A CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS OF COHERENT WRITING SKILLS OF PAKISTANI ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

*Prof. Dr. Muhammad Asim Mahmood, **Shahbaz Haider, ***Dr. Rashid Mahmood

Abstract

Coherent writing skills are essentialprerequisites for the construction of the academic discourse, specifically at the undergraduate level.Coherence in writing can be attainedvia the utilization of textual metafunction. The textual metafunctionrealized by the Theme-Rheme system organizes ideational and interpersonal meanings in discourse to generate coherence at the local and global levels. The mixed-method research aims to investigate the coherent writing skills of undergraduate Pakistani learners. The Theme and Thematic progression patterns (T/TP)based on the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) were applied to twenty-five argumentative essays of Pakistani learners retrieved from the International Corpus of Learners English (ICLE).The findings demonstrate that most undergraduate Pakistani English Learners overused prenominals at the onset of clausesand constant thematic progressionchoicesto link the clauses. These two factors formedPakistani learners' argumentative writing into descriptive writing, and the underutilization of interpersonal and textual thematic choices further indicated Pakistani learners' unawareness about the social norms of persuasive writing. The pedagogical implications of this study provide English Language Teachers (ELTs) and English Language Learners (ELLs) with a wide range of explicit lexico-grammatical resources to maintain the coherenceat the text level.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics, Theme-Rheme, Thematic Progression, Argumentative Writing, Coherence, Pakistani English Language Learners

1. Introduction

The acquisition of argumentative writing skills is likely to be a time-consuming and complex skillas compared to other language skillssincethe complexity of writing demands the simultaneousmanagement of linguistic, motivational, and cognitive processes(Mendoza, Lehtonen, Lindblom-Ylänne&Hyytinen, 2022). In the second language (L2) context, the significance of argumentative writing, as mentioned by Kroll (2003), can be assessed through its presence as an essential component of internationally recognized English language tests (, e.g., IELTS, TOEFL, TOIEC, TESOL, O/A Level Cambridge Assessments, and GRE, etc.) to achieve higher education admissions. At the universitylevel, learners are,primarily,required to construct well-formulated argumentative responsesto a given prompt by adopting a stance supported by academically reliable reasons(Hirvela, 2017;Martin, 1993). Argumentative writing comprises not only reasons and their plausible explanations but also uses of appropriate lexico-grammatical resources to develop cohesive and coherent structuresto persuade uncommitted readers.The cohesive and coherent writing, therefore, is an important parameter for successful argumentativecommunication inacademia.Coherence(i.e., a text's relations to its social and cultural context)in discourse can be achievedthrougha textual metafunction realized by Theme-Rhemesystem as lexico-grammatical structures in Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG). Numerous studies (, e.g., Schleppegrell, 2001, 2004; Christie, F., & Dreyfus, 2007)confirm that the analysis of theme and thematic progression (T/TP) resourcescan be employed to gauge the coherence of English Language Learners' texts (ELLs).

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*Dean Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

**Department of Applied Linguistics, Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

*** (Ex) Associate Professor Department of Applied Linguistics, Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

T/TParranges ideational and interpersonal meanings into coherent and meaningful form through the encoding of semantic meanings and generic schematic structures into the text (Thompson, 2014). Therefore, this research selected SFL theoretical framework to analyze the textual metafunctionin Pakistani undergraduate learners' argumentative essays whether the thematic choices used in Pakistani essays generate coherence or not.

In the Pakistani academic context, various researches (Gill & Janjua, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Haider et al., 2021; Bukhari & Shakir, 2020) indicated academic writing issues, e.g., inappropriate and incoherentexpansion of ideas,in Pakistani learners' written responses because of havingweak syntactic organization at the clause and discourse level.The writing issues faced by Pakistani learners compromise the effectiveness of their writing. Secondly, the majority of Pakistani English Language Teachers (ELT) preferably resort to grammatical translation methods (GTMs) rather than using functional grammatical methods required to satisfy the social and cultural demands of academic discourse.

To address the foregoing academic writing issues, the researchers applied a Theme/ Thematic progression framework to argumentative essays written by Pakistani undergraduate students (Chang & Lee, 2019). The appropriate use of T/TP choices maintains authorial stance, coherence, and the logical flow of information. This research, thereby, analyzed thematic choices used in Pakistani argumentative writings and compared the results with the findings of previous researches to find out whether the thematic resources in the Pakistani argumentative essays generate coherence or not. Thus, it is likely to infer that the findings of this research will equip ELTs and Pakistani ELLswith a broad range of thematic choices required in academically valued writing constructions.

The research has targeted the following objectives:
1. To find out thematic choices used in the Pakistani argumentative essays
2. To identify the academically valued thematic choices required to enhance the coherence of argumentative essays

Premised upon the above-mentioned research objectives, the present research has answered the following two research questions (RAs):

RA No.1: What types of theme linguistic choices were excessively used in the Pakistani argumentative essays?

RA No.2: Did the thematic patterns used by Pakistani English Language Learners generate the coherent flow of information in their argumentative essays?

2. Literature Review

This section offered an overview of the past researches that were further divided into three groups. Firstly, numerous studies compared the Thematic choices deployed by the learners belonging to different linguistic backgrounds, whereas other researchesanalyzed the impactsof disciplinary backgrounds on the students' Thematic choices. Finally, the studies analyzed the use of themes on proficiency levels were reviewed.

In regards to examining different linguistic backgrounds, the following studies (e.g., Green et al., 2000; Herriman &Boström Aronsson, 2009; Wei, 2016)detected a higher number of textualthemes (e.g.,moreover, and, and in addition to, etc.) and interpersonal themes(, e.g., in my opinion, probably, etc.)in EFL and ESL learnerscompared to L1 learners.The ESL/EFL learners utilized conjunctive adjuncts of temporal (, meanwhile, before that, later on, next, soon, finally),

additive (, e.g., also, moreover, in addition, besides) and adversative (, e.g., on the other hand, however, conversely) types. In terms of interpersonal themes, modal adjuncts to express opinions (, e.g., in my opinion, personally, to my mind), persuasion (, e.g., evidently, apparently, no doubt, presumably)and evaluation ((un)wisely, understandably, mistakenly, foolishly) were excessively found out. The overuse of textual and interpersonal themes constitutes marked themes leading to incoherence inside the clauses and among the clauses (Green et al., 2000).

