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Thematic Progression and Thematic Repetition in IELTS Essays: Vietnamese Learners Versus a British Expert

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ABSTRACT

Coherence remains a challenge for Vietnamese English learners in argumentative writing, yet comparative evidence regarding regional universities against expert models remains scarce. This study compared thematic progression (TP) patterns and thematic repetition in IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 essays written by 40 third-year English majors at a Vietnamese regional university and 20 model essays written by a British expert writer. All essays were divided into T-units and coded within Systemic Functional Linguistics using a six-pattern TP scheme and three repetition types, with all texts coded independently by two raters. Independent-samples t-tests and Mann-Whitney U tests revealed two mirror-image differences. The students used significantly more Motivated-New transitions (d=1.07) and lexical repetition (r=0.40) than the expert, whereas the expert demonstrated more Rheme-Theme progression (d=1.31) and referential repetition (d=1.24). Theme-Theme progression and textual repetition showed no significant differences, suggesting that connective use is not the primary source of learners' coherence difficulties. Qualitative analysis further uncovered breakdowns in formulaic introductions, list-style topic sentences, inferential themes, and bare fronted time adverbials. These findings support targeted instruction in Rheme-to-Theme uptake techniques over conventional connective drills. By analyzing learner and expert texts through a replicable framework, this study pinpoints specific learner difficulties in identifiable linguistic operations and translates them into concrete classroom pedagogical targets.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ability to write coherent argumentative essays is essential in standardized English examinations, particularly IELTS Academic Writing Task 2, since Coherence is as important as Task Response, Lexical Resource, and Grammatical Range (Sun et al., 2024). Vietnamese learners commonly struggle with this skill, producing sentences that are grammatically correct but do not form a coherent text (Pham et al., 2023; Pham, 2024). As the problem lies at the text level rather than within individual sentences, it cannot be sufficiently addressed by the error-focused feedback that is usual in writing teaching and instead requires a systematic explanation of how information is organised throughout the text.

Systemic Functional Linguistics introduces a systematic model for measuring coherence using thematic progression (TP): it explains how the Theme of each message repeats or grows out of the Themes and Rhemes that came before it (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In EFL contexts, a controlled progression is linked to better writing, whereas introducing entirely new Themes relates to poorer writing (Pavavijarn, 2022; Sun et al., 2024). Two lines of research in Vietnam indicate the source of the problem. When Thang and Tam (2020) examined 24 model IELTS Task 2 essays from a well-known language learning website, they found that Simple Linear Progression, which corresponds to Rheme-Theme in Vu's (2011) terminology, was clearly the most common (42.7%), followed by constant progression (26.7%) and split-Rheme progression (24.0%). In contrast, when Pham et al. (2023) applied Vu's six-pattern system to freshmen students' argumentative paragraphs, they found that Motivated-New was the most frequent pattern, due to the overuse of textual Themes, the use of inappropriate marked Themes, and non-linear development. Therefore, the model texts show a linear trend while the learners' texts tend to show Motivated-New.

Three major shortcomings prevent these findings from being turned into effective teaching methods. Firstly, the two Vietnamese studies used different corpora and coding systems, so it is not clear whether the differences seen are due to the writers' level of expertise or to variations in the methodology. Secondly, few frameworks clearly specify what counts as a repeated Theme, which means that the coding process depends greatly on the researcher's judgment and makes it difficult to compare the results across studies (Mauranen, 1996; Wan Jusoh et al., 2022). Thirdly, although the studies usually give figures for the frequency of each progression pattern, they seldom record the specific linguistic mechanisms that link the sentences. A text that is only joined together by cohesive devices may seem just as coherent as one that shows real continuity. As a result, teachers may notice that learners tend to produce many new Themes but will have no understanding of where the thematic chains break down or of the reasons for this. These problems are especially noticeable in provincial areas, though no research has been carried out at learners at a university in the Mekong Delta. At the school looked at in this study, IELTS Writing Task 2 is introduced in the third year, coherence being mainly taught through example essays and cohesive devices. This method gives learners linking words but gives them little guidance on how to construct sentences that follow logically on from the ones before.

The present study now looks at each of the three gaps in turn. To allow for a direct comparison, it evaluates the essays of learners and experts using the same criterion-explicit framework. It both notes which progression pattern appears and records the linguistic resource that carries out each link, thus distinguishing surface cohesion from real continuity. Furthermore, it identifies where breakdowns occur, turning a general criticism of coherence into a small set of specific teaching procedures. By applying Vu's (2011) framework, which defines six TP patterns prioritising distance and three repetition types together with explicit coding rules, we compare 40 essays written by third-year English majors at a university in the Mekong Delta

with 20 model essays by a British expert writer, the essays being coded in the same way and fully double-coded. The analysis is guided by two research questions: (1) What are the differences in TP patterns between the Vietnamese ESL essays and the British expert essays? (2) What are the differences in thematic repetition types between the two groups?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theme and Rheme

Every clause is organized as a message consisting of Theme and Rheme (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The Theme is the point of departure of the message, extending from the beginning of the clause up to and including the first experiential element; the Rheme is the remainder, which typically carries new information that propels the discourse forward (Thompson, 1996). At text level, coherence emerges from how successive Themes relate to preceding Themes and Rhemes, a phenomenon first systematized by Danes (1974) as thematic progression.

