Theme-Rheme Framework in Hemingway's The Old Man and The Sea: A Systemic Functional Linguistics Perspective

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Article Info
Received 24 October 2025
Revised 21 August 2026
Accepted 26 August 2026
Available online 31 August 2026

Abstract

This paper explores the theoretical framework of Theme and Rheme within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and its relevance to Ernest Hemingway's novella The Old Man and the Sea. Drawing on Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) model, the study examines how thematic structures, including topical, textual, and interpersonal Themes, organize the flow of information and contribute to textual coherence. A literature review approach was employed, synthesizing three main strands: applications of Theme-Rheme in literary texts, its role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing, and linguistic as well as literary analyses of Hemingway's work. The findings revealed that Theme-Rheme analysis offers valuable insights into Hemingway's minimalist style, paratactic sentence structures, and symbolic representations, while also highlighting the novella's suitability for pedagogical use in ELT contexts. The study identifies gaps in previous research, noting limited integration of Theme-Rheme with Hemingway studies, and underscores the framework's interdisciplinary potential. Overall, this paper lays the groundwork for future research applying Theme-Rheme analysis to literary texts, bridging linguistic theory, literary interpretation, and language pedagogy.

Keywords: Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea, Systemic Functional Linguistics Perspective, Theme-Rheme Framework

Introduction

This paper investigates the theoretical framework of Theme and Rheme in Ernest Hemingway's novella The Old Man and the Sea. Theme and Rheme, central concepts within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), describe how information is structured in a clause and how meaning unfolds in discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Over the past decades, Theme-Rheme analysis has been widely applied across disciplines, including literary studies (Khalfan, Irshad, & Khawar, 2021), discourse analysis (Martin & Rose, 2022), and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing (Shi & Yuan, 2019; Himphinit & Astia, 2023). Such applications demonstrate the framework's value in uncovering textual coherence, stylistic features, and communicative strategies.

The Old Man and the Sea, awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954, is regarded as one of Hemingway's most enduring masterpieces. Its concise prose, symbolic depth, and distinctive narrative rhythm have inspired extensive literary scholarship (Handayani, 2021; Rauf, 2023). However, while many studies focus on symbolism, the Iceberg Theory, or narrative style, relatively fewer have explored the novella through the lens of SFL, particularly Theme-Rheme structures. Recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of integrating linguistic and literary perspectives to achieve deeper textual interpretation (Thompson, 2021). Against this background, the present paper reviews the Theme-

Rheme framework and explores its potential for analyzing Hemingway's narrative style. In doing so, it also highlights pedagogical implications for English Language Teaching (ELT), where thematic analysis can enhance learners' awareness of textual organization and coherence.

Rationale of the Study

This study holds significance from both linguistic and literary perspectives. From a linguistic standpoint, it extends the application of Theme–Rheme analysis to a literary text, demonstrating how information is sequenced, how discourse is organized, and how textual coherence is achieved. From a literary standpoint, the use of Theme–Rheme theory provides deeper insights into Hemingway's minimalist style and his celebrated Iceberg Theory, illustrating how meaning is constructed both explicitly and implicitly in the narrative. By bridging these perspectives, the study not only reviews the theoretical framework of Theme and Rheme in relation to The Old Man and the Sea but also highlights its broader implications for linguistic analysis, literary interpretation, and English Language Teaching (ELT).

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and the Theme–Rheme Framework

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is widely recognized as a fundamental analytical framework for examining language as a social semiotic system. It is described as a functional-semantic approach to grammar that explores how people use language in different contexts and how linguistic structures are organized to create meaning (Eggins, 2004; Matthiessen, 2019). According to Martin, Matthiessen, and Painter (1997), Halliday's original purpose in formulating SFL was to provide a general grammar for the analysis and interpretation of texts. Unlike traditional formal grammar, SFL emphasizes meaning over form, offering richer insights into how texts function in context (Thompson, 2021).

Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) identify three metafunctions of language, each reflecting a distinct dimension of meaning-making:

1. Ideational Metafunction – This metafunction organizes human experience into meaning, enabling the representation of processes, participants, and circumstances. It consists of two components:

Experiential function: encodes processes and participants in discourse.

Logical function: expresses relationships between clauses, contributing to the organization of the text (Martin & Rose, 2022).

