

Influences of Thematic Progression on Quality of EFL Argumentative Writing

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Received 09/06/2021 Received in revised form 01/10/2021 Accepted 25/10/2021	Abstract Textual coherence is an important part of writing. This study examines whether textual coherence affects the quality of argumentative essays by evaluating papers written by 22 EFL university students. Firstly, the argumentative essays were evaluated by two raters using an AP English Argumentative Writing rubric available on Turnitin, an online program for checking plagiarism. Then, by drawing on Daneš’ (1974) Thematic Progression, the Theme and Rheme development in the essays were identified. Two essays – one from a low-score group and one from a high-score group – were selected as examples. The findings reveal that the low-score essays lacked a coherent thematic progression due to the frequent occurrences of brand-new Themes, and some constant Themes or Thematization of Rhemes. In contrast, the high-score essays included various patterns of thematic progression, including constant Themes, thematization of Rhemes, and several split Rhemes. The findings suggest that thematic progression, specifically with the choice and development of Themes, has influenced the coherence of whole essays, contributing to the essay scores. In addition, local cohesion strategies at a sentence level, particularly
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	lexical cohesion, contributed to the connectivity of arguments and their supporting evidence that were expressed and realized in the forms of Themes and Rhemes. The concept of thematic progression can benefit the teaching and learning of argumentative writing in EFL contexts.
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Introduction

The vast body of research on argumentative writing by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students suggests that it is important and should be required in EFL classrooms. Attention has been given to the teaching and learning of argumentative writing in EFL contexts because an ability to construct strong academic arguments can affect students' success in their studies (Bacha, 2010; Wingate, 2012). Argumentative writing is also believed to be associated with critical thinking (Alagozlu, 2007; Liu & Stapleton, 2014; Stapleton, 2001). In addition, argumentative writing tasks have been chosen to test students' writing abilities in major standardized tests, namely TOEFL, IELTS, and the GRE (Plakans & Gebril, 2017).

At the same time, argumentative writing is often the most difficult writing task for students (Bacha, 2010). This level of difficulty can be the result of required rhetorical structures derived from cultural practices that many EFL students are not familiar with (Bacha, 2010; Hirose, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2017; Stapleton, 2001). Various efforts attempting to find suitable approaches for cultivating argumentation skills among EFL students have often been made (e.g., Bacha, 2010; Kankan-dee & Kaur, 2015; Liu & Stapleton, 2014; Lu & Xie, 2019).

From personal experience, I have seen that English argumentative writing at a tertiary level is notoriously difficult for Thai students. This could be because argumentative writing requires abilities beyond a mere mastery of writing skills, English grammar and vocabulary. It also encompasses knowledge about the topic under discussion and the ability to contextualize a writing. In addition, instructors often find the tasks of

giving feedback during the writing process and grading argumentative essays tedious and frustrating.

Among many weaknesses in students' argumentative writing, a lack of coherence seems to be the most prominent issue. Despite clearly instructing students about an organizational pattern that contains an introduction with a thesis statement, three body paragraphs with an explicit topic sentence, and a concluding paragraph that summarizes the main points discussed, the lack of consistency in essays persists. Many essays appear to lack continuity of meaning even though cohesive devices such as references, substitutions, and conjunctions are often used. Strings of supportive reasons seem to make essays less convincing. I couldn't agree more with Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 300) when they compare omitted semantic chains to "a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces in it."

Two terms describing the unity and textual continuity of a text, cohesion and coherence, are sometimes used interchangeably. They encompass a logical relationship between and among ideas demonstrated using linguistic devices. However, several research projects have found that there is a subtle difference between the two which needs to be clarified. According to Alarcon and Morales (2011), McCagg (1990 as cited in Alarcon & Morales, 2011, p. 115), and Crossley et al. (2013), 'coherence' can refer to the logical relatedness of ideas (meaning of a text) which are derived from an interpretation or decoding of the expressed language features and elements. In addition, coherence is dependent on the lexical and grammatical features of a text, as well as on a reader's background knowledge and reading skills. In other words, coherence can be viewed as a reader's mental representation created while decoding meaning from a text. Crossley et al. (2013, p. 202) clarify that 'cohesion' includes the "explicit textual cues" in a text that facilitate the connection of ideas. These cues can be implicit or explicit. However, Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 4) do not distinguish between the two terms but only mention cohesion as a semantic relation or mental understanding after decoding explicit linguistic cues. Thus, cohesion encompasses both the language elements in a text and the process of interpreting those elements. Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 299) further

explained that cohesion goes beyond the sentential level as it involves continuity, a relationship between parts within the text. This continuity establishes information structures or thematic patterns for the entire text. In this paper, the term 'coherence' has a meaning common to EFL writing spheres, the comprehension that readers achieve by interpreting or decoding messages in a written text.

The coherence of Thai students' writing has been examined often, a clear indication that this factor is an important element of writing and is perhaps the most difficult one for Thai students to achieve and master. Studies focusing on the use of cohesive devices in Thai university students' writing (Chanyoo, 2018; Toaditthep & Kaewcha, 2016) revealed similar findings. Chanyoo (2018) found that students most often relied on reiteration/lexical cohesion, followed by reference, conjunction, and ellipsis. In Toaditthep and Kaewcha's (2016) study, reference was the most used device, followed by lexical cohesion and conjunction. Findings indicate that the devices most frequently used by Thai students to create coherence are reference, reiteration (lexical), and conjunction. Students are generally able to satisfactorily use cohesive devices to connect ideas at a paragraph level but achieving overall coherence related to their organization of ideas at an essay level seems to be problematic.

The concept of coherence when applied to the teaching of writing to Thai EFL students tends to focus on the use of cohesive devices as adapted from Halliday and Hasan's (1976) taxonomy. These devices are often taught at the format level – their forms and locations in sentence structures – disregarding the semantic properties that they possess. Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 2) emphasize that "a text is best regarded as a semantic unit: a unit not of form but of meaning." This means that meaning is realized in and by decoding linguistic representations which are in the form of sentences.

