Does Thematic Progression Enhance English Discourse Coherence? Evidence from Selected University of Zambia Students' Written Discourse

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Abstract: *This study investigated the thematic progression patterns that enhance English discourse coherence in the written pieces of discourse produced by a sample of University of Zambia students in the School of Education and the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. The purpose of the exercise was to establish the types of theme-rheme patterns that the sampled students use in order to enhance discourse coherence and also to determine the extent to which these patterns are used. The investigation was motivated by the need to determine whether or not there was coherence in most of the students' written pieces of discourse at different levels of study as recommended by Simwinga (1992). Four main patterns that enhance discourse coherence were examined and these included simple linear, constant, derived hyper-thematic and split progression. The data were collected from 100 scripts comprising samples of written pieces of discourse produced by students at the University of Zambia as part of their normal coursework test and examination tasks. From each script, coherence-enhancing theme-rheme patterns were identified and categorized according to types. As regards data analysis and interpretation, the study adopted the qualitative approach. Each of the findings was categorized further according to the set research objectives. The major findings indicate that there is a relationship between thematic progression patterns and discourse coherence in that there was evidence of discourse coherence in the scripts which had adhered to the application of the coherence-enhancing thematic progression patterns. It was also observed that the type of question was an important attribute to determining the type of patterns to use. It was further observed that the constant progression pattern was the most dominantly used pattern in the students' written pieces of discourse. In some cases, there were combinations of either constant and linear progression or linear and constant progression patterns. Arising from the findings, the study has made some recommendations for enhancing coherence in the written pieces of discourse produced by University of Zambia undergraduate students.*

Keywords: *Thematic Progression, Theme, Rheme, Coherence*

1. INTRODUCTION

English is one of the official languages used in Zambia along-side seven other local languages which include Bemba, Kaonde, Lozi, Lunda, Luvale, Nyanja and Tonga. As observed by Simwinga (1992:1) "the use of English in Zambia started with the coming into the country of British colonial administrators ad is now the most dominant of the eight in education, commerce, industry and government". Despite being a second language for the majority of Zambians, English has remained the most prominent language of the nation because of its elevated status as national official language as well as official language of classroom instruction. As a result, a number of studies have been conducted on the use of English in Zambia. Most of the studies have concentrated on elements that form a second language such as the Zambian variety of English (Simukoko, 1977; Africa, 1980; Lawrence and Sarvan, 1983; Chisanga, 1987). Other studies by Kapena (1985), Musakabantu (1985) and Tambulukani (1985) focused on language in Education. Few studies among them Moody (1985) and Banda (2005) investigated the naturally occurring spoken and written pieces of discourse in Zambia. Although Studies by Kapena (1985), Musakabantu (1985) and Tambulukani (1985) dealt with text analysis which is an aspect of discourse analysis, they did not deal with naturally occurring spoken or written pieces of discourse but analysed institutionalised registers. The corpus for these studies comprised business reports, law reports and civil service letters collected from different

institutions. The objective of these studies was to find out the discoursal and linguistic, and to some extent rhetorical structures that could be taught to those training to write business and law reports and civil service letters in colleges in Zambia.

Few studies have investigated aspects of students' written discourses in Zambia, and these include Kashina (1988) and O'brien (1996) who examined the distribution pattern of the noun phrase in clauses produced by University of Zambia students. The study by Kashina revealed that the distribution pattern of the noun phrase in the written pieces of discourse produced by English second language learners was the same as that produced by those using English as their first language. For O'brien, the study focused on the organization of writing, grammar and the significance of cohesion and coherence in pieces of discourse for second language learners in Zambian schools.

Another study like that of Kashina (1988) that departs from the trend that characterised the studies of English was that by Simwinga (1992) who analysed complete and authentic pieces of discourse produced by a stratified sample of University of Zambia undergraduate students. The study was an exercise in discourse analysis which aimed at determining regularities in the use of cohesive ties to establish how these related to or with coherence measures. Simwinga's (1992:25) study has "provided evidence that though there is a relationship between cohesion and coherence, the relationship is not causal". This finding entails that "any incoherence in the written pieces of discourse prodiuced by Zambian University students is due to factors other than the students' failure or inability to use appropriate cohesive ties" (Simwinga, 1992:26).

