THEMATIC PROGRESSION IN EFL LEARNERS' WRITING: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

By examining relevant research articles published in reputable journals or conference proceedings in 2013-2020, the literature review article attempted to shed light on the areas: (1) contributions of thematic progression to the coherence and cohesion quality of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' writing, (2) EFL learners' problems regarding thematic progression in their writing, and (3) research on pedagogical implications of thematic progression on teaching writing. While there have been extensive studies on thematic progression, it remained intriguing to investigate the extent to which this topic had been explored by scholars, particularly in the context of English as a foreign language. The previous studies had consistently confirmed the following results: (1) thematic progression contributes to the coherence and cohesion quality of EFL learners' writing, (2) problematic thematic progression in EFL learners' writing included the emergence of the brand new theme, double rheme, empty rheme, empty theme, overuse of constant theme pattern, overwhelming selection of textual theme, and (3) some studies evidenced good results of integrating thematic progression in teaching writing. The research suggests that further research develops a more detailed and systematic procedure of teaching thematic progression in a specific EFL teaching-learning context by integrating thematic progression theory with English language teaching materials. Furthermore, the research calls for more experimental research on teaching thematic progression to determine the significance of this method in enhancing students' writing quality.

Keywords: thematic progression, EFL learners' writing, text coherence, text cohesion

INTRODUCTION

Evaluating the coherence and cohesion of an English text means discussing the structure of its clauses. This structure refers to the theory of textual meaning. It assigns the first element of a clause as theme, which gives the clause its character as a message, and the second element as rheme, which provides additional information related to the message (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The term textual meaning is introduced in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). This theory views language as a resource for making meaning, focusing on the use as well as the purpose of using language in communication. In SFL theory, a clause simultaneously comprises three lines of meaning or metafunctions; ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning.

Textual meaning not only identifies the elements of theme and rheme but also accentuates how thematic elements succeed each other through certain patterns. These patterns of theme-rheme organization belong to a system called thematic progression. Thematic progression offers some ideal ways to organize the flow of ideas or information from the writer. That is to say, they enable the writer to develop a theme by picking up or repeating a meaning from a preceding theme or rheme (Eggins, 2004). The organization of theme-rheme in the text is supposed to follow certain patterns as proposed by some experts, such as Eggins (2004). She has mentioned three patterns of thematic progression (1) linear theme/zigzag when a theme

of a clause is derived from the previous rheme, (2) constant theme/theme reiteration, when a theme of a clause is derived from the previous theme, and (3) multiple theme/split rheme when a rheme of a clause is developed into several following themes.

Thematic progression is essential in writing due to its role in maintaining the continuity and information flow of the text. In other words, thematic progression highly contributes to the cohesion and coherence of a text. Thematic progression has recently become the central issue in evaluating the quality of students' writing and gained researchers' attention. While there have been extensive studies on thematic progression, it remains intriguing to investigate the extent to which this topic has been explored, particularly in the context of English as a foreign language. The research will support the development of second/ foreign language acquisition theory in terms of how EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners as non-native speakers of English can better develop their academic writing skills. The research can also help EFL learners, particularly novice writers, in grasping the importance of thematic progression to enhance the quality of academic writing, as evidenced in the previous studies. Moreover, it provides EFL teachers and lecturers with a succinct description of teaching thematic progression, which can be implemented in their writing classes.

By examining the relevant research articles published in reputable journals and international conference proceedings in 2013-2020, the research is an attempt to shed light on the main issues of thematic progression in the teaching of English as a foreign language. It reports the results of the literature review in regard to answering the following questions: (1) How does thematic progression contribute to the coherence and cohesion quality of EFL learners' writing? (2) What are EFL learners' problems regarding thematic progression in their writing? (3) What are the pedagogical implications of thematic progression on teaching writing?

METHODS

The literature-review research examines relevant research articles on thematic progression published in reputable journals or conference proceedings in 2013-2020. The word 'reputable' refers to journals or conference proceedings that are nationally or internationally accredited. The research analyzes 31 research articles using thematic analysis. The articles are then identified and grouped into three categories based on the following theme; (1) contributions of thematic progression to the coherence and cohesion quality of EFL learners' writing, (2) EFL learners' problems regarding thematic progression in their writing, and (3) research on pedagogical implications of thematic progression on teaching writing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