I have extended Halliday and Hasan's (1976) conceptualization of a text to an examination of argumentative writing by proposing that the quality of arguments in these texts is also realized and encoded in other sentence-level linguistic resources, going beyond the elements of argument. In other words, I contend that linguistic coherence elements reinforce the soundness and construction of arguments in argumentative

writing. To build an argument, students need to bring in language use resources as well as a knowledge of logical reasoning, signaling an interrelatedness of the two domains.

In fact, Gao (2012) postulated that the quality of argumentative writing relies on coherence in its linguistic aspects and argument components. In her study, Gao (2012) examined and compared coherence in argumentative writing from American and Chinese university students by using existing linguistic coherence frameworks and Toulmin's model of argumentation. This study revealed that regarding the creation of coherence, American students tended to rely on pronominal reference and sequential parallel progression, whereas their Chinese counterparts relied heavily on lexical cohesion (e.g., reiteration) and extended parallel thematic progressions. Regarding coherence of arguments, the Chinese students' writing followed Toulmin's argument structure; on the other hand, arguments in essays by the American students were organized differently, as they had not learned how to implement Toulmin's argument structure.

Yet, studies on argumentative writing of EFL students, whether focusing on coherence (e.g., Gao, 2012; Keskin & Koçbaş Demir, 2021; Soleymanzadeh & Gholami, 2014) or quality of arguments (e.g., Gao, 2012; Qin & Karabacak, 2010; Qin & Liu, 2021; Stapleton & Wu, 2015), tend to report on either the elements of coherence or whether the arguments were constructed using appropriate elements and structures. In addition to evaluating the use of argumentation structures, the quality of writing can be evaluated based on the ways that the arguments are expressed. This can include investigation of the linguistic coherence of arguments, expanding these features to use in an argument process.

This paper attempts to delineate how linguistic coherence elements reinforce the soundness of arguments and how arguments are constructed in argumentative writing by using linguistic cohesive components. Two research questions guide this investigation.

1. What are the differences in thematic progression patterns demonstrated by low-score and high-score argumentative essays?

2. How do thematic progression patterns influence the quality of argumentative essays of low-score and high-score groups?

For the current research, I considered thematic progression global coherence at a whole text level. This global coherence is determined through an examination of Themes and Rhemes whose constructions can be comprised of cohesive devices which provide semantic chains of a message (Wei, 2017). In other words, thematic progression evaluations in this study inevitably also include an analysis of cohesive devices.

Theoretical Frameworks

Themes and Rhemes

Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, p. 89) specifically describe a Theme as “the element that serves as the point of departure of the message.” The Theme is located at the start of a sentence, orienting readers toward an intended message of a given text. The Theme is comprised of an experiential element; this can be a process, participants involved in a process, or circumstance of a process (Fontaine & Kodratoff, 2003; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). This constituent is called a topical theme (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The Rheme is what remains after the first mention of one of the three experiential elements (Chanyoo, 2013; Bloor & Bloor, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Herriman, 2011; Thompson, 2014; Wei, 2016). The Rheme provides further details about the Theme and helps to develop other Themes.

Some examples of Themes in different are as follows. Themes have been underlined and the Rhemes are italicized.

(a) Our neighbors + *have given us flower pots and freshly baked bread.*

(b) In our backyard, + *children often enjoy playing and running with our dogs.*

(c) What the neighbors gave us + *were flower pots and freshly baked bread.*

The structure of a Theme does not always take the form of a noun or nominalization; it can be in different forms (e.g., adverbial phrases or prepositional phrases). Importantly, the Theme “consists of

just one structural element, represented by just one unit,” be it “a nominal group, adverbial group or prepositional phrase” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 92).

As seen in the above examples, the Theme in (a) is considered a participant and is denoted by a nominal set. The Theme in (b) is in the form of a prepositional phrase which functions as Adjunct. The Theme in (c) is in the form of a nominal group, known as thematic equative.

Thematic Progression

Daneš' (1974) concept of Thematic Progression (TP) can be viewed as a representation of textual connectivity within a text. This connectivity is built upon an ordering of utterance units. Utterance units make up a text; each utterance unit includes at least a Theme and a Rheme. The Themes and Rhemes are connected in systemic ways and their relationship contributes to the development of the major Theme of a text, a hypertheme (Daneš, 1974). The connectivity of Themes and Rhemes in a text therefore creates textual coherence at a whole text level.

According to Daneš (1974, p. 116), utterances (U's) are divided into three groups: simple U's, composed U's, and condensed U's. For composed and condensed U's, the number of Themes and Rhemes in an utterance unit designate different sub-types (structures) of utterances. Examples of these utterance types, as described in Daneš (1974, p. 117), are included below.

Simple Utterance Units

A simple utterance unit is composed of a single Theme and a single Rheme. In the following examples, Themes are underlined and the Rhemes are in italics.

- Our neighbors + *have given us flower pots and freshly baked bread.*
- We + *thanked them by inviting them to a BBQ party in our backyard.*

Composed Utterance Units

Composed utterance units are divided into three sub-groups based on the number of Themes and Rhemes.

(a) Multiple Utterance Units:

A multiple utterance unit is composed of two simple utterance units linked by a conjunction. For example:

Our neighbors + *have given us flowerpots and freshly baked bread* and we + *thanked them by inviting them to a BBQ party in our backyard.*

The above sentence contains two simple utterance units which have been combined by using the conjunction 'and'.

(b) Utterance unit with a multiple Themes:

This type of utterance unit contains more than one Theme. In addition, one Rheme describing a characteristic or property common to the Themes is included. For example:

- "The melting of solid ice and the formation from ice of liquid water + *exemplify physical changes.*" (Daneš, 1974, p. 117)

The Themes of this unit are "The melting of solid ice" and "the formation from ice of liquid water." The two Themes are combined by using the conjunction 'and'. The Rheme then states a meaning or property shared by the two Themes.

(c) Utterance unit with a multiple Rhemes:

This type of utterance unit contains a simple Theme and multiple Rhemes.

- "It + *is further postulated that the activated amino acids are joined together...and that the long chains are molded in a specific manner...*" (Daneš, 1974, p. 117).

Condensed Utterance Units

Condensed utterance units contain either a condensed Theme or a Rheme. For example:

(a) Utterance unit with a complex Theme:

The Theme in this utterance unit is complex, including embedded or additional information. For example:

- "This dark-coloured liquid, known as crude petroleum or crude oil, + is obtained from wells of different depths." (Daneš, 1974, p. 117)

The Theme "This dark-coloured liquid" has embedded information ("known as crude petroleum or crude oil") which gives specific information about the Theme.

