

**The Role of Theme and Rheme in Thematic Progression Patterns in English Argumentative
Essays by Turkish University Students**

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Geliş Tarihi/Received:
25.05.2021

Kabul Tarihi/Accepted:
27.06.2021

e-Yayım/e-Printed:
30.06.2021

Abstract

The present study aims to determine the role of Theme and Rheme in thematic progression patterns in Turkish EFL students' argumentative essays in relation to their language education background. The data in this study were collected from two groups of students who study in English Language Teaching (ELT) and Psychological Counselling and Guidance (PCG) departments in a private university in Turkey. In order to analyze the data, first, the use and flow of Theme and Rheme were examined at the clause level based on Danes' (1974) progression model. The results revealed that although students from both of the departments used similar types of thematic progression patterns in their essays, ELT students used higher numbers of thematic progression patterns than PCG students. In addition, problem areas that arise from misuse of Theme and Rheme, Thematic

progression or both are described to understand the role of Theme and Rheme in thematic progression in argumentative essays. In general, ELT group in this study were found to be more successful in managing Theme and Rheme patterns to support the flow of their arguments because of their English education background. The results showed that studying Theme and Rheme relationships in EFL students' texts is important to understand writing development even at the advanced levels, because when the writers cannot succeed in the flow of information, their texts become difficult for readers to follow an idea or argument. Therefore, this study argues for the necessity of teaching Theme and Rheme relationships explicitly in advanced writing classes to support EFL students' writing development.

Key Words: Theme- Rheme, Thematic Progression Patterns, Argumentative Essay

1. INTRODUCTION

An effective text has to be clear, logical, organized, clearly structured and cohesive including a large spectrum of vocabulary items (Jacobs, 1981; Hall, 1988). Nunan (1989) believes that writing an effective text is a difficult cognitive activity because it requires the writer to have control over grammatical, lexical, as well as textual factors. Writers' background knowledge, personal interests and linguistic and cognitive abilities have critical effects on how well they are able to organize ideas in a coherent and cohesive way (Hyland, 2003; Dar & Khan, 2015; Haider, 2012; Myhill, 2019). In addition, their educational background, language experience or academic disciplines are important factors affecting their success in writing. In line with the similar idea, North (2005) claims that students' writing performance can vary depending on their academic disciplines. She examined students' text by using systemic functional approach to see whether their use of Theme differs with regard to their disciplinary backgrounds. The results revealed that students from arts backgrounds were more successful in managing thematic relations in their texts compared to others who have science backgrounds. Moreover, the study suggested that students' writing experiences in their previous courses influenced their success in writing.

Students write better and more coherent texts when they use the Theme and Rheme structures effectively (Witte & Faigley, 1981; Ma, 2001; Cheng, 2002; Zhang, 2004; Wang, 2007; Mellos, 2011). They need to present their ideas with proper equilibrium of thematic and rhematic patterns with the ideal position which is before and after each other. While cohesive ties are seen as a substantial part of a coherent text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976); Theme and Rheme are also considered being a significant element to create textual cohesion (Fries, 1981, 1992, 1994, 1995a, 1995b). Theme in a sentence has the role of providing new, additional or unfamiliar information to the readers. In other words, Theme can be explained as 'the point of departure for the message' helping the reader to understand what the writer wants to express as the initial point of the statement (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). Rheme comes as the remainder of the message after the Theme in a clause (Wang, 2007). The flow of information in a clause from Theme to Rheme is important to succeed in the effectiveness of a message. The exchange of information between Theme and Rheme in sentences is called thematic progression. Danes' (1974) model of thematic progression is highly significant, useful, and widely accepted while studying the progression patterns.

Producing well-written texts can be even more challenging for EFL learners when they are writing in their second language. Even when L2 writers have extensive exposure with the target language, one main difficulty could be related to the organization of starting and ending points of their ideas in their L2 (Jing, 2015). Since building thematic relationships between ideas successfully is an essential feature of well-organized texts, there has been a consensus that feedback in thematic progression should be included in English language classes (Alonso & McCabe, 2003; Cheng, 2002; Hawe & Thomas, 2012; Ventola, 1994; Wang, 2007).

