# The realization of thematic progression in argumentative essays by third-year English-majored students at a public university in Vietnam

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## ABSTRACT

Text coherence remains a challenge for both teachers and students in ESL/EFL writing courses. Text coherence is determined by thematic progression patterns, which describe the organization of theme and rheme in a text. Using a qualitative research approach, this study aims to analyze the thematic progression patterns in argumentative essays written by third-year English-majored students at a public university in Vietnam. It was found that simple linear thematic progression was the most popular pattern in the students' argumentative essays. The study hopes to contribute to the field as a reference for teaching academic writing to English-majored students at the tertiary level in Vietnam.

## Introduction

Writing undoubtedly plays an important role in teaching and learning a language. Argumentative writing is an important skill in an educational context. When attending university, students must encounter many writing tasks involving argumentative functions, such as reviews, reports, essays, and term papers (Jackson, 2024). Argumentative writing helps learners develop their reasoning skills, as students must use logical techniques such as analyzing concepts, making judgments, and reasoning to dissect problems in their writing (Pennebaker et al., 1990). Argumentative writing also supports learners in fostering their critical thinking ability because students must examine tacit beliefs and assumptions during the writing process (Hadley & Boon, 2003).

However, EFL/ESL learners encounter many difficulties in writing an argumentative text compared to a narrative text (Beers & Nagy, 2011). Argumentative writing requires students to employ more sophisticated vocabulary and grammar than other text types (Bar-Ilan & Berman, 2008; Beers & Nagy, 2011). This kind of writing also involves the use of a knowledge-transforming strategy, which requires writers to reorganize the retrieved content and ideas in their written work (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1987). In Vietnam, English-majored students at the tertiary level have problems with coherence in writing argumentative essays. Many students produced argumentative essays with little focus on the writing topic (Dang et al., 2020; Nguyen

et al., 2021). Some English-majored students found it challenging to develop their ideas in argumentative essays (Dang et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021).

Argumentative writing is a genre that English-majored students must acquire before graduating from universities in Vietnam. On the journey to write argumentative essays effectively, English-majored students encountered many difficulties, such as a lack of knowledge of grammar vocabulary and poor idea development (Bar-Ilan & Berman, 2008; Beers & Nagy, 2011; Dang et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021). This is mainly because coherence is an abstract concept. There are many teaching and learning methods to improve coherence in students' essays, such as the use of AI tools in writing classes (Phan, 2023; Tran, 2024). However, this study focuses on how coherence is manifested in argumentative essays. Dane (1974) used systemic language theory to devise thematic progression and shed light on coherence. With thematic progression by Danes (1974), teachers and students can expand their understanding of how a theme progresses throughout a text, which increases the level of coherence of the text.

At the university where this study is conducted, the researcher observed that third-year English major students receive low scores in terms of coherence in their argumentative essays. Therefore, this current study employs the theoretical framework on thematic progression by Danes (1974) to analyze thematic progression patterns in students' argumentative essays. The thematic progression will help to determine the coherence in students' argumentative essays. This type of research has never been done at this university before.

## Literature review

### *Coherence and cohesion in academic writing*

Coherence refers to "an underlying logical structure that acts to guide the reader through the text" (Neubert & Shreve, 1992, p. 94). The "underlying logical structure" is understood as the connection and progression of ideas in a text. There are two types of coherence: propositional coherence and interactional coherence (Todd et al., 2007). Propositional coherence indicates the implicit connection between statements in a text, which requires the background knowledge of readers. Interactional coherence describes the implicit connection among functions in a text.

Cohesion indicates a set of linguistic resources that help writers link different parts of a text (Halliday & Hasan, 1989). The linking of many parts in a text is determined by connecting sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph. This process involves the use of words or phrases that display relations, which are also known as cohesive devices. Five main types of relations include reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). The appropriate use of cohesive devices contributes to the cohesion of a text.

The major difference between coherence and cohesion is that the former refers to the implicit connection between concepts, propositions, and communicative functions, whereas the latter describes the explicit relationship between sentences and paragraphs. However, coherence and cohesion are interrelated because cohesive devices help readers uncover the text's coherence. This current study focuses on examining propositional coherence in argumentative writing by third-year English-majored students.

