

From theme to quality: Investigating thematic progression in IELTS writing

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Abstract

Coherence is one of the indicators of good writing, especially in high-stakes proficiency tests, like IELTS. Very few studies have been conducted on the thematic progression of IELTS writing, especially to compare the quality of the essays across different bands. This study aims to explore the thematic progressions employed in IELTS Writing band 2 essays, from bands 4 – 9. By doing quantitative and qualitative text analysis on 30 argumentative essays, which responded to the same prompt, the thematic progressions and thematic breaks were analyzed. The study revealed that all types of thematic progressions are employed by the essays from different bands, with different portions, while breaks mostly occur at low-band essays. This confirms the importance of incorporating thematic progressions in writing instructions, so student learn that they need to plan their writing structure to make is more persuasive.

Keywords: thematic progressions, breaks, argumentative writing

INTRODUCTION

The quality of academic writing does not solely rely on the accurate use of grammar and varied word choices because it also puts the emphasis on the logical development of sentences in paragraphs and texts. The way of putting the sentences in paragraphs and paragraphs in a text follows a mechanism called thematic progression (TP); the flow of themes and rhemes of the sentences develops cohesive discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Danes, 1974). Themes are the points of departure of the message, and rhemes are the remainder of the message which contains new information. Within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the patterns of TP organizes information flow and shape text coherence (Egins, 2004; Fries, 1995).

There are three different types of thematic progressions: constant, linear, and derived (Danes, 1974). However, effective writing usually employs a variety of TP patterns, especially linear and derived progressions, in order to elaborate the topic sentences and make the text coherent (Ebrahimi & Khedri, 2011); (Jalilifar et al., 2017; Wang, 2007). These patterns are usually employed in academic contexts and reflected in frameworks of language proficiency test in writing, where coherence and cohesion become parts of the evaluation criteria (Suwandi, 2016). However, in practice, constant TP is still used by many student writers; they repeat the same theme. As a result, they fail to develop new ideas creating disjointed or redundant texts (Arunsirot, 2013; Hawes, 2015); (Syharizal et al., 2018). Several recent studies show that student at lower proficiency levels often employ low variation of TP patterns in their essays. Constant progressions are highly used in descriptive essays (Purba & Pasaribu, 2021), and derived TP are not frequently used in argumentative writing either (Haji, 2024). In addition, the overused of constant TP usually shows low-quality argumentative essays and causes frequent thematic breaks ((Pavavijarn, 2022; Sari & Agustina, 2022).

Although we have read a lot of studies on the relationship between TP and student writing quality, there is still a significant research gap in this area. Most existing studies explore general classroom writing or descriptive and argumentative essays, often comparing low- and high-proficiency texts without controlled tasks or scoring benchmarks. Bi (2023), Islam et al. (2022), Muttaqin et al. (2022), and Sari & Agustina (2022) showed that poor control on TP patterns in writing affects the

argument development and the text organization. However, there is very limited research that examines thematic progression in standardized writing tasks like IELTS, where coherence and cohesion become the determinant of test scores. Pavavijarn (2022) reported that high-quality argumentative essays used varied TP patterns with fewer breaks, in contrast with the lower quality ones which employed more constant TP creating incoherent text. In addition, (Pham, 2024) showed that linear TP was the most used TP by Vietnamese EFL learners, with more varied TP and coherent essays performed by advanced students. In addition, some studies done by Kraus (2018), Jalilifar et al.(2017) did TP analysis on academic essays without controlling the topics or comparing samples. So far, a very limited study, Thang & Tam (2020) has conducted exploring the connection between TP and IELTS band performance. These studies also analyzed the essays without paying attention to specific topic or comparing the TP used in different bands. No known studies did an analysis on a clause-level analysis of TP types and breaks from different bands.

