



Thematic Progression Patterns in the IELTS Task 2 Writing

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the thematic progression patterns in the Task 2, essays, of the writing section of the IELTS test. To this end, thirty Task 2 essays with a score of 8 and 8.5 were selected. Then, the data were analyzed based on the thematic progression model proposed by Eggins (2004). The findings suggested that the selections of the thematic progression patterns were directly imposed by the nature of the genre of essay writing. This means that the writers were required to select the thematic progression patterns in a way which help meeting the general goals and purposes of this genre. The finding could be used in the IELTS preparation writing classes to help the writers, especially EFL novice writers, to achieve satisfactory scores in the Task 2, essays, of the writing section of the IELTS test.

Keywords: Theme; Rheme; Thematic Progression; Task 2 writing; IELTS; Genre.



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INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, the IELTS test has gained an increasing importance in university systems around the world. In Australia, for instance, it is now the only test accepted by all universities and is often referred to as the 'preferred' test (Coley, 1999, P.10). The IELTS is one of the few English language proficiency test in which the listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills of examinees are assessed and reported on. The writing skill requires examinees to do two Tasks in 60 minutes. In Task 1, examinees write a short description of information presented in the form of a table, diagram etc. In Task 2, examinees should write an essay in response to a question or proposition. Test's designers illustrated that examinees in their responses to the requirement of Task 2 should 'provide general factual information, outline and/or present solution, justify an opinion, and evaluate ideas and evidence' (UCLES, 2002). In the present study, researchers decided to focus merely on Task 2 essay. This decision was partly motivated by the heavier weighting of this Task on the test and the greater attention that it receives in test preparation classes. In addition, the focus on Task 2 was sourced from fact that it has a major influence on students' emerging understandings of what academic writing fundamentally infold.

A sustainable literature has been published on the writing section of the IELTS test. These studies have focused on the role of argument in IELTS writing (Coffin, 2004) and the washback of IELTS tests on the education systems and societies in which they operate (Green, 2006, 2007). In addition, Moore and Morton (2005) compared IELTS essay writing and university writing. More recently, Dickinson (2013) shed the light on the adaptation of a genre-based framework to help learners prepare for the essay writing section of the IELTS test. Literature reviews have indicated that no research has been carried out on the linguistic features used in the writing section of the IELTS test. Thus, this study aims to shed the light on theme as one of the linguistic features by investigating the thematic progression patterns in the Task 2 essay of the writing section of the IELTS test.

The contribution of this study is obvious in the IELTS preparation writing classes as the resulting outcomes can be capitalized as guidelines to help novice writers, especially EFL novice writers, to develop their essays by smoothing the flow of information which in turn increases their scores of writing.

Methodology

Data

This study was carried out on a data of 30 Task 2 essays. These Task 2 essays came from the publicly available IELTS materials with score band of 8 and 8.5. The particulars of the data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Particulars of the data

Number of Task 2 Essays	30
Length of Task 2 Essays	251-376
Total number of words of Task 2 Essays	8701
Total number of Thematic progression patterns	540

The data selection was based on three criteria: genre, English for Academic purposes (EAP) and text type. Essay writing (Task 2 essays of the IELTS test in this study) qualifies as a genre on its own satisfying the first criterion. To meet the second, Task 2 essays from the academic IELTS test were selected. Lastly, to meet the third criterion, this study focused on the Task 2 essays of the IELTS test as a text type which contains peculiar linguistic features.

Method of Analysis

Halliday (1994) defines theme as the element in a particular structural configuration taken as whole, that organizes the clause as a message; this is the configuration of theme and rheme. Based on this definition, a clause is made of two parts theme followed by rheme. Theme is the starting point for the message; it is the ground from which the clause takes off. Theme helps us to know what the clause will be about and what it is going to tell us. He also gives two examples to show the importance of theme in the meaning of the clause.

1. A halfpenny is the smallest English coin.
2. The smallest English coin is a halfpenny.

In the first sentence, theme is "*a halfpenny*" which this means the writer wants to tell us about "*a halfpenny*" but in the second sentence, the theme is "*the smallest English coin*" this means the writer wants to tell us about "*the smallest English coin*".

Theme has been studied from two perspectives, thematic organization and thematic progression. This study focused on only thematic progression patterns.