In the clause *Technology has changed the way people live*, the Theme is *Technology* and the Rheme is *has changed the way people live*. In *In recent years, technology has changed the way people live*, the fronted circumstance *In recent years* becomes the Theme, and everything that follows is the Rheme. The choice matters because only material placed in Theme position can serve as the point of departure that the next sentence picks up.

2.2. Thematic progression

Vu (2011), extending the work of Danes (1974) and later developments by Lautamatti (1987) and Mauranen (1996), identifies six TP patterns at the level of the T-unit. In Rheme-Theme (RT) progression, some of the rheme from the immediately previous sentence becomes the current topical theme; in Theme-Theme (TT) progression, the topical theme from the previous sentence is reused. Extended-Rheme-Theme (ERT) and Extended-Theme-Theme (ETT) indicate the same kind of link that has been established over the units in between. A Motivated-New (MN) Theme is entirely new but is implicitly connected with the topic of the paragraph, while an Unmotivated-New (UN) Theme has no logical connection with the topic and is excluded from the counts because it reflects a failure of proficiency rather than being a rhetorical convention. The patterns are arranged in order of distance, with those involving shorter distances being coded first (see Table 1).

Table 1. Thematic pattern identification

Code	Definition	Examples
Rheme-Theme (RT)	The Rheme-Theme (RT) pattern is a thematic progression pattern where a part of the Rheme of the immediately preceding T-unit is reused as the topical Theme of the current unit.	**Mathematics** often poses a significant challenge for *learners*. **Learners** must study diligently to do well in their texts.
Theme-Theme (TT)	The Theme-Theme (TT) pattern involves the reuse of the topical Theme from the immediately preceding unit of analysis as the topical Theme of the current unit, maintaining a consistent topic across sentences.	**Sustainability** hinges on the adoption of renewable energy. **Improving sustainability** requires more improvements in technologies harnessing solar and wind.

Code	Definition	Examples
Extended-Rheme-Theme (ERT)	The Extended-Rheme-Theme (ERT) pattern involves reusing a part of a previous Rheme as the topical Theme of the current unit of analysis, but not immediately, as there are intervening units between the two occurrences.	**Marine ecosystems** are suffering due to *pollution*. The threat to numerous aquatic species is concerning. **Such environmental contamination** promotes collaborative efforts to reduce it.
Extended-Theme-Theme (ETT)	The Extended-Theme-Theme (ETT) pattern is a thematic progression pattern where a previous topical Theme is reused as the topical Theme of the current unit of analysis, but not immediately, as there are intervening units between the two occurrences.	**Marine ecosystems** are suffering due to *pollution*. The threat to numerous aquatic species is concerning. Preserving **marine ecosystems** promotes collaborative efforts to be reduced.
Motivated-New (MN)	The Motivated-New (MN) thematic progression pattern is characterized by the introduction of a totally new topical Theme in the current unit of analysis that, while unrelated to previously established Themes and Rhemes, is still implicitly linked to the main idea of the paragraph.	**Marine ecosystems** are suffering due to *pollution*. **You** should worry about the threat to numerous aquatic species is concerning.
Unmotivated-New (UN)	The Unmotivated-New (UN) thematic progression pattern refers to the introduction of a completely new topical Theme within a unit of analysis that is not only unrelated to the previously established Themes and Rhemes but also lacks a logical and semantic connection to the main idea of the paragraph.	**Marine ecosystems** are suffering due to *pollution.* People should consume less food.

Because both linked and extended patterns can apply at once, the framework decides between conflicting options based on distance: it gives priority to the nearest available link, and so a direct Rheme-Theme or Theme-Theme link is recorded before its extended version.

2.3. Thematic repetition

While thematic progression analysis examines the structural arrangements of information flow, thematic repetition analysis reinforces it by providing verifiable evidence for these links, reducing the subjectivity involved in coding (Vu, 2011). One of Vu's (2011) main contributions is the way in which he defines a Theme as being repeated. In the case of lexical repetition, there must be an explicit relationship between the words, such as exact repetition, a singular-plural or an affirmative-negative form, or a common head noun (Schneider & Connor, 1990). Referential repetition involves an explicit and direct anaphoric link, for example through the use of a pronoun or a demonstrative phrase. Textual repetition only occurs when there is neither a lexical nor a referential link, the continuity being provided solely by an internal conjunction that functions as a textual Theme; it can be used in RT transitions only, external conjunctions which

order real-world events being ignored (Martin & Rose, 2003). Transitions of the MN type contain no repetition by definition. Moreover, in order to avoid double-counting, the types of repetition are arranged in the order lexical > referential > textual, so that only the strongest semantic link between two T-units is noted (Vu, 2011). The examples are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Lexical, referential, and textual repetitions

