

# Thematic Patterns in Discussion Texts Written by the Third Year Students of English Department of Universitas Negeri Padang

Isvanelly Anwar<sup>1</sup> and Zul Amri<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universitas Negeri Padang, Padang, Indonesia, ✉ (e-mail) [isva1982@gmail.com](mailto:isva1982@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Universitas Negeri Padang, Padang, Indonesia, ✉ (e-mail) [amri\\_zul@yahoo.com](mailto:amri_zul@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

This paper aims at finding out the types of themes and the thematic patterns used in the discussion texts written by the third year students of English Department of Universitas Negeri Padang. This study used a descriptive qualitative method taking 20 students of English Department of Universitas Negeri Padang as the participants who were asked to write a discussion text based on the suggested topics. The data were analyzed using a content analysis method. The results of data analysis indicate that the four types of themes – simple unmarked theme, simple marked theme, multiple unmarked theme, multiple marked theme – are used in the students' discussion texts. Then, the thematic patterns in the students' discussion texts are: Topical, Textual^Topical, and Interpersonal^Textual^Topical. Simple unmarked theme is the thematic pattern found in all parts of discussion text and plays the most important role in building the arguments. It is concluded that the choice of types of themes and thematic patterns used in the students' discussion texts indicate their lack of attention to the ideas organization, especially in presenting the arguments in the discussion texts.

**Keywords:** *thematic pattern, type of theme, discussion text, students' writing*

## Introduction

Theme as the starting point of a clause as a message (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) plays an important role in confirming a written well-organized text. Good organization of ideas distinguishes writing from speaking, another mode of communicating a text. Consequently, the choice of theme of a clause should consider the other message delivered in other clauses, and incorrectly choosing the theme of a particular clause leads to awkwardness in presenting the ideas in a text.

The important role of clause theme in writing a text has attracted a number of researchers to conduct studies on theme-rheme organization in a text, such as theme-rheme pattern (Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo, 1998; Dejica-Cartis & Cozma, 2013; Ebrahimi, 2016; Jingxia & Li, 2013), theme markedness (Rosa, 2007a; Sofyan & Tarigan, 2018), and thematic progression (Gunawan & Aziza, 2017; He & Tian, 2018; Rahmawati, 2016; Rosa, 2007b, 2011; Yang, 2008; Yunita, 2018). Those studies are particularly aimed at showing the contribution of theme-rheme patterns to the text cohesiveness due to several common problems related to textual cohesion and coherence in writing.

In addition, those previous studies seek to characterize ideas organization in certain text types. Some of them focused on ideas organization in exposition texts (Rosa, 2007a, 2007b), recount texts (Rahmawati, 2016; Yunita, 2018), explanation texts (Yang, 2008), and news item texts (Sofyan & Tarigan, 2018). The results of their studies successfully formulate typical characteristics of theme and thematic progression pattern in particular text types. Furthermore, those previous studies leave the gap for further exploration on other text types, one of which is discussion text.

A discussion text has its own characteristics in presenting the issue and how the ideas supporting the issue are organized. Unlike exposition texts, discussion texts present the issue from at least two points of view (Gerot & Wignell, 1994; Rosa, Muryanti, Mulia, & Jaya, 2008), locating their writers in a neutral position. Exploring how themes are used and organized in presenting arguments in a discussion text is interesting since it provides two-sided arguments. Thus, this paper aims at finding out types of themes and the thematic patterns used in the discussion texts written by English Department students at Universitas Negeri Padang and how themes contribute to reveal the characteristics of discussion texts.

## Method

This study used a descriptive qualitative method to explore problems and deeply understand the phenomenon of thematic patterns of discussion written by students learning English as a foreign language.

The data were the themes of the clauses used in the discussion texts written in English by the third year students of English Department of Universitas Negeri Padang in the 2018/2019 academic year. 20 students were taken as the participants who were asked to write a discussion text based on one of the three suggested topics (use of Internet in learning, excluding English subject at elementary school, and application of online learning in English Department of UNP). There was time limitation as the students were only given 90 minutes to complete their writing, and the uses of any resources (both printed and online resources) were allowed. The discussion texts were divided into their clauses and were analyzed using a content analysis method.

## Results and Discussion

The results of data analysis indicate that the discussion texts written by the third year students of English Department of Universitas Negeri Padang are composed of clauses constituted by four theme patterns: simple unmarked topical theme (SUT), simple marked theme (SMT), multiple unmarked theme (MUT), and multiple marked theme (MMT). One of the examples of the use of SMT in the students' discussion texts can be seen in (1).