Eggin's (2004) model of Thematic progression:



Fries (1994) points that thematic progression is the way in which a theme of a clause repeats or pick up a meaning from the preceding theme or rheme. This progression is necessary for the creations of the information flow which in turn contributes to the communicative effectiveness in a message (Eggins, 2004).

Eggins (2004) categorizes these patterns into:

1) Reiteration pattern: In this pattern, theme of one clause is derived from the theme of the previous clause.

Example: In fact, **I** think when young people today are so rebellious that it's possible that both parents and teachers are afraid to exercise their authority. However, **I** do not agree that this is the basic reason for the increase in teenage violence.

2) Zig-zag pattern: In this pattern, theme of one clause is derived from the rheme of the previous clause.

Example: I believe there are **two main causes** of this situation. **The first** is parental pressure and **the second** is competition for university places.

3) Multiple-Rheme pattern: In this pattern, the rheme of the first clause is split into two parts, then each in turn being taken as the theme element of the subsequent clauses.

Example: Also, students **go to colleges and universities** to have new experiences. **This** often means having the opportunity to meet people different from those in their hometowns. For most students, **going to college** is the first time they've been away from home by themselves.

The rationale behind the selection of this model was: first, this is the most practical, reliable model which provides attestable mechanisms for determining the thematic progression patterns of the texts correctly (Martinez, 2003) and second, most of the studies that have been done in terms of thematic analysis have resorted to this model.

Unit of Analysis

In this study, only main clauses were analyzed for their thematic progression patterns. This enables a clear display of the thematic progression patterns used in the Task 2 essays without having to focus on the secondary organization of text (Gosden, 1993). In this concern, Halliday (1985) argues that main clause's theme makes the major contribution in the method of development of the text. To Fries and Francis (1992) and Berry (1989), examining only the main clause because of its significance could help knowing the text organization and increase the genre awareness.

Procedure

The procedure of analysis follows a few steps. First, the Task 2 essays were stored into word files and word count run on them. Second, the data were analyzed based on Eggins' (2004) model of thematic progression patterns. Initial analysis is verified by two raters who are pursuing their PhD in English language studies. Once concordance was established, the researchers proceeded with the rest of the analyses. Third, the frequency and percentage of thematic progression patterns of the sample were calculated and tabulated. Finally, manifestations of thematic progression patterns were discussed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All the t-units in the data were analyzed to determine different patterns of thematic progression including *reiteration*, *zig-zag*, and *multiple rheme*. In this study, following McCabe (1999), the themes for which the reader has to go back more than two clauses to find a previously mentioned concept were not considered as part of thematic progression pattern. In other words, if links were established over a maximum of three clauses, these links were not considered as part of thematic progression patterns. One more point to be mentioned is that some themes were not related to other clauses, and they could not be categorized under any of the conventional thematic progression patterns. These themes were called miscellaneous. The result is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of the Thematic Progression Patterns

	Thematic Progression Pattern	Frequency	Percentage
1	Reiteration Progression Pattern	118	22%
2	Zig-zag Progression Pattern	125	23%
3	Multiple-Rheme Progression Pattern	51	10%
4	Miscellaneous	246	45%
	Total	540	100%

Reiteration Progression Pattern

Table 2 demonstrates that the writers of the Task 2 essays dedicated 22% of the thematic progression patterns to the realization of the reiteration progression pattern. This finding is in contrast with Jalilifar's (2010) and Ebrahimi's (2008) findings. Jalilifar (2010) who scrutinized the thematic progression patterns of Applied Linguistic research articles found



38% of the reiteration progression pattern. This difference could be discussed on the grounds of difference in genre. In the genre of research article, there are some rhetorical sections which impose writers to make the use of this progression pattern. Rhetorical sections of introduction and methodology could be obvious examples in which writers need to name and present list of the aims, instruments, and procedures of the study. In the genre of essay writing, writers use this progression pattern mostly to list the advantages and/or disadvantages of an event or item. Our finding is also in contrast with the study conducted by Ebrahimi (2008). He analyzed the thematic progression patterns of students' compositions and found 47% of the reiteration progression pattern. Even our study and the study conducted by Ebrahimi (2008), both analyzed related kinds of texts, essay and composition, but the plausible justification of the contrast could be the nature of the analyzed text which were argumentative and narrative respectively. It seems that it is possible to refer to the same item, person, or event in thematic position in the narrative texts.

