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Original Research

## Thematicity in High-Graded and Low-Graded Argumentative Compositions Written by Persian EFL Learners and Their Perceptions of Theme

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### Abstract

This study investigates the realization and patterns of thematic progression in argumentative essays written by Persian-speaking learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Specifically, it compares the use and distribution of thematic structures between high- and low-graded learner compositions, and examines how these patterns differ from those found in comparable native-speaker essays. Drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics, the analysis follows the thematic framework proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) and later elaborated by Martin and Rose (2013). The data consist of EFL learner essays collected from a university writing course, together with native-speaker argumentative texts selected from established reference corpora. Each text was segmented into t-units and analyzed for Theme-Rheme structures and thematic patterns (constant, linear, derived, split, and peripheral). A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative analysis of Theme types and frequencies with qualitative interpretation of textual organization. Results show that high-graded essays demonstrate a more balanced and cohesive use of thematic progression, whereas low-graded essays exhibit limited variety and weaker textual connectivity. In particular, the overuse of textual Themes and peripheral progressions correlates with reduced coherence. Interview data further indicate that most learners have limited explicit awareness of thematic progression and tend to associate coherence solely with lexical cohesion or surface organization. The findings suggest that targeted instruction in thematic progression can significantly improve coherence and writing quality among EFL learners.

**Keywords:** Thematic Progression; Theme-Rheme; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Argumentative Writing; EFL Learners; Cohesion.

### 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, academic discourse, particularly in English academic writing, has gained increasing scholarly attention (Hyland & Paltridge, 2011; Sun et al., 2024). Academic writing plays a pivotal role in defining career development for scholars, as it underpins scholarly achievement (Murray & Moore, 2006). Effective academic writing is crucial for success in higher education, as it is one of the primary means through which students are assessed (Gillett et al., 2009; Nguyen, 2024).

A key component of effective academic writing is cohesion (Abdul Rahman, 2013), which ensures that readers can follow the logical flow of ideas. As Swales and Feak (1994) emphasize, academic English is shaped by various factors, including the flow of information, which guides the reader from one idea to the next. This flow is essential for maintaining unity within a text. One of the linguistic resources that contributes directly to this flow is the organization of information within the clause. In this regard, Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) define the Theme as “the point of departure of the message” (p. 89), that is, the element that establishes the orientation of the clause and from which the subsequent message develops, while the remainder of the clause constitutes the Rheme. This Theme/Rheme construct is a fundamental aspect of discourse-level cohesion (Alonso & McCabe, 1998; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Similar

attention to thematic organization has been echoed in more recent discourse analytic studies (Rahnemoon et al., 2020; Shokri, 2016), which emphasize the link between cohesive structures and the rhetorical effectiveness of academic writing.

In addition to Theme/Rheme choices, thematic patterns play a significant role in structuring academic discourse. Thematic progression (TP) refers to how Themes and Rhemes interact to establish logical connections between ideas (McCabe, 1999). Daneš (1974, p.114), as cited in McCabe (1999), referred to these thematic progression chains as the “skeleton of the plot”, emphasizing their importance in creating cohesive and well-organized written discourse. Consequently, understanding thematic progression is essential for writers aiming to produce clear, structured academic texts. Recent studies by Jodairi Pineh (2022), Yang and Ahmad (2024), and Sun et al. (2024) have reinforced this perspective, showing that thematic progression is central to coherence and cohesion in both student and professional writing.

Empirical research on thematicity and thematic progression has demonstrated that writers’ management of Theme-Rheme structures plays a crucial role in shaping coherence and overall text quality. Higher-rated academic texts tend to display consistent and purposeful thematic progression patterns, whereas less proficient writers often rely on repetitive or underdeveloped Themes that disrupt information flow (e.g., Hawes & Thomas, 2012). Studies in EFL contexts have similarly shown that learners frequently exhibit limited variation in thematic progression, which contributes to weakened cohesion in their academic writing (e.g., Fitriati & Gayatri, 2021; Jalilifar, 2010). Recent research has further indicated that higher-proficiency L2 writers make more effective use of simple linear, constant, and derived thematic patterns, leading to clearer information flow and more coherent argumentative texts (e.g., Hawes, 2015). Other studies have highlighted the relationship between thematic control and writing quality, showing that stronger writers demonstrate greater flexibility in Theme selection and thematic development across clauses and paragraphs, and that explicit attention to Theme-Rheme in instruction can support more coherent revisions (e.g., Jing, 2018).

While thematicity has been studied extensively (e.g., Jalilifar, 2010; Hawes, 2015), few studies have specifically explored thematic patterns in EFL compositions. Previous research has focused on cohesive devices in writing (e.g., Al-Jarf, 2001; Abdul Rahman, 2013), but investigations into the systematic use of thematicity in students’ compositions are still relatively rare (e.g., Alonso & McCabe, 2000b; Ebrahimi & Ebrahimi, 2012a; Sun et al., 2024). Recent studies (e.g., Jodairi Pineh, 2022; Yang & Ahmad, 2024) suggest that EFL learners face significant challenges in managing cohesive devices, particularly thematic progression, which influences overall textual coherence. Despite these contributions, notable gaps remain in the empirical literature. Few studies have compared high- and low-graded argumentative compositions within the same educational context, and even fewer have incorporated learners’ own perceptions of Theme and thematicity. The present study addresses these gaps by examining thematic progression patterns in argumentative essays of differing quality written by Persian-speaking EFL learners and by exploring their understandings of Theme in the writing process.

