

Improving EFL Students' Academic Writing by Raising Awareness of Thematic Progression Patterns

Harald Kraus

Department of English and Linguistics
Thammasat University, Thailand
harald@staff.tu.ac.th

Abstract

The analysis of Theme and Rheme, and thematic progression, based on a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach to language, has, in the context of English language teaching, been largely limited to analyzing student writing, and has not investigated if these concepts are helpful to the students themselves. This paper examines the use and potential value of teaching the concept of thematic progression to EFL learners in an academic writing course in a Thai university. First, the paper aims to discover if Thai EFL writers exhibit the same issues with their writing as previous international studies have found, such as overuse of constant progression. It then reports on the results of an investigation as to whether knowledge of the concept impacts their writing in any way. Students were also asked whether they found the concepts useful during their composition. Results indicate that their writing does change as a result of instruction, that they find it a useful aid, and that they feel they can apply the concept relatively unproblematically while drafting essays. The paper closes by discussing the potential benefits and weaknesses of this approach and suggests ways it may be adopted in EFL writing classes.

Keywords: Essay writing, Theme, thematic progression patterns

1. Introduction

As EFL students develop their writing skills and are tasked with composing texts such as essays, they must not only progress with their strictly linguistic competence but also in their ability to organize and structure texts in a manner that is considered logical and coherent. ELT writing instruction dealing with academic writing therefore often covers topics relating to coherence, predominantly by presenting features such as conjunctions and transitions. Yet, while one area in applied linguistics – Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) – does in fact examine this kind of textual development, it is rarely resourced, and, based on the author's experience in teaching academic writing for many years, is difficult to find any ELT course books that approach writing from this perspective. Is this a wasted

opportunity? Could raising awareness of thematic progression patterns, as found in academic writing, better guide students into structuring their essays more coherently and with a better sense of flow? While some may argue that introducing these concepts would be overloading learners with more (unnecessary and difficult) metalanguage, it may also afford learners with new ways of approaching the writing process. Additionally, while numerous studies have shown that EFL students quite consistently exhibit weaknesses in their coherence related to thematic progression, very little research has actually examined the effects of direct instruction of thematic progression and various progression patterns and their effects in constructing improved essays. This investigation therefore hopes to contribute to this area of enquiry.

This paper, therefore, sets out to examine the potential use and benefits of presenting the concepts of Theme and Rheme, and more specifically thematic progression, as learning tools in an EFL writing context, rather than as tools to be used by researchers to analyze student writing, as is normally the case. It does so by comparing pre- and post-treatment compositions of an intact group of Thai EFL learners, as well as by eliciting the students' responses to their exposure to these concepts. The paper closes with a discussion as regards the pedagogical value of teaching students about thematic progression as a means to improve student writing.

2. Background

2.1 Theme and Rheme

The Theme-Rheme concept was introduced as early as the mid-1800s, and later explored by the Prague school of linguists (Ping 2004). While numerous other scholars, such as Firbas (1992), Fries (2002, 2004, 2009), and Thompson (2014), to name but a few, have examined the topic in depth, perhaps the most widely-referenced analyses of Theme and Rheme were published by Halliday (1994) and later Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) as part of their development of a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory of language.

For Halliday and Matthiessen, the Theme is defined as 'the first group or phrase that has some function in the experiential structure of the clause' (2004, p. 66.), with the Rheme being the rest of the sentence. The Theme of a clause may therefore be expressed through the use of a nominal group (where it is the subject), or by an adverbial group, prepositional phrases or complement. Where the Theme of a clause corresponds to the Subject it is considered to be unmarked, while Themes that are not subjects, but are thematized at the beginning of a clause are considered marked, as the following examples show.

Theme	Rheme	
I	ate the pizza on Wednesday night.	unmarked
On Wednesday night	I ate the pizza.	marked
The pizza,	I ate it on Wednesday night.	marked

2.2 Thematic Progression

The definition of Theme is subject to debate, (and indeed has been dismissed as too confusing, see Fries 2009, Ping 2004 & McCabe 1999 for discussions), particularly when considering thematic progression (TP), which refers to the linkage between the Theme or Rheme in one sentence and the Theme in the subsequent sentence(s), and which is an aspect of text that SFL theory considers critical to coherence. Halliday and Matthiessen's definition is indeed insufficient in this case, in their consideration of adverbial phrases as Themes – *On Wednesday night* in the above example – would not show how two sentences are thematically linked. Researchers analyzing texts for TP therefore generally consider the Theme as being all the components up but not including the main verb of a clause, including the subject on the grounds that it allows better identification of the development of the text (Forey 2002).

This established, analysts identify three main TP patterns: constant, linear (also known as reiterative and zig-zag, respectively), and split. A constant TP pattern is one in which the theme of a prior sentence is repeated in some way (e.g. through repetition, reference or synonymy) as the Theme of the subsequent sentence:

T1 ----> R1 I ate the pizza
T1 ----> R2 I had some wine with it.