(1)	Internet	is basically a network of many computers all over the world
	Topical	Rheme
	SUT	

The clause in (1) is only composed of one theme, i.e. "Internet", which is therefore called simple theme. The theme is also called topical theme because it is the element of transitivity. As the topical theme is composed of first participant element, it belongs to an unmarked theme. Therefore, the type of theme of the clause in (1) is called SUT. The other examples can also be seen in (2) to (5).

(2)	Internet	is basically a network of many computers all over the world
	Topical	Rheme
	SUT	

(3)	Many students	gain knowledge or information with the help of internet.
	Topical	Rheme
	SUT	

(4)	Everybody	needs internet for some or other purpose.
	Topical	Rheme
	SUT	

(5)	Including English in Elementary school	is the right decision of the government.
	Topical	Rheme
	SUT	

As indicated by the clauses in (2) to (5), the participants that serve as the topical themes can be composed of more than one word as long as they belong to a nominal group.

Although its uses are less frequent than SUT, SMT is also found in the students' discussion texts, one of which is presented in (6).

(6)	In junior high school curriculum,	the teacher do not focus teach vocabulary
	Topical	Rheme
	SMT	

The theme constituent of the clause in (6) is circumstance of place indicating its role as a marked theme. The use of marked theme in (6) is motivated by the student's intention to emphasize the role of junior high school curriculum as the main point of the message. As there is only a marked topical theme used as a theme, the clause theme is called SMT.

The other type of circumstances used in the students' discussion texts is circumstance of time whose example is provided in (7).

(7)	Nowadays,	school assignments are now noticeably easier to find on the internet
	Topical	Rheme
	SMT	

The theme of the clause in (7), i.e. nowadays, is the circumstance of time used to highlight the current fact about using internet sources in school assignments. The clause theme in (7) is called SMT because it is a simple theme (composed of only one type of theme) and a marked theme (a topical theme made of circumstance element). The choice of circumstance of time as the theme in this context is a good decision since the previous clauses (see the extract paragraph from the data in (8)) do not give any information related to the time.

- (8) Internet presence provides positive benefits for the world of information, but it also has negative effects. Many students gain knowledge or information with the help of internet. Nowadays, school assignments are now noticeably easier to find on the internet. It is undeniable that internet gives effect to student in learning process.

As shown in (8), the first three clauses do not provide any time-related information which is necessary to specify when the phenomena of using internet elaborated in the paragraph take place. Therefore, placing a circumstance of time as the theme of the fourth clause in (8) is a good decision.

Using circumstance of place and time dominates the SMT in the students' discussion texts; nevertheless, there are also few instances where the students use circumstance of angle as the clause theme as shown in (9).

(9)	For that reason	the use of internet in study provides both positive and negative effects.
	Topical	Rheme
	SMT	

The clause theme in (9) is "For that reason" leading to the presence of positive and negative effects of internet in study. As the theme is a circumstance of cause, which is a constituent of topical theme, it is categorized as a marked theme. Furthermore, as there is only one theme in the clause (indicating simple theme), the clause theme is called SMT.

The topical theme element that serves as the marked theme in the students' discussion texts does not only contain circumstance element but it also contains second participant as shown in (10).

(10)	All aspect of life, both positive and negative	students can access and obtain from the internet
	Topical	Rheme
	SMT	

Although the theme of the clause in (10) is composed of a nominal group (participant), it is not a common element of a theme. It is identified as the second participant which is usually located after the process. The first participant "students", that should ideally be the clause theme, is placed in the rheme position. Such uncommon use of theme is known as marked theme. Moreover, as the theme is only composed of one type of theme, the theme of the clause in (10) belongs to SMT.

In addition to simple themes, there are a number of clauses composed of multiple themes. The clause in (11) is the example of MUT.

(11)	Even though	learning language in early age	is better.
	Textual	Topical	Rheme
	MUT		

The clause in (11) is composed of two theme elements: the conjunctive "Even though" and the participant "learning language in early age", constituting a thematic pattern "Textual^Topical". This means that the clause is composed of textual and topical themes which is, therefore, called multiple theme. Furthermore, as the topical theme is the participant element, it belongs to unmarked theme. Thus, the thematic pattern of the clause in (11) is called MUT. The use of conjunctive "Even though" is intended to contrast the idea presented in the clause from those presented in the previous clauses.

In addition to using contrast conjunctives as the themes, other MUT clauses in the students' discussion texts are also composed of time conjunctives as presented in (12).