Due to the fact that IELTS test is widely used in academic mobility, we need to prepare the IELTS test taker do the writing tasks. There are two tasks in IELTS writing; Task 1 asks the test taker to write a summary on the given visual information, and task 2 asks the test taker to present an argument on a given prompt. Those two tasks will be assessed on four criteria: task response, coherence and cohesion, lexical resources, and grammatical range and accuracy; coherence and cohesion become the main attention in scoring because we will be able to assess the test taker's ability in developing easy -to-follow ideas. IELTS band scores are related to Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) that shows the language proficiency levels, like bands 4-5 for B1 or intermediate level, bands 6-7 for B2 or Upper-intermediate level, and bands 8-9 for C1-C2 for proficient to master levels (British Council, 2025). The higher their language proficiency levels provide the information about the test taker's ability in writing with logically structured ideas and varied thematic progressions with minimal breaks (Arnold, 2023). Therefore, there is a need to expand the scope of TP research by examining how theme-rheme structures evolve across officially banded IELTS Task 2 essays.

A careful analysis of TP in official writing samples can reveal the structural differences of high- and low-band essays. The result of this analysis will have an impact in improving IELTS writing instruction, especially in guiding the students to develop their ideas. In addition, as thematic progression sometimes do not get enough attention in IELTS preparation resources, this research can offer a practical and evidence-based foundation for coherence-focused pedagogy. Therefore, this study aims to fill in the gap by applying Danes's TP model to a corpus of IELTS task 2 writing samples across bands 4-9. This study aims to show the contribution of different TP types employed in the different level essays and the occurrence of breaks on the coherence, contributing to academic writing pedagogy, especially in the instruction of IELTS writing preparation in guiding learners to develop their ideas. In order to achieve the research objectives, I determined to answer the following questions:

1. What thematic progression patterns (constant, linear, derived) are used in IELTS Task 2 writing samples across Bands 4 to 9?
2. How do thematic breaks occur in IELTS Task 2 writing samples across Bands 4 to 9?

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to explore how proficiency level—represented by official IELTS band scores—relates to the use of different thematic progression types and the occurrence of thematic breaks. Therefore, SFL-informed discourse analysis was employed to reveal thematic progression patterns in IELTS Writing Task 2 essays across six distinct band levels: Band 5, Band 6, Band 7, Band 8, and Band 9. A total of 30 essays taken from a public website for free IELTS test preparation; 5 website user-written essays from each band, which met the requirement of having a minimum 250-word count, were chosen. As all selected essays responded to the same IELTS task 2 prompt, where the test takers needed to show their ability to present their position on a specific academic issue, it ensured the topic control for a valid comparison of writing structure across different proficiency levels. These essays have received expert assessments on the four IELTS writing task 2 criteria: task response, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy. The result of the assessment on coherence and cohesion provides a valid assessment of this criterion. To increase the data validity of the thematic progression analysis, this study included the official coherence and cohesion scores provided in the websites for each essay. These scores show how the examiners

sequenced the information logically. Thus, the data represents a balanced and leveled sample of learner-written IELTS essays, enabling a clear analysis on how thematic progression patterns affect writing quality.

Table 1. Coherence and cohesion scores of IELTS essays across Bands 4 to 9

Text	Band 4	Band 5	Band 6	Band 7	Band 8	Band 9
Text 1	4.0	4.5	5.5	6.5	8.0	9.0
Text 2	4.0	5.0	5.0	7.0	8.0	9.0
Text 3	4.0	5.0	6.0	7.0	8.0	9.0
Text 4	3.5	5.0	6.0	7.0	8.0	9.0
Text 5	4.5	5.0	5.0	7.0	8.0	9.0

Source: Engnovate.com (2025)

To do the data analysis, this study adopted Danes's (Danes, 1974) model of thematic progression, which includes the following patterns: (1) Constant Thematic Progression (CT) – the same theme is repeated across multiple clauses, (2) Linear Thematic Progression (LT) – the rheme of one clause becomes the theme of the next, and (3) Derived Thematic Progression (DT) – different themes stem from a shared overarching hypertheme. In addition, the existence of Thematic Breaks (TB) in the essay was also investigated. Thematic breaks appears when there is a new theme is introduced without lexical or semantic connection to the previous clause, causing a disruption on textual flow. Each essay was broken down into its individual clauses, and each clause was then analyzed for its theme and rheme. The thematic progression types and breaks, if any, were manually identified and put in tables to ease the coding. The result of the coding provided quantitative data on frequencies of TP types and breaks occurring per band levels. The patterns were then compared across bands to observe developmental progression in thematic control. To ensure consistency and validity in the analysis, a second trained coder annotated 20% of the total dataset (5 essays across different bands). Cohen's Kappa was used to measure inter-rater reliability, and all discrepancies were discussed and resolved collaboratively.