EFL students often struggle with thematicity due to differences between their native-language structures and English conventions. These discrepancies make it essential for EFL learners to adapt their thematic patterns to align with native-like writing conventions. This study, therefore, aims to examine the thematic issues in EFL students’ writing and to propose instructional methods to address them. The following research questions guide the study:

1. Is there any notable difference in thematicity between high-graded and low-graded compositions?
2. What typical thematization problems do EFL students encounter?
3. Are students aware of the importance of the point of departure in a clause?

## 2. Literature Review

The analysis of thematicity in this study draws on two key models from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL): The Hallidayan model of thematic progression (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) and Daneš’s thematic progression patterns (Daneš, 1974). These models provide the theoretical foundation for examining how Themes and Rhemes structure meaning in written discourse. The choice of these models is grounded in their theoretical robustness and their ability to address the complexities of academic writing in an EFL context. Recent research by Sun et al. (2024) and Yang and Ahmad (2024) has shown that both thematic progression and progression patterns are critical for textual cohesion,

particularly in academic discourse. Furthermore, the use of SFL in EFL studies has been shown to enhance the systematic understanding of how learners manage coherence and cohesion in argumentative writing (Nguyen, 2024). This study aims to build on these findings by applying these frameworks to compare thematicity in high- and low-graded student compositions, where *high-graded compositions* refer to essays that met or exceeded the upper threshold on the combined holistic and analytic rating scales, and *low-graded compositions* refer to essays falling below this threshold (see Section 3.5 for scoring criteria).

### 2.1. Hallidayan Model of Thematic Organization

The first model is derived from Halliday's (1994) framework, which categorizes Themes into three types: Topical, Textual, and Interpersonal. According to Halliday, the Topical Theme represents the experiential content of the clause, typically realized by a participant, circumstance, or process. For instance, in the short text "*The duke has given away that teapot. The family will probably never see it again*", the Topical Themes "*The duke*" and "*The family*" orient the reader to the entities being discussed and maintain continuity across the two clauses (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 89). Textual Themes, by contrast, signal how the clause relates to the surrounding discourse; for example, in "*He left the house early. And then he went home again*", the conjunction "*And*" functions as a Textual Theme, showing the logical sequence between the two clauses (p. 88). Interpersonal Themes encode the writer's attitude or stance. This can be seen in "*Frankly, that seems unlikely. Honestly, the evidence does not support the claim*", where "*Frankly*" and "*Honestly*" operate as Interpersonal Themes that evaluate the proposition (p. 91). In this model, the Topical Theme is obligatory in both simple and Multiple Themes, and Multiple Themes arise when Textual and/or Interpersonal elements precede the Topical Theme. This classification is fundamental in understanding how information is presented and connected in the text, guiding the reader through the unfolding message (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

### 2.2. Daneš's Thematic Progression Patterns

The second model used in this study is the modified classification of Daneš (1974), which outlines various TP patterns in written discourse. These patterns describe how Themes and Rhemes are organized across successive clauses. According to McCabe (1999), thematic progression is crucial for achieving cohesion in texts, as it establishes how new information is introduced and linked to prior discourse. Daneš's original model identified three types of thematic progression: simple linear, constant, and derived. McCabe (1999) extended this classification to include split Theme and split Rheme patterns.

- Simple linear progression occurs when the Rheme of one clause becomes the Theme of the next, forming a simple sequence of clauses with clear forward movement of information. For example, in "*My friend bought a new bicycle. The new bicycle is very light and fast*", the Rheme "*a new bicycle*" in the first clause becomes the Theme "*The new bicycle*" in the second clause (McCabe, 1999, p. 177).
- Constant progression involves the repetition of the same Theme across successive clauses, creating a sense of stability or continuity. McCabe (1999, p. 179) illustrates this with "*The internet has changed education dramatically. The internet provides access to vast information. The internet also enables global communication*", where "*The internet*" functions as the Theme throughout.
- Derived progression features a Theme that is expanded or developed over several clauses, often creating complex or layered thematic structures. This type of progression is especially prevalent in academic writing, where extended arguments or explanations require the development of key ideas across multiple sentences. For instance, Daneš (1974, p. 118) and McCabe (1999, p. 180) discuss examples such as the following: Hyper-Theme: *Modern cities face several environmental issues*. From this Hyper-Theme, subsequent clauses begin with "*Air pollution*", "*Noise pollution*", and "*Water contamination*" as Themes, each representing a facet of the overarching environmental concern.
- Split Theme progression occurs when a Theme consists of multiple components, each of which is developed in subsequent clauses. McCabe (1999, p. 181) provides the example "*Teachers and learners shape classroom interaction. Teachers manage lesson structure. Learners contribute through participation*," where the initial Theme "*Teachers and learners*" is split into the Themes "*Teachers*" and "*Learners*" in the following clauses.

- Split Rheme progression arises when the Rheme of a clause is divided into two distinct ideas, which are then elaborated in later clauses. As shown in McCabe (1999, p. 182), “*The program offers two benefits: improved accuracy and greater fluency. Improved accuracy helps learners express ideas precisely. Greater fluency supports more natural communication*”. Here, the Rheme components “*improved accuracy*” and “*greater fluency*” become the Themes of the next two clauses.

These progression patterns are crucial for creating well-structured, cohesive academic texts, as they govern how Themes are connected to build coherent arguments.

