AN ANALYSIS OF THEMES IN ACADEMIC IELTS ESSAYS
PHÂN TÍCH ĐỀ NGỮ TRONG BÀI VIẾT HỌC THUẬT IELTS

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Abstract - Nowadays, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), covering the assessment of four language skills, namely listening, reading, writing and speaking, is the preferred test to assess language competence in countries where English is not the primary spoken language. Among the four language skills of English assessed by IELTS, academic writing undoubtedly occupies a crucial part whether in school or workplace. How to enhance IELTS writing outcomes, therefore, has been a matter of great concern for language researchers and educators in different countries where English is taught as a foreign language or second language. The article focuses on identifying different types of themes used in Academic IELTS essays, thereby showing the frequency of theme types and the choice of what element to be selected as theme in the English clauses in the light of functional grammar with a view to providing IELTS candidates with insights into the texture in order to produce an effective and coherent piece of writing.

Key words - Theme; type of themes; clause; academic writing; IELTS essays

Tóm tắt - Ngày nay, hệ thống kiểm tra Anh ngữ quốc tế (IELTS) được dùng phổ biến ở các quốc gia tiếng mẹ đẻ không phải là tiếng Anh để đánh giá năng lực ngôn ngữ thông qua bốn kỹ năng: nghe, đọc, viết và nói. Trong các kỹ năng này, viết học thuật đóng một vài trò quan trọng không chỉ trong nhà trường mà cả ở nơi làm việc. Do vậy, vấn đề nâng cao kết quả viết IELTS luôn được các nhà nghiên cứu ngôn ngữ và các nhà giáo dục học quan tâm, đặc biệt ở các quốc gia mà tiếng Anh được giảng dạy như một ngoại ngữ hoặc ngôn ngữ thứ hai. Bài báo này tập trung phân tích các loại đề ngữ trong các bài viết học thuật IELTS qua đó chỉ ra tần suất sử dụng của mỗi loại đề ngữ và yếu tố được chọn làm đề ngữ trong mệnh đề tiếng Anh trên cơ sở ngữ pháp chức năng nhằm cung cấp cho thí sinh IELTS những thông tin chi tiết về kết cấu để có thể viết bài văn mạch lạc và hiệu quả.

Từ khóa - Đề ngữ; loại đề ngữ; cú; viết học thuật; bài luận IELTS

1. Introduction

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which measures the language proficiency of those who would like to study or work in places where English is used as a means of communication, is now accepted by over 6000 tertiary institutions in over 135 countries (IELTS Research Reports Online Series, 2017). Among the four language skills of English assessed by IELTS, academic writing, especially Task 2 of the Academic Module, which is given more weight than Task 1, is considered one of the most challenging skills for IELTS test-takers since it requires a higher level of productive language manipulation. In order to gain higher scores in the academic IELTS writing, in addition to a wide range of lexical items, sentence structures with flexibility and accuracy, cohesion and coherence, which can be achieved from the mastery of thematic patterns are of great significance. In line with this, this study is to identify themes, particularly the element to be selected as the theme and the types of themes to be employed in good IELTS sample essays in the light of functional grammar. The findings of this research are projected to enable test-takers to make good use of the prominent thematic features for high quality IELTS academic essays in order to complete their IELTS essay writing successfully.

2. Literature review

2.1. Previous studies

In the study of writing, the choice and representation of theme are seen as a crucial element related to the success of a text (Martin, 1985, 1992b, 1993b; Martin and Rothery, 1993, Bloor & Bloor, 1992; Wang, 2007; Wei, 2013a, 2013b; Wei, 2014). Several studies on theme-rheme employment in academic writing have been conducted up to now. An investigation by Belmonte & McCabe [1] proved that the notion of theme-rheme can be a very useful tool for evaluating students' writing at the level of discourse. Wang [15] focused on developing students' theme-rheme employment and their textual meta-function to frame effective teaching of cohesive essays. Jalilifar [9] stated that Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) students with low English proficiency tend to use more simple themes than multiple themes and indicated that themes are important elements in constructing better English texts. For Ebrahimi & Ebrahimi [4], senior students used marked themes more frequently than sophomores thanks to their academic experience.