Examining the disciplinary backgrounds on the uses of themes, the analysis of a study conducted by North (2005) indicated that the higher-graded essays of Arts studentscontained a higher proportion of textual, interpersonal, and experiential themes to explicitly present structures and student writers' commitments to their views in comparison to science students' essays having mostly bald assertions.

Finally, the proficiency level even in the L1 context affectsthe appropriacy of thematization and coherence in discourse.The following studies (Mellos, 2011; Xue-wen, 2010; Hewings, 2004; Chang & Lee, 2019) compared high and low coherence essays of ESL undergraduate learners and observed that the low coherence essays contained the overuse of unmarked themes of simple nominal groups, pronouns and constant thematic progression, which disrupted the overall coherence of the essays. The lower-level essays overused the constant thematic progression to organize information. Highly coherent essays, conversely, displayed lexically dense nominal groups in Topical Themes by utilizing multiple types of textual themes to explain complicated abstract notions and deployed varied types of thematic progression (, e.g., constant, linear, and derived) to formulate more readable and coherent arguments. Thus, it can be deduced that the deployment of varied thematic choices and thematic progression patterns generates effective academic writing. Marked experiential themes in adult texts can also be used to display the discontinuity as expert writers at times need to "signal his move from one activity sequence to the next" (Martin & Rose, 2008, p. 35). The marked signal new turns of informational settings in terms of time, place, and manner to discontinue the information flow. The discontinuity in the highly valued texts, however, occurs in this manner that "the text's register, genre, and, consequently its themes" are well established (Couture, 1985, p. 81 as cited in Promwinaie, 2010).

In conclusion, the present research has examined varied types of themes and thematic progression (T/TP) deployed by undergraduate Pakistani students and their impact on the overall coherence of their essays. Despite identifying the highly valued T/TP resources used in argumentative essays, most Pakistani English Language Teachers do not pay attention to the skillful uses of textual metafunction in creating coherence and cohesion throughout the essays. Resultantly, they wrestle difficulties in teaching Pakistani English Language Learners about the linguistic tools of coherence. Hence, the likelihood is that the findings of the present research will present English teaching and learning community explicit T/TP patterns in order to create well-formulated argumentative essays.

3. Research Methodology

3.1.Data Collection and SamplingMethod

The current study selected twenty-five argumentative essaysof university undergraduate learners drawn from the International Corpus of Learners English (Granger et al., 2009), and the word length of each essay is from 500 to 1000.The topic of each essay is "Are women better

parents than men?". To perform an in-depth analysis of essays, the researchers deployed purposeful random sampling to obtain comprehensive information of Pakistani learners' thematic choices in their argumentative essays.

3.2 Research Framework

The researchers applied two frameworks to conduct a phase-wise analysis of essays: the argumentative genre model and Theme-Rheme and the Thematic Progression (T/TP) of the research framework for this research.

3.2.1. GenreAnalysis

Martin and Rose (2008) pointed out the essential stages of argumentative essays (i.e., thesis, argument, and conclusion). They categorized stages into more specific phases, i.e., macro-Theme (, i.e., thesis statement), hyper-Theme (i.e., topic sentence), hyper-Rheme (i.e., concluding sentence), and macro-New (, i.e., Conclusion stage).

3.2.2. Multiple Themes and Thematic Progression Patterns

Theme as the element of clause serves as "the starting point for the message: it is what the clause is going to be about" (Eggins, 2004, p. 299). In clause, a writer typically departs from the places which are familiar with the "Theme" or "given" information that has already been mentioned in the text or is familiar from the context. On the other hand, Rheme is defined as the part of the clause in which the theme is developed. It means that, in the clause, the writer departs from the familiar to head towards the unfamiliar the "Rheme" which typically contains the unfamiliar or new information. The following figure provides an overview of the types of themes:
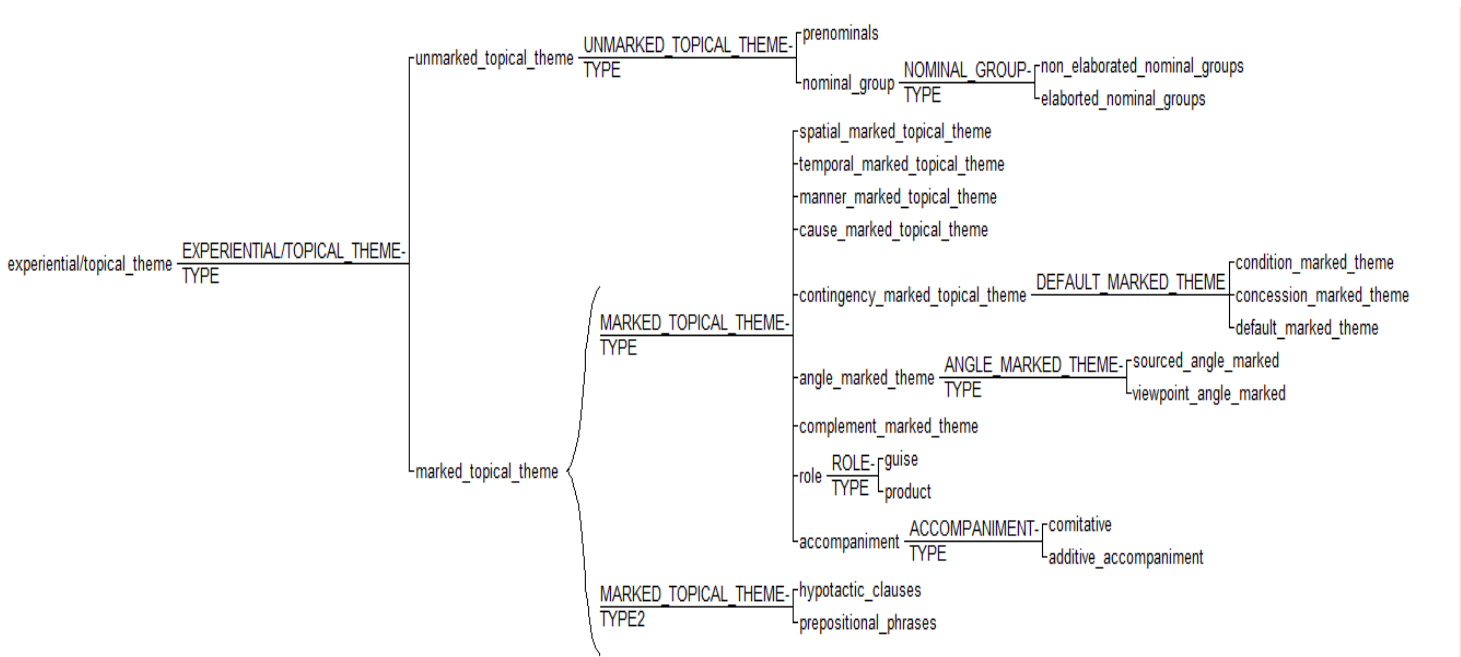
Figure 1