2. Interpersonal Metafunction-This metafunction manages social interaction, conveying attitudes, judgments, and speaker intentions. It includes mood (statements, questions, commands), modality (certainty, obligation), and evaluation. For example, in The Old Man and the Sea, Hemingway's use of declaratives and interrogatives creates authentic dialogue and reveals character relationships (Thompson, 2021).

3. Textual Metafunction-This metafunction ensures cohesion and coherence by organizing information flow across discourse. Theme and Rheme are central to this metafunction, as they structure clauses into points of departure (Theme) and development (Rheme), thereby shaping textual progression and coherence (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Among these metafunctions, the Theme-Rheme framework is particularly relevant to this study because it highlights how information is sequenced, how coherence is maintained, and how meaning is foregrounded within Hemingway's narrative style.

Theme-Rheme Structure

The Theme-Rheme framework is one of the key theories in SFL. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), Theme is the element that serves as the point of departure of the message, which locates and orients the clause within its context; while Rheme is the remainder of the message in which the Theme is developed. Based on this definition, a clause consists of a Theme accompanied by a Rheme, and the structure is expressed by the order in which whatever is chosen as the Theme is put first (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Table 1 shows the Theme-Rheme structure.

Table 1: Theme-Rheme Structure

Theme	Rheme
Sarah	has given Aisha that doll
Aisha	has been given that doll by Sarah
That doll	Sarah has given to Aisha

As shown in Table 1, the three clauses convey the same propositional content, but the choice of Theme highlights different elements as the point of departure, thus creating different thematic prominence. Hence, a clause can be regarded as a message unfolding from the chosen Theme (the part the speaker or writer highlights for the addressee) to the Rheme (the part that further develops the message) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Marked and Unmarked Themes

Having introduced the basic Theme-Rheme structure, it is important to consider how Theme can be further distinguished as marked or unmarked according to its position within the clause. As Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) suggested, in a declarative clause, if a Theme is conflated with the Subject, it refers to the Unmarked Theme of that declarative clause. Conversely, if a Theme is something other than the Subject, it is defined as a Marked Theme. Table 2 presents the usual forms of Marked Theme.

Table 2: Usual Forms of Marked Theme

Forms	Examples
Adverbial Group	today, suddenly, somewhat distractedly
Prepositional Phrase	at night, in the corner,

source: Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014, p.98

Group / Phrase Complexes as Theme

In the examples above, the Theme consists of a single element. However, in some cases, the Theme may include two or more groups or phrases functioning together as one structural unit (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Table 3 represents this type of Theme.

Table 3: Group Complex or Phrase Complex as Theme

Theme	Rheme
The Walrus and the Carpenter	were walking close at hand
From house to house	I went away

source: Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 92

As shown in Table 3, such Themes still count as simple Themes, since the group complex or phrase complex constitutes a single element within the clause. For instance, in the first clause, the Theme comprises two nominal groups (“the Walrus and the Carpenter”), forming a nominal group complex; in the second clause, the Theme is realized by two prepositional phrases (“from house to house”), forming a prepositional phrase complex.

Thematic Equative

In contrast to group and phrase complex functioning as simple Themes, another thematic structure worth noting is the thematic equative. This refers to an identifying clause with a thematic nominalization, and its function is to express the Theme-Rheme structure in such a way as to allow the Theme to consist of any subset of the elements of the clause (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). This type of thematic structure is expressed by some form of the verb *be*. Examples are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Examples of Thematic Equative

Theme	verb be	Rheme
Nominalization as Theme		
What no one seems to notice	**Was**	the writing on the wall
The thing that impressed me	**is**	their enthusiasm for the job.
Nominalization as Rheme		
Two pence a day	**was**	what my master allowed me
The Walrus	**is**	the one I like the best

source: Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, P.96

As shown in Table 4, in the typical instance, the nominalization functions as Theme since the Theme is the prominent element in the Theme-Rheme structure (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). *What no one seems to notice* in the first clause and *the thing that impressed me* in the second clause are of this type. However, there is a marked alternative, in which the usual relationship is reversed and the nominalization becomes the Rheme (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Such as *what my master allowed me* in the third clause, and *the one I like the best* in the fourth clause.

