

Theme Types and Thematic Progression Analysis in Undergraduate EFL Students' Argumentative Texts

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Abstract:

This study examines how undergraduate students organize information in argumentative texts through Theme choices and thematic progression from a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) perspective. The study employed a qualitative research design using qualitative content analysis to examine 20 argumentative texts obtained from a Paragraph Writing course in the even semester of 2025. The analysis was conducted using UAM CorpusTool as a supporting tool, while Theme types were analyzed based on Halliday and Matthiessen's framework and thematic progression was examined following Bloor and Bloor's framework. The findings revealed 346 Theme elements, consisting of topical Theme (63.01%), textual Theme (35.26%), and interpersonal Theme (1.73%). Topical Themes were mainly realized through nominal groups and were predominantly unmarked. The analysis identified 198 thematic relationships, including constant Theme (32.32%), linear Theme (28.79%), derived Theme (10.10%), and split Rheme (5.05%), alongside brand-new Themes (22.22%) and empty uses of "there" (1.52%). The findings suggest that students relied primarily on maintaining and developing established information through constant and linear progression, while the relatively frequent occurrence of brand-new Themes indicates challenges in maintaining thematic continuity when introducing new information.

Keywords: *Argumentative Writing; EFL Students, Systemic Functional Linguistics; Theme Types; Thematic Progression*

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) requires more than grammatical accuracy. Writers also need to organize ideas, establish relationships among propositions, and maintain a clear flow of information throughout a text. For this reason, the way ideas are introduced and developed has become an important concern in studies of EFL writing (Wang et al., 2024). Undergraduate EFL students may experience difficulty generating ideas, linking sentences and paragraphs, and sustaining coherence as their texts develop (Wakerkwa & Astuti, 2025). These difficulties suggest that weaknesses in student writing are not limited to grammatical control but also involve how meaning is arranged and connected across a text. Examining information organization can therefore provide insight into how coherence is constructed in students' writing (Feri et al., 2023).

These demands become particularly important in argumentative writing. Writers are expected to establish a position, develop reasons to support it, and connect claims with appropriate evidence. The effectiveness of an argumentative text consequently depends not only on the ideas presented but also on how those ideas are organized and related to one another (Baquerizo & Guerrero, 2025). Previous studies have shown that EFL students continue to experience difficulties in developing arguments and maintaining logical connections among them (Ananda et al., 2024). Similar problems have been reported among undergraduate learners who struggle to formulate appropriate claims and arrange supporting ideas coherently (Ghanbari & Salari, 2022). Since argumentative writing requires information to develop continuously from one proposition to another, investigating relationships across clauses can help reveal how students structure their arguments (Pavavijarn, 2022).

This issue is particularly relevant in the English Education Department of a state Islamic university in Bandung, Indonesia. Students in the program encounter Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) early in their undergraduate study through Introduction to Functional Grammar in the first semester and Functional Grammar in the second semester. The argumentative texts examined in the present study were produced by second-semester students while they were developing their understanding of functional grammar as well as their academic writing skills. This instructional setting therefore provides a relevant context for examining whether students' emerging knowledge of language as a meaning-making system is reflected in the way they organize argumentative texts. Research conducted previously within the same program also examined thematic progression in students' argumentative writing and found constant Theme progression to be the most frequently occurring pattern (Nurjannah et al., 2023). However, that study concentrated primarily on thematic progression rather than examining Theme types and progression patterns together.

Within SFL, the organization of information can be investigated through the textual metafunction. Theme functions as the initial organizing element of a clause, while Rheme develops the message introduced by that Theme (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Theme can be realized as topical, interpersonal, or textual, while topical Themes can further be distinguished as marked or unmarked depending on their grammatical relationship with the Subject. The analysis of thematic progression extends beyond individual clauses by examining how Themes and Rhemes are connected across successive clauses. Common patterns include constant Theme, linear Theme, split Rheme, and derived Theme progression (Bloor & Bloor, 2013; Eggins, 2004). Theme analysis therefore shows how writers select points of departure within clauses,

whereas thematic progression reveals how those choices contribute to the development and continuity of information throughout a text.

Previous studies of thematic organization in EFL writing have approached the issue from several perspectives. Some studies have focused primarily on thematic progression. Pavavijarn (2022), for example, reported that weaker argumentative writing was associated with greater use of brand-new Themes, while Haji (2024) investigated thematic progression patterns in argumentative essays produced by Tunisian EFL students. In the Indonesian context, Nurjannah et al. (2023) examined argumentative texts written by students in the same institutional setting as the present study and identified constant Theme progression as the dominant pattern. Other research has concentrated more specifically on Theme selection. Al-Reshaid and Alhojailan (2025), for instance, examined variation in thematic structure across academic genres produced by EFL graduate students.

Taken together, previous studies demonstrate the importance of Theme and thematic progression for understanding the organization of EFL writing, but several areas remain insufficiently explored. A number of studies have concentrated on thematic progression without systematically describing Theme types (Haji, 2024; Nurjannah et al., 2023; Pavavijarn, 2022), whereas others have concentrated more specifically on thematic choices (Al-Reshaid & Alhojailan, 2025). Although several studies have combined the two dimensions (Allagbé et al., 2023; Bangsa, 2021; Feri et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2024a), they differ considerably in genre, learner population, and educational context. Moreover, relatively little attention has been given to the simultaneous distribution of Theme types, thematic progression patterns, and problematic features such as brand-new Themes and the empty use of there in undergraduate argumentative writing. The instructional context of learners who are still developing their knowledge of SFL while simultaneously learning academic writing also deserves closer examination.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining how second-semester undergraduate EFL students in an Indonesian English Education program organize meaning in 20 argumentative texts. It analyzes both Theme types and thematic progression patterns and also considers problematic features of thematic development. By examining these features together, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive account of how students organize and develop information in argumentative writing within an instructional context in which they are simultaneously developing their knowledge of SFL and academic writing. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What types of Themes are realized in undergraduate students' argumentative texts?
2. What patterns of thematic progression are realized in undergraduate students' argumentative texts?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) views language as a social semiotic resource for constructing meaning in context. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) identify three metafunctions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational metafunction represents experience, the interpersonal metafunction concerns relationships and attitudes, while the textual metafunction organizes meanings into coherent messages. Since the present study examines how

students organize information through Theme types and thematic progression, it focuses specifically on the textual metafunction.

