

## **ANALYZING THE STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING PROJECT USING THEMATIC PROGRESSION**

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### **Abstract**

This study analyzed students' academic writing projects using thematic progression analysis. The investigation aimed to identify the thematic progression development patterns commonly used in students' writing projects and to understand how these patterns relate to overall writing quality. Using the qualitative method, this study described the analysis of student's writing projects from the thematic progression point of view. The data of the study were six writing projects, which were analyzed and categorized into some patterns so that the level of coherence could be seen. As the result, the data of writing projects showed that they used three dominant patterns, namely reiteration, multiple, and zig-zag. The second discovery found that all of the academic papers were categorized as less coherent, indicating that the respondent often introduced new themes in the middle of paragraphs, disrupting the flow of ideas and making it difficult for readers to follow the main argument. After conducting the research, researchers suggested that lecturers should strengthen students' ability to develop coherent paragraphs by providing explicit instruction on thematic progression patterns, encouraging students to practice various patterns, and providing feedback on the coherence of their writing.

**Keywords:** *Academic Writing, Project-based Learning, Thematic Progression Analysis*

### **Introduction**

Project-based learning, or PjBL, has been used in education for a very long time. Dewey (1938) proposed the idea of "learning by doing" which is also known as experiential learning or experience-based learning. This learning method places a strong emphasis on the value of firsthand experience in the learning process. PjBL was widely utilized in science teaching when it first emerged. According to Hujjatusaini et al. (2022), PjBL can enhance pre-service biology instructors' HOTS, particularly in the areas of

assessment and creation. Furthermore, the PjBL model can enhance the scientific literacy components of attitude, context, knowledge, and competencies for the Primary Education Postgraduate Program in the sciences, as well as the learning activities of Postgraduate Program students in a natural science subject (Winarni & Purwandari, 2020). PjBL is recognized as a suitable approach for interdisciplinary education (Capraro et al., 2013). In real life, some teachers or lecturers tend to ask the learners to develop their critical thinking skills by exploring the complexity of the subject learned in the classroom. To achieve this, higher educators require the learners to produce meaningful products, one of which is PjBL or specifically writing academic essays. According to Syarifah and Emiliasari (2019), project-based learning can support students in honing their narrative writing skills and creativity. Additionally, the students reported that PjBL taught them teamwork, networking, and collaborative learning. Furthermore, students' writing abilities were enhanced by integrating Instagram, process writing, and project-based learning, particularly when creating hortatory exposition prose (Khulel, 2022).

In line with the previous paragraph, academic writing is a crucial skill for students in higher education, enabling them to effectively communicate complex ideas, develop their critical thinking, (Latifa & Kurniawan, 2023) and write research findings, and have a proper discussion area from several references. Thus, writing is one of the most important tools to help higher education students express the scientific findings of the research. However, mastering this skill requires significant practice and feedback. On the other hand, academic writing requires academic discipline and literacy to apply discipline-specific rhetorical and linguistic conventions to achieve the purpose of students' writing (Zhu, 2004). Previous studies have proven that academic writing is not always related to publication, it is more likely related to how the writers, the higher education students, are willing to improve, practice, and even integrate the writing habit into their lives. The students can start by articulating their beliefs, values, and the purpose of writing the academic aims (Moore & Murray, 2006). Additionally, Richard & Renandya (2002). mentioned four basic stages in writing are required to help the students produce a comprehensive academic text those are planning – editing – drafting – and revising. At this stage, the teacher's role is intentionally needed to guide and give proper feedback, and hopefully, teachers can write along with the students and present their academic writing products for further discussion.