Predicated Theme

Predicated Theme is another resource that often occurs in the organization of the clause as a message, which involves a particular combination of thematic and informational choices (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), and the structure is frequently associated with an explicit formulation of contrast-typically realized as it was (not)…, that/which/who… An example is provided in Table 5

Table 5: An example of the Predicated Theme

	It	was his teacher	who	persuade him to continue
(a)	Theme	Rheme	Theme	Rheme
(b)	**Theme**		**Rheme**	

source: Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, P.124

Table 4 provides a complete thematic analysis, with the local thematic structure (version a) in which it and who are both subjects, and the thematic structure of the whole clause as predicated Theme (version b) in which it was his teacher functions as the Theme of the whole clause.

The Classification of Theme Types

Beyond specific realizations such as thematic equative and predicated Theme, Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) further classify Theme into three types according to their function in the clause: topical, textual, and interpersonal Theme. Each type of Theme is composed of different constituents. Topical Theme refers to the Theme of a clause that ends with the first constituent: participant, circumstance, or process. Other elements in a clause preceding the topical Theme are textual or interpersonal Themes, and these two types of Themes play no part in the experiential meaning of the clause. Table 6 presents the components of each type of Theme.

Table 6: Components of Each Type of Theme

Types of Themes	Components
Textual Theme	Continuative Conjunction (structural Theme) Conjunctive Adjunct
Interpersonal Theme	Modal/comment Adjunct Vocative Finite operator
Topical Theme	participant Circumstance Process

source: Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, P.107

As shown in Table 6, textual Themes can be summarized as continuative, conjunction (structural Theme), and conjunctive Adjunct. Table 7 illustrates the components of each element with definitions and representative examples.

Table 7: Components of Textual Theme

Types of components	Definition	Examples
Continuative	A small set of words signaling a move in the discourse, such as a response, in dialogue, or a new move to the next point if the same speaker is continuing.	1. Yes 2. No 3. Well 4. Oh 5. Now
Conjunction	A word or group links (paratactic) or binds (hypotactic) the clause in which it occurs structurally to another clause.	**Paratactic**: and, or, nor, either, neither, but, yet, so, then… **Hypotactic**: when, while, before, after, until, although, that…

Types of components	Definition	Examples
	Semantically, it sets up a relationship of expansion or projection.	
Conjunctive Adjunct	Adverbial groups or prepositional phrases that relate the clause to the preceding text. They cover roughly the same semantic space as conjunctions.	Appositive: that is, in other words Corrective: or rather, at least dismissive: in any case, anyway…
For more examples, see Halliday & Matthiessen's (2014) Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar (4th edition), pages 108-109.		

source: Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 107-109

On the other hand, the interpersonal theme can be summarized as modal/comment Adjunct, vocative, and finite verbal operator (in yes/no interrogative). Vocative is any item, typically a personal name, being used to address. In contrast, Modal/comment Adjuncts express the speaker or writer's judgement on or attitude to the content of the message. In comparison, the finite verbal operator is the small set of finite auxiliary verbs (including their negatives) construing primary tense or modality. They are also the unmarked Theme of yes/no interrogatives (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Together with topical Themes, these categories provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing how Themes contribute to the organization of meaning in discourse.

Theme in Bound, Embedded, Minor, and Elliptical Clauses

In addition to free clauses, Themes also function in various clause structures, such as bound, minor, and elliptical clauses, in which the analysis and identification are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of thematic organization. Table 8 concludes Theme in these structures with representative examples.

Table 8: Theme in Bound, Minor, and Elliptical Clauses

Types of Clauses	Theme Identification	Example
Dependent Bound Clauses	If finite, these typically have a conjunction as a structural Theme, followed by a topical Theme	[They know] that (structural Theme) in spring (topical Theme) the snow would melt (Rheme).
	If the bound clause begins with a WH-element, that element constitutes the topical Theme.	[I asked] why (topical Theme) no one was around (Rheme).
	If non-finite, there may be a conjunction or preposition as structural Theme, which may be followed by a Subject as topical Theme; but many non-finite clauses have neither, in which case they consist of Rheme only.	With (structural Theme) all the doors (topical Theme) being locked (Rheme), [we had no way in]