Another study undertaken by Lu [11] found that among three groups of freshmen, Singaporean students from an English speaking background tended to employ more topical and interpersonal themes than the other two groups. The findings of this study showed that English Singaporean and Chinese learners yielded a variety of similarities and differences, traceable to their sociolinguistic and educational backgrounds. Similarly, using a systemic functional linguistics (SFL) framework to analyse English writing, Rahayu [13] found that Indonesian students' ability to construct good academic texts may be enhanced by the understanding of theme-rheme arrangement.

More recently, Nurdianingsih & Purnama [12] conducted action research to examine whether an improvement in the students' writing skill performance can be achieved after being taught using thematic progression. They concluded that thematic progression pattern effectively improves coherence in their skills.

Therefore, given the crucial essence of theme, the purpose of this study is to apply insights gained from the analysis of thematic choice to raise IELTS test-takers'

awareness of the important role of theme as an orienter to the text and as an essential element in bringing about cohesion and coherence for a text, contributing to score enhancement in their essays.

2.2. Theoretical background

2.2.1. Definition of theme

Halliday [8], the founder of SFL, claimed that a clause is composed of two parts: theme and rheme, together constituting a message. Theme typically occurs at the beginning of a clause. It is, therefore, 'the point of departure' to provide the settings for the remainder of the clause-rheme, in which the writer wants to impart about the theme. It is information the writer wants the reader to pay attention to as newly introduced into the argument. In this study, theme is defined as 'the first group or phrase that has some function in the experiential structure of the clause' Halliday [8, p.91] serving as a starting point of clause from the perspective of SFL.

2.2.2. Marked and unmarked theme

The boundary between theme and rheme is simple: Theme is the first element occurring in a clause; the remainder of clause is rheme. The example of theme-rheme given by Halliday & Matthiessen [8, p.100] is as follows.

Theme	Rheme
She	went to the baker's.
On Saturday night	I lost my wife.

From the above division of theme and rheme in the clause, it can be seen that the theme 'she' in the first example overlaps with the grammatical subject of the clause. This kind of theme is named unmarked theme, according to Halliday [8]. Marked theme, on the other hand, is something other than the subject namely adjunct and complement like in the second clause, where the prepositional phrase 'on Saturday night', is the theme. Thus, it can be concluded that theme may be realized by a nominal group, an adverbial group, a prepositional phrase or a dependent clause.

2.2.3. Topical, textual and interpersonal theme

Based on the thematic content and its function, theme is classified into 3 categories: topical theme, textual theme, and interpersonal theme corresponding to the three-meta-functional structures of the clause in Halliday's model.

Topical theme can be identified when the first constituent of the clause has a transitivity role- that is either participant, circumstance, or process realized by nominal groups, prepositional groups or adverbial groups. Every clause must contain one and only one topical theme [5].

Textual theme is the element which relates the clause to its context [5]. There are three types: Continuative referring to the discourse markers such as *yes, no, well…*; Conjunction joining two or more clauses such as *or, but, and…*; and Conjunctive Adjunct relating the clause to the preceding text such as *as a result, in other words, actually …*

Interpersonal theme indicates the kind of interaction between writers and readers. This type consists of Finite Verbal Operator (*do, does, can…*); Modal/ Comment Adjunct *(probably, surprisingly, frankly…)*; and Vocative (*direct addresses such as personal names*).

2.2.4. Simple and multiple theme

According to its constituents, theme is divided into two types: simple and multiple theme.

A simple theme is made when only a topical theme occupies the thematic position.

A multiple theme is the theme that is composed of the topical theme together with other elements such as interpersonal and/or textual themes occurring before it.