A linear TP occurs when the Rheme of a clause is taken up as the Theme in the next:

T1 ----> R1 I ate the pizza
T2 (R1) ----> R2 It was delicious

A split Rheme progression is one in which a Rheme constituted of two elements is taken up in two subsequent separate Themes:

T1 ----> [R1 + R2] I ate pizza and fried chicken.
T1 (R1) ----> R The pizza was delicious.
T2 (R2) ----> R The fried chicken was too salty.

The less commonly occurring split Theme is one in which the initial Theme is constituted of two elements which are subsequently reiterated in separate clauses:

T1 + T2 ----> R	My friend and I ate pizzas.
T1 ----> R	My friend had a salami pizza.
T2 ----> R	I had a Hawaiian.

Analysts have identified other rarer TP patterns. Shieh and Lin (2011) for example discuss concentrative:

T1 ----> R1	England is a country.
T2 ----> R2 (=R1)	France is a country.
Tn □ Rn (=R1)	

as well as juxtaposed patterns:

T ₁ ----> R ₁	Americans eat with forks.
T ₂ ----> R ₂ (=R ₁)	Japanese eat with chopsticks

In addition to strictly sequential progression types, some analysts also consider ‘back’, ‘gapped’ and ‘derived’ progressions, though with varying views as to how far back in a text one can go in order to consider a given Theme as being part of a TP. McCabe (1999), for example, decides to go as far back as only three Themes to label it a ‘back’ TP, while others more liberally consider any retrievable Themes in a text, i.e. one which the reader can pick up from the text as a whole, as a case of hyperthematic progression.

‘New’ progressions, as the term suggests, refer to Themes which have no connection to previously mentioned content. These can be evidence of lack of coherence, but in some cases are necessary, such as in paragraph openings.

Finally, there is a category of Themes which do not necessarily detract from the coherence of a text, but at the same time do not form thematic progressions. McCabe (1999) considers these as peripheral Themes and these include:

- Grammatical: Themes starting with *it*, *there is/are*, interrogative *wh*- constructs and cataphoric references
- Extralinguistic: Themes which refer to the writer through personal pronoun *I*, or address the reader personally, i.e. with *you* or *we*
- Metatextual: Themes which refer to the text itself, such as in ‘*This essay will...*’

2.3 Themes and Thematic Progression in EFL Writing

Thematic progression has been of some interest in foreign language teaching, and previous research has indicated that an analysis of thematic progression can indeed shed light on aspects of student writing and subsequently identify weaknesses in their compositions. Numerous researchers, including Arunsirot (2013), Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo (1998), Herriman (2011) and Lu (2013), and Wang (2007) have identified similar traits among EFL writers, finding that they:

- overuse constant progression,
- insert material between rheme and subsequent thematization,
- use empty Rhemes i.e. with no conceptual content to develop in the subsequent Theme
- overuse 'there is/are' as Theme,
- use Themes with unclear reference
- overuse brand new Themes
- use ellipted Themes

Despite these analyses, there is much less research which has set out to actually raise *student* awareness of Theme-Rheme and thematic progression so as to assess whether such an awareness impacts their writing in any way. Of the small number of investigations, Priyatmojo (2012) and Yang (2008, 2015) applied a 'Theme-based approach' to their classes and concluded that the approach was effective in teaching writing, though without providing evidence. Wang (2007) similarly taught students to identify TP in texts, with the assumption that they could then apply the concept in their own writing, although she conducted no follow-up in this matter. Finally, Wei (2015) presented an 'instructional package', but presents no data as to the effectiveness of the package. To the researcher's knowledge therefore, despite the potential of raising awareness of this aspect of text in writing instruction, there have been no investigations in this area, in particular in the Thai/ASEAN region. Yet, if students can make use of it as they compose essays and other texts, their writing may show signs of improvement in terms of coherence and overall readability.

3. Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to explore whether teaching Theme-Rheme and more specifically thematic progression patterns can noticeably benefit EFL students' academic writing. In other words, do the essays of Thai university EFL students change or indeed improve following an introduction to thematic progression patterns, to the degree that they use this awareness to compose their texts, thus avoiding the common weaknesses outlined above? The assumption behind this is that if students are aware of and can focus on how their texts develop in relation to what they have written in preceding clauses, their essays will improve in readability. That is to say, would a reader get a sense of greater coherence (and general writing quality) in essays in which thematic progression

patterns had been consciously worked on by the students?

The research also hopes to gain an insight as to whether students themselves feel it is helpful in guiding their essay drafting and composition process.

Of course, it is necessary to establish if the students in the investigation share weaknesses previously identified in other EFL contexts – there would be no need for intervention if they did not.