Type	Code	Definition	Examples
Lexical	L	Thematic repetition occurs when a previous topical Theme or a Rheme is lexically reused through exact word repetition, taxonomic relations (e.g., synonyms), or shared head nouns.	**Modern technology** enables rapid communication across vast distances. **The importance of such technology** has grown significantly in the digital era.
Referential	R	Thematic repetition occurs using an anaphoric expression that directly references a prior topical Theme or Rheme.	**Many of the jobs today** demand high levels of *technical knowledge*. **This expertise** is more crucial in the modern industry than it was in previous decades.
Textual	T	Thematic repetition is achieved by employing a textual Theme that explicitly connects to the T-unit that immediately precedes it.	This means that, in the near future, **we** will witness cultural diversity in every part of the world. For example, **the cutting-edge world** is representing the traditional heritage of other countries called the global village with the help of the internet.

Topical Theme: Bold and underlined;
Interpersonal Theme: Bold;
Textual Theme: Underlined;
Objects being referred to: Italic

2.4. Previous studies and the research gap

2.4.1. Thematic progression and writing quality.

A few studies on TP and essay quality show one common pattern: high scoring texts have a balanced mix of progression types based on linear uptake whereas low scoring essays are marked with brand-new Themes. Pavavijarn (2022) compared a rubric-rated Thai EFL essay as low scoring as well as high scoring ones and found it very consistently to make use of brand-new Themes and thematize the Rhemes and split Rhemes in a controlled manner. Soleymanzadeh and Gholami (2014) also found that the Iranian students' IELTS essays were mainly based on constant progression followed by simple linear and split-Rheme progression and Sari and Agustina (2022) showed theme reiteration to be the most common pattern as compared to zig-zag (26.0%) and multiple themes (6.8%) in 13 Indonesian argumentative essays. Fitriati and Gayatri (2021) combined the recurring problems of EFL writing and presented them in terms of brand-new Themes, empty Rhemes and Themes, continuous progression and ambiguous selection of textual Themes in a review of 31 studies.

2.4.2. Vietnamese contexts

Two strands of Vietnamese research, read side by side, anticipate the learner-expert divide tested here. Analyzing 24 model IELTS Task 2 samples from a popular learning website, Thang and Tam (2020) found Simple Linear Progression, equivalent to RT in Vu's (2011) terms, clearly dominant (42.7%), followed by constant (26.7%) and split-Rheme progression (24.0%), though even these model texts showed inappropriate Theme positioning and overuse of non-referential It and There. By contrast, applying Vu's (2011) six-pattern system to freshmen's argumentative paragraphs, Pham et al. (2023) found Motivated-New the most frequent pattern, attributed to overused textual Themes, inappropriate marked Themes, and non-linear idea development. Model texts thus lean linear while learner texts lean Motivated-New, yet no study has compared the two text types directly within a single design

2.4.3. Research gap

Past studies have three gaps. First, many competing classifications exist, and they are not applied consistently. The studies above draw on Danes (1974), Eggins (2004), and McCabe (1999), and the review by Wan Jusoh et al. (2022) shows that even studies naming the same framework frequently apply its categories differently, so findings about which pattern dominates cannot easily be compared across studies. Second, most frameworks do not state explicitly what counts as a repeated Theme or Rheme, leaving the decision to the researcher's intuition. This matters most when a link depends on inference or on cultural knowledge the reader is assumed to share. Third, studies count how often each pattern occurs but rarely ask how the link between sentences is made, even though connectives can make a text look cohesive while the meaning underneath does not carry through.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Research design and corpora

This study employed a quantitative, corpus-based comparative design supplemented by qualitative analysis of coded excerpts. The learner corpus (ESL) comprises 40 argumentative essays written by third-year English majors at a university in Mekong Delta, Vietnam, during supervised 45-minute sessions in response to a single IELTS Task 2 prompt on whether technology and traditional cultures are incompatible (Table 1). All participants had completed the general ESL course in their first semester and were of comparable proficiency, established through a placement test based on the Cambridge Key English Test. Because the topic question asks for arguments with explanations and examples, it is suitable for examining coherence and thematic progression. Data were collected in April 2026 in an invigilated classroom session; no dictionaries or electronic devices were permitted. Essays were rated against the public IELTS Writing Task 2 band descriptors by two course lecturers, and scores ranged from 4.5 to 8.0.

Table 3. IELTS Writing Task 2 prompt given to the ESL group

It is inevitable that traditional cultures will be lost as technology develops. Technology and traditional cultures are incompatible. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this view?
Give reasons for your answer and include any relevant examples from your own knowledge or experience.
Write at least 250 words. (Sinclair, 2019, p. 23)

The expert corpus (BE) comprises 20 model essays from The Key to IELTS Writing Task 2 (Cullen, 2023), authored by a British expert writer of standard Cambridge-aligned training

materials. Using all expert essays from one author keeps writing style constant across the corpus and gives a recognised standard to compare the learners against.