3. Research methods

The study tries to identify three aspects of themes: first, what types of themes are employed in terms of marked or unmarked, second, whether they are topical, interpersonal and textual, and third whether they are simple or multiple. As a result, the study combines descriptive, analytic and inductive method. Among them, the descriptive method is primarily used to give a detailed description of themes employed in the sample essays. The analytic method is used to classify and justify linguistic features of theme selection. In drawing out the generalizations from the findings and making conclusions, the inductive method is employed.

Since the primary purpose of this study is to identify different types of themes in a small scale, only 20 essays with the band score of 9 or ones prepared by examiners as examples of very good models from books published by Cambridge University Press were selected. The samples are from 260 to 342 words in length. The average words used per essay is about 282 words.

Based on the work of the Prague school of linguistics and Halliday [8], theme choice analysis involves first dividing the sample essays into T-units, then identifying themes in each T-unit into different categories namely: marked and unmarked; topical, interpersonal and textual; simple and multiple.

A T-unit 'consists of an independent clause together with all hypotactically related clauses and words that are dependent on that independent clause' [6, p.49]. Here are some examples of t-units.

1. I don't think one should necessarily study hard. (one t-unit);

2. Only when you study hard and when you try your best, you can find capability and be successful. (one t-unit);

3. When we talked I was thinking of myself// and you may have thought me very selfish. (two t-units).

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Marked and unmarked theme

As can be observed in Figure 1, it is apparent that the writers prefer to place themes in the subject position of the clause in order to make sure that their clauses are grammatically correct. However, it is noticeable that marked topical themes occupy nearly a quarter of the total topical themes with 71 instances, which is high in comparison with those found by Ebrahimi & Ebrahimi

[4]and Gunawan & Aziza [7]. When marked themes are found, it can be interpreted that the purpose behind the writer's thematic pattern may be to draw the reader's' attention to a particular group or phrase, but more often to build a coherent text that is easy to follow [3].
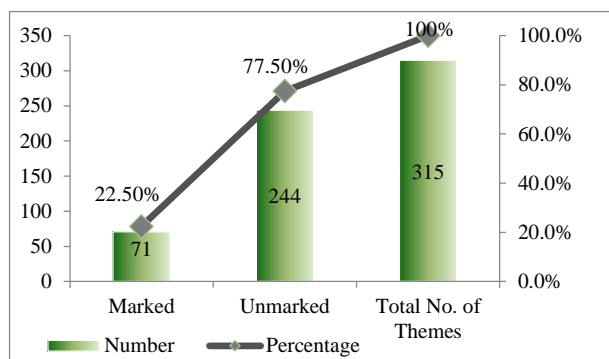

Figure 1. *Distribution of Marked and Unmarked Themes*

It is quite common in English to have adverbial groups or prepositional phrases serve as circumstantial adjuncts or dependent clauses in the initial position acting as theme in hypotactic clause complexes as illustrated in the following extracts from the sample essays.

(1) **In many cultures**, this has led to a lack of discipline in schools, family breakdowns and even serious social problem.

(2) **At present** driving is not formally taught in schools.

(3) Also, **if people walked to work instead of travelling by car**, they would become healthier and fitter.

(4) **Once a child goes to school**, they are entering a wider community where teachers and peers will have just as much as parents do at home.

In example (3), the theme *'if people walked to work instead of travelling by car'* is a conditional circumstance, setting up a context for the interpretation of rheme 3, that is, *they would become healthier and fitter.* In extract (4), the whole dependent clause '*Once a child goes to school'* sets up a temporal framework as the starting point for the whole clause complex.

Eggins [5, p.320] pointed out that skillful writers choose marked themes to add coherence and emphasis to their texts. In addition, Thompson [14, p.19] stated that developing writers with limited resources may be restricted to less marked options. Consequently, marked topical themes should be used to produce an effect on the development of information, to make the writing more argumentative in nature and avoid monotonous use of the theme in the subject position in the text.

