



An Analysis of Thematic Progression Patterns in Zambian Students' ESL Academic Writing: Evidence of Coherence-Obscuring Patterns

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Abstract: This study investigated the types of theme and rheme patterns that obscured discourse coherence in the writings produced by English second language undergraduate learners at the University of Zambia. It also established the extent to which the coherence-obscuring theme-rheme patterns affect the communicative effectiveness in the students' written discourses. The data were based on Bloor and Bloor (1992) argument that some theme-rheme patterns contribute to incoherence in written pieces of discourse. The data were 400 undergraduate written scripts from the School of Education and the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. From each script coherence-obscuring theme rheme patterns were identified and presented according to types. Data analysis and interpretation mainly followed the qualitative approach. The type of assessments included one in-class test and end of year examination for the year 2021 for each academic level of study. The results showed that seven coherent obscuring theme-rheme patterns were used by the undergraduate students at the university of Zambia which included; brand new theme, empty rheme, empty use of there, use of the dummy it, incomplete split progression, split theme progression and use of the conversational personal pronouns.

Keywords: Zambian, students, ESL, writing, academic, Analysis, thematic progression, coherence

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing of academic pieces of work is one of the requirements for students in higher learning institutions. In Zambia, students admitted to these institutions are expected to write their academic scripts in English. As observed by Simwinga (1992:1) "English in Zambia is one of the eight official languages. The others are the indigenous Lozi, Bemba, Nyanja, Tonga, Luvale, Kaonde and Lunda chosen by Government for use in specified situations such as education and broadcasting". To date, this has remained the official allocation of linguistic space. Mumbi and Simwinga (2018) have stated that "As a result of Government decisions, English is required to be used as the only medium of instruction in all forms of post primary education in Zambia, in parliament, for the administration of the country, for all national and international official communication and in the more important commercial and industrial sectors". In view of the linguistic alignment presented above where English has remained the most dominant language in the education system it is the case that "by the end of grade twelve school leavers are expected to be able to write and speak English quite fluently" (Simwinga, 1992).

However, it has been noted over the past decades that most of the University of Zambia students using English as second language experience difficulties in writing coherent academic pieces of discourse. As observed by Wigzell (1983:5) many students at University level "find themselves struggling to express concepts that are only dimly understood in a language which is inadequate for their needs, resulting in garbled and incoherent discourse" thereby contributing to the learners' poor performance in academic essays as well as in examinations. In this regard, research has focused on causes of incoherence. Simwinga (1992) quantitatively investigated the possible existence of a relationship between cohesion and coherence in the written pieces of discourse produced by some University of Zambia undergraduate students. The conclusion of the study was that the "null hypothesis of no relationship was rejected and that of the existence of a relationship between cohesion and coherence

accepted" (Simwinga, 1992:22). Halliday and Hassan (1976) argue that lack of cohesion is not the absolute cause of incoherence but that it only contributes to incoherent text spartially. This is further noted by Stocky (1983) who contends that it is not sufficient for the cohesive ties to render a written text coherent. For Danes (1974), adherence to certain theme-rheme patterns enhances discourse coherence while non-adherence obscures it. This is in tandem with Bloor & Bloor (1992) who note that incoherence may be attributed to poor application of thematic progression patterns which deal with how themes and rhemes are used in the development of information in a piece of discourse.

A study by Wang (2007) notes that when the flow of theme and rheme in not appropriately handled, there is incoherence in a written piece of discourse and concludes that thematic progression provides an effective method of identifying causes of incoherence in discourse as well as provides remedies for addressing them. Additionally, Belmonte and McCabe-Hidalgo (1998), in their analysis of students' compositions confirmed that the theme-rheme construct can be used to identify some problems that contributed to incoherence in the students' composition. They noted that the theme-rheme construct is also a valuable tool for students to self-evaluate themselves when writing compositions.