(b) Utterance unit with a complex Rheme:

This utterance unit has a complex Rheme, including embedded or additional information that describes the Rheme further. For example:

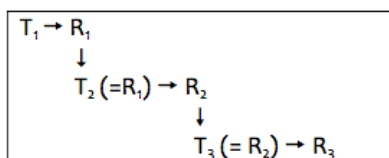
- "The amino acids + are required for making proteins, consisting of long chains of these units." (Daneš, 1974, p. 117)

In the above example, "consisting of long chains of these units" is embedded information describing the Rheme "are required for making proteins".

Thematic Progression Patterns

Daneš (1974) suggested using four types of TP patterns to evaluate the development of a Theme or hypertheme of a text. Similar TP patterns have been described by Eggins (2004), using somewhat different names. The TP patterns, along with example texts below, have been taken from Daneš (1974).

(1) Simple linear TP

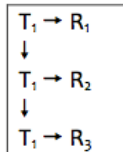


In this progression pattern, Rhemes of clauses which provide details of Themes are further developed as Themes in subsequent clauses. This process is called thematization of Rhemes (Daneš, 1974, p. 118).

Sample text

"The first of the antibiotics + was discovered by Sir Alexander Fleming in 1928. He + was busy at the time investigating a certain species of germ which is responsible for boils and other troubles."
(Daneš, 1974, p. 118)

(2) TP with a constant Theme

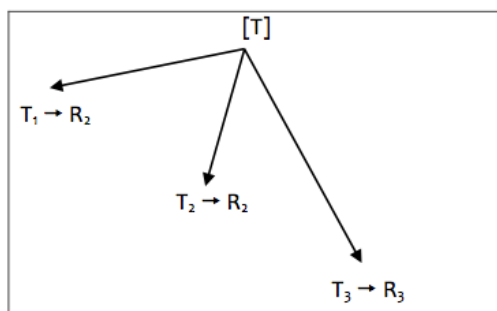


As the name suggests, the same Theme is maintained and new pieces of information about the Theme are provided in the form of Rhemes. The repeated Themes can be in different form (Chanyoo, 2013). These Rhemes also contribute to the depth of the Theme.

Sample text

"The Rousseauist especially + feels an inner kinship with Prometheus and other Titans. He + is fascinated by any form of insurgency...He + must show an elementary energy in his explosion against the established order and at the same time a boundless sympathy for the victims of it...Further the Rousseauist + is ever ready to discover beauty of soul in any one who is under the reprobation of society." (Daneš, 1974, p. 119)

(3) TP with derived Themes

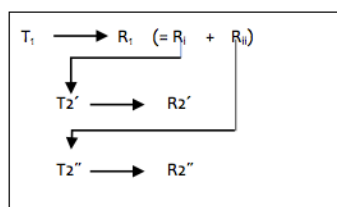


In this progression, the hypertheme has been divided into several aspects. These aspects become individual Themes which may not explicitly resemble the hypertheme. These individual Themes can be understood as ‘of the hypertheme’ and they are equipped with their own relevant Rheme(s). Together, they provide not only new information but also depth to the hypertheme.

Sample text

“New Jersey + is flat along the coast and southern portion; the north-western region is mountainous. The coastal climate + is mild, but there + is considerable cold in the mountain areas during the winter months. Summers + are fairly hot. The leading industrial production + includes chemicals, processed food, coal, petroleum, metals and electrical equipment. The most important cities + are Newark, Jersey City, Paterson, Trenton, Camden. Vacation districts + include Asbury Park, Lakewood, Cape May, and others.” (Daneš, 1974, p. 120)

(4) Split Rheme



This split Rheme progression combines a simple linear TP with a TP having a constant Theme. The Rheme is split, and the split Rhemes become Themes in subsequent clauses.

Sample text

"All substances + can be divided into two classes: elementary substances and compounds. An elementary substance + is a substance which consists of atoms of only one kind...A compound + is a substance which consists of atoms of two or more different kinds..." (Daneš, 1974, p. 121)

From these sample texts, we can see that a Theme holds a central focus throughout a text; it holds both old and new information. Rhemes provide new information which gives depth to a Theme.

Cohesive Devices within Thematic Progression

Cohesive devices are linguistic elements that help connect parts of a text through a system called cohesion relations. Halliday and Hasan (1976) conceptualize cohesion relations as meaningful ties between and among statements that unify a text. Cohesive devices can be categorized into two main types, each with its own sub-types: grammatical and lexical cohesion.

Grammatical cohesion includes references, substitutions, ellipses, and conjunctions. References can be personal, demonstrative, or comparative. Substitutions can be categorized as nominal, verbal, or clausal. Ellipses are divided into sub-categories similar to those in substitutions, but they are omitted. Conjunctions are categorized as additive, adversative, causal, or temporal cohesion. Lexical cohesion is created through vocabulary choices, and has only two main subcategories: reiteration and collocation. Reiteration is the use of vocabulary, including a same word, a synonym or near synonym, a superordinate, and/or a general word. The meaning created by these linguistic cues within and among sentences and parts of a text help produce textual coherence.

The interconnectedness of cohesive devices and thematic progression can be illustrated by the following sample text showing

simple linear progression, one of Daneš' (1974) thematic progression patterns.

"The first of the antibiotics + was discovered by Sir Alexander Fleming in 1928. He + was busy at the time investigating a certain species of germ which is responsible for boils and other troubles." (Daneš, 1974, p. 118)

In this simple linear progression, the underlined parts are Themes. The first Theme "The first of the antibiotics" is in the form of a nominal group and is called a topical theme. The second Theme is "He", derived from the Rheme of the first sentence, known as thematization of Rheme. This pronoun 'He' is a grammatical cohesion reference, referring to "Sir Alexander Fleming" from the preceding sentence.

