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TOWARDS COHERENCE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE THEME IN THE WRITING OF ARAB EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract. *This study investigates the challenges that L1 Arabic EAP students experience in creating coherent texts, specifically concerning the use of the systemic functional linguistics (SFL) notion of Theme. Data included twenty-two writing samples of eleven students throughout a year-long academic writing course. The texts were analyzed for marked Themes, Thematic progression (TP), and multiple Themes. Results show that marked Themes increased significantly, not only facilitating the reading of the texts but also pointing towards possible development in reader awareness. Additionally, the use of coherent TP patterns improved slightly, indicating better choices in building on and developing meanings. In contrast, the use of multiple Themes did not increase, demonstrating a lack of sophistication in orienting the reader. It can be concluded that writing instruction to L1 Arab speakers should ensure that all three Thematic features examined in this study are made visible and practiced.*

Key words: *L1 Arabic writers of English, coherence in writing, SFL Theme, SFL Thematic progression*

1. INTRODUCTION

EFL learners find it challenging to write EAP texts that attend to content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary, and mechanics (Abu Rass, 2001; Shokprour and Fallahzadeh 2007) while demonstrating ‘critical thinking, logical development, and coherence of ideas’ (Choo 2009, 15). They should also achieve familiarity with writing processes and language features such as “formality, objectivity, and complexity to use the language precisely and accurately” (Tài 2017, 641) besides different ways of connecting ideas (Shriganeshan 2017).

It is also important to have the ability to present their ideas in a logical order and support their opinion (Gudkova 2021).

Regarding Arabic-speaking EFL learners, attaining familiarity with English rhetoric and structures (Al-Khatib 2017) can present a hurdle when learning writing for EAP (Al-Khatib 2017; Alkubaidi 2019; Elachachi 2015; Kaplan 1966), especially concerning the construal of cohesion, the focus of the current research.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Investigation of cohesion in writing among L1 Arabic speakers began with Kaplan's (1966) seminal study, which observed that Arabic rhetorical patterns tend to get transferred into English writing, citing that L1 Arabic students' paragraph development is based on a complex series of parallel constructions, resulting in "circular and non-cumulative" text organization. More recent studies have concurred with Kaplan's (1966) findings. For example, Allen (1970) found that English texts written by L1 Arabic writers might reach the same point two or three times from different angles so that an L1 English reader "has the curious feeling that nothing is happening" (cited in Sa'adeddin 1989, 36). Further, the transfer of some Arabic stylistics has been noted (Koch 1983), such as the extensive use of parallelism and repetition of the most powerful words and phrases. Other research has found that Arab writers often use rather long sentences linked by coordinating conjunctions (Al-Khatib 2001; Oshima & Hougeas cited in Almeahadi 2012), in which they write around the topic and repeat phrases before stating the main points (Dweik as cited in Alsamadani 2010). In addition, Jordanian student writing in English has seemed to be characterized by a lack of organization and unclear linking of ideas (Khuwaileh and Al Shoumali 2000; Lakkis and Abdel Malak 2002).

With regard to cohesive devices, several studies have observed how L1 Arabic students transfer the Arabic features of cohesion into their English essays, resulting both in the misuse of such devices as well as textual deviation (Qaddumi 1995). Ahmed's 2010 study at the Helwan Faculty of Education in Egypt reveals that cohesion and coherence are challenging for students. Similarly, Modhish's 2012 investigation of cohesive devices among 50 Yemini students shows the use of elaborative cohesive devices followed by inferential, contrastive, causative, and topic-relating markers. Further, Fareh's 2014 analysis of five hundred essays by Arab students finds a lack of coherence, cohesion, and logical relations between sentences, as well as ineffective paragraph development. This resonates with Aldera's (2016) Saudi Arabian findings, revealing a lack of logical progression, organization, inter-sentence relations, and cohesive devices in the writing of advanced learners in the Najran University English MA program.