This paper is based on a study which was an exercise in discourse analysis aimed at establishing the writing practices of some University of Zambia undergraduate students. The main focus of the study was to determine the types of thematic progression patterns through the application of theme and rheme patterns that enhance coherence in the written pieces of discourse produced by some University of Zambia undergraduate students.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The importance of thematic progression in achieving discourse coherence has been acknowledged by Halliday (1968, 1985) and Downing (2001). Other researchers such as Danes (1974) have observed that although adherence to certain theme-rheme patterns such as simple linear progression, derived hyperthematic progression, constant progression and split progression enhances discourse coherence, non-adherence to these patterns obscures it. While the use of theme and rheme patterns in written pieces of discourse have been acknowledged by scholar such as Danes (1974),to date, there is a dearth of information on the use ofthematic progression patterns that enhance discourse coherence in the written pieces of discourse produced by Zambians using English as a second language even though lack of coherence in their written pieces of discourse has been acknowledged (Spiegel & Fitzgerald 1986; Simwinga, 1992). Stated as a question, the problem under investigation is: are there any thematic progression patterns that enhance discourse coherence in the writings produced by University of Zambia undergraduate students? The investigation will help fill the knowledge gap regarding incoherence in the written texts of the undergraduate students at the University of Zambia by highlighting the theme-rheme patterns that enhance discourse coherence in their scripts.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

(i) What types of theme-rheme patterns do selected University of Zambia undergraduate students use in their written pieces of discourse?

(ii) Which theme-rheme patterns enhance discourse coherence?

(iii) What are the implications of the theme-rheme patterns that enhance discourse coherence?

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1. Theoretical Review

The data analysis in this paper were guided by the theory of thematic progression which originated from the Prague scholars and Hallidayan systemic grammarians in the early 1970's. The theory emphasizes the importance of using theme and rheme in the development and organization of

information in a written piece of discourse. This is supported by Mauranen (1993:103) who explains that thematic progression gives attention on how themes can be related to previous themes and rhemes by means of different semantic links such as identity, synonymy, contrast and specification to achieve communicative effectiveness in a text. In the sections that follow, the key concepts related to thematic progression which include theme and rheme are discussed. In general terms, thematic progression is defined as the ordering and organization of information as displayed by the theme and rheme relations to indicate coherence in a particular piece of discourse. In this paper, thematic progression is used to refer to the logical interrelatedness that exists between theme and rheme to enhance discourse coherence. In systematic functional linguistics, theme is viewed as the 'point of departure' of a sentence containing either familiar, given or new information which provides the setting for the remainder of the sentence called the rheme (see also Njobvu, 2010; 2013). According to Halliday (1985:38) and Wang (2007:2) theme is given information which functions as a point of departure of a clause while rheme is what remains after the theme has been identified. The rheme represents new information or the end point. In this paper rheme is all the information that comes after the main verb in a piece of discourse.

4.2. Empirical Review

A number of empirical investigations have been conducted on the role of thematic progression in English discourse coherence (Witte and Faigley, 1981; Fries, 1995; Martin, 1995; Almaden, 2006). Some have attributed coherence to cohesion (Halliday and Hasan, 1976, others to effective organization skills (Leonard and Hukari, 2005) while others have attributed it to thematic progression (Almaden, 2006). Moore (1971:115) defines coherence as "the rhetorical quality by which all of the parts are clearly and smoothly joined to each other". For Almaden (2006:128), coherence is the logical relationship of parts of discourse which is clearly presented to the readers through the application of theme and rheme. Danes (1974) claims that the way in which lexical strings and reference chains interact with theme and rheme is not random, rather the patterns of interaction realize what they refer to as text's thematic progression.

One of the dimensions on coherence has revealed that cohesion in a written text enhance coherence (Lyons, 1977; van Dijk, 1977; Simwinga, 1992). However, Louwerse and Graesser (2005) argue that cohesion alone is not sufficient for a piece of discourse to be coherent but that both speaker and listener should make inferences based on background knowledge and discourse constraints. Therefore, it does not follow that the more the use of cohesive ties, the more coherent a piece of written discourse is. If this were the case, the problem of incoherence in the pieces of written discourses produced by University of Zambia students would not have been an issue.