The studies cited above show that theme and rheme constructs can be used to investigate incoherence in students' writings. This study therefore aims at establishing the types of theme and rheme patterns that obscure discourse coherence in written pieces of discourse produced by University of Zambia under graduate students using English as Second Language.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Most of the studies on discourse coherence have acknowledged the importance of using thematic progression to achieve discourse coherence (Halliday, 1985; Mauranen, 1993, McCabe, 1999; Downing, 2001; Leonard and Hukari, 2005). Some researchers such as Wang (2007) and Almaden (2006) have observed that the application of thematic progression patterns in writing plays a critical role in enhancing discourse coherence. Others such as Danes (1974) postulate that adherence to theme and rheme patterns such as simple linear progression, constant progression and split progression enhance discourse coherence, while non-adherence obscures it. Although problems relating to thematic progression and thematic selection were acknowledge by Belmonte and McCabe-Hidalgo (1998), to date there is lack of adequate information on the types of theme-rheme patterns that obscure discourse coherence among the Zambian Second Language Learners using English in their written pieces of discourse at the University of Zambia. Stated as a question the problem under investigation is: are there any thematic progression patterns that obscure discourse coherence in the written pieces of discourse produced by University of Zambia undergraduate students? The investigation will help identify what theme-rheme patterns students at the University of Zambia should not use in their written discourses to avoid incoherence.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- (i) What type of theme rheme patterns obscure coherence in writing?
- (ii) Which theme-rheme patterns used by the selected University of Zambia undergraduate students obscure discourse coherence?
- (iii) To what extent do the theme-rheme patterns identified in (ii) above obscure coherence

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1. Theoretical Review

The theoretical principle guiding the analysis of data in this paper is based on the theory of thematic progression whose origin dates back to the Prague scholars and Halliday an systemic grammarians in the early 1970's. This theory is founded on the premise that there is a relationship between theme and rheme in the development and organization of information in a text. The thematic progression approach to discourse coherence is concerned with the manner in which information flows in a sentence from theme to rheme. According to Mauranen (1993) thematic progression investigates how themes relate to previous themes and with rhemes in order to foster continuity in discourse and text organisation. Theme, according to Wang (2007) is given information that serves as a point of departure of a particular discourse in a clause. This information, as Wang claims, could be a nominal

group, a verbal group, an adverbial group, a prepositional phrase or a dependent phrase or clause. Theme, therefore, can be viewed as that part of a clause that usually contains familiar, old or given information which provides a setting for the remainder of the sentence called the rheme (see Halliday, 1985; Fries, 1995; Njobvu, 2010; Halliday, 2014). This is illustrated in table 1 below:

Table1. *Illustration of the theme rheme relationship*

Theme	Rheme
<u>1 Discourse analysis</u>	is a very important component in <i>composition writing</i> .
2. In composition writing	pupils learn how to express their ideas in writing.
3. The ideas	can flow in a text when one uses cohesive ties.

From the examples presented in Table 1 above, there is a clear demarcation of Theme and Rheme. In sentences one and three, the theme is a nominal group *discourse analysis* and *the ideas* respectively. In sentence two, the theme is a prepositional phrase *in composition writing*. The examples above present the fact that theme should not entirely be equated to subject and rheme to predicate though sometimes the two concepts may overlap with grammatical subject and the predicate of the sentence (see also Wang, 2007).

Theme and Rheme, play an important role in the production of a better piece of written discourse (Witte and Faigley, 1981, Eggins, 2004; Arusiro, 2013) and in achieving thematic progression. Danes (1974) categorises three main types of thematic progression patterns.

The first type of thematic progression patterns is the Simple Linear Progression where an element from the rheme of the first clause becomes the theme of the succeeding clause as illustrated below. The themes in the examples have been underlined.

1. Fertility is affected by the status of *a woman*. A woman with an important role to play such as being a manager commits and dedicates herself more to work than family. Family becomes secondary in her life.

The second is the Constant Progression pattern: In this pattern, the same theme or similar themes are used in successive sentences (Firbas, 1986). In the example below, the noun *Atalanta* and its pronoun equivalent *she* is used as a theme of the sentences.

2. Atalanta is a strong and independent woman. She differs from Mathilde because she does not only depend on herself but competes or equals herself to men. Atalanta grew up to be a true daughter of the wilderness, an incomparable hunter.

The third thematic progression pattern noted by Danes is the Derived Thematic Progression which is realised when particular themes in subsequent clauses are derived from a hyper theme or overriding theme (see also Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo, 1998). This pattern can be illustrated in example 3 where *Nc'wala* and *Kulamba* are traditional ceremonies derived from a hyper theme which is 'traditional ceremonies'.

