

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter shows a description of the full contents of the research. In detail, this chapter explains the background of the research, research questions, research purposes, research significances, research scope, research framework, and previous studies.

A. Background of the Study

The problem with undergraduate EFL writing is generally not a lack of ideas, but rather how those ideas are organized into a coherent textual flow. Students in EFL writing frequently struggle to create ideas, connect sentences and paragraphs, and maintain a consistent flow of information throughout the text (Wakerkwa & Astuti, 2025). These challenges become more difficult in argumentative texts because students must express a clear perspective, organize arguments rationally, and support their claims with relevant evidence (Ananda et al., 2024). As a result, students' writing challenges cannot be viewed solely as grammatical issues. They were also concerned how ideas are organized and developed within and across clauses. From Systemic Functional Linguistics perspective, theme types and thematic progression provide a good framework for investigating how students structure information and build coherence in their writing (Feri et al., 2023).

Argumentative texts were selected because this genre requires writers to present a viewpoint, support it with evidence, and organize ideas logically to persuade readers. Knapp and Watkins (2005) explained that arguing involves putting forward a viewpoint and providing evidence, while the logical ordering of points is central to an effective argument. Oshima and Hogue (2006) further stated that an argumentative essay includes a clear thesis, opposing arguments, rebuttals, and the writer's own arguments. Argumentative writing is also frequently used to assess EFL learners' academic writing proficiency (Xie & Lv, 2022). Although EFL undergraduates often struggle to develop sound claims, provide relevant evidence, and organize their arguments coherently (Ghanbari & Salari, 2022). These

interconnected demands make argumentative texts particularly suitable for examining theme types and thematic progression. Pavavijarn (2022) showed that thematic progression affects the connection between arguments and supporting reasons, thereby contributing to textual coherence and argument quality.

This research was conducted in the English Education Department of a state Islamic university in Bandung. Students are introduced to Systemic Functional Linguistics through Introduction to Functional Grammar in the first semester and Functional Grammar in the second semester. However, based on preliminary observation, these concepts are not explicitly reinforced in writing courses from the third semester onward, creating a gap between theoretical knowledge and its practical application in organizing coherent texts. Therefore, this study is needed to examine how students apply theme types and thematic progression in argumentative writing. In this context, Nurjannah et al. (2023) found that students mainly used constant theme, split rheme, and simple linear progression, but their study focused only on thematic progression. Therefore, the present study examines both theme types and thematic progression.

This study investigated how students organized meaning in writing using the textual metafunction from Systemic Functional Linguistics. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) stated the theme as the point of departure of the message, while the rheme is where the message develops. Additionally, theme was divided into three categories: textual, interpersonal, and topical. Topical theme was marked or unmarked based on its position in the clause. To see how these decisions extended across clauses, thematic progression was employed to follow the movement of theme and rheme in textual coherence (Bloor & Bloor, 2013).

Several previous studies have investigated theme types and thematic progression in EFL writing. In "Thematic Structure in Students' Writings: Implications on their Ideas Organization and Development," Feri et al. (2023) discovered that high-scoring essays used more linear theme patterns, whereas low-scoring essays used more constant theme patterns. In "Applying Theme Types and Thematic Progression to Cohesion and Coherence of IELTS Academic Writing Task 2," Sun et al. (2024) reported that higher-level essays used more textual

themes and Simple linear progression, while lower-level essays relied more on topical themes and constant theme progression. In their study "Stylistic Variations in Thematic Structure Across Academic Genres," Al-Reshaid and Alhojailan (2025) discovered that topical unmarked themes were predominant in EFL graduate students' academic writing, with variations across genres. In "Influences of Thematic Progression on Quality of EFL Argumentative Writing," Pavavijarn (2022) demonstrated that stronger argumentative essays had more cohesive thematic development, whereas weaker essays featured more brand-new themes. Nurjannah et al. (2023) in "The Analysis of EFL Students' Writing of Argumentative Text Using SFL Thematic Progression Theory," discovered that students at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung primarily employed constant theme progression in argumentative texts. Therefore, these studies show that theme choices and thematic progression contribute to textual coherence. However, the closest local study by Nurjannah et al. (2023) examined only thematic progression and did not analyze theme types in detail. Therefore, the present study fills this analytical gap by examining both theme types and thematic progression in undergraduate students' argumentative texts.