The research questions therefore are:

1. Do Thai students exhibit similar weaknesses regarding thematic progression as indicated in previous research in other EFL contexts?
2. Do students' essays perceptively change following instruction of thematic progression patterns? If so, does their overall coherence in writing subsequently improve?
3. What do students think about thematic progression as a tool to help them compose academic texts?

These answers to these questions will then be assessed to discuss the overriding pedagogical question as to whether it is feasible and effective to teach EFL writing students the concept of thematic progression as part of their writing skills development.

4. Methodology

This research followed a pre-experiment, one-group pretest-posttest approach by analyzing 22 essays from an intact class of students studying a third-year course in Introduction to Discourse Analysis in an English major program (there were 16 students in the class, but two were exchange students and the remaining 3 did not complete both essays to enable comparison). Their English ranged from lower to upper intermediate competence. The 15-week course incorporated an introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics for approximately five weeks in one three-hour class per week. Prior to introducing the class to Theme-Rheme and thematic progression, the students were asked to compose a short persuasive essay of approximately 400 words on the topic of "Should cigarette smoking be made illegal?", being told that the essays were to serve as source texts for their own future analysis. In order to avoid the possibility of copying or awkwardly paraphrasing secondary sources, they were instructed to not quote other works, though they could use researched information such as statistics and technical terms. Students drafted their essays in a computer lab under the instructor's supervision and students submitted drafts electronically.

Following this, there were 2 normal classes, totaling 6 hours, in which Theme-Rheme and thematic progression patterns were taught. The instruction focused only on

four main thematic progression patterns: constant, linear, split, and derived, mainly because they were the ones addressed in the reference texts for the course (Bloor and Bloor 2004) and to avoid overwhelming students. Students also conducted paragraph writing exercises and practice analyses on short texts in class and for subsequent homework assignments. Part of the instruction included drawing attention to the fact that texts feature not only thematic progression *per se*, but that 'good' writing displayed a variety of progression patterns. (One class exercise included paragraph writing, and most students were amused to discover that they had almost exclusively used constant progression.) Students were then asked to write another short essay, on the topic "Should smoking marijuana be legalized?" this time with the instruction that they should try to pay attention to their use of thematic progression as they were composing their essays, which they did in the same conditions as the first essay. These conditions and instructions regarding their compositions were based on the premise that, if Theme-Rheme and thematic progression ever were to be considered as topics in writing classes, that it still would not be possible to be prescriptive with regard to these concepts. Thus, students were advised to try to employ TP patterns mindfully, but not obsessively, and to avoid the common pitfalls as a means to improve their writing in general and in terms of trying to ensure logical and coherent arguments.

Essays were analyzed by identifying and coding Themes and TP patterns. The total numbers of progression patterns and other Theme types were tallied. The percentages indicated in Table 1 are therefore the percentage of the total clauses identified.

As noted above concerning the definition of Theme, and in keeping with Forey (2002, 2004), Hawes (2015), North (2005) and Martin and Rose (2003), this research considered Theme as consisting of all elements up to and including the topical Theme, or the subject, on the basis that subject themes 'contribute to topic continuity by identifying major participants in the text and participating in the identity chains that help to make the discourse coherent' (North, 2005, p. 437). Thus, sentence initial circumstantial phrases such as 'in many countries', which Halliday would consider as (marked) Themes, were considered orienting Themes, and part of Theme complexes, and were thus not individually categorized as Theme.

Related to the question of Theme identification is the selection of the unit of analysis, in particular whether to analyze dependent clauses as separate units. Although it is possible to consider the thematic structure of dependent clauses, Forey (2002) makes the cogent argument that, for pedagogical purposes, the analysis of the orthographic sentence is most appropriate as it is 'easily recognizable by students with little or no knowledge of grammar (Forey 2002, p. 62). As the purpose of this investigation is likewise pedagogical, the full sentence was considered as the unit of analysis in this investigation also. Thus, also following Forey, dependent clauses were ignored, and those that preceded independent clauses were considered as extended Themes and required the inclusion of the subject element of the following independent clause for Theme identification.

For example, the following sentence, from Fries (2002, p. 119), has a number of Themes as part of a Theme complex. But for analyzing thematic progression all Theme

types were considered collectively, so that in the example below ‘the best idea’ would only have been considered as lending itself to thematic development.

Well	but	then	Ann	surely	wouldn't	the best idea	be to join the group?
Textual			Interpersonal			experiential	
Theme						Rheme	

There were at any rate very few instances in student writing in which more than two Themes occurred, as in the following student sample, with the circumstantial Themes italicized and the subject Theme underlined:

As a result, according to the mentioned increase, the risk of lung cancer, stroke and heart attack also increase.

This nonetheless did not account for other commonly used types of Theme which do not necessarily impede the logical flow of a text. To the list of Themes to be counted, therefore, was added a range of ‘peripheral’ Themes, so-called by McCabe (1999) because they do not detract from textual development, but are not parts of progressions, including: existential subject ‘there (is/are)’; interrogative (wh- and polar); topical subject ‘I’, ‘you’/‘we’, and ‘it’ (when not used as reference pronoun); clauses commencing with demonstrative pronouns such as ‘this’ ‘these’ or ‘that’ constructs such as ‘that is why’ and metatextual phrases, such as ‘this essay’.