### 2.3. Unit of Analysis and Application to EFL Writing

In determining the unit of analysis for thematic studies, Fries (1995) suggests that a unit larger than a clause but smaller than a sentence would be helpful. Fries introduces the concept of an “independent conjoinable clause complex”, which McCabe (1999) equates with the idea of a t-unit. A t-unit refers to a minimal unit of analysis that maintains a single independent clause or a clause complex that is conjoined by a coordinating conjunction. For this study, the t-unit was chosen as the unit of analysis. This unit allowed for a more accurate identification of thematic structures and progression patterns within complex sentence structures. According to McCabe (1999), thematic patterns are observed through the connections made across three t-units, meaning that the progression of Themes within a three-clause segment of text is a key element in this analysis. This approach provides a detailed look at how information flows and connects in the writing, especially in EFL compositions, where thematic choices may vary from native-speaker structures.

In the context of EFL writing, this analytical unit works in tandem with the theoretical models employed in the study. The Hallidayan model helps identify how students organize the content of their clauses (Topical Themes) and how these are linked to the broader discourse context (Textual and Interpersonal Themes). Similarly, the Daneš and McCabe progression models are applied to analyze how students maintain thematic continuity and coherence across sentences and paragraphs. Together, this combined framework allows for a detailed examination of thematic choices and their impact on the overall cohesiveness of the student compositions.

## 3. Methodology

The present study employed a systematic approach to examine how EFL learners structure information thematically in their writing and to identify common challenges in their use of thematic progression and cohesion. It outlines the research design, participants, data collection procedures, and analytical methods used to explore differences between high- and low-graded compositions and to assess students’ likely awareness of thematicity.

### 3.1. Participants

Twenty-six senior and 44 junior bachelor’s students majoring in English language translation at Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, located in Ahvaz in southwestern Iran, participated in this study. The university is one of the major public institutions in the region, and the participants were enrolled in an English-language academic program that prepares students for professional translation and advanced language study. The students had already completed two introductory grammar and writing courses, as well as another essay-writing course; therefore, they were expected to be able to write a well-structured five-paragraph essay. Another group of 28 master’s students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and English Literature at the same university participated in the study. The master’s students were in their first semester when this study was conducted. Right at the outset, the participants were informed about the goals of the study.

Since the prospective data of the study was divided into high- and low-graded compositions, the research team determined that the participants’ degree level would not serve as a selection criterion. This decision was based on the study’s primary focus on thematicity rather than academic seniority, and on the fact that all participating students, regardless of degree status, had completed the necessary prerequisite coursework to produce argumentation-based essays of comparable structure. Additionally, no criteria for age or gender were applied, as the study sought to investigate thematic progression as a linguistic phenomenon independent of demographic variation. Participation was voluntary and was obtained in accordance with departmental research procedures, with all students providing informed agreement after being briefed on the purpose and process of the study.

### 3.2. Data

Argumentative writing is a genre in which the writer defends a specific viewpoint. To be argumentative, a text should comprise some aspects of which warrant, claim, and grounds are the most common (Toulmin, 2003). The data for this study comprised two major parts. Part of the data included five-paragraph essays of argumentation, which participants were required to produce within the time limit of 40 to 50 minutes. In one session, the students were informed about the study's goals and asked to write about a topic of common interest, selected from sample tests in IELTS Cambridge books. Another part of the data consisted of argumentative texts written by native English speakers, downloaded from reliable websites. The native argumentative texts downloaded from online resources were carefully analyzed, and the elements of argumentation were identified. These texts were used as the touchstone against which the students' texts were evaluated.

To complement the quantitative analysis, interviews were also conducted with 20 participants. Interviewed in separate sessions, the students were asked about their views of cohesion and thematic progression. Moreover, the interviewees were asked about ways of improving textuality in composition writing. The students were individually interviewed, with each interview lasting about five minutes. The interview was crafted with open-ended questions to allow participants more freedom to express their intended responses. Additionally, to render the analysis more feasible, the interviews were tape-recorded. Afterwards, the analysis was conducted to gain insight into students' attitudes and perceptions of the Theme in English written discourse. Additionally, the analysis examined whether the participants were aware of the concept of Theme and to what extent this knowledge was incorporated into their writings.

### 3.3. Rating Criteria

To determine the quality of students' compositions, the data were scored using two rating scales. A holistic rating scheme suggested by Hyland (2003) and an analytic rating scheme devised by Anderson, based on a scale proposed by Harris (1968, as cited in Hughes, 1989), were utilized to achieve this goal. These scales are presented as follows (See Tables 1 & 2):

Table 1. *Holistic Rating Scheme*

Score	Descriptor
86-100	Outstanding work: excellency in correct selection of content, overall coherence, internal cohesion, linguistic accuracy and appropriate tone and style
71-85	Very good work: mostly successful in selection of content, good overall coherence, logical and connected ideas, limited syntactic variety, a sprinkling of grammatical errors, occasional lapses in tone and style; mainly through inappropriate selection of vocabulary
56-70	Satisfactory work: good overall coherence but faulty places for cohesion within sentences, limited variety of structures/vocabularies and more than a sprinkling of grammatical errors
41-55	Marginally satisfactory work: relatively poor linkage of ideas, overall coherence and local cohesion but comprehensible, frequent grammatical mistakes and frequent lapses in tone and style
26-40	Unsatisfactory work: inadequate and poor in relevant points
1-25	Very unsatisfactory work: consistently poor and incomprehensible

Table 2. *Analytic Rating Scheme*

Mark	Grammar
6	Few (if any) noticeable errors of grammar or word order.
5	Some errors of grammar or word order which do not, however, interfere with comprehension
4	Errors of grammar or word order fairly frequent; occasional re-reading necessary for full comprehension.
3	Errors of grammar or word order frequent; efforts of interpretation
2	Errors of grammar or word order very frequent; reader often has to rely on his/her own interpretation.
1	Errors of grammar or word order so severe as to make comprehension virtually impossible.
Mark	Vocabulary
6	Use of vocabulary and idioms rarely (if at all) distinguishable from that educated native writer.
5	Occasionally uses inappropriate terms or relies on circumlocutions; expressions of ideas hardly impaired.
4	Uses wrong or inappropriate words fairly frequently; expression of idea may be limited because of inadequate vocabulary.