3. Eastern Province is one of Zambia's ten provinces and has two significant traditional ceremonies. Nc'wala is celebrated in Chipata District by the Ngoni tribe mainly in the month of February. Kulamba, celebrated by the Chewa tribe of Katete District is held annually in the month of August.

Another pattern according to Paltridge (2006) is the Split Rheme Progression. This pattern is expressed when the rheme of the first clause is split into two or three subsequent themes (see also Eggins, 2004; Njobvu, 2013) as below.

4. The study predominantly deals with *cohesion and coherence*. Cohesion is the study that looks at the texture of discourse in relation to reference, substitution, conjunctions, comparatives and other similar variables applicable in the study. Coherence deals with meaning in a unified text or conversation.

In example 4 above, *cohesion* and *coherence* emanate from the rheme of the first clause and are split in two different themes of the successive sentences. All the patterns presented above are significant because they help give cohesion and coherence to a piece of writing (Paltridge, 2006; Wang, 2007). However, as Danes (1974) observes, these theme-rheme patterns can enhance discourse coherence when properly applied (see also Njobvu and Simwinga, 2022) and they can obscure discourse coherence when poorly applied in a text as discussed in the next section.

4.2. Empirical Review– Coherence-Obscuring Theme-Rheme Patterns

Different studies have been conducted on the causes of incoherence in English written discourse among second language users of English. Some have attributed incoherence in discourse to lack of cohesion (Halliday and Hasan, 1976) while others have associated it to lack of thematic progression (Leonard and Hukari, 2005; Almaden, 2006; Wang, 2007; Jing, 2015) which utilises the theme and rheme patterns in a text. Wang (2007) asserts that a balance in the movement of theme and rheme in a text is essential in achieving coherence whereas failure to control the flow of information from theme to rheme makes it difficult for the reader to follow the progression of the text.

A study by Perez (1999) on causes of incoherence in translation reveals that lack of clear connection between the theme and the rheme within the text in a source text is a potential problem of interpretation into a target text. For Bloor & Bloor (1992) incoherence is as a result of poor application of theme and rheme patterns. They identified three common problems that emanate from the poor application of theme and rheme in a text. These are; brand new theme, double rheme and the empty rheme. These will be discussed in detail in the later sections.

Another study by Wang (2007) analysed a text by one of the sophomore students majoring in political forms in South-Eastern University in China. The main aim of the task was to analyse the theme-rheme application in the written text. The results indicate that the text was incoherent because there were no thematic progression patterns exhibited by the lack of continuity in the themes and in some instances lack of cross-referential link with the rheme in the preceding clause.

In trying to establish whether the notion of theme and rheme can be a useful tool of instruction for teachers to analyse written discourses for second language learners, Belmonte and McCabe-Hidalgo (1998), managed to uncover several common problems of textual cohesion and coherence in the writings of these students. Some of the problems which are different from those identified by Bloor & Bloor (1992) include the over-use of constant progression, wrong choice of discursal and topical themes, intervening material between rheme and subsequent thematisation. Others are over use of *There*, and themes with unclear reference. It is evident from the studies listed above that the wrong application of theme-rheme-patterns obscures effective communication in a text as discussed in the sections below.

5. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework employed in the study was derived from Bloor & Bloor (1992) who claims that poor application of themes and rhemes is the source of incoherent discourse and identifies the poor application of theme and rheme in a text as brand new theme, double rheme and the empty rheme. These will be complimented by arguments from Belmonte and McCabe-Hidalgo (1998) who also identify the over-use of constant progression, over use of the adverbial *there*, and themes with unclear reference (e.g., the dummy *it*) as potential causes of incoherence. All these patterns are discussed and illustrated in the sections below.

5.1. Brand New Theme

The application of the brand new theme is realised in instances where before a given idea introduced in the initial theme of the sentence is exhaustively substantiated, a new theme is introduced, followed by a 'jump back' or a return to the previous theme with a view to providing further explanation. This approach to thematic development creates a rupture in the flow of information thereby compromising discourse coherence as shown in the examples illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Illustration of the brand new theme progression pattern

Pattern	Theme	Rheme
Brand new theme	<i>Fertility</i>	Is one of the major components to change.
	<i>It</i>	contributes to population change by increasing the number of births.
	<i>Age</i>	is believed to be one of the factors that affect the level of fertility
	<i>A woman,</i>	is only active in terms of child bearing in a specific age.