An Overview of Multiple Themes
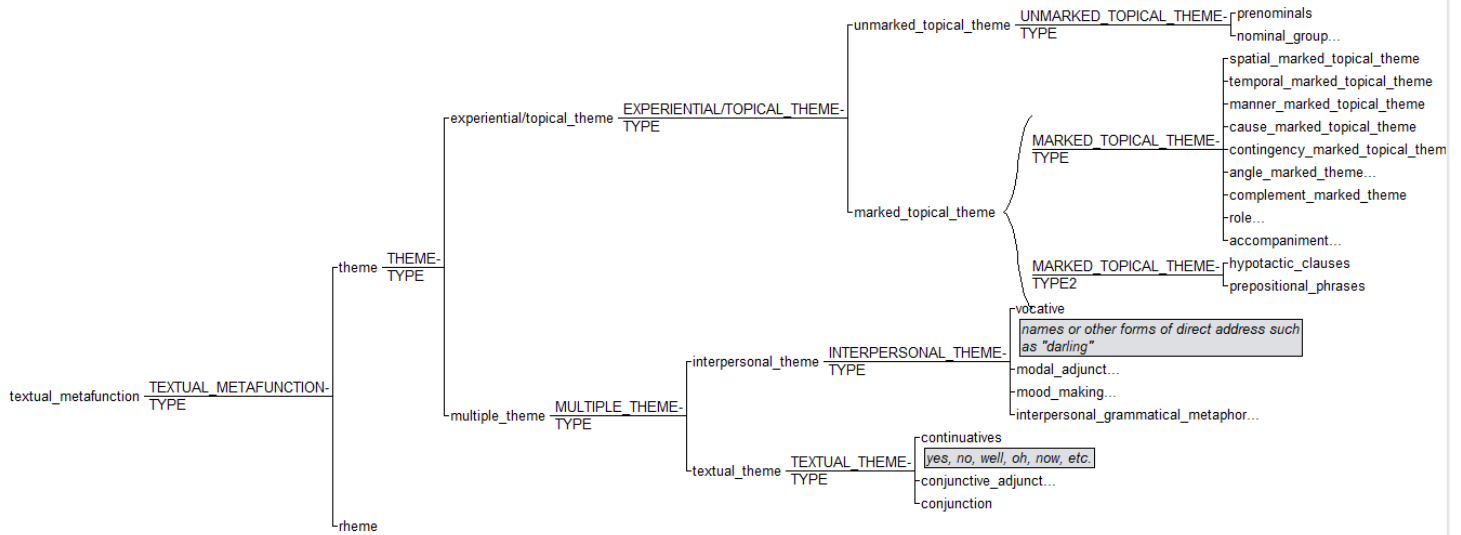
3.2.2.1. Topical Themes. The topical Theme is the first ideational component in the clause that can be a participant (, e.g., I/You/S/he), a process (, e.g., Let's), or a circumstance (, e.g., in our society) as depicted in the below figure:

Figure 2

Sub-types of Topical or Experiential Themes

3.2.2.2.Interpersonal Themes. Topical Themes can also be headed by vocatives (e.g.

David, Sir), mood-making devices comprising Wh-interrogatives (e.g., what is the responsibility of woman?), yes/no interrogatives (e.g., Are women parents better than men?), and Let's-imperative clauses (e.g., Let's talk together.); modal adjuncts, according to Halliday (2014, p.157) consisting of mood adjuncts which include temporal meanings, modality (,i.e., modalization and modulation); and comment adjuncts which comment on the clause as whole as given the figure below:

Figure 3

An Overview of Interpersonal Themes
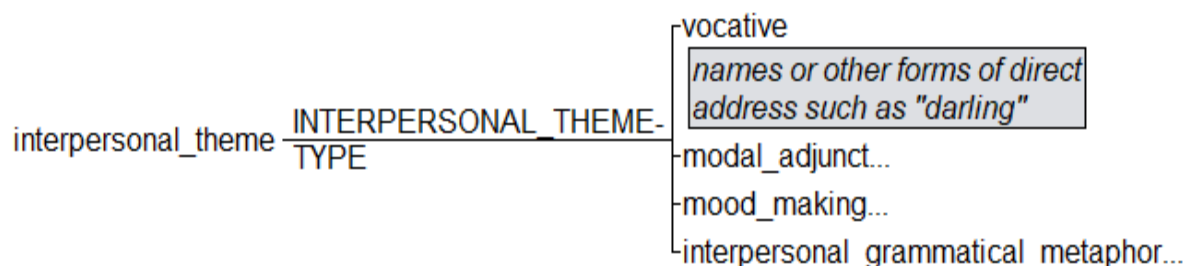
The following figure illustrates sub-types of modal adjunct:

Figure 4

Sub-Types of Modal Adjunct

```
                                          ┌probability
                                          │ probably, possibly, certainly, perhaps, maybe
                                          ├usuality
                      mood_adjunct MOOD_ADJUNCT-│ usually, sometimes, always, (n)ever, often,
                                   TYPE      │ seldom
                                          ├typicality
                                          │ occasionally, generally, regularly, for the most
                                          │ part
                                          └obviousness
                                            of course, surely, obviously, clearly

                                          ┌opinion
                                          │ in my opinion, personally, to my mind
                                          ├admission
                                          │ frankly, to be honest, to tell you the truth
                                          ├persuasion
                                          │ honestly, really, believe me, seriously
                                          ├entreaty
modal_adjunct MODAL_ADJUNCT-              │ please, kindly
              TYPE                        ├presumption
                                          │ evidently, apparently, no doubt, presumably
                     comment_adjunct COMMENT_ADJUNCT-│ ├desirability
                                     TYPE  │ (un)fortunately, to my delight/distress, regrettably,
                                          │ hopefully
                                          ├reservation
                                          │ at first, tentatively, provisionally, looking back on it
                                          ├validation
                                          │ broadly speaking, in general, on the whole,
                                          │ strictly speaking, in principle
                                          ├evaluation
                                          │ (un)wisely, understandably, mistakenly, foolishly
                                          └prediction
                                            to my surprise, surprisingly, as expected, by
                                            chance
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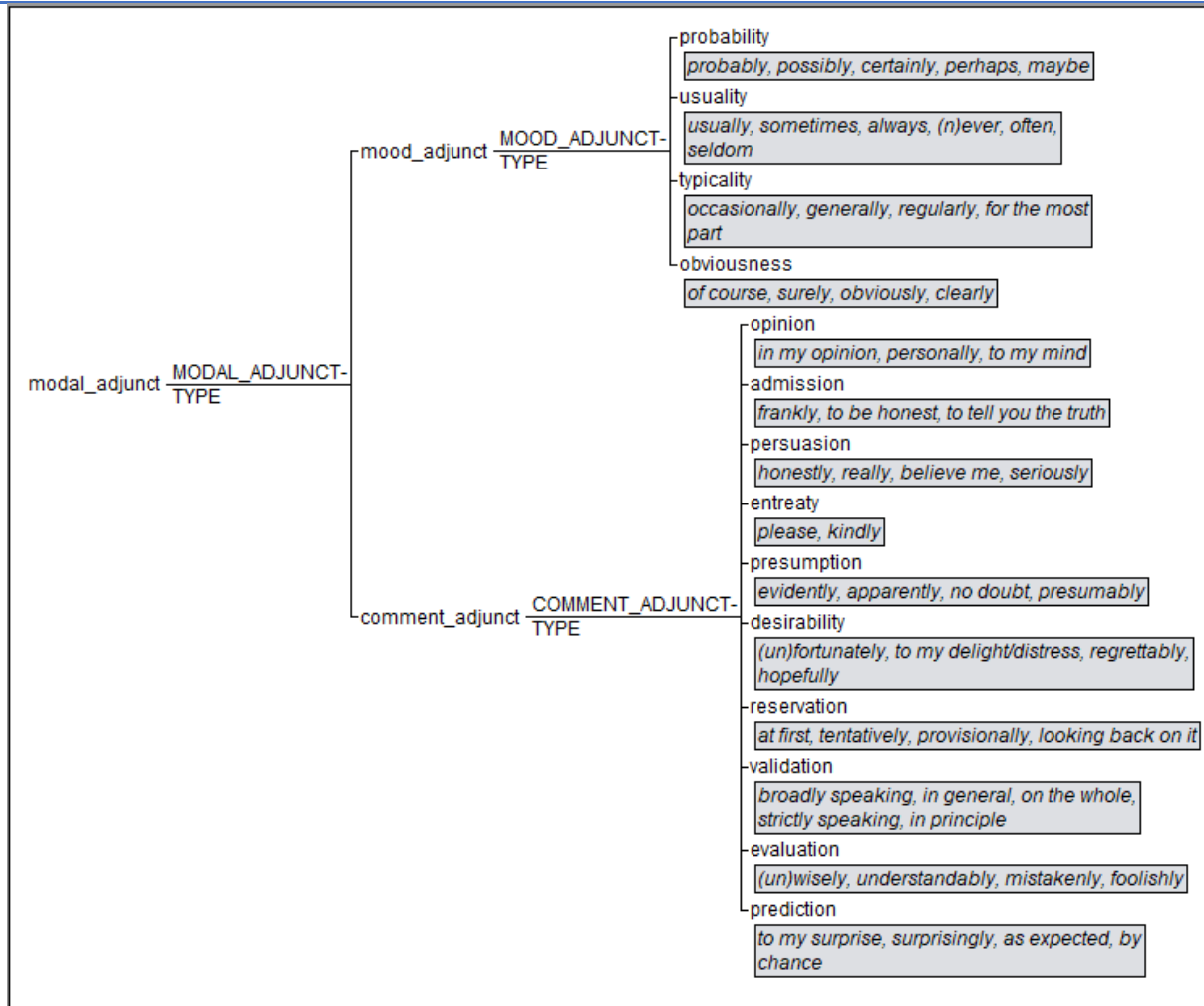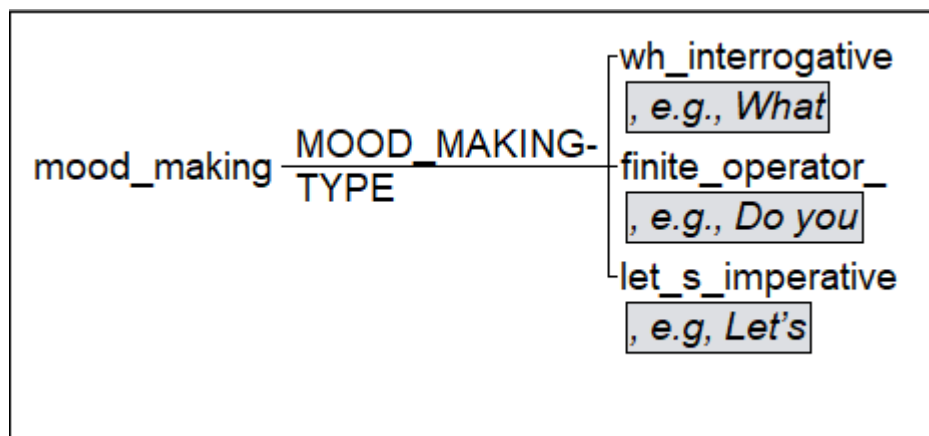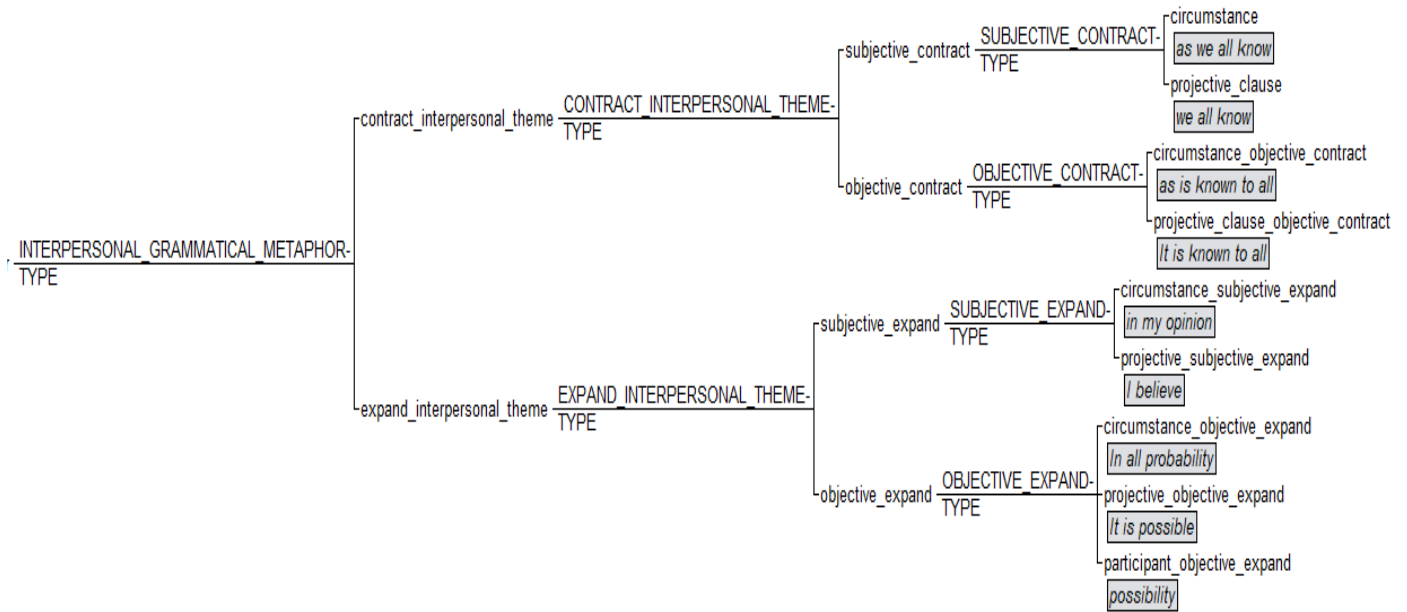
The sub-types of mood-making are given below:

Figure 5

Sub-Types of Mood-making

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                              ┌wh_interrogative
                              │ , e.g., What
mood_making MOOD_MAKING-      ├finite_operator_
            TYPE              │ , e.g., Do you
                              └let_s_imperative
                                , e.g, Let's
```