B. Research Questions

Based on the problem in the background above, the research questions is formulated as follows:

1. What types of themes are realized in undergraduate students' argumentative texts?
2. What patterns of thematic progression are realized in undergraduate students' argumentative texts?

C. Research Purposes

Based on the research problem above, the objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To identify and classify the types of themes used in undergraduate students' argumentative texts based on the Systemic Functional Linguistics framework.
2. To analyze the patterns of thematic progression realized in undergraduate students' argumentative texts.

D. Research Significances

The significance of this research is divided into two aspects: theoretical significance and practical significance.

1. Theoretical Significance

Theoretically, this research contributes to the application of Systemic Functional Linguistics in analyzing undergraduate students' argumentative texts. By examining theme types and thematic progression, this study shows how students organize information at the clause level and develop ideas across clauses. The findings also support the discussion of textual metafunction, especially in relation to theme-rheme structure, thematic choice, and coherence in EFL academic writing.

2. Practical Significance

Practically, this research is useful for the following parties.

a. For EFL Lecturers

The findings can help EFL lecturers understand how students organize arguments through theme types and thematic progression patterns. This can be used as input in teaching academic writing, especially to help students improve coherence, text organization, and argument development.

b. For Undergraduate Students

This research can help undergraduate students understand how theme choices and thematic progression affect the clarity of their writing. This awareness can guide them to introduce information more effectively, connect ideas more logically, and produce more coherent argumentative texts.

c. For ELT Curriculum and Material Development

The findings can support the development of writing materials that include theme-rheme analysis and thematic progression. These materials can help students understand how ideas are organized and developed in argumentative texts.

d. For Future Researcher

This research can serve as a reference for future studies on Systemic Functional Linguistics and writing analysis. Future researchers can develop this study by examining theme types and thematic progression in different genres, proficiency levels, or educational contexts.

E. Research Scope

This research focuses on the analysis of theme types and thematic progression in undergraduate students' argumentative texts. The analysis is limited to the textual metafunction in SFL, particularly the organization of theme and rheme in students' writing.

The unit of analysis in both the theme-type analysis and the thematic-progression analysis is the finite ranking clause with an identifiable theme–rheme structure. Each independent clause, finite dependent clause, projecting clause, projected clause, and finite coordinated clause is segmented and coded as a separate analytical unit. Embedded clauses and non-finite clauses are not analyzed separately. Instead, they remain within the theme or rheme of the ranking clause in which they occur. The same clause segmentation and coding are applied consistently in both stages of analysis to ensure comparability between the frequency and percentage calculations.

The scope of theme types includes topical theme, textual theme, and interpersonal theme. The topical theme is further classified into marked and unmarked topical themes. Meanwhile, the scope of thematic progression and problematic features includes constant theme pattern, linear theme pattern, split rheme pattern, derived theme pattern, brand-new theme, and the empty use of “there”.

The data of this research are limited to argumentative texts written by undergraduate students. Therefore, this study does not examine other genres of

writing, such as narrative, descriptive, recount, or report texts. This research also does not focus on grammar accuracy, vocabulary use, or argument quality in general, except when they are related to how ideas are organized through theme types and thematic progression.