2.2. Theme Types

In Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Theme functions as the point of departure of a clause, while Rheme develops the message that follows (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Theme selection therefore helps organize information and guide readers through the text. Based on the textual metafunction, Theme is categorized into three types: topical, interpersonal, and textual Theme.

The first type is topical Theme which represents the first experiential element of a clause and commonly functions as the starting point of the message. It may be realized through nominal groups, adverbial groups, or prepositional phrases (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

The second type is interpersonal Theme which expresses the writer's stance or interaction with readers and may be realized through vocatives, modal adjuncts, comment adjuncts, and finite verbal operators (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

The third type is textual Theme which connects a clause with the surrounding discourse and is commonly realized through continuatives, conjunctions, and conjunctive adjuncts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In argumentative writing, these elements help signal relationships between claims and supporting information.

The classification of Theme types provides a foundation for understanding how writers organize information at the clause level. In argumentative writing, the realization of topical, interpersonal, and textual Themes reflects how students introduce information, express their position, and connect arguments. Therefore, analyzing Theme types is necessary before examining how these Themes develop across clauses through thematic progression.

2.3. Thematic Progression

Thematic progression refers to the way Themes and Rhemes are connected across clauses to organize the flow of information in a text (Bloor & Bloor, 2013). It shows how writers maintain previously introduced information while developing new ideas, thereby contributing to textual coherence. Several patterns of thematic progression have been identified to explain the movement of information across clauses. Bloor and Bloor (2013) describe several patterns, including constant Theme pattern, linear Theme pattern, split Rheme pattern, and derived Theme pattern. These patterns illustrate different ways writers organize information depending on how Themes and Rhemes are developed throughout discourse.

The first pattern is constant Theme pattern. This pattern occurs when the same Theme is repeated in several successive clauses, while each clause introduces different information in the Rheme. Through this pattern, writers maintain a consistent focus on a particular topic or idea throughout the text. Bloor and Bloor (2013) explain that constant Theme progression provides continuity because readers can easily identify the main point being discussed. In EFL students' writing, this pattern is frequently used because it allows writers to maintain focus on the topic, although excessive repetition may limit information development (Sari & Agustina, 2022; Nurjannah et al., 2023).

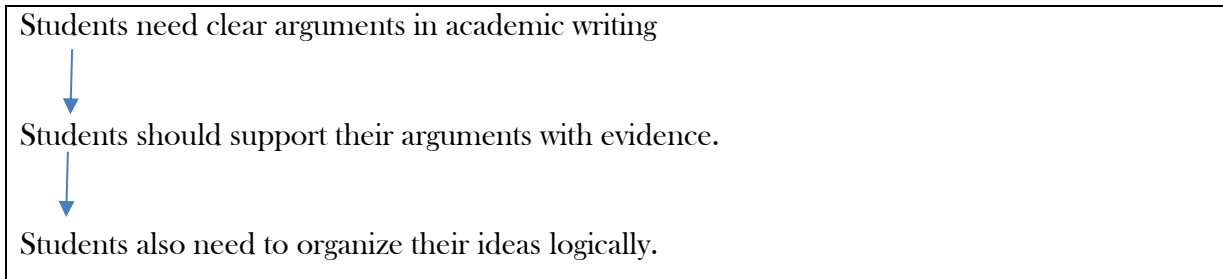


Figure 1. Constant Theme Pattern Example

The second pattern is linear Theme pattern. Unlike constant Theme progression, this pattern develops information by using the Rheme of one clause as the Theme of the following clause. As a result, information moves progressively from one clause to another, allowing writers to introduce new ideas based on previously established information. Bloor and Bloor (2013) explain that linear progression creates a logical connection between clauses because each new Theme originates from information introduced in the previous Rheme. Previous studies have shown that linear Theme patterns contribute to stronger idea development because they enable writers to expand arguments systematically (Feri et al., 2023; Pavavijarn, 2022).

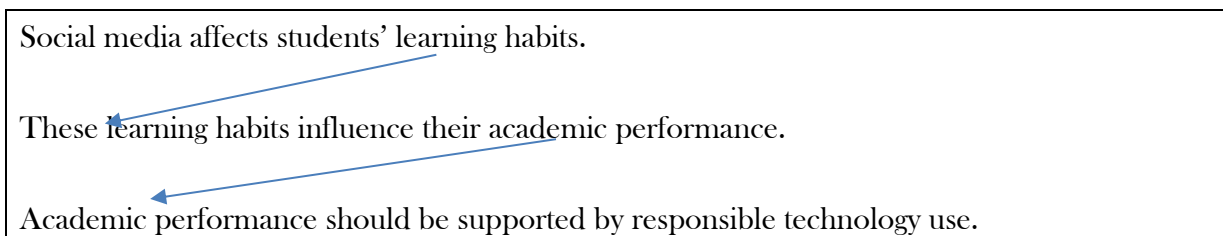


Figure 2. Linear Theme Pattern Example

The third pattern is split Rheme pattern. This pattern occurs when a Rheme contains several pieces of information that are subsequently developed as Themes in following clauses. Through this pattern, writers can expand multiple points from a previously introduced idea. Bloor and Bloor (2013) explain that split Rheme progression enables texts to develop several related ideas while maintaining connections with the initial information. In argumentative writing, this pattern is useful because a main argument can be expanded into several supporting points or explanations.