The other dimension that accounts for discourse coherence includes the use of theme and rheme. Based on this, Leonard and Hukari (2005) report how undergraduate English second language (ESL) students improved their organizational skills in academic writing through the application of thematic progression skills. A similar study on the use of English in a second language setting involved Filipino English Second Language students (Almaden, 2006). The investigation looked at the use of thematic progression in paragraphs written by Filipino students. The study recommended that the use of discourse features and thematic progression would help the audience to easily understand the students' writings.

Further investigations on the use of thematic progression and coherence sought to prove that the notion of theme/rheme could serve as a useful tool of instruction for the teacher to evaluate L2 writing at the level of discourse (Belmonte, 1998). The investigation involved conducting a thematic progression analysis of student compositions written by Spanish native speakers learning English as a second language. It was noted that the empirical analysis of the data had enabled the researcher to uncover several common problems for textual cohesion and coherence in L2 writing which could be addressed through the application of thematic progression patterns. Another study that supports the use of thematic progression is by Sade (2007) who applied theme-rheme patterns on the written discourse of the Christian tracks. Sade reported that the application of the theme and rheme on the Christian written discourse helped the readers to easily understand these tracks.

It is evident from the studies listed above that there is merit in applying thematic progression in assessing discourse coherence and that theme and rheme are the main elements required for the achievement of thematic progression. These concepts are dependent on each other. The only boundary between theme and rheme is that theme is the first element occurring in a clause and rheme is the remainder of the clause as illustrated in table 1.

Table1. *Illustration of the theme rheme relationship*

Theme	Rheme
The inflectional morphemes	do not take the progressive form which is the 'ing' participle as in the word "walking".
An utterance	is a physical event when something is being spoken.
Cohesion	enhances the use of cohesive ties or semantic interpretation of a given text

5. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework employed in the study was derived from Danes (1974). Danes (1974) posits that the concepts of theme and rheme are crucial in achieving sentence connectivity and thematic progression in writing. Consequently, he proposes four types of theme-rheme patterns that can solve the problem of incoherence in writing. These include simple linear progression pattern, constant, split rheme and derived hyper-thematic progression pattern which are illustrated in the sections below.

5.1. Simple Linear Progression Pattern

The simple linear progression pattern is realized when the rheme or part of the rheme of the first clause is turned into the theme of the following clause as illustrated in the examples 1 and 2 below. The themes are in boldface and the rhemes are italicized.

1. **Fertility** is affected by the status of *a woman*. **A woman** with an important role to play such as being a manager commits and dedicates herself more to work than family.

2. **The main aim of teaching English** is to enable pupils to use the language *flexibly and coherently.* **This** can be done by exposing the pupils to *cohesive ties*. **These ties** are relevant in the teaching of structure to *the pupils*. **They** can also apply knowledge of the world especially bottom up for the purpose of word building.

In example 1 above, it will be noted that in the first clause *fertility* is the point of departure or as Firbas (1976:11) asserts, 'the starting point of an utterance' while the segment *is affected by the status of a woman* is the rheme. From the rheme of the first clause, the noun *woman* has been used as the theme of the second clause. In the second example, the phrase *flexible and coherent* which is part of the rheme has become the theme of the following sentence although it has been substituted by the demonstrative pronoun *this*. The rheme of the second sentence is *cohesive ties.* This has been substituted by the noun phrase *these ties* in the theme position of the following sentence. The rheme of this particular sentence has part of the information which is *the pupils* substituted by the pronoun *they* in the theme of the following sentence. This application of the theme and rheme between sentences shows the interdependency that exists between the two elements in a given piece of discourse in order to enhance the logical flow of information.

5.2. Constant Progression Pattern

In the constant progression pattern, a common theme is shared by all clauses and this theme is equivalent to given information. In other words, this pattern deals with an item in the theme of the first clause which is also selected as the theme of the following clause as shown in examples 3 and 4 below.

Atalanta is a strong and independent woman. **She** differs from Mathilde because she does not only depend on herself but competes or equals herself to men. **Atalanta** grew up to be a true daughter of the wilderness, an incomparable hunter.

Fertility is the actual reproductive performance. **Fertility** is simply the ability to give birth to infants. **It** is actually one of the major three components of population growth.