Another issue concerned the variously defined derived, related, contextual, gapped, back, return and hyperthematic Themes. Bloor and Bloor’s definition that derived Themes are “expressions in Theme position which are cohesively linked in meaning, but not necessarily in form, to a topic which has been stated earlier in the text” (2004, p. 91) leaves room for interpretation with regards to how far back a topic can be stated to still be considered. The question was resolved in this paper by selecting and defining the following Theme types: Theme return (or gapped Theme), referring to a Theme which is restored after a digression within the existing paragraph; derived, referring to topical Themes which are subsumed by, or topically related to previous Themes or Rhemes (such as ‘the drug business’ and ‘drug sellers’), and hyperthematic Themes referring to Themes which restate the overall topic, but are not continuations of the previous or nearby Themes.

Shieh and Lin’s (2011) ‘juxtaposed’ and ‘concentrative’ patterns were here interpreted collectively as ‘comparative’ patterns. This was because students often used ‘some people x’ (while) ‘other people y’ constructs which may not adhere strictly to Shieh and Lin’s definition, but in this researcher’s view is certainly a comparative rhetorical gesture.

Finally, during analysis it was frequently necessary to make a judgement call concerning the linguistic acceptability of students’ clauses and whether to subsequently

'clean' the data (a problem that has curiously not been noted in previous research). However, as the purpose of the analysis was to essentially identify TP patterns, many common typographical or grammatical errors – such as missing commas, incorrect capitalization, subject-verb agreement, or run-ons, as well as misnomers and other inappropriate words usages were ignored or corrected in order to enable easier identification of Themes and Rhemes. Similarly, mistakenly ellipted elements were 'reinserted' if necessary, so as to make progression pattern identification easier. However, clauses where meaning was completely lost due to lexical, syntactical or grammatical choice were marked 'irretrievable'.

In sum, although previous research has tended to focus on the four main 'canonical' thematic progression patterns, this research examined additional patterns to enable a more thorough analysis, as the following list shows:

1. 'Canonical' (Dubois 1987)
 - a. constant
 - b. linear
 - c. split Theme
 - d. split Rheme
2. Uncommon/additional
 - a. demonstrative *that/this is why*
 - b. Theme return/gap
 - c. derived
 - d. hyperthematic
 - e. comparative
3. Peripheral:
 - a. Extralinguistic *I*
 - b. Extralinguistic *you, we*
 - c. Existential *there (are)*
 - d. Metatextual *this essay*
 - e. Interrogative (polar and wh- combined)
4. New
5. Irretrievable

The sample below illustrates an analyzed sample of student writing:

Theme	Rheme	Progression
People	smokes marijuana in hand-rolled cigarettes and use pipes or water pipes (called bongs).	Linear Constant Constant Constant Constant Periph. we
It	can also be used to brew tea.	
Moreover, it	can be sold or consumed for medicine.	
It	is edible when we cook it with brownies, cookies, or candies.	
In addition, it	can be ingredients such as honey.	
Marijuana	contains more than 60 chemicals known as cannabinoids.	
It	can affects directly to our brain.	Gap Linear
When we smoke it too much we	will be high and cannot stop laughing.	
It	is popular used by among teenagers and adults.	Periph. There Metatextual
More than 1 in 3 people in America	have tried marijuana according to newhealthadvisor.com.	
There are	many debates about marijuana in many countries.	
Thus this essay	is going to talk about marijuana should made legal or not?	

Essays were evaluated by one native-speaking rater and one non-native, both long-term English instructors, following a standard rubric (in terms of content, grammar, and coherence, equally weighted). The rating was ‘blind’ in two ways. First, the raters were not informed that the essays were pre- and post-treatment essays, and were led to believe they came from a single assignment. Second, the raters were not informed that the investigation concerned thematic progression. Thus, they would not be distracted from their usual rating standards and procedures, and any differences in pre- and post-treatment essay scores could be attributed, in part, to their interpretation of improved writing quality as a result in the differences in thematic progression patterns.

Upon completing the second essay, the students (N=16) were asked to complete a short questionnaire consisting of five, five-point Likert scale questions in response to their learning about thematic progression and a sixth open-ended question offering the opportunity to comment.

Thematic progression patterns were calculated for each essay and figures subsequently compared.

5. Results

5.1 Essay Analysis

The results of analysis are presented in Table 1, with thematic progression patterns represented in terms of the percentage of overall patterns used.