3.2. Analytical framework and coding procedure

Every essay was divided into T-units, each consisting of one independent clause plus any dependent clauses attached to it (Thompson, 2008). Themes were identified following Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) as applied by Vu (2011). The Theme runs to the first experiential element; when a dependent clause comes first, that whole clause is the topical Theme of the T-unit; a fronted circumstance is a marked topical Theme; and experientialized Themes are counted only in first- and second-person mental clauses.

Each transition between units was then assigned one of the six TP patterns, with every paragraph tracked against its own thematic stack. Transitions that formed a link (RT, TT, ERT, and ETT) were further classified by how the link was made, whether lexical, referential, or textual. Following Vu (2011), proportions were calculated over all coded transitions in each essay, MN included, so that the lexical, referential, textual, and no-repetition shares add up to one. UN transitions were set aside.

3.3. Interrater reliability

Two raters independently coded all 60 essays across five categories: T-unit segmentation, Theme-Rheme segmentation, Theme type, TP pattern, and thematic repetition. Reliability was estimated with simple percentage agreement and Cohen's kappa, computed per group and combined as weighted means using the number of essays per group (40 ESL; 20 BE) as weights. Results are reported in Table 4; values at or above .81 are considered excellent (Portney & Watkins, 1993). Disagreements were resolved through discussion to consensus before analysis.

Table 4. Interrater reliability for the five coded textual categories

Category	ESL %	ESL k	ESL N	BE %	BE k	BE N	Weighted %	Weighted k
T-Unit	0.96	0.85	598	0.98	0.86	415	0.97	0.85
Theme/Rheme Segment	0.97	0.84	598	0.98	0.85	415	0.97	0.84
Theme Type	0.95	0.87	915	0.97	0.89	626	0.96	0.88
Thematic Pattern	0.93	0.88	437	0.94	0.89	335	0.93	0.88
Thematic Repetition	0.95	0.9	341	0.94	0.89	298	0.95	0.9

Note. % = simple percentage agreement; *k* = Cohen's kappa; *N* = units coded by both raters.

3.4. Statistical analysis

All analyses were run in jamovi 2.7 (The jamovi project, 2025). Each variable was first checked for normality within each group using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which was chosen because it works well with small samples. Variables that were normal in both groups were compared with independent samples t-tests, after Levene's test was used to check whether the two groups had similar variances; Welch's correction was applied where they did not. Variables that failed

the normality check in either group were compared with Mann-Whitney U tests instead. Effect sizes are reported as Cohen's d for the t-tests and rank-biserial correlation for the Mann-Whitney tests (Cohen, 1988).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Descriptive statistics and normality screening

Table 5. Shapiro-Wilk normality screening and resulting test selection by group

Variable	BE *W*	BE *p*	ESL *W*	ESL *p*	Test applied
Motivated-New	0.961	0.567	0.974	0.465	*t*-test
Rheme-Theme	0.958	0.498	0.979	0.656	*t*-test
Theme-Theme	0.978	0.910	0.945	0.049	Mann-Whitney *U*
Extended-Rheme-Theme	0.731	< .001	0.735	< .001	Excluded
Extended-Theme-Theme	0.818	0.002	0.897	0.002	Excluded
Referential repetition	0.969	0.738	0.975	0.507	*t*-test
Textual repetition	0.943	0.273	0.949	0.068	*t*-test
Lexical repetition	0.900	0.041	0.960	0.166	Mann-Whitney *U*

Note. Shapiro-Wilk *W* and *p* computed within each group (BE $n = 20$; ESL $n = 40$). A variable qualified for parametric testing only if normality held in both groups.

Table 5 reports the Shapiro-Wilk screening for all eight variables. Motivated-New, Rheme-Theme, referential repetition, and textual repetition satisfied normality in both groups and were assigned to parametric testing. Meanwhile, Theme-Theme violated normality in the ESL group and lexical repetition in the BE group; both were assigned to Mann-Whitney *U* tests.

The two extended patterns departed severely from normality in both groups. Both were rare events, with means below 0.10 in every cell and an ESL median of 0.00 for Extended-Rheme-Theme, indicating that more than half of the learner essays contained no such transition. They were therefore excluded from inferential testing and are reported descriptively only.

4.2. Thematic progression patterns (Research Question 1)

Table 6 reports the group comparisons for the three retained TP patterns, and Figure 1 (Panel A) and Figure 2 (Panel A) display the corresponding group means. Levene's test indicated homogeneity of variance for Motivated-New and Rheme-Theme, so Student's *t*-tests are reported. The groups differed significantly on both patterns, with large effects in opposite directions: the ESL group produced a higher proportion of Motivated-New transitions, whereas the BE group produced a higher proportion of Rheme-Theme transitions. Theme-Theme progression did not differ between groups, with a small effect size.

