

Using Theme-Rheme to Analyze ESL/EFL Learners' Academic Writing

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***Abstract:** To a large number of ESL/EFL learners, academic writing is considered particularly challenging. For different reasons many of them have to spend more time and effort than others in order to have a good command of this skill. Cohesion, as one of the essential elements of text, is an important element they need to improve in English writing. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the so-called Theme-Rheme framework as an effective tool to help ESL/EFL learners enhance their argumentative writing skill. The paper consists of three main parts: the first part gives an overview of the theoretical framework of Theme-Rheme and thematic progression. The second part analyzes an academic text by a Vietnamese ESL student, hence suggests how to apply Thematic Progression in enhancing cohesion of the student's text. Finally, the paper attempts to explain the learners' production of thematic progression within their texts.*

***Keywords:** ESL/EFL, academic writing, Thematic Progression*

Introduction

ESL/EFL learners, particularly those who are studying English for academic purposes, have found writing, among others, full of difficulty; and improving this skill requires hard work, time and effort. A student may find in any textbook writing tips and strategies to help them fix basic errors as well as enhance their writing quality. Most books of that kind would mention more or less the two important concepts of coherence and cohesion in writing in general, and in English writing in particular. As one vital factor to determine whether or not a writing text is “good”, cohesion is interpreted as tight connection between sentences to create paragraphs, and between paragraphs to create a text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Cohesion can be considered as an element of coherence which is what makes the text understood in a certain context (Witte & Faigley, 1981). In ESL/EFL teaching and learning, failure to create cohesive ties in students’ writings may result in their low scores in exams (Bamberg, 1983 as cited in Wang, 2007). Text connectivity in Halliday and Hasan’s taxonomy is not limited to adjacent sentences, but extended to bind larger chunks of discourse throughout the text. While cohesive devices such as coordinating conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs is conventionally introduced in writing books, so far the relationship between Theme and Rheme has caught much attention in the teaching of academic writing (Wang, 2007). Students who are more effective at using Theme-Rheme appear to be more successful in producing academic papers (Witt and Faigley, 1981). Similarly, researchers have found a close relationship between cohesion and academic text quality as the former can be seen as a predictor of the latter (Chiang and Liu, 1999, Chiang, 2003, and Yang & Sun, 2012). The term “academic writing” in this paper refers to the type of writing accepted among the academia. This includes writings in academic genre, academic papers, and academic paper abstracts.

The purpose of this paper is to prove that Theme-Rheme can be used as an effective tool to analyze EFL students’ academic texts, and to explore the framework patterns that later help improve ESL students’ academic writing skill. The paper consists of three main parts: first, it gives an overview of the theoretical framework of Theme-Rheme, particularly discussing the definition of Theme-Rheme, thematic development patterns, and common problems of theme-rheme misused by L2 learners. The second part involves an analysis of a Vietnamese EFL learner’s writing piece, hence to conclude whether s/he has difficulty in producing thematic progression. The last part suggests a potential explanation for the problems found in part two.

What is Theme-Rheme?

Theme and Rheme are actually not new concepts and have been issues of debate since the eighteenth century when Weil (1844) introduced a clausal structure consisting of a point of departure and enunciation (as cited in Wang, 2007). Also known in different terms such as Topic and Comment, or Topic and Dominance, Theme and Rheme come from the terminology of the Prague school of linguists, and are used favorably by Halliday (2004) in his theory of Systemic Functional Grammar.