The interpersonal grammatical metaphor (IGM) and its types are displayed below:
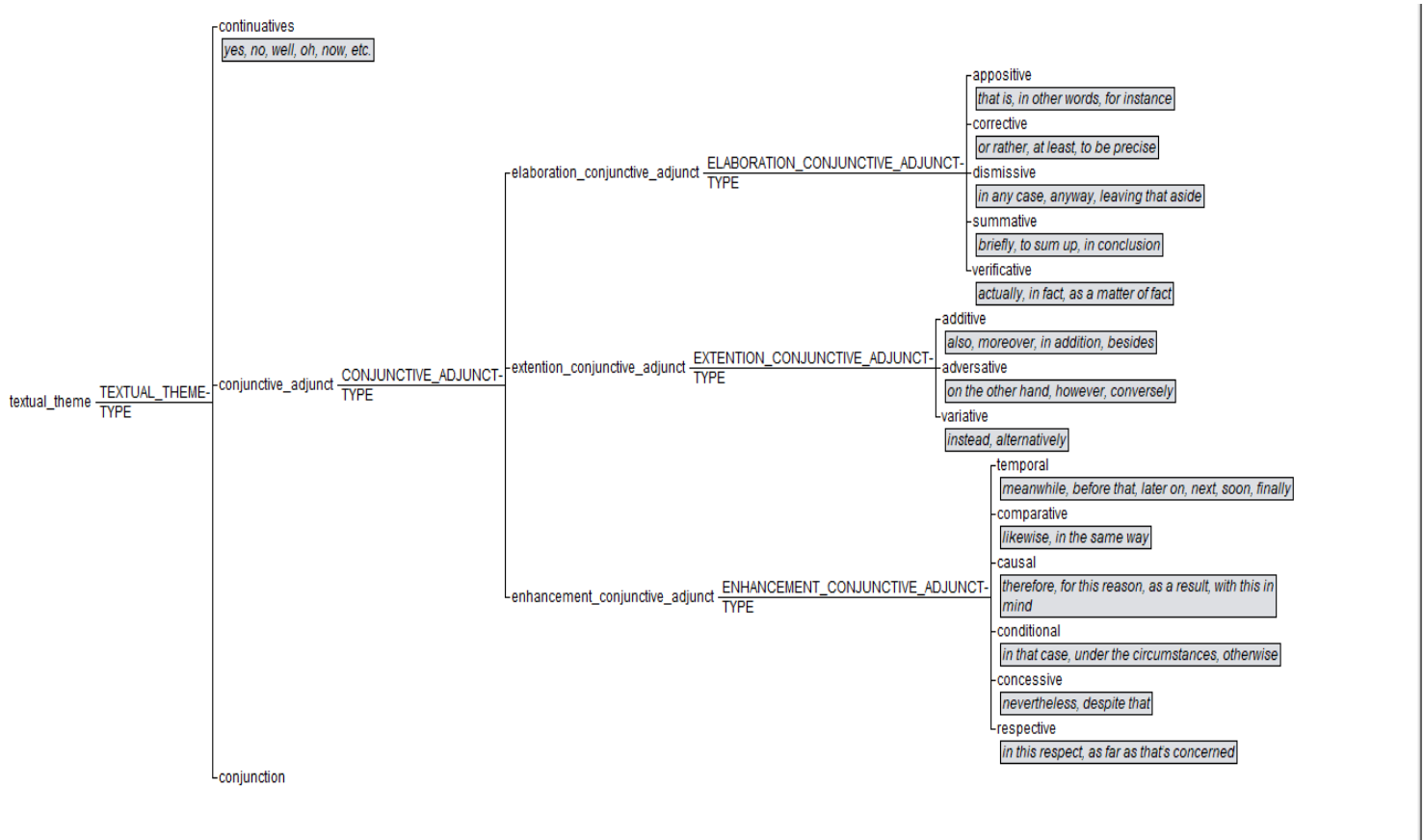
Figure 6