### *Thematic progression*

Thematic progression refers to how themes and rhemes are organized in sentences to develop ideas in a text (Danes, 1974). While a theme takes the initial position in a clause and establishes the focus of the clause, a rheme follows and elaborates on the theme (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Danes (1974) developed one of the earliest frameworks on thematic progression (TP), with three types: Simple Linear TP, TP with a Continuous Theme, and TP with Derived Themes. These types of TP are presented in Figure 1, figure 2, and figure 3, respectively.

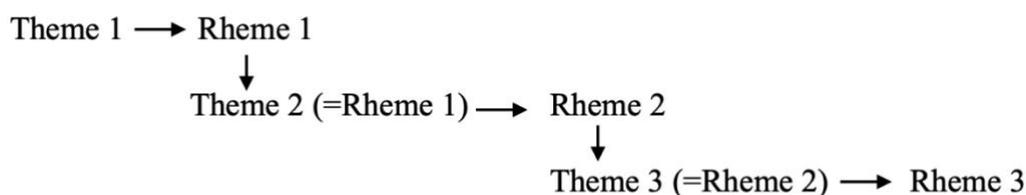**Figure 1.**

Simple linear thematic progression



Figure 1 shows that in Simple Linear TP, the theme of a sentence is introduced in the rhyme of the preceding sentence.

**Figure 2**.
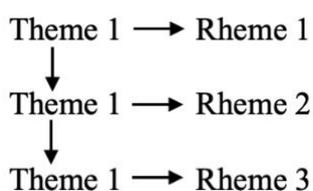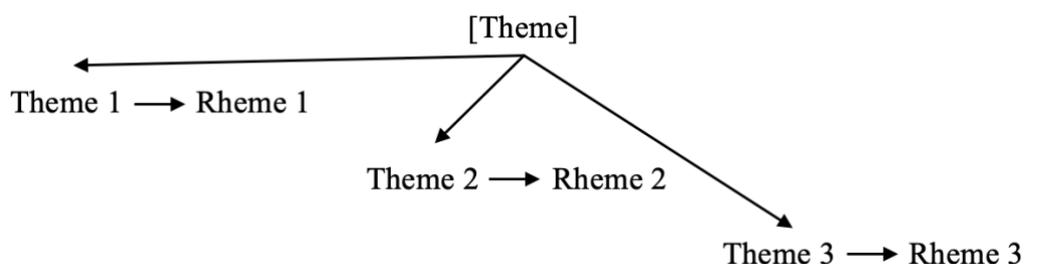
Thematic progression with a continuous theme



Figure 2 illustrates a Continuous Theme characterized by the repetition of one theme across many sentences (Figure 2). The theme can be expressed in different wordings.

**Figure 3**.

Thematic progression with derived themes



As can be seen from Figure 3, multiple sub-themes, such as Theme 1, Theme 2, and Theme 3, are derived from one theme.

In this study, Danes' (1974) thematic progression model is used to describe the underlying structure of a text. Thematic progression is a useful tool for analyzing propositional coherence (Todd et al., 2007).

*Previous studies*

Several studies have examined thematic progression patterns in students' argumentative essays. Using Danes' (1974) framework on thematic progression to analyze students' essays, it was found that the most popular pattern is TP with a continuous theme, followed by simple linear TP, and the least proportion came to TP with derived themes (Soleymanzadeh & Cholami,

2014). Danes' (1974) framework was also used to investigate thematic progression patterns between low- and high-scoring essays. The findings suggested that low-scoring essays contained a high frequency of new themes in clauses, followed by some instances of TP with a continuous theme and simple linear TP (Pavavijarn, 2022). By contrast, TP with a continuous theme and simple linear TP was found to have the highest occurrences in high-scoring essays (Pavavijarn, 2022). Eggins' (2005) approach was used to identify thematic progression in students' essays. It was concluded that TP with a continuous theme was the most common pattern, followed by simple linear TP, and TP with derived themes being the least frequent (Sari & Agustina, 2022).

### Research Question

The study aims to examine thematic progression in argumentative essays by third-year English-majored students. To fulfill this aim, the study seeks to answer the research question: "What thematic progression patterns are realized in third-year English-majored students' argumentative essays?".