Many studies have confirmed the importance of thematic progression patterns as a crucial tool to identify writing difficulties (Wang, 2007). Wei (2013), Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi (2012) and Jalilifar (2010) investigated how written texts coming from different academic discourse communities and language levels affect thematic progression. Alonso and McCabe (2003) claimed that English learners tended to write essays in which sentences were not connected into a cohesive text, thus, language learners should be instructed about the patterns to develop coherence and cohesion in their writing. In language classes, instructors need to give more importance to the progression of information in written texts in addition to cohesive devices

Discourse, Coherence and Cohesion

Cohesion, coherence, text patterns and clause relations are all parts of successful written texts. When the sequence of words are coherently and cohesively tied to one another, it is easier to understand the meaning (Todorascu et al., 2013). Cohesion is like “bridging” information by sequencing the given and new information. According to Grabe (1984), cohesion is “the means available in the surface forms of the text to signal relations that hold between sentences or clausal units in the text”. Majdeddin (2010) stated that some students cannot succeed in this flow of information and tend to jump from one idea to another unexpectedly. Thus, language learners should be taught how sentences should be formed in a linear order. While cohesion is related to local semantic relations, coherence is more about the textual prosody based on the logical organization of ideas (Bublitz, 2011).

Theme and Thematic Progression in EFL writing

To create a cohesive text, thematic progression plays an important role (Ebrahimi & Ebrahimi, 2012; North, 2005; Rosa, 2007; Yunita, 2018). Halliday (1968, 1985) introduced the concepts of Theme and Rheme to analyze how the information is spanned in a sentence. The place of given and new information has to be ordered in a certain pattern for a cohesive text. The exchange of information between Theme and Rheme is called Thematic Progression (Egins, 1994). With the help of successful connections between Theme and Rheme, thematic progression can be developed and this promotes the coherence of a text.

2. CURRENT STUDY

In the current study, thematic progression patterns in argumentative essays written by two groups of Turkish EFL learners were analyzed. In contrast to most of the studies in the field which compare written texts of native and non-native speakers of English, the present study focuses on two groups of Turkish EFL university students who have different language education backgrounds. These two groups of students were chosen from Psychological Counselling and Guidance (PCG) and English Language Teaching (ELT) departments because it is assumed that EFL writers who share the same first language would show different results in terms of thematic progression depending on their language education backgrounds.

Research aim and questions

Patterns of thematic progression in written texts produced by Turkish EFL students have not been studied yet. In addition, this study also looks at problems related to misuse of Theme and Rheme and/or thematic progression in participants' texts. Therefore, results of this study aim to contribute to the field in terms of improving teacher feedback and students' awareness. The most common results will guide writing instructors while evaluating their students' texts. Moreover, results will also show where students face difficulties in managing Theme and Rheme. Thus, instructors might give more specific feedback to students on thematic progression patterns. With the help of effective feedback, students will not be only aware of their problems related to thematic progression patterns but also produce more effective and coherent written texts.

In line with the aims of the study, the following research questions are asked to analyze the data:

1. What kinds of patterns are used in Turkish EFL writers' English argumentative texts?
 - a) What kinds of patterns are used in Turkish ELT students' texts?
 - b) What kinds of patterns are used in Turkish PCG students' texts?
2. Is there a difference between Turkish ELT and PCG students' written texts in thematic progression patterns
3. What are the common problems resulting from the misuse of Theme and Rheme in Turkish EFL students' English written texts?

3. METHOD

Participants

Participants of the present study are 1st grade Turkish EFL students who are studying in English Language Teaching (ELT) and Psychological Counselling and Guidance (PCG) departments in a private university in Turkey. Students are chosen from two different disciplines because it is expected that students with different language backgrounds would show different results in terms of their use of Theme and Rheme in their English argumentative essays. While ELT students study English in their high school in English Language Department and take English exams to get into university, PCG students take exams from other fields such as maths, Turkish language or science. Moreover, when students get to the university, they study English in prep school because the medium of teaching in the chosen university is English. After studying a year in prep school, all students need to pass the exam to get to the faculty . To pass the prep school, ELT students need to get 80 while PCG students need to get 60 from the proficiency exam. Contrary to PCG students, ELT students have English language skills courses in their first grade for two semesters to develop their oral communication skills, writing skills, reading skills and listening skills. Nevertheless, PCG students do not have any courses that improve their language skills when they start faculty. Since practice is highly important to improve students' language skills, ELT students have more opportunities to practice and improve their academic language skills.