Types of Clauses	Theme Identification	Example
Embedded Clauses	These clauses function inside a nominal group's structure, defining relative clauses. However, due to their down-ranking, the fact that they do not function as constituents of a sentence, their thematic contribution to the discourse is minimal, and for practical purposes can be ignored.	Who came to dinner in The man who came to dinner. The dam broke in the day the dam broke. Requiring travel permits in all personnel requiring travel permits.
Minor Clauses	These clauses have no mood or transitivity structure, typically as calls, greetings, exclamations, and alarms. They are not regarded as clauses because they have no independent speech function.	Mary! Good night! Well done!
Elliptical Clauses	Conversational Ellipsis: In dialogue, the Theme is often omitted when contextually recoverable, especially in responses.	Q: Who ate the cake? A: John.
	Implicit Theme in Imperative Clauses	Close the door (Implied Theme: You).
	Shared Theme in Coordinated Clauses	She opened the door and walked in (the second clause omitted the Theme “she”).

source: Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 125-128

The foregoing discussion has outlined the theoretical framework of Theme and Rheme. The following section turns to previous studies that have applied this framework in different contexts.

Different Studies on Theme-Rheme

The Theme-Rheme framework has been applied across diverse fields, particularly in literary narratives and EFL writing. This section reviews selected studies to illustrate how the framework has been developed and applied.

Theme-Rheme in Literary Narratives

Dashela (2021): Theme and Rheme in *Sleeping Beauty*

Dashela (2021) conducted an SFL-based analysis of Theme-Rheme structures in Charles Perrault’s *Sleeping Beauty*, examining 45 clauses. The study identified three main findings: 1) topical Themes were typically realized as subjects or adverbials, 2) textual Themes included conjunctive adjuncts, continuatives, and conjunctions, and 3) interpersonal Themes were absent. This absence suggests that thematic structures may vary across genres. While the study successfully classified Theme types, its scope was limited, given the small dataset. Moreover, it did not fully explain why interpersonal Themes were missing, whether

this was due to genre conventions or authorial style, and how this absence influenced reader engagement and narrative construction.

Khalfan et al. (2021). Theme and Rheme in Edgar Allan Poe's Poetry

Khalfan et al. (2021) analyzed Theme–Rheme structures in four dream-themed poems by Edgar Allan Poe (A Dream, Dreams, Dreamland, and A Dream within a Dream). Their findings revealed that unmarked Themes dominated, while textual and multiple Themes contributed to textual cohesion and flow. Marked Themes were also employed to create ambiguity and emphasis, reflecting Poe's stylistic choices. The study demonstrates how Theme-Rheme analysis can uncover more profound coherence and interpretive layers in poetry.

Together, the studies by Dashela (2021) and Khalfan et al. (2021) highlight how different literary genres employ Theme-Rheme structures in varying ways. Narrative texts such as fairy tales rely heavily on topical and textual Themes to maintain coherence. At the same time, poetry tends to incorporate a higher proportion of marked Themes to create emphasis, ambiguity, and emotional resonance. These findings confirm that Theme-Rheme analysis is a versatile tool for uncovering stylistic and genre-specific patterns in literary texts.

Table 8: Comparison of the Two Studies

Study	Primary Text Type	Dominant Theme Type	Key Findings
Dashela (2021)	Narrative	Topical & Textual	Interpersonal Themes were absent. Thematic continuity was maintained through repeated subjects.
Khalfan et al. (2021)	Poetry	Topical & Interpersonal	More frequent use of Interpersonal Themes in dialogue-heavy poetry.

These studies suggest that text type significantly influences thematic structuring:

Narrative texts rely on Topical and Textual Themes to maintain coherence and continuity.

Poetry employs a higher frequency of Interpersonal Themes to convey emotion, address the reader, and introduce rhetorical devices.

The findings of these studies provide a methodological foundation for the present paper. They demonstrate that:

Different literary genres exhibit distinct Theme-Rheme structures, affecting textual coherence.

Topical Themes remain dominant in narrative and poetic texts, but Interpersonal Themes vary based on the text's communicative function.

While the above studies highlight how Theme-Rheme structures vary across literary genres, another important line of research concerns their role in EFL writing. This strand of work explores how learners organize information and achieve coherence through thematic choices.

Theme and Rheme in EFL Writing

The Theme-Rheme framework has been widely applied in EFL writing research, where it plays a crucial role in textual organization, coherence, and cohesion, all of which directly affect writing quality. Shi and Yuan (2019) investigated the thematic structures of

Chinese EFL students' compositions from the College English Test-6 (CET-6). Their analysis revealed that high-scoring texts displayed a greater variety of Theme types and thematic progression patterns. In contrast, low-scoring texts relied heavily on repetitive topical Themes, resulting in weak cohesion and disorganized structures. The authors concluded that explicit instruction in Theme-Rheme analysis could enhance students' ability to produce coherent academic writing.