## Methods

### Pedagogical Setting & Participants

This study was conducted at a university in Hanoi, where students do the degree of Bachelor in English. The students must complete five writing courses, including English writing skills 1, English writing skills 2, English writing skills 3, English writing skills 4, and English writing skills 5. Entering the first semester of the third year at university, English-majored students take the course "English Writing Skills 5", which consists of ten modules. Four of the ten modules are designed for students to learn to write argumentative essays.

After taking four modules of argumentative writing, students take a progress test that aims to measure students' writing ability in this genre. When the students take this test, the English language proficiency of most students is expected to be at the B2 level according to the Common European Reference Framework (CERF). The assumption about the English language proficiency of the participants stems from English teachers who are in charge of "English Writing Skills 5" classes.

### Design of the Study

The study adopts a qualitative approach, which helps researchers study a phenomenon in its natural setting by examining the meanings that people attach to such a phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 1996). The qualitative approach refers to a research procedure that involves gathering information from participants and then transforming the information into themes, which are developed into broad patterns (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Some qualitative methods should be employed to collect data, such as observation, interview, and text analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Textual analysis is a method of analyzing data to examine the meaning and structure of texts (Benaquisto & Given, 2008).

### Data collection & analysis

The researcher visited one class of third-year English-majored students to ask the teacher and the students for their approval of photocopying the argumentative essays written by the students during the progress test of the course "English Writing Skills 5". It is noted that these essays were marked by the teacher, and the students were informed of their grades before the

researcher borrowed the essays. After photocopying 25 argumentative essays, the researcher returned the essays to the teacher for record.

Based on Danes' (1974) framework on thematic progression, the data were analyzed following the steps below:

1) A T-unit is identified in each essay. A T-unit is "an independent clause together with all hypotactically related clauses and words that are dependent on that independent clause" (Fries, 1995, p. 49). The number of T-units will correspond to the number of independent clauses.

2) The boundary between theme and rheme in each T-unit is drawn based on work by the work (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). If an independent clause is placed before a dependent clause, the theme of the independent clause functions as the theme of the whole clause complex. When a dependent clause precedes an independent clause, the former is viewed as the theme, and the latter is taken as the theme.

3) A diagram that illustrates the TP patterns of each paragraph of an essay is drawn.

4) The number of TP patterns is counted from the diagram. In this study, the thematic progression pattern is counted at the sentence level. At this level, it is ideal that at least two independent clauses exist in a sentence so that thematic progression can be realized in the sentence. However, if there is only one clause in the sentence, it is necessary to look at the following sentences. Counting TP patterns is decided by the switch of themes among types of TP. For instance, sentence 1, sentence 2, and sentence three are placed next to each other. Sentence 1 and sentence 2 illustrate simple linear TP, and sentences 2 and sentence 3 also signify simple linear TP. Suppose the theme that progresses in each TP is the same, which is considered one TP pattern. If the theme in TP from sentence one and sentence 2 is different from the theme in TP from sentence 2 to sentence 3, the number of TP patterns is two.

5) The number of TP patterns is presented quantitatively using tables.

## Findings

### *Physical features of essays*

In this study, the researcher collected 25 argumentative essays written by third-year English-majored students at a university in Hanoi. The essays were created during a progress test after students studied four modules on argumentative writing. All the essays are structured with three main parts: Introduction, Body, and Conclusion. Each essay has one introduction paragraph, two body paragraphs, and one conclusion paragraph.

### *Thematic progression patterns in introduction paragraphs of students' essays*

The study employed three types of thematic progression by Danes (1974). It was found that 17 of 25 introduction paragraphs did not follow any of the thematic progression patterns by Danes (1974). This is because the students tend to begin the clauses with a new theme. Table 1 describes the occurrence of thematic progression in eight introduction paragraphs of students' argumentative essays.

**Table 1.**

Thematic progression in introduction paragraphs of students' essays

| Thematic progression pattern | Occurrences | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Simple linear thematic progression | 6 | 77% |
| TP with a continuous theme | 2 | 25% |
| TP with derived themes | 0 | 0% |

Table 1 shows that simple linear thematic progression was found in introduction paragraphs with the highest frequency (75%), followed by thematic progression with a continuous theme (25%). No thematic progression with derived themes was found in the introduction paragraphs. It is suggested that third-year English major students would prefer a straightforward approach in introduction paragraphs by linking each new sentence closely to the previous one. This structure can help the students establish a clear flow of information in the introduction paragraphs, making it easier for readers to follow the writer's viewpoint at the beginning of an argumentative essay.

