

Investigating Theme deployment in advanced Saudi EFL students' academic writing

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Summary: This study investigates the construction of cohesive and complex writing among advanced Saudi EFL university students. Specifically, the aim of this study is to explore the types of Themes as initial elements in sentences and how students employ them to build textual cohesion and coherence in their writing.

Keywords: Theme, advanced EFL students, academic writing

Introduction

In university settings, English academic writing assignments are essential in highlighting the importance of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' ability to achieve cohesion and coherence in their texts (RahmtAllah, 2020). Within Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) theory, Themes emerge as fundamental resources shaping meaning in texts.

As Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) explain, Themes are the initial elements that serve as the point of departure of the message; they are what the clause is about. They function as cohesive tools, packaging information through linking preceding and subsequent sentences (Forey & Sampson, 2017). Examining how Themes are chosen is essential for understanding the complexity and cohesion within academic writing.

While much EFL research has focused on language proficiency levels based on sentence structure and vocabulary mastery (e.g., Fajrina & Sadeghi, 2021), limited studies have examined the formation of rhetorical structuring in EFL writing, particularly in the Saudi context, with a focus on Themes. Creating informative flow and maintaining cohesive concepts are critical variables in text quality, necessitating strategic thematic choices (Schleppegrell & Christie, 2018).

However, Themes are not always expressed in the same way in different languages; writers from different linguistic backgrounds organize information differently (McCabe & Alonso-Belmonte, 2000). Kaplan (1995) emphasizes the influence of native language and culture on how writers structure their written texts. For EFL students, this interference affects writing organization, potentially opposing English language norms (Hyland, 2013).

This study, therefore, employs a content analysis approach to investigate the types and frequencies of Theme choices in 36 research proposals written by advanced Saudi EFL students. The primary goal is to understand how these students

utilize Themes to create cohesive and coherent texts, with attention to the cultural influences on their thematic choices. This exploration aims to offer practical tools to enrich the meaningfulness and organizational structure of EFL academic writing.

What is Theme and why is it powerful?

Themes, as previously discussed, serve as the foundational elements in sentences, significantly enhancing the cohesion and complexity of academic writing (Schleppegrell & Christie, 2018). They serve to organize texts, linking preceding and subsequent sentences through detailed elaboration (Forey & Sampson, 2017). This function is essential in fostering cohesive and coherent structures in the academic writings of EFL undergraduate students.

Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) underscore SFL's emphasis on constructing meaning across various language development settings. Within this framework, Berry (1995) categorizes Themes in children's data into two types: interactional (contentlight) and informational (contentful). These choices address what Themes refer to in discourse. Interactional Themes, such as personal pronouns, engage directly with discourse participants, while informational Themes, represented by full noun phrases addressing aspects of the topic, add depth to discourse. Although Berry initially focused on children's writing, recent studies (e.g., Martinez-Insua, 2022) demonstrate the framework's relevance in university learners' analyses. This study emphasizes the significance of Themes in academic writing to enhance the language learning and teaching processes. The following brief paragraph exemplifies these two types of Themes. (Themes of interest are in bold).

***Translation of poetry** is one of the most difficult tasks a translator can take on because poetic language cannot be as easily understood as ordinary language*

that has a literal meaning. **These translators** may face linguistic, literary, aesthetic, and cultural problems in translating poetry. In this research, **we** will focus on the most important difficulties the Saudi university students face in translating poetry from Arabic to English.

In the first sentence, *Translation of poetry* introduces new information, which serves as an informational Theme. In the next sentence, the Theme *these translators* refers to the concept of translators mentioned in the preceding sentence. This linkage represents an informational thematic choice that sustains discourse cohesion. The pronoun *we* in the third sentence serves as an interactional Theme that helps in engaging readers and provides an authorial voice in the text. Therefore, personal pronouns such as *we* serve as interactional Themes compared to other informational Themes. Such thematic choices, utilizing referential expressions, contribute significantly to discourse development (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

In addition, Themes in writing, as highlighted by Brown and Yule (1983), serve two essential functions. Firstly, Themes act as cohesive ties that weave sentences together, interconnecting ideas and referring to previously introduced concepts, known as local cohesion. Secondly, Themes help maintain a coherent viewpoint by establishing connections and links with preceding discourse, thereby establishing global coherence across paragraphs. Therefore, the investigation of the types of Themes written by Saudi EFL learners and their roles in establishing cohesion and coherence is crucial for understanding how these learners effectively convey their intended messages.