Building on these findings, Himphinit and Astia (2023) examined Theme use among Indonesian undergraduates. Their study showed that high- and mid-proficiency learners successfully employed topical, textual, and interpersonal Themes. In contrast, low-proficiency learners often failed to apply them, sometimes producing Rhemes without preceding Themes, which led to incoherent sentences. These results closely align with those of Shi and Yuan (2019), despite the different educational contexts, reinforcing the argument that writing proficiency is closely tied to the ability to diversify Theme choices.

Collectively, these studies emphasize that proficient learners tend to employ a balanced mix of Theme types, while less proficient learners rely almost exclusively on topical Themes. This echoes Paltridge's (2006) observation that native speakers intuitively use thematic progression, whereas second-language learners require explicit guidance. More recent scholarship further highlights that instruction in Theme–Rheme analysis not only improves writing coherence but also raises learners' awareness of textual organization as a resource for meaning-making (Wei, 2023).

Together with research on literary texts, these EFL writing studies confirm the versatility of the Theme-Rheme framework. While literary analyses employ it to uncover stylistic and interpretive patterns, EFL research highlights its diagnostic and pedagogical value in assessing and developing writing competence. This convergence of findings provides a strong foundation for the present study, which applies Theme-Rheme theory to Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea to explore both its linguistic and literary significance.

Previous Studies on The Old Man and the Sea

Among Hemingway's works, The Old Man and the Sea is widely regarded as a masterpiece, and numerous studies have examined its stylistic and literary significance. Four major areas emerge from this scholarship: Hemingway's writing style, the use of symbolism, the Iceberg Theory, and linguistic approaches rooted in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Together, these perspectives provide a foundation for exploring how Theme–Rheme structures contribute to textual coherence in the novella.

Writing Style

Hemingway's prose is renowned for its brevity and precision, and The Old Man and the Sea exemplifies this minimalist style. The language is natural, direct, and unadorned, producing clarity and immediacy. When Hemingway does not employ short, simple sentences, he frequently links clauses paratactically, often through the conjunction and (Xie, 2008). From an SFL perspective, such usage functions as a textual Theme, guiding readers seamlessly through the narrative. Another defining feature of his style lies in the use of dialogue. As Xie (2008) observes, interpolations such as he said are often omitted, lending a conversational quality that makes readers feel as though they are "listening" rather than "reading." Viewed through Theme-Rheme analysis, this style opens space for examining how interpersonal Themes shape character interaction and narrative flow.

Symbolism

The novella is rich in symbolism, which deepens its thematic resonance. According to Handayani (2021), both characters and natural elements serve symbolic roles. For example, the marlin represents a worthy opponent and the dignity of struggle, the sea embodies life's vast unpredictability, and the lions in Santiago's dreams symbolize youth, strength, and

resilience. From a linguistic perspective, Hemingway reinforces these symbols through the repetition of topical Themes (e.g., "the marlin," "the sea"), which ensures their centrality and cohesion throughout the narrative. Thus, symbolic meaning and thematic structuring work hand in hand to sustain the novel's coherence.

The Iceberg Theory

Hemingway's Iceberg Theory emphasizes the power of implicit meaning, suggesting that the surface of the text reveals only part of the story while more profound truths remain submerged (Todd, 2007; Rauf, 2023). In The Old Man and the Sea, this is evident in the sparse prose that conveys themes of endurance, human-nature relationships, and existential struggle. As Rauf (2023) notes, the novella encourages readers to uncover hidden meanings through allegory and symbolism. From an SFL standpoint, the Iceberg Theory can also be analyzed through Theme-Rheme choices, as Hemingway's structuring of Themes subtly directs interpretation and foregrounds key ideas without overt exposition.

Linguistic Approaches to The Old Man and the Sea

Several studies have applied SFL frameworks directly to the novella. Khrisna et al. (2018) used the Appraisal Framework to analyze Santiago's characterization across the narrative's three stages, orientation, complication, and resolution. Their findings showed that Affect (emotions) dominated over Judgement (personality) and Appreciation (physical condition), portraying Santiago primarily through his emotional experiences. For example, the line "He had felt faint and dizzy, and that had worried him" highlights Santiago's vulnerability, reinforcing the centrality of emotion in his characterization.