F. Research Framework

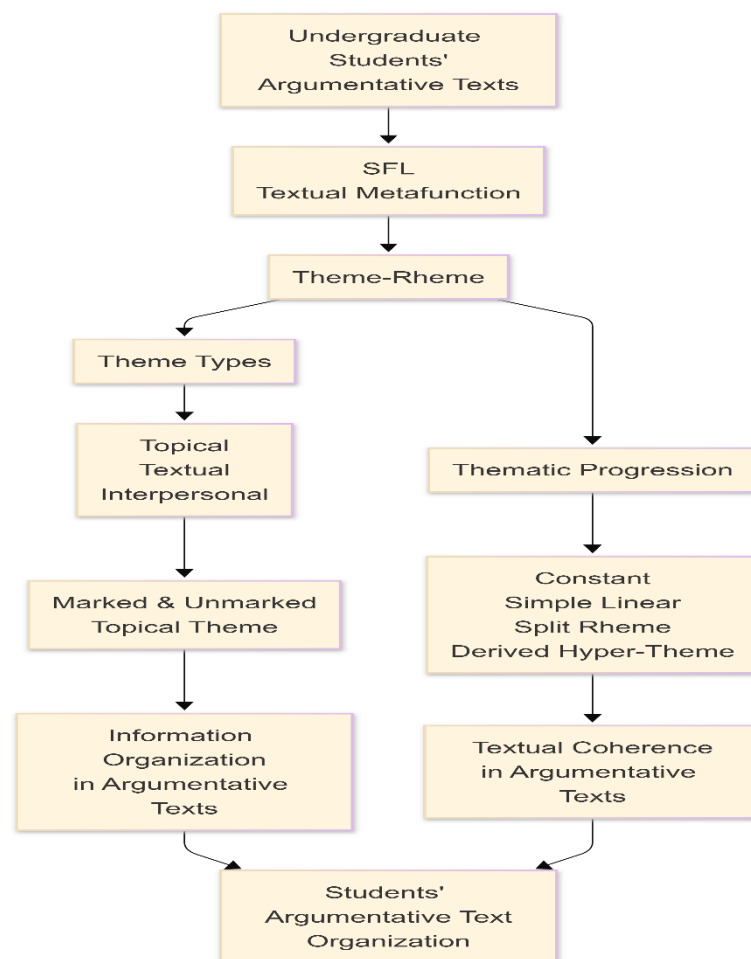


Figure 1.1 Research Framework Scheme

Systemic Functional Linguistics, particularly the textual metafunction, provides the framework for this study. From this perspective, language is viewed as a resource for making meaning, and the textual metafunction explains how meaning is organized into a coherent text (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Since this research

focuses on undergraduate students' argumentative texts, the textual metafunction is used to analyze how students organize information and connect ideas in their texts.

The central concepts in this study are theme and rheme. theme refers to the point of departure of the clause as a message, while rheme refers to the part in which the message is developed (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In written texts, the choice of theme is important because it indicates what information the writer places first and how the reader is guided to understand the following message. Therefore, this study uses theme and rheme to analyze how students begin their clauses and develop information in argumentative texts (Bloor & Bloor, 2013).

Topical, textual, and interpersonal themes are the three main categories of theme. Topical theme usually represents the main experiential element of the clause and shows what the clause is about. It may take the form of a participant, process, or circumstance. Textual theme establishes a connection between the clause and the surrounding text, while interpersonal theme reveals the writer's attitude, judgment, or interaction with the reader. Furthermore, topical theme can be categorized as either marked or unmarked. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) stated an unmarked topical theme commonly appeared as the subject of the clause, while a marked topical theme occurs when an element such as an adverbial group or prepositional phrase is placed in theme position.

The second concept used in this study is thematic progression. Bloor and Bloor (2013) elaborated thematic progression shows how theme and rheme are linked from one clause to another, creating the flow of information in a text. Through this concept, the analysis can reveal how students maintain, develop, or shift ideas across clauses. In this study, thematic progression is classified into four patterns: constant theme progression, simple linear progression, split rheme progression, and derived hyper-theme progression. These patterns are used to analyze how students develop information and establish coherence in their argumentative texts, as thematic progression has been shown to influence the quality of EFL argumentative texts (Pavavijarn, 2022).

Argumentative text is also an important concept in this study because it constitutes the genre from which the data are drawn. From an SFL-GBA

perspective, argumentative genres include exposition, which argues for one point of view through thesis, arguments, and reiteration, and discussion, which considers two or more viewpoints through issue, sides, and resolution (Rose & Martin, 2012). Knapp and Watkins (2005) similarly explain that exposition presents one viewpoint supported by evidence, whereas discussion considers an issue from several perspectives. These organizational demands make argumentative texts an appropriate context for examining how theme choices and thematic progression organize claims, reasons, and supporting information across clauses.