3	Limited vocabulary and frequent errors clearly hinder expression of ideas.
2	Vocabulary so limited and so frequently misused that reader must often rely on his/her own interpretation.
1	Vocabulary limitations so extreme as to make comprehension virtually impossible.
Mark	Mechanics
6	Few (if any) noticeable lapses in punctuation or spelling.
5	Occasional lapses in punctuation or spelling which do not, however, interfere with comprehension.
4	Errors in punctuation or spelling fairly frequent; occasional re-reading necessary for full comprehension.
3	Frequent errors in spelling or punctuation; lead sometimes to obscurity.
2	Errors in spelling or punctuation so frequent that reader must often rely on his/her own interpretation.
1	Errors in spelling or punctuation so severe as to make comprehension virtually impossible.
Mark	Fluency (style and ease of communication)
6	Choice of structures and vocabulary consistently appropriate; like that educated native speaker.
5	Occasional lack of consistency in choice of structures and vocabulary which does not, however, impair overall ease of communication.
4	'Patchy', with some structures or vocabulary items noticeably inappropriate to general style.
3	Structures or vocabulary items sometimes not only inappropriate but also misused; little sense of ease of communication.
2	Communication often impaired by completely inappropriate or misused structures or vocabulary items.
1	A 'hotch-potch' of half-learned misused structures and vocabulary items rendering communication almost impossible.
Mark	Form (organization)
6	Highly organized; clear progression of ideas; well linked; like an educated native writer
5	Material well organized; links could occasionally be clearer but communication not impaired.
4	Some lack of organization; re-reading required for clarification of ideas.
3	Little or no attempt at connectivity, though reader can deduce some organization.
2	Individual ideas may be clear, but very difficult to deduce connection between them.
1	Lack of organization so severe that communication is seriously impaired.

### 3.4. Scoring and Reliability

In the first phase of the study, to avoid bias in the rating process, participants' names were removed, and the composition sheets were coded. The compositions were scored by one researcher and two other raters using the holistic and analytic rating schemes. Since one of the raters failed to complete the rating process, another colleague was requested to rate the writings. The students' final scores used for data analysis were the average of the scores from the three raters.

Regarding inter-rater reliability, all data were used to determine the degree of correlation between holistic and analytic scores. Since a new rater replaced one of the raters, the data was split into two parts. For each data chunk, two reliability indices were calculated using Spearman's correlation coefficient because the data were ordinal (Hatch & Lazarton, 1991). Each reliability index was the sum of three figures, resulting from three possible pairings of the three sets of test scores. Regarding the reliability of holistic scores, the correlation coefficients for the two parts of the data were .67 and .83, respectively. Based on widely cited reliability guidelines indicating that coefficients between .50-.75 reflect moderate reliability and values above .75 indicate good reliability (Koo & Li, 2016), these results demonstrate an acceptable level of agreement among the raters. Moreover, the analytic score reliability indices for the first and second chunks of the data were .72 and .76, respectively, indicating a relatively high degree of correlation between the test scores given by the three raters.

To determine intra-rater reliability, the researcher rated the compositions twice, with a 3-week interval between the ratings. Likewise, Spearman's formula was utilized to obtain the intra-rater reliability indices for holistic and analytic scores. Reliability indices of .896 and .842 indicated a strong correlation between the researcher's holistic and analytic ratings, respectively.

### 3.5. Grading the Compositions

To obtain a single score, the analytic scores were normalized by multiplying each figure by 3.3. Then, the holistic mean and the normalized analytic mean of each student writer were summed up to acquire a single score. Considering

140 as the cut-off point for the sum of holistic and analytic means, the data were divided into high-graded and low-graded compositions. Accordingly, 45 of the compositions were assigned as high-graded and 53 compositions were categorized as low-graded. However, to ensure an equal number of compositions in each group, eight compositions from the low-graded group were randomly selected and discarded from the data. As a result, 90 compositions were equally placed in high- and low-graded groups. Moreover, to determine the suitable statistical method, a normality test was conducted on the data. The test results indicated that the data distribution was not normal, so non-parametric tests were utilized for analysis. To identify the significance of the grades in the two groups, the data was measured on an ordinal scale, and the groups being unrelated, a Mann-Whitney U test was run. Results indicated that the grade differences were meaningful across the two groups.

#### 4. Results

The study findings address the three research questions through analyses of thematic structures in high- and low-graded compositions, comparisons of their progression patterns, identification of common thematization problems, and insights from interviews on students' awareness of thematicity and cohesion as follows.

##### 4.1. Thematic Differences between High-graded and Low-graded Compositions

The frequency of occurrence of Theme types and thematic patterns in high-graded and low-graded groups was compared using the Chi-square test. The test results indicated that, in most cases, the differences were not statistically significant. However, there were a few key differences that are highlighted in the following tables.