Setyaji et al. (2019) focused on clause structures and logical relations, examining the distribution of parataxis and hypotaxis. Their results revealed that parataxis dominates (65.3%), with expansion relations far more frequent than projection, underscoring Hemingway's preference for direct, additive structures. This aligns with Xie's (2008) observation that Hemingway's prose is often built on sequential connections, which serve as textual Themes to maintain narrative cohesion.

Together, these studies illustrate complementary dimensions of Hemingway's style. While Khrisna et al. (2018) highlight how evaluative resources construct Santiago's emotional identity, Setyaji et al. (2019) emphasize the structural and cohesive mechanisms of the text. Both approaches demonstrate the value of SFL in literary analysis, yet neither explicitly applies the Theme-Rheme framework. This gap underscores the potential of the present study to explore how Hemingway's narrative coherence and stylistic effects can be systematically explained through Theme-Rheme analysis.

The reviewed studies have shown that The Old Man and the Sea has been analyzed extensively from literary and linguistic perspectives that highlight Hemingway's minimalist style, symbolic richness, and use of implicit meaning through the Iceberg Theory. Linguistic research grounded in SFL, such as Appraisal and clause structure analysis, has also revealed valuable insights into character construction and narrative coherence. However, these approaches stop short of systematically applying the Theme-Rheme framework to the novella. Since Theme-Rheme analysis provides a powerful tool for uncovering how information is sequenced, how cohesion is maintained, and how textual coherence is achieved, this gap represents an opportunity for deeper interdisciplinary inquiry. The present study addresses this need by positioning Theme-Rheme analysis as a bridge between literary interpretation, linguistic description, and pedagogical application, thereby offering fresh insights into Hemingway's narrative techniques and their relevance to English Language Teaching (ELT).

Critical Analysis and Discussion

Building on the reviewed literature, this section critically examines how the Theme-Rheme framework has been applied in literary texts, EFL writing, and research on The Old

Man and the Sea. The discussion highlights the framework's strengths in revealing textual organization and stylistic effects, while also pointing out its limitations and unexplored areas.

Studies on literary narratives and poetry demonstrate that Theme-Rheme structures significantly shape textual organization and stylistic meaning. Dashela (2021), for example, found that narrative texts rely heavily on topical and textual Themes to maintain coherence, while Khalfan et al. (2021) showed that poetry employs interpersonal Themes more frequently to express emotion and engage readers. These findings indicate that thematic choices vary across genres, reflecting differences in communicative function. While such studies are valuable, they tend to be narrowly focused, often analyzing a limited number of clauses or texts. Consequently, their findings, though insightful, lack generalizability. To strengthen claims about thematic structuring in literature, future research should employ broader corpus-based investigations that can capture patterns across multiple works and genres.

In the field of EFL writing, Theme–Rheme research highlights a strong relationship between thematic variety and writing proficiency. Shi and Yuan (2019) showed that high-scoring Chinese students employed diverse Theme types and progression patterns, while low-scoring students relied primarily on topical Themes, producing texts with weaker cohesion. Similarly, Himphinit and Astia (2023) found that Indonesian undergraduates with higher proficiency successfully used topical, textual, and interpersonal Themes, while lower-proficiency learners sometimes produced Rhemes without preceding Themes, leading to incoherent sentences. These consistent findings across different educational contexts confirm that mastery of Theme–Rheme correlates with writing quality. However, the studies stop short of offering pedagogical frameworks for explicitly teaching Theme–Rheme usage. As Paltridge (2006) notes, native speakers use thematic progression intuitively, whereas second-language learners require direct instruction. This suggests that Theme–Rheme analysis should not only be seen as a diagnostic tool but also integrated into writing pedagogy to help learners consciously improve textual coherence. More recent studies (Wei, 2023) reinforce this point, demonstrating that explicit training in thematic progression enhances students' awareness of textual organization and overall writing performance.

When turning to literary studies of The Old Man and the Sea, most research has focused on style, symbolism, and Hemingway's Iceberg Theory. Xie (2008) highlighted the paratactic sentence structures that create rhythm and clarity, often linked through and. Handayani (2021) examined the novel's symbolism, showing how repeated motifs such as the marlin, the sea, and lions reinforce thematic depth. Rauf (2023) emphasized the Iceberg Theory, noting how Hemingway's sparse surface prose conceals profound existential themes. While these studies provide valuable literary insights, they are not grounded in linguistic frameworks, leaving questions about how Hemingway achieves narrative coherence at the clause level.