Table 1: Theme Use and Thematic Progression Patterns in Student Essays

	ESSAY 1	ESSAY 2
thematic progression	%CODES	%CODES
constant	28.6	24.5
linear	16.4	20.2
split rheme	2.2	4
split theme	0	0.6
this-that	2.5	4.6
theme return/gap	9.1	9.5
derived theme	8.2	1.2
related linear	0	4
hyperthematic	4.4	0.9
comparative	1.6	2.1
peripheral – I	1.6	2.8
peripheral- you-we	4.7	5.2
peripheral there is/are - it	12.3	7.1
peripheral - metatextual (this essay)	0	0.9
peripheral - interrogative	2.2	0.6
new	4.4	10.1
summative	0.6	1.2
irretrievable	1.3	0.3

Of the main TP patterns, the constant pattern was the most used in both essays, with a slight reduction from 28.6% and 24.5% between essay 1 and 2. This is in contrast to Herriman's (2011) findings in which the linear TP was most used. However, the use of linear progression pattern did increase from 16.4% to 20.2%, which represents an approximately 4% shift from constant to linear progression pattern use.

Other interesting changes occurred in the split Rheme pattern, which increased

from 2.2% to 4%, which may suggest greater awareness of the pattern following instruction, and the peripheral there is/there are pattern, which decreased by approximately 42% within the category from 12.3% to 7.1%, also suggesting that students were mindful of its potential overuse.

Somewhat more difficult to interpret is the shift in the use of derived Themes, which dropped notably from 8.2% to 1.2%, and hyperthematic Themes which also dropped considerably from 4.8% to 0.6%, and these may indicate a change in rhetorical strategy. At the same time, these results may be a consequence of differing interpretations in analysis: where Herriman (2011) identified the use of summative progression patterns as the use of Themes forming topic sentences of new paragraphs, the students in this study relied heavily on what were considered as hyperthematic constructs to start new paragraphs, i.e. referring back to the essay topic per se, not to summarizing previous clauses.

The use of new Themes, in particular to start paragraphs, also increased by more than 100%, from 4.4% to 10.1%, and, finally, the often-distracting use of the interrogative pattern also decreased from 2.20% to 0.60% – drop of approximately 74%.

A discussion of these results follows in section 6.

5.2 Rater Results

The raters were relatively consistent in marking the essays. Of interest in their rating was whether they would award higher scores to the second essay and this turned out to be the case, although not in complete synchronicity. The direction of change is presented in Table 2, which shows the percentage of essays in which each rater awarded a higher score the same scores or a lower score from each student's essays. The percentages are calculated from the 11 participants who submitted both essays.

Table 2: Direction in Change Expressed as a Percentage of Total Essays

	Change between Essay 1 and Essay 2	
	<u>Rater 1</u>	<u>Rater 2</u>
positive	36.36% (4)	45.45% (5)
equal	36.36% (4)	27.27% (3)
negative	27.27% (3)	27.27% (3)

As the table shows, both raters gave a slightly higher rating in essay 2, rating 36.36% and 45.45% of the second essays higher than the first, respectively.

5.3 Student Responses

For the questionnaire, students were asked five-point Likert scale questions in response to their learning about thematic progression with a sixth open-ended question offering the opportunity to comment. Comments were coded into three main categories based on keyword analysis: “helpful,” “difficult,” and “challenging but useful”. It was interesting to note a high degree of positive responses, which was somewhat unexpected, given the novelty and additional cognitive workload required by students when composing their second essays.

Table 4 shows that a high percentage of the students responded positively to learning about and applying thematic progression as an approach to improving their writing. All but three of the responses to question 2 (81%) indicated that TP helped ‘very much’ or ‘a little bit’, when deciding what to write next, while the three (19%) responded with a non-committal ‘maybe’. A clear majority (77%) felt that the principles of thematic progression should ‘very much’ be taught in writing courses.

Table 3: Responses to Questionnaire

		very much (1)	a little bit (2)	maybe (3)	not really (4)	not at all (5)	Total resp.
Q1	Learning about T-R and TP helped me compose my essay	31% (5)	43% (7)	19% (3)	6% (1)	0	16
Q2	Awareness of TP helped me to know what to write next	31% (5)	50% (8)	19% (3)	0	0	16
Q3	TP helped me with draft correction	25% (4)	50% (8)	19% (3)	6% (1)	0	16
Q4	I will use TP in future writing	63% (10)	31% (5)	6% (1)	0	0	16
Q5	T-R and TP should be taught in writing classes	77% (10)	15% (2)	7% (1)	0	0	13*

6. Discussion

With regard to the first research question, the results do indicate that Thai students exhibited similar weaknesses in their writing that previous research has found. That is, the students used constant progression, there is/there are clause openings, and a high number of new Themes, (in the second essay at least), among others. This is interesting in the sense that the bulk of previous research has focused on learners whose native languages – such as Swedish (e.g. Herriman, 2011) and Spanish (e.g. Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo, 1998) – are historically and culturally more related to English than Thai, and suggests that first language interference is not a necessarily dominant factor explaining the common

weaknesses in student writing.