As a response to the primary issue of thematic progression, the research departs from a general claim that thematic progression contributes to the coherence and cohesion quality of English learners' writing (Al-Bazzaz & Al-Shajlawi, 2018; Dewi, Hernawan, & Apsari, 2019; Emilia, Habibi, & Bangga, 2018; Gunawan & Aziza, 2017; Hawes, 2015; Khany & Nejad, 2018; Lestari, Mujiyanto, & Saleh, 2019; Pangestu, Harvian, & Suprijadi, 2019; Pasaribu, Pasaribu, & Panggabean, 2019; Rahmawati & Kurniawan, 2015; Yunita, 2018). Thematic progression is one of the indicators to evaluate the coherence and cohesion of a text and the use of appropriate cohesive devices. Emilia, Habibi, and Bangga (2018) have investigated thematic progression in exposition texts written by Indonesian-year-eleven students. Findings of Emilia, Habibi, and Bangga's (2018) research are similar to those of Sujatna, Pamungkas, and Heriyanto (2018). Both pieces of research identify the dominant use of zigzag patterns, followed by theme reiteration in EFL learners' writing. Moreover, the employment of multiple themes in the text reflects students' emerging capacity to build a sense of cumulative development of information. It appears that students are mostly able to introduce new information from the previous information found in the preceding clauses.

Thematic progression in the writing of Indonesian eleventh graders also becomes the major concern in the research by Yunita (2018), Pangestu, Harvian, and Suprijadi (2019), and Dewi, Hernawan, and Apsari (2019). In her research, Yunita (2018) has employed a descriptive qualitative research design scrutinizing students' recount texts in a state vocational high school in Bandung. This research concludes that the theme and thematic progression used by the students are able to support the development of their recount text. For example, the dominant use of the theme reiteration pattern helps build the text focus; the zigzag pattern indicates students' ability to manage the given-new information and create links between clauses. The findings suggest that teachers introduce theme management to students through modeling and construction activities.

Dewi, Hernawan, and Apsari (2019), and Pangestu, Harvian, and Suprijadi (2019) have shared things in common in their research. Both endeavors to identify thematic progression patterns and evaluate the quality of coherence in descriptive texts written by eleventh graders of a senior high school in Indonesia, and they confirm three models of thematic progression. While Dewi, Hernawan, and Apsari (2019) have found the prominence of the constant theme; Pangestu, Harvian, and Suprijadi (2019) have yielded the domination of the zigzag model. The findings also identify the emergence of a new theme in the middle of a sentence, resulting in less coherent descriptive texts.

Shifting the research subject into students at higher education level, the research by Pasaribu, Pasaribu, and Panggabean (2019), and Anwar and

Amri (2019) have focused on exploring theme systems in the short functional texts written by third-semester students of the English Department in an Indonesian university. While Pasaribu, Pasaribu, and Panggabean (2019) have examined students' narrative texts; Anwar and Amri (2019) have investigated students' discussion texts. The findings of Pasaribu, Pasaribu, and Panggabean (2019) have revealed an overuse of the zigzag non-linear patterns in students' narrative texts. However, this research has found out that the development of students' writing is not well-organized and not consistent. Students still need more guidance in writing narrative text, particularly regarding thematic progression.

Furthermore, Chang, Tsai, and Chen (2020) have sought to analyze thematic progression in EFL learners' essays in order to achieve coherence in their writing. The essays are evident to mostly demonstrate linear thematic progression, especially after the students are given intervention about thematic progression. This research has proclaimed that it is important for EFL students to understand the concept of thematic progression to obtain a better score for their writing.

Suwandi (2016), as well as Rahmawati and Kurniawan (2015), have attempted to describe and analyze thematic progression in abstracts written by undergraduate students in Indonesian universities. These pieces of research reveal that the constant theme pattern outnumbers other patterns of thematic progression. This leads to the conclusion that the students' abstracts are not quite well-arranged. Another cause that exacerbated this problem is the limited words in abstracts, which are more or less 200 words. This may result in students' confusion on how to create concise information in composing an abstract.

Al-Bazzaz and Al-Shajlawi (2018) have focused on two different disciplines (Medicine and Engineering) written by Iraqi EFL learners. Using the descriptive design, this research has revealed the dominant use of simple linear patterns (zigzag) in both kinds of research articles. The suggestion of this research calls for a need to provide a specific course in college to accentuate thematic progression to achieve cohesion and coherence. This becomes an urgent issue, especially for writers who have a deficient level of English.

Similar to Al-Bazzaz and Al-Shajlawi (2018), Lestari, Mujiyanto, and Saleh (2019) have evaluated the use of thematic progression in research articles written by undergraduate students. The finding of this research interestingly identifies numerous empty patterns of thematic progression, which results in less coherence of their article. Besides the empty pattern, the zigzag pattern is frequently employed by students in their writing, followed by a reiteration pattern and multiple theme pattern. Several students have already demonstrated consistent writing, while others do not.