Data Collection

The present study adopts a discourse analysis approach to investigate the role of Theme and Rheme in thematic progression patterns in English argumentative essays by Turkish university students.

It is presupposed that all participants know how to write an argumentative essay because they had instructed on writing argumentative essays in writing courses in prep school. All participants were given two prompts and they chose one of them to write an argumentative essay. These two prompts were chosen considering students' opinions with the help of a pilot study. They wrote 250-300 word essays in one session (45 minutes).

Data Analysis

To analyze Theme and Rheme in thematic progression patterns in participants' written texts, the present study relied on Danes' (1974) model. In this model, Danes proposed four thematic progression patterns which are simple linear, constant, derived hyperthematic and split progressions. Danes' (1974) model is based on a functional sentence perspective which focuses on the links between the structure of a sentence and language communication system in general. Danes (1974) describes his concept of thematic progression as "the choice and ordering of utterance themes, their mutual concentration and hierarchy as well as their relationship to the hypertheme of the superior text units (such as paragraph, chapter...) to the whole text, and to the situation." (p.114).

Danes defined simple linear progression as the most elementary type of thematic progression. This pattern requires the Rheme of the first clause to become the Theme of the following clause, as shown in the example below:

	<u>Theme 1</u>	<u>Rheme 2</u>	<u>Theme 2</u>	<u>Rheme 2</u>
(1)	She	<i>picked the flower.</i>	<i>The flower</i>	was pink.

Constant progression pattern is characterized as the progression pattern where the Theme of the first clause becomes the Theme of the following clause. In this type, the same Theme can be used multiple times in subsequent clauses. Although it appears repeatedly it does not have to be the exact same wording as shown in the following example:

	<u>Theme 1</u>	<u>Rheme 1</u>	<u>Theme 2</u>	<u>Rheme 2</u>
(2)	<i>Deniz</i>	is a student.	<i>He</i>	studies English Language Teaching.

A hypertheme, which means global Theme to establish a number of related Themes, of a sentence becomes the Theme of the following clauses. The main Theme has different subcategories. These subcategories are like multiple Themes that can be found in subsequent sentences. All Themes may be different in each clause but all of them are related to a hypertheme. Note the following example:

- (3) *Fruits* are plentiful in the market at the moment. *Bananas* are particularly cheap. *Mangoes* are expensive but delicious.

In split progression pattern, multiple Rhemes in a clause are divided into different items and become the Themes of the following clauses as shown in the example given below:

- (4) There are two essential properties of the texts in academic writing which are *cohesion and coherence*. *Coherence* is the connection of ideas at the idea level. *Cohesion* is the connection of ideas at the sentence level and focuses on grammatical aspects of writing.

In order to assess participants' texts, sentences were divided into clauses. The clauses were analyzed according to Danes' (1974) thematic progression patterns and Theme/ Rheme patterns were identified in students' written texts. After determining Theme and Rheme patterns in students' writings, results of two departments were compared with each other.

Problems resulting from the misuse of Theme and Rheme

In addition to the patterns used in argumentative essays, problems related to thematic progression and thematic selection of students' texts were also identified.

Problems occur when the writers fail to provide clear signposts when they switch to another theme and hence cannot succeed the flow of information. As a result, their texts become difficult for readers to follow an idea or argument. Bloor & Bloor (1992) characterized three common problems that stem from misuse of Theme and Rheme. First of all, the problem of a "brand new Theme" occurs when the writer puts new information in the position of Theme. Second common problem is "the empty Rheme" which occurs when writers

do not share 'new' information in the place of Rheme. Thirdly, the problem of "the double Rheme" happens when there are two Rhemes in a sentence but one of the Rheme has had no previous mention.

In addition to these common problems identified by Bloor & Bloor (1992), Belmonte and McCabe-Hidalgo (1998) indicated other related problems such as "over-use of constant progression", "confusing selection of Discoursal and Topical Themes", "over-use of 'There'", "intervening material between mention in Rheme and subsequent thematization", and "Themes with unclear reference".

