were analyzed to determine different patterns of thematic progression including *constant*, *linear*, *split theme*, and *split rheme*. In this study, following McCabe (1999), the themes for which the reader has to go back more than two clauses to find a previously mentioned concept were not considered as part of thematic progression pattern. In other words, if links were established over a maximum of three clauses, these links were not considered as part of thematic chains (p. 270). One more point to be mentioned is that some themes were not related to other clauses, and they could not be categorized under any of the conventional thematic progression patterns. These themes were called miscellaneous.

In all the three groups, students used somehow similar patterns of progression in their compositions. Constant chain was used the most comparing to other chains. Linear chains were ranked next; split rheme was less frequent and split theme was neglected in students' compositions. A substantial proportion of themes were also miscellaneous patterns in students' composition.

This result was in line with Wang's (2007) finding, but in contrast with Fries' (1983), Alonso and McCabe's (2000) findings. Wang (2007) declared that there are several main types of thematic progression, which depend on different text types. For example, in narrative-type text, we often repeat the theme of one clause into the theme of subsequent clause (constant pattern) (p.4). Fries (1983) pointed out that thematic progression of an academic text needs to have high incidence of cross-referential links from the rheme of the clause to the theme of the next clause, as the academic text presents complex arguments in which each successive idea is an expansion of an idea in the previous sentence (p.124). Alonso and McCabe (2000) also have the same idea as Fries' (1983). They pointed out that linear pattern provides more of a dynamic text, which works well with explanation, as it allows writers to add to points by always moving from given idea to a new one (p.3).

TABLE 1. FREQUENCY of THEMATIC PROGRESSION PATTERNS

	Sophomore (%)	Junior (%)	Senior (%)
Linear T.P	344 (25.68)	543 (31.59)	624 (31.64)
Constant T.P.	638 (47.58)	744 (43.24)	930 (47.16)
Split R.	12 (0.80)	31 (1.80)	36 (1.80)
Split T.	5 (0.50)	-	-
Miscellaneous	343 (25.58)	402 (23.35)	382 (19.40)
Total	1342	1720	1972

### 3.2 Thematic Progression and Students' Academic Experience

To see the significance of the differences between the three groups regarding using different thematic progression patterns, Chi-square was run on the data. The result is presented in table 2.

### 3.3 Linear Pattern

Chi-square analysis showed significant difference between the three groups regarding linear progression pattern. The findings also illustrated an increase in the use of this pattern as we move from sophomore to senior group. This may suggest that academic experience of senior students helped them to use more of this pattern to help the reader to be aware where the information has come from and where it is going to and to create cohesive text. Linear pattern is important for creating cohesive text in that the theme of a certain sentence is the summary of most of the content of the previous sentence, and thus makes a new point of departure which further introduces a new rheme. Since the application of the pattern could make readers curious for the coming information, it is much easier to be regarded as coherent.

The gained result may indicate the students in senior group are aware that by using linear pattern, as McCabe (1999) stated, they can ensure that the readers are constantly "with them" in terms of points of departure, thus elaborating on concepts in a way which allows readers to optimally build up the conceptual framework (p.190). It seems that they also know, as stated by Wang (2007), that high frequency of linear pattern in writing has more dynamic effect on readers, and also causes more cohesion between ideas and sentences in the composition.

### 3.4 Constant Pattern

Significant difference between the three groups regarding their use of constant pattern was declared by Chi-square analysis. Students in the three groups allocated a big percentage of their progression patterns to constant pattern. Findings of this study illustrated an increase in the use of this pattern in the three groups respectively. The over-use of this pattern yields simple, repetitive, and redundant paragraphs which may result from continuous use of the same topic. Senior students might not know that this scheme makes their composition be read like a list, and by using this pattern, they tend not to go in depth on the ideas

introduced in the text by not expending on information introduced in the rheme.

Pointing to these students that using this pattern result in redundant and repetitive paragraphs can help them discover how they can generate more ideas to write about. Because when students understand the importance of the different patterns in developing coherent composition, they are more likely to use them appropriately to develop coherence in their composition.