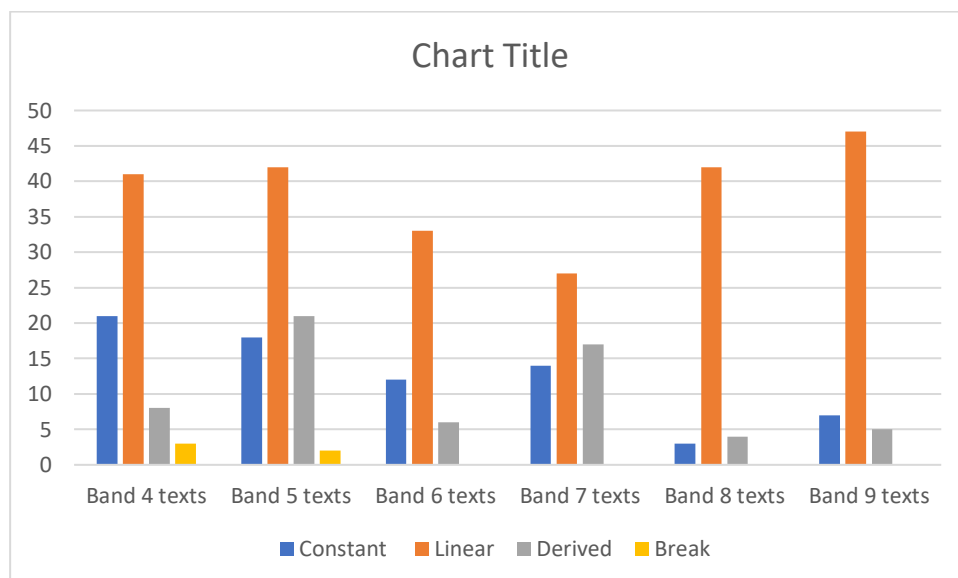
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the results of the analysis on thematic progression (TP) conducted on 30 IELTS Task 2 essays, ranging from Band 4 to Band 9. The aim of this article is to show how different types of TP—constant, linear, and derived—are used by test takers from six different proficiency levels, in relation with the coherence and cohesion scores obtained by the essay. The result of the analysis is written in the order of the four research questions, based on both quantitative counts and qualitative observations on the types of thematic progression patterns and breaks occurring in the essays. Key trends are highlighted, and the implications for writing instruction and assessment are discussed.

Thematic progression patterns across bands

The analysis result of selected 30 IELTS Task 2 essays revealed TP patterns used by the writers. In addition to the analysis on three TP types: constant, linear, and derived as coherence strategies, the analysis also identified thematic breaks—where sentences unpredictably shifted or had no logical connection with the prior sentences, indicating cohesion problems. Across all bands, constant progression was the most frequently observed pattern. However, its usage frequency differed significantly depending on proficiency level. In low-band essays (Bands 4 and 5), constant progression tended to be overused and applied mechanically. It can be seen from repetitive sentence structures that obstructed idea development. In contrast, high-band essays, especially Bands 8 and 9 employed constant progression more selectively and purposefully. The constant progression in higher-band essays reinforced key arguments or maintained thematic focus across complex paragraph structures.