To analyze the construal of cohesion by EFL learners, much research has been conducted within systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Eggins 1994; Schleppegrell 2004 and 2009). SFL is a social semiotic approach to language, originated by Halliday in the 1960s (Yang, Ramfrez and Harman 2007), emphasizing the role of language as a meaning-making resource. Of interest in the present research on coherence is the SFL notion of Theme. Nam and Park (2015) define Theme as the initial position of a sentence, "where background information is condensed and connected to new arguments in a logical manner, and thus, can serve as a powerful method of [text] development" (99). According to Eggins (1994), the Theme contains given information, which is relatively familiar or which has already been mentioned somewhere else in the text, while the ensuing Rheme contains new information. Such Theme-Rheme patterns contribute to a logical unfolding of the text, helping to "guide...readers effectively through the texts" (Rosa 2007, 97), ultimately leading to its cohesiveness. If writers fail to move from Theme to Rheme effectively, readers may not follow the development of an idea or argument in a text (Wang 2007) or even understand the text (Halliday and Matthiessen

2004). In this study, three aspects of Theme were analyzed: Marked Themes, Thematic progression, and Multiple Themes.

Writers have the choice of using unmarked or marked Themes. In the unmarked case, the Theme functions as the topic of the clause (topical). In contrast, marked Themes do not function as the topic, but textually (Eggins 1994), such as “and” or interpersonally, such as “unfortunately”. When writers use a marked Theme, they “signal that all things are not equal, that something in the text requires an atypical meaning to be made” (Eggins 1994), serving as an acknowledgment of the need to construe cohesiveness between ideas for the reader. In contrast, the choice of using mostly unmarked Themes could indicate that the writer is inexperienced and has a limited repertoire (Zhou 2020), thus placing the burden on the reader to create cohesiveness. For example, in Indonesia, Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi (2012) carried out a study to analyze Theme position, type in terms of marked and unmarked, and frequency in the writing of 180 compositions written by 60 EFL students: 20 sophomores, 20 juniors, and 20 seniors in which they narrated three pictorial stories in three sessions of 45 minutes each. While approximately 91% of sophomores did not use marked Themes, frequency increased steadily each year, demonstrating a correlation between learner use of more marked Themes with increased experience and level.

Next, Thematic Progression (TP), or how Themes unfold throughout a text, has become important in examining EFL student writing (Arunsirot 2013; Herriman 2011; Lu 2013, Pavavijam 2022; Wang 2007), especially at the tertiary level, where students are expected to introduce and develop concepts/ideas in extended texts. Several researchers have analyzed the Thematic Progression of EFL writers in English. Based on the Theme analysis of different researchers, Kraus (2018) has identified three TP patterns: (1) constant, (2) linear, and (3) split. A constant TP pattern is one in which the Theme of a prior sentence is repeated in the following sentence in different ways such as through repetition, reference, or synonymy. A linear TP occurs when the Rheme of a clause is taken up as the Theme in the next: “I ate the *pizza*. *It* was delicious”. A split Rheme progression is one in which a Rheme consisting of two elements is taken up in two subsequent separate Themes: “I ate *pizza* and fried chicken. The *pizza* was delicious. The *fried chicken* was too salty”. Additionally, derived Themes in subsequent clauses are derived from a Hypertheme of a paragraph or another section of the text (Danes as cited in Jing, 2015). There are also peripheral themes (McCabe 1999), which do not necessarily detract from the coherence of a text but at the same time might not contribute to TP. McCabe (1999) identifies three types of these: grammatical, extralinguistic, and metatextual. The grammatical Themes start with ‘it’, ‘there is/are’, interrogative wh-constructs, and cataphoric references. Extralinguistic Themes refer to the writer through the personal pronoun “I”, or address the reader personally with “you” or “we”. Metatextual Themes refer to the text itself such as in “This essay will...”