A simple linear thematic progression in an introduction paragraph is shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4**.

The mapping of simple linear thematic progression in Text 14

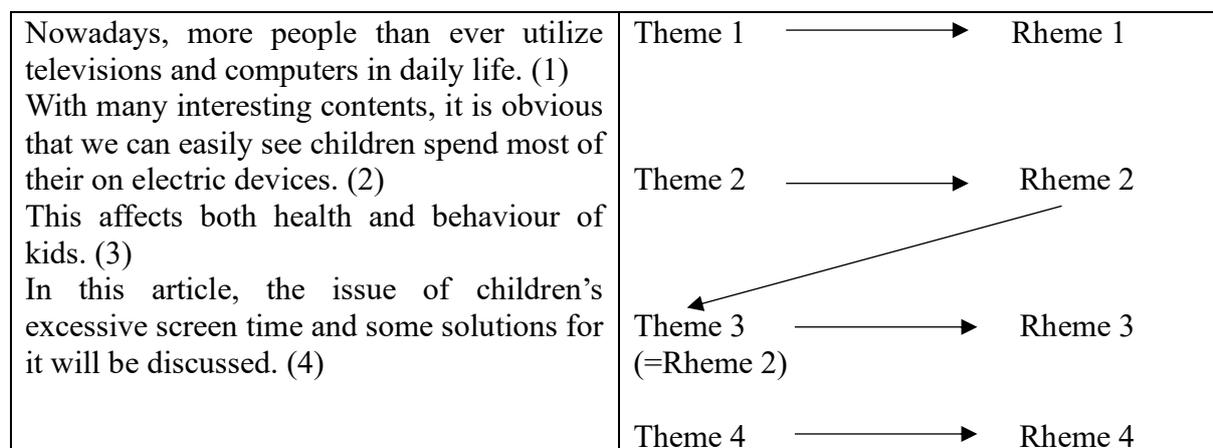| | |
|---|---|
| Nowadays, more people than ever utilize televisions and computers in daily life. (1)<br>With many interesting contents, it is obvious that we can easily see children spend most of their on electric devices. (2)<br>This affects both health and behaviour of kids. (3)<br>In this article, the issue of children's excessive screen time and some solutions for it will be discussed. (4) | Theme 1 → Rheme 1<br><br>Theme 2 → Rheme 2<br><br>Theme 3 → Rheme 3<br>(=Rheme 2)<br><br>Theme 4 → Rheme 4 |

Figure 4 shows that Rheme 2, "that we can easily see children spend most of their on electric devices." is picked up on the following Theme 3, "this." There is no progression from Theme 1 to Theme 2 and from Theme 3 to Theme 4.

Thematic progression with a continuous theme in an introduction paragraph is shown in Figure 5.

**Figure 5.**

The mapping of thematic progression with a continuous theme in Text 16

| In this modernized world, youngsters are getting more and more accessible to advanced technologies such as televisions or computers.<br>However, children excessively use them on a daily basis.<br>This essay will point out the problems which can be resulted in and show some useful measures to tack those issues. | Theme 1 ⟶ Rheme 1<br>↓<br>Theme 2 ⟶ Rheme 2<br>(=Theme 1)<br><br>Theme 3 ⟶ Rheme 3 |
|---|---|

As can be seen from Figure 5, Theme 1, "youngsters," and Theme 2, "children," indicate young people who use technological devices for a considerable amount of time. In other words, the same theme is repeated across clause one and clause 2.

*Thematic progression patterns in body paragraphs of students' essays*

It was found that 8 of 50 body paragraphs did not match any of the thematic progression patterns by Danes (1974). Table 2 describes the occurrences of thematic progression in 42 body paragraphs of students' argumentative essays.