Considering the role of culture, Gunawan and Aziza (2017) have addressed this matter by analyzing theme and thematic progression in an undergraduate thesis written by an Indonesian university student. In the analysis, this research places culture as the factor that shapes the making meaning process. It implies that an excellent academic text shares its characteristics across cultures. This research identifies the use of three thematic progression patterns in the thesis, dominated by theme reiteration patterns. This commonality of thematic progression patterns is deemed essential to intrigue a sense of cohesiveness in the text.

The issue of thematic progression involving EFL writers other than students has also been studied, for example, by Babaii, Atai, Shoja (2016), and Leong, Toh, and Chin (2018). Babaii, Atai, and Shoja (2016) have compared thematic choices and progression patterns in research articles of international discipline and national discipline by using Halliday's framework of the theme-rheme structure of thematic progression. Employing a quantitative approach, statistical analysis results show significant differences in the pattern of thematic progression between the two categories. However, both categories use the simple linear and constant theme patterns more frequently and avoid writers' personal judgment by the minor use of interpersonal themes. Similar to Babaii, Atai, and Shoja (2016), Leong, Toh, and Chin (2018) have identified thematic progression in 30 scientific research articles, from the introduction to the subsequent sections. Introduction sections are mostly composed using a progressive thematic pattern, while the subsequent sections are constructed by an anchored development. Moreover, this research confirms similarities across the research articles in terms of the thematic structure. Meanwhile, research by Kuswoyo et al. (2020) in the Netherlands has revealed the dominant use of combining constant and zigzag theme patterns to maintain EFL learners' focus and introduce some new concepts. This research believes that effective selection of thematic progression can help the audience identify the primary issue of discourse.

The previous studies analyzing thematic progression in EFL learners' writing consistently accentuate the importance of thematic progression in building the coherence of cohesion of the text. The studies have also revealed that EFL learners prominently use either zigzag or theme reiteration patterns in their writing and less use multiple theme/rheme. Both zigzag and theme reiteration patterns serve particular functions to support the flow of information or ideas in the writing. The zigzag pattern indicates writers' ability to develop given information into new information, and theme reiteration is deemed effective to maintain the text focus.

Besides analyzing thematic progression patterns, some scholars attempt to identify thematic progression problems that frequently appear in EFL learners' writing. Studies on the problems regarding thematic progression in English learners' writing have been carried out by Arunsirot (2013), Kuswoyo and Susardi (2017), and Hawes (2015). Arunsirot (2013) has taken as the point of departure Thai EFL students' difficulty in composing a good English text. Thus, it is no surprise that there are several problems identified

in students' writing in terms of the theme selections and thematic progression. The problems are the empty theme, the brand new theme, the overuse of constant progression, the empty rheme, and the confusing selection of textual themes. These results can be effectively used by English teachers as guidance to help students' writing process.

Following Arunsirot's (2013) framework, Kuswoyo and Susardi (2017), in their research, have attempted to identify the problems regarding thematic progression in students' academic writing, encompassing 20 texts written by fifth-semester students in Indonesia. This research confirms six prominent problems regarding thematic progression as identified in the previous studies. They are the emergence of the brand new theme, double rheme, empty rheme, empty theme, overuse of constant theme pattern, and an overwhelming selection of textual theme. Moreover, four new problems are identified, including incomplete clauses, errors in selecting the topical theme, unnecessary textual theme, and double textual theme. Both Arunsirot (2013) and Kuswoyo and Susardi (2017) have urged on the importance of raising students' awareness of thematic progression in their writing in order to produce a well-organized text in compliance with the concept of cohesion and coherence.

To grasp a detailed description of how EFL learners' writing deviates from English native speakers' writing, Hawes (2015) has compared essays written by international students to the editorials in British newspapers. Students' writing indicates abrupt introduction in theme, inappropriate assignment to theme/rheme, linear rheme progression, derived linear progression, and poor coherence in spite of constant progression sequences. The research has highly suggested that students be exposed to the theory of thematic progression, so they have a good understanding of progression patterns that can make more or less explicit arguments, more or less forceful arguments. The studies by Arunsirot (2013), Kuswoyo and Susardi (2017), and Hawes (2015) have depicted EFL learners' failure to recognize thematic progression when developing their writing. Although some learners' failure is similar across these studies, each of them somehow revealed newly identified problematic patterns in students' writing. Thus, it allows further research to confirm even explore more problematic patterns in EFL learners' writing.