4.3. Thematic repetitions (Research Question 2)

Table 6 also reports the repetition comparisons, with group means shown in Figure 1 (Panel B) and Figure 2 (Panel B). Variances were homogeneous for referential and textual repetition. Referential repetition was significantly higher in the BE group with a large effect, and lexical repetition was significantly higher in the ESL group with a medium effect, whereas textual repetition showed no group difference and a negligible effect size.

Table 6. Group comparisons for thematic progression patterns and thematic repetitions

Variable	Test	Statistic	*p*	Effect size
Motivated-New	Student's *t*(58)	-3.90	< 0.001	*d* = -1.07
Rheme-Theme	Student's *t*(58)	4.77	< 0.001	*d* = 1.31
Theme-Theme	Mann-Whitney *U*	358	0.510	*r* = 0.11
Referential repetition	Student's *t*(58)	4.52	< 0.001	*d* = 1.24
Lexical repetition	Mann-Whitney *U*	241	0.013	*r* = 0.40
Textual repetition	Student's *t*(58)	-0.11	0.917	*d* = -0.03

Note. Negative statistics indicate higher proportions in the ESL group. Effect sizes are Cohen's *d* for *t*-tests and rank-biserial correlation for Mann-Whitney *U* tests. Levene's test indicated homogeneity of variance for all parametrically tested variables (all *p* >= 0.134).

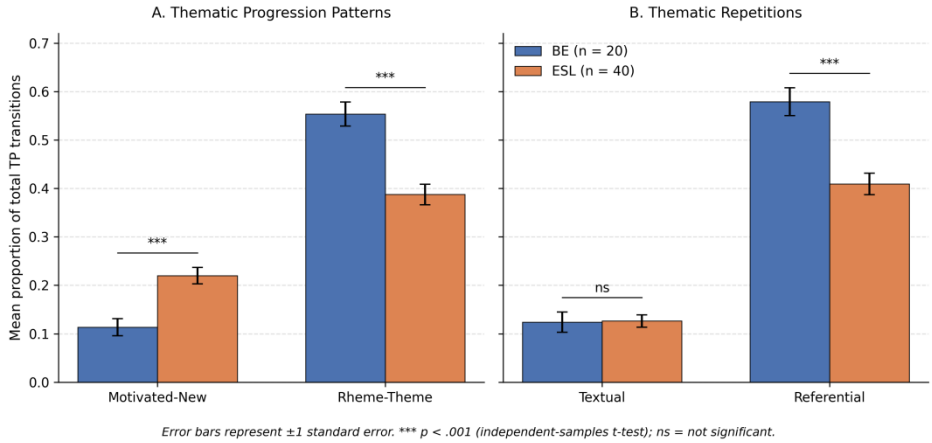


Figure 1. Mean proportions of the parametric-tested TP patterns (Panel A) and thematic repetitions (Panel B) in BE and ESL essays

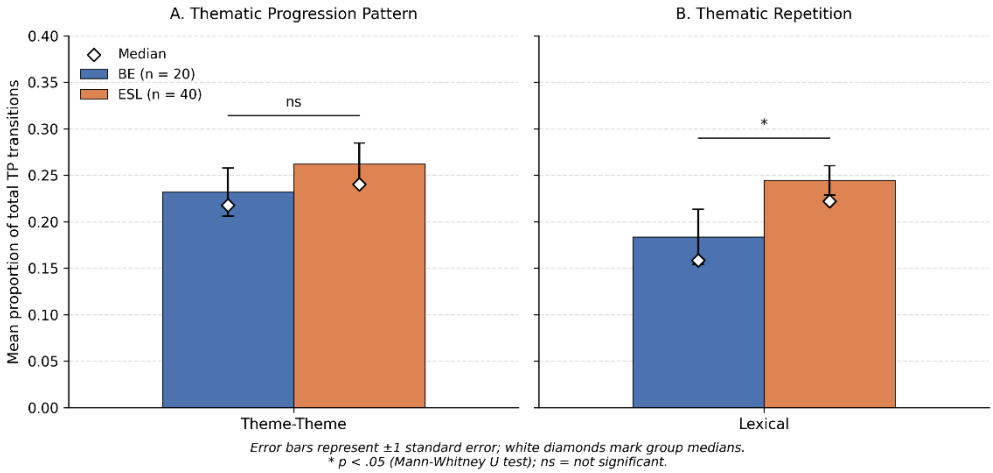


Figure 2. Mean proportions of Theme-Theme progression (Panel A) and lexical repetition (Panel B), compared with Mann-Whitney *U* tests

4.4. Qualitative analysis of thematic breakdowns

This section examines the specific sites where thematic cohesion broke down in the learner corpus, contrasted with the two key mechanisms that sustained it in the expert corpus. Excerpts drawn from the coded essays are presented with their original coding intact, accompanied by revised versions in select cases to highlight the direct contrast between disrupted and seamless transitions. These excerpts aim to illustrate the qualitative mechanisms underlying thematic breakdowns rather than their quantitative frequencies.

