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## **A Comparative Study of Thematicity in the Argumentative Writing of University EFL Students and the Introduction Section of Research Articles**

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### **Abstract**

The present study aimed to find out thematic organization and progression in the argumentative writing of Iranian learners of English, representing two levels of language proficiency, and the introduction section of published Research articles (RAs) of Applied Linguistics. For this aim, 60 articles were downloaded from three journals and also 92 MA and BA students majoring in English Language Teaching and English Literature were selected. Then, three topics were used for gathering data from them. Of the written argumentative compositions, only 67 were chosen for the next phase of the study. These compositions together with the RAs were analyzed based on Halliday's (1985) model of thematic structure and the revised model of Danes' (1974) thematic progression patterns. The results of Chi-square suggested that there was a significant difference in the thematic structure of the essays written by MA students and the introduction section of RAs. It was concluded that thematicity can be effectively applied in classrooms to help students in writing. Students will know where they are losing their effectiveness in their arguments due to problems with either thematic progression or thematic selection, or both. The findings of this study can be effectively applied in teaching writing skills.

*Keywords:* thematicity, thematic organization, argumentative writing, introduction, research articles

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An important aspect of writing is unity which is not a problem in simple sentences, but it becomes serious when sentences are combined. Focusing on cohesion can be useful in helping students with their writing (Ostrom & Cook, 1993). "It can help students to learn how to hook their sentences together in a way that enables them to create a text with both unity of texture and unity of structure" (Jalilifar, 2010a, p. 32). Thornbury (1999) argues that students need to move from sentence-oriented to text-oriented teaching to help them obtain communicative goals. This transition requires awareness of the organizational structure of text of which theme-rheme pattern is just one example (Thornbury, 1999).

Construction of the message in the clause, as an element for organization in a whole text, is a serious problem which must be solved in order to have a successful communication. Thus, a clause is organized as a message by having a special status assigned to one part of it (Jalilifar, 2010b). Halliday (1994) describes this part as "theme which serves as the point of departure of the message and as what is placed in initial position within the clause" (p. 37). The remainder of the message is called the rheme (Halliday, 1994). Starting a sentence with theme is especially useful in helping students to communicate their ideas successfully.

The concept of thematic progression (TP) was first proposed by Danes (1974, p. 114 as cited in Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo, 1998, p.17) who defined it as "the choice and ordering of utterance themes, their mutual concentration and hierarchy, as well as their relationship to the hyper themes of superior text units (such as paragraph, chapter, ...) to the whole of text, and to the situation".

Many researchers and scholars consider thematic organization as an essential element in creating a cohesive text (Brown & Yule, 1983; Fries, 1990; Jianghong, Hairong & Xiangfeng, 2005; Wang, 2007). Fries (1990) points out that the choice of information to place as theme is significant. Specifically, the thematic choice serves an orienting function for the clause complex, and through this thematic choice, writers can

manipulate the attention of their readers. Since Swales' pioneering work (1990) on the analysis of the moves within the introduction section of RAs, many other researchers have studied the introduction, the method, the result or the discussion sections of this genre mainly in the social and natural sciences.

In recent years, thematic organization and progression have been widely studied and proved to be a very important cohesive enterprise at the level of discourse. In relation to non-native learners of English, Belmonte and McCabe (1998) studied the thematic organization with the aim of helping teachers to evaluate students' writings. Fontain and Kodratoff (2003) studied thematic progression and textual structure of English research articles written by English scientists and French scientists who write their research papers in English. The results showed that the authors in the francophone corpus have less dexterity in dealing with the textual construction from two points of view: thematic progression and concept texture. Likewise, Jalilifar (2010a) studied thematization in EFL student's compositions, showing that students' level of language proficiency monitors the use of linear and split thematic progression chains.

In relation to research articles, Rafiei and Modirghamene (2012) investigated thematicity in two rhetorical sections, that is, method and results sections of three categories of MA students' theses. The overall results of this study added another block to the building made by previous researchers such as Jalilifar (2010b) and McCabe (1999) in which they presented evidence confirming the fact that texts of the same genre might have similar contextual configurations. This means that texts belonging to the same genre appear with similar linguistic choices related to the field, mode, and tenor of the text (Halliday, 1985, 1994; McCabe, 1999). Zhou (2006) investigated the interpersonal metafunction and theme in English and Chinese advertisement texts. The results showed that advertisement texts did not engender similarities in interpersonal metafunction across two languages. Also, it was interesting to find that English and Chinese corpora showed great similarity in the amount of

modality as theme except for the fine difference in finite modal operators.