In example 3 above, the pattern takes the same element *Atalanta* as the point of departure for all the clauses. Similarly, in example 4, *fertility* is the theme for all the clauses and the rheme for each clause provides further information and explanation about the theme. The use of the personal reference *she* in example 3 andthe third person pronoun *it* in example 4 does not imply a change in theme. This is used to avoid repetition. This pattern is easy to comprehend though the over use of the same theme may perhaps render the text monotonous.

5.3. Derived Hyper-thematic Progression Pattern

In this type of thematic progression pattern, individual themes from the subsequent clauses are derived from a Hyper-theme or the same overriding theme. An example of this pattern is drawn from Belmonte (1998; see also Njobvu, 2010; 2013) as presented in Table 2 below.

Table2. *Illustration of the Derived Hyper-thematic Progression*

Pattern	Theme	Rheme
Derived Hyper-thematic progression	Many researchers on writing	Conducted different investigations on ESL writing process.
	Spack (1984) and Zamel (1983)	studying ESL writers corroborated Hayes and flower's finding about the writing process for their populations.
	Raimes (1987:459-460)	compared ESL students' composing processes with other researcher's findings on L2 basic writers, and concluded that the two groups of students had much in common.
	Both krapels (this volume) and Friedlaner (this volume)	continue the discussion of ESL writing process research.

Table 2 above shows that each theme in a clause is different from the other. In clause one, the theme is *many researchers on writing* while in clause two the theme is *Spack* and *Zame. Raimes* is the theme of clause three, and in clause four the theme is both *Krapels and Friedlander*. Despite this difference, the themes are all related under the same hypertheme, *researchers on writing*. This pattern uses a variety of words referring to the same hypertheme.

5.4. Split-rheme Progression Pattern

In this pattern, the rheme of the first clause in a text is split into two items. Each of the rhemes is in turn taken as theme element in the following clause. The subsequent theme therefore becomes given information. This correlates with the opening sentence of a paragraph called the topic sentence as shown in Table 3 below (see Njobvu, 2010, 2013).

Table3. *Illustration of split-rheme progression pattern*

Pattern	Theme	Rheme
Split progression pattern	The study	predominantly deals with *cohesion and coherence.*
	Cohesion	is the study that looks at the texture of discourse in relation to reference, substitution, conjunctions, comparatives and other similar variable applicable in the study.
	Coherence	deals with meaning in a unified text or conversation.

Table 3 shows that the rheme of the first clause has been split into two items which are *cohesion* and *coherence*. Each of these items is used as the theme of the subsequent clauses where *cohesion* is the theme of the second clause while *coherence* has become the theme of the third clause.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1. Data Collection

6.1.1. Population

The population for the study comprised university of Zambia undergraduate students enrolled in in the School of Education and School of Humanities and Social Sciences across the first four academic years of study. According to Lock *et al* (1987:58) a population is "the entire aggregate of cases that meet a designated set of criteria." The researcher considered all the students registered in School of

Education and the School of Humanities and Social Sciences in the 2020 academic year as constituting the study population. In the case of the present study, purposive sampling of the schools was used based on the fact that the selected schools had adequate numbers of students who write descriptive and narrative pieces of work for their class assignments and tests. As advised by Bogdan and Biklen (2007) purposive sampling is used when the researcher solicits informants with specific characteristics to participate in a study". The academic level of the participants was also purposively sampled because the researcher sought to make inferences on whether or not the thematic progression patterns the students had mastered at the different levels in their education were adequate to enable them produce coherent pieces of discourse.

6.1.2. Study Approach

The study employed the qualitative approach in order to identify the appropriate types of theme-rheme patterns that would enhance discourse coherence**.** A total of 400 scripts were selected from 400 students drawn from four academic levels of study. Each academic level was represented by 100 students. The scripts had been written during their normal class work in form of end-of-year examinations in order to ensure uniformity. Simple random sampling techniques were used to obtain samples to ensure that equal opportunity was extended to all the students constituting the population at the time of the study. The scripts which were selected related to examination questions that required the participants to express themselves in naturally-occurring language as part of responding to the examination questions. Thus, the questions at the centre of investigation required them to discuss issues in depth as expected by the examiners.