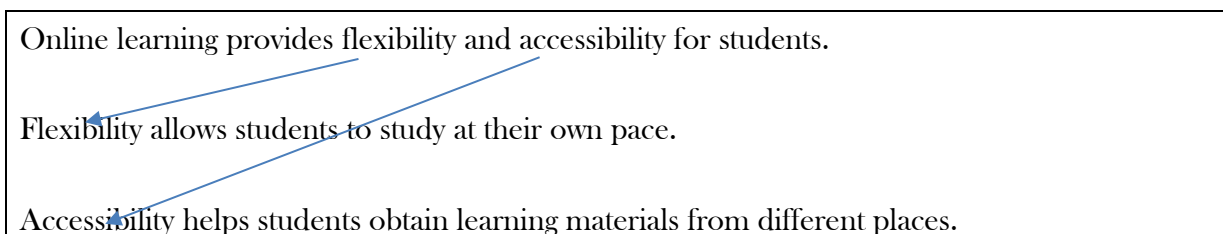


Figure 3. Split Rheme Pattern Example

The fourth pattern is derived Theme pattern. This pattern occurs when several Themes are derived from a broader idea or hyper-Theme established earlier in the text. Unlike constant

Theme progression, which maintains the same Theme, derived Theme progression allows writers to organize several related ideas under a general topic. This pattern enables more complex information development because different Themes can be introduced while still maintaining relationships with the overall topic of discussion (Bloor & Bloor, 2013).

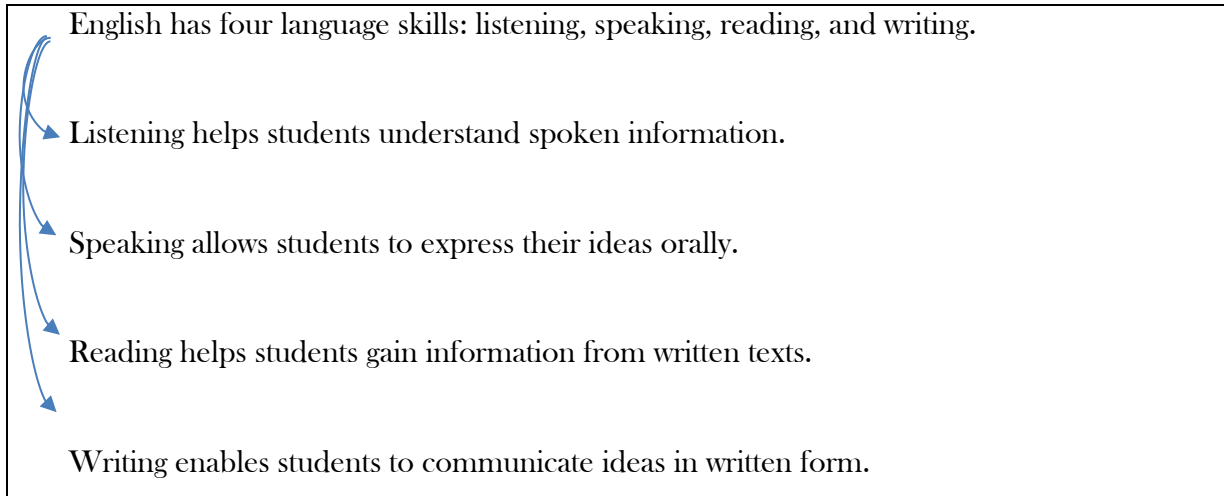


Figure 4. Derived Theme Pattern Example

Although thematic progression provides a framework for understanding how information develops across clauses, students' writing may still contain problematic features that interrupt the continuity of information. According to Jusoh et al. (2022), ineffective thematic development may affect textual coherence because the relationship between Themes and Rhemes becomes unclear. These problems occur when writers fail to establish meaningful connections between previously introduced information and newly developed ideas. In this study, two problematic features of thematic progression are examined: brand new Theme and empty Rheme through the use of "there."

The first problematic feature is brand new Theme. A brand-new Theme occurs when a new Theme is introduced in a clause without any clear connection to the previous Rheme or information flow. Although introducing new information is necessary in developing a text, an unrelated Theme may disrupt the continuity of ideas because readers are required to interpret a sudden shift of information. Jusoh et al. (2022) explain that brand new Themes can weaken coherence when the newly introduced information does not develop from the preceding discourse. In argumentative writing, this problem may appear when students introduce new arguments or supporting points without establishing a clear relationship with the previous argument.

Online learning helps students access materials easily.
Online learning also allows students to study flexibly.
Environmental pollution damages public health.

Figure 5. Brand-new Theme Example

The second problematic feature is empty Rheme, which may occur through the use of the existential structure there. In this structure, the Theme introduces the existence of something,

but the Rheme does not provide sufficient information to develop the message. According to Jusoh et al. (2022), excessive use of empty Rheme may reduce textual development because the clause contributes limited new information to the progression of ideas. In academic writing, this problem may occur when writers use existential structures without elaborating the information introduced.