In another study, Jalilifar (2010b) investigated different thematic types and thematic progression patterns used in different rhetorical sections of international and local journals. The results confirmed the need for informing local writers of English of the crucial role of thematic organization in the writing of ELT articles. Despite the above studies, the study of thematic structure in the argumentative writing of Iranian learners of English and the introduction section of published RAs in Applied Linguistics has been a neglected area.

One of the difficulties that Persian learners of English may have in their writing is how to achieve cohesion. One reason behind this difficulty may be thematic fitness between ideas, sentences and details in the text. The existing literature fails to provide an account of thematic configuration of a professional writer's argumentative text, nor does it provide directions regarding the thematic structuring of a novice writer's argumentative text. Given there are few, if any, studies linking novice writing to professional argumentative writing, the present study aims to find out thematic organization in the argumentative texts written by Iranian learners of English and the introduction section of RAs published in scholarly journals and to identify possible sources of non-professionalism in students' writing. It also aims to find out if thematic structuring/complexity associates with language proficiency.

### Research Questions

This study aimed to reflect on the following questions:

1. What types of theme are used in the argumentative texts written by Iranian MA and BA learners of English?
2. What types of theme are used in the introduction section of published RAs in Applied Linguistics?
3. What types of thematic progression are used in the argumentative texts written by Iranian MA and BA learners of English?

4. What types of thematic progression are used in the introduction section of RAs?
5. Are there any differences between the argumentative texts written by Iranian MA and BA learners of English, and the introduction section of RAs in terms of theme/rheme organization and thematic progression?

## Method

### Participants

The participants of this study were two intact groups of 86 male and female adult English learners, one at BA level and one at MA level. The BA group included 33 students selected from those studying English Literature at Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz. Only 28 students returned their essays and so their essays were considered for analysis. The second group included 17 students (of whom only 10 students returned their papers to the researchers for subsequent analysis) chosen from those studying at MA level majoring in English Language Teaching at Chamran University of Ahvaz and also 36 MA students majoring in the same field from the Islamic Azad University of Ahvaz. Among them, only 29 compositions were acceptable and were used for the purpose of this study.

**Theoretical framework.** In this study, three frameworks are used to analyze texts: an argumentative framework proposed by Ramage, Bean and Johnson (2009), a thematic organization model and a thematic progression model suggested by Halliday (1994) and Danes, 1974 as cited in Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo (1998). The first model is a framework for argumentative texts which is used to choose RA introductions with argumentative organization. The frame of an argument is a claim supported by reasons (Ramage, Bean & Johnson, 2009). The second will be Halliday's model of thematic organization. According to Halliday (1994), theme is the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that with which the clause is concerned. The remainder of the message – the part in which theme is developed – is called rheme. Halliday (1994) classifies themes into textual (the

organization of the text as a whole), interpersonal (the relationship between speakers and the hearers), and ideational (construing experiences), marked theme (a theme which is not the subject), unmarked theme (a theme which is the subject), simple and multiple themes (which have one or more than one constituent in the structure of a clause).

The third model is the revised model of Danes' (1974, as cited in McCabe, 1999) TP patterns, which is utilized for analysis of the patterns deployed in texts. Thematic progression refers to the way in which the theme of a clause may pick up or repeat a meaning from a preceding theme and rheme (Matthiessen & Halliday, 1997). McCabe (1999) modified the thematic progression scheme proposed by Danes and developed *linear TP* (when the subject matter in the rheme of one clause is taken up in the theme of the following clause), *constant TP* (the first theme is picked up and repeated in the next clause), *split TP* (the theme of the first clause is split into two or more ideas, and these ideas are developed in the themes of subsequent clauses) , and *split rheme progression* (the rheme of the first clause is split into two items, each in turn being taken as a theme element in subsequent clauses).