Theme-Rheme is a structure that carries a “*line of meaning*”, hence assigning a clause a message that it has to bear. The structure, as known as thematic structure, presents the distribution of information within a clause as well as within a sentence. Information is

allocated in two parts of the clause namely “Theme” and “Rheme”. Theme is defined as “the point of departure” of the message (Halliday, 1985, 2004), and frequently serves to present given information which has already been mentioned somewhere in the text, or understood as a common knowledge from the particular context. In other words, Theme provides a setting which typically contains familiar or old information. The setting is followed by the remainder of the message – Rheme. Rheme is the second part of the clause in which Theme is developed, and usually contains unfamiliar information, or new knowledge that a writer assumes his/her readers do not know. New information, or Rheme, is indispensable in order to follow the progression of the argument. Theme and Rheme can be recognized by looking at their distinct positions in a clause: Theme occurs first, followed by Rheme. For example:

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Rheme</i>
<i>The lion</i>	<i>beat the unicorn all around the town</i>
<i>All around the town</i>	<i>the lion beat the unicorn</i>
<i>However, the unicorn</i>	<i>still did not want to bow to the lion</i>
<i>The lion</i>	<i>decided to beat him to death</i>
<i>Would the unicorn</i>	<i>give in to the lion</i>
<i>When the lion got to the battle field</i>	<i>the unicorn was ready for the battle</i>

(Wang, 2007)

Based on the above sample division of Theme-Rheme, two inferences can be made as follows: First, Theme is not necessarily the subject of a sentence, nor is Rheme equated with the predicate. When Theme and Rheme overlap with sentential grammatical components (subject and predicate), like sentences 1 and 4 in the above example, the Theme is called unmarked Theme (Halliday, 1985, 2004). On the other hand, a Theme that does not coincide with the subject of a sentence is called marked Theme. Examples for marked Theme can be “All around the town” in sentence 2 above, which is actually a prepositional phrase. Second, Theme can be “*realized by a nominal group, verbal group, adverbial group, prepositional phrase or a dependent clause*” (Wang, 2007). Whether a Theme is represented in one way or another, its distinct characteristic that Theme appears first in a clause and presents given information is preserved.

As Halliday (1985, 2004) stated in his influential theory, the Theme is the element “*which locates and orients the clause within its context*”. Since the initial place has an enormous importance in a clause, whatever chosen to be the Theme will influence how readers interpret every piece of information that follow. Given or familiar information presented in Theme position acts as a signpost so that the readers know where the messages are from and where they are heading to. Meanwhile, new information is distributed in Rheme position. Such allocation of information in Theme-Rheme structure is a base that contributes to the success of a cohesive writing. Failure to produce the Theme-Rheme

distribution of information can result in unclear and confusing texts that cause difficulties for readers to follow the progression of ideas and/or arguments (Wang, 2007).

In textual analysis and the Theme-Rheme structure, Halliday (1985, 2004) describes a clause as construing “*a quantum of human experience*” of a process, the participants in that process, and/or any circumstantial factors involved. He stresses the Theme of a clause always contain “*one, and only one, of these experiential elements*”, that is process, participant, or circumstance. Such theme is called topical Theme. Topical Theme can be preceded by other elements which are textual and/or interpersonal themes. Textual Theme includes categories of continuative, conjunction, and conjunctive adjunct; whereas interpersonal Theme modal or comment adjunct, vocative, and finite verbal operator. Take the following as an example:

<i>Well</i>	<i>but</i>	<i>then</i>	<i>surely</i>	<i>Jean</i>	<i>wouldn't</i>	<i>the best idea</i>	<i>be to join in (?)</i>
Cont	Stru	Conj	Modal	Voc	Finite	Topical	
Theme							Rheme

(Halliday, 2004)

What is Thematic Progression?

According to Eggins (1994), Thematic Progression refers to the exchanging flow of information between consecutive Theme-Rheme pairings in a text. As mentioned above, the success of a cohesive text depends heavily on whether the arrangement of given and new information is effective or not. The distribution of information needs to follow certain patterns of thematic progression. Eggins (1994) classifies three main patterns of thematic development:

1. Theme reiteration/constant theme pattern:

As the title suggests, the first theme is repeated in the beginning of the next clauses. This type is occasionally called parallel pattern:

John (TH 1) was born in Russia and was deeply fascinated with the circus at a very early age (RH1). **He (TH 2)** loves the antics of the clowns (RH2). **He (TH 5)** receives an apprenticeship in a small circus at the age of six (RH3).