According to Wang (2007) and McCabe (1999), the use of the reiteration progression pattern makes the text to be simple, repetitive, and redundant. They added that this is due to the use of the similar theme for more than one t-unit. This could not be the case in Task 2 essay writing as the writer is limited by the word counts. Writers have to present their arguments in 250 to 300 words; therefore it is not possible to elaborate and develop all the information presented in the theme of the t-unit. A support to this claim comes from findings of Ebrahimi, Chan and Tan's (2012) study. They analyzed research article abstracts from different disciplines and found 14% to 22% of the reiteration progression pattern. This similarity could be due to that in both, essay and research article abstract, writers are limited by the word counts.

In the analyzed Task 2 essays, the reiteration progression pattern was mostly used to list the advantages and/or disadvantages (Example 1-2) of an event or item. It was also used to help writers to present themselves in the thematic position as it is a focal point which makes the text to be more personal (Example 3). It seems that IELTS instructors should make the students aware of the use of the reiteration progression pattern for these three purposes. This awareness could help the students not to use this progression pattern else where in their Task 2 essays which might make their Task 2 essays to be redundant and repetitive.

Example 1: Throughout my life, I have been lucky enough to have a very good relationship with my parents. They have supported me, given me necessary criticism, and taught me a great deal about how to live my life. Parents can be very important teachers in our lives; however, they are not always the best teachers. Parents may be too close to their children emotionally. Sometimes they can only see their children through the eyes of a protector. For example, they may limit a child's freedom in the name of safety.

Example 2: People don't join community organizations and they're not willing to get involved in trying to improve the quality of life. If someone has a petition to put in a new street light, she has a very hard time getting a lot of people to sign. They don't feel it has anything to do with them. They don't get involved in improving the schools because they don't think the quality of education is important to their lives. They don't see the connection between themselves and the rest of their community. People don't try to support others around them. They don't keep a friendly eye on their children, or check in on older folks if they don't see them for a few days. They're not aware when people around them may be going through a hard time. For example, they may not know if a neighbor loses a loved one.

Example 3: If our town is going in growth, I would prefer slow growth with good planning. I don't want to see rows of cheaply constructed townhouses. Our quality of life must be considered. I believe that this growth will change our city too much. I love my hometown because it is a safe, small town. It is also easy to travel here. If we must expand to hold new citizens, the small-town feel will be gone. I would miss that greatly. A factory would be helpful in some ways. However, I feel that the dangers are greater than the benefits. I cannot support a plan to build a factory here, and hope that others feel the same way.

Zig-zag Progression Pattern

According to the figures in Table 2, the Zig-zag progression pattern was realized in 23% of the total progression patterns. This finding contradicts with the earlier findings reported by Jallilif (2009) and Ebrahimi (2008). Jallilif (2009) analyzed the Applied Linguistic textbooks for the thematic progression patterns and found that the Zig-zag progression pattern was realized in 40.61% of the total progression patterns. This contradiction could be discussed based on the difference in nature of the writers of these texts. Applied Linguistic textbooks are written by expert writers of English that most of them are native speakers of English, but Task 2 essays of the IELTS test are written by non-native speakers of English that big portion of them are holding undergraduate degrees. Therefore, it is not surprising if we have more cohesive textbooks than Task 2 essays. The less realization of this progression pattern could be discussed based on the limitations in word counts that imposed on Task 2 essays writers participating in the IELTS test.

A closer look at the analyzed data, it was evident that this pattern was used mostly in the body of the essays as the essays written for the Task 2 of the IELTS test include short introduction and conclusion. Therefore, short space dedicated to the introduction and conclusion sections of Task 2 essays leaves no room for the use of this progression patterns. In the body section of the essays, writers used this progression pattern to develop the information presented in theme of t-unit (example 4). This progression pattern also helps the readers to know where the information comes from and where it is going which contributes to the cohesion of the texts that contributes directly to the increase of the score of the Task 2 essays.

Example 4: Also, students go to colleges and universities to have new experiences. This often means having the opportunity to meet people different from those in their hometowns. For most



students, **going to college** is the first time they've been away from home by themselves. In additions, **this** is the first time they've had to **make decisions** on their own. **Making these decisions** increases their knowledge of themselves.