**Topic.** All students were required to write a composition based on the following topic. This topic was selected from Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS (Jakeman & McDowell, 2009) which are usually argumentative and require answers written in response to the following topic:

*1. There are many different types of music in the world today. Why do we need music? Is the traditional music of a country more important than the International music that is heard everywhere nowadays?*

### **Procedure**

This study required two major stages. In the first stage, a list of ISI journals was prepared. Then, five professors of Applied Linguistics were asked to select five important journals that they preferred to publish their articles in. Among them, the three most common ones, *TESOL Quarterly*, *Linguistics and Education*, and *Language Testing*, \_ were

selected and their most recent issue(s), based on their accessibility, were chosen as a source to download articles. Afterward, around 60 RAs published in selected journals were downloaded, and the introduction sections were carefully read to identify the elements characteristics of an argumentative text. In this analysis, only those introductions with conventional argumentative organization were selected and their thematic structures were examined carefully. From all 60 articles, 16 articles were discarded from this analysis, because they did not represent argumentative structure. The table below illustrates the patterns they represent.

Table 1  
*Types of Articles*

Types of articles				
Number	Narrative	Descriptive	Argumentative	Expository
60	0	16	44	0

In the second stage, participants were asked to write an argumentative composition for the topic that was assigned to them. They were asked to write a composition around 250 words for that topic. Next, compositions were initially read very carefully in order to determine the overall structure adopted by the students. In the next section, the results of the analysis of the macrostructure or generic structure of the compositions will be presented in detail.

In this stage, thematicity was checked only in compositions with argumentative structures. It is important to note that T-unit was adopted as the unit of analysis because this was recognized as the optimal unit for thematic progression in textual analysis (McCabe, 1999).

Meanwhile, the reliability of the data analysis was checked. At first, a portion of the data (about 10%) was analyzed, and again the same portion was double checked by an experienced researcher. Then, inter-rater reliability was checked and Kappa coefficient was run to compute the reliability index. After the assurance of the reliability of the data

analysis ( $K = 0.86$ ), the rest of the data was analyzed. Then, the frequencies of the different types of theme as well as patterns of thematic progression, with considerations of the functional meaning, were calculated. With the data being non-parametric and nominal, two Chi-square tests were run to compare the groups and determine possible differences in their thematic structure. In order to check the significance of the differences between the thematic structure of the introduction section of RAs and students' language proficiency level and the thematic structure of their texts (those with high language proficiency), a Chi-square test was run. Another Chi-square was administered to determine the significance of the difference in the deployment of theme types and thematic progression patterns used by the participants with low and high language proficiencies.

## Results

### Unit of Analysis

One of the primary considerations in the analysis of texts is the unit of analysis for which themes will be specified. Fries (1995), terms it as "independent conjoinable clause complex" (p. 319). The present study considered T-unit as the unit of analysis. Coulthard (1994) believes that "the theme of the T-unit provides a framework within which the rheme of the T-unit can be interpreted" (p. 230). Therefore, this is the unit analyzed consistently through the present study. To begin the analysis, the number of words and T-units in the articles and compositions were calculated, and the result is presented below.

Table 2

#### *Word Count and T-units in Journals*

Journals	TESOL	Language Testing	Linguistics & Education	Total
Word count	36,426	15,362	16,976	68,764
T-unit	3,839	1,227	1,281	6,347



Table 3

*Word Counts and T-units in Students' Essays*

Essays	BA	MA	Total
Word count	8,010	10,753	18,763
T-unit	706	1,005	1,711

**Theme Types in RAs and Compositions**

The total frequency and the percentage of different types of themes were somewhat similar across BA compositions and MA compositions, but comparing MA essays and the introduction section of RAs, the result was significantly different. Table 4 illustrates this point. Comparing textual and interpersonal themes in MA essays and RAs' introduction showed that the number of textual themes was by far greater than the number of interpersonal themes in students' essays and RAs. Results obtained from RAs seem to be compatible with Ghadessy (1999), McCabe (1999), North (2005), and Whittaker's (1995) findings. Whittaker (1995) believes that this finding is not surprising since it is expected that scientific writing to be impersonal and objective; moreover, the purpose of its writer is to persuade reader to read it (p. 109). It is also clear from the table below that the total frequency of textual themes in RA introductions is greater than that in MA essays. This confirmed the greater tendency of RA authors to apply textual theme resulting in the argumentative, impersonal, and factual tone of texts in the introduction section of RAs than in MA essays (McCabe, 1999). Whittaker (1995) also argues that textual themes help the reader follow the organization of the argument of the text (p. 113), hence, their greater inclusion. Comparing BA and MA students' essays also revealed this point that students also relied on textual themes, a result which was earlier suggested in Ghadessy (1999), North (2005), Coffin and Hewings (2005), and McCabe's (1999) findings. This might be the characteristic of composition writing as distinct from other text types. Comparatively speaking, MA students used more textual themes which might have resulted in more coherence than BA essays.