The example abides by the following pattern of thematic progression:

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Theme 1 + Rheme 1;
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Theme 2 (= Theme 1) + Rheme 2;
↓
Theme 3 (= Theme 1 = Theme 2) + Rheme 3;

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Figure 1. Theme Reiteration/Constant Theme/ Parallel Pattern

2. A zigzag/linear theme pattern

The Rheme of one clause is taken up as Theme of the subsequent clause:

Outside my window (TH 1) is a big garden with many kinds of plants (RH1), and **in the middle of the garden (TH 2)** is a flower bed (RH 2). **The flower bed (TH 3)** is full of roses and tulips in the spring (RH3). **Roses and tulips (TH 4)** are my favorite flowers(RH 4).

The example abides by the following pattern of thematic progression:

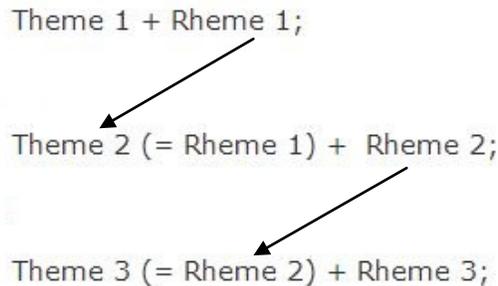


Figure 2. **Zigzag/Linear Theme Pattern**

3. Multiple theme/split rheme pattern

The Rheme of a clause has more than one component, each of which is taken in turn as Theme of the subsequent clauses:

The textual theme (TH 1) is any combination of continuative, structural and conjunctive, in that order(RH 1). **A continuative(TH 2)** is one of a small set of discourse signalers which signal that a new move is beginning (RH 2).**A structural theme (TH 3)**is any of the obligatory thematic elements (RH 3)...

The example abides by the following pattern of thematic progression:

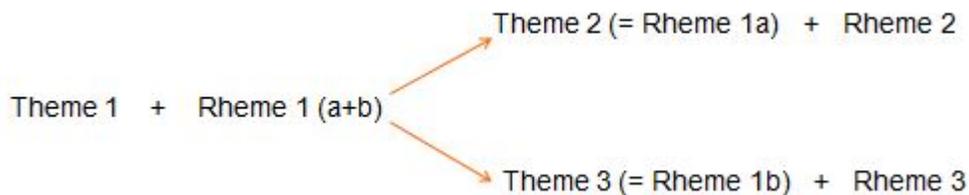


Figure 3. **Multiple Theme/Split Rheme Pattern**

In English academic writing, the linear or zigzag pattern of thematic development is favored and recommended (Fries, 1983, as cited in Wang, 2007). Accordingly, the thematic progression of an English academic text has a high frequency of cross-referential links from the Rheme of the preceding clause to the Theme of the next clause. Such a

notice about the linear progression is discussed in most ESL/EFL writing class; however, the effectiveness of learners' production of Theme-Rheme structure depends on how fast and properly they can understand and apply the theory. At times, they find difficulty in handling the exchange of information between Theme and Rheme. The common problems are divided into three categories (Bloor & Bloor, 1992, as cited in Wang, 2007, and Mellos, 2011):

- problem of brand new Theme (new information is put in Theme position);
- problem of double Rheme (a sentence has two Rhemes, one of which has never been mentioned previously); and
- problem of the empty Rheme (new information cannot be presented in Rheme position).

Take a look at the following examples:

- a. Exams *are the results of cramming*. Most of them *are tests of memories, working under pressure, not ability*. **Teachers** (1) *would teach students exam techniques* (2). The heavy pressure of exams and anxiety *has increased number of suicide dropouts*.