Sub-Types of Interpersonal Grammatical Metaphor(Liardét, 2018, p.71)

3.2.2.3.Textual Themes. Topical Themes are preceded by textual Themes to organize the information and consist of continuatives (e.g., yes, no, well), conjunctions (e.g., and, but, so), and conjunctive adjuncts which are divided into the following categories:

Figure 7

Sub-types of Textual Themes

3.2.3. Thematic Progression

Thematic progression, particularly, shows cohesion and flow of information in the text to analyze how Themes relate to the preceding Themes and Rhemes to observe the method of development of content (Thompson, 2014, p. 175). Bloor and Bloor, (2004) divides the thematic progression into the following four patterns as illustrated in the figure:

Figure 8

Sub-Types of Thematic Progression Patterns
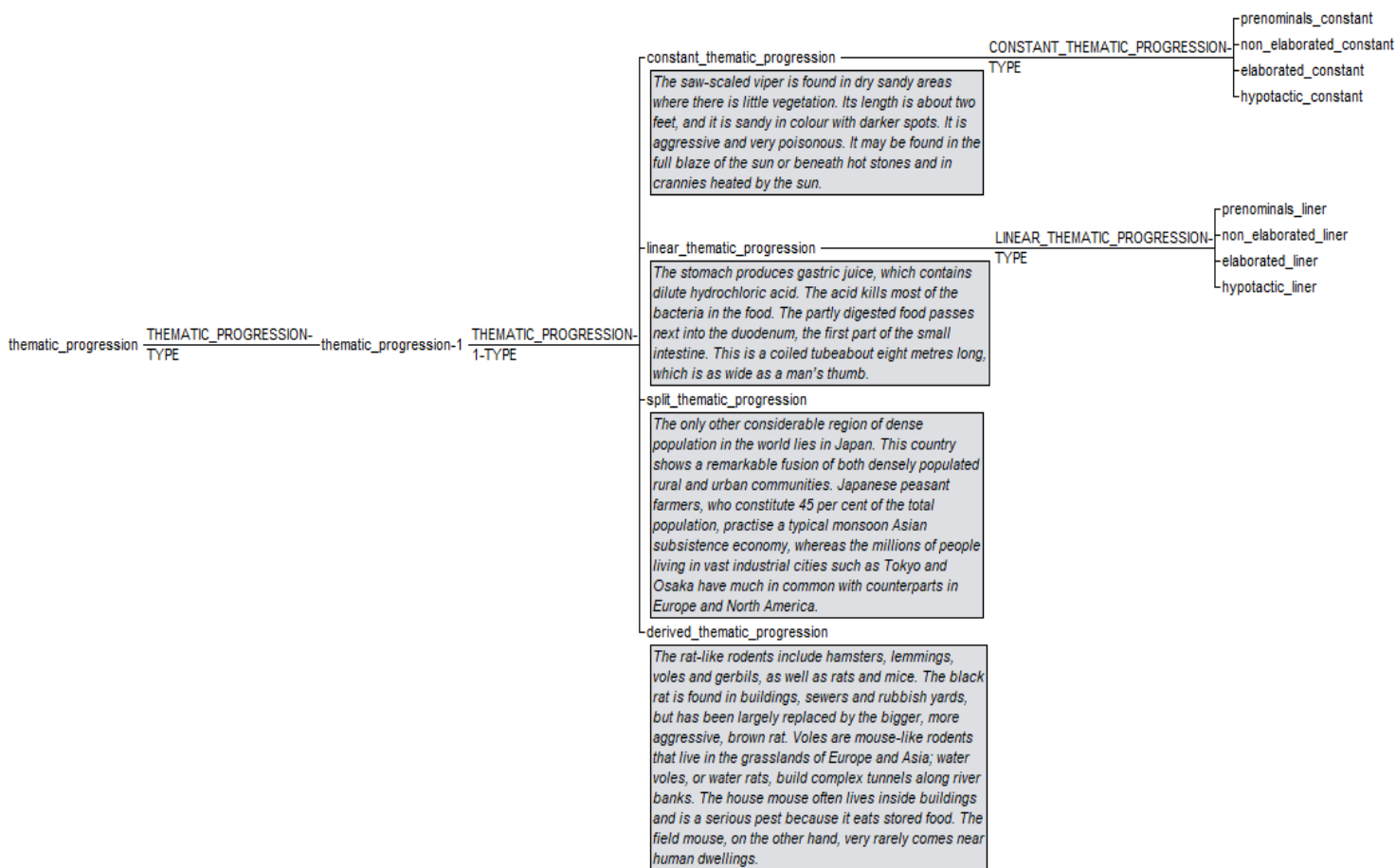
3.2.4. Analysis Unit for Multiple Themes and Thematic Progression

The T-unit was selected for the analysis unit. A T-unit means an independent clause with another dependent clause around it (Fries, 1995). The reason is that the T-unit is used to trace the larger thematic pattern in the textual development (North, 2005).