Students need clear evidence to support their arguments. <i>There are many problems in academic writing.</i>

Figure 6. Empty use of “There” Example

Overall, thematic progression analysis provides insight into how writers organize and develop information beyond individual clauses. The identification of thematic patterns and problematic features allows researchers to examine both the strategies used by students and the difficulties they encounter in constructing coherent texts. Therefore, analyzing Theme types, thematic progression patterns, and problematic features provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how undergraduate students organize meanings in argumentative writing.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative design using qualitative content analysis to examine 20 argumentative texts produced in a Paragraph Writing course in the even semester of 2025. This approach was appropriate because the study focused on interpreting linguistic patterns and meaning organization in written texts rather than testing relationships among variables. Qualitative content analysis allows textual data to be systematically identified, categorized, and interpreted (Schreier, 2012). In this study, the analytical categories were based on Systemic Functional Linguistics, particularly the Theme-Rheme system and thematic progression, to examine how students organized and developed information across clauses.

3.2. Data Sources

The primary data consisted of 25 argumentative paragraphs produced by second-semester students in one Paragraph Writing class during the even semester of 2025. The texts were existing course assignments obtained from the course lecturer, who is also the third author of this study. The first author was not involved in teaching the class or administering the assignment. Clause segmentation, Theme-Rheme identification, classifications, frequencies, and percentages were treated as analytical outputs rather than primary data.

Before analysis, the 25 texts were screened using the generic structures of arguing proposed by Knapp and Watkins (2005). Exposition texts were expected to contain a thesis statement, arguments with points and elaboration, and a conclusion, while discussion texts contained a thesis statement, arguments for and against, and a reiteration or conclusion. ChatGPT was used only to support the initial mapping of each text to these criteria. The first author then reviewed each text and made the final inclusion decision. Five texts were excluded because they did not meet the basic genre requirements, such as being predominantly descriptive, unfinished, or lacking a conclusion. The screening was completed before Theme-Rheme analysis and was based on genre eligibility rather than thematic performance. The remaining 20 texts formed the corpus analyzed in this study.

3.3. Data Analysis Procedure

The data were analyzed deductively using predetermined categories from Systemic Functional Linguistics. Theme types were analyzed based on Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), while thematic progression was analyzed using Bloor and Bloor (2013). UAM CorpusTool was used to support text annotation, corpus organization, and frequency analysis.

First, each text was segmented into finite ranking clauses and divided into Theme and Rheme. Theme elements were then classified as topical, textual, or interpersonal, with topical Themes further identified as marked or unmarked. Second, relationships between Themes and Rhemes across successive clauses were classified into constant Theme, linear Theme, split Rheme, and derived Theme patterns. Brand-new Theme and the empty use of there were also identified as problematic features. ChatGPT was used only as a supporting tool during the preliminary classification, while all segmentation and classifications were manually checked by the first author against the adopted frameworks. Ambiguous cases were discussed with the supervisors before the final classification was determined. Finally, the occurrences of each category were counted and converted into percentages to describe the distribution of Theme types and thematic progression patterns across the 20 texts.

4.1. Theme Types

Theme types analysis was conducted to identify how students organized information at the clause level in their argumentative texts. Based on the analysis of 20 argumentative texts, three Theme types were identified, namely topical Theme, textual Theme, and interpersonal Theme. The distribution of Theme types realized in each text is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of Theme Types in Students' Argumentative Texts

Text Number	Total Occurrence		
	Topical	Textual	Interpersonal
T1	13	8	-
T2	11	7	-
T3	7	3	-
T4	12	8	-
T5	9	7	1
T6	9	4	-
T7	17	7	-
T8	13	10	1
T9	10	5	1
T10	13	5	2
T11	9	3	-
T12	12	5	-
T13	10	5	-
T14	10	6	-
T15	15	8	-
T16	7	3	1
T17	5	3	-
T18	11	5	-
T19	11	7	-
T20	14	13	-
Total	218	122	6
Total Themes	346		
Percentage	63.01%	35.26%	1.73%

As presented in Table 1, a total of 346 theme elements were identified in the 20 undergraduate students' argumentative texts. Topical theme was the most frequently realized type, with 218 occurrences or 63.01% of the total theme elements. It was followed by textual theme, which occurred 122 times or 35.26%. Interpersonal theme was the least frequently realized type, with only six occurrences or 1.73%. These findings show that the students predominantly used topical themes as the points of departure of their clauses.

4.1.1. Topical Theme

Topical theme was the most frequently identified theme type in the undergraduate students' argumentative texts. It occurred 218 times, accounting for 63.01% of the 346 theme elements identified in the data. Topical theme represents the first experiential element of a clause and functions as the main point of departure of the message. In the analyzed texts, topical themes were realized by nominal groups, prepositional phrases, and adverbial groups.

Table 2: Distribution of the Realizations of Topical Themes

Text Number	Total Occurrence		
	Nominal Group	Prepositional Phrase	Adverbial Group
T1	13	-	-
T2	10	-	1
T3	5	2	-
T4	11	-	1
T5	8	1	-
T6	8	1	-
T7	15	2	-
T8	13	-	-
T9	9	1	-
T10	10	3	-
T11	6	2	1
T12	11	1	-
T13	9	1	-
T14	8	2	-
T15	13	2	-
T16	7	-	-
T17	3	2	-
T18	9	2	-
T19	11	-	-
T20	13	1	-
Total	192	23	3
Total Topical Theme	218		
Percentage	88.07%	10.55%	1.38%

Topical Themes in the analyzed texts were realized through three grammatical forms, namely nominal groups, prepositional phrases, and adverbial groups. These realizations represent the different grammatical forms through which topical Themes were identified in the students' argumentative texts. The following examples illustrate the realization of topical Themes through these three forms.