From Table 2 it will be observed that the initial theme *fertility*, has been repeated in sentence two through the application of the substitute pronoun *it*. However, sentences three and four have new themes which are *age* and *awoman* respectively. The problem with this approach to organisation of information is that it creates a sudden breakdown in the logical flow of information resulting in discourse incoherence.

5.2. Empty Rheme

The application of the empty rheme is experienced when the rheme is empty of new information. In this case, the writer does not present any new information in the rheme thereby leaving the rheme empty of content as indicated in Table 3 below.

Table3. *Illustration of the empty rheme pattern*

Pattern	Theme	Rheme
Empty rheme	A woman's role in society	<i>is simple.</i>
	Age at marriage	<i>is important</i>

Table 3 shows that the rheme, which is *is simple* and *is important* do not provide any new information to what has been mentioned before. This type of progression causes a rupture as the writer is unable to expand the initial argument in the rheme. This also results in discourse incoherence.

5.3. Double Rheme

This pattern occurs when a sentence has two rhemes with one rheme not previously mentioned in a sentence as in the table.

Table4. *Illustration of the double rheme pattern*

Pattern	Theme	Rheme
Double Rheme	<i>The COVID 19 pandemic</i>	has affected the ministry of health and education in Zambia.

In the example above, *the COVID 19 pandemic* is the theme while *has affected the Ministry of health* is the first rheme and *education in Zambia* is the second rheme. The latter rheme, *education*, has had no previous mention. According to Wang (2007), one way of solving such a problem is to make use of the phrase '...not only.... but also...' which is one the strategies for presenting given information before new information. With the use of this strategy the sentence in table 4 would be presented as follows:

'The COVID 19 pandemic has affected not only the ministry of health but also the ministry of education'.

5.4. Empty Use of there

The use of the empty adverbial *there* occurs in instances where this word is used without any reference to any preceding information. It is considered empty because of none specificity of reference. This pattern is illustrated in Table 5 below.

Table5. *Illustration of the empty use of there*

Pattern	Theme	Rheme
Empty use of <i>there</i>	<i>A morpheme</i>	can also be defined as the simplest unit of a word
	There	are many other morphemes that linguists have come up with.

Table 5 shows that the theme for the second sentence which is *there*, is meaningless because it does not refer to either the theme or the rheme of the previous sentences and therefore does not contribute to discourse coherence.

5.5. Use of the dummy it

The use of the dummy *it* occurs when the pronoun *it* is used without any clear reference to either the theme or the rheme of the previous sentence. The application of this pronoun creates ruptures in the presentation of ideas thereby obscuring discourse coherence. An instance of this case is presented in Table 6 below.

Table6. *Illustration of the use of the dummy it*

Pattern	Theme	Rheme
Use of the dummy <i>it</i>	<i>Discourse analysis</i>	is relevant to the teaching of English in secondary schools
	It	is only through utterances that one is able to understand meaning.

Table 6 above shows that the pronoun *it*, as used in the second sentence is empty of content because it does not refer to any specific item in the previous sentence.

5.6. Incomplete Split Progression

Incomplete split progression occurs when the information in the rheme is not exhaustively elucidated in subsequent sentences as shown in Table 7 below.

Table7. *Illustration of the incomplete split progression pattern*

Pattern	Theme	Rheme
Incomplete split progression	<i>The teaching of structure</i>	comprises sentence transformation and formation
	<i>Sentence transformation</i>	can be achieved through the knowledge of cleftness.
	The knowledge of pragmatic inferencing	is also important in the teaching of comprehension.

Table 7 shows that the information which has been captured in the rheme of the first sentence is *sentence transformation and formation*. Part of this information, which is *sentence transformation*, has become the theme of the second sentence. However, nothing has been discussed on *sentence formation*. Instead, a new theme *the knowledge of pragmatic inferencing* has been introduced disrupting the flow of information. This failure to develop the other information into the theme has created a rupture as nothing new about *sentence formation* has been provided.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1. Data Collection

6.1.1. Population

The population for the study comprised the full-time 2021 academic year undergraduate students enrolled in the School of Education and the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, at the University of Zambia, in Lusaka. The two schools were purposively chosen because according to Casteel and Bridier (2021), in purposive sampling, the researcher is intentional in selecting the participants because each possesses a specific quality that is of interest to the investigator. This sampling technique is significant because the two schools selected have more students than any other school in the University. Further, the demand on the use of English imposed on students from the two schools is greater than that imposed on students from other schools in the University as they have to analyse and express complex concepts in English in connected discourse. This is not the case in other schools where either symbols are sufficient or only factual and descriptive information is presented. Additionally, the academic level of study for the participant was also purposively sampled because the researcher wanted to establish the extent to which the theme-rheme patterns obscured discourse coherence at each level.