Multiple-rheme Progression Pattern

As is evident from Table 2, the multiple-rheme progression pattern received little attention from the writers of the Task 2 essays. Even this progression pattern was realized in only 10% of the thematic progression patterns but it is far more than that found by Jalilifar (2009, 2010), Ebrahimi (2008) and Ebrahimi, Chan, and Tan (2012). These studies have reported that this progression pattern was realized in less than 1% of the total thematic progression patterns. The difference between our finding and earlier studies' findings could be sourced from the fact that when writers are imposed by time and word counts, they prefer to put more information in the rheme part and develop this information in the following t-units. This means that the Task 2 essay writers starts the body section of their essays by putting more information in the topic sentence and develop this information in the supporting sentences (Example 5).

Example 5: **Traveling to a centralized workplace** also has a **number of points** in its favor. **The first** is that many employees would miss the social aspect of work such as seeing colleagues and meeting customers. **A further point** is that employers would need to be able to trust their workers to work at a high standard and finish their work on time, since supervising teleworkers is even more complicated than supervising workers in the same office.

Data analysis indicated that the writers of the Task 2 essays used this progression pattern to provide a clear layout for the reader to catch what the passage is about. It also helps the readers to find the useful information and as they move a step forward, the information offered are become more and more specific. Task 2 essays which have more of this progression pattern are treated as more logic and coherent.

Miscellaneous Progression Pattern

Table 2 illustrated that 45% of the progression patterns could not be classified under any existing patterns (Eggins' (2004) patterns of Thematic progression), therefore they were classified as the miscellaneous progression patterns. According to Wang (2007), the overall effect of applying miscellaneous progression patterns is in creating essays which is lacking in the development of ideas. Contrary to Wang's (2007) suggestion that miscellaneous progression patterns distort the development of ideas, McCabe (1999, P.180) argues that:

"In no way are all of the themes in the corpus chained to a previous theme or rheme in close proximity. However, this does not necessarily mean that they are difficult to process, only that they are difficult to analyze in terms of linking them to one previous point in the discourse in order to say that they belong to one or another chain. These themes are important to the organization of the discourse; they are only labeled as peripheral in that they are peripheral to the thematic progression patterns."

The miscellaneous progression patterns are crucial to the development of the text and can provide thematic continuity in the text because of the accessibility of their references to the reader. Sometimes the reader goes back to more than three clauses to relate propositions together even though the clauses fall outside thematic rules because context compensates for the distance between the clauses by giving the reader the opportunity to rely on the contextual clues to link ideas together. And sometimes when a new idea that has no connection to the preceding clauses is introduced, analysis of thematicity requires great efforts on the part of the readers (Example 6). In addition, some t-units starts with empty themes (e.g. there) which distort the link between the ideas. (Example 7)

Example 6: **It** is obviously difficult to restrict the movement of people around the world and **it** is probably foolish to try to stop it, but attempts should be made to redress the imbalance.

Example 7: **The second cause** is related to the higher education system. Each year, **there** are many times more applicants to university than there are university places. **The result of this** is that only those students with very high grades manage to obtain a place.

CONCLUSION

The data were analyzed in terms of thematic progression patterns proposed by Eggins (2004). All types of thematic progression patterns were found in analyzed data. The researchers found that a large percentage of clauses did not fit into any of the thematic progression patterns proposed by Eggins (2004). These progression patterns were called miscellaneous progression pattern by the researchers.

The findings suggest that thematic progression patterns need to be considered as one of the effective and valuable techniques in teaching essay writing for Task 2 of the IELTS test due to the following points. First, thematic progression patterns enhance connectivity between ideas presented in the Task 2 essays thus helps writers to construct more cohesive essays. Second, they help the readers to have a better understanding of how The Task 2 essays are developed. This is due to the fact that, in Task 2 essay writing, the thematic progression patterns guide the readers through the logical paths constructed by the writers. If little attention is paid to these progression patterns, the writers' attempt to help the readers to understand the text will be destroyed. Third, the selections of the thematic progression patterns are directly imposed by the genre. This means that different genres require the writers to link the ideas in a way which help in achieving the purposes and goals of that genre.



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