



Exploring Pre-Service Teachers' Ability in Organizing Ideas through Thematic Progression in English Short Story

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-06-07 Revised: 2026-09-28 Accepted: 2026-09-28 Keywords: <i>pre-service teachers, English short story, thematic progression, Theme–Rheme, idea organization.</i> DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.10782 Corresponding Author: Kusma Alesda Wati kusmaalesdawati@gmail.com English Education Study Program, Universitas Ibn Khaldun, Bogor, West Java, Indonesia	<i>This study examines pre-service teachers' ability to organize ideas in English short stories through thematic progression. Pre-service teachers as learners and future teachers need to understand how written texts work because they will later explain, model, and assess writing in classroom contexts. This study used Systemic Functional Linguistics as the analytical framework and English short stories as a narrative genre because short stories contain multiple clauses organized into meaningful sequences, making them suitable for examining thematic progression patterns. The genre also requires writers to organize events and ideas coherently across a temporal structure, which reflects their ability to manage discourse organization. A qualitative descriptive design was employed, with data collected from 23 English short stories written by fourth-semester pre-service teachers in the English Education Department. The data were analyzed by identifying clauses, determining the Theme and Rheme of each clause, and classifying the thematic progression patterns into constant theme, linear theme, and split theme. Rather than focusing only on textual coherence, this study also explores how thematic progression patterns reveal pre-service teachers' organization of ideas in writing that reflects their writing ability. The findings reveal that three patterns appeared in pre-service teachers' writing, which are constant, linear, and split theme patterns. The constant theme pattern was the most dominant of the total data, and was followed by the linear theme pattern, while the split theme pattern appeared the lowest. These findings indicate that pre-service teachers' ability to organize ideas is still developing. On the other hand, this finding contributed by extending thematic progression analysis to narrative genre and by positioning pre-service teachers as a critical population for writing pedagogy, also offers a linguistic and pedagogical basis for designing writing instruction that supports idea organization, coherence development, and narrative competence in English teacher education programs.</i>

1. Introduction

Writing is one of the most demanding skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it requires learners to transform ideas into a coherent and meaningful text. Unlike speaking, writing provides limited opportunities for immediate clarification, making the organization of ideas essential for successful communication. In higher education, students are expected not only to produce grammatically accurate texts but also to present ideas in a logical and coherent manner. Recent studies have shown that writing quality is strongly influenced by how writers organize information and connect ideas throughout a text rather than grammatically acceptable sentences (Castells et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2023; Robledo & Álvarez, 2024).

However, many EFL learners continue to experience difficulties in maintaining coherence because they tend to focus on grammar and vocabulary while paying less attention to the flow of information across clauses and paragraphs (Hoang & Hoang, 2024; Saeed et al., 2021; Uçar, 2023). This issue is especially important in EFL contexts where students often struggle to develop ideas clearly due to limited linguistic resources, limited exposure to English discourse patterns, and insufficient awareness of textual organization (Fitriati & Gayatri, 2021; Sun et al., 2024; Zhang, 2022).

This problem suggests that writing competence cannot be assessed only through surface-level linguistic accuracy. It also needs to be examined through the way writers introduce, maintain, and develop ideas throughout a text. Recent studies have confirmed that textual organization, idea development, and information flow are strong indicators of writing quality in EFL learning (Anshu & Yesuf, 2022; Chang et al., 2020; Feri et al., 2023). Therefore, analyzing how students organize ideas can provide deeper insight into their actual writing ability.

These challenges are particularly important for pre-service teachers, who are expected to become both competent writers and future writing instructors. Their writing ability reflects not only their current academic competence but also their readiness to teach writing in classroom contexts. Studies on EFL teacher education show that pre-service teachers still face challenges in academic writing, especially in rhetorical organization, coherence, idea development, and written feedback practices (Bui et al., 2023; Kong et al., 2022; Marzuki et al., 2023). Such findings indicate that writing instruction in teacher education should move beyond grammatical accuracy and help students understand how meaning is organized across clauses and textual choices support coherence ideas are organized to create meaningful texts.

This perspective is consistent with Writing Process Theory, which views writing as a recursive cognitive process involving planning, drafting, and revising (Flower & Hayes, 1981). From this perspective, difficulties in organizing ideas and achieving coherence may reflect limitations in how writers manage and transform ideas across different stages of the writing process. Therefore, problems in coherence may not simply reflect limited language proficiency but also difficulties in managing ideas during the writing process. Examining how ideas are organized in students' writing can therefore provide a deeper understanding of their writing ability especially in organizing idea.

One useful framework for examining idea organization in writing is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). SFL views language as a resource for making meaning in social contexts. Within this framework, the textual metafunction explains how language organizes information into coherent messages between Theme and Rheme (Halliday & Matthiessen,

2013). Theme serves as the point of departure of a clause, while Rheme develops or extends the information introduced by the Theme. When this relationship is maintained systematically across clauses, it forms thematic progression, which contributes to the continuity of information throughout a text (Danes, 1974; Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). From this perspective, Theme–Rheme relations represent the clause-level organization of information, thematic progression explains how information develops across clauses, and consistent thematic progression supports textual coherence. In turn, coherence reflects the writer's ability to organize ideas, making it an important indicator of overall writing quality. Thus, thematic progression is not only a linguistic feature but also a means of understanding how writers manage and develop ideas while constructing a coherent text.

Within thematic progression, several major patterns have been identified, including constant theme pattern, linear theme pattern, and split or derived theme pattern (Eggins, 2004). Constant theme progression occurs when the same Theme is repeated across clauses. This pattern helps maintain focus on a specific topic or participant. Linear theme progression occurs when the Rheme of one clause becomes the Theme of the next clause. This pattern supports gradual information development. Split theme progression occurs when one Rheme contains several pieces of information that are then developed into separate Themes in subsequent clauses. This pattern allows writers to manage more complex idea development (Eggins, 2004; Leong, 2019).