Studies on Thematic Progression in EFL Writing

A number of research studies were conducted to examine the development of Themes-Rhemes in EFL writing. Some researchers conducting these studies identified different types of thematic progression in EFL writing by drawing on either Daneš' (1974) thematic progression or on Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) Theme-Rheme conceptualization. The common thematic progression patterns found in those studies were overuse of constant Themes, underdeveloped Rhemes, empty Rhemes, and brand-new Themes (Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo, 1998; Le & Wijitsopon, 2012; Rosa & Padang, 2007; Truc, 2019; Wang, 2007). The lack of thematic progression, just including strings of unrelated ideas, was also apparent (Rosa & Padang, 2007). However, Chanyoo (2013) found derived thematic progressions, linear progressions, and constant themes in his corpus comprised of student writing and health science scholarly writing. The differences in patterns identified in these studies suggest that novice writers have difficulty organizing and controlling the flow of their ideas whereas proficient writers seem to express their ideas and thoughts in a more organized manner.

When studying the application of thematic progression in the teaching of writing, Le and Wijitsopon (2012) extended their

investigation by discussing problems faced by a graduate student subject. The researchers examined a short writing assignment of a student by using thematic progression patterns. Feedback on the textual organization, based on a thematic progression concept, was given to the student to assist with revision. After the student revised the text, the researchers found that the writing was much improved. This shows that discussing thematic progression issues with students can help them improve their writing and enable them to edit and revise their own work.

Studies on Thematic Progression in EFL Argumentative Writing

Several studies have analyzed thematic progression of argumentative writing by EFL students; however, those studies mainly reported on thematic progression patterns identified in participants' writing. Their results were similar to studies that investigated the flow and continuity of textual features in other types of writing.

Keskin and Koçbaş Demir (2021) investigated if students' academic backgrounds influence thematic progression in their argumentative writing. Their participants were comprised of undergraduate students majoring in English Language Teaching (ELT) and Psychological Counseling and Guidance (PCG) majors. The researchers' assumptions were consistent with those of Fries (1995), stating that thematic progression, specifically the Themes students chose when organizing their writing, was genre-dependent or disciplinary-related. Findings revealed thematic progression patterns similar to those found in previously discussed studies. Specifically, the essays written by ELT students contained more types of thematic progression patterns than the PCG group. The ELT students' essays were organized using constant Themes, simple linear Themes, and split Rhemes, whereas the PCG essays used constant Themes, simple linear themes and derived hyper-thematic patterns. Yet, the problems of brand-new Themes, empty Themes, overuse of constant Themes, and Themes with unclear references frequently appeared in the essays of both groups.

Soleymanzadeh and Gholami (2014) investigated if there is a correlation between IELTS scores and the ratio of thematic progression patterns identified in the argumentative writing of 13 Iranian undergraduate students majoring in English Language and Literature. The

student participants had taken the IELTS test and received average scores of 5.5 - 6.5. They were required to write an essay on child labor, a topic taken from a pool of IELTS practice prompts. Thematic patterns found in those 13 essays were mainly thematic progression with a constant Theme, followed by a simple linear progression and split Rheme. Derived Themes were the least frequent. Statistical analysis yielded a small correlation of .364 between the two variables. The researchers argued that simple linear progression and constant progression were more common in argumentative texts than in other patterns.

Yan (2015) experimented with integrating thematic progression in teaching to determine whether this could help improve Chinese university students' writing. The participants were 100 non-English-major students and they were divided into an experiment and a control group. Prior to the course, both groups wrote an argumentative essay on the same topic, online shopping. The essays were graded using a CET-4 rubric and the mean scores underwent statistical comparison. There was no statistical significance between the two groups. Then, after the course, the two group wrote another argumentative essay about city problems and the essays were graded using the same rubric. A statistical comparison of mean scores showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the experiment and control groups, with the experiment group attaining a higher mean score. The results of this study emphasized the significance of instruction on textual coherence at a discourse level – focusing on the essay level in addition to coherence at a paragraph level.

The findings of the two studies (i.e., Keskin & Koçbaş Demir, 2021; Soleymanzadeh & Gholami, 2014) reviewed thus far suggest that the organization of arguments in argumentative writing tend to be in the form of thematic progression with a constant Theme, followed by simple linear Themes and split Rhemes. As seen from the studies by Le and Witjisopon (2012) and Yan (2015), identifying thematic progression patterns in EFL writing can benefit both instructors and students. In the following sections, I will present how thematic progression of two argumentative essays from different authors contributed to their scores.

Methodology

Data

Twenty-two essays written by second-year students majoring in English at a university in northern Thailand were collected via Google form online. The recruitment of participants was conducted via online applications. Out of 100 students contacted, twenty-two students voluntarily agreed to provide their essays. The essays were one of the assignments for an Essay Writing course held during the second semester of the 2019-20 academic year. This assignment allowed students to select any controversial topic of their choosing. Hence, the 22 essays were about different topics. However, two essays were about the same topic, reducing the number of topics to 21. One of the purposes of this assignment was to encourage students to express their opinions and argue for a stand on their selected topic. The students had to substantiate their stances with logical and appropriate reasoning. Appropriate information from external sources was permitted with proper citation. The students had one week to write the essay. The required length of the essay was 500-600 words, with an average of 598 words.

The overall structural organization of all essays included an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. A thesis statement at the end of the introduction included the stance of the student writers. The body paragraphs all began with a topic sentence. The concluding paragraph usually summarized the points discussed with some variations in suggestions or predictions.

Data Analyses

The 22 essays were analyzed using the following process.

Essay Rating

The essays were assessed by two raters, the researcher and another English writing instructor at the same institution, using an AP English Argument Essay rubric obtained from the Turnitin program (Turnitin, 2021). This rubric was chosen because it provides specific descriptors of argument quality. The rubric assesses three aspects of

argumentative writing: thesis statements (0-1 point), evidence and commentary (0-4 points), and sophistication (0-1 point). Sample responses for each point level are provided for all three aspects, with a total possible score of 6 points. Interestingly, the evidence and commentary aspect requires student writers to demonstrate their engagement or interaction with the evidence they provide. They need to show that the relationships between the evidence and their conclusions (e.g., their thesis statements) are well developed and relevant. The sophistication aspect includes five sub-descriptors which are grouped into three categories: contextualization of the argument, awareness of argumentative elements (e.g., concession, rebuttal, and refutation), and effective (rhetorical) writing style. The sophistication aspect is quite flexible, allowing student writers to demonstrate any of the five descriptors. The AP English Argument Essay rubric has been provided in the Appendix.