6.1.2. Data Collection

The study employed qualitative approach to identify the theme-rheme patterns that would obscure discourse coherence. A total of 400 scripts were selected from 400 students drawn from four academic levels of study. From each academic level, a representation of only 100 students was adopted. All the students' scripts collected had been written during normal class work in form of in-class tests and end-of-year examinations to ensure that uniformity was guaranteed. The questions that were selected for analysis required the students to either compare or discuss certain concepts or characters in a particular field of study considering that these constitute the major types of tasks students are expected to perform in a university setting.

6.1.3. Data Analysis

Data was generally analysed qualitatively and was complemented by the quantitative approach where descriptive statistics as methods of data analysis were used (Kumar, 2005). The qualitative analysis involved identifying specific instances of theme-rheme patterns in a given piece of discourse, categorising them according to type and making decisions on how such instances of the theme-rheme pattern were not congruent with the established thematic progression patterns and therefore obscured coherence.

7. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

7.1. Results

In the study, seven theme-rheme patterns that obscure discourse coherence were identified in the written pieces of discourse of the University of Zambia under-graduate students. These include: brand new theme, empty rheme, empty use of the adverbial *there*, use of the dummy *it*, incomplete split progression, split (theme) progression and use of the conversational personal pronouns. However, the double rheme was not displayed in any of the scripts for this did not seem to pose a challenge in the students' written scripts. In instances where two different ideas were presented in the rheme, the students ably discussed them separately in their written texts. The results presented in this section were obtained from two different assessment tasks of the students written discourses. These are the test and examination scripts.

7.1.1. Brand New theme

The problem of the brand new theme was identified in some scripts at all academic levels. In all cases, the use of the brand new theme created ruptures in the logical flow of information. An example of such poor sentence presentation in a piece of discourse is illustrated below.

Utterances are physical events. They can either be loud or quiet. The accent and voice quality are some of the characteristics. Utterance meaning usually includes sentence meaning.

In the example above, the first two sentences contain the same theme, *utterances*, which is substituted with the pronoun *they* in the second sentence and the ideas are interlinked. The third sentence however, has introduced a new theme *the accent and voice quality* which is different from the initial theme. This introduction has caused a breakdown in the logical flow of information because there is no relationship between the initial theme in the example and the newly introduced theme in the third sentence. Instead of developing the newly introduced theme in example 5, the initial theme has been reintroduced creating a problem of 'jump back'. This is an indication of poor organization skills.

7.1.2. Empty rheme

The use of the empty rheme was also identified in some written pieces of discourse at all levels of study. The problem is illustrated in examples 6 and 7 below.

Discourse analysis *is very useful.*

Discourse analysis *is also important in schools.*

In the examples presented in 6 and 7 above, the rhemes are empty of content because they do not provide any information about the *usefulness* and *importance* of the themes.

7.1.3. Empty use of there

The use of the empty adverbial *there* was also observed at all academic levels regardless of the thematic development pattern coming either before or after this word as show in example 8 and 9 below.

Composition is another component that has shown that discourse analysis is relevant to the teaching of English language. This is done by the use of cohesive tie. **There** is also the concept of organization of information in discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis helps in the interpretation of the syllabus. The syllabus is made of objectives. **There** are certain objectives, for example; at the end of grade nine, pupils should be able to manipulate the English language in order to be flexible in communication.

From examples 8 and 9 above, it will be observed that the theme of the third sentences of each example which is *there*, is meaningless because it does not refer to either the theme or the rheme of the previous sentences.

7.1.4. Use of the Dummy *it*

The dummy *it* was also identified at all academic levels. The application of this pronoun created serious problems of ruptures in the presentation of ideas in some of the students' written pieces of discourse as shown in some of the examples presented below.