Table 4  
*Frequency and Percentage of Themes in BA Essays, MA Essays, and RAs*

Hallidayan's Model of Thematic Organization	BA Compositions (%)	MA Compositions (%)	Total No. of BA & MA (%)	Research Articles (%)
Topical	782 (22.56)	891 (22.31)	1673 (22.43)	3297 (21.51)
Textual	457 (13.18)	530 (13.27)	987 (13.23)	2469 (16.11)
Interpersonal	99 (2.85)	124 (3.10)	223 (2.99)	458 (2.98)
Marked	353 (10.18)	369 (9.24)	722 (9.68)	1537 (10.03)
Unmarked	460 (13.27)	542 (13.57)	1002 (13.43)	1547 (10.09)
Simple	861 (24.84)	960 (24.04)	18.21 (24.42)	2413 (15.74)
Multiple	453 (13.07)	576 (14.42)	1029 (13.79)	3602 (23.50)

In the analysis of topical themes of the groups in terms of marked and unmarked, it was found that the majority of topical themes were unmarked meaning that they occupied both the thematic and subject positions. Results of BA and MA compositions showed that the number of unmarked themes outran marked themes in both groups which indicated that topical themes occupied both thematic and subject positions. This may also be indicative of simple structure of students' writings with different levels of language proficiency. It also points to the fact that in compositions, students pay more attention to the subject of the sentence. This result, however, is in contrast to the findings of Coffin and Hewings (2005) and North (2005). They found more marked themes in the students' writings (18.82% and 17.08% respectively). This differed from the findings of the present study, where only about 10.18% of BA essays and 9.24% of MA essays made use of marked themes. However,

this comparison indicates that differences can be made in terms of frequencies, but as shown in Table 4, they are not significant and cannot make any distinction between BA and MA students with regard to language proficiency, meaning that students at different levels of BA and MA possess relatively similar language proficiencies. Comparing MA essays and RA introductions in this regard revealed that MA students used more topical themes (22.31%) than RA authors (21.51%). This means that MA essays utilized simpler structures than RA introductions. RA findings in this study are similar to Ghadessy (1999), Gomez (1994), McCabe (1999), North (2005), and Whittaker's (1995) findings in terms of applying topical themes.

Considering simple/multiple themes in BA and MA students' writings, the findings of the present study showed that simple theme was predominantly used by both groups of students. This was compatible with Coffin and Hewings (2005) findings. Multiple themes allow writers to encode coherence markers whereas their low proportion in students' writings might reduce continuity, and their failure to persuade the reader to read the text. In case of differences, multiple themes in MA essays were a bit more than their corresponding themes in BA essays. Regarding simple/multiple themes in MA essays and RA introductions, the results revealed a significant difference. Multiple themes were predominantly used by RA writers, while simple themes prevailed in MA essays. Findings of RAs in the present study were in contrast to the findings obtained by Gomez (1994) and Ghadessy's (1999) studies. The frequency of multiple themes was 453 (13.07 %), 576 (14.42 %), and 3602 (23.50 %) in BA essays, MA essays, and RAs respectively. In addition, analysis of this type of theme showed that multiple themes were outstandingly unmarked in RAs (around 73%), close to Gomez's (1994) study in which 99% of multiple theme were unmarked. However, analysis of MA students' essays showed that only 18.05% of multiple themes were unmarked and the majority of simple themes were unmarked. But, comparing BA and MA essays revealed significantly similar results and justification in this case cannot make a clear

difference between BA and MA groups. In the following sections, the different types of theme are explained separately. The data presented in the following table shows the total frequency and percentage of different types of theme in BA compositions, MA compositions, and RA introductions.

**Textual theme.** The total number of textual themes was somewhat identical in both students' essays at BA and MA levels, but it was a bit more in the introduction section of RAs (16.11%). This seems to be almost in line with Whittaker's (1995) findings who found out 15% textual themes in the analysis of linguistics and economics articles. But this is less than that found in McCabe's (1999) results. In the analysis of history texts, she found 23.40% textual theme in English and 23.91% in Spanish texts. The following table demonstrates the results.