The two raters studied the rubric together to create a clear understanding of the descriptors. Then, the raters rated the essays individually and simultaneously. For each essay, the scores of each aspect were compared. Discrepancies between points given to the aspects of evidence/commentary and sophistication were immediately discussed and resolved. For the sophistication aspect, we also identified the sub-descriptor(s) that helped each essay earned the point.

During the rating process, we recognized certain discrepancies between the low-scoring and high-scoring essays. For example, there were significant differences in content development of the essays besides the argumentative elements. To examine textual development further, the essays underwent a Thematic Progression analysis by the researcher.

Thematic Progression Identification

To determine thematic progression of the 22 essays, the researcher drew on the conceptualization of Theme and Rheme by Halliday and Matthiessen (14) and Daneš' (1974) categories of thematic progression, as delineated in the literature review section.

Thematic progression coding was conducted on each sentence. In this analysis, a 'sentence structure' refers to a segment that begins with a

capital letter and ends with a full stop, regardless of grammatical status. In other words, fragments and run-on sentences were retained. In each sentence, a Theme and a Rheme were identified. Then, the Themes and Rhemes were mapped out sentence by sentence.

Two essays (i.e., essay no. 019 from the low-score group and essay 022 from the high-score group) have been selected for presentation in this paper. These two essays were selected because they manifested thematic progression patterns that occurred frequently in the essays of their respective group. Essay no. 019 received a score of 2 out of 6 and essay no. 22 earned a score of 5 out of 6. The essays each included an introduction paragraph with a thesis statement, three body paragraphs that began with a topic sentence, and a concluding paragraph. Each thesis statement was treated as a hypertheme and was expected to be developed throughout the essay.

Findings

Essay Scores and Argument Elements

The 22 essays underwent statistical analysis using a Microsoft Word program to obtain word and sentence counts. Basic information about the essays in the two groups is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Basic Information about the Essays

	N	Paragraphs	Average Total Sentences	Average Words per Sentence	Average Total Words
Low-score essays	8	4-5	29.25	19.96	571
High-score essays	14	4-5	36	18.43	601

The high-score essays contained more sentences and words per paragraph than those in the low-score group. However, the length of sentences in the high-score essays appeared to be shorter than those in the low-score group. This indicates that the students who wrote the essays that earned high scores might be able to write more concisely.

By using an AP English: Argument Writing rubric available as part of the Turnitin program (Turnitin, 2021), the 22 essays were categorized into two groups based on the total scores. A low-score group, comprised of eight essays, received scores of 1-3 points, and a high-score group, including 14 essays, earned scores of 4-5 points. No essays were awarded the full score of 6 points. The details of the two essay groups are shown in Table 2. The details of the AP English: Argument Rubric are shown in the Appendix.

Table 2

Scores and Argument Elements of Low-score and High-score Essays

	N	Average Thesis Score (1 point)	Average Evidence Score (4 points)	Sophistication		Average Total Score (6 points)	Mode	SD
				Aspects	Average Sophistication			
					Score (1 point)			
Low- score Essays	8	0.75	1	0, 1, 3	0.38	2.13	3	0.99
High- score Essays	14	1	2.29	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	1	4.29	4	0.47

Three essays from the low-score group provided sufficient support for the thesis statements (sub-aspect 1). Only one of the three essays included a concession to an opposing viewpoint, but there were

no rebuttals or refutations provided (sub-aspect 3). Five of the low-score essays received zero points because they failed to provide adequate or sufficient support for the thesis statements, contained sweeping generalizations, or included ineffective language that hindered the progression of arguments.

On the other hand, all essays that received high scores secured full points in the sophistication aspect by effectively proving their thesis statements with adequate evidence. Four of the fourteen essays in this group demonstrated a control over the argumentation process by positioning their arguments within the context of their topics as well as by using concession and refutation strategies. Only one of the fourteen essays manifested all sub-aspects of sophistication. Specifically, this essay clearly acknowledged an opposing viewpoint and rebuttals.

Thematic Progression Patterns in Low-score Essays

The thematic progression patterns of eight low-score essays generally included brand-new Themes (157 instances). In addition, there were 46 instances of thematic progressions with a constant Theme, eight instances of thematization of Rhemes, and only one split Rheme. All eight low-score essays contained brand new Themes with almost all sentences beginning with new themes. Thematization of Rhemes was found in only four essays and occurred once or twice in each essay. The thematic progression of essay no. 019 was selected as an example to illustrate the thematic progression of essays in this group.

Details of Essay No. 019

Score:	2 out of 6
Topic:	Abolishing University Star Contest
Words per sentence:	23.76
Sentences:	21
Paragraphs:	5
Words per paragraph:	99.8
Total word count:	499

Thematic Progression of Essay no. 019

	Thematic Progression Patterns		Argument Elements
Paragraph 1			
Clause 1	T1 → R1		
Clause 2	T2 →R2	(Brand new theme)	
Clause 3	T3 →R3	(Brand new theme)	
Clause 4	T4 →R4	(Brand new theme)	
Clause 5	T5 → R5	(Hypertheme)	Claim
Paragraph 2			
Clause 6	T5 →R6	(TP with a constant theme)	Main Data 1
Clause 7	T6 (R6) →R7	(Thematization of rheme)	Data
Clause 8	T5 →R8	(TP with a constant theme)	Data
Clause 9	T7 →R9	(Brand new theme)	Data
Clause 10	T8 (R9) →R10	(Thematization of rheme)	Data
Paragraph 3			
Clause 11	T5 →R11	(TP with a constant theme)	Main Data 2
Clause 12	T9 →R12	(Brand new theme)	Data
Clause 13	T10 (R12) → R13	(Thematization of rheme)	Data
Paragraph 4			
Clause 14	T5 →R14	(TP with a constant theme)	Main Data 3

Clause 15	T9 → R15	(TP with a constant theme)	Data
Clause 16	T9 → R16	(TP with a constant theme)	Data
Clause 17	T11 → R17	(Brand new theme)	Data
Clause 18	T12 → R18	(Brand new theme)	Data
Paragraph 5			
Clause 19 claim	T13 → R5	(Brand new theme)	Restatement of
Clause 20	T14 → R19	(Brand new theme)	Data
Clause 21	T14 → R20	(TP with a constant theme)	Data

The majority of thematic progression patterns found in essay 019 included brand-new Themes, some incidences of TP with a constant Theme, and a few thematization of Rhemes. The Theme (a freshman star contest) was consistent in the topic sentences of paragraphs 2, 3, and 4. However, the Rhemes of these topic sentences were not made into Themes and there was no further elaboration in the paragraphs. In other words, there were minimal incidences of Rheme thematization. Overall, both Themes and Rhemes constantly introduced new ideas in this essay, disconnecting old and new information.