(12)	When	their teacher	ask to do some task,
	Textual	Topical	Rheme
	MUT		

The MUT of the clause in (12) is composed of textual theme “when” and topical theme “their teacher”, constituting a thematic pattern “Textual^Topical.”. The use of conjunctive “when” in the clause indicates time relation with another clause that follows. Moreover, the clause theme in (12) is called MUT because it is composed of two themes and the topical theme is an unmarked theme.

Furthermore, the constituent of textual theme in the students’ discussion text is also generated from conjunctions. One of the examples is shown in (13).

(13)	and	the resource availability	is very much convenience to students
	Textual	Topical	Rheme
	MUT		

The conjunction used as the textual theme in the clause in (13) is “and”. It is used to show a paratactic relation with the previous clause to construct a clause complex. The conjunction “and” together with the participant “the resource availability” constitute the MUT.

Moreover, the MUT pattern in the students’ discussion texts is also composed of three different types of themes: interpersonal, textual and topical themes. One of the examples can be seen in (14).

(14)	Maybe	when	elementary school student	cannot speak English
	Interpersonal	Textual	Topical	Rheme
	MUT			

The clause in (14) shows that its thematic pattern is “Interpersonal^Textual^Topical”. The interpersonal theme used in the clause is “Maybe”, a modal adjunct showing probability. The textual theme is “when”, a conjunctive adjunct indicating time. The topical theme is “elementary school student”, a participant serving as the clause subject. This participant is also called first participant, and its use in the clause typically results in an unmarked theme. Thus, the thematic pattern composed of three themes in the clause in (14) is called MUT.

The other type of theme used in the students’ discussion texts is MMT. Nevertheless, it is used much less frequently than the other theme types. One of the examples is provided in (15).

(15)	So	in learning	there is information or knowledge
	Textual	Topical	Rheme
	MUT		

The MMT in the clause in (15) is composed of textual theme “So” and topical theme “in learning”, constituting a thematic pattern “Textual^Topical”. The conjunctive “So” is used to show that the clause is the result of the previous process described in the previous clause. Then, the circumstance “in learning” indicates the location where information or knowledge can be obtained. Unlike the MUT which is composed of two or more than two themes, the MMT in the students’ discussion texts is only composed of two themes.

Based on the results of data analysis, it is found that SUT is the thematic pattern most frequently used in the students’ discussion texts as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Types of them in the students’ discussion texts

No.	Types of theme	Frequency	
		Number	Percentage
1	Simple Unmarked Theme (SUT)	338	52.98%
2	Simple Marked Theme (SMT)	71	11.13%
3	Multiple Unmarked Theme (MUT)	206	32.29%
4	Multiple Marked Theme (MMT)	23	03.60%
	Total	638	100%

The very frequent use of SUT as displayed in Table 1 does not only dominate the clauses in the introduction and conclusion but also in the arguments, meaning that both pros and cons in the students’ discussion texts are mostly presented in SUT clauses. This finding is in contrast with the finding of the

previous study (Rosa, 2007a) arguing that con arguments are more frequently presented in marked themes. The difference might be due to the writers' different experience in writing (student writers and expert writers). Student writers are usually novice writers that are less creative and pay less attention to ideas organization. These characteristics have been mentioned in several previous studies involving student or novice writers (McCutchen, 2011; Nayan & Jusoff, 2009; Rosa, 2019). In contrast, MMT is the type of theme which is least frequently used in the students' discussion text. This is motivated by the students' preference to focus on "who" or "what" rather than on "when", "where", "why" or "how" in presenting their arguments through MMT clauses.

Furthermore, the thematic pattern most frequently used in the students' discussion texts is "Topical", composed of only one theme. The finding concerning the thematic patterns of the students' discussion texts is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Thematic patterns in the students' discussion texts

No.	Thematic patterns	Frequency	
		Number	Percentage
1	Topical	409	64.11%
2	Textual^Topical	225	35.26%
3	Interpersonal^Textual^Topical	4	00.63%
	Total	638	100%

The very frequent use of Topical pattern as displayed in Table 2 is motivated by the dominant use of simple theme in the students' discussion text. In addition, the frequent use of Textual^Topical pattern is motivated by the absence of interpersonal theme in the multiple theme composed of two types of themes. Meanwhile, the least frequent use of Interpersonal^Textual^Topical pattern is motivated by the very small occurrence of interpersonal theme in the students' discussion texts. The rare use of interpersonal theme is caused by the arguments provided in the students' discussion text that are typically made of facts. In fact, arguments presented in a discussion text must not always be facts, opinions and assumptions are applicable as well which are permissible to present possibilities and usualities, such as the use of modality or modality expressions (Román & Zapata, 2019).