Teachers are advised to give meanings of words from the context of use and the knowledge of word building. **When it** comes to the actual teaching of the English language, content material and discourse analysis come in very handy.

A proposition can be expressed by using several different sentences and each of these sentences could be uttered in infinite number of utterances. **It** is worth noting that a proposition can be expressed in many languages.

From the examples cited above, the pronoun *it*, as used in the second sentence of 10 and 11, is empty of content because it does not refer to a specific item in the previous sentence.

7.1.5. Incomplete Split Progression

The problem of incomplete split progression was only identified at academic level three. This is illustrated in 12 below.

The teaching of structure comprises sentence transformation and formation. Sentence transformation can be achieved through the knowledge of cleftness. **The knowledge of pragmatic inferencing** is also important in the teaching of comprehension.

In example 12 above, the information which has been captured in the rheme of the first sentence is *sentence transformation* and *formation*. Part of this information, which is *sentence transformation*, has become the theme of the second sentence. However, nothing has been discussed on *sentence formation*. Instead, a new theme *the knowledge of pragmatic inferencing* has been introduced disrupting the flow of information. This failure to develop the other information into the theme has created a rupture as nothing new about *sentence formation* has been provided.

7.2. Discussion

7.2.1. Brand New Theme

The findings revealed that the problem of the brand new theme was prevalent at all academic levels. As stated earlier, in this pattern, before an idea introduced in the initial theme of a sentence was exhaustively substantiated, a new theme was introduced. This was usually followed by a 'jump back' to the previous theme, in some of the scripts, with a view to providing further explanation. Among all the academic levels, academic level one displayed the highest occurrence of the pattern with 70 percent in the test and 78 percent in the examination scripts. However, the fourth academic level displayed the least application of the brand new theme with 24 percent in the test and 32 percent in the examination scripts. This information is summarised in Table 8 below.

Table 8. Frequency of the application of brand new theme

Test script results				Examination script results		
Academic level	Number of scripts	Frequency per level	%	Number of scripts	Frequency per level	%
1	50	35	70	50	39	78
2	50	30	60	50	35	70
3	50	26	52	50	24	48
4	50	12	24	50	16	32
TOTAL	200	103		200	114	

The information in Table 8 shows that the problem of the brand new theme was particularly prevalent in the scripts analysed at all levels of study especially in the argumentative questions. This approach to organization of information creates a sudden breakdown in the logical flow of information resulting

in discourse incoherence. The problem can be solved by maintaining the application of the same theme in a series of sentences or by integrating the rheme or part of the rheme in the second sentence as the theme of the following sentences.

7.2.2. Empty rheme

The empty rheme was also identified at all academic levels with academic level one displaying the highest frequency. As observed earlier, the empty rheme is experienced when new information is presented in the theme position instead of the rheme position. At academic level one, 50 and 40 percent of the pattern was identified in the test and examination scripts respectively. At academic level two, 34 percent was identified in both the test and the examination scripts while 28 percent was identified at academic level three in both the test and the examination scripts. The least application of the pattern was identified at academic level four with 8 percent and 12 percent frequency in the test and examination scripts respectively. This is illustrated in Table 9 below.

Table9. *Frequency of the application of empty rheme*

Test script results				Examination script results			
Academic level	Number of scripts	Frequency per level	%	Number of scripts	Frequency per level	%	
1	50	25	50	50	20	40	
2	50	17	34	50	17	34	
3	50	14	28	50	14	28	
4	50	4	8	50	6	12	
TOTAL	200	60		200	57		

Table 9 shows that the problem of the empty rheme was experienced by students at all the four academic levels. The empty rheme created a rupture in the flow of information as the participants failed to expand on the initial argument in the rheme resulting in discourse incoherence. One way of overcoming this problem is to add new content to the rheme in order to complete it.

7.2.3. Empty Use of there

The empty use of the adverbial *there* was observed at all academic levels regardless of the thematic development pattern coming either before or after this item. It was used haphazardly at all levels of study. The frequency of this application among the scripts analysed at different levels of study is shown in Table 10 below.