At 24%, the use of constant progression by the Thai students can certainly be considered overuse if when compared to say, Herriman's 2011 findings that Swedish writers of English used the constant in 20% of patterns, compared to the 17% exhibited by native English writers. Conversely, even though they improved in the second essay, the Thai students significantly underused the linear progression compared to Herriman's findings of 32% and 29% for Swedish and native speakers respectively. These figures certainly support any argument that raising awareness of these patterns may lead students to more reflectively construct and edit their essays.

Related to this is another finding, which is not available in the data as presented here, namely the number of sequential patterns, or 'Theme chains', in student writing, which may indicate another source problems regarding coherence. In the essays analyzed, the highest number of same pattern chains was only 3, (e.g. three constant progressions in a row), and this was in fact a rare occurrence. Thus, although previous discussions have focused on overuse of progression patterns, students might also benefit from being taught to avoid too frequent changes, as this would also disrupt the logical flow of essays.

Other features of student writing emerged in the analysis. One was the relatively high frequency use of 'some people' and 'many people' or related phrase as subject. This repetitiveness suggests that students are limited in using a variety of forms to express generally held opinions. This could be addressed by presenting students with a variety of strategies and alternate phrases (e.g. 'it is largely felt').

The second question, whether the teaching of Theme-Rheme and thematic progression in writing instruction results in qualitatively better essays yielded mixed results. While the introduction of Theme-Rheme and thematic progression as features of writing did appear to impact student compositions, it was only a slight, non-significant improvement, if judging by the raters' scores. The fact the students employed a greater number linear progression patterns and used fewer of the less common, peripheral patterns – representing a redistribution from the 'bad' to the 'good' patterns – does indicate a degree of awareness and application of that knowledge.

It is also interesting to consider the students' responses in the questionnaire, which were overall positive, and indeed a little surprising in light of the concern that they would not appreciate having to think about yet more things as they drafted their compositions. Indeed, the participants did not seem overwhelmed by the introduction of thematic progression patterns as yet another metalinguistic aspect of language to be mindful of and indeed, their support of including the concept in writing classes suggests that many of the students may have found it a useful guiding principle.

One of the biggest questions regarding this concerns the fluidity of the Theme-Rheme barrier itself: without clear and obvious delimitations of Theme is there a point in trying to encourage students to use it? Many of the researchers cited in this paper have themselves noted the difficulty and confusion in conducting analyses (the current author among them!) – hence the continuous proposing of new categories. Nonetheless, as Hawes

notes, 'for teaching purposes it matters little which definition of theme is preferred' (2015, p. 94). If students are generally aware of how coherence is achieved with thematic progression patterns, and not only with micro-level tokens such as conjunctions, they may also find the composition easier in terms knowing what to say, seeing that one sentence is generally a development of the preceding one. This was the premise in question 2 of the questionnaire, the results of which suggested that a third of the students did find this aspect of thematic progression helpful guide.

Another case for supporting the inclusion of thematic progression patterns in writing classes is that despite the difficulty of identifying Theme in some cases, the students did not find the concept overly challenging. This was borne out in the 3-hour class that was conducted in this research, and which obviously did not allow for a thorough examination of Theme-Rheme; students were therefore not expected to have a thorough understanding of the concept prior to applying it in their work. But, students did change their writing, and suggested the concept of thematic progression was understandable and that they could apply it in their work. In its basic form then, the principle of thematic progression was accessible. And while the improved essay scores were not statistically significant, all the factors combined are encouraging. In fact, it is a source of bemusement that so little of this aspect of SFL is presented in writing instruction when it could be of benefit to a significant percentage of students.

There are obviously some provisos and limitations to the possibility for teaching about thematic progression patterns in writing classes. First is the fact that thematic progression patterns are not in any way a prescriptive or even mnemonic device: there are no correct applications for given texts and genre. Attempting to apply TP patterns in their writing would not yield much feedback in terms of overall writing quality; thematic progression obviously cannot address issues of grammar, style or register and these are critical to academic writing. And while students could use their awareness of thematic progression patterns in academic to target problems of overuse (as in the 'overuse' of constant progression patterns), judging what is overuse is largely subjective in any given passage.

However, these issues need be of little concern if it is used as a tool for feedback and teacher commentary: if students are aware of the concept, the teacher's pointing out significant problems in a draft may guide them in the editing process. Thematic progression in this way would serve as conceptual terminology.

For example, the following passage suffers from (among other things) problems related to Rheme. Sentence (2) presents a hyperthematic Theme (in that smokers and smoking are topics of the essay), but then repeats the Theme from the previous sentence in the Rheme position (cigarette butts), in a crossing pattern. Sentence (3) is constant, (and like sentence 2 has a two-part Rheme), but the student has then created a circular argument by essentially using a hyperthematic (or hyper-rhematic, as it were) construct. Sentence (4) again has a hyperthematic Theme, but its Rheme introduces a disconnected idea

(1) Cigarette butts also annoying for other people. (2) Most of the people who

smoke will leave their cigarette butts behind, and it had to be clean by other people. (3) *Actually* smoker is one of reason who destroy environment pollution, and those people just blame other things. (4) *In fact* smoke of the cigarette also harm for other people who near smoker.