Table 3. Results of Chi-Square Tests of Theme Types in High and Low Groups

Theme Type	High Group (%)	Low Group (%)	Chi-Square	Asymp. Sig.
<b>Topical</b>	726	695	.676	.411
<b>Textual</b>	290 (39.94)	323 (46.47)	1.777	.183
<b>Interpersonal</b>	31 (4.26)	20 (2.87)	2.373	.123
<b>Simple</b>	425 (58.53)	374 (53.81)	3.255	.071
<b>Multiple</b>	301 (41.46)	321 (46.18)	.643	.423
<b>Marked</b>	399 (54.95)	417 (60)	.397	.529
<b>Unmarked</b>	327 (45.04)	278 (40)	3.969	.046
<b>Tx.top</b>	270 (89.70)	302 (94.08)	1.790	.181
<b>Int.top</b>	20 (6.64)	16 (4.98)	.444	.505
<b>Tx.int.top</b>	11 (3.65)	3 (0.93)	4.571	.033

Df= degree of freedom; asymp. Sig= level of significance; Tx.top= combination of textual-topical themes; Int.top= combination of interpersonal-topical; Tx.int.top= combination of textual-interpersonal-topical.

As demonstrated in Table 3, except for the Unmarked Theme and the combination of Textual-Interpersonal-Topical Theme, there was no significant difference between the high-graded and low-graded groups. The high-graded compositions showed a higher incidence of Unmarked Themes and Textual-Interpersonal-Topical Themes. With an Unmarked Theme signifying structural simplicity, it can be inferred that the high-graded compositions were structurally simpler. Regarding the occurrence of Textual-Interpersonal-Topical Themes, the results indicate that students in the high group were more adept at utilizing the thematic potential available in their chosen Themes.

As evident from Table 4, a statistically significant difference existed between the high and low groups in the frequency of constant progression patterns. Compared to the low-graded compositions, the high-graded compositions included a greater number of consistent progression patterns. More importantly, the results indicated that the total number of thematic bonds (i.e., cohesive links between Themes and Rhemes) was significantly higher in the high-graded essays. This suggests that high-graded compositions displayed stronger thematic cohesion and more effective thematic progression than low-graded compositions.

Table 4. Results of Chi-Square Tests of Progression Types in High and Low Groups

Progression Types	High Group (%)	Low Group (%)	Chi-Square	Asymp.sig
Linear	34 (11.25)	21 (9.95)	3.073	.080
Constant	52 (17.21)	11 (5.21)	26.683	.000
Derived	213 (70.52)	179 (84.83)	2.949	.086
Split Theme	1 (0.33)	0 (0)	---	---
Split Rheme	2 (0.66)	0 (0)	---	---
Peripheral Theme	284 (48.46)	312 (59.65)	1.315	.251
Total TP	302 (51.53)	211 (40.43)	16.142	.000

#### 4.2. Thematic Properties in High- and Low-graded Compositions

An in-depth examination of the students' writings revealed qualitative differences in the actual utilization of thematic schemes. For instance, it was found that the majority of the T-Units in low-graded compositions were meaningless and grammatically incorrect. Conversely, in the high-graded group, the T-Units were, for the most part, grammatically acceptable. The following excerpts shed light on this observation. The first example is from a low-graded composition, and the second excerpt is from a high-graded composition. In Excerpt 1, several grammatical and vocabulary errors can be detected. Conversely, Excerpt 2 is marked by excellence in the choice of vocabulary and grammatical structures.

##### Excerpt 1 (Low-Graded Composition)

*/Some talent students in country sides and poor areas are prevented to go to the English classes .../ If the education system let them learn English in primary stage helping them to use... /*

##### Excerpt 2 (High-Graded Composition)

*/ Living in a world which is incredibly improving technologically, one can hardly deny the necessity to keep up with this giant technology without which the modern man will be lost. /*

Regarding the use of Textual Themes, the low-graded compositions were marked by a high incidence of limited conjunctions such as "and", "but", and "so". Moreover, the student writers frequently used consecutive Textual Themes. However, unusual combinations occurred in the low-graded compositions. These observations are made evident in Excerpt 3 from a low-graded composition. The underlined conjunctions play a minor role in achieving cohesion.

##### Excerpt 3 (Low-Graded Composition)

*/ For example, children will mix between two languages. / And they can't correct this mistake forever..., / and they can't separate them from each other. /*

Regarding the use of Interpersonal Themes, particularly modal adjuncts, students in the low-graded group relied heavily on opinion and validation modal adjuncts, failing to use other types. In the high-graded group, in addition to using validation and opinion adjuncts, the students used modal comment adjuncts to express usuality, desirability, and typicality.

During data analysis, Themes that could not be linked to the previous discourse were considered peripheral or miscellaneous. McCabe (1999) asserts that peripheral Themes are not entirely disconnected from the text; rather, they are crucial to the organization of written discourse. Regarding the frequency of peripheral Themes, the low-graded compositions showed a higher incidence of this type of Theme. This might render the students' writings difficult to analyze in terms of connecting these Themes to progression chains. The following are instances of the use of peripheral Themes in the introductory parts of high- and low-graded compositions, respectively.

In Excerpt 4, peripheral Themes are used at the beginning to introduce the topic in an interesting way. However, Excerpt 5, which is extracted from a low-graded composition, presents the reader with a bland introduction to the topic.