Concerning EFL learner choices of TP, some of Wang’s (2007) findings include overuse of constant progression; insertion of material between Rheme and subsequent thematization; use of empty Rhemes i.e. with no conceptual content to develop in the subsequent Theme; overuse of “there is/are” as Theme; using Themes with unclear reference; and overuse of brand new Themes. In another study, Nam & Park (2015) analyzed the use of Theme in the development of Korean students’ argumentative essays, compared to those written by L1 English speakers. Their analysis shows a striking difference between the L1 Korean and L1 English speakers’ essays in all four key

aspects of thematic structure: length, function, plurality, and semantic role. Based on their results, the researchers note that Korean students tend to overuse highly formulaic and repetitive Themes.

Kraus (2018) examined the use and the potential pedagogic value of TP for Thai EFL students in an academic writing course, showing that Thai students demonstrate similar weaknesses in their writing that previous studies had shown. For example, the students used a great deal of constant progression, placed “there is/there are” as clause openings, and employed a high number of new Themes. In the study, Kraus (2018) indicated that the overuse of constant progression could indicate the limitedness of students in using a variety of forms to express opinions.

Finally, writers might use multiple Themes to construe cohesiveness among ideas (Hasselguard 2000) to help the reader not only to follow the flow of information but also to understand how a text is intended to be interpreted. The use of multiple Themes is often found among high achievers (Emilia, Habibi, and Bangsa 2018), while their correct use can be difficult for English language learners. For example, in Zhou’s (2020) comparison between the use of single and multiple Themes in English abstracts of an MA thesis in psycholinguistics with their Chinese translations, results revealed that 14 out of 21 multiple Themes in English were realized by the repetition of common conjunctions and deemed “not appropriate in most cases” (784).

3. THE OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Though interest in the challenges of construing cohesion among Arabic speakers worldwide is evident in the literature, there seems to be scarce attention paid to the fine-grain data afforded by Theme analysis or the English writing of Arabic-speaking students in Israel (Chaleila & Garra-Alloush, 2019). As such, the present research aimed to track the progress of construing cohesion by Arabic-speaking EFL students studying academic writing at a teacher training college in central Israel, as indicated by the use of unmarked Themes, multiple Themes, and TP between two texts, one written at the beginning of the semester (T1) and the other written at the end (T2).

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

4.1. Research questions

Our research set out to answer the following questions.

1. In T1 and T2:
 - a. What kinds of multiple Theme constellations can be found?
 - b. What kinds of marked Theme functions can be found?
 - c. What kinds of Thematic progression patterns can be found?
2. Between T1 and T2, was there a significant increase in:
 - a. the use of multiple Theme constellations, and if so, which ones;
 - b. the use of marked Themes, and if so which ones;
 - c. different patterns of TP, and if so, which ones?

4.2. Research methods

This mixed-methods study included a qualitative element in which 22 samples (T1 and T2) of 11 students (pseudonyms) were examined in terms of marked/unmarked Themes and their functions/constellations, single v. multiple Themes and their functions, and Thematic progressions and their patterns. For the quantitative portion, features were tallied for T1 and T2, followed by a statistical significance test ($p < .05$) to indicate whether the increase/decrease was significant from T1 to T2.

4.3. Context

The four-hour weekly academic writing course was part of the B.Ed curriculum offered to 17 first-year pre-service teachers majoring in EFL at a teacher training college in the central part of Israel. The course was taught by Abu Rass, a former EFL learner and L1 speaker of Arabic, who had been teaching writing to Arabic speakers for 20 years. A process-writing pedagogy was adopted in this course, prioritizing process over product, gradually aiming to enable students to produce well-written paragraphs and short essays to fulfill current and future academic English requirements. Writing, editing, and revising were regularly practiced. Cohesion was addressed with regard to the use of connectors and transition words in general but not specifically introduced or taught through the prism of the SFL features analysed in this study. The writing assignments analyzed in this study were:

- Essay 1 (T1) (paragraph): assigned at the beginning of the first semester, without any prior instruction, explaining the learner's reasons for studying to be an English teacher at this particular college.
- Essay (T2) (essay): assigned at the end of the course, arguing for or against online education.