Table 3: Example of Topical Theme

Topical Theme	
A pleasant teacher (Nominal Group)	can also create a harmonious and comfortable class.
According to Noam Chomsky (2006), (Prepositional Phrase)	really understanding a language comes down to mastering generative grammar.
where (Adverbial Group)	students participated in structured debates

Topical Themes were further classified into unmarked and marked Themes based on their position and function within the clause. An unmarked topical Theme occurs when the Theme occupies the expected position in the clause, whereas a marked topical Theme occurs when another experiential element is placed before the expected Theme (Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). This classification was used to examine how students positioned experiential information as the starting point of their messages, and the distribution of unmarked and marked topical Themes is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Distribution of Unmarked and Marked Topical Themes

Text Number	Topical Theme	
	Unmarked	Marked
T1	13	-
T2	11	-
T3	5	2
T4	12	-
T5	8	1
T6	8	1
T7	15	2
T8	13	-
T9	9	1
T10	10	3
T11	7	2
T12	11	1
T13	9	1
T14	8	2
T15	13	2
T16	7	-
T17	3	2
T18	9	2
T19	11	-
T20	13	1
Total	195	23
Total Topical	218	
Percentage	89.45%	10.55%

The analysis further identified two classifications of topical Theme based on their markedness, namely unmarked and marked topical Themes. Unmarked topical Themes occur when the Theme corresponds to the expected Subject position, whereas marked topical Themes occur when another experiential element is placed in the initial position of the clause (Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The following examples illustrate the unmarked and marked topical Themes identified in the students' argumentative texts.

Table 5: Example of Unmarked and Marked Topical Theme

Topical Theme	
Huda (Unmarked)	emphasizes biological approaches and clinical interventions.
From both perspectives, (Marked)	it is clear

Overall, topical Themes were realized through nominal groups, prepositional phrases, and adverbial groups, with nominal groups being the most frequently identified realization. The analysis also showed that unmarked topical Themes occurred more frequently than marked topical Themes in the students' argumentative texts. The examples presented above illustrate the grammatical realizations and markedness classifications of topical Themes identified in the data.

4.1.2. Interpersonal Theme

Interpersonal theme was the least frequently identified theme type in the undergraduate students' argumentative texts. A total of six interpersonal themes were found, accounting for 1.73% of the 346 theme elements. All interpersonal themes in the data were realized by modal or comment adjuncts, while no vocatives or finite verbal operators functioning as interpersonal themes were identified.

Table 6: Example of Interpersonal Theme

Interpersonal Theme	
In my opinion, (Comment Adjunct)	having a strong grasp of English means blending good grammar skills with confidence in using it as a universal language.

As shown in Table 6, the six interpersonal Themes identified in the students' argumentative texts were all realized through modal or comment adjuncts. No vocatives or finite verbal operators were found to function as interpersonal Themes in the analyzed texts. Thus, modal or comment adjuncts constituted the only realization of interpersonal Theme identified in the data.

4.1.3. Textual Theme

Textual theme was the second most frequently identified theme type in the undergraduate students' argumentative texts. A total of 122 textual themes were identified, accounting for 35.26% of the 346 theme elements. In the analyzed texts, textual themes were realized by conjunctions and conjunctive adjuncts, while no textual theme realized by a continuative was found.

Table 7: Example of Textual Theme

Textual Theme	
But (Conjunction)	It has more negative effects.
Therefore, (Conjunctive Adjunct)	mental health approaches should involve a broader understanding within a social context.

As shown in the table, the identified textual Themes were realized through conjunctions and conjunctive adjuncts. Conjunctions accounted for the larger proportion of the textual Theme realizations, while conjunctive adjuncts occurred less frequently. No continuative functioning as a textual Theme was identified in the analyzed argumentative texts.

4.2. Thematic Progression

Thematic progression analysis was conducted to examine how information was developed across clauses in the undergraduate students' argumentative texts. The analysis identified four thematic progression patterns, namely constant Theme, linear Theme, split Rheme, and derived Theme, as well as two problematic features, namely brand-new Theme and the empty use of "there." A total of 198 thematic progression occurrences were identified across the 20 analyzed texts. The frequency and percentage of each thematic progression pattern and problematic feature are presented in Table 8.

Table 8: Distribution of Thematic Progression Patterns and Problematic Features

Text Number	Total Occurrence					The Empty Use of "There"
	Constant Theme	Linear Theme	Split Rheme	Derived Theme	Brand-new Theme	
T1	4	4	-	-	4	-
T2	3	4	-	-	3	-
T3	2	0	-	2	2	-
T4	4	3	2	-	2	-
T5	2	3	-	1	2	-
T6	3	2	-	2	1	-
T7	4	5	2	-	2	3
T8	4	4	-	-	4	-
T9	3	5	-	1	0	-
T10	1	3	2	2	4	-
T11	2	3	-	1	2	-
T12	2	2	2	2	3	-
T13	3	1	-	2	3	-
T14	4	3	-	1	1	-
T15	6	5	-	1	2	-
T16	3	1	-	-	2	-
T17	0	1	-	1	2	-
T18	3	4	-	2	1	-
T19	3	1	2	2	2	-
T20	8	3	-	-	2	-
Total	64	57	10	20	44	3
Total Relationship	198					
Percentage	32.32%	28.79%	5.05%	10.10%	22.22%	1.52%

The constant Theme pattern was the most frequently identified thematic progression pattern in the undergraduate students' argumentative texts, with 64 occurrences (32.32%) out of the 198 thematic progression occurrences. According to Bloor and Bloor (2013), this pattern occurs when the same Theme is maintained across successive clauses while different information is presented in the Rhemes. In the analyzed texts, the constant Theme pattern was identified when the Theme of a clause was repeated or maintained as the Theme of the following clause. The following example illustrates the constant Theme pattern identified in the students' argumentative texts.