In example (a), the problem of brand new theme is shown in (1) and empty rheme in (2). "Teachers" turns up suddenly and has not been mentioned before, thus it is totally new information. "Exam techniques" is seen as empty because it does not contain useful information as the readers inquire what techniques to understand.

- b. The expanding number of out of school youths *had a big impact on the economy and the parents are faced with unemployment* (3).

Example (b) illustrates the problem of double rheme when two rhemes can be found "a big impact on the economy" and "the parents are faced with unemployment". One rheme has been mentioned previously while the other has not.

An analysis of a Vietnamese student's writing

The analyzed text was written by Do, a PhD student of Civil Engineering in Chulalongkorn University. During his study, Do has to produce numerous papers in academic style. This sample writing is taken from his paper abstract to an academic paper in his field (see Appendix A). Thematic progression analysis helps to systematically identify cohesive problems in Do's writing.

Based on the analysis (see Diagram 1), it can be seen that Do's text lacks systematic thematic progression, resulting in a stream of disconnected ideas and without proper development of ideas. As can be seen, there are only four instances of cross-referential thematic development in his text: TH6 = RH3, TH5 = RH4, TH7 = RH4, TH9 = RH8. At these points, new information is produced in Rheme position, and then becomes Theme of the subsequent clause(s).

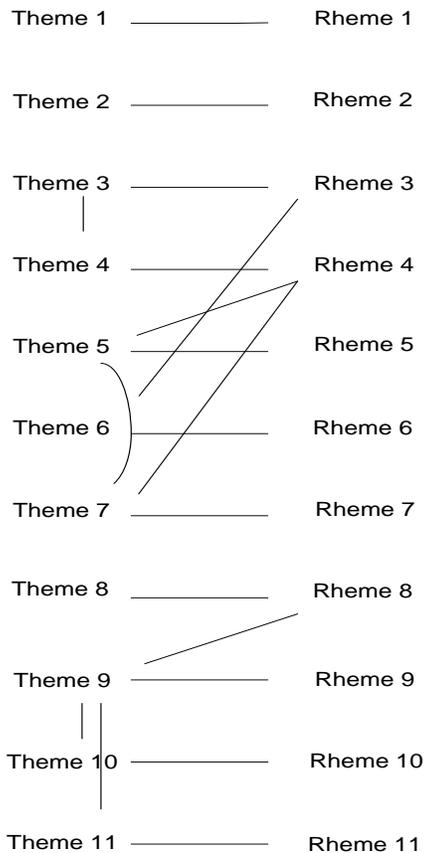


Diagram 1. **Thematic Progression Analysis of Original Text by Student Do**

One of the three common problems discussed above can be found in Do's writing work, namely "brand new Theme" in clauses 2, 3, and 8, and "empty Rheme" in clause 1. It is these problematic points that lead to the fraction in the overall meaning of the text as the writer at times go from one idea to another idea with little or no relevance. Take the knot between clause 1 and 2 as an example. Although RH1 succeeds in producing new information about infrastructure challenges, it does not explain what specific challenges. Therefore, when theme 2 appears as capital investment, it takes longer for the readers to figure out the author is trying to further explain about the difficulty. Thus, clause 2 (or the second sentence) begins with "new information" about the challenges with puzzlement to the readers. Other knots can be analyzed similarly.

It must be noted that even though cohesive ties and devices such as repetition (i.e. the government, the form, public and private sector), and conjunctions (i.e. thus, in spite of, and as a result) were widely used, the lack of thematic development together with Theme-Rheme misuse problems in the text make it less cohesive, and hence less clear.

After all, this thematic progression analysis was brought to discussion with student Do. He was explained about the problems found in his abstract, and thus learned about the concepts of theme/rheme and how to produce thematic progression in academic writing. Three days later, he produced a revised version of this abstract which can be seen as an improvement (see Appendix B).