4.4. Data Analysis

For this study, 22 samples (T1 and T2) of 11 students were analyzed in terms of marked/unmarked Themes, single v. multiple Themes, and Thematic progression. Analysis was carried out by an experienced SFL user (Portman), who had been teaching L1 Arabic writers of English for six years and confirmed by the participants' writing teacher (Abu Rass). Each essay was read aloud by Portman, to ascertain the overall meaning. Then, multiple Themes were identified, as well as their functions. Next, single-marked Themes were identified along with their functions. Finally, TP analysis was carried out, revealing the various TP patterns. For all analyses, features were then tallied for T1 and T2, followed by a statistical significance test ($p < .05$) to indicate whether the increase/decrease was significant from T1 to T2.

5. RESULTS

Below are the findings for the use of multiple Themes, marked Themes, and TP.

5.1. Multiple Themes

Three multiple Theme constellations were identified for both T1 and T2. The table below provides the constellations and examples of each one:

Table 1 Findings of the Multiple Theme Constellations with Examples

For all three constellations, no significant difference was found between T1

Table 1 Findings of the multiple Theme constellations with examples

Multiple Theme Constellation	Example
Interpersonal + Topical	Interpersonal + Topical
Textual + Topical	<i>At the end of the road, + I</i> just wanted to say that I'm glad to study in [college name], because it's one of the most coolest colleges around (Mo, T1)!
Textual + Interpersonal + Topical	<i>[A]nd + for me, + there is</i> a connection between being a leader and a teacher (Ra, T1).

For all three constellations, no significant difference was found between T1 and T2. The table below provides the number of instances of each multiple Theme and the p-value ($p < .05$):

Table 2 Findings of the multiple Theme constellations with examples

Multiple Theme Constellation	T1	T2	p-value ($p < .05$)	Significant
Interpersonal + Topical	11	9	0.78	No
Textual + Topical	38	60	0.19	No
Textual + Interpersonal + Topical	3	5	0.48	No
Total Multiple Themes	52	74		

While no significant differences were found between T1 and T2 in the three multiple Theme constellations, it is worth noting the use of these constellations in construing coherence. In the Interpersonal + Topical constellation, the writer evaluates the topic before introducing the topic, providing the reader with the viewpoint of the writer concerning the topic. Such a constellation helps the writer align the reader with the writer's positioning regarding the topic so that related ideational meanings construed after such a constellation are framed according to the writer's evaluation, thus construing evaluative coherence as the text continues to unfold. A Textual + Topical constellation helps the reader follow the writer's intended organization of ideational meanings, thus creating organizational coherence among the different ideational meanings that both proceed and follow. Finally, a Textual + Interpersonal + Topical constellation allows for a combination of coherent effects discussed above, yet prioritizes the organizational orientation. Such a "stacking" of multiple Themes assists the reader in following both evaluative and organizational meanings and demonstrates the writer's awareness of textual, interpersonal, and ideational types of coherence.

While the construal of coherence is evident in both drafts, it still seemed to remain emergent in the cohort of writers in this study, as multiple Themes did not increase significantly from T1 to T2.

5.2. Marked themes functions

Three marked Theme functions were identified for both T1 and T2. The table below provides the functions with examples of each one:

Table 3 Findings of the marked Theme functions with examples

Multiple Theme Constellation	Example
Topical	<i>At my previous job</i> , I achieved success in leadership when I became a shift manager... (Ra, T1)
Interpersonal	<i>It is true</i> that in order to own a computer and other devices, one may pay a respectable amount of money (Ra, T2).
Textual	<i>At the end of the road</i> I just wanted to say that I'm glad to study in XX, because it's one of the most coolest colleges around (Mo, T1)!