4.2. Topical, interpersonal and textual theme

The results of the descriptive analysis of thematic structure reveals that topical themes are the most frequently used with 315 instances, accounting for 66%. The second most common type is textual themes, which make up 26.2% and interpersonal themes are the least frequently employed, representing 7.8% as illustrated in Figure 2 below.
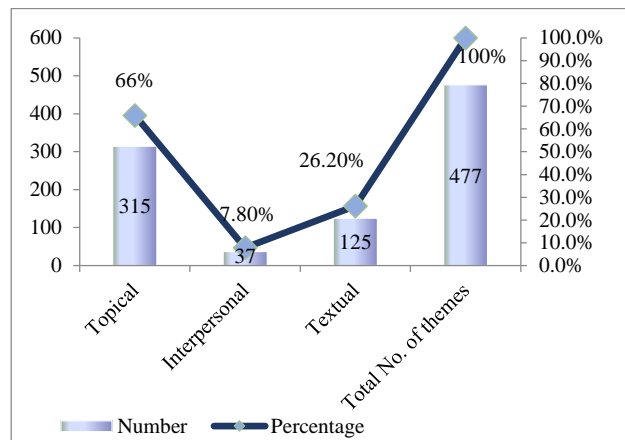

Figure 2. *Distribution of Topical, Interpersonal and Textural Themes*

The findings also indicate that the lengthy nominal groups and dependent clauses are commonly used to form topical themes in the essays. For instance,

(5) I do not believe that **the increase in the number of working mothers** has resulted in children being brought up less well than previously.

(6) **The sense of belonging to a team or a working community** also contributes to satisfaction because colleagues help each other to enjoy their working lives.

(7) For example, **if sufficient sky trains and underground train systems were built and effectively maintained in our major cities,** then traffic on the roads would be dramatically reduced.

With regard to interpersonal themes, very low frequency of interpersonal themes are found in the data, giving the essays an impersonalised tone. It can be argued that interpersonal themes usually convey personal viewpoints on the value or validity of the information in the clause, which are not generally valued in English academic writing. Below are some examples of interpersonal themes employed by the writers.

(8) **Obviously** one way to do this would be for the government to pay the fees of those choosing such subjects.

(9) **In my opinion** immunisation should be obligatory.

(10) **Perhaps** incentives can be offered to factories and companies to relocate.

In the above instances, the writers employ modal adjuncts such as *obviously, perhaps, in my opinion* to express their attitudes, judgments on the issue in the writing. In spite of the low usage of interpersonal themes in the writing, mastery of a range of interpersonal themes will be important for the expression of arguments and opinions in written English [10].

In this study, a percentage use of textual themes is quite high, indicating that clauses are linked, providing a cohesive tie to the previous clauses in the text. The occurrence of textual themes is realized by the use of conjunctions such as *and, or, but, then, for, while, because, since* to indicate paratactic and hypotactic relationships or conjunctive adjuncts such as *furthermore, in other words, for instance, in conclusion, in addition, however, therefore,*

as a result to set up a semantic relation with what precedes. For example,

(11) … **and** the proportion of their lives spent doing such jobs is very high.

(12) **Therefore,** this cannot be the responsibility of the parents alone.

(13) **First of all,** people from the countryside will try to move to the cities to get more employment opportunities and better access to the facilities available there.

In extract (11), (12), and (13) the writers use the textual themes *'and'* to add more information to the previous clause, *'therefore'* in the theme position to show causal relationships, *'first of all'* to mark the enhancing relation. These resources help the writers to control the flow of information and to organize the text by showing relationships between various clauses.