English academic writing and EFL Arabic students

Arab EFL learners face challenges in English academic writing, particularly in producing well-structured paragraphs and essays (Abu Rass, 2015), negatively impacting their advanced education and language skills. The complexity of lengthy writing tasks poses a particular challenge for these students, demanding careful organization and structure.

These challenges stem from cultural and linguistic differences between Arabic and English. For instance, Arabic, influenced by Qur'anic phrasing, often employs repetition and an oral style (Abu Rass, 2015). Consequently, the writing of Arab EFL students frequently mirrors these repetitive thematic patterns aligned with their native language structures (Mohamad & Omar, 2000).

However, proficient and cohesive texts necessitate the strategic use of advanced linguistic devices such as nominalization and signaling nouns. Nominalization involves transforming verbs and adjectives into nouns (Ventola, 1996) while signaling nouns contain abstract nouns to encapsulate previous discourse (Flowerdew, 2003). These choices are crucial for packaging information and developing complex academic writing. Analyzing the types of Themes in students' writing

sheds light on how EFL learners construct sentences and develop information in writing.

Research methods

This study employed a mixed methods content analysis approach to explore Themes in students' writing (Krippendorff, 2018), aiming to understand how students construct cohesive and coherent texts. The investigation specifically focused on analyzing thematic patterns to establish connections between ideas at both the sentence and paragraph levels.

Participants and data collection

For this study, 173 fourth-year students from the Department of English Language and Translation at Saudi Electronic University collaborated in groups of three to five individuals, collectively producing 36 research proposals. These students were selected based on their advanced academic level, having successfully completed previous examinations and assignments. All participants were native Arabic speakers. Consent was obtained from each participant to access their papers via the university's student portal.

While the collaboration involved 173 students, this study's analysis specifically focuses on these 36 documents. The emphasis centers on the content of these papers rather than the collaborative process among the students. These documents, analyzed using the UAM Corpus Tool (O'Donnell, 2008), formed the corpus of this study.

Data analysis

- **Qualitative Coding:** All 36 documents were uploaded into the corpus for systematic review, aiming to identify Themes at the beginning of each sentence. A total of 1,138 instances of these Themes were detected and categorized using Berry's (1995) framework, distinguishing between interactional and informational Themes.
- **Quantitative Counting:** Following the coding process, all identified Themes were quantified to reveal trends within the texts, providing numerical insights into Theme usage.
- **Concordance Tracking:** Utilizing the UAM Corpus Tool's concordance function, a detailed contextual examination of Theme usage was conducted. This approach helped pinpoint the specific choices of Themes employed by students to connect ideas across previous sentences and paragraphs.

Results

After identifying Themes in Saudi students' writing, the study showed a strong preference for informational Themes over interactional Themes (Figure 1). Informational Themes accounted for 70.22% of coded Themes, significantly higher than interactional Themes (29.78%). This 40% difference revealed the students' reliance on content-heavy Themes. As established by Berry (2013), academic writing prioritizes informational Themes due to their referential value in constructing meaningful and cohesive discourse.