Figure 1. The thematic progressions and breaks across bands



In linear progression, the rheme of one sentence becomes the theme of the next. Linear progression is generally used in all bands, from band 4 to 9; band 9 essay used more linear progressions than the other bands. This pattern shows that in argumentative writing, writers put the sentences in a logical way and step-by-step elaboration of points. However, the result also shows that the use of linear progressions is not align with the coherence and cohesion score given by the expert. When reading the essays with linear progressions, the essays exhibited a smoother, more persuasive rhetorical flow; the traits which commonly associated with higher band scores for coherence and cohesion can be seen on the essays scored bands 8 and 9.

Derived progression, which introduces multiple clauses whose themes stem from a common conceptual or hyper-theme, is used by all bands. Usually, derived progressions are employed by high-band essays, like in Bands 8 and 9. However, this study found that band 5 used more derived progressions. Derived progression contributes significantly to overall paragraph unity, as it allows for the diversification of ideas under a unified topic umbrella. This suggests that writers at all bands notice the need of spreading the themes to some parts of the essays, showing the major supporting details of the topic sentence.

Constant progressions, that employs the same themes, are also used in all band essays. However, low-band essays, like bands 4 and 5, employ more constant progressions. They author used the same themes in some parts. In high-band essays, constant progressions are also used; they are used to emphasize the previous sentence.

A close comparative analysis of IELTS Task 2 writing samples from Bands 4 and 5 (low-band group) versus Bands 8 and 9 (high-band group) shows a significant qualitative difference in the management of thematic progression (TP). Although all essays responded to the same prompt, their thematic structures reflected markedly different levels of writing proficiency, coherence, and discourse planning. The lower band essays employed more constant TP, while the higher band essays used more linear TP. These differences show the writer's ability in using linear patterns to support the argumentation and cohesion.

Thematic breaks occurred across bands

On the other end of the spectrum, thematic breaks also occurred in all band essays. Breaks occur when the theme is not correlated with the previous themes or rhemes. In fact, breaks occurred more in lower-band essays. Some sentences have new themes, which manifest as abrupt shifts in topic, unconnected sentences, or the introduction of new themes without sufficient contextual linkage. It will be difficult for readers to follow the written ideas when thematic breaks appeared. The

number of thematic breaks lowers progressively with rising band scores, indicating that higher-proficiency writers were better able to plan and maintain thematic cohesion throughout their texts.

Low-band essays—particularly those scored at Bands 4 and 5—often exhibited weak thematic control. Writers often introduced new ideas, with minimal reference to the theme or rheme of preceding sentences, resulting in fragmented discourse. Thematic breaks were common, often arising from sudden topic shifts, broken statements, or the use of unrelated examples that disturbed the paragraph's flow. These sudden changes hindered the logical progression of ideas and made it difficult for the reader to follow the writer's line of reasoning. The constant progression as the dominant TP pattern in these essays exhibited the repetitive use of word. Themes such as “students” or “academic subjects” were reiterated in multiple consecutive sentences. This goes to unexpanded argument development. When writers over relied on simple, fixed structures, they showed their limited rhetorical awareness and a lack of control over discourse-level cohesion.

These results reinforce the fact that thematic progression patterns not only vary by band level but also play a crucial role in the perceived coherence. Writers of all band essays successfully use a mix of TP types to produce argumentative essays. In addition, the use of linear and derived thematic progressions is more likely employed by the higher descriptors in the IELTS Writing Task 2 scoring rubric for coherence and cohesion.

In contrast, higher-band essays (Bands 8 and 9) showed that the writers used a more sophisticated approach to thematic progression. Writers in these bands consistently used linear progression and derived progressions, so the thematic breaks do not occur. This helped them to connect the sentences to move fluidly from one point to the next, creating a strong sense of flow within and across paragraphs. The use of derived progressions introduced overarching conceptual categories mentioned in the first paragraph that served as hyper-themes from which multiple related sub-themes in some parts of the essays were developed. This macro-level thematic progressions allowed them to structure paragraphs with multiple layers of meaning while maintaining overall unity. Another difference was in the degree of thematic flexibility and conceptual abstraction found in higher-band essays. Instead of simply repeating the same grammatical subject, high-band writers reintroduced core ideas in varied linguistic forms or synonyms and with different grammatical constructions. For instance, a Band 9 essay might use the words “formal schooling”, “academic subjects”, “curricular content”, in replace of the word “education”. The ability of using varied lexical resources contributed significantly to the textual sophistication and rhetorical clarity that characterized higher-scoring essays.