**Excerpt 4 (High-Graded Composition)**

*/ It's been years since the educational system of our country has been adjusted. / But it seems that this method should be renewed, since the test results showing common knowledge of a foreign language among graduated students have not been satisfactory at all. / So debates have been aroused to decide whether it is better for children to begin learning a foreign language at primary school or maintain the old policy and teach them a foreign language at secondary school. /*

**Excerpt 5 (Low-Graded Composition)**

*/ Is it better for children to learn a foreign language at primary school rather than secondary school? / It has been suggested that foreign languages should be taught at primary school because bringing children into contact with foreign languages may result in faster learning. / It is better for children to begin learning a foreign language at primary school rather than secondary school for some reason. /*

**4.3. Thematic Differences between Students' Writings and Native Texts**

To identify potential differences between native and non-native texts, the frequency of Theme types and thematic patterns in both groups was compared. A Chi-square test was performed to analyze the data. Table 5 reveals significant differences between the students' writings and the native texts in terms of thematic structures. An important difference was observed in the frequency of occurrence of Topical and Textual Themes. Native texts showed a higher frequency of Topical Themes, while non-native texts exhibited a higher incidence of Textual Themes. This suggests that non-native writers may rely more heavily on textual cohesion to connect ideas, whereas native texts tend to use Topical Themes more effectively to drive their arguments. Additionally, there were meaningful differences in the use of Multiple, Marked, and Textual-Topical Multiple Themes. Native texts showed more frequent use of Multiple Themes, while non-native texts relied more on Marked Themes. The combination of Textual-Topical themes was also used more frequently in native compositions, indicating a more integrated thematic structure in native writing.

Table 5. Results of Chi-Square Tests on Theme Types in (Non)-Native Texts

Theme and Progression Types	Native (%)	Non-Native (%)	Chi-Square	Asymp. sig
Topical	1116	1421	36.667	.000
Textual	315 (28.22)	613 (43.12)	95.694	.000
Interpersonal	50 (4.48)	51 (3.51)	.010	.921
Simple	768 (68.8)	799 (56.22)	.613	.434
Multiple	348 (31.18)	622 (43.77)	77.398	.000
Marked	570 (51.08)	816 (57.42)	43.622	.000
Unmarked	546 (48.92)	605 (42.57)	3.024	.082
Tx.top	301 (85.75)	572 (91.96)	84.125	.000
Int.top	43 (12.25)	36 (5.78)	.620	.431
Tx.int.top	7 (1.99)	14 (2.25)	2.333	.127
Linear	73 (10.31)	55 (10.72)	2.531	.112
Constant	66 (9.32)	63 (12.28)	.070	.792
Derived	561 (79.23)	392 (76.41)	29.970	.000
Split Theme	7 (0.98)	1 (0.19)	4.500	.034
Split Rheme	1 (0.14)	2 (0.38)	.333	.564
Peripheral Theme	235 (25.92)	596 (53.74)	156.824	.000
Total TP	708 (75.07)	513 (46.25)	31.143	.000

Both linear and constant progression patterns were found to be equally common in native and non-native texts, suggesting that both groups employ them in a comparable way to link ideas. However, a significant difference was observed in the use of derived Themes, with native texts showing a higher frequency (561 vs. 392), suggesting a more sophisticated thematic progression in the native group. Furthermore, a striking difference was found in the use of peripheral Themes. Native texts had fewer peripheral Themes compared to non-native texts (235 vs. 596). This suggests that non-native writers may introduce irrelevant or disconnected Themes, thereby hindering the coherence of their compositions.

In summary, while both native and non-native texts share some thematic structures, native texts tend to be more topically driven, utilizing derived Themes and Textual-Topical cohesion. Non-native texts, on the other hand, tend to rely more on textual cohesion and peripheral Themes, leading to less cohesive, thematically less sophisticated writing.

#### 4.4. Students' Awareness of the Concepts of Thematicity and Cohesion

Twenty participants were interviewed to determine whether they were aware of the concepts of thematicity and cohesion in writing. The interviews were conducted in Persian, the interviewees' first language, to avoid communication difficulties that might arise from speaking a foreign language. The interviewees were asked the following questions:

1. Are you familiar with the concepts of cohesion and thematic progression?
2. Have you received any instructions regarding these two concepts?
3. What is the importance of cohesion in a text?
4. What is the significance of thematic progression in a text?
5. Can you suggest ways to improve cohesion and thematicity in writing?
6. Do you actually consider and use these elements in your own writing?

Regarding the first question, almost all the respondents were unfamiliar with the concept of thematic progression. The participants stated that they had never received any formal instruction on thematic progression. To continue the interview, all the participants were provided with a concise definition of the Theme concept. Upon receiving this information, all the interviewees acknowledged that the instruction they had previously received was inadequate and that their knowledge of cohesion was limited. Therefore, the answers to the third question were generic, with many participants providing similar responses.

For the fourth question, two participants stated that the Theme of a sentence comprises the main idea of the text. Similarly, one participant believed that the Theme is a key element for achieving coherence and improving comprehension. Another interviewee emphasized that thematic progression is critical for conveying a message effectively, asserting that text formality depends on the organization of the Theme. Additionally, one participant expressed the view that marked choices of Theme make texts appear more sophisticated and native-like.

Regarding the fifth question, several strategies were suggested for improving cohesion and thematicity in writing. One interviewee recommended allocating more time to the writing process. Another indicated that reading formal texts would be an effective way to improve cohesion. Other strategies included acquiring adequate knowledge of grammar, watching the news, and watching movies. Additionally, one participant pointed out that creating a sequence of events in one's mind could be a valuable technique for improving cohesion. Another participant recommended reading books by well-known authors, understanding different writing styles, and memorizing texts to enhance cohesion.