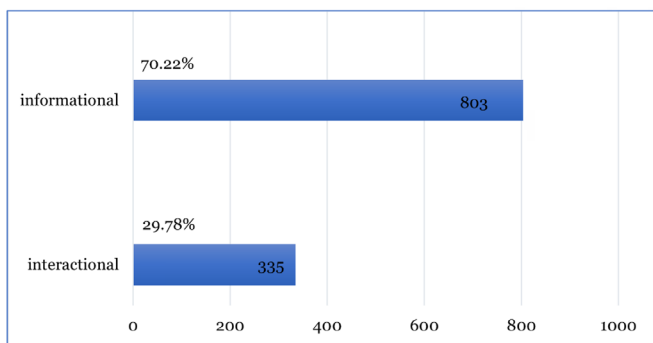


Figure 1: Frequencies of Theme types in students' writing

An in-depth analysis of students' thematic choices in connecting ideas revealed four key Themes: repetition, nominalization, reclassification, and signaling nouns (Figure 2). Repetition emerged as the most frequent Theme, accounting for 71.22% of all coded Themes. This high frequency indicates a strong reliance on repeating the same words and phrases when referencing preceding concepts. For instance, the Theme *cultural competency* was repeated across four consecutive sentences, as exemplified in the discussion section below. In contrast, nominalization was notably less frequent, comprising only 2.93% of the observed Themes. This low occurrence might suggest that students find nominalization patterns unfamiliar or challenging to utilize. For instance, *interpretation* in the following example was nominalized from the verb *interpret* in the preceding sentence, serving as a cohesive element linking ideas in a complex manner: *The speaker interprets the speech and then pauses. However, interpretation has significantly increased in importance and experienced significant evolution.*

Reclassification was moderately used, representing 18.54% of instances. This use of reclassification involved substituting synonymous phrases to repeat concepts, such as replacing the research in one sentence with the study in the following sentence. Finally, signaling nouns, which encapsulate and summarize previous statements, comprised only 7.32% of the coded Themes. In the following example, the *process* serves as a cohesive device, referencing the translation procedures discussed in two preceding sentences: *The process is difficult since there is a need for expertise in many cultures as well as staying up to date on new terminology as language evolves.*

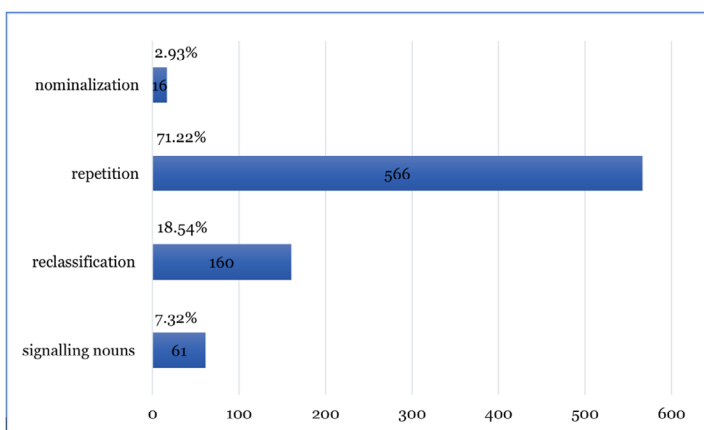


Figure 2: Frequencies of informational Themes in students' writing

Discussion

The extensive use of repetitive choices aligns with research showing Arab EFL writers favor redundancy, influenced by linguistic and cultural factors (Mohamad & Omer, 2000). For Saudi students, repetition aids meaning-making as a preferred learning strategy stemming from the memorization and restatement valued in Arabic rhetoric (Al-Seghayer, 2021). These tendencies transfer into repetitive academic writing patterns echoing Arabic structures.

While repetition creates local cohesive links within paragraphs, overreliance on duplicate phrasing reflects basic writing strategies (Jalilifar, 2010). Consider the following paragraph from a student's essay.

Cultural competency can be defined as a collection of beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable a system, organization, or group of people to work effectively in a cross-cultural setting. Cultural competency also entails a thorough awareness and respect for a culture, as well as the ability to know “what to say to whom, where, and when” from a social and pragmatic standpoint. A complete understanding of the cultural competency will allow translators to deliver intended messages effectively and appropriately. In addition, cultural competency has a significant impact on translation quality.

The paragraph displays a pattern of repetition, predominantly featuring the Theme of *cultural competency* across four successive sentences. Initially introduced in the first sentence, the concept is repeated in the second sentence for elaboration and emphasis, demonstrating an attempt to clarify and define the topic. The third sentence incorporates the same Theme within a complex noun phrase, introducing new information while preserving the original topic, marking a shift in presentation style. The fourth sentence refers to the original Theme, providing a sense of continuity and expressing the subsequent discussion.