Table 5

*Frequency and Percentage of Textual Themes in RAs, MA, and BA Essays*

	RAs	MA essays	BA essays
Total (%)	2469 (16.11)	530 (13.27)	457(13.18)

**Interpersonal theme.** The three groups were analyzed in terms of the frequency of interpersonal themes. A relative similarity was found in the use of interpersonal theme across the three groups. The frequency of interpersonal themes was 99 (2.85%), 124 (3.10%), and 458 (2.98%) in BA essays, MA essays, and RAs respectively. This finding was compatible with Gomez (1994) and Martinez's (2003) findings in which interpersonal theme occurred in low proportion attributing this low occurrence to the formality of the register. Table 6 manifests the results pertaining to the comparison of three groups of themes.

Table 6

*Frequency and Percentage of Interpersonal Themes in RAs, MA, and BA Essays*

	RAs	MA essays	BA essays
Total (%)	458 (2.98)	124 (3.10)	99(2.58)

As the above table shows, interpersonal themes were more frequent in MA students' essays than in BA students' essays and RAs. Compared to textual theme, this type of theme was underestimated in students' writings suggesting the factual tone of their writings. Coffin and Hewings (2005) also found 4.25% interpersonal themes in the students' writings which is very close to the results obtained from MA students' essays. The reason could be that where the interpersonal stance is signaled by pronouns such as "I" and "we" in theme position they are categorized as topical not interpersonal themes. North (2005) found 9.75% interpersonal theme in students' essays. The difference between the results of the present study and North's findings could suggest a low degree of personality in the students' writings.

**Marked and unmarked themes.** Acknowledging the use of a proportionate number of marked and unmarked themes in compositions, we also witness the greater tendency for unmarked themes in MA students' essays than in BA students' essays. This balance is disrupted in relation to RAs in which expert writers opt for a fairly equal number of marked and unmarked themes. Considering BA and MA groups, as shown in the table below, it was noticed that the use of unmarked themes in both groups was identical and was more than marked themes. This result was in contrast with North's (2005) and Coffin and Hewings' (2005) findings. Coffin and Hewings found 18.82% marked themes in students' writings (p. 158). North (2005), in her study of thematicity in essay writing, found that 17.08% of the topical themes was marked (p. 11). The obtained result indicates that most of the topical themes occupy both thematic and subject positions. Theme/subject compliance may also be indicative of structural simplicity of students' writings with different

levels of language proficiency. The low portion of the marked themes in students' writings show that students' writing is less argumentative in nature. Considering MA essays and RA introductions, as mentioned before, RA writers used a fairly equal number of marked and unmarked themes. In spite of all that, a slightly minor difference exists in terms of frequency. Unmarked themes were used slightly more than marked themes in RAs (10 cases). This finding, however, is in contrast with Whittaker's (1995) and Martinez's (2003) results where more marked themes were reported. This means that most of topical themes in RA introductions in Applied Linguistics fill both theme and subject positions.

Table 7

*Frequency and Percentage of Marked and Unmarked Themes in Three Groups*

Hallidayan's Model of Thematic Organization	BA Compositions	MA Compositions	Total No. of BA & MA	Research Articles
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Marked	353 (10.18)	369 (9.24)	722 (9.68)	1537 (10.03)
Unmarked	460 (13.27)	542 (13.57)	1002 (13.43)	1547 (10.09)

**Simple and multiple themes.** The total frequency of simple themes was 861 (24.84%) and 960 (24.04%) in BA and MA groups in order. It was revealed that the unmarked simple themes were dominant in BA and MA compositions which may refer to the simple structure of the essays written by students. Comparing MA essays and RAs introduction in terms of simple/multiple theme, as shown in the table below, it seems that multiple themes prevailed in RAs while simple themes were dominant in MA students' essays. Results of RAs are in contrast with Martinez' (2003) findings. In the analysis of method and discussion sections of biology articles, she found high percentage of unmarked

simple themes in both sections. She argues that unmarked simple themes have an important function, giving continuity to the texts. As clear in the table below, multiple theme by (23.50%) was predominantly used in RAs in comparison with simple themes which may refer to the more complex structure of the texts written by RA expert writers.