A significant increase between T1 and T2 was found for marked Topical and Textual themes, while no significant increase was found for marked Interpersonal themes.

Table 4 Findings of the instances of marked Theme functions

Theme Function	T1	T2	p-value (p<.05)	Significant
Topical	12	30	0.004	Yes
Interpersonal	6	7	0.80	No
Textual	19	61	0.003	Yes

Overall, the use of marked Themes increased significantly from T1 to T2, not only facilitating the reading of the texts but also suggesting a developing consciousness of the reader as an audience. As far as the types of marked Themes, significant rises were seen for Topical and Textual. Increased use of Topical Themes helps the reader follow the text, especially with regard to the orientation of time and place, thus helping the reader to frame within a specific context the ideational meanings to follow. This suggests the writer's awareness of the need to assist the reader in restricting such ideational meanings to the specific context at hand. Increased use of Textual Themes assists the reader in following the organization of the text, suggesting an increased writer's awareness of the need to orient/reorient the reader as the text unfolds. Interestingly, no increase was seen for Interpersonal Themes, perhaps signifying that the writers felt it appropriate to let the readers form their own opinion of the ideational meanings, without imposing their point of view.

5.3. Thematic progression

Eight TP patterns were identified for both T1 and T2. The table below provides examples of each one:

Table 5 Findings of the thematic progression patterns

TP Pattern	Example
Back	<i>With online education</i> [picking up on Theme 5 clauses before], you can take any program or course present in traditional four-year universities (Ma, T2).
Constant	<i>My mother</i> recommended me to study at [college name]. <i>She</i> told me that after I graduate from the... college I will be ready to be a teacher (Sh, T1).
Derived	First of all, I was loving [sic] English. <i>Since I was a child</i> [refers back to writer's 'loving' of English], I was all the time [sic] talking with myself in front of the mirror... (Ay, T1).
Extralinguistic	I believe that the advantages of online courses overweight [sic] their disadvantages. (Ma, T2).
Grammatical	<i>It's true</i> that on-line courses help students to earn time by getting rid of traffic jam, long distances, dressing up and other things (Sh, T2).
Hyperthematic	A student can usually take the course any time during the day or week (Ri, T2). [picked up from the beginning of the essay: Online courses should be part of student's classes in college...]
Linear	I chose XX college specifically because one of my teachers who taught me at high school. <i>This wonderful teacher</i> made me fall in love more and more in English, get high marks in it... (Ma, T1).
Split	I chose to learn English at XX college for many reasons: <i>First of all and the most important thing for me</i> are the wide green areas surrounding us at the college... (Mai, T1).

A significant increase between T1 and T2 was found for derived and extralinguistic TP patterns. No significant increase was found for back, constant, grammatical, hyperthematic, linear, or split TP patterns.

Table 6 Findings of the instances of thematic progression patterns

TP pattern	T1	T2	p-value ($p < .05$)	Significant
Back	4	6	0.61	No
Constant	26	17	0.33	No
Derived	12	37	0.027	Yes
Extralinguistic	1	8	0.021	Yes
Grammatical	3	9	0.083	No
Hyperthematic	18	24	0.410	No
Linear	24	23	0.888	No
Split	5	13	0.153	No

Regarding back and linear TP, there were surprisingly few instances, suggesting that building upon and developing previous ideational meanings as the text unfolded remained emergent among the students. More evidence of such lack of building and development can

be found in the consistent number of constant TP patterns from T1 to T2, as opposed to a decrease, as might be expected of more sophisticated writing. Further evidence can be seen in the lack of increase in hyperthematic and split TPs, both of which rely on the follow-up and development of ideational meanings at the macro- and hyperthematic levels. Grammatical TP did not increase, suggesting that a variety of realizations of grammatical TP might not have been present in the learners' linguistic repertoires. While the explicit building on and development of ideational meanings seemed to remain emergent, the use of derived TP rose, possibly indicating the writers' ability to pick up on a previous Rheme, yet not as explicitly as with the other TP patterns. Finally, while a significant increase in extralinguistic TP is noted, its occurrences of 1 in T1 and 8 in T2 deem this finding insignificant overall.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Multiple themes