6.1.3. Data Analysis

Seliger and Shohamy (1989) define data analysis as "the sifting, organizing, summarizing and synthesizing of the data so as to arrive at the results and conclusions of the research."Qualitative research uses inductive analysis which means that critical themes emerge out of data (Patton, 1990). These themes are constructs which the investigator identified before, during and after data collection (Maxwell, 1996 and Strauss and Corbin, 1990). In line with Bogdan and Biklen (1982), data were analysed following the criteria that involve working with data, organizing it into manageable chunks, synthesizing it, searching for patterns and discovering what is important in line with the research objectives and questions. A four-stage qualitative approach was applied in data analysis. The first involved reading each of the 400 scripts to familiarize with the content. The second comprised locating the themes and the rhemes used in each of the 400 scripts and highlighting them by means of a highlighter. Thirdly, each of the theme-rheme relations was classified accordingly into four patterns in accordance with the analytical framework postulated by Danes (1974). The four are: simple linear progression pattern, constant progression pattern, split progression pattern and derived hyper-thematic progression pattern. Finally, identification and cataloguing of instances of appropriate and inappropriate uses of thematic progression was done.

7. RESULTS

Five types of thematic progression patterns that enhance coherence were identified in the writings of the University of Zambia under-graduate students. These are, constant progression, simple linear progression and split progression pattern. The hyper-thematic progression pattern, though a possibility, was not displayed in any of the scripts. Other patterns include the constant linear progression and the linear constant progression pattern. The students responded to two types of questions and these are the comparative question and the argumentative question.

7.1. Constant Progression Pattern

The findings revealed that the constant progression pattern was more extensively used by most of the students at the University of Zambia. This pattern was identified in both comparative and argumentative questions. There was a 100 percent application of the pattern in both question types. These results suggest that there is a strong relationship between the application of constant progression and discourse coherence as indicated through the theme-rheme application in the essays. Most of the students maintained the same theme as illustrated below:

Pupils can use the knowledge of pragmatic inferencing in comprehension exercises. **They** can infer the implied meaning of a text by using the context and co-text of a text. **They** can also apply knowledge of the world to understand a text.

In example5 above, the theme of the first sentence which is the noun *pupils*, has been selected as the theme of the following clauses, though, in the subsequent clauses, the theme is represented by the equivalent personal pronoun *they*. The pronoun is used to avoid repetition. This is because constant progression is characterized by the application of pronouns. Although the pattern was used in all the students' written pieces of discourse, more instances were noted in argumentative questions. Therefore, it can be concluded that the type of question asked plays a defining role on the type of pronouns used as substitute themes.

7.2. Simple Linear Progression Pattern

The simple linear progression pattern was also identified in both the test and the examination scripts. Examples 6 and 7 below represent the cross-referential links from the rheme of one clause to the theme of the following clause.

Theory X states that *man is a busy and dull creature*. **He** does not like to work.

The main aim of teaching English is to enable pupils to use the language *flexibly and coherently.* **This** can be done by exposing the pupils to *cohesive ties*. **These ties** are relevant in the teaching of structure to *the pupils*. **The pupils** can also apply knowledge of the world especially bottom up for the purpose of word building.

In example 6, the segment *man is a busy and dull creature*, which is the rheme of the first clause, has become the theme of the next clause. Instead of using the same noun *man,* the substitute pronoun *he* has been used in the second clause. The development of ideas in this manner is typical of the simple linear progression pattern. Further, in example 7, the phrase *flexible and coherent* which is part of the rheme has become the theme of the following sentence. Like in (6), the theme that follows has been substituted by the demonstrative pronoun *this*. From the second sentence, *cohesive ties* which is the rhemehas been substituted by the noun phrase *these ties* in the theme position of the following sentence. The rheme of this particular sentence has part of the information which is *the pupils* substituted by the pronoun *they* in the theme of the following sentence. This application of the theme and rheme is in tandem with Fries (1983) argument that the cross-referential links from the rheme of one clause to the theme of the next clause contribute immensely to the expansion of ideas from the previous sentence to the next one. This particular way of applying theme and rheme mostly leads to sentence coherence and this is what Fries suggests in the definition of simple linear progression.

The analysis also revealed that the type of question asked leads to the application of this pattern. It was discovered that the pattern was more prominent in the argumentative questions than in the comparative questions.

7.3. Split Progression Pattern

The split progression pattern was only identified in higher level students' writings (i.e. fourth year students). Examples 8 and 9 below illustrate how the pattern was presented.