4. RESULTS

The results of the study indicate that ELT students who have an extensive foreign language education background used a higher number of thematic progression patterns than PCG students who do not have a foreign language education background. Additionally, some problems resulting from misuse of Theme and Rheme were identified in line with findings of various previous studies in the literature. To present the findings of the present study, the following sections will (1) explain and compare the results of Turkish ELT and PCG students' use of thematic progression patterns, and (2) detail the common problems resulting from the misuse of Theme and Rheme in Turkish EFL students' written texts.

4.1. Turkish ELT and PCG Students' Use of Thematic Progression Patterns

One of the main purposes of the present study is to identify what kinds of thematic progression patterns are used in Turkish EFL students' English written texts. The number and percentage of the use of constant, simple linear, derived hyperthematic and split progression patterns of ELT and PCG students' written texts tabulated below in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of ELT and PCG Students' Thematic Progression Patterns

	Department	Token	Percentage based on total
Constant	ELT	265	81.54 %
	PCG	111	79.29 %
Simple Linear	ELT	58	17.85 %
	PCG	26	18.57 %
Derived Hyperthematic	ELT	0	0 %
	PCG	3	0%
Split	ELT	2	0.62 %
	PCG	0	0 %
TOTAL	ELT	325	100 %
	PCG	140	100 %

Considering Danes' progression patterns, ELT students used constant, simple linear and split progression patterns in varying frequencies in their written texts. Nevertheless, derived hyperthematic progression pattern was not used by any of the ELT students. Among 325 thematic progression patterns in ELT students' texts, 265 of them are written as constant progression pattern. Therefore, it can be said that ELT students used constant progression pattern most frequently. The second commonly used pattern by ELT students is simple linear progression pattern and 58 of 325 thematic progression pattern is used as simple linear. Moreover, the results showed that ELT students used constant progression pattern almost five times more than simple linear progression. Split progression pattern was used rarely in ELT students' texts because students used only two of them among 606 clauses and 325 thematic progression patterns.

PCG students mostly used constant, simple linear and derived hyperthematic progression patterns in their written texts. Nonetheless, the split progression pattern was not found in PCG students' written texts. Constant progression pattern was used 111 times among 409 clauses and 140 thematic progression patterns. Similar to ELT students' findings, the constant progression pattern is used most frequently in PCG students' texts. To widen the information given in the Rheme of the first clause, PCG students used the simple linear progression pattern 26 times within 409 clauses. Moreover, PCG students

used derived hyperthematic progression patterns for three times among 409 clauses in their texts. The reason why they used derived hyperthematic progression patterns seldom can be because of its difficulty to use for EFL students.

According to the results, ELT students had 188 more thematic progression patterns than PCG students in their writings. This is due to the fact that ELT students had more number of clauses than PCG students in their written texts. While ELT students used 606 clauses, PCG students used 409 clauses in their writings.

Percentage based on total results show that there is not much difference in the types of thematic progression patterns used by ELT and PCG students. Writers from both of the disciplines used almost similar types and frequencies of constant, simple linear, derived hyperthematic and split progression patterns in their written texts. Constant progression overruns all other progression patterns in both of the disciplines. Nevertheless, the token numbers show that ELT students use more thematic progression patterns in their written texts compared to PCG students. Therefore, ELT students have the ability to write more cohesive texts than PCG students.

4.2. Problems resulting from the misuse of Theme and Rheme

The balance and management of Theme and Rheme is a crucial factor for a cohesive text. When the writer cannot achieve to hold the flow of information from Theme to Rheme, it would be difficult for the reader to follow the ideas and text. Since the text cannot direct the readers, they would get lost while reading the text.

There are six problems related to misuse of Theme and Rheme in the texts written by EFL participants in this study. These problems are “*brand new Theme*”, “*empty Rheme*”, “*overuse of constant progression*”, “*intervening material between Rheme*” and “*subsequent thematization*”, “*Themes with unclear reference*” and “*empty Theme*”. In order to clarify these problems, they are explained and exemplified in Table 3.