Table 8

*Frequency and Percentage of Simple and Multiple Themes in Three Groups*

Hallidayan's Model of Thematic Organization	BA Compositions (%)	MA Compositions (%)	Total No. of BA & MA (%)	Research Articles (%)
Simple	861 (24.84)	960 (24.04)	1821 (24.42)	2413 (15.74)
Multiple	453 (13.07)	576 (14.42)	1029 (13.79)	3602 (23.50)

The most frequent type of multiple theme was *textual ^ unmarked* theme in RAs. This is similar to Gomez's (1994) finding. In analyzing BBC news, she found that the pattern *textual ^ unmarked* themes which presented 68% of all multiples, were the most common of all. This indicates the formal and factual tone of RA introduction in Applied Linguistics. The frequency of multiple themes containing interpersonal themes was low. This seems to confirm Martinez's (2003) study in which she found that the percentage of multiple themes was four times as high as that in the method section. She believed that this thematic choice manifest would the author's rhetorical effort to persuade reader.

**Chi-square statistics in different theme types.** In this study, *\_Chi-square tests\_* were carried out to check the significance of the differences between the thematic structure of the introduction section of RAs and students' language proficiency level (those with high language proficiency). As it is shown in the above table and since the obtained value of significance was less than 0.05, it was concluded that the differences were meaningful. In other words, there were significant

differences between the thematic structure of the compositions written by students with high language proficiency (MA students) and the introduction section of RAs written by expert writers.

Table 9

*Chi-Square Tests (MA & RAs)*

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	300.582 <sup>a</sup>	6	.000
Likelihood Ratio	301.793	6	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	.951	1	.329
N of Valid Cases	19315		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 120.29.

Accordingly, another Chi-square was run between BA and MA groups to determine whether there were significant differences in the use of theme types by the participants of BA and MA levels or not. As illustrated in the following table and since the obtained value of significance was greater than 0.05, it was concluded that the differences were not statistically meaningful. In other words, there were no significant differences between the BA and MA compositions in terms of different types of themes.



Table 10

*Chi-Square Tests (BA & MA)*

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.236 <sup>a</sup>	6	.514
Likelihood Ratio	5.240	6	.513
Linear-by-Linear Association	.359	1	.549
N of Valid Cases	7457		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 103.62.

**Thematic Progression Patterns (TP Patterns)**

All T-units were analyzed to determine different types of Thematic Progression (TP) patterns, according to McCabe's (1999) revised model. Therefore, in the analysis of students' essays and the introduction section of RAs, the patterns constant, simple linear (zig-zag), split thematic, and split rhematic progressions were taken into account in order to determine how they were related to the previous discourse, previous theme or rheme.

It should be mentioned that in order to observe the textual bindings of the texts in students' compositions and the introduction section of RAs, these four types of patterns, as stated by McCabe (1999), were analyzed in no more than three T-units. That is, the themes for which the reader has to go back more than three units to find the links were not considered as thematic progression patterns. These findings were in contrast to the results obtained by Fontaine and Kodratoff (2003), and McCabe (1999).

Fontaine and Kodratoff (2003), in their analysis of scientific texts in Francophone and Anglophone corpus, found out that, in both corpora, linear thematic progressions were the most frequent patterns. As it is clear in Table 11, the results of TP patterns in the three groups were similar to each other. In all groups, the number of constant patterns was more than simple linear patterns. Next in rank is simple linear, then split rheme, and the last one is split theme progression.

Table 11

*Frequency and Percentage of Thematic Progression Patterns*

Dane's TP Patterns	BA Compositions (%)	MA Compositions (%)	Total No. of BA & MA (%)	Research Articles (%)
Constant	144 (81.35)	157 (72.68)	301 (76.59)	260 (67.35)
Linear	32 (18.07)	55 (25.46)	87 (22.13)	105 (27.20)
Split theme	1 (0.56)	1 (0.46)	2 (0.50)	7 (1.81)
Split rheme	0 (0)	3 (1.38)	3 (0.76)	14 (3.62)
Total No. TP Patterns	177	216	393	386

**Chi-square statistics for thematic progression patterns.** In order to compare the total frequency of thematic progression patterns in the compositions written by participants of BA and MA level and the introduction section of RAs, Chi-square tests were carried out.

Table 12

*Chi-Square Tests (BA & MA)*

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.829 <sup>a</sup>	3	.120
Likelihood Ratio	6.997	3	.072
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.085	1	.024
N of Valid Cases	393		

a. 4 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .90.