**Table 2.**

Thematic progression in body paragraphs of students' essays

| Thematic progression pattern | Occurrences | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Simple linear thematic progression | 55 | 71% |
| TP with a continuous theme | 19 | 25% |
| TP with derived themes | 3 | 4% |

Table 2 shows that the highest frequency of thematic progression patterns came to simple linear thematic progression (71%), followed by thematic progression with a continuous theme (25%), and the least thematic progression with derived themes (4%). This result suggests that third-year English-majored students rely on simple linear progression to structure information clearly and directly. The low frequency of thematic progression with derived themes indicates that complex thematic structures are less favored by the students because the students would rather craft a text that is easily accessible and straightforward rather than layered with multiple ideas.

A simple linear thematic progression in one body paragraph is illustrated in Figure 6.

**Figure 6.**

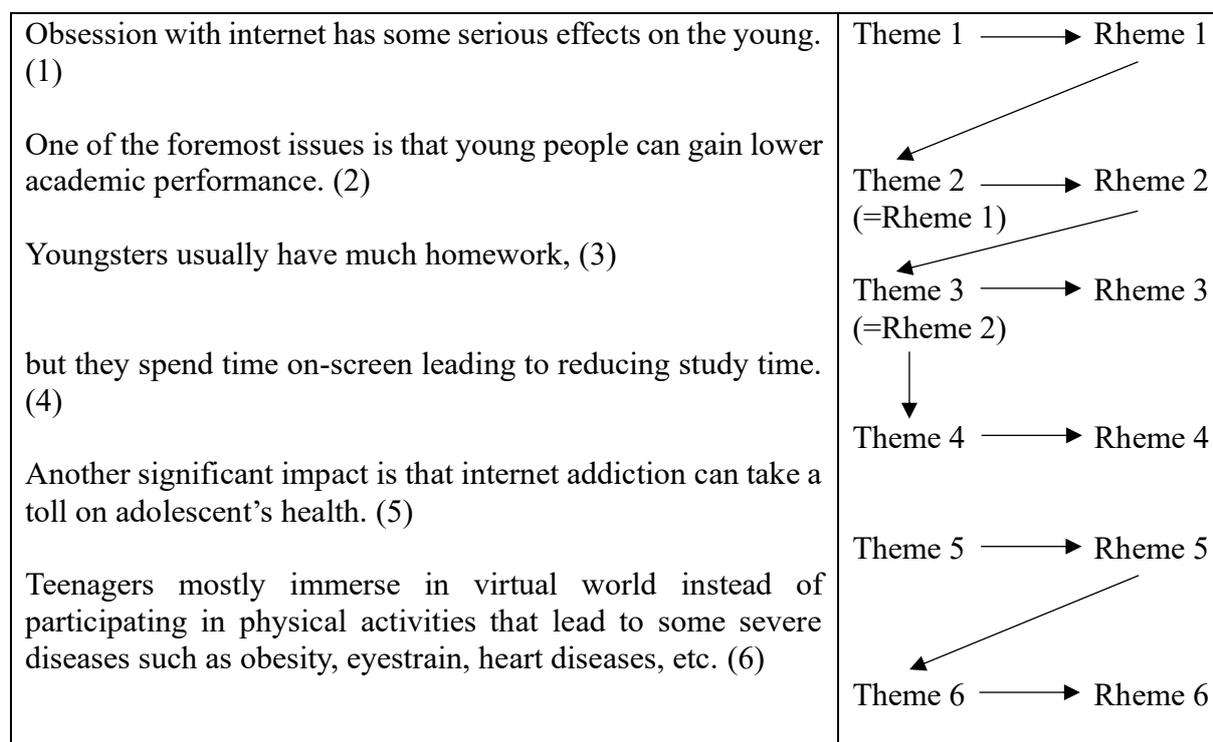The mapping of simple linear thematic progression in Text 24

| | |
|---|---|
| Obsession with internet has some serious effects on the young. (1) | Theme 1 ⟶ Rheme 1 |
| One of the foremost issues is that young people can gain lower academic performance. (2) | Theme 2 ⟶ Rheme 2 (=Rheme 1) |
| Youngsters usually have much homework, (3) | Theme 3 ⟶ Rheme 3 (=Rheme 2) |
| but they spend time on-screen leading to reducing study time. (4) | Theme 4 ⟶ Rheme 4 |
| Another significant impact is that internet addiction can take a toll on adolescent's health. (5) | Theme 5 ⟶ Rheme 5 |
| Teenagers mostly immerse in virtual world instead of participating in physical activities that lead to some severe diseases such as obesity, eyestrain, heart diseases, etc. (6) | Theme 6 ⟶ Rheme 6 |