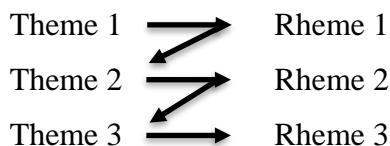
However, assessing the quality of student work produced within a PjBL framework requires robust analytical tools. This study employs thematic progression analysis to evaluate students' academic writing projects, aiming to identify common patterns in thematic development and to understand how these patterns relate to overall writing quality. The thematic progression is crucial as a basic guideline to help higher education students arrange proper writing passages, especially for academic purposes. The understanding of how information is briefly described in clauses is essential for cohesive and coherent discourse. Besides, the role of thematic progression points out where the topics begin and end, along with the paragraph's organization (Hawes, 2015). This is crucial since the written target languages have different grammatical structures compared to the mother tongue. Conveying the proper meaning and written language context needs a basic and strong fundamental grammatical understanding. It is common to find where higher education students are lack of such understanding. Thus, thematic progression is needed as one part of systemic functional linguistics (Syharizal, Fitriani, & Anggraeni, 2018).

The theme-rheme system, a concept rooted in systemic functional linguistics, examines how writers organize information and develop their ideas through the arrangement of themes and rhemes within a text. Insights from thematic progression analysis can guide educators in designing curricula that focus on improving students' writing skills, particularly in structuring their arguments and maintaining coherence (Zamroni, Wuli Fitriati, & Widhiyanto, 2023). This aligns with Halliday's (1985) that the theme-rheme system is an effective analytical model for understanding how language constructs meaning and structure in texts. The theme represents the starting point of the message, while the rheme conveys the new information. It classifies sentences based on their communicative function, by dividing sentences into two parts: theme and rheme. The theme is the part of the sentence that is the focus of the discussion, while the rheme is new information conveyed about the theme. In an educational context, the theme-rheme system was developed to enhance writing skills (Subiyanto, 2019). In addition, the thematic progression serves as an important tool for evaluating EFL writing by enhancing textual cohesion and coherence (Kim Nhung & Huu Hiep, 2023). Downing stated in Latifa & Kurniawan (2023) that the thematic progression can be determined by what occurs in the utterances of theme and rhemes that is related and explained to one another.

The use of the theme-rheme system in writing assessment can provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' thinking processes. By understanding how students choose themes and rhemes, teachers can identify students' thought patterns, communication strategies, and potential difficulties in writing. This information can be used to provide more targeted and effective feedback and help students develop their writing skills optimally.

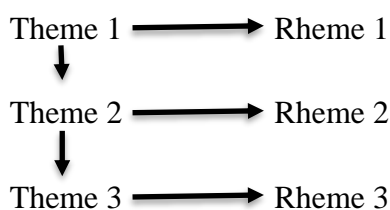
According to the statement of Martin and Rother in Lestari et. al. (2024), there are three types of theme development patterns in the theme-rheme system, namely zig-zag pattern, re-iteration pattern, and multiple theme pattern. Moreover, Eggins (2004) and Danes (1974) name three patterns of thematic progression as simple linear, constant, and derived. The first pattern is a zig-zag pattern or Simple Linear thematic Progression that appears when a theme derives from an element in the rheme of the preceding clause. Eggins has described the aim of this pattern is to complete the cohesion by creating new related information. The theme will mention new information while the rheme will develop other related information. In another way, it has built a sense of cumulative development, which may be lacking in the repeated themes. (Latifa & Kurniawan, 2023).

It is illustrated as follows:



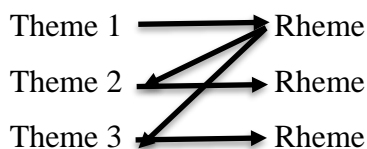
**Figure 1. The Zig-Zag Pattern**

The second pattern is a re-iteration pattern or constant theme progression that appears when the topical theme relates to the one in the next clause, so a reiteration pattern emerges. Martin and Rother in Paltridge in Lestari et. al. (2024) also mentioned that the first theme is taken up and repeated at the beginning of the next clause. It can be seen as follows:



**Figure 2. The Re-iteration Pattern**

The third pattern is a multiple-theme pattern or derived theme progression, which mostly occurs in the longer text and appears when it has one or some elements in a clause, which are then distributed in themes of the following clauses. It was shown as follows:



**Figure 3. The Multiple Theme Pattern**

The background briefly stated that the traditional writing assessment rubrics often focus on surface-level aspects like syntax, vocabulary, and organization, failing to fully capture students' thinking and communication processes in writing. To solve this limitation, previous studies have explored alternatives, leading to the suggestion of using the theme-rheme system—a systemic functional linguistics concept—as a more nuanced analytical model for measuring writing quality for academic purposes. Herdiawan (2017) observed some textual features in undergraduate thesis backgrounds, including textual subject, theme-rheme concordance, empty rheme, and incomplete rheme. Additionally, a study by Suharsono, et al (2024) has proven that the Theme-Rheme structure in academic writing could significantly enhance the quality of academic papers for both educators and students. Zamroni et al., (2023) figured out that the realization and application of various thematic progression have been significantly effective in improving the students' coherence in the background of their undergraduate thesis. The theme-rheme method shows how writers organize material, helping teachers to better evaluate students' cognitive processes and communication abilities.

Despite these findings, there have been few studies on the impact of subject creation on writing quality. Those studies have examined its application in developing evaluation rubrics, emphasizing the need for more study. Eggins (2004) provides a framework for assessing coherence in writing. This parameter outlines four levels of coherence: good, fair, less, and poor—based on the consistency of subject development within paragraphs. Good coherence is achieved when the type of thematic progression remains consistent throughout each paragraph. This means that the same pattern of thematic development (e.g., re-iteration, multiple, zig-zag) is consistently used within each paragraph. Fair coherence occurs when the type of thematic progression is inconsistent or changes from

one type to another within a paragraph; however, less coherence happens when it disrupts the flow of ideas and makes it difficult for the reader to follow the main line. Poor coherence, on the other hand, is described as the complete absence of thematic progression. This means that the ideas in the paragraph are not connected, making it difficult for the reader to understand the overall message.

The application of theme-rheme system is fully understood and applied in writing; higher education learners are guaranteed to receive valuable feedback to produce greater coherence in a written academic context. Thus, employing PjBL as a teaching method is truly beneficial. This method will increase the learner's ability to arrange writing products with great organization and construct logical content, especially to reinforce the notion of thematic development. In addition, higher educators will be able to increase the quality of students' writing skills, and for further application, interactive learning activities in the classroom will be conducted effectively. In this case, since both PjBL and topic development are useful spaces for improving learners' writing skills, future studies should look at how to include these two beneficial ideas into the EFL writing evaluation system. This may lead to more comprehensive rubrics that evaluate students' academic writing not just for linguistic accuracy but also for coherence and depth of argument. Therefore, this research intends to explore the use of thematic progression to analyze the students' writing projects, specifically on (1) what pattern the students used in their writing projects, and (2) how the quality of thematic progression is used by the students.

## **Methods**

This study investigates the application of thematic progression analysis as a framework for assessing student writing. To achieve this goal, a descriptive qualitative research design was adopted. This approach is particularly well-suited to this study because its primary purpose is to analyze, describe, and interpret the textual organization of student writing projects within an Academic Writing course. Following Creswell (2018), a descriptive qualitative design facilitates the discovery of meaningful descriptions of phenomena through textual analysis and interpretation. The focus is on understanding the patterns and nuances of thematic development in student writing, rather than quantifying results.

This study utilized 35 writing projects submitted by fifth-semester students enrolled in the Academic Writing course at the English Education study program, in one of private

university in Kediri, Indonesia. There were two kinds of students' writing project including resume of writing theories and background of study. However, this study only selected the background of study for analysis. Creswell (2018) mentioned that sampling in qualitative research could be done under certain circumstances. Due to time and resource constraints, a purposive sample of six projects was selected for analysis. These projects were chosen to represent a range of student writing abilities and were selected from the highest three score and the lowest three scores to ensure relevance. To find out the students' writing projects with high and low score categories, the researcher looked at the lecturer's assessment documents on the students' writing projects. However, the assessments conducted by the lecturers did not use the thematic progression analysis framework. Then, the research location was selected because the findings are expected to directly benefit students at the university, particularly in developing their ability to write academically cohesive texts that meet the expectations of the university's academic culture.