As reported, there was no increase in the use of multiple Themes, from T1-T2 in all three constellations identified in the data. These results support the findings of Emilia, Habibi, and Bangga (2018), regarding EFL writers' lack of use of multiple Themes. It also resonates with the findings reported by Zhou (2020) concerning the inability of Chinese MA students. The lack of increase in the use of multiple Themes in the present study seems to suggest a devoid of writer awareness of the need to assist the reader in following the writer's explicit intended textual flow of ideational meanings and how these meanings should be interpreted. This results in readers having to work out these meanings on their own. While the use of multiple Themes seems to remain emergent for other learners, Reid's (1989) "reader responsibility" findings for L1 Arabic writers could account for the absence of explicit text/idea navigation markers by the participants in this research.

6.2. Marked theme functions

The increase in the use of marked Themes concurs with Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi's (2012) findings, which stated that though students tended to use unmarked themes at the beginning of the writing course, their use increased throughout their years of study. This resonates with Eggins (1994), who related the use of marked Themes as an indicator of writers' development of sophistication and diversity of resources. In reflecting on the course in this research, perhaps the emphasis on connectors and transition words helped highlight the importance of audience consideration as far as ideational and textual meanings yet did not do so about the encoding of explicit interpersonal viewpoints on the ideational meanings.

6.3. Thematic progression

Overall, the writing of the students in the present research can be characterized as emergent concerning the effective use of TP in creating and developing ideational meanings at the macro- and hyperthematic levels. Specifically, the results show that the writing of the participants in this research is similar to the writing of Korean learners in terms of the tendency to use the same kinds of Themes (Nam and Park 2015). Also, similar to Wang's (2007) findings, the writers in this study seemed to favor constant TP. However, the TP repertoire was expanded by the increase in derived TP.

Generally, it seems that the lack of explicit creation of cohesiveness could be attributed to the transfer of Arabic language stylistics, resulting in “circular and non-cumulative” nature of Arabic writing (Allen, 1970), leaving the reader to make connections that would normally be made explicit through a variety of TP patterns. This could perhaps explain the increase in derived TP, which, while acknowledging the need to assist the reader to connect ideational meanings because it does so indirectly, is still consistent with the “reader-responsible” (Hinds 1987) orientation of Arabic writing.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study support the literature regarding the difficulties EFL learners, particularly Arabic L1 writers encounter when creating cohesive EAP texts. However, the contribution of this study is that through the prism of the SFL notion of Theme, we have been able to surface some of the particular Theme-related features that show these difficulties.

This highlights the importance of raising the awareness of L1 Arabic learners in construing coherent texts through the skillful use of Multiple Themes, Theme functions, and TP. As such, we suggest that when working with L1 Arabic learners, time should be spent making visible the use of Theme to create cohesion. This can first be done by encouraging the learners to consider themselves as writers addressing real-world purposes, as opposed to simply fulfilling the presumed expectations of their teacher.

With these in mind, some pedagogical suggestions are presented:

1. Learners should be guided through text exemplars, making visible the specific realizations of multiple Themes, Theme functions, and TP as they assist in construing coherence within and between ideational and interpersonal meanings. This should be followed by extended, targeted writing practice.
2. Writing instructors should design writing tasks aimed at raising the rhetorical awareness of a genuine audience. This can be done through explicitly scaffolded assignments in response to real-world situations. Following this, student peer reviewers should read and respond to the texts, taking on the role of the presumed reader.
3. Given the stark differences between Arabic and English stylistics, contrastive analysis between writing samples in both languages should be done in class, to highlight that the languages follow different, yet legitimate conventions for construing cohesion.

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