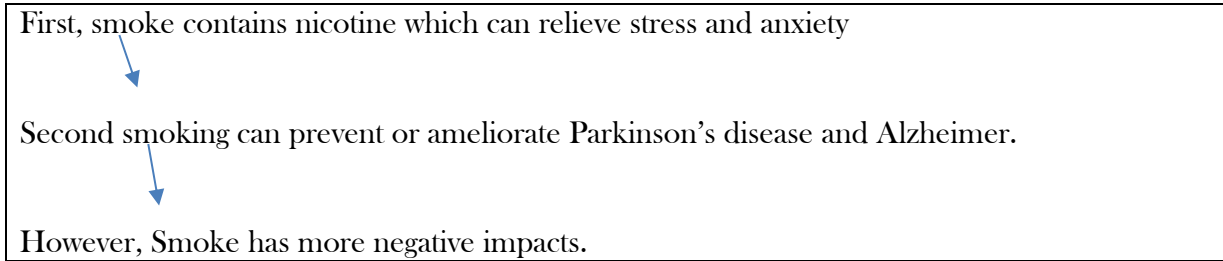


Figure 7. Example of Constant Theme Pattern

The linear Theme pattern was the second most frequently identified thematic progression pattern in the undergraduate students' argumentative texts, with 57 occurrences (28.79%) out of the 198 thematic progression occurrences. According to Bloor and Bloor (2013), this pattern occurs when the information presented in the Rheme of one clause becomes the Theme of the following clause, allowing information to develop from one clause to another. In the analyzed texts, the linear Theme pattern was identified when a Rheme element in one clause was subsequently taken up as the Theme in the following clause. The following example illustrates the linear Theme pattern identified in the students' argumentative texts.

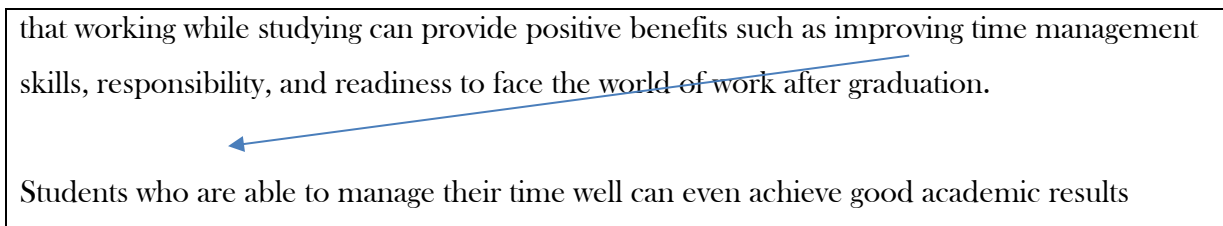


Figure 8. Example of Linear Theme Pattern

The split Rheme pattern was identified in 10 occurrences (5.05%) out of the 198 thematic progression occurrences in the undergraduate students' argumentative texts. According to Bloor and Bloor (2013), this pattern occurs when the Rheme of one clause contains two or more pieces of information that are subsequently developed as Themes in following clauses. In the analyzed texts, the split Rheme pattern was identified when information introduced together in one Rheme was divided and taken up as separate Themes in subsequent clauses. The following example illustrates the split Rheme pattern identified in the students' argumentative texts.

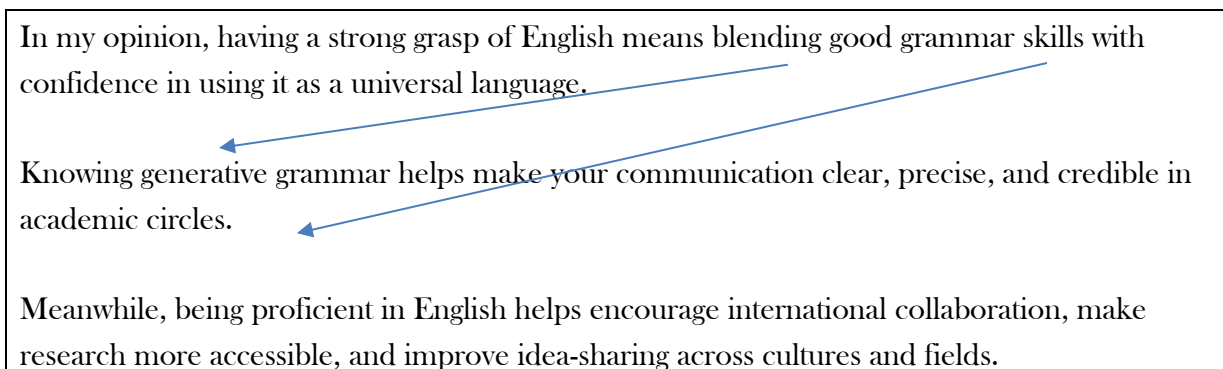


Figure 9. Example of Split Rheme Pattern

The derived Theme pattern was identified in 20 occurrences (10.10%) out of the 198 thematic progression occurrences in the undergraduate students' argumentative texts. According to Bloor and Bloor (2013), this pattern occurs when several Themes in successive clauses are derived from a broader Theme or overall topic established in the discourse. In the analyzed texts, the derived Theme pattern was identified when different Themes were related to and developed from a broader preceding topic rather than being directly repeated from the previous clause. The following example illustrates the derived Theme pattern identified in the students' argumentative texts.