In trying to help the student straighten this passage out, the teacher could point out its Theme-Rheme problems and direct the student to identifying the main Theme and Rheme of the passage in order to construct the passage around it, by writing, for example (in the vein of a student's style)

Smoking causes a number of problems for other people. One of the main problems is pollution. *For example*, the cigarette butts that smokers throw away require others to clean them up. Another problem is that, people near smokers are harmed by the smoke.

Here the sentences are constructed in a derived linear pattern, which at least allows the student to incorporate a number of new ideas into the paragraph, based on the first Rheme *number of problems*.

Another question that might be raised is at what stage in the learners' development the concept of TP patterns might be introduced. It would seem difficult to do so at earlier stages of competence, but this has not prevented the teaching of other abstract (e.g. grammatical) concepts in FL education. At any rate, academic writing is usually not taught at earlier stages of study and thus the introduction of TP patterns would logically coincide with the stage where academic writing was actually taught. It would also be unrealistic to use thematic progression as a criterion for assessing essays, as teachers would not have the time for such detailed analysis.

As to the overriding question of this research, namely the feasibility and potential effectiveness of incorporating the teaching of Theme-Rheme and thematic progression in ELF writing pedagogy, the results, as noted above, are positive but inconclusive, despite the criticisms mentioned above. Writers such as Belmonte and McCabe-Hidalgo (1998) are equally positive, and one may conclude that a Theme-Rheme based approach is certainly possible, in part. This is especially the case given that the relative wealth of analyses of student writing has not yet led to any widely-known approaches or strategies to teaching it. While Wei (2015) offers a useful 10-session instructional package, the length of instruction may deter many writing instructors.

Therefore, for a shorter approach of approximately 5 sessions, the following procedures are suggested:

- Following instruction, students might be asked to identify and clarify examples of poor writing in other essays, either by way of co-evaluating classmates' essays or external samples which suffer from such weaknesses as over use of constant progression, overuse of 'there are' constructs and lack of consistent/use of

excessive progression changes

- Allow students to identify their 'style' through TP analysis, in particular focusing on their weaknesses or overuse of particular progression patterns (or faulty Themes)
- Practice paragraph writing by composing multiple drafts on the same topic, practicing and then comparing the effect of various patterns

Finally, given these initial results, the question then becomes as to whether the research and the approach to teaching academic writing is applicable beyond the context of the present study. Wei's work in China, the numerous analyses of student writing in Europe and further afield, and the current research set in the Thai tertiary education context would certainly suggest that students in various settings could benefit from awareness-raising efforts.

7. Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations to the present study. The pre-experimental research design and sample size are the most obvious issues limiting credence to any claim of generalizability. The duration of the treatment was also too short: students were exposed to Theme-Rheme and thematic progression patterns for only six hours prior to being asked to write their second essay, and while they managed to do so, a more thorough examination and practice period may have yielded stronger results. Related to this is the fact that the instruction of thematic progression was limited to four patterns, whereas the analysis was compelled to identify quite a number more. Epistemologically speaking, the instruction given to students to 'be mindful' of their use of TP patterns limited the ability to observe if students were actually being mindful in their writing or whether the changes in the essays was coincidental.

The exact results of teaching Theme-Rheme and thematic progression were also difficult to ascertain. In this research, the evaluators of the student essays were asked to evaluate the essays following standard rubric, and were not informed of the treatment concerning thematic progression. This was done with the aim to establish if any improved thematic progression patterns in student essays led to an overall 'sense' of better coherence, as manifested in higher essay scores. While the students did score slightly higher, it is still difficult to claim this was a direct result of instruction, or perhaps even the 'natural' result of having done more writing.

Additionally, and somewhat beyond the control of the research, is the ongoing issue of defining Theme, and the problem that analyzing (and teaching) thematic progression poses – indeed, the topic is itself worthy of a separate discussion paper in this context. At this stage researchers and teachers will need to decide themselves, as this paper did in following Forey's definition, noted in section 4.

8. Further Research

This paper represents an initial attempt to pursue a relatively unexplored area of investigation in EFL pedagogy, and in particular in teaching EFL (academic) writing in Thailand. As such, a number of potential follow-up investigations seem warranted.

As this paper investigated thematic progression patterns, and was therefore concerned with identifying topical Themes and their connections, further research could investigate the students use of the different Theme types. In other words, how, and to what extent, do students at various levels employ textual, ideational, interpersonal and topical Themes? A cursory glance at the essays analyzed in this paper for example suggested that learners had a limited repertoire in their use of subordinating conjunctions, i.e. textual Themes, and insights from such research might guide writing instruction in future.