Table10. *Frequency of the application of empty use of there*

Test script results				Examination script results			
Academic level	Number of scripts	Frequency per level	%	Number of scripts	Frequency per level	%	
1	50	0	0	50	20	40	
2	50	20	40	50	14	28	
3	50	14	28	50	15	30	
4	50	0	0	50	13	26	
TOTAL	200	34		200	62		

The information presented in Table 10 shows that 40 percent application of this pattern was identified in the examination scripts at academic level one and test scripts at academic level two. Examination scripts at academic levels two and test scripts at academic level three displayed 28 percent of the pattern. Examination scripts at academic level three showed 30 percent of the pattern while at academic level four, 26 percent displayed the pattern. No application was identified in the test scripts at academic levels one and four. The introduction of the empty *there* caused a lot of ruptures within the sentences resulting in discourse incoherence. The problem of the empty use of *there* can be solved if the initial theme is repeated in a series of sentences or if part of the rheme is developed into the theme of the following sentence.

7.2.4. Use of Dummy it

The use of the dummy *it* was also observed at all the levels of study. This usually happens when the pronoun *it* is used without reference to any specific entity in either the theme or the rheme of the previous sentences. Academic level one recorded 52 percent application of the pattern in the test scripts and nothing in the examination scripts. At academic level two, 28 percent and 12 percent of the pattern was used in the test and examination scripts while 12 and 28 percent application was identified at academic level three in the test and examination scripts respectively. At academic level four, 28 and 20 percent application of the dummy *it* was also identified in the test and examination scripts. This piece of information is presented in Table 11 below.

Table11. Frequency of the application of the dummy *it*

Test script results				Examination script results			
Academic level	Number of scripts	Frequency per level	%	Number of scripts	Frequency per level	%	
1	50	27	52	50	0	0	
2	50	14	28	50	6	12	
3	50	6	12	50	14	28	
4	50	14	28	50	10	20	
TOTAL	200	61		200	30		

Table 11 shows that some of the participants at all academic levels applied the *dummy it* in the essays. The application of this personal pronoun created serious problems of ruptures in the presentation of ideas in the essays resulting in lack of discourse coherence. The problem of using the dummy *it* can be rectified by developing information in the rheme into the theme of the following sentences or by repeating the initial theme of the sentence in the subsequent sentences.

7.2.5. Incomplete Split Progression

The problem of incomplete split progression was only identified at academic level three. The pattern was displayed in 20 percent of the examination scripts. As stated earlier, this problem is realised when the information in the rheme is not exhaustively elucidated in the subsequent sentences leaving the introduced idea incomplete of meaning. This problem can be solved by ensuring that every idea introduced in the rheme is exhaustively expanded separately in order to complete its meaning.

7.2.6. Split Theme Progression Pattern

The split theme progression pattern was only displayed at academic level one in 13 percent of the scripts. This pattern occurs in instances where information is split in the theme rather than in the rheme as advised by Danes (1974). The application created ruptures as information in the rheme was not expanded. Ventola (1994; 1997) supports this observation by stating that when new information is used in the theme position it leaves the rheme empty of content. This problem can be solved by introducing new information in the rheme not in the theme as the case is in some of the written pieces of discourse analysed at academic level one.

7.2.7. Use of Conversational Personal Pronouns

Most of the scripts produced by students at academic level one displayed themes which did not have clear reference due to use of personal pronouns such as *I*, *we*, and *you* in the theme position. These pronouns were used in 73 percent of the cases. The use of such personal pronouns, which are mostly used in conversation, compromised the effectiveness of thematic progression. There was general lack of concatenation of ideas in the essays. This problem can be resolved by adherence to the effective application of theme-rheme patterns in the sentences.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented the thematic progression patterns which obscure discourse coherence at each level of study. The findings have revealed that the most prominent patterns that obscured coherence at all levels of study included the introduction of the brand new theme, the use of the empty rheme, the empty use of the adverbial *there* and the use of the dummy *it*. Others which were unique to specific

levels of study are split theme progression and the use of conversational personal pronouns at academic level one, and incomplete split progression at academic level three. These problems arise from ineffective application of theme and rheme patterns.

With regard to the purpose of the present investigation, it can be conclusively stated that one of the sources of incoherence in the written pieces of discourse produced by University of Zambia undergraduate students is non-adherence to thematic progression patterns which enhance coherence. In this regard, the notion of theme-rheme patterns, if well applied by the students at the University of Zambia will definitely improve the quality of their written pieces of discourse.

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