Even though there were incidences of TP with a constant Theme (T5 and T9), these Themes were not placed closely together, causing an interruption in idea progression. T5 in paragraph 2 was repeated but there was no follow up in the subsequent clauses. Instead, new Themes were introduced. Displacement of ideas was demonstrated by T9, with a far distance between the constant Theme embedded in paragraphs 3 and 4.

Regarding argument development, the thesis statement was treated as a main claim and a hypertheme, stating that the contest had 'disadvantages' and thus must be abolished. The word 'disadvantages' appeared in the Rheme of the thesis statement. The disadvantages were

specified again as Rhemes in the topic sentences of the three body paragraphs. Yet, these Rhemes were not prioritized as Themes in their respective paragraphs. Instead, lexical cohesion, namely references and substitution referring to the contest, were used as Themes.

Thematic Progression Patterns in High-score Essays

The fourteen high-score essays contained more instances of TP with a constant Theme (77 instances), thematization of Rhemes (36 instances), and split Rhemes (4 instances) than were found in the low-score essays. A thematic progression with a constant Theme pattern was found in 10 essays. Thematic progressions with a constant theme were found within and across paragraphs in this essay group. Thematization of Rhemes was found in 12 out of 14 essays in this high-score group. Split Rheme patterns were found in four essays. However, brand new Themes were also frequently found in all 14 essays (229 instances). The thematic progression of essay no. 022 was selected to illustrate the thematic progression of essays in this group.

Details of Essay No. 022

Score:	5 out of 6
Topic:	Legalizing Euthanasia
Words per sentence:	19.36
Sentences:	36
Paragraphs:	5
Words per paragraph:	139.4
Total word count:	697

Thematic Progression of Essay no. 022

Thematic Progression Patterns	Argument Elements
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Paragraph 1

Clause 1	T1 → R1		
Clause 2	T1 → R2	(TP with a constant theme)	
Clause 3	T2 (R2) → R3	(Thematization of rheme)	
Clause 4	T3 → R4		
Clause 5	T2 → R5	(TP with a constant theme)	
Clause 6	T2 → R6	(TP with a constant theme)	
Clause 7	T2 → R7	(Hypertheme)	Claim

Paragraph 2

Clause 8	T2 → R8	(TP with a constant theme)	Data
Clause 9	T2 → R9	(TP with a constant theme)	Data
Clause 10	T4 → R10	(Brand new theme)	Data
Clause 11	T2 → R11	(TP with a constant theme)	Data

Paragraph 3

Clause 12	T5 → R12	(Brand new theme)	Counterclaim 1
Clause 13	T6 (R12) → R13 (R13–1 & R13–2)	(Split rheme)	Counterclaim data
Clause 14	T7 (R13–1) → R14		Counterclaim data
Clause 15	T8 (R14) → R5	(Thematization of rheme)	Counterclaim data
Clause 16	T9 (R13–2) → R15	(TP with a constant theme)	Counterclaim data
Clause 17	T9 → R16	(TP with a constant theme)	Counterclaim data
Clause 18	T4 → R17	(TP with a constant theme)	Rebuttal claim
Clause 19	T4 → R18	(TP with a constant theme)	Rebuttal data
Clause 20	T10 → R19	(Brand new theme)	Counterclaim 2

Clause 21	T9 → R20	(TP with a constant theme)	Counterclaim data
Clause 22	T11 → R21	(Brand new theme)	Conceding
Clause 23	T2 → R22	(TP with a constant theme)	Rebuttal claim 2
Clause 24	T2 → R23	(TP with a constant theme)	Rebuttal data

Paragraph 4

Clause 25	T2 → R24	(TP with a constant theme)	Counterclaim 3
Clause 26	T2 → R25	(TP with a constant theme)	Counterclaim data
Clause 27	T12 (R25) → R26	(Thematization of rheme)	Rebuttal claim 3
Clause 28	T2 → R27	(TP with a constant theme)	Rebuttal data
Clause 29	T13 → R28	(Brand new theme)	Rebuttal data
Clause 30	T13 → R29	(TP with a constant theme)	Rebuttal data
Clause 31	T14 → R30	(TP with a constant theme)	Rebuttal data
Clause 32	T15 (R30) → R31	(Thematization of rheme)	Rebuttal data

Paragraph 5

Clause 33	T16 → R32	(Brand new theme)	Restatement of Claim
Clause 34	T2 → R33	(TP with a constant theme)	Data
Clause 35	T17 → R34	(Brand new theme)	Data
Clause 36	T2 → R35	(TP with a constant theme)	Data

Unlike essay no. 019, essay no. 022 had a thematic progression that showed a considerable degree of textual coherence. The most frequently occurring patterns in this essay were TP with a constant Theme, followed by a split Rheme and thematization of a Rheme. Nevertheless, some patterns with brand new themes were also apparent, but they did not interrupt the thought flow. A constant Theme was found within paragraphs and throughout the essay. The topical Theme,

“physician-assisted suicide (PAS)”, was first introduced as Rheme 2 in clause 2 and was consistently maintained as Themes in later paragraphs. Several others, such as Themes 4, 9, and 13, were also maintained in the body paragraphs. A split Rheme found in paragraph 3 was used to define Theme 6 in clause 13.