As we can see from a coherence and cohesion standpoint, high-band essays employed the thematic strategies align closely with the descriptors outlined in the IELTS Writing Task 2 scoring rubric. The ability of the writers to write the sentences in sequencing information logically, using cohesive devices, and employing thematic progressions to develop paragraph unity contribute to higher coherence scores. In contrast, the low-band essays do not meet the criteria in the scoring rubrics; this is in line with the low scores in coherence and less smooth idea flow. Overall, the findings suggest that the quality of thematic progression is a reliable indicator of writing proficiency. High-band writers know how to use varied thematic progressions to construct cohesive argumentative text, while lower-band writers often struggle to manage thematic continuity and coherence, leading to structurally weak and rhetorically underdeveloped essays.

Discussions

The findings of this study show that writers' ability in managing thematic progression (TP) improves along with the improvement in writing proficiency. Different thematic progressions used in different IELTS band levels reflect a growing ability to construct coherent discourse by employing thematic progressions. The ability in using various thematic progressions is aligned with broader theories of second language writing, particularly those informed by systemic functional linguistics (SFL), which view writing development as a scaffolded change from the ability in writing sentences to the ability to organize the sentences across extended discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Fries, 1995).

At the lower proficiency, especially in Band 4 and Band 5 essays, writers relied more on constant progression by repeating the same theme across consecutive sentences. While

this may show a direct cohesion, it causes redundancy in using words and limited ability in elaborating ideas. Frequent thematic breaks occur in these low-band essays; new themes were introduced without logical linkage to previous ideas. This produced fragmented structure which reflects a clause-level orientation where sentences are constructed in isolation, not planned as a part of an essay (Jalilifar et al., 2017; Wang, 2007). Thematic progression in these low-band essays is mostly surface-level cohesion, with minimal rhetorical control or deeper conceptual planning.

The patterns employed by the low-band writers reflect the early stages of development described in SFL-informed models, which emphasize the early ability to use linguistic aspects to discourse competence. As learners grow their ability, they are expected to be able to write beyond clause-bound thinking and develop an awareness that sentences in an essay must be structured as a text-level organization that have certain communication goals (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In this context, TP analysis offers a valuable way to observe a learner's positioning on this developmental continuum.

In contrast, a more advanced use of TP strategies are employed by high-band essays, like Bands 8 and 9, including balanced employment of linear and derived progression. These writers were able to construct cohesive and logically sequenced texts, linking rhemes to subsequent themes to guide readers smoothly through their argumentation. This kind of development was particularly evident in argumentative essays, where logical build-up and clear progression of ideas are essential for coherence (Wang, 2007). In addition, these writers showed an ability to use derived progression through the introduction of macro-themes that become the root of multiple subpoints across a paragraph. This ability in putting the sentences in a good paragraph structure shows the level of a deeper understanding on rhetorical intent.

High-band writing usually intentionally avoid or carefully manage thematic breaks. In lower-band essays, breaks were disruptive and frequently occurred, while high-band essays showed very few breaks; When breaks occurred, transitional markers were used. This ability to control the thematic flow of a text contemplates the ability in planning the discourse and using rhetorical awareness. The observed trend supports the hypothesis that the ability to control the use of thematic progression patterns develop alongside language proficiency. As learners advance, they do not think about the length of the text and the grammatical aspects, but they also have the ability to plan the text so the sentences in the text will sustain meaning across larger textual units. These findings are similar with Chang (2023) who emphasized the close relationship between TP and coherence in L2 writing. This proposes that TP is a marker of written competence, and TP can be used in both assessment and instruction.