Table 3: Number of PCG and ELT students who faced problems resulting from the misuse of Theme and Rheme

Problems resulting from the misuse of Theme and Rheme	PCG	ELT	TOTAL NUMBER OF TEXTS IN EACH GROUP
Brand New Theme	20	20	20
Empty Rheme	12	6	20
Intervening Material between Rheme and Subsequent Thematization	6	6	20
Overuse of Constant Progression	12	8	20
Themes with Unclear Reference	13	9	20
Empty Theme	2	0	20

Each participant had at least one problem related to misuse of Theme and Rheme and thematic progression in their written texts. Table 3 shows that PCG students had more problems resulting from the misuse of Theme and Rheme in their written texts compared to ELT students. This result indicates that PCG students' written texts were more difficult for the reader to follow the message. Thus, PCG students' written texts lacked coherence. ELT students could locate relevant information and connect ideas within each sentence and paragraph coherently.

Based on Bloor & Bloor's (1992) studies, Wang (2017) stated the problem of the brand new Theme as putting new information in the Theme position. This means that the writers use new Theme(s) that are not mentioned in the previous Theme(s) or Rheme(s) without introducing them appropriately. The new Theme can be connected to the overall text but this would make the text difficult for the readers to understand and can make them get confused. Moreover, using Brand new Themes excessively is a sign that inexperienced writers are not able to develop and introduce ideas appropriately. Brand new Theme was the most frequently faced problem related to misuse of Theme in both of the groups' written texts. All

of the students in both of the groups had the problem of brand new Theme in their written texts. The problem of brand new Theme by an ELT student is illustrated below:

- (5) (1) People are becoming technological zombies. (2) It is getting worse every day.
(3) Social media and usage of mobile phones became essential in today's world. (4) Every teen has a mobile phone these days and (5) they use it all the time. (6) Even when they are with their friends or families, (7) they do not pay attention to the outer world. (8) Not just teens, but many adults are addicted to technology too.
(9) People are living their lives on social media. (10) They envy other and want to show themselves by posting pictures on the internet. (11) I think this is sad.

The example given above shows how many different Themes in a short paragraph were used by a student. The student jumped from one idea to another which made it difficult for the reader to follow the message. For example, the Theme in sentence 8 is *teens and adults* which is followed by *people* in sentence 9.

Another common problem in students' writing is the empty Rheme in which students do not provide new information in Rheme position (Bloor & Bloor, 1992). The problem of empty Rheme was seen in both of the groups' written texts but more in PCG students' texts. 12 of the PCG students had the problem of Empty Rheme at least once in their written texts and six of ELT students had the same problem in their writings. Students can overcome this problem by widening the information given in Rheme. Consider an example written by a PCG student.

- (6) (1) Technology has changed everything. (2) Technology has made a deep impact on the functioning of the world. (3) It led to positive changes and negative changes.
(4) We have become technological zombies.

The Rhemes of the sentences given above were empty because they were not explained in the essay. For example, the student wrote *positive changes and negative changes* but these changes were not explained in the essay.

The third problem found in students' writing was about the placement of Rheme in thematic progression. This problem occurs when the writers do not provide details about the Rheme just after they mention it but rather provide it in subsequent sentences. Since the writers do not develop the new idea at the time it was introduced into the text, it shows that there is no clear plan of development. This forces the reader to go back to previous sentences and reread them carefully in order to find the similar information. Same number of PCG and ELT students confronted this problem. Therefore, students from both of the groups need to improve their skills in developing clear plans while writing an essay (Belmonte and Hidalgo, 1998). A fragment below of a PCG student's composition is an example of the placement of Rheme in thematic progression.

- (7) (1) The teacher is responsible for low grades of students. (2) The teacher should prepare the lessons. (3) The teacher should bring the necessary materials to the lesson. (4) Students may be more successful in the classroom.

In this example, the student developed the Rheme *students* two sentences later. The writer should provide detail about the Rheme just after mentioning it rather than providing it in subsequent sentences.

The analysis showed that both groups of students overused the pattern of constant progression in which clauses have the similar Theme continuously. 12 of the PCG student writers and eight of the ELT student writers encountered this problem in their texts. Since the writers do not use simple linear, derived hyperthematic and/or split progression types effectively, their writings show that they do not provide enough details and fail to expand information that is shared in the Rhemes. An example of over-use of constant progression patterns in an ELT student's text is given below.

- (8) (1) People have adjusted the technological world, (2) so people think that (3) they could not survive without technology in this modern world. (4) While some people believe that (5) people are not addicted to technology, (6) other people believe that (7) people are becoming technological zombies.