3.2.5. Procedures Followed in the Analysis of Essays

The following steps were adopted to analyze the thematic choices and thematic progression of the essays:

i.   Manually converting the twenty-five essays into their schematic phases by applying an argumentative generic model of Martin and Rose(2008)

ii. Creating twenty-five folders of each essay containing the notepad files ofphases

iii. After manually designing the tagging scheme of textual metafunction in the UAM corpus tool (O'Donnell, 2008), twenty-five folders consisting of 350 notepad files were uploaded to the UAM corpus tool for systematic tagging and counting of frequencies of multiple themes and thematic progression

iv. Annotating the multiple themes and thematic progression choices of the phases of each essay

v.   After adding the frequencies, the thematic choices were tabulated according tothe phases of the essays.

4.   Analysis and Discussion

This section of the study contains three sub-sections: results, findings, and discussion of theme and thematic progression (T/TP) writing choicesutilized by Pakistani English Language Learners in their essays. The result section will depict an overview of frequenciesof T/TP patterns in percentages according to each argumentative phase. The findings will illustrate the T/TP variations used in Pakistani students' essays and their relevant instances. Finally, the discussion section will qualitatively explain the textual impact of thematic choices on the logical flow of the essays.The following table offers an overview of basic information of twenty-five essays:

Table 1

 Basic Information of Essays

Total Number of Words	1693
Average word count/per essay	664
Total T-units	1120
Average T-units/per essay	45
Average words/T-unit	15

The above table indicates that the overall T-units in twenty-five essays are 1120, and the number of T-units per essay is 45. The average number of words in each T-unit is 15.

4.1. Results of Multiple Themes and Thematic Progressionin Pakistani Argumentative Essays

4.1.1. Multiple Themes in Pakistani Argumentative Essays

In the thematic analysis, the themes in Pakistani learners' essays were analyzed through the three analytical tools, that is, topical themes realized by unmarked and marked themes, interpersonal themes comprising interpersonal grammatical metaphors (IGM), and textual themes comprising conjunctions and conjunctive adjuncts. The following table given below

Table1

Multiple Themes in the Phases of Essays

provides a detailed overview of the frequencies of themes for different phases:

Multiple Themes				Phases of Argumentative Essays					
Types of Multiple Themes	Sub-Types	Sub-Types	Sub-Types	Elaboration	Macro Theme	Hyper-Theme	Claim	Support	Macro-New

Topical Theme	Unmarked	Prenominal		12%	6%	1%	21%	10%	3%
		Nominal groups		3%	1%	0	2%	2%	0
	Marked	Hypotactic Clauses		1%	1%	0	1%	1%	0
		Prepositional Phrase		2%	0	0	2%	2%	0
Interpersonal Theme	Modal adjunct	Mood adjunct	probability		1%	0	0	0	0
	IGM	Expand	Objective	1%	0		0	0	0
Textual	Conjunction			4%	2%	0	8%	4%	1%
	Conjunctive Adjunct	Enhancement	Temporal	0	0	0	1%	0	0

Table No. 1 shows that Pakistani students excessively utilized prenominalsas sub-types of topical themes.

4.1.2. Thematic Progression in Pakistani Argumentative Essays

In addition to intra-clause coherence, inter-clause coherence is constructed through effective thematic progression. Thus, the thematic progress is tabulated in the below table:

Table 2

Thematic Progression of Argumentative Stages

Stages	Thematic Progression		
	Constant	Liner	Split
Thesis Stages	280	130	6
Argument Stages	495	150	6
Conclusion Stages	43	8	2
Total	818	288	14
Percentage	73%	26%	1%

The above table indicated the higher proportion of constant thematic progression in the Pakistani students' argumentative essays.

4.2. Findings of Multiple Themes and Thematic Progression Patternsin Pakistani Argumentative Essays

As flagged above, the excessive employment of topical themes in the essays depicted the majority of topicalthemes. The topicalthemes were further categorized into unmarked and

marked topical themes. The frequent uses of unmarked topical themes (, e.g.,they, woman, mother's role in this regard, and researches) at the theme position mentioned the given information. Then, the new information about women (that is, a character in essays) at Rheme position was given, (, e.g., the title given to a creature who is very kind, responsible, caring and loving., plays a great role in order to bring up a child.", and "also go outside for a job).

To focus on the particular information in the clause, the meageramount of marked topical themeswere used in the texts, for instance, *If they are not good ...". "If we throw the light on the past …". "Because men has to go outside to earn …". "Despite the distinguish importance of both mother and father, …".* Most examples of marked topical themes attempted to orientate the readers' attention on the particular points discussed in the essays, i.e., personality development of the child.

To show the evaluation and stance in the essays, Pakistani learners utilizeda very small amount of interpersonal grammatical metaphor. The following examples conveyed the writers' stances about mothers(a character in the essays) in their essays, e.g., Now *we can say without any hesitation …, …, I do not thinkthat,* This is why *I strongly support.* The examples IGMpresented learners' attitudinal stances about their viewpoints.The textual themes deployed in the essays were mostly paratactic conjunctions (, e.g., and, however)to connect their ideas.

In addition to using prenominal themes, Pakistani learners extensively used constant thematic progression (that is, T1-T2-T3-T4…) to describe the qualities of a woman as a mother in their essays.
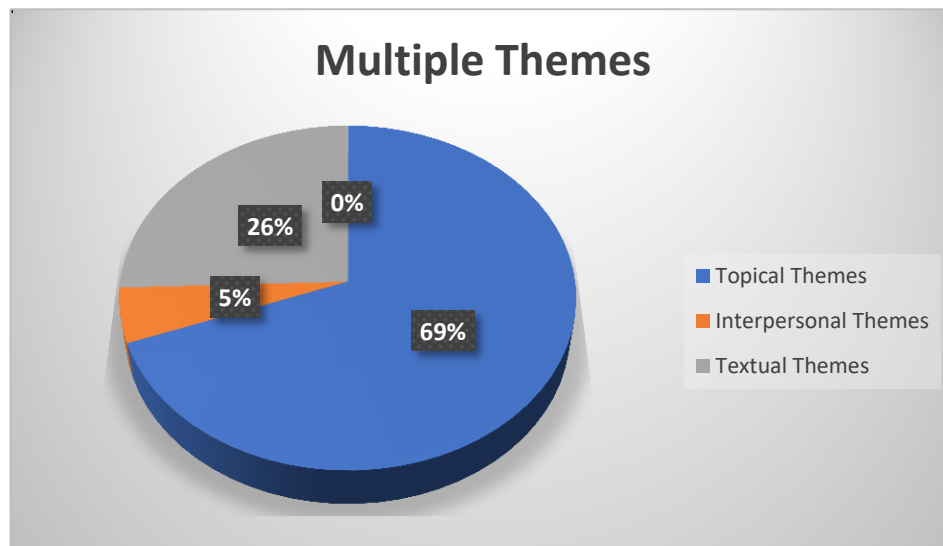
4.3. Discussion of Multiple Themes and Thematic Progression in Pakistani Learners' Essays
4.3.1. Use of Multiple Themes in Pakistani Learners' Essays