According to Sneddon (2003), the Indonesian language has absorbed a significant amount of vocabulary from Sanskrit, Arabic, Dutch, and English due to cultural contact and colonialism, making it dynamic but also at risk of losing its purity.

On the other hand, Alwi et al. (2000) argue that Indonesian has developed and refined elements of the Malay language through a more systematic grammatical structure to support modern communication needs.

Based on these two perspectives, Indonesian appears to be a language that both absorbs and refines elements from other languages.

Figure 10. Example of Derived Theme Pattern

The brand-new Theme was identified in 44 occurrences (22.22%) out of the 198 thematic progression occurrences in the undergraduate students' argumentative texts. Jusoh et al. (2022) describe brand-new Theme as a thematic problem in which new information is introduced in the Theme without being appropriately connected to the preceding information. In the analyzed texts, a brand-new Theme was identified when the topical Theme of a clause did not establish a clear connection with the Theme or Rheme of the preceding clause. The following example illustrates the brand-new Theme identified in the students' argumentative texts.

On the other hand, smoking its expensive

and we must carefully choose our decision either be a smoker or no

Figure 11. Example of Brand-new Theme

The empty use of "there" was identified in three occurrences (1.52%) out of the 198 thematic relationships in the undergraduate students' argumentative texts. Jusoh et al. (2022) identify the use of there as a potential problematic feature when it does not establish a meaningful connection with the preceding discourse. In this study, the empty use of there was identified when an existential there appeared as the point of departure of a clause but did not continue or meaningfully develop the information introduced in the preceding clause. All three occurrences were found in Text 7.

Furthermore, *There* is a study (2013) conducted by researchers at the University of Utah that analyzed brain scans from over 1,000 individuals aged 7 to 29 and concluded that either part of the brain was more active than the others.

Figure 12. Example of Empty Use of “There”

Overall, the analysis identified 198 thematic progression occurrences across the 20 undergraduate students' argumentative texts. The constant Theme pattern occurred most frequently with 64 occurrences (32.32%), followed by the linear Theme pattern with 57 occurrences (28.79%), while the derived Theme pattern occurred 20 times (10.10%) and the split Rheme pattern occurred 10 times (5.05%). In addition, two problematic features were identified, namely brand-new Theme, with 44 occurrences (22.22%), and the empty use of “there”, with three occurrences (1.52%). These findings show the distribution of the thematic progression patterns and problematic features identified in the analyzed argumentative texts.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings show that topical Theme was the dominant Theme type, accounting for 63.01% of all Theme elements, followed by textual Theme at 35.26%, while interpersonal Theme accounted for only 1.73%. This distribution is broadly consistent with previous research on EFL student writing. Feri et al. (2023) found topical Theme in both high- and low-scoring essays, while Sun et al. (2024a) also reported topical Theme as the dominant type in IELTS essays. Similar tendencies were identified by Allagbé et al. (2023), Bangga (2021), Tarigan and Zahiri (2025), and Mubarak (2021), particularly in the frequent use of unmarked topical Themes.

The predominance of topical Theme in the present study therefore suggests that students generally organized clauses around participants, concepts, or circumstances directly related to their arguments. However, topical Theme dominance should not by itself be interpreted as evidence of effective writing because topical Theme is a basic resource for construing experiential information. More revealing is the predominance of unmarked topical Themes, which indicates that the students generally preferred conventional Subject-initial organization rather than frequently foregrounding other experiential elements. Allagbé et al. (2023) similarly associated the prevalence of unmarked Themes with the usual positioning of Subjects, while Mubarak (2021) also found unmarked topical Theme to dominate undergraduate academic texts.

The relatively substantial use of textual Theme shows another dimension of the students' organization. Conjunctions and conjunctive adjuncts were regularly placed in thematic position to signal relationships between propositions. Tarigan and Zahiri (2025), for example, reported textual Theme as the second major Theme type in undergraduate argumentative writing, while Sun et al. (2024a) found that textual Themes became more prominent as the level of IELTS essays increased.

Nevertheless, the presence of textual Themes should not automatically be equated with coherence. A conjunction can explicitly signal addition, contrast, or consequence while the propositions it connects remain weakly related. Thus, the 35.26% textual Theme occurrence indicates that the students made frequent use of explicit linking resources, but their effectiveness must also be considered together with thematic progression. Interpersonal Theme, in contrast, occurred only six times. Its low frequency is comparable with Tarigan and Zahiri (2025), who

found interpersonal Theme to be very limited in their argumentative data. This does not necessarily mean that the students lacked stance because evaluation may also be realized outside thematic position. Rather, the result shows that explicitly interpersonal elements such as modal and comment adjuncts were rarely selected as clause openings.

The thematic progression findings provide a more detailed picture of how these clause-level choices developed across the texts. Constant Theme was the most frequent pattern at 32.32%, followed closely by linear Theme at 28.79%. The predominance of constant Theme pattern agrees with Haji (2024), Nurjannah et al. (2023), Sari and Agustina (2022), Nicolas and Hartono (2022), and Keskin and Koçbaşı Demir (2021), all of whom found strong reliance on repeated or constant Themes in student writing. Haji (2024), for example, identified constant Theme as dominant in Tunisian argumentative essays, whereas Nurjannah et al. (2023), working with second-semester students in the same institutional context as the present study, also found constant Theme to occur most frequently. Sari and Agustina (2022) reported Constant Theme in 67.2% of their argumentative-essay data, and Nicolas and Hartono (2022) found constant Theme to account for 59% of progression in undergraduate final-project backgrounds. Keskin and Koçbaşı Demir (2021) likewise reported constant Theme far more frequently than other patterns in both groups they examined.