### 3.5 Split Rheme

Chi-square analysis showed that there was a significant difference between the three groups in terms of split theme pattern. Even though this pattern was used in low proportion comparing to other types of thematic progression patterns, but there was a slight increase in three groups respectively. Senior students used this pattern more knowing that texts with this pattern will have a clear layout for the reader to catch what the passage is about. According to different scales of delicacy, it would be easier for reader to find useful information. With each step forward, the information offered will be more and more specific. Texts with this pattern will impress readers as logical and coherent.

### 3.5 Miscellaneous Pattern

Patterns which can't be categorized under any existing patterns (McCabe's 1999, patterns of thematic progression) were utilized in the students' compositions. The Result didn't show a systemic increase or decrease in the use of miscellaneous pattern by students in the three groups. According to Wang (2007), the overall effect of using miscellaneous pattern is in creating text which is lacking in the development of ideas (p. 6). Contrary to Wang's (2007) suggestion that miscellaneous chains distort the development of ideas, McCabe (1999) suggests that miscellaneous bonds are crucial to the development of the discourse and can provide thematic continuity in the text because of the accessibility of their references to the reader. Sometimes the reader goes back to more than three clauses to relate propositions together even though the clauses are far from the thematic rules, and sometimes some elements even they introduced for the first time but the should be thematized (e.g. temporal adverbials) (p.271). The second possibility is that context compensates for the distance

between the clauses by giving the reader the opportunity to rely on the contextual clues to link ideas together.

TABLE 2. CHI-SQUARE RESULTS

	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Chi-square Value	df	Sig.
Linear T.P	344	543	624	82.431	2	0.0001
Constant T.P.	638	744	930	56.701	2	0.0001
Split R.	12	31	36	12.170	2	0.0023
Split T.	5	-	-	-	-	-
Miscellaneous	343	402	382	4.792	2	0.0911
Total	1342	1720	1972			

#### 4 Conclusions and Implications

The data were analyzed in terms of thematic progression patterns proposed by McCabe (1999). All types of thematic progression patterns were found in students' writings. The researcher found that a large percentage of clauses did not fit into any of the thematic progression patterns proposed by McCabe (1999). These themes were called miscellaneous progression pattern by the researcher. The other interesting point was that students did not use split theme in their writings. Chi-square analysis showed a significant difference between the three groups in terms of linear, constant and split rheme patterns. The result also displayed no significant difference in the frequency of miscellaneous patterns.

The results suggest that thematic progression is a highly effective and valuable technique in writing. It enhances connectivity between ideas in the text. The results also point that our understanding of how texts are created and interpreted would be much poorer without the concept of theme and thematic progression. In composition writing theme – rheme patterns are important in guiding the reader through the logical paths constructed by the writer. If little attention is paid to this pattern, the writer's attempt to help readers to comprehend the text will be destroyed. Theme and rheme progression patterns can improve text coherence. Teachers need to look beyond the traditional grammar of the clause when teaching writing, and teach students how to connect their sentences, and produce a coherent text. The result also suggests that theme and rheme patterning can be effectively applied in classrooms to help students in writings. Students will know where they are losing their effectiveness in their arguments due to problems with either thematic progression or thematic selection, or both.

The findings of the present study will benefit EFL students and English language instructors in general and students in composition writings in particular. Therefore, students must be trained in the way that they can create cohesive composition. They should be aware that if they want to convey information effectively and successfully and to write cohesive composition, a focus on the theme-rheme structure is very important and has an immediate result in their writings. If students become aware of how to arrange the old and new information in composition, they would be able to write cohesive composition.

The present study can also help the readers to comprehend the text. The readers need to be aware of the way different thematic choices are realized in different texts. This awareness can guide them through the logical path constructed by the writers to comprehend the subsequent segment and help them to understand the text better, since the kind of meaning realized by thematic options may vary depending on the purpose of the writers.

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