4.4.1. Formulaic introductions realized as disconnected Themes

Most ESL essays appear to open with the same three moves: reporting what others believe, stating the writer's position, and announcing the thesis. The plan itself is sound, but learners start each move with a completely new Theme, so two links are already broken before the essay begins. In Table 7, the Themes run *Some people*, then *I*, then *technology*. None of the three picks up anything from the sentence before it, and both transitions are coded Motivated-New.

Table 7. ESL 2, U1-U3: the three-move introduction, original and revised

Unit	Theme	Rheme	TP	Type
U1	**Some people**	believe that technological developments can lead to the loss of traditional cultures	Opening	
U2	**I**	strongly disagree with this statement	MN	None
U3	*In my perspective,* **technology**	can protect cultural heritage and help it stay relevant	MN	None
Revised				
U1	**Some people**	believe that technological developments can lead to the loss of traditional cultures	Opening	
U2'	**Such a belief**, however,	underestimates what technology can offer to cultural heritage	RT	Referential
U3'	**Technology**, in my perspective,	can protect cultural heritage and help it stay relevant	RT	Lexical

Note. In Tables 7 to 12, bold marks the topical Theme and italics mark textual and interpersonal Themes. This formatting carries analytical meaning and is retained from the coding scheme rather than used for emphasis. TP = thematic progression pattern; MN = Motivated-New; RT = Rheme-Theme; TT = Theme-Theme.

The fix needs no change of content or structure except the opening words. In Table 7, the revised second sentence begins with *Such a belief*, which gathers up the whole of the first sentence into a single phrase, and its Rheme now ends with *technology*, giving the third sentence a word to start from. Both transitions become RT, the introduction's MN count falls from two to zero, and the writer's own stance survives in *in my perspective*.

4.4.2. Reliance on connectives in place of content linkage

When developing an argument, learners open each new point with an entirely new Theme and rely on connectives alone to signal continuity. This explains a result that first looks paradoxical: textual repetition did not differ between the groups. Learners are not short of connectives, since *First*, *Second*, and *Moreover* appear throughout; the problem is that connectives stand in for content links, so continuity is announced on the surface rather than built into the Theme-Rheme chain.

Table 8 shows a typical list paragraph. The topic sentence ends with *cultures*, and the first list item opens with *manuscripts and artifacts*. The two sentences are related in meaning, since manuscripts and artifacts are part of a culture, but they share no word that carries the link, so readers must infer it themselves and the transition is coded MN.

Table 8. ESL 2, U9-U10: a list item without an anchor, original and two revisions

Unit	Theme	Rheme	TP	Type
U9	*Nevertheless,* **technology**	can preserve cultures effectively	Opening	
U10	*First,* **manuscripts and artifacts**	can be kept in digital forms	MN	None
Revised: category noun				
U9'	*Nevertheless,* **technology**	can preserve cultures effectively in several ways	Opening	
U10'	**The first of these ways**	is digital storage: manuscripts and artifacts can be kept in digital forms	RT	Referential
Revised: repeated head noun				
U9"	*Nevertheless,* **technology**	can effectively preserve cultural artifacts	Opening	
U10"	*First,* **manuscripts and other artifacts**	can be kept in digital forms	RT	Lexical

The repair is to use a category noun. If the topic sentence ends with *in several ways*, the item can open with *the first of these ways* (Table 8).

The other option is to use a more specific noun. If the topic sentence ends with *cultural artifacts* rather than *cultures*, the next sentence can open with *manuscripts and other artifacts*, and the word *artifacts* now appears in both Units (Table 8). The principle behind both options is the same: the topic sentence of a list paragraph needs to give its items something to attach to, whether a general noun such as *ways*, *methods*, or *benefits*, or a specific noun that each item repeats.

4.4.3. Inferential Themes

An inferential Theme happens when a new Theme restates an idea from the sentence before, but nothing on the page shows the connection. Table 9 illustrates the pattern.

Table 9. ESL 1, U4-U6: inferential Themes, original and revised

Unit	Theme	Rheme	TP	Type
U4	**With the rapid technology development**	the traditional practices can be lost	Opening	
U5	**The accessibility of streaming and social media platform**	has made mainstream cultures less [popular]	MN	None
U6	**Nowadays**	many people stop attending local festivals and learning traditional skills	MN	None
Revised				
U5'	**One such development, the accessibility of streaming and social media platforms,**	has made mainstream cultures more dominant	TT	Lexical

From the writer's side, U5 is not a new theme. Streaming and social media platforms are specific instances of the *rapid technology development* named in U4, so the writer is moving from a general concept to a particular case. The relation, however, exists only as an inference: readers are expected to infer that streaming platforms are a kind of technological development.

To turn the inference into a lexical repetition, writer needs to use *One such development* to refer to the Theme *development* in U4, which creates a Theme-Theme transition (Table 9). The phrase *One such development* does two things at once: *such* points back to *rapid technology development*, and *development* repeats its head noun. The implicit general-to-specific relation becomes a link that is more explicit.