While using repetition can maintain the focus of the central idea (Fries, 2002), the repetitive nature of establishing local cohesion by consistently repeating the same concepts hinders the formation of broader connections between ideas, thereby limiting the depth of expression (Jalilifar, 2010). Such a repetition-heavy approach might stem from an attempt to enhance clarity and maintain focus, typical of less experienced learners aiming for straightforward cohesion rather than complex interconnections (Wang, 2007).

Conversely, strategically connecting repetitive Theme chains across a text can establish global coherence, indirectly familiarizing readers with complex concepts and shaping their understanding through reinforcement of key terms (Tabari & Johnson, 2023), as can be seen in this paragraph:

Translation is described as a “cultural turn” as defined by Bassnett and Lefevere (2016). To effectively translate messages from the source language to the target language audience, translators must be culturally competent for each of the target audiences they work with by gaining a complete understanding

of cultural background, awareness, and sensitivity. **Translators** must do more than merely translate words from the source language into the target language. **They** must also communicate the meaning of those words in a way that the audience can understand.

Continuing with the same essay, this paragraph transitions from discussing cultural competency in the previous paragraph to emphasizing the importance of translation in conveying messages effectively. Although there were repetitive Themes such as translators in the second and third sentences, the shift from cultural understanding to the role of translators contributes to establishing global coherence, marking a transition in the focus while maintaining contextual relevance.

Although the emphasis on global coherence denotes an advanced approach (Tabari & Johnson, 2023), local cohesion, which is mostly generated through repetitive Themes within paragraphs, may rely on more basic strategies. This issue, commonly observed among EFL writers, has been consistently highlighted in previous research (Wang, 2007). While the writer attempts thematic variation between paragraphs, further diversification could enrich the text. Specifically, nominalizations and signaling nouns could connect ideas, increase structure complexity, and strengthen cohesive flow. Relying less on repetition and employing more varied thematic choices would advance the textual development.

Therefore, this analysis reveals the dual-edge role of repetition in EFL writing. Students heavily utilized repetitive Themes, potentially reflecting cultural inclinations. Such excessive repetition often fails to advance concepts, indicating underdeveloped skills (Wang, 2007). However, strategic reinforcement can serve advanced functions by underlining global connections to strengthen textual coherence (Tabari & Johnson, 2023). Essentially, while overuse signifies weaker writing capabilities, purposeful emphasis of central Themes enhances semantic flow.

Implication and conclusion

The specific utilization of thematic repetition in Saudi EFL writing holds substantial pedagogical implications, particularly as students demonstrate limited understanding in this area. Therefore, enhanced support from teachers is crucial to assist them in overcoming these challenges.

To begin, discussions around culture and language awareness could effectively familiarize students with the contrasts between their first language writing and the established norms of standard English academic writing. For instance, teachers could initiate instruction by exploring elements of both L1 and L2 writing, encouraging students to reflect on what constitutes good writing in each language.

Further, employing text analysis can prove invaluable in familiarizing EFL students with English language norms. Analyzing short paragraphs from their own writing helps demonstrate the use of Themes in connecting ideas, highlighting strong and weak choices. This analysis provides clarity on distinguishing between repetitive elements that enhance text complexity and those that merely add ineffective emphasis. Explicitly identifying instances of excessive repetition can raise students' awareness about their thematic choices. Furthermore, illustrating the differences between excessive local repetition and repetition for global reinforcement enables students to differentiate between surface-level cohesion and conceptual development.

Guidance on the impacts of thematic choices in creating cohesion and coherence significantly contributes to developing advanced writers. Recognizing areas where students struggle with repetitive Themes and transitioning to more advanced choices can empower students with vocabulary and structural variations. For example, demonstrating the use of nominalization and signaling nouns aids in condensing information and eliminating unnecessary wording. This thematic-based approach supports students in advancing towards sophisticated writing choices that enhance text development, fostering cohesion, and coherence.

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