Discourse analysis is the study of language in use and this study predominantly deals with *cohesion and coherence effects*. **Cohesion** is the study that looks at the texture of discourse in relation to reference, substitution, conjunction, comparative and other similar variables applicable to the study. **Coherence** deals with meaning in a unified text or conversation.

Discourse analysis provides the pupils with the techniques to use when writing *narrative and descriptive compositions*. **When writing narratives**, ideas are organized as the event is unfolding. **In descriptive writing,** a pupil has to understand how to present ideas in his writing from general to specific.

Examples 8 and 9 above show that two ideas have been introduced in the rheme of the first clause. In the second clause, one of the ideas from the previous rheme has been chosen as the theme of the following clause. In the third clause, the theme is the second idea from the rheme of the first clause. It can be deduced, therefore, that the type of question determines the application of the split progression

pattern in a given piece of discourse. Other theme-rheme patterns as Danes (1974) observes, combine two different patterns as discussed below.

7.4. Constant Linear Progression Pattern

The constant linear progression pattern combines two different theme-rheme patterns and these are constant and simple linear progression pattern. This pattern was identified only in the argumentative question. In this pattern, the ideas were developed from constant progression to simple linear progression as shown in example 10 below.

Discourse Analysis is relevant to the teaching of English at secondary school level in Zambia. **Its relevance** will be seen in the way a teacher who has done discourse analysis will apply*the knowledge of cohesion and coherence*. **This knowledge** will help the teacher to use cohesive ties, which include reference, substitution, ellipsis, comparative and even lexical cohesion.

In example 10 above, the theme of the first clause is also the theme of the second clause. However, the theme of the third clause has been derived from the rheme of the second clause which is *the knowledge of cohesion and coherence.* This way of organising information combines two theme-rheme patterns which are the constant progression and simple linear progression. The pattern was identified in the written scripts of higher academic levels of either third or fourth year students.

7.5. Linear Constant Progression

Linear constant progression is achieved by combining ideas in such a way that the simple linear progression leads to constant progression. This happens when the information in the rheme of a clause is developed into the theme of the following sentences. The pattern was only identified argumentative questions as shown in examples 11 and 12 below.

The x and y theory was propounded by *Douglous Macgregory*. **He** argued that each manager in an organization deals with employees who have either the Y or X characteristics. **He** argued further that X are workers who do not like to work unless they are forced to do so.

Theory x advances *that human beings are naturally dull and lazy*. **They** do not want to work and given a chance, they would do nothing. **They** work to be pushed or forced to do anything.

In example 11, the rheme of the first sentence has become the theme of the two subsequent sentences where the pronoun *he* has been used a substitute word for Douglous Macgregory. Additionally, in example 12, the rheme of the first sentence, has been substituted with the pronoun *they* and has been used as the theme in the following sentences. This is intended to avoid repetition. From the examples, it can be deduced that pronouns are a very important attribute in the application of this pattern as they help enhance coherence.

From the findings presented above, there are five thematic progression patterns which ensured coherence in the writings of UNZA students. These are: the simple linear progression pattern, constant progression pattern and the split progression pattern. Other patterns that were identified consists of a combination of two patterns, the constant progression pattern and the simple linear progression pattern. These are; the linear constant progression pattern and the constant linear progression pattern. The hyper-thematic progression pattern, though a possibility, was not displayed in any of the scripts. Table 4 shows the prevalence of these patterns in the students' written discourses. The percentages on the usage of these are presented below.

Table4. *Coherence-enhancing thematic progression patterns used in students writings at UNZA*

Theme-Rheme Patterns	Frequency	Percentage %
Constant progression	100	100
Simple linear progression	80	80
Constant linear progression	58	58
Linear constant progression	35	35
Split progression	30	30
Hyper-thematic	0	0
Total No. of scripts	100	

The results presented in Table 4 show that the constant progression pattern was the most frequently used thematic progression pattern in all the scripts which were analysed. The simple linear progression was the second most preferred progression pattern, followed by the constant linear progression pattern and then the linear constant progression pattern. The split progression pattern was the least applied pattern by the students and it was only observed at higher levels of study (i.e. third and fourth year levels). However, the hyperthematic progression pattern was not used in any of the students' writings. It is worth noting that all the examples used in this section were drawn from the students' written discourse.