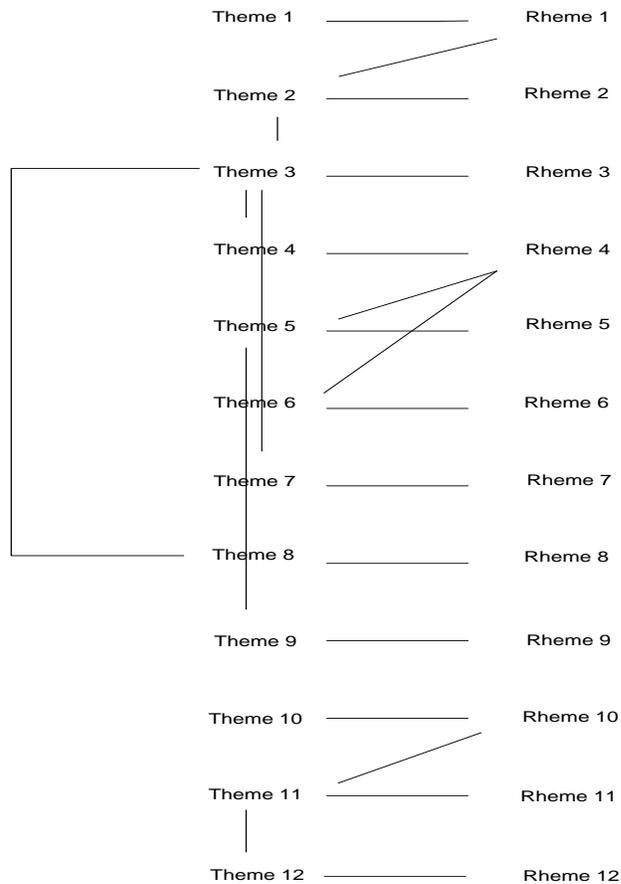


Diagram 2. Thematic progression analysis of revised text by student Do

In this revised version (see Diagram 2), it is obvious that the writer produce more thematic pattern, mostly parallel framework. The act of paralleling Themes significantly provides the known paragraph with more cohesion as, again, reference and repetition are majorly used as effective cohesive tool to link the clauses and ideas. Linear pattern takes place three times in the text, a slight improvement compared to only twice in the previous version. Meanwhile circular pattern can still be found in clauses 5, 6, and 9, which confirms a certain impact of L1 to the author's writing style. Although linear pattern is not the major one in this text, the rising use of repeated themes (theme-reiteration/parallel pattern) and multiple theme (split theme pattern or circular pattern) indicates an improvement in using cohesive devices, particularly reference and lexical reiteration, in linking the ideas within the whole text.

Within a short time of practicing and revising, progress has been made and observed by the piloted student. Such an improvement within a short-term input of the theory implies a possibility of more remarkable enhancement given that the learner has more time to practice the theory of Theme-Rheme to create cohesion in writings.

Possible Explanation for Learners' Selection of TP Pattern in ESL/EFL Writing

Over the years, different comparative studies on Vietnamese and English discourse have been carried out in an attempt to explain Vietnamese ESL learners' problems in academic writing, many of which have linked the challenges to the learners' L1 background. Kaplan (1966, 1987, 1988, 2001, 2005, as cited in Vu, 2011) assumed that writers from different backgrounds of language and culture may have different way of structuring and developing their compositions. He also placed Vietnamese in his Oriental language group whose rhetorical organization is likely to follow a circular model. Bar-lev (1986, as cited in Vu, 2011), from a different point of view, assumed that Vietnamese would be better described as having a parallel pattern (or theme reiteration pattern). However, both of them share similarities when concluding that Vietnamese EFL learners possess an indirect way of expressing their ideas in written language. Vu (2011), assuming that Vietnamese learners use a translation method (from Vietnamese to English) when composing English academic essays, is prone to agree with Bar-lev since his analysis was based on L1 data whereas Kaplan worked on L2 data.