Secondly, as this investigation has argued that teaching students about Theme-Rheme and thematic progression may be helpful in learning to write, future researchers may explore various methodologies and activities for the incorporation of this area of study.

Third, a cross-linguistic comparison of TP patterns may be valuable in examining whether and how native language patterns differ and may be transferred to English writing. Despite noting in section 6 that Thai students did not seem to have been overly influenced by their L1, there is a gap in the literature that could be addressed, not only in Thai-English comparison but any other language pairing.

9. Conclusion

This paper examined the thematic progression patterns used by intermediate Thai learners of English in short essay compositions, and first corroborated previous research findings from other ELT contexts. In particular, this research found the potentially problematic issues of the overuse of constant TP patterns, overuse of there is/there are sentence openings and overuse of new Themes.

The paper then examined whether explicit instruction in thematic progression patterns could influence students' compositions and some interesting findings emerged in that there were definitive changes in the way students composed their second essays following the introduction of the concept of thematic progression. Though the findings are inconclusive given the scale of the research, further research does seem warranted and may prove a fruitful direction in the study of foreign language writing instruction.

References

- Arunsirot, S. (2013). An analysis of textual metafunction in Thai EFL students' writing. *Novitas-ROYAL (Research on Youth and Language)*, 7(2), 160-174.
- Belmonte, I. A., & McCabe-Hidalgo, A. (1998). Theme-Rheme patterns in L2 writing. *Didactica*,

10, 13-31.

- Bloor, T., & Bloor, M. (2004). *The functional analysis of English: A Hallidayan approach*. London: Arnold.
- Dubois, B. L. (1987). A reformulation of thematic progression typology. *Text*, 7(2), 89-116.
- Firbas, J. (1992). *Functional sentence perspective in written and spoken communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Forey, G. (2002). *Aspects of theme and their role in workplace texts* (Doctoral dissertation), University of Glasgow.
- Forey, G. (2004). Workplace texts: do they mean the same for teachers and business people? *English for Specific Purposes*, 23(4), 447-469.
- Fries, P. H. (2002). The flow of information in a written English text. In M. C. Peter H. Fries, David Lockwood and William Spruiell (Ed.), *Relations and functions within and around language* (pp. 117-155). London: Continuum.
- Fries, P. H. (2004). On Theme, Rheme and discourse goals. In M. Coulthard (Ed.), *Advances in written text analysis*. (pp. 229-249). London: Routledge.
- Fries, P. H. (2009). The textual metafunction as a site for a discussion of the goals of linguistics and techniques of linguistic analysis. In G. Thompson & G. Forey (Eds.), *Text Type and Texture* (pp. 8-44). London: Equinox.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. (2004). *An introduction to functional grammar* (3rd ed.). London: Hodder Arnold.
- Hawes, T. (2015). Thematic progression in the writing of students and professionals. *Ampersand* (2), 93-100. (capitalization)
- Herriman, J. (2011). Themes and theme progression in Swedish advanced learners' writing in English. *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, 10(1), 1-28.
- Lu, A. (2013). A functional grammar approach to analysing Asian students' writing. *American Journal of Educational Research*, 1(2), 49-57.
- Martin, J. R., & Rose, D. (2003). *Working with discourse: Meaning beyond the clause* (2nd ed.). London: Continuum.
- McCabe, A. M. (1999). *Theme and thematic patterns in Spanish and English history texts* (Doctoral dissertation), University of Aston, Birmingham. Retrieved from 31 March 2015 <http://www.isfla.org/Systemics/Print/Theses/McCabePhd.pdf>
- North, S. (2005). Disciplinary variation in use of Theme in undergraduate essays. *Applied Linguistics*, 26(3), 431-452.
- Ping, A. L. (2004). Delimiting the Theme of the English clause - An inference-boundary account. *SKY Journal of Linguistics*, 17, 167-187.
- Priyatmojo, S. (2012). Improving Coherence of the students' sentences by applying thematic progression and personal blog in the sentence-based writing class *Register Journal*, 5(2), 207-226.

- Shieh, C.-M., Lin, K.-R. S., 謝春美, & 林冠汝. (2011). thematic progression patterns and the texts of the department required English test. *國立屏東商業技術學院學報/第十三期*.
- Thompson, G. (2014). *Introducing functional grammar* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Wang, L. (2007). Theme and Rheme in the thematic Organization of text: Implications for teaching academic writing. *Asian EFL Journal*, 9(1), 164-176.
- Wei, J. (2015). Theme and thematic progression in English writing teaching. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(21), 178-187.
- Yang, Y. (2008). Thematic progression analysis in teaching explanation writing. *English Language Teaching*, 1(1), 29-33. (capitalization)
- Yang, Y. (2015). On the patterns of thematic progression in the argumentation writing of non-English majors. *US-China Foreign Language*, 13(3), 222-229.