Some research has employed Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to analyze the novella. Khrisna et al. (2023) applied the Appraisal Framework to show how Santiago is primarily characterized through Affect (emotion), while Setyaji et al. (2019) analyzed clause structures, finding that parataxis dominates and expansion relations outnumber projections. Together, these studies reveal how linguistic choices shape characterization and narrative flow. However, neither explicitly applies Theme–Rheme analysis, which could reveal how coherence is maintained through clause-level organization and thematic progression.

Taken together, the reviewed studies demonstrate the value of both literary and linguistic approaches, but also highlight an important gap. Literary analyses illuminate symbolism and implicit meaning, while linguistic studies provide insight into characterization and clause structures. However, neither strand explicitly examines how Theme-Rheme contributes to textual coherence in The Old Man and the Sea. Addressing this gap, the present

study positions Theme-Rheme analysis as a bridge between literary interpretation, linguistic description, and EFL pedagogy. By doing so, it contributes not only to a deeper understanding of Hemingway's minimalist style but also to the practical integration of linguistic frameworks into language teaching.

Gaps in the Literature

The reviewed studies demonstrate that Theme–Rheme analysis has the potential to bridge literary interpretation, linguistic description, and pedagogical application. In literary texts, it explains how stylistic and symbolic choices contribute to textual coherence; in EFL writing, it functions as both a diagnostic and instructional tool; and in Hemingway studies, it offers a systematic method to examine narrative techniques. Nonetheless, the literature remains fragmented. Literary analyses often neglect linguistic theory, EFL studies are limited in scope and generalizability, and SFL-based analyses of Hemingway rarely integrate Theme–Rheme explicitly. This gap highlights the need for interdisciplinary research that combines literary, linguistic, and educational perspectives, applying Theme–Rheme analysis to enrich understanding of narrative techniques and textual cohesion.

Implications

Several key implications emerge from the reviewed literature. First, studies on *Sleeping Beauty* (Dashela, 2021) and Poe's poetry (Khalfan et al., 2021) confirm the feasibility of applying Theme–Rheme analysis to literary texts, showing how thematic choices shape text organization and narrative structure. Second, EFL writing research (Shi & Yuan, 2019; Himphinit & Astia, 2023) indicates that learners with greater awareness of Theme–Rheme produce more coherent writing, suggesting that teachers can integrate this framework into classroom instruction. For example, writing tasks can be designed to focus on Theme–Rheme shifts, helping learners move beyond repetitive topical Themes toward more varied and cohesive textual organization. Third, *The Old Man and the Sea* demonstrates the suitability of a literary text for Theme–Rheme analysis. Its brevity, clarity, and symbolic elements make it not only ideal for linguistic exploration but also highly adaptable for ELT pedagogy. By encouraging students to trace how Themes recur and shift across passages, teachers can enhance learners' sensitivity to textual progression while simultaneously deepening their literary appreciation.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the theoretical framework of Theme-Rheme and its applications in literary studies, EFL writing, and Hemingway scholarship. Three key insights emerge. From a literary perspective, Theme-Rheme analysis illuminates how information flows, how coherence is maintained, and how Hemingway's minimalist style and Iceberg Theory are linguistically realized. From a linguistic perspective, studies using SFL have revealed characterization strategies and clause structures in the novella; however, they have not yet systematically addressed thematic progression. From a pedagogical perspective, research confirms that Theme-Rheme analysis can be integrated into writing instruction to improve coherence and cohesion. At the same time, Hemingway's novella provides rich, authentic material for classroom use.

Despite these advances, a noticeable gap remains: the Theme-Rheme framework has not been systematically applied to The Old Man and the Sea. Addressing this gap would enrich both linguistic and literary analysis while demonstrating the framework's interdisciplinary potential. Future studies could conduct clause-by-clause Theme-Rheme mapping of the novella to reveal how narrative flow is achieved, how symbolic motifs are reinforced, and how coherence is sustained. Such research would provide practical benefits

for ELT by offering models for writing tasks, reading comprehension exercises, and classroom discussions. In this way, Theme-Rheme analysis can move beyond theory to serve as a practical resource, enabling learners to understand how meaning unfolds in texts and to apply these strategies in their own academic and creative writing.

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