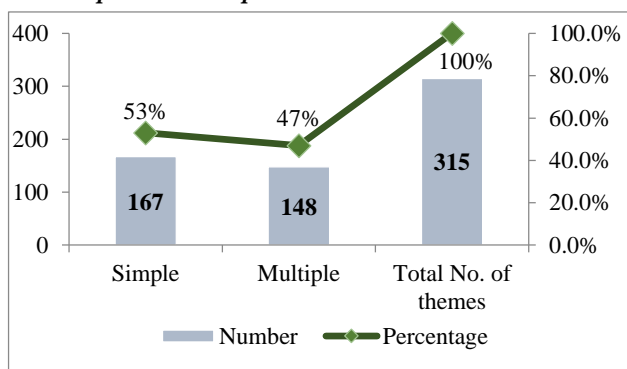### 4.3. Simple and multiple theme

Figure 3. Distribution of Simple and Multiple Themes

As can be seen from Figure 3, the writers apply multiple themes at a higher frequency in their writing. The number of occurrence of the multiple themes is 148, representing 47% of the total themes employed in the essays.

As previously mentioned, multiple themes can have interpersonal, textual, and topical components, but the topical element is the compulsory one. Therefore, a great proportion of employed multiple themes are more appropriate for IELTS essay writing in order to show high English proficiency. The ordering of elements in multiple themes in the writing is: Textual^ Interpersonal ^Topical, although sometimes textual and interpersonal may be switched. Below are some examples for illustrations.

(14) **In conclusion**, **I think** that **long-term traffic and pollution reductions** would depend on educating the public to use public transport more,…

(15) **In conclusion**, **I agree** that **any child** can be taught particular skills,…

(16) **However**, **I feel the question** is not whether they should immunise but whether, as members of society, they have the right not to.

In instances (14) and (15), all the themes are multiple including the textual theme '*In conclusion*' signaling the concluding paragraph of the text, the interpersonal theme (*I think* or *I agree*) showing the writer's explicit involvement in the discussion and the topical theme *'long-term traffic and pollution reductions'* or *'any child'.*

In extract (16), the conjunctive element '*however*' acts as a textual theme and introduces a contrastive point and the modal adjunct '*I feel'* functions as an interpersonal theme preceding the topical theme '*the question'*, which together constitutes a multiple theme.

It is worth noting that textual themes are more frequently employed than interpersonal ones preceding topical themes to form multiple themes in the selected essays with a view to providing connection between clauses in the text. Consider the following extracts from the data.

(17) **By contrast**, **those who have spent some time earning a living or travelling to other places**, have a broader view of life and better personal resources to draw on.

(18) **However**, **traffic congestion** will not be solved by changing the type of private vehicle people can use.

(19) **In addition**, **younger people** are often the most affected by globalization.

(20) **Of course not everyone** enjoys their work.

In instance (17), the textual theme '*By contrast'* marks the beginning of the clause, signaling an adversative relationship between what has been stated before and what is going to be stated, the topical theme '*those who have spent some time earning a living or travelling to other places*' use a relative clause making the information denser.

The multiple theme in extract (18) involves the combination of the conjunction '*however*' stating a meaning that contrasts the following clause with the preceding one and the topical theme '*traffic congestion.'* while in example (19), the textual theme '*In addition'* signaling an extension of information to the previous clause is placed before the topical theme *'younger people'* to form a multiple theme. In example 20, the interpersonal theme '*of course*' indicates that the writer would like the reader to take the point for granted.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the study reveals that the right choice of theme types enables IELTS test-takers to produce a well-written text which exhibits two important features: cohesion and coherence. As Eggins [5, p.321] stated, "The most striking contribution of thematic choices is to the internal cohesion of the text: skillful use of thematic selection results in a text which appears to hang together and make sense." In order to gain high scores in the essay writing, much attention should be paid to the following points relating to theme application.

First, the IELTS candidates should employ more marked themes in their writing as skillful writers choose marked themes to add coherence and emphasis to their text [5] and make their writing more argumentative. In addition, a small number of interpersonal themes should be tactfully used to convey the writers' attitudes towards the value of what they are about to write, establishing the relationship between them and the readers while a great use of textual themes are more appropriate for providing connection between the previous and following clauses.

Moreover, more multiple themes than simple themes should be applied in the writing. Establishing multiple

themes can provide a useful guide to the rhetorical path that the writer is following [2] and make the writing more academic, thereby improving the chances of scoring high on the IETLS examination.

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