Argumentative texts provided an appropriate context for analyzing theme types and thematic progression because students are required to organize their stance, reasons, and supporting ideas coherently. Ananda et al. (2024) found that EFL students often struggle to develop and connect their arguments effectively. Therefore, this study uses theme types to identify the starting points of students' clauses, while thematic progression is used to examine how those starting points are connected across clauses. Since theme types and thematic progression are closely related to cohesion and coherence in writing, this analysis is expected to show how students organize information and build textual coherence in their argumentative texts (Sun et al., 2024).

G. Previous Studies

Several studies have examined theme types and thematic progression in EFL writing. These studies show that theme-rheme analysis can be used to investigate how students organize information, develop ideas, and build textual coherence in written texts. Although the studies were conducted in different contexts and genres, they provide useful references for the present study because they focus on textual organization in students' writing.

First, Feri et al. (2023) conducted a study entitled "Thematic Structure in Students' Writings: Implications on their Ideas Organization and Development." The study analyzed 24 high- and low-scoring essays using Systemic Functional Linguistics. It employed qualitative content analysis supported by quantitative data. The findings showed that all theme types appeared in both groups, but high-scoring essays used more varied theme choices and more linear theme patterns. In contrast,

low-scoring essays tended to rely more on constant theme patterns. This study is relevant to the present research because it shows that theme choices and thematic progression are related to students' ability to organize and develop ideas in writing. However, Feri et al.'s study focused on essays classified by writing scores, while the present study focuses specifically on undergraduate students' argumentative texts.

Second, Sun et al. (2024) examined theme types and thematic progression in IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 essays. The study analyzed fifteen practice essays written by Chinese undergraduate students and used theme-based and thematic progression-based rubrics to assess their cohesion and coherence. The findings showed that topical themes and constant theme progression were dominant in the essays. However, as the students' writing level increased, the use of textual themes and simple linear progression also increased. This study is significant because it directly connects theme types and thematic progression with cohesion and coherence in writing. However, the study was conducted in the context of IELTS writing, while the present study focuses on argumentative texts written by undergraduate students in a local EFL academic context.

Third, Al-Reshaid and Alhojailan (2025) explored thematic choices across academic genres in EFL graduate students' writing. Their study analyzed 108 written assignments submitted by Saudi female graduate students and used interviews to support the textual analysis. The findings showed that topical unmarked themes were dominant across genres, while marked, textual, and interpersonal themes varied depending on the genre and communicative purpose. Research papers tended to use more topical unmarked themes, whereas essays used more textual and interpersonal themes to create flow and engagement. This study is relevant to the present research because it demonstrates that theme selection contributes to coherence and genre-based writing conventions. However, Al-Reshaid and Alhojailan's study focused on graduate students' academic genres, while the present study focuses on undergraduate students' argumentative texts.

Fourth, Pavavijarn (2022) investigated the influence of thematic progression on the quality of EFL argumentative texts. The study analyzed 22

argumentative essays written by EFL university students and compared high-scoring and low-scoring essays. The findings showed that low-scoring essays often lacked coherent thematic progression because they contained many brand-new themes. In contrast, high-scoring essays used more varied thematic progression patterns, including constant theme, thematization of rheme, and split rheme. This study is relevant to the present research because it shows that thematic progression influences the coherence and quality of argumentative texts. However, Pavavijarn's study mainly focused on thematic progression, while the present study examines both theme types and thematic progression.

Fifth, Nurjannah et al. (2023) conducted a study entitled "The Analysis of EFL Students' Writing of Argumentative Text Using SFL Thematic Progression Theory." The study analyzed thirteen argumentative texts written by second-semester students of the English Education Department at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung. The findings showed that constant theme progression was the most frequent pattern, followed by split rheme progression and simple linear progression, while derived hyper-theme progression was not found. This study is the closest to the present research because both studies use students' argumentative texts and are conducted in a similar institutional context. However, Nurjannah et al.'s study focused mainly on thematic progression and did not examine theme types in detail.

Based on the previous studies above, theme types and thematic progression have been shown to play an important role in textual organization, cohesion, and coherence in EFL writing. However, these studies were conducted in different contexts, such as IELTS writing, proficiency-based essays, graduate academic genres, and thematic progression-focused argumentative texts. The closest local study analyzed thematic progression in students' argumentative texts, but it did not examine theme types in detail. Therefore, the present study fills this gap by analyzing both theme types and thematic progression in undergraduate students' argumentative texts.