Finally, in response to the last question, all participants stated that they used connectors and cohesive devices in their writing to achieve cohesion. This suggests that while the students may not have been formally taught about thematicity, they were aware of the practical use of cohesive devices to improve the flow of their writing.

### 5. Discussion

This section discusses the study's findings in relation to the three research questions. First, it compares the thematic structures of high-graded and low-graded compositions to identify key differences in thematicity. Second, it explores typical thematization problems that emerged in students' writings. Finally, it examines participants' awareness of the concept of thematicity and its significance in constructing cohesive and coherent texts. These discussions collectively highlight how EFL learners' difficulties with thematic progression and cohesion influence the overall quality of their writing.

#### 5.1. Differences between High-graded and Low-graded Compositions in Terms of Thematicity

The incidence of a constant progression pattern was exceptionally higher in the high-graded compositions. When used effectively, constant progression serves as a powerful tool in persuasive discourse (Hawes, 2015). As such, high-

graded compositions, compared to low-graded writings, tend to be more argumentative and compelling. However, if used inappropriately, constant progression can lead to a plain text filled with unnecessary detail. The following is an example of the inappropriate use of constant progression in low-graded writing (See Excerpt 6):

**Excerpt 6 (Low-Graded Composition)**

*/ First, they are young and fresh, / and they start school from age six or seven, / they are ready to get new information. / So they learn it faster. /*

Jalilifar (2010) found that students used constant progression more frequently than linear progression. Similarly, both the high and low groups employed constant progression more than linear. However, in contrast to the findings of Jalilifar and Khedri (2011) and McCabe (1999), the latter was slightly more frequent in the high group, subtly suggesting that the high-graded compositions were more argumentative in nature (Alonso & McCabe, 1998; Soleymanzadeh & Gholami, 2014). Furthermore, high-graded compositions displayed more frequent and effective thematic bonds, suggesting that the connections between Theme and Rheme were better developed.

A qualitative analysis revealed substantial differences in the T-Units across the two groups. Grammatical errors, inappropriate choice of Themes, and vocabulary and spelling errors were more prevalent in the low-graded compositions. In terms of Textual Themes, Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi (2012c) note that higher frequencies of Textual Themes indicate greater impersonality and factuality in texts. However, upon closer examination, the redundant and incorrect use of Textual Themes in the low-graded compositions compromised their cohesion, making them less effective in conveying clear ideas. Similar findings have been reported by Sun and Ahmad (2024), who noted that non-native students often overuse Textual Themes as a cohesion strategy, leading to diminished thematic variety and textual rigidity.

The most common progression pattern in both the high and low groups was the derived progression pattern. While derived Themes contribute to a more academic impression in texts, they require more background knowledge and greater attentiveness from the reader (Hawes, 2015). Contrary to the findings of this study, Soleymanzadeh and Gholami (2014) found that derived progression was relatively infrequent in the writings of EFL undergraduate students. In the present study, however, the low-graded compositions included a higher percentage of derived progression. The following example demonstrates how derived Themes were used in low-graded compositions. However, the lexical and syntactic errors in the sentences fail to create an academic impression (See Excerpt 7):

**Excerpt 7 (Low-Graded Composition)**

*/ Second, as the children are younger, they are nearer to their sensitive period in which children can acquire a language. /*

Recent research by Pavavijarn (2022) also found that derived progression patterns are crucial in improving textuality and argumentation in higher-level writing. However, they also caution that the improper use of derived Themes can lead to overcomplicated arguments, especially when the thematic progression is not clearly developed.

Additionally, the results of the correlation tests revealed that the rating criteria were not particularly sensitive to the Theme types and progression patterns in the compositions. In the holistic rating scheme, Hyland (2003) defines the cohesive qualities associated with each group of scores in general terms, such as “good overall coherence,” but notes the presence of faulty cohesion within sentences. Given the lack of attention to thematicity and cohesion in this rating scheme, thematic progression has rarely been considered a significant factor in evaluating writing quality. Similarly, the analytic rating scale did not prioritize thematic differences when assigning scores for writing organization.

## **5.2. The Participants’ Thematization Problems**

The results revealed notable differences in the frequency of occurrence of Topical, Textual, Multiple, and Marked Theme types, as well as the combination of Textual-Topical Themes. Regarding thematic patterns, significant differences were observed in the application of derived Themes, peripheral Themes, and the overall frequency of thematic bonds (Pavavijarn, 2022; Sun & Ahmad, 2024).

Although Themes play a significant role in text cohesion, their imprudent use in students’ compositions did not make their writing more cohesive than that of native speakers. The quality of Multiple Themes was negatively affected by the unwise use of Textual Theme types. Excessive reliance on Multiple Themes did not enhance the thematic structure

but instead contributed to a more redundant and disjointed flow of ideas (Latifa & Kurniawan, 2023). In fact, overuse of Multiple Themes can detract from the coherence of an argument by overwhelming the reader with repetitive structures rather than advancing the central thesis (Ebrahimi & Ebrahimi, 2012).

The native speakers, on the other hand, exhibited slightly different preferences regarding the use of modal adjuncts. In addition to the typicality, validation, and usability adjuncts found in the students' texts, the native texts included other modal adjuncts expressing prediction, presumption, evaluation, obviousness, and probability (Alonso & McCabe, 1998). This variety suggests that native speakers tend to share a broader range of attitudes and judgments about the content of their texts with their readers, aligning with the findings of Hawes and Thomas (2012), who emphasize the significance of modality in adding depth and nuance to argumentation.