The following figure summarized the multiple themes used in Pakistani learners' argumentative essays:

Figure 9

Cumulative Frequencies of Multiple Themes in Essays

The above results of textual metafunctionexhibited the Pakistani learners' heavy reliance on the pronominal at Theme position, resonating with the findings in the following studies (Ebrahimi & Ebrahimi 2012; Green, Christopher &Larn, 2000; Ho 2009; Lu 2013; Wei 2013).The following table presents an overview of Pakistani learners' writing style:

Table 3

Example of Topical Themes in Pakistani Argumentative Essay

Topical Theme	Rheme
In some respects	women have excelled men.
In sports intellectual and artistic pursuits, in office and industry,	they have set a new record of honesty and efficiency.
They	succeeded marvelously as teachers and nurses.
Goldsmith, the famous poet and writer, made a complaint two centuries ago,	Women famed for their valour, their skill in politics or their learning have left the duties of their own in order to invade the privilege of ours.

As also illustrated in the above table, the predominant use of topical themespointed tothe prevent writing style of Pakistan ELLswhorepeated similar topical themes several times to add information rather than extending the points, picking up rhemes of clauses at the theme position of the succeeding clauses to construct well-formulated arguments. The internal cohesion, according to Schleppegrell (2004), is formulated in the proficient writers' text through lexically dense nominal groups at the Theme position and their explanation at the Rheme position. The information unpacked at the Rheme position is, then, packed through lexically condensed nominalization at the Theme position of the next incoming clause. The disorganization of information in Pakistani learners' essays was further observed through the unplanned usage of marked topical themes. The marked themes in different phases of stages, as mentioned by Hoey (2009), produce a discontinuity in the claims to introduce the new point. Therefore, the discontinuity is linguistically realized via lexically dense prepositional groups to retrospect the previous arguments, and then the new argument is initiated. Pakistani learners, however, constituted the marked themes by placing the subordinate clauses at the Theme position.
      Secondly, the quite smallnumber of interpersonal themes in essays most likely indicated Pakistani learners' unawareness about the prevalent norms of the argumentative genre. The use of interpersonal themes, according to Liardet (2018), produces dialogic expansion to enhance the persuasive power of argumentative discourse byproviding uncommitted readers with space to at least disagree with the writer's viewpoint.The infrequent usage of textual themes deployed in the

essaysneitherlinkedclauses within a text and the context to make longer sentences nor interpreted the text.Among the textual themes, Pakistani learners preferred to use coordinate conjunctionsto connect their arguments, but Crossley and McNamara (2010) and Plakans and Gebril (2017) noted that most advanced L2 writers preferably utilized fewer cohesive patterns. The logical flow of information in the text distinguished a mature writer from a novice writer not explicit uses of cohesive devices.

4.3.2. *Thematic Progression in Pakistani Argumentative Essays*

Pakistani English Language Learners significantly deployed more constant thematic progression as compared to linear or derived thematic progression to reiterate their ideas by using the same theme at the onset of clauses. Few instances of Linear Thematic progression in which the content placed at the rheme position converts into the themes of next clauseswere, however, noted in the Pakistani learners' essays as tabulated below:

Table 4

Examples of Constant and Linear Thematic Progression in Pakistani Learners' Essays

Themes	Rhemes
The parents	are a great blessing of God
T1	R1
It	is because of their care and love with children that makes them what they are
T2	R2
Both of them	contribute to their full extent and provide us with utmost facilities.
T3	R3
They	try to give their children with best clothes to wear, provide good food to eat etc, so that their children get proper development.
T4	R4
They	provide children with best possible education so that their children can stand on their own and compete in the world later on.
T5	
Most of the fathers	do jobs so that they best earn for their children and provide their families with a happy life.

The above table presents the widespread use of constant thematic progression "T1-T2-T3…" in the' essayscontributing tothe more static and redundantarguments. The constant thematic progression is primarily utilized in the description, narration, and classification rather than in argumentative responses (Alonso & McCabe, 2003).The argument progression in argumentative discourse, pointed out by Hawes (2015), is realized by the linear or derived thematic progression to expand and explain the argumentative points which are defended or opposed to orient readers'

attention to the writer's intentional meanings. Thus, it can be deduced that the overemphasis on prenominal topical themes and constant thematic progression patterns demonstrates the Pakistani learners' limited understanding regarding effective strategies used to link arguments in their essays.

5.   Conclusion

This research analyzedthe writing skills of Pakistani English Language Learners by applying Theme-Rheme and Thematic Progression choices to their argumentative essays. The researchers found that Pakistani learners dominantly used topical themes in comparison to interpersonal and textual thematic choices, especially pronouns, and constant thematic progression patterns to organize information. The use of the foregoing lexico-grammatical choices converted Pakistani argumentative essays into descriptive discourse rather than the use of lexically dense thematic choices and linear thematic progression. The scantiness in interpersonal thematic resourcespointed out that Pakistani learners overused the bare assertions to communicate their notions and, resultantly, did not afford dialogic space to their readers to disagree with writers. The underuse of textual thematic patterns in Pakistani learners' essaysrevealed their incapacity of logically linkingthe clauses across the text to substantiate their arguments. Despite a small sampling of twenty-five essays, it is quite likely that the research findings will helpthe Pakistani English teaching and learning community in using a broad range of explicit linguistic choices required to create coherent and convincing arguments in the argumentative written discourse.

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