The instrument used in this study was adapted from thematic development patterns (Martin and Rother in Paltridge in Lestari et al., 2024) and Eggin's parameter of coherence (Eggins, 2004). Furthermore, there are five roles in conducting this research including: (1) locate the clause in the table by focusing on the identified theme and rhyme, (2) determine the theme of each clause and its thematic progression, (3) chooses each clause relating to the various thematic progression kinds in order to analyse the data, (4) determines the realization of topic progression used in the background of the study section in the data-sheet by counting the number and percentages of thematic progression in both texts, and (5) determines the research's outcome by drawing and confirming conclusions. Here, the study closes after completely recognizing the thematic progression and determining the fulfilment of thematic progression used in the background of the study section produced by students.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **The analysis of thematic progression in students' writing project**

The researcher assessed the writing project of the chosen student using thematic development patterns (Danes, 1974; Eggins, 2004) . There were three patterns of the thematic development including reiteration theme-rheme pattern, zig-zag theme-rheme

pattern, and multiple theme-rheme patterns. Table 1 show the results of the analysis of the three patterns in thematic progression among the student’s writing projects.

**Table 1. The summary of thematic progression analysis**

Student’s categories		Reiteration theme-rheme pattern	Zig-zag theme-rheme pattern	Multiple theme-rheme pattern	Total of Clause
1	Low	6	2	16	24
2		10	3	17	30
3		10	4	21	35
<b>Total</b>		<b>26</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>89</b>
4	High	9	4	21	34
5		11	5	22	38
6		10	3	23	36
<b>Total</b>		<b>30</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>108</b>

Table 1 illustrates the trend of thematic progression in the student’s writing project. The illustration is divided into 2 categories, low and high achievers. There were 89 clauses from the low achiever category and 108 clauses from the high achiever category. Both the low and high achiever categories tended to use multiple the-rheme patterns. After that, the reiteration theme-rheme pattern was the second dominant pattern used by them. The last pattern was a zig-zag theme-rheme pattern with only 9 times in the low achiever category and 12 times in the high achiever category.

The multiple theme-rheme patterns commonly occurs in longer text (Zamroni et al., 2023). This pattern appears when it has one or some elements in a clause which are then distributed in themes of the following clauses. The example of this pattern is as follows:

**Table 2. The analysis of multiple theme-rheme pattern**

Clause	Theme	Pattern	Rheme
C10	They must be able to know about the structure of sentences	→	because different structures make different means.
C11	Sometimes they get confused	←	when they want to create sentences grammatically.
C12	For beginners, when they try to make sentences using grammar	→	they still experience errors, lecturers often ask students to write papers to hone their grammar skills, but lecturers still accompany them to provide correct directions in writing English papers.



The rheme message in C10 “different structures make different means” was explained toward some subsequent new theme in C11 “sometimes they get confused” and theme in C12 “they try to make sentences using grammar”. In order to gain unity, the students in this instance attempted to expand the concepts to a variety of themes. It illustrates how the first rheme's concept evolved into other thematic areas.

The reiteration theme-rheme pattern was the second dominant pattern used by the students. This pattern is frequently found in brief descriptive passages and occasionally in narratives that concentrate on a single character's actions (Zamroni et al., 2023). The thematic progression of this pattern is achieved by repeating a specific theme. The example of this pattern is as follows:

**Table 3. The analysis of reiteration theme-rheme pattern**






Clause	Theme	Pattern	Rheme
C11	By mastering critical reading skill for instance		they will be able to weigh public issues and make intelligent choice among political candidates.
C12	Critical reading will also enable them		to detect misleading advertisement calims recognize the best values, and avoid spending their money foolishly.
C13	In short it is an essential ability		because we are living in times of advanced technology and the widespread expansion of information, when each individual needs to be a critical reader to uncover bias, prejudice, faulty, reasoning misinformation, and illogical conclusions presented in text.