4.4.4. Fronted time adverbials

In the coding framework, a fronted time expression is a marked topical Theme. Sentences opening with a bare *Nowadays* or *Today* appear in at least five ESL essays, and every mid-paragraph instance produces a MN transition. The reason is twofold: a time adverb cannot repeat a head noun or refer back, so it has nothing to link with, and it pushes all the linkable content into the Rheme.

The connection is usually related but left implicit. In Table 10, people losing interest in local festivals is a consequence of mainstream culture's dominance, yet nothing on the page carries that relation. The fact that *Nowadays, many young people are more interested in modern lifestyles* recurs almost word for word in two different essays suggests a memorised opener that sounds academic but does no linking work.

Table 10. ESL 6, U5-U6 and BE 19, U4-U6: The same fronted time Theme, two outcomes

Unit	Theme	Rheme	TP	Type
ESL6 U5	**The accessibility of social platforms**	has made mainstream culture more popular than traditional culture	TT	Referential

Unit	Theme	Rheme	TP	Type
ESL6 U6	**Today**	people not very interesting to the local festival	MN	None
BE19 U4	**The issues surrounding online shopping**	are complex	Opening	
BE19 U5	**In the past, when people needed to buy something**	they would wait to visit a shop and buy several things at once	MN	None
BE19 U6	**Nowadays**	we can have whatever we want brought to our door within a day	TT	Referential

The expert uses the same structure to different effects. In BE 19 the writer accepts one Motivated-New transition in order to set up the frame *In the past*. The *Nowadays* that follows is then not an empty opener but the second half of a past-present contrast, pointing back to the frame just established, and it is coded Theme-Theme.

4.4.5. How the expert sustains Rheme-Theme chains

The BE essays maintain RT patterns in two main ways: a demonstrative followed by a summary noun, or a noun made from the verb or adjective of the previous Rheme. Because learners rarely use either, they are left with only one option when an idea needs developing, which is to start again with something new. Table 11 shows four consecutive units from BE 4, where *This type of wealth* gathers the *financial rewards* and *money* of the two preceding Rhemes into a single Theme. Meanwhile, Table 12 shows a chain of the second kind in BE 5, where each Rheme is turned into the Theme that follows it, with *common sights* becoming *the commonness* and *meagre budgets* becoming *budgetary constraints*, so that the new information in one sentence becomes the starting point of the next.

Table 11. BE 4, U6-U9: Encapsulation through demonstrative plus summary noun

Unit	Theme	Rheme	TP	Type
U6	*Secondly,* **celebrities**	can reap enormous financial rewards from their fame	RT	Textual
U7	On top of their fame, **the famous**	have the potential to earn huge amounts of money from promoting luxury brands	TT	Referential
U8	**This type of wealth**	is possible because celebrities are often seen as role models	RT	Referential
U9	*and so* **people**	want to copy them and buy what they have	RT	Textual

Table 12. BE 5, U9-U11: Encapsulation through nominalization

Unit	Theme	Rheme	TP	Type
U9	*In fact,* **groups of teenagers**	enjoy themselves are common sights	RT	Referential

Unit	Theme	Rheme	TP	Type
U10	*Nevertheless,* **the commonness** of seeing them hanging around	is attributed to their meagre budgets hindering them from enjoying other recreational activities	RT	Lexical
U11	**Budgetary constraints** aside	they are kept in intense study schedules to accommodate their parents' expectations	RT	Lexical

5. DISCUSSION

The expert's high rate of RT progression contrasts sharply with the learners' high rate of MN Themes, and these two differences carry the largest effect sizes in the study. Where the expert picks up information from the previous sentence to open the next one, learners more often start with a new Theme, leaving the reader to infer how it fits the argument.

5.1. Relation to previous research

The findings speak to two strands of earlier work. First, they confirm a divide that could previously only be inferred across separate studies. Thang and Tam (2020) found linear progression dominant in model IELTS essays, while Pham et al. (2023) found Motivated-New dominant in Vietnamese learners' paragraphs, but because the two studies analysed different corpora with different frameworks, the contrast could not safely be attributed to writer expertise. Coding both text types with a single framework in one design shows that the divide is real: the expert leans on RT uptake where the learners restart with new Themes.

Second, the learner profile goes beyond the Vietnamese context. Pavavijarn (2022) reported that low-scoring Thai essays were identified by brand-new Themes, and Fitriati and Gayatri (2021) listed brand-new Themes among the recurrent problems of EFL writing across the 31 studies they reviewed. The learners here, writing in a different country and institutional setting, show the same profile, which suggests that thematic restarting is a general feature of developing second-language argumentative writing rather than a difficulty confined to one context.

5.2. Theoretical implications

Theoretically, the study shows the value of separating two layers of connection that are often treated as one. Textual repetition did not differ between the groups, while RTprogression and referential repetition differed sharply. This is direct evidence that a text can be full of connectives and still have a broken thematic chain. A framework that records not only which pattern occurs but also how the link is made can therefore catch coherence problems that frequency counts miss. Explicit repetition criteria also make expert and learner texts comparable, so learner difficulty can be traced to specific operations rather than described as general incoherence.