In light of these findings, language educators are encouraged to integrate TP awareness into writing instruction. Writing instructions can focus on theme–rheme development and progression strategies. Learners will learn how to progress beyond sentence-level fluency to create coherent, reader-friendly writing. Applying progression strategies in teaching writing will be especially beneficial in preparation for high-stakes academic tests like IELTS, where discourse-level cohesion and thematic clarity are explicitly assessed.

Coherence and Thematic Organization

Coherence, one of the four core criteria in IELTS Writing Band descriptors alongside task response, lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy, is widely recognized as a critical element in effective academic writing. One of the study's most important findings is the role of thematic progressions in shaping the overall coherence of IELTS Task 2 essays. However, while coherence is usually correlated with logical sequencing, paragraph unity, and the use of cohesive devices, the structure of texts, how the themes and rhemes are put in

a paragraph or text, often receives far less attention in both instructional practice and formal assessment (Chang, 2023).

This study highlights that effective use of thematic progression (TP) in writing. Employing TP is not only about style, but it is a foundational mechanism for constructing coherent discourse. High-scoring essays consistently employed linear progression to establish clear logical relationships between ideas. In this TP pattern, writers need to use the rheme (new information) of one clause as the theme (starting point) of the next clause in order to build logical chain of reasoning, enhancing clarity and promoting smooth information flow across sentences. These linear thematic progressions support argument development by ensuring that each idea is introduced, expanded upon, and connected to improve the readability (Jalilifar et al., 2017).

The presence of derived progression in high-band essays also shows strategies that involve the development of multiple sub-themes that are conceptually linked to a single overarching macro-theme or hyper-theme. The use of derived thematic progressions allows for greater thematic variety without sacrificing cohesion. The writers present multifaceted arguments within a unified conceptual frame. The consistent use of such thematic strategies in higher-band essays contributed significantly to the structural clarity and rhetorical effectiveness (Wang, 2007).

On the contrary, thematic breaks occur more frequently in low-band essays as a result of a lack of cohesive planning and limited awareness of thematic structuring, or an over-reliance on simplistic sentence construction. When there is a sudden thematic change, the coherence of the paragraph weakened and made the texts more difficult to follow. The unclear connection between ideas directly reduces the essay's persuasive impact and affects the coherence scores in the IELTS rubric (Thang & Tam, 2020).

These findings show that coherence can be achieved by the good planning of thematic progressions in addition to the use of linking words in the text. The way a writer develops new themes and develops rhemes across a paragraph or essay will help the reader understand the argument presented. When TP is varied, it creates a logical progression of ideas that reflects the effective argument flows. At the same time, the coherence of the text is disturbed, and consequently the message becomes unclear when TP is disrupted by breaks. Therefore, this study not only reaffirms the importance of coherence in academic writing but also advocates for a more explicit focus on thematic organization as a tool for achieving it. Teachers should incorporate TP into writing instruction. Improving the awareness of writing classes will help learners understand how thematic progressions are highly correlated with cohesion, idea development, and paragraph unity. By doing so, learners can construct essays better and meet the highest standards of coherence as expected in IELTS and other academic writing contexts (Chang, 2023).

CONCLUSION

After a comprehensive comparative analysis of essays spanning Bands 4 to 9, this study has proven that more proficient writers exhibit great ability in meeting the scoring rubrics of writing: producing sentences that are free of grammatical mistakes, using sophisticated vocabulary, and using strategies in putting information in a systematically structured way throughout their texts. One of the most important findings is the use of TP patterns will vary as band scores increase. Lower-band essays employ more constant progression with frequent thematic breaks, which are the characteristics of poor planning and lack of paragraph unity. Varied TP are employed by higher-band essays to build logical chains of argument. The frequent breaks in lower bands essays shows a clear marker of low academic ability in using the essential component of coherent paragraph development.

Moreover, the study proved a close relationship between thematic progression and coherence. In addition, this study suggests that incorporating thematic progressions in writing instructions will help learners develop their awareness of how to develop their ideas into more persuasive texts. In conclusion, thematic progression is a descriptive tool that has become a predictor of writing proficiency. It is a teachable skill for students so they can develop texts with academic clarity, cohesion, and persuasion.

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