In my own viewpoint, both models can be used to explain the reasons why Do's text was not a good one. With Kaplan's model, the Oriental circular trajectory gives an explanation that Vietnamese students apply such an organization pattern to their English essay; therefore, it is likely to be difficult to produce zigzag pattern of the discussed Theme-Rheme progression. Similarly, the model of Vietnamese L1 model by Bar-lev leaves evidence in the way Do structured his text, with the four occurrences of constant theme pattern (Clause 3-4, 5-7, 9-10 and 9-11) as well as repetition over the text.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to investigate the effectiveness of theme-rheme framework in analyzing ESL/EFL learners writing in order to help them see their writing problems concerning cohesion within texts and textual ideas. Furthermore, it aims to raise the learners' awareness of the essential concepts of Theme and Rheme as well as Thematic Progression that are useful for them to master a good command of English writing skill. It is recommended that learners of English have to understand the concepts in-depth and practice using Theme-Rheme structure to analyze texts, and organize and develop their own compositions. In terms of explaining the learners' problems in fully acquiring English thematic progression, assumptions of possible answer can be given, however, further studies need implementing to give a more in-depth explanation to this mystifying question.

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Appendix A. Original text by student Do

Vietnam (TH1) has encountered various infrastructure challenges in recent decades resulting from the increasing demand for infrastructure and unable to meet all of the financing needs for required infrastructure investment (RH1). **Capital investment (TH2)** is so huge that the state budget cannot "burden" (RH2). **Thus, the government (TH3)** has called for the sharing of the different economic sectors, with particular emphasis in the private sector and abroad (RH3) **The government (TH4)** has been cooperating with private sectors in the new form of public private partnership (PPP) to attract private sectors to invest further (RH4). **This form (TH5)** has been adopted in the construction industries worldwide (RH5) **because the private sector (TH6)** can address capital shortages, their work experiences and resources with the State that understand cultural, political, legal factors and can have supporting incentives (RH6). **In spite of its numerous merits, it (TH7)** still has a lot of problems because of the immature and instability of PPP in Vietnam (RH7). **The objectives of this paper (TH8)** are to identify, assess critical risk factors affecting the performance of PPP in Vietnam (RH8). **Throughout the findings from pilot interview and questionnaire surveys, list of risk factors (TH9)** are first listed (RH9). **The risks (TH10)** were then ranked by considering probability and impact of such risks using PI method (RH10). **As a preliminary results, the critical risk factors groups (TH11)** were concluded, namely, political issues, legal matters, procurement problems, construction and operation troubles, and financial aspects (RH11).

Appendix B. Revised text by student Do

The increasing demand for infrastructure (TH1), not yet being satisfied due to an ineffectiveness in financing for investment in the field, has resulted in various challenges for Vietnam in recent decades (RH1). **As one of the major difficulties, the required sum (TH2)** is so huge that the state budget alone cannot burden (RH2). **In order to encounter such a challenge, the government (TH3)** has called for the sharing of the different economic sectors, with particular emphasis in the private and overseas sectors (RH3). **Accordingly, the government (TH4)** has been cooperating with private sectors in the new form of public private partnership (PPP) (RH4). **This form (TH5)** has been adopted in the construction industries worldwide (RH5) **because the private sector with their work experience and other resources (TH6)** can address capital shortages (RH6), **while the State (TH7)** can assist them with cultural, political, legal factors (RH7). **At the same time, the State (TH8)** can support them with other incentives (RH8). **In spite of its numerous merits, PPP (TH9)** still has a lot of problems because of its immaturity and

instability in Vietnam (RH9). **The objectives of this paper (TH10)** are to identify, assess critical risk factors affecting the performance of PPP in Vietnam (RH10). **Throughout the findings from pilot interview and questionnaire surveys, such risk factors (TH11)** are first listed, and then ranked by considering their probability and impact using PI method (RH11). **As a preliminary result, the critical risk factor groups (TH12)** are concluded, namely political, legal, procurement, construction and operation, and financial issues (RH12).