The example given above shows how the student overused the Theme *people*. While the student provided information about *people* constantly, information given in Rhemes were not expanded.

The problem of Themes with unclear reference was found in 13 PCG students' and nine ELT students' written texts. Students who encounter this type of problem use constant pronouns and indefinite "it" in their texts. Several students switch from the pronoun "I" to "we" to "you" without making any thematic connection. Moreover, this shows that there is not a clear plan of development in the text. This can be seen in the sample of an ELT student's text below:

- (9) (1) Some people think that (2) people are not addicted to technology, (3) they use it when (4) they are in need. To exemplify, (5) *some people* use technology to get information with one click, (6) *you* can reach every news or information all around the world.

In this example, the Theme in sentence 5 is *some people* but the student suddenly used *you* as the Theme of sentence 6. The problem of unclear reference raised in this sample because the reader needs to guess that *you* refers to *some people*.

The problem of the empty Theme was rarely seen in students' texts. Two of the PCG students had this problem in their written texts but none of the ELT students had it. The problem of empty Theme occurs when the writer omits the subject for different reasons. One reason can be L1 interference. To avoid such interferences, teachers can facilitate cross-lingual comparisons through several practices on the omitted subjects. Consider an example written by a PCG student.

- (10) (1) There are several causes why schools and teachers responsible for low test scores. (2) *The first* is related to readiness of students.

The writer of this example wrote *the first* instead of *the first cause* and expects the reader to guess it. To establish coherence, the subject should not be omitted but referred clearly.

5. DISCUSSION

The present study provides the most frequently used thematic progression patterns and the most common problems that arise from misuse of Theme and Rheme in Turkish EFL students' written texts. When Turkish EFL students' texts were analyzed, all kinds of thematic progression patterns that were proposed by Danes' (1974) were identified. This finding was in line with the results of other previous studies (e.g. Koç, 2018; Jalilifar, 2009; Rakhman, 2013; Yunita, 2018) that investigated all types of thematic progression patterns in EFL students' texts. Students from both of the groups used constant progression, simple linear progression, derived hyperthematic progression and split progression patterns in their texts.

The study investigated that ELT students who have an extensive foreign language education background used higher number of thematic progression patterns than PCG students who do not have a foreign language education background. ELT students had more numbers of constant progression, simple linear and split progression patterns than PCG students. PCG students used only derived hyperthematic pattern more than ELT students because none of ELT students used derived hyperthematic progression pattern in their texts. In line with the previous findings from the literature, students' language background and academic writing experience are found to be two important factors affecting coherence in their written texts. In both of the groups' written texts, constant progression pattern outruns other patterns which results in simplistic and repetitive sentences and paragraphs. The reason behind this may be applying the same topic continuously. With overuse of constant progression pattern, as Wang also states (2007), the text may be seen as a list and lack in further progression of information that is presented in the Rheme. In most of the argumentative essays, EFL writers in this study mostly make a list of arguments that they are going to write in their texts with little explanations and examples to extend on their arguments. Writers may overuse constant progression patterns because they may not be aware that their written texts seem as a list as a result of this tie (Khedri, 2011). Therefore, using explicit instruction on the use of thematic progression patterns is highly important for learners' text development.

6. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The findings of the present study have important implications for EFL context as this is the first study, examining misuse of Theme and Rheme resulting in problems that occur in textual cohesion. When students' texts were analyzed, seven problems were identified that resulted in losing effectiveness in their arguments. These problems were either related to Thematic selection or Thematic progression, or both. Moreover, disconnections between sentences and meanings can emerge because writers do not widen the Rheme in which new information is provided (Rosa, 2007). These problems showed the value of teaching Theme and Rheme relationships in EFL writing classes. Moreover, the results suggest that EFL learners need to learn and distinguish which thematic progression pattern helps to make an argument more or less distinct or convincing.

Since it is assumed that use of thematic progression patterns will influence coherence in student texts, it should also be taken into consideration by instructors in writing classes. Nevertheless, several EFL instructors still focus on errors that occur below the clause level, such as incorrect use of verb, lack of subject-verb agreement and so on while giving feedback (Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo, 1998). Although the focus has widened to discourse level in different fields, teachers currently feel the lack of tools to analyze students' texts at the discourse level. The present study confirmed the need for coaching in thematization in writing classes.

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