However, the students' overuse of Multiple Themes, both general and specifically textual, seemed to be an attempt to feign structural sophistication. This injudicious choice of Themes did not enhance the structural complexity or argumentative quality of the students' compositions. In fact, it often led to redundancy and diminished the overall clarity of their arguments (Sun & Ahmad, 2024). Similar observations were made by Latifa and Kurniawan (2023), who argued that excessive thematization without proper thematic progression leads to superficial structures. Similarly, the disproportionate use of peripheral Themes in the students' writings made the analysis of their texts cumbersome. These peripheral Themes often detracted from the central argument, introducing irrelevant details that disrupted the coherence of the compositions. The excessive use of peripheral Themes hindered the ability to follow a clear, cohesive thread throughout the texts, contributing to disorganization in the argumentation (Ebrahimi & Ebrahimi, 2012c).

### 5.3. Students' Awareness of the Importance of the Point of Departure in a Clause

The interviews revealed several key issues regarding students' awareness of thematicity. First, the students were unfamiliar with the concept of Theme in linguistics, and the brief definition provided was insufficient to familiarize them with it. The majority of students lacked understanding of thematic progression and its role in structuring written discourse (Jing, 2015). Their responses were vague, and they could not grasp the significance of the Theme as the point of departure in a clause, which echoes descriptions of the clause-initial position as the element that orients readers to the message that follows in Theme-Rheme organization (Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Studies of EFL and learner English writing similarly show that learners often struggle to manage Theme choices and thematic progression patterns, which can hinder clear information flow (Jalilifar, 2010; Jing, 2015; Wang, 2007). This indicates that thematicity was not formally addressed in their writing instruction, leading to a gap in their ability to use thematic choices strategically as a discourse-organizing resource (Jing, 2015; Wang, 2007).

Second, despite receiving instruction on cohesion, the students' writings still lacked effective cohesion. Although students reported receiving instruction on cohesion, their writing showed inadequate application of it. While students had been taught cohesion in theory, their writings showed inadequate application of it. They primarily focused on surface-level cohesive devices, such as connectors (and, but, so), rather than using thematic progression to structure their arguments more effectively. This pattern aligns with findings that many learners rely on overt cohesive devices when they lack awareness of how Theme and thematic progression contribute to coherence and overall text quality in academic writing (Jalilifar, 2010; North, 2005). These observations that while cohesion may be addressed at the level of explicit ties, the deeper role of Theme in guiding readers through an argument and linking ideas across the text often remains underexplored in pedagogy (Jing, 2015; Wang, 2007).

Third, the participants suggested that an adequate knowledge of cohesive devices, watching movies, and reading were effective ways to improve textuality. The students proposed gaining a better understanding of cohesive devices, reading more, and watching movies as strategies for strengthening their writing. These strategies can indeed increase language exposure and fluency, but do not directly target the management of Theme and thematic progression in academic prose (Jing, 2015). Reading formal texts and engaging with input can expose learners to thematic structures; however, research indicates that exposure alone does not automatically translate into improved thematic control without an explicit metalinguistic focus on Theme and thematic progression (Wang, 2007). Scholars reviewing learner English research argue that learners benefit from targeted instruction in how Themes are selected and developed across clauses and paragraphs if they are to construct coherent, well-organized academic arguments (Jing, 2015; North, 2005).

Overall, the results highlight that EFL learners' awareness of thematicity remains limited. Although some students recognized cohesion as necessary, few understood the deeper relationship between Theme and textual progression, a pattern also reported in studies that link successful writing to more flexible and principled management of Theme and thematic progression chains (North, 2005). This gap underscores the need for explicit instruction on thematicity and its integration into EFL writing pedagogy to enhance students' ability to structure coherent and persuasive academic texts.

## 6. Conclusion

This study investigated the differences between high- and low-graded compositions written by EFL students, focusing on Theme selection and progression patterns. It also aimed to identify difficulties regarding thematic properties by comparing the students' compositions with native texts. Additionally, the study explored students' awareness of thematicity and its role in cohesion and coherence.

The study findings indicate that a purely quantitative analysis of thematic properties in EFL students' writing may provide misleading results. The quantity and quality of thematic properties varied across the high- and low-graded compositions, with the grades reflecting overall writing quality rather than thematic quality alone. This suggests that existing rating criteria might not adequately capture the thematic properties in student compositions. As thematicity is a complex concept, it is recommended that a rating scale be developed to assess thematic properties specifically in EFL students' writing.

While cohesion is taught to EFL university students, the participants in this study still struggled to apply cohesive devices effectively in their writing. This suggests that thematicity is not only about learning cohesive devices but also about understanding their strategic use to improve the logical flow of ideas. Factors such as time constraints and a lack of enthusiasm for writing tasks also affected students' thematic choices and cohesion.

The results underscore the importance of thematic progression in academic writing. To improve students' ability to construct high-quality argumentative texts, teachers should focus on thematicity and its role in shaping coherence. This includes explicitly teaching Theme selection and progression patterns and helping students understand how their choices affect the overall structure of their arguments. Future studies should explore thematic properties across other genres of writing, such as narrative and descriptive genres, and apply Hawes' (2015) model of thematic progression to deepen understanding of thematic patterns. Additionally, investigating participant and non-participant Themes and Marked Theme types in EFL compositions could further enhance our knowledge of thematicity in academic writing.

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