However, constant Theme is not uniformly dominant across studies, and this contrast is important. Hariyadi et al. (2023) found linear Theme slightly more frequent than constant Theme in analytical exposition texts. Proficiency-based studies provide a further distinction. Feri et al. (2023) found greater reliance on linear Theme in higher-scoring essays but more constant Theme in lower-scoring essays, and Sun et al. (2024a) similarly reported a decrease in constant Theme and an increase in linear Theme as writing level increased. Saepuloh (2023) also found that although constant Theme was dominant overall, some middle- and high-achieving students relied more heavily on linear Theme when developing argumentative exposition. These comparisons suggest that constant Theme is useful for maintaining topic focus, whereas linear Theme offers greater opportunity for cumulative development by turning information introduced in a Rheme into the point of departure of a subsequent clause. The present data should not, however, be interpreted as evidence of a particular proficiency level because the students' texts were not grouped or scored according to writing quality. More cautiously, the relatively small difference between constant and linear Theme indicates that the students used both topic maintenance and information development rather than depending exclusively on repetition.

The less frequent occurrence of split Rheme (5.05%) and derived Theme (10.10%) also deserves attention. Haji (2024) reported limited split Rheme and no derived Theme in the argumentative essays examined, while Sari and Agustina (2022) found multiple-Theme development to be the least frequently selected pattern. Nicolas and Hartono (2022) similarly reported only 2% multiple-Theme progression. Allagbé et al. (2023) also found no multiple-Rheme pattern in their argumentative corpus. In comparison, the 10.10% occurrence of derived Theme in the present study is noteworthy because it shows that some students were able to organize different Themes around a broader semantic point. Nevertheless, both derived and split patterns require the writer to manage several related pieces of information simultaneously, which may help explain their lower frequencies. Their limited use should not automatically be treated as a deficiency, since Sun et al. (2024b) showed in their systematic review that the distribution of thematic progression

patterns varies considerably across writing genres and contexts. Different genres therefore do not necessarily require identical proportions of each progression pattern.

A more substantial concern is the occurrence of brand-new Theme, which represented 22.22% of the thematic relationships. This percentage is not marginal: it approaches the frequency of linear progression and therefore indicates that discontinuous introduction of information occurred repeatedly across the corpus. Similar problems have been reported in several studies. Pavavijarn (2022) found frequent brand-new Themes particularly in lower-scoring argumentative essays and associated them with disrupted connections between old and new information. Islam et al. (2022) likewise reported brand-new Theme as a frequent problem in undergraduate argumentative essays, where students introduced information that was not clearly linked to preceding clauses. Khorina et al. (2024) identified brand-new Theme among the main thematic-progression problems in students' academic writing, while the systematic review by Jusoh et al. (2022) lists brand-new Theme among recurring problems documented across student-writing studies. The present finding therefore suggests that the students could maintain and develop information through constant and linear patterns but still encountered difficulty when shifting to new claims or supporting points. Importantly, introducing a new Theme is not inherently problematic; the problem arises when the new Theme has no recoverable semantic or referential relationship with the preceding discourse.

By comparison, the empty use of “there” occurred only three times, or 1.52%, and all cases appeared in one text. It should therefore be interpreted as a localized rather than corpus-wide problem. Keskin and Koçbaşı Demir (2021) include overuse of there among potential problems of Theme-Rheme management, while Jusoh et al. (2022) similarly identify empty Themes and related disruptions among problematic thematic features. The contrast between 22.22% brand-new Theme and 1.52% empty there suggests that the more important issue in the present corpus was not existential construction itself but the broader challenge of maintaining recognizable links when introducing new information.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the students already possessed several resources for organizing argumentative writing: they predominantly used topical Themes, employed textual Themes to signal relationships, and combined constant and linear progression to maintain and develop information. At the same time, the frequency of brand-new Themes indicates that continuity across argumentative moves remains an area for development. This interpretation also has pedagogical relevance. Nhung and Hiep (2023) found that explicit instruction in thematic progression was followed by improvement in students' coherence and cohesion scores, while Hariyadi et al. (2023) reported improvement after thematic progression was incorporated into instruction. Bangga (2021) and Tarigan and Zahir (2025) similarly emphasize the pedagogical value of making Theme and thematic progression explicit in EFL writing instruction. These intervention findings cannot be taken as evidence that the same effects would necessarily occur with the participants in the present study. However, given that these second-semester students were simultaneously developing knowledge of functional grammar and academic writing, connecting Theme-Rheme concepts more explicitly with actual writing tasks may help them see how grammatical choices operate beyond individual clauses and contribute to the development of an argument.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed Theme types and thematic progression in undergraduate students' argumentative texts from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics. Based on the findings, several conclusions can be drawn to answer the research questions. First, the students realized three types of Theme, namely topical, textual, and interpersonal Theme, with topical Theme being the most dominant, followed by textual Theme, while interpersonal Theme occurred least frequently. Topical Themes were mainly realized through nominal groups and were predominantly unmarked, while textual Themes were realized through conjunctions and conjunctive adjuncts, and interpersonal Themes were realized through modal or comment adjuncts. Second, the students employed four thematic progression patterns, namely constant Theme, linear Theme, split Rheme, and derived Theme, with constant Theme and linear Theme occurring most frequently. Finally, the analysis also identified brand-new Theme and the empty use of there as problematic features in the thematic development of the students' argumentative texts. Overall, the findings show that the students employed various Theme types and thematic progression patterns to organize information in their argumentative writing, although problematic thematic development was still present in some texts.

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