Figure 6 shows that Theme 2, "issues," develops from Rheme 1, "serious effects." Similarly, Rheme 2, "young people," transitions into Theme 3, "Youngsters," and Rheme 5, "adolescent" becomes Theme 6, "teenagers." Rheme 1, Rhem 2, and Rheme 5 progress into Theme 2, Theme 3, and Theme 6, respectively, which characterizes simple linear thematic progression in the body paragraphs of students' essays.

Thematic progression with a continuous theme in one body paragraph is shown in Figure 7.

**Figure 7.**

The mapping of thematic progression with a continuous theme in Text 1

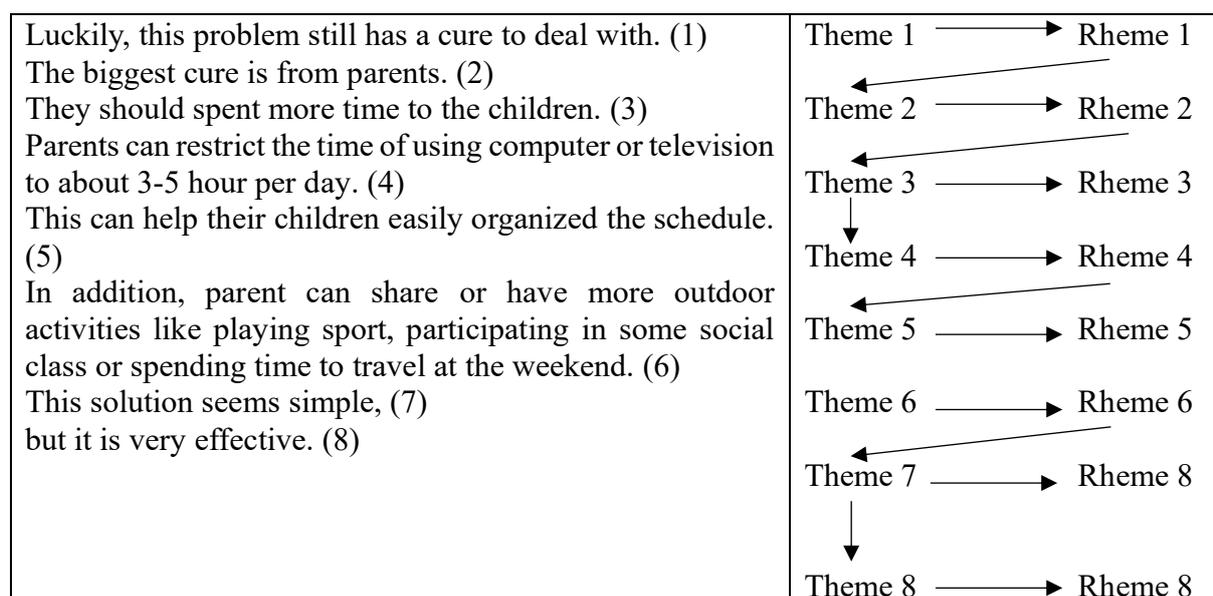| | |
|---|---|
| Luckily, this problem still has a cure to deal with. (1) | Theme 1 ⟶ Rheme 1 |
| The biggest cure is from parents. (2) | |
| They should spent more time to the children. (3) | Theme 2 ⟶ Rheme 2 |
| Parents can restrict the time of using computer or television to about 3-5 hour per day. (4) | Theme 3 ⟶ Rheme 3 |
| This can help their children easily organized the schedule. (5) | Theme 4 ⟶ Rheme 4 |
| In addition, parent can share or have more outdoor activities like playing sport, participating in some social class or spending time to travel at the weekend. (6) | Theme 5 ⟶ Rheme 5 |
| This solution seems simple, (7) | Theme 6 ⟶ Rheme 6 |
| but it is very effective. (8) | Theme 7 ⟶ Rheme 8 |
| | Theme 8 ⟶ Rheme 8 |

Figure 7 shows that simple linear thematic progression happens four times, whereas thematic progression with a continuous theme occurs twice. Theme 3, "they," and Theme 4, "parents," refer to the same people. Theme 7, "this solution," and Theme 8, "it" remain constant across clause seven and clause 8.