## Conclusion

Based on the results of the study it is concluded that the SUT is the type of theme most frequently used in the discussion texts written by the third year students of English Department of Universitas Negeri Padang. This indicates that the ideas or arguments are not presented in a good organization. One of the indicators of well-organized ideas is the frequent use of conjunctions and conjunctives to show how the arguments are related one another. Besides, it is also concluded that the students' discussion texts are made of three thematic patterns, and due to the dominant use of simple theme, Topical pattern dominates the clause themes. These findings imply that the students are less creative in presenting ideas especially in providing their pro and con arguments. In addition, the implication leads to the students' lack of ability in writing a discussion text. Therefore, the learning process of writing discussion texts should pay more attention to the quality of arguments, not merely introducing and modeling the generic structure and lexicogrammatical features of a discussion text. This refers to the nature of discussion texts whose strength is located in the way how the arguments are presented. Moreover, for further studies, it is advisable to do studies involving expert writers to see how their arguments in discussion texts are different from those written by student or novice writers. Finally, it is suggested for other researchers to conduct studies on thematic patterns in other different text types.

## References

- Belmonte, I. A., & McCabe-Hidalgo, A. (1998). Theme-Rheme patterns in L2 writing. *Didáctica ( Lengua y Literatura )*, (10), 13–32. <https://doi.org/10.5209/DIDA.20673>
- Dejica-Cartis, D., & Cozma, M. (2013). Using theme-rheme analysis for improving coherence and cohesion in target-texts: A methodological approach. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 84, 890–894. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.06.668>
- Ebrahimi, S. F. (2016). Theme types and patterns in research article abstracts: A cross disciplinary study. *International Journal of English Language and Translation Studies*, 04(03), 104–115.
- Gerot, L., & Wignell, P. (1994). *Making sense of functional grammar*. Sydney: Gerd Stabler.
- Gunawan, W., & Aziza, F. (2017). Theme and thematic progression of undergraduate thesis: Investigating meaning making in academic writing. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v7i2.8350>

- Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2004). *An introduction to functional grammar* (Third Edit). London: Arnold.
- He, Y., & Tian, J. (2018). A comparative study of thematic progression in abstracts of scientific papers -- A case study of science and science bulletin. *International Journal of Arts and Commerce*, 7(7), 1–7.
- Jingxia, L., & Li, L. (2013). An empirical study on the application of Theme Theory in the field of writing pedagogy. *English Language Teaching*, 6(5), 117–128. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v6n5p117>
- McCutchen, D. (2011). From novice to expert: Implications of language skills and writing-relevant knowledge for memory during the development of writing skill. *Journal of Writing Research*, 3(1), 51–68. <https://doi.org/10.17239/jowr-2011.03.01.3>
- Nayan, S., & Jusoff, K. (2009). A study of subject-verb agreement: From novice writers to expert writers. *International Education Studies*, 2(3), 190–194. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v2n3p190>
- Rahmawati, A. (2016). Thematic progression in descriptive and recount texts written by nursing students. *The 3rd University Research Colloquium 2016*, 102–108.
- Román, I. F., & Zapata, M. F. (2019). Analysis of argumentative texts prepared by Chilean students of pedagogy. *Educ. Pesqui.*, 45, 1–19. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S1678-4634201945197601>
- Rosa, R. N. (2007a). Analisis fungsi tekstual dalam surat kabar harian Haluan. *Lingua Didaktika*, 1(1), 56–65. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.24036/ld.v1i1.7350>
- Rosa, R. N. (2007b). Thematic progression as a means to keep cohesion in exposition text. *Jurnal Bahasa Dan Seni*, 8(2), 94–100.
- Rosa, R. N. (2011). Pola gerak tema pada tulisan mahasiswa tingkat III Jurusan Bahasa dan Sastra Inggris UNP: Analisis tentang kepaduan teks. *Komposisi: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa, Sastra, Dan Seni*, 12(2), 169–183. <https://doi.org/10.24036/komposisi.v12i2.3920>
- Rosa, R. N. (2019). Thematic progression shifts in the translation of student translators. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 276, 241–247. <https://doi.org/10.2991/icoelt-18.2019.35>
- Rosa, R. N., Muryanti, E., Mulia, D., & Jaya, I. (2008). *English for general purposes: A course for university students*. Padang: Sukabina Offset.
- Sofyan, R., & Tarigan, B. (2018). Theme markedness in the translation of student translators. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 8(1), 235–243. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v8i1.11463>
- Yang, X. (2008). Thematic progression analysis in teaching explanation writing. *English Language Teaching*, 1(1), 29–33. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v1n1p29>
- Yunita, S. (2018). Theme and thematic progression in students' recount texts. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 7(3), 524–530. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v7i3.9797>