7.6. Discussion

7.6.1. Constant Progression Pattern

The constant progression pattern was the most dominantly used pattern at all the levels of study. In this pattern, common themes appear in sequences in a series of sentences. Fries (2001) describes this as topically linked thematic progression pattern. This pattern was noted in all the scripts that were examined representing 100 % application. The pattern was used in both comparative and argumentative questions. These results suggest that there is a strong relationship between the application of constant progression and discourse coherence as indicated through the theme-rheme application in the essays by University of Zambia undergraduate students.

The reason for this is that the pattern is the easiest to use and that information is reiterated so that the students do not lose thread of the theme or the idea under discussion. The other reason is that the type of question asked contributes to how often the theme which may be the subject is referred to. Nicholas (1984) confirms the claim by asserting that a single structural element can conflate various functions such as subject, theme and given information. Generally, it was observed that the comparative questions exhibited more instances of the constant progression pattern than the argumentative ones in the students' written discourse. This may be attributed to the fact that it is easier to develop ideas in a comparative question because the writer sticks to the initial theme in the subsequent sentences. This style of theme-rheme presentation is supported by Wang (2007)who claims that starting a sentence with the same theme in both the initial and subsequent sentences is especially useful in helping students to communicate their ideas successfully.

One other characteristic of the constant progression pattern which was noted is the substitution of the initial theme by appropriate pronouns in the subsequent sentences (see also Sade 2007:68). These pronouns are mostly anaphorically used in the essays as they refer to information presented in a stretch of preceding discourse (Francis, 1989). Although there were very few instances of pronouns used anaphorically in the sentences that followed in the written scripts, the most dominant pronouns used in the students' writings were 'he/*she/it and they*. The rest was a repetition of the same theme.

It was also observed that the constant progression pattern was presented across paragraphs in some scripts. Danes (1974) indicates that the theme sentence of a paragraph can be related to either the new parts of the preceding paragraph or to some part of the initial theme of the sentence. The application of the same theme in the first clause in a series of paragraphs is referred to as macro theme. One of the examples where the same theme is used across paragraphs is shown in example 13 below.

Derivational morphemes unlike the inflectional morphemes change the meaning of the word to which they have been added. When the derivational morpheme 'un' which has a negative connotation is added to the word "comfortable", it changes the meaning of the word and it becomes "uncomfortable".

Derivational morphemes are not productive. They are also opaque in that after an   addition of derivational morpheme there is no clear or relation between the formed word and the supposed meaning of the separate words.

Derivational morphemes have syntactic role. They also have a lexical form. Derivational morphemes can also be placed either at the beginning of a word or at the end of the word.

In example 13 above '*derivational morphemes*' which is the theme of the initial sentence of the first paragraph is also the theme of the two subsequent paragraphs. This type of presentation of the theme

can be associated with the type of questions that were asked. The application of constant progression to maintain the macro theme at paragraph level contributed greatly to thematic consistency and this provide a clear insight on the theme of the whole text. Despite the various applications of this particular pattern, certain problems were identified.

One of the problems identified with this type of application of constant progression is that ideas are presented as though they were just lists of items. To avoid the monotony of using constant progression in this manner, it would be better to vary the use of words while sticking to the same theme. Another problem of using the constant progression pattern as demonstrated in examples belowwas the possibility of ruptures in the flow of information between sentences. The problem of ruptures precipitates the introduction of new themes in most sentences resulting in discourse incoherence.

Fertilityis one of the components of demography that influences population growth and the number of births that occur in a population. **It**is very important to note that fertility can be measured through women and not men.

Inflectional morphemes are also very productive. **They** also inflect for tense. **You** can easily add other morphemes like –*ing*, *s* and *ly* to the stem

The pronouns *it* and *you* in examples 14 and 15 above do not refer to anything mentioned earlier. Consequently, they do not give any extra meaning to the clauses in any way. Research has shown that the extensive use of the first/second person, especially in the initial thematic position, is typical of personal narratives and speech not formal essay writing (Thompson, 2003; Biber et al 1999; Brown & Yule 1983; Fries 1995).

7.6.2. Simple Linear Progression Pattern

The findings reveal that the simple linear progression pattern was applied in 80% of the students' written discourse. The frequency in the application of simple linear progression pattern among the students shows that they are familiar with the application of given and new information. This demonstrates that students are able to expand new information in the rheme of the previous sentence by making it given information in the theme of the following sentence. This is also supported by Nwogu (1995) and Li and Liu (2005)who asserts that the application of given and new information accounts for effective organization of information in a text.