Thematic progression with derived themes in one body paragraph is displayed in Figure 8.

**Figure 8.**

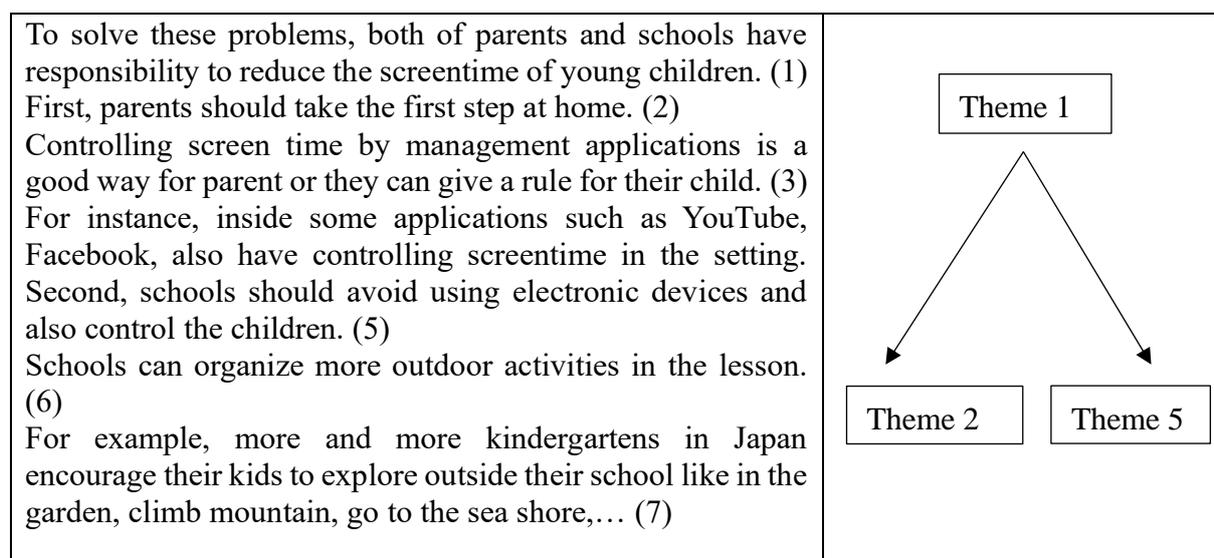The mapping of thematic progression with derived themes in Text 15

| To solve these problems, both of parents and schools have responsibility to reduce the screentime of young children. (1) First, parents should take the first step at home. (2) Controlling screen time by management applications is a good way for parent or they can give a rule for their child. (3) For instance, inside some applications such as YouTube, Facebook, also have controlling screentime in the setting. Second, schools should avoid using electronic devices and also control the children. (5) Schools can organize more outdoor activities in the lesson. (6) For example, more and more kindergartens in Japan encourage their kids to explore outside their school like in the garden, climb mountain, go to the sea shore,… (7) | Theme 1 → Theme 2, Theme 5 |

Figure 8 shows that Theme 1, "both of parents and schools," has two sub-themes, including Theme 2, "parents" and Theme 5, "schools."

*Thematic progression patterns in conclusion paragraphs of students' essays*

It was found that 17 of 25 conclusion paragraphs do not fit into any of the thematic progression patterns by Danes (1974). Table 3 describes the occurrences of thematic progression in eight conclusion paragraphs of students' argumentative essays.

**Table 3.**

Thematic progression, in conclusion, paragraphs of students' essays

| Thematic progression pattern | Occurrences | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Simple linear thematic progression | 8 | 67% |
| TP with a continuous theme | 1 | 23% |
| TP with derived themes | 0 | 10% |

Table 3 shows that simple linear thematic progression and thematic progression with a continuous theme accounted for 67% and 23% of the total thematic progression patterns, respectively. No thematic progress with derived themes was realized in the conclusion paragraphs. The high percentage of simple linear thematic progression indicates that the students would prefer a straightforward approach to conclude their texts, where each sentence is built based on the information in the previous one.

A simple linear thematic progression in a conclusion paragraph is shown in Figure 9.