The theme message in C11 “By mastering critical reading skill for instance” that was repeated in theme C12 using the clause “Critical reading will also enable them”. Then, it continued to theme C13 using “In short it is an essential ability”. In this case, the student picks up the word “mastering critical reading” in C11 as the topic for C12 and C13 which become constant themes form.

The last pattern was the zig-zag theme-rheme pattern which has the least frequency. The writer or speaker builds on what they introduce in Rheme in the next clause in this

pattern (Zamroni et al., 2023). Additionally, develop a new theme by incorporating previously published information into a new one that serves as a common thread connecting the concepts. The example of this pattern is as follows:

**Table 4. The analysis of zig-zag theme-rheme pattern**

Clause	Theme	Pattern	Rheme
C21	Effectively,		students must be able to evaluate critically what they read.
C22	The fourth semester of English department at Khairun University	 	have learnt the subject of interactive reading in first semester, reading comprehension and critical reading.
C23	It	 	encourages the researcher to make deep research.

The rheme of C21 is “students must be able to evaluate critically what they read” which is restated as a new theme “The fourth semester of the English department at Khairun University” in C22 to complete the information. The zig-zag theme continued in C22 which gave specific information about the students in theme C23 “It” picked up from rheme “have learned the subject of interactive reading in the first semester, reading comprehension and critical reading” in C23. It is indicated that each idea was connected each-other to unify the message.

**The quality of thematic progression used by the students**

The recent study also measures the quality of thematic progression used in students’ writing projects by using Eggin’s parameter of coherence. For the "good" category, it will get a score of 4. While for the "fair" category, it will get a score of 3. The "less" category only gets a score of 2 and the "poor" category, gets a score of 1. Table 5 illustrates the quality of the results.

**Table 5. The quality of thematic progression in student’s writing project**

Text	Score	Level of coherence
1	2	Less
2	2	Less
3	2	Less
4	2	Less
5	2	Less
6	2	Less

The result of the evaluation of thematic progression used in the student’s writing project showed that all of the students, both in the category of low and high achiever,

were classified into less quality. All of the students created a new theme in the middle of a paragraph. Therefore, the student's writing project in the form of the background of the study is less coherent.

### **Conclusion**

The current research revealed two key findings regarding thematic progression in students' writing projects. Firstly, the analysis identified three distinct patterns of thematic progression: reiteration, multiple, and zig-zag. The reiteration pattern, where the same theme is repeated with new information, emerged as the most prevalent. The multiple pattern, characterized by the addition of new information related to the same theme, was the second most common. The zig-zag pattern, which involves a shift between two contrasting themes, was found to be the least frequent. This suggests that instructors should be aware of these patterns and explicitly teach them to students, providing opportunities for practice and feedback. The second finding highlighted a consistent issue in the students' writing projects: a lack of coherence. All of the writing projects analyzed were categorized as having "less coherence," indicating that new themes were often introduced within paragraphs, disrupting the flow of ideas and making it difficult for the reader to follow the main argument. Lecturers should prioritize teaching strategies that emphasize coherence, such as explicit instruction on thematic progression patterns, encouraging students to practice different patterns, and providing detailed feedback on the coherence of their writing. By emphasizing the importance of coherence, lecturers can help students produce more effective and engaging writing that meets the expectations of academic discourse. Furthermore, the research found no significant difference in the coherence levels of writing projects produced by high-achieving and low-achieving students.

Based on these findings, the researchers recommend that lecturers focus on strengthening students' skills in developing coherent paragraphs. This could involve providing explicit instruction on thematic progression patterns, encouraging students to practice different patterns, and offering feedback on the coherence of their writing. By emphasizing the importance of coherence, lecturers can help students produce more effective and engaging writing.

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