Follow-up studies concerning pedagogical implications of thematic progression on teaching writing have been conducted by Stoian (2017), Nurdianingsih and Purnama (2017), Linda, Maisa, and Mulatsih (2017). Particularly in teaching translation, Stoian (2017) has offered a conceptual idea for classroom practices consisting of eight main activities. The activity begins with providing students with a model text, asking students to identify the theme-rheme and the thematic progression patterns, giving examples of how students can change the text focus by interchanging the theme with the rheme, explaining how the shift in the text focus creates different perspectives, inviting students to practice focus-shifting, and asking students to modify the thematic progression pattern. The findings of this research have proclaimed that the information placed in the theme affects the focus and coherence of the message, as well as the tone, the level of objectivity-subjectivity, and generality-particularity. Thus, by using this sequence of activities, students are hopefully able to reflect on their first language and perform a contrastive analysis. They could also translate texts, maintain, or change the thematic structure.

While Stoian (2017) has explored conceptual ideas to enrich the body of knowledge, Nurdianingsih and Purnama (2017) have conducted experimental research by teaching thematic progression to Indonesian students of the English Education Department in a university. This research has claimed that the thematic progression pattern is an effective technique in teaching writing skills to students. To support this claim, Nurdianingsih and Purnama (2017) have compared students' writing in two classes with different treatments. One class is taught using direct instruction, serving as the control class, and the other is through thematic progression patterns, as the experimental class. The learning result has found out that thematic progression pattern is more effective than direct instruction in teaching writing.

Moreover, Linda, Maisa, and Mulatsih (2017) have conducted quasi-experimental research for eleventh-grade students in Indonesia. The research is accomplished through the procedures of planning, drafting, editing, and final writing, each of which involves several learning activities. Their research has summarized that the use of thematic progression patterns in teaching writing hortatory exposition text is effective. It indicates the higher score of students' writing in the posttest than the pretest in the experimental class.

In addition, the urge to provide EFL learners with the concept of thematic progression has been proclaimed by Xiao (2017) that has intended to explore thematic progression patterns in 50 research article abstracts. Na-on and Jaturapitakkul (2017) have investigated thematic and rhetorical patterns in the research project abstracts of Thai EFL engineering undergraduate students.

Studies on pedagogical implications of thematic progression in teaching writing have been conducted as a response toward the importance of raising students' awareness of thematic progression for the sake of betterment in their writing. Some studies offer conceptual ideas of integrating thematic progression in writing, such as the one conducted by Stoian (2017). The research encourages further researchers, English language lecturers, as well as teachers to practically implement these conceptual ideas in their writing class. By doing this integration under experimental research design, some other studies confirm that students mastering thematic progression obtained a higher score in writing tasks than those who experienced

conventional writing class.

Revisiting a considerable number of previous studies on thematic progression, the research groups these previous studies into four main areas. In the first area, the previous studies have consistently confirmed that thematic progression contributes to the coherence and cohesion quality of EFL learners' writing, involving students in the junior high school, senior high school, and university level. This is due to the consideration that each pattern of thematic progression serves particular functions to manage the text flow. While the first area depicted EFL learners' success in employing thematic progression patterns, the second area of studies provides readers with EFL learners' failure to compose coherent and cohesive writing because of the problematic thematic progression. The previous studies group this failure into several categories. However, each of them somehow reveal newly identified problematic patterns in the students' writing. Thus, it allows further research to confirm even explore more problematic patterns in EFL learners' writing. The third area of study offers conceptual ideas of teaching thematic progression in the EFL classroom. Moreover, some studies evidence good results of integrating thematic progression in teaching writing. These studies aim to raise students' awareness of thematic progression for the sake of betterment in their writing.

CONCLUSIONS

The research presents and evaluates a wide range of studies on thematic progression in EFL learners' writing. Previous studies have widely investigated how thematic progression contributes to the coherence and cohesion quality of EFL learners' writing. By analyzing EFL learners' writing, some scholars attempt to identify problems or problematic thematic progression emerging in writing. They also touch upon the quality of translation produced by EFL learners after understanding the distinctive features of thematic progression in both languages. In addition, previous studies have offered conceptual ideas of teaching thematic progression in the EFL classroom as well as the results of their implementation.

The research results contribute to the body of knowledge on textual meaning and thematic progression. These can be useful for EFL writers to raise awareness of thematic progression, which eventually affects the coherence of their writing. Furthermore, the research can support the enhancement of teaching English writing. When teaching writing, the English language teachers can relate the materials to thematic progression.

However, the research is limited only to research articles published in 2013-2020. The research suggests that further research develops a more detailed and systematic procedure of teaching thematic progression in a specific EFL teaching-learning context by integrating thematic progression theory

with English materials. Furthermore, the research calls for more experimental research on teaching thematic progression in order to find out the significance of this method to enhance students' writing quality.

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