**Figure 9**.

The mapping of simple linear thematic progression in Text 7

| In conclusion, children spend a considerable amount of time on using computers every day. This can make them addicted and cause some physical and mental health problems. The key to this problem is the responsibility of their parents. | Theme 1 ⟶ Rheme 1<br><br>Theme 2 ⟶ Rheme 2<br>(=Rheme 1)<br><br>Theme 3 ⟶ Rheme 3<br>(=Rheme 2) |
|---|---|

Figure 9 shows that Rheme 1, "spend a considerable amount of time on using computers every day," turns into Theme 2, "This," and Rheme 2, "make them addicted and cause some physical and mental health problems," becomes Theme 3 "the key to this problem." These progressions characterize simple linear thematic progression.

Thematic progression with a continuous theme in a conclusion paragraph is shown in Figure 10.

**Figure 10**.

The mapping of thematic progression with a continuous theme in Text 7

| In conclusion, children spend time on screen so much for several reasons and different purposes. Children should balance time to use televisions and out activities that can help them improve mental and physical health. | Theme 1 ⟶ Rheme 1<br><br>↓<br><br>Theme 2 ⟶ Rheme 2<br>(=Theme 1) |
|---|---|

As can be seen from Figure 10, Theme 1 and Theme 2 are constant as they refer to children.

## Discussion

In this study, the work by Danes (1974) was employed to analyze thematic progression patterns in argumentative essays by third-year English-majored students. The third-year English-majored students in the study would favor a straightforward approach to writing argumentative essays.

In the introductory paragraphs, the students tended to use simple linear thematic progression by linking each sentence closely to the previous one. By straightforwardly connecting sentences, the students could present their points of view clearly and ensure that readers can easily follow the viewpoints of the writers.

In body paragraphs, the students would prefer to use simple linear thematic progression as they prioritized accessibility by presenting their ideas in a manner that is easy for readers to comprehend without navigating intricate thematic connections. This approach indicates the students' preference for simplicity over complexity.

In conclusion paragraphs, the students built each sentence based on the information in the previous one, which helps them to reinforce the main points without introducing new ideas. This strategy remains focused and leaves readers with a clear understanding of the core arguments in the essays.

However, the limited use of thematic progression with derived themes may imply that the students did not fully explore or develop complex ideas. This would indicate a gap in the student's ability to handle multiple ideas within an argumentative essay, which is essential for more sophisticated academic writing.

The results of this study showed that the least frequent thematic progression pattern was thematic progression with derived themes, which is in line with studies by Soleymanzadeh and Gholami (2014), Pavavijarn (2022), and Sari and Agustina (2022). Another finding in this study is that simple linear thematic progression occurred more frequently than thematic progression with a continuous theme in the students' essays. However, the finding contradicts the studies by Soleymanzadeh and Gholami (2014), Pavavijarn (2022), and Sari and Agustina (2022). Nearly half of the paragraphs in the students' essay follow thematic progression patterns by Danes (1974). One possible reason is that the students are likely to start the following sentences with brand-new themes.

## Conclusion

Third-year English-majored students in this study tend to use new themes in the subsequent sentences in a paragraph, so nearly half of the paragraphs of students' argumentative essays show no thematic progression pattern. Accordingly, it is necessary to introduce the students to thematic progression patterns. This could help students structure their ideas more effectively in argumentative essays.

In the introduction, body, and conclusion paragraphs of the essays, simple linear thematic progression has the highest frequency, compared to thematic progression with a continuous theme and thematic progression with derived themes. It is suggested that teachers should encourage students to develop more layered arguments using thematic progression with derived themes. The teachers should have students analyze texts that incorporate different thematic progression patterns, allowing students to observe how complex ideas are developed and interconnected.

This study examines thematic progression in 25 argumentative essays, so it is impossible to generalize this finding to all the essays written by third-year English-majored students. Future research should analyze a larger sample of argumentative essays across different classes and schools to provide a more comprehensive understanding of thematic progression patterns used by third-year English-majored students and allow for more reliable conclusions about their writing practices. The study results hope to help teachers use thematic progression to give feedback on coherence in students' essays and tailor lessons to improve students' coherence by using thematic progression patterns.

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## Biodata

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