The table above determines the results of Chi-square tests between BA and MA compositions in terms of TP patterns. Since the obtained value of significance was greater than 0.05, it was concluded that the

differences between the TP patterns used by students with low and high language proficiency, not statistically meaningful. In other words, there were no significant difference between students' essays of BA and MA levels in terms of thematic progression patterns.

Meanwhile, another Chi-square was administered to determine the significance of the differences between the essays written by participants with high language proficiency (MA students) and the introduction section of RAs in terms of TP patterns. The results are shown in the following table.

Table 13

*Chi-Square Tests (MA & RAs)*

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.083 <sup>a</sup>	3	.166
Likelihood Ratio	5.715	3	.126
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.992	1	.046
N of Valid Cases	602		

a. 1 cells (12.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.87.

As shown in the table above, and since the obtained value of significance was greater than 0.05, it was concluded that the differences were not meaningful. In other words, there was no significant difference between essays written by MA students and the introduction section of RAs in terms of thematic progression patterns.

### Discussion

In view of the first and second questions, the results indicated that different types of theme [topical, textual, interpersonal, marked, unmarked, simple, and multiple] were used in the essays written by the three groups of BA students, MA students, and RA writers. While the results of Chi-square revealed that there was no significant difference

between the thematic structure in the argumentative compositions written by students with low and high language proficiency, it confirmed that there was a significant difference between the essays written by MA students and the introduction section of published articles in Applied Linguistics. Regarding the first question, the differences occurred simply in terms of frequency; for example, topical theme appeared in higher frequency compared to interpersonal theme. Therefore, it can be claimed that these compositions represent the same genre in terms of different types of theme. In addition, thematic organization helps the cohesiveness of these essays, and has a crucial bearing in organization of ideas in students' writings.

### **Theme Types**

In spite of the general similarities in the students' essays at BA and MA levels regarding textual themes, there were differences in the frequency of textual theme. In students' compositions, the total frequency of textual themes in MA essays was slightly more than BA essays which could indicate that MA essays had more formal and factual tone in comparison to BA essays.

**Interpersonal theme.** In addition to the impersonal and factual tone of RAs, the low percentage of interpersonal themes might reflect the lack of symmetrical relationships between the reader and the writer. Overall, the number of interpersonal themes in published RAs of Applied Linguistics was greater than that in MA students' essays. This revealed the greater tendency of these articles towards reader- friendliness of their writings and so softening the textual effect. Comparing BA and MA essays in this regard showed that the total frequency of interpersonal theme in MA essays was more than BA essays. Therefore, it could be concluded that MA essays adopted a more personal tone than BA essays.

**Marked/ unmarked themes.** Comparing frequency of such themes in three groups, it seems that writers showed more tendency to place the theme as the subject of the clause. Writers of RAs used more unmarked theme than MA students, and comparing MA and BA texts revealed that

there was more unmarked theme in the essays written by MA students than by BA group.

**Simple/ multiple themes.** Comparing BA and MA students showed that simple themes were more frequent in MA students' essays. Their important functions were creating continuity and cohesion in the texts. So, it could be claimed that MA essays contained more constant flow than BA essays. However, comparing MA essays and RA introductions indicate that in RAs, in contrast to MA essays, the frequency of multiple themes was more than simple themes. Regarding multiple themes, the frequency of multiple themes containing interpersonal themes was low, as this theme was very low in academic articles indicating factual and impersonal tone of such articles. *Textual ^ unmarked multiple themes* was the most frequent type of theme in RAs. It is believed that textual, marked themes help the argumentative nature of the introduction section of RAs. However, as mentioned earlier, the difference between the total frequency of marked and unmarked theme in RAs was not significant (10 cases) and it could not reject the argumentative nature of the introduction section of these articles.

**Thematic progression patterns.** Considering the third, fourth, and the last part of fifth questions, different patterns of thematic progressions (constant, linear, split theme, and split rheme) were used in the texts written by both groups of students and RAs' expert writers. An interesting result was gradual increase of the total frequency of TP patterns used in both groups of students which might refer to the students' level of language proficiency. However, this result was also true comparing MA essays and RAs' introduction. As the results of Chi-square test showed, there was no significant difference between the essays written by neither group of students in terms of different types of thematic progression patterns and of course there was no significant difference between the essays written by MA students and the introduction section of RAs. The differences were just revealed in terms of frequency. The results showed that thematic progression patterns were used more frequently in RAs rather than in MA students' writings.