The argument in essay no. 022 emphasized the necessity of legalizing euthanasia. Euthanasia was replaced by the term ‘physician-assisted suicide’ (PAS) throughout the essay, showing reiteration which also became a constant Theme. The claim in the form of a thesis statement began with a circumstance preceding the noun ‘PAS’. The Rheme of the thesis statement (a hypertheme) contained a participant (‘patients’) and a process (‘make their own decision with their body’). These elements in the Rhemes were then thematized in subsequent paragraphs, and were mostly in the form of lexical cohesion, namely reiteration (e.g., PAS, patients, doctors) and collocations (e.g., terminal disease, ethics, and rights). The frequent use of lexical cohesion as Themes helped strengthen the argument on legalizing PAS as well as clarifying the ethical side of PAS which was stated implicitly, but could be inferred from the various lexical devices used.

Discussion

This research answers two research questions. Research question 1 relates to the differences in thematic progression between low-score and high-score essays. Research question 2 is about how thematic progression influences the quality of argumentative writing. The answers to these two research questions have been integrated into the following discussion.

The frequent occurrences of brand-new Themes in the low-score essays were consistent with findings from previous studies (Belmonte & McCabe-Hildalgo, 1998; Le & Wijitsopon, 2012; Rosa & Padang, 2007; Truc, 2019; Wang, 2007). However, the high-score essays appeared to be better organized than the low-score counterpart because of the frequent employment of constant Themes, thematization of Rhemes, and split Rhemes. The frequent use of thematic progressions with a constant Theme in the argumentative writing of the high-score group was in line with findings from studies by Keskin and Koçbaş Demir (2021) and

Soleymanzadeh and Gholami (2014). Even though the sample high-score essay was more effective at using these techniques than the sample low-score one, the previous studies indicate that these patterns are still commonly found in essays written by beginner EFL writers. When these findings are compared to those of Chanyoo (2013), it is clear that students' writing levels, based on Daneš' (1974) patterns, are related to their ability to organize textual ideas or information within a text. In other words, less proficient writers tend to rely on repeating a topic, a constant Theme pattern, and thematization of Rhemes, whereas more proficient writers can take control of their writing and ideas by more often using derived thematic progression and linear progression.

An analysis of the essay 019, a sample low-score essay, suggests a lack of thematic progression. This result is similar to findings from Raso and Padang (2007), and shows that a scarcity of Theme progressions caused difficulties for readers trying to follow and make connections among the ideas. In addition, the Rhemes did not provide additional in-depth details about the Theme. The Rhemes in essay no. 019 often led to new ideas, failing to elaborate on the Themes of the hypertheme (thesis statement) and paragraphs. This incoherence weakened the soundness of the reasons provided and contributed to the low score that this essay received. On the other hand, essay no. 022, a sample high-score essay, showed connections and continuity among ideas using regular Themes and Rheme elaborations or expansions. These progressions emphasized the focus of the essay and resulted in a deeper discussion about the topic. Such textual continuity within the text helped this essay to earn a high score.

It is important to mention that the students who wrote these two essays had not yet been taught about thematic progression nor introduced to the concepts of Theme and Rheme. In fact, they will learn about these concepts in their third-year linguistic courses. What they have learned thus far has focused on the use of cohesive devices to create coherence in writing along with components of paragraph and essay structures.

The frequent occurrences of a constant Theme and split Rheme in the high-score essay suggest that the student writer was able to clearly understand the focus of the essay—the topic. In the low-score essay,

which had few incidences of a constant Theme but many brand-new themes, the student might not have had a clear understanding of how to pinpoint or develop a focus. All paragraphs within the low-score essay did contain a topic sentence, showing that the student understood the correct structure. However, the controlling idea in the topic sentence was not appropriately developed because new Themes and Rhemes were regularly introduced in subsequent clauses. This significantly weakened the development of the main ideas stated in the topic sentences.

In addition to the problems noted with the thematic progression of the entire text, the findings also signal students' difficulties in constructing coherence at a sentential level. The brand-new themes found frequently in the low-score essay showed that this student had not yet gained a clear understanding of sentence structure meaning. It is true that all sentences in this essay were grammatically correct, including a subject and predicate. However, underlying the position of those grammatical elements is a focus which needs to be prioritized and proved; as Halliday (2014) suggests, the focus of a sentence should be at an initial position (Theme). This student may understand grammar but needs to learn more about the meaning aspects of those structures. In other words, meaning needs to come with forms or formats.

Daneš' (1974) Thematic Progression allows us to visualize an overall organization of an entire text or a writing, enabling writers to later examine individual sentences and their connections that build up the text. The progression patterns can be perceived as representations of deductive thinking in which a Theme is continuously expanded with relevant details.

In short, there was a difference in terms of patterns of thematic progression in the essays from both score groups. The fact that the low-score essays did not follow thematic progression patterns led to a lack of coherence in all of the essays in this group. Linguistic coherence of the whole text may not be enough to account for the scores these essays earned. Subsumed within linguistic coherence is argument coherence, which could be examined and determined by the use of cohesive devices. I demonstrate through the analysis of the sample essays that arguments are also realized and encoded in the forms of words which are small units of syntactic and text structures. Lexical cohesion in the forms of reiteration, substitution, and collocation signaled claims or arguments

that the students tried to make. These needed to be of central focus in order to prove and delineate one's claim. When these lexical cohesion ties were not connected or reinforced in the writing, the arguments became weak, leading to underdeveloped arguments and low scores.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This research is not without limitations, and they need to be addressed. First, this research employed a qualitative approach, specifically textual analysis, to investigate coherence issues in the writing of EFL undergraduate students. The small sample size and the data collection methods may weaken the generalizability of the results. Any generalization made from the findings of this research should be made with caution. Next, the data were not collected during a control situation in which student participants were all required to write an argumentative essay on a same topic. The variety of essay topics might have effected the lexical choices that the students made. It may also have effected their choices of Themes and thematic progression patterns. The issue of topic and thematic progression choices might be of interest to investigate further. Regarding the rating of the essays, interrater reliability was not statistically examined. This was due to time constraints and the fact that the two raters (the researcher and the other teacher) were not yet familiar with the rubric. As the result, we had to conduct both training and scoring at the same time. In hindsight, the rubric should have been adapted, so that the score of each aspect used would be statistically sound. Finally, the coding of thematic progression should have been conducted by two coders instead of one coder to provide statistically reliability of the coding. This was also due to time constraints and the current circumstances unsuitable for training on thematic progression patterns.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The objective of the current paper is to determine the reason(s) why argumentative essays earned different scores on a rubric that emphasized arguments with a focus on the connectedness of a thesis statement and its accompanying evidence. By examining the thematic progression patterns of the essays, the findings suggest that textual