Further, the information also shows that most of the instances of the pattern in the test scripts were employed across paragraphs. Generally, this was shown in the connection between a part of the rheme of the last sentence being developed into the theme of the first sentence of the following paragraph.

The inflectional morpheme does not take the progressive form which is the *'ing'* participle as in the word *'walking'*. The root in this word is *walk* and the *'ing'* is a *derivational morpheme.*

The derivational morpheme is a morpheme that can be added to the root or the base to make up another word. For example the 'er' can be added to the word *teach* to come up with the word *teacher*.

It was a common trend among students to repeat the element from the rheme to the theme of the following clause. However, some students made attempts to substitute the elements in the rheme with their pronoun equivalents in the theme. One of the examples where a part of the rheme was substituted is exemplified in17.

In some agencies they give a time frame for *the process to end*. *It* comes to an end when both the client and the case worker are satisfied.

In example 17 above, the phrase *the process to end* has been substituted by the pronoun *it*. All this was done to avoid repetition and to achieve coherence. Firbas (1976) supports this observation by pointing out that the rheme represents the core of the utterance and 'pushes the communication forward'. In other words the rheme provides important information which is elaborated later in the theme position of the following sentence. The application of this pattern is very important because new information in the rheme is expanded in the theme of the subsequent sentences. The analysis reveals that the pattern was more dominant in the argumentative questions than in the comparative ones.

7.6.3. Split Progression Pattern

As indicated earlier, in split progression pattern, the rheme of the first clause is split into two items which are then presented as separate theme elements in the clauses that follow. In all the scripts that were analysed, only scripts produced by participants at higher level of study (academic levels three and four) attempted to apply this pattern correctly. The pattern was displayed in only30 percent of the scripts.

Although this pattern was least applied by the students, the knowledge of the pattern will help students to be particularly conscious in dealing with information in the rheme so that no information is left unattended to. Other patterns displayed in the students' writings are constant linear progression and linear constant progression.

7.6.4. Constant Linear Progression Pattern

The findings revealed that, the constant linear progression pattern was displayed in 58 % of the students' written discourse and mostly appeared in the argumentative questions. This percentage shows that not many students are able to develop information from constant to simple linear and vice versa. The application of this pattern should be encouraged because it improves the flow of information and solves the problem of ruptures. Another combination, like constant linear progression, is linear constant progression.

7.6.5. Linear Constant Progression Pattern

The findings indicate that only 35 % of scripts exhibited the presence of the linear constant progression pattern. It was noted that despite the pattern being identified in both argumentative and comparative questions, there were more instances of the pattern in the argumentative question than in comparative questions. The findings have also shown that the correct application of this pattern enhances coherence. This is why it is advisable that students should be encouraged to use the pattern as it would definitely solve the problem of incoherence in their written pieces of discourse.

8. CONCLUSION

The discussion above has confirmed that there are five theme-rheme patterns used by University of Zambia undergraduate students to enhance discourse coherence. These are constant progression, simple linear progression and split progression. Others that emanated from the combination of patterns are constant linear progression pattern and linear constant progression pattern. Among the patterns that enhance discourse coherence, some were dominantly used in all the scripts regardless of the nature of the question asked. These are constant progression patterns and simple linear progression patterns. Others such as split progression, were unique to specific questions while constant-linear and linear constant progression were unique to higher levels of study. This has been attributed to the fact that at higher levels of study students are able to handle complex questions since they may have mastered the application of theme and rheme in their writings.

From the findings, it has been further revealed that theme-rheme observances in the written pieces of discourse are critical in achieving coherence. As such, all students should be encourage to use the theme-rheme patterns if they are to enhance coherence in their pieces of written discourse.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the overall study and the conclusion drawn, the following are some of the recommendations made:

i) Students should be introduced to the use of theme and rheme at the onset of their University education. This will help them write more coherently and, at the same time, assess themselves on how effectively information should be presented in their essays.

ii) There is also need to extend the study to high school level, which is supposed to prepare pupils sufficiently for further education, in order to establish the type of competencies which the students bring with them into the university.

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