5.3. Practical recommendations for teaching

Since the learners have already used as many connectives as experts, additional practice with linking words is not likely to enhance coherence and might even reinforce the idea that either a First or a Moreover is sufficient to keep a paragraph together. Instead, teaching effort should focus on the operations that transform a Rheme into the next Theme. Section 4.4 mentions four tasks below that can therefore be taught as brief, specific revision exercises.

In Task 1, reordering and mapping is carried out by giving learners a scrambled set of the T-units of a paragraph and asking them to reassemble these. For each unit they circle its topical

Theme and then draw a line back to the Theme or Rheme which it picks up. A paragraph with a complete chain can be reconstructed in just one way, thus allowing the chain to be seen without having to use technical terminology.

In Task 2, which involves building referential and lexical links, learners begin by breaking down each instance of 'this', 'it', and 'this + noun phrase' found in a short expert text, writing out in full what each of these expressions refers to. They then carry out the reverse process by producing a referring expression for a given Rheme. The second part of the task focuses on the lexical repetitions: the learners write a topic sentence that ends with a category noun which the subsequent items can refer to (Table 13).

Table 13. Task 2: Unpacking and building referential and lexical links

Preceding Rheme	**Referring expression**	**Written out in full**
...can reap enormous financial rewards from their fame	This type of wealth	the money celebrities earn from fame
...the universal goal seems to be the uniting of family members	such a tradition	families gathering at New Year
...technological developments can lead to the loss of traditional cultures	Such a belief	the view that technology destroys tradition
Lexical Rêptitions: technology can preserve cultures effectively **in several ways**	The first of these ways	*(learners supply the item)*

In Task 3, learners are asked to identify each MN Theme in a body paragraph and then rewrite the ones that appear in the middle of the paragraph. In the excerpt mentioned, the connection in question relies on cultural knowledge which the reader might not have. A non-Vietnamese reader, for example, will not be able to tell from the text that the song by U2 referred to is an example of the kind of fusion described in U1. The relationship can be made clear by using This together with the summary noun and then the word such as (Table 14).

Table 14. Task 3: Repairing an inferential Theme in a learner body paragraph

Unit	**Topical Theme (original)**	**TP**	**Topical Theme (revised)**	**TP**
U1	For example, some traditional practices and art forms, such as music and dance,	MN	*(unchanged)*	MN
U2	Hoàng Thùy Linh's song "See Tình"	MN	This fusion of traditional and modern forms, such as Hoàng Thùy Linh's song "See Tình",	RT

In Task 4 learners are asked to rewrite sentences that begin with a bare time expression by moving that expression to the end, thereby bringing the main content into Theme position where it can establish a link.

5.4. Limitations and future research

There are three limitations to the findings. Since the expert corpus was produced by a single author, the patterns it exhibits might to some extent reflect that person's individual style. Furthermore, as both corpora consist of responses to prompts within a single topic area, it cannot be ruled out that the topic influenced the choice of Themes. Lastly, the patterns described in Section 4.4 were identified through the analysis of selected examples rather than quantified across the entire corpus. Therefore, while they illustrate how thematic breaks occur, they do not indicate the prevalence of specific types of thematic breaks. These limitations suggest three avenues for future research. Compiling a corpus of Vietnamese expert writers would allow first-language rhetorical conventions to be examined directly rather than remaining an unresolved possibility. Expanding the expert sample to include multiple authors and drawing prompts from a variety of topic domains would help determine the extent to which the patterns reported here are generalisable. Finally, the four teaching routines suggested in Section 5.3 are proposed base on the comparative findings but have not been empirically evaluated. The next logical step would be to conduct an intervention study to examine whether explicit instruction in Rheme-to-Theme uptake reduces the frequency of Motivated-New transitions in learners' writing.

6. Conclusion

This study compared thematic progression and thematic repetition in 40 IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 essays written by third-year Vietnamese English majors and 20 essays produced by a British expert writer, using a common analytical framework and independent double coding. Two contrasting patterns emerged, with large effect sizes: learners produced nearly twice as many MN transitions as the expert writer, whereas the expert writer relied more on RT progression and referential repetition than on lexical repetition. No significant differences were found in Theme–Theme progression or textual repetition. These findings suggest that maintaining topic continuity and using connectives alone do not fully account for learners' coherence difficulties. Instead, these difficulties appear to be concentrated in formulaic introductions, list-like topic sentences lacking clear discourse anchors, inferential Themes, and unanchored fronted temporal adverbials. These patterns point to learners' limited control over the linguistic resources needed to develop the Rheme of one clause into the Theme of the next.

The findings suggest that instruction should move away from connective training, which learners have already mastered, toward direct teaching of Rheme-to-Theme uptake. The four teaching routines set out in Section 5.3 offer a task sequence for doing so.

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