coherence through thematic progression affects the connectivity of arguments and the accompanying reasons of the essays, contributing to the scores and argument quality. In addition, well-structured thematic progression with constant Themes as well as the thematization of Rhemes help develop a discussion on argument(s) of a given topic. These two prominent progression patterns were reinforced using reiteration of the subjects in the topics (e.g., physician-assisted suicide or PAS in Legalization of Euthanasia). By doing this, student writers could focus on the subject matter and add depth as well as breadth to a topic, moving the discussion forward and achieving the purposes of the writing. It is thus plausible to make an inference that novice writers tend to rely on thematic progression with a constant theme and thematization of Rheme when they write argumentative essays in the same manner as they would when they write in other modes of discourse such as narrative and expository texts.

Thematic progression can be a helpful concept in the teaching and learning of EFL writing. It can be applied at the revision stage, with students examining textual coherence at a macro level – a whole piece of writing – in addition to local coherence at sentential or clause levels. For teachers, addressing issues of thematic progression when discussing drafts can help students to better understand how to develop and improve their ideas. Moreover, the progression of Themes should be listed as a specific part of coherence in rubrics and the use of cohesive devices should be required in order to raise students' awareness about how to develop relevant ideas for their topic.

Thematic progression by Daneš (1974) suggests structures for logical connections of ideas as well as how to move a theme or topic forward and increase depth. These patterns should not merely be used at the format level. Latent features, including thematic patterns or the 5-paragraph format, are hierarchical relationships of ideas, objects and things which require some cognitive processing. They should not be considered fixed formats of textual organization for writing, but rather provide a foundation for understanding how to create textual continuity and coherence in writing. They are only guidelines that novice EFL writers can use to progress beyond merely learning to organize their writing and gain the skills required to truly express their meanings.

To this end, incorporating a knowledge of thematic progression in writing courses not only assists instructors and student writers during the writing process but also promotes students' understanding of how to apply theoretical linguistic knowledge to skill-based courses. This will help bridge gaps in knowledge and correct the misunderstanding that content courses are not related to skill-based courses. To clarify, at the department where I teach, Themes and Rhemes are not new to students because these concepts are included in their linguistics courses. I believe students in similar contexts who have studied Systemic Functional Grammar in their linguistics courses will benefit as well. It is hoped that applying the linguistic frameworks of Theme – Rheme will encourage both instructors and students to integrate these ideas and put theories related to writing into practice.

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Appendix

Turnitin Rubric: AP English Argument Essay (Total: 6 points) (Turnitin, 2021)

Thesis (1 point)
The thesis may appear anywhere within the essay. A thesis that meets the criteria can be awarded the point whether or not the rest of the response successfully supports that line of reasoning.
0 points For any of the following: - There is no defensible thesis.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The intended thesis only restates the prompt. - The intended thesis provides a summary of the issue with no apparent or coherent claim. - There is a thesis, but it does not respond to the prompt. <p>Responses that do not earn this point:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The intended thesis is vague, must be inferred, does not take a position (e.g., it depends on your point of view) - The intended thesis simply states an obvious fact rather than making a claim that requires a defense.
<p>1 point</p> <p>Responds to the prompt with a defensible thesis that may establish a line of reasoning.</p> <p>Responses that earn this point:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The thesis responds to the prompt rather than restating or rephrasing the prompt and clearly takes a position rather than just stating there are pros/cons.
<p>Evidence & Commentary (4 points)</p>
<p>Writing that suffers from grammatical and/or mechanical errors that interfere with communication cannot earn the fourth point in this row.</p>
<p>0 points</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Simply restates thesis (if present). OR Repeats provided information. OR Provides examples that are generally irrelevant and/or incoherent. - Typical responses that earn 0 points <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - are incoherent and do not address the prompt - may offer just opinion with little or no evidence provided.
<p>1 point</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provides evidence or example(s) relevant to the subject of the prompt. AND - Provides little or no commentary. <p>Typical responses that earn 1 point:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide evidence but little or no explanation

<p>2 points</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provides evidence or examples(s) relevant to the subject of the prompt. AND - Provides commentary; however, it repeats, oversimplifies, or misinterprets the cited information or evidence <p>Typical responses that earn 2 points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide explanations of evidence that are repetitive (there is little or no development).
<p>3 points</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provides evidence relevant to the thesis. AND - Provides commentary that explains the relationship between evidence and the thesis; however, commentary is uneven, limited, or incomplete. <p>Typical responses that earn 3 points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide commentary that is clear but there are times when the link between the evidence and the thesis may be unclear or strained.
<p>4 points</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provides evidence relevant to the thesis. AND - Provides well-developed commentary that consistently and explicitly explains the relationship between the evidence and the thesis. <p>Typical responses that earn 4 points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide commentary that engages specific evidence to draw conclusions. - Integrate evidence throughout to support the student's reasoning.
Sophistication (1 point)
This point should be awarded only if the demonstration of sophistication or complex understanding is part of the argument, not merely a phrase or reference.
<p>0 points</p> <p>Does not meet the criteria for 1 point. Responses that do not earn this point:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attempt to contextualize their argument, but such attempts consist of predominantly sweeping generalizations - Only hint or suggest other arguments.

- Use complicated or complex sentences or language that are ineffective in that they do not enhance the argument.

1 point

Demonstrates sophistication of thought and/or a complex understanding of the rhetorical situation. Responses that earn this point may demonstrate sophistication of thought and/or a complex understanding of the rhetorical situation by doing any of the following:

1. Crafting a thesis that demands nuanced consideration of textual evidence to prove – and then successfully proves it.
2. Situating the argument within a broader context, recognizing the implications of the argument.
3. Engaging concession, rebuttal, and/or refutation of other arguments relating to the thesis.
4. Making effective rhetorical choices that strengthen the force and impact of the student's argument.
5. Utilizing a prose style that is especially vivid, persuasive, convincing, or appropriate to the student's argument.