Therefore, it could be claimed that RAs contained more text connectivity and discourse continuity than MA essays. Comparing BA and MA essays revealed that MA essays included more TP patterns than BA essays, confirming that these essays had more intimate connection than BA essays which might be indicative of their higher level of language proficiency.

In addition, the results showed that constant progression occurred in a higher frequency than other patterns in three groups. It should be mentioned that, due to the higher frequency of constant progression pattern, it will be easier for the reader to decode the information in the texts, particularly in BA compositions. According to Fries (1983, p. 124), “when constant progression pattern is used, it tends to relate sequence of events happening in the stories and involve a common character or set of characters, or has, as the point of departure, a setting of time or place.” Note the following example from *Latino (a) and Burmese elementary school students reading scientific informational texts: The interrelationship of the language of the texts, student’s talk, and conceptual change theory* by Croce (2015):

*Ex (1):* Miscue analysis studies have demonstrated that *students* use cueing systems as *they* read that are universal across languages (Freeman, 2001; Mott, 1980); yet, *these students* do not investigate the role of genre in influencing the multilingual learner.

Furthermore, comparing simple linear progression is the most frequent one after constant progression and placed in the second row. McCabe (1999) states that, “by using simple linear progression, authors can ensure that the readers are constantly interacting with theme in terms of points of departure, thus elaborating on concepts in a ways which allows readers to optimally build up the conceptual framework” (p. 190). Moreover, the high frequency of simple linear progression, in the texts, especially in RAs, indicates that these texts, as stated by Wang (2007), have a more dynamic effect on the reader, that is, in their texts, there is a further development of rheme, and these texts tend to expand on information in the rheme, and as stated by Wang (2007), this gives the

reader orientation to where the information has come from and where it is going and hence creates cohesion in the text. Also, there is more cohesion between the ideas and sentences in RAs, and this has a positive influence on the reader. Besides, since the simple linear progression predominates in RAs rather than MA students' compositions, and in MA essays prevailed than BA essays, this indicates that there is an asymmetrical relationship between the reader and writer, and, this asymmetrical relationship indicates that there is a shared knowledge between the reader and writer; therefore, in choosing the point of departure, the writer selects the information contained in the rheme of the preceding context in which the reader and the writer have shared knowledge. Consider the following example from *Understanding the Quality of Out-of-Class English Learning* by Lai, Zhu, and Gong (2014):

*Ex (2):* Brown (2000) compares the learning environment to an ecology comprising *various dynamic and interdependent elements*, and *these various formal, non-formal, and informal learning elements* interact with each other to form *an individual learning ecology*. *A healthy ecology* relies on *various constituents* having unique strengths that work together in a complementary manner and *this diversity* is crucial in sustaining the adaptability and well-being of a learning ecology.

In a nutshell, considering the above mentioned points, it is claimed that thematic progression patterns have important roles in the organization of texts at the level of discourse, and improve cohesion between the sentences and ideas. According to McCabe (1999, p. 283), "incorporating thematic progression chains in texts allows for ease of text processing on the part of readers". Therefore, paying attention to these patterns helps the readers' comprehension of texts.

### **Conclusion and Implications for Second Language Learning**

As the results showed, although the introduction sections of RAs and students' compositions represented argumentative patterns, there was a significant difference in the thematic structure of the introduction

section of RAs and the essays written by MA students. This finding, however, did not reject the claim that genre influences theme choice. This difference partly refers to the lack of unity and cohesiveness in MA students' writings and of course their lack of knowledge about thematic structure. It also refers to the lack of instruction regarding thematicity which may refer to the less attention concerning this issue.

In addition, an important point regarding students' essays and RAs which should be noted is the higher frequency of constant theme compared to linear and other patterns. Since constant progression keeps some elements constant in a series of clauses, it makes the text seem simpler, and so the reader can easily decode the information.

Now that thematicity plays very important roles in writing essays, the following steps are suggested for writing instruction. Firstly, students should be aware of the importance of theme-rheme theory in writing essays. Therefore, its importance should be explained to students. Secondly, they should be explained the thematic structure organization in a text, and they should be demonstrated how to organize and use each patterns to improve their writing cohesiveness. Thirdly, practice is very important. Students can choose a topic and try to write an essay. They can highlight themes and identify thematic progression patterns in their essays and try to improve their writing and make more cohesive texts.

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