The function of thematic progression, however, may differ across genres. In argumentative and expository writing, information is usually organized around claims, evidence, explanations, and conclusions, so thematic progression tends to support logical reasoning and argumentative development. Narrative writing involves a different type of organization because writers must maintain continuity among characters, settings, events, conflicts, and resolutions. A narrative text may also contain shifts in time, perspective, and narrative focus that require careful management of information flow (Rahayu et al., 2020). Consequently, the same thematic progression pattern may serve a different organizational function in narrative writing than in argumentative or expository writing. This makes English short stories particularly relevant for examining how students organize ideas in texts that require both linguistic control and narrative development.

Recent studies have strengthened the relevance of thematic progression in EFL writing research (Fitriati & Gayatri, 2021; Kim Nhung & Huu Hiep, 2023; Saeed et al., 2021). These studies generally agree that Theme–Rheme progression helps students produce more coherent texts and that explicit instruction can improve coherence and cohesion. However, they mainly focus on instructional effects or on identifying common progression patterns. Other studies have shown that different thematic progression patterns reflect different levels of writing competence. Chang et al. (2020) found that linear thematic progression was associated with stronger organization in expository writing, while Pavavijarn (2022) reported that high-scoring argumentative essays contained more varied progression patterns than low-scoring essays. Feri et al. (2023) and Sun et al. (2024) further showed that students' thematic structure was closely related to their ability to organize and develop ideas by strengthening organization, content development, and language use across genres.

These findings show that thematic progression is not a minor linguistic feature. It is a meaningful indicator of how students construct coherence. However, most previous studies still treat thematic progression primarily as a textual feature or as a predictor of writing quality, with limited attention to how progression patterns themselves reveal students'

processes of organizing ideas, especially in narrative writing. This unresolved issue suggests the need for a more interpretive approach that examines what different thematic progression patterns indicate about students' organizational control and coherence.

Despite the growing body of research on thematic progression in EFL writing, several issues remain insufficiently addressed. First, many studies on thematic progression have focused on academic essays, argumentative writing, exposition, IELTS writing, thesis introductions, or recount texts (Bui et al., 2023; Ismail et al., 2024; Pavavijarn, 2022; Sun et al., 2024). While these genres provide valuable insights into information flow, they differ from narrative writing in their communicative purposes and organizational demands. English short stories involve different demands because students need to organize characters, events, setting, conflict, and emotional development. A short story may also contain shifts in time, perspective, and narrative focus. These features make idea organization more complex than in simple paragraph writing or controlled academic tasks. Therefore, thematic progression in English short stories deserves further investigation.

Second, previous studies often identify thematic progression patterns without deeply connecting those patterns to students' ability to organize ideas. Pattern identification is useful, but it does not fully answer what the pattern means for writing competence. For instance, a high frequency of constant theme progression may indicate topic stability, but it may also show limited development if the writer repeats the same Theme without expanding the narrative. Linear progression may indicate stronger information flow because the writer develops new ideas from previous information. Split progression may indicate more complex organization because the writer manages several related ideas at the same time. Without interpretation, the analysis may remain descriptive and fail to explain students' writing ability. This gap is important because EFL writing research needs to move from counting patterns to explaining how patterns represent coherence, development, and organizational control (Feri et al., 2023; Fitriati & Gayatri, 2021; Sun et al., 2024).

Third, limited attention has been given to pre-service teachers' English short stories. This population is important because pre-service teachers are future writing instructors. If they have limited awareness of thematic progression, they may also have limited ability to guide students in developing coherent texts. Previous research on pre-service teachers has discussed writing strategies, feedback, academic writing challenges, digital storytelling, and writing support tools (Bui et al., 2023; Castillo-Cuesta et al., 2021; Kong et al., 2022; Marzuki et al., 2023). However, fewer studies have examined how their clause-level information flow reflects their ability to organize ideas in creative narrative writing. This gap limits our understanding of how teacher candidates develop coherence in texts that require both linguistic control and narrative organization.

Based on these gaps, the present study investigates pre-service teachers' ability to organize ideas through thematic progression in English short stories. This study uses SFL as the theoretical framework, particularly the concepts of Theme, Rheme, and thematic progression. It focuses on three patterns i.e., constant theme, linear theme, and split theme. These patterns are used to examine how pre-service teachers maintain narrative focus, develop information across clauses, and manage multiple thematic elements. By analyzing English short stories written by pre-service teachers, this study aims to provide a clearer explanation of how thematic choices reflect their writing ability.

This study contributes to EFL writing research in several ways. First, it extends thematic progression analysis to English short stories, a genre that has received less attention than academic essays and argumentative texts. Second, it places pre-service teachers as the main research focus, which is relevant to teacher education and future writing pedagogy. Third, it interprets thematic progression as evidence of idea organization ability rather than treating it only as a linguistic pattern.

This focus allows the study to explain how pre-service teachers construct coherence, maintain topic continuity, and develop narrative information. The findings are expected to inform writing instruction in English teacher education programs, especially in teaching students how to organize ideas more coherently through explicit awareness of thematic development. Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions (1) What types of thematic progression are mostly used by pre-service teachers in English short stories? (2) How do thematic progression patterns reflect pre-service teachers' ability to organize ideas in English short stories?

This study aims to identify the types of thematic progression used by pre-service teachers in English short stories and to explain how these patterns reflect their ability to organize ideas. The study argues that thematic progression can reveal the quality of idea organization because it shows how writers maintain focus, develop information, and connect meanings across clauses. Through this analysis, the study provides a linguistic and pedagogical basis for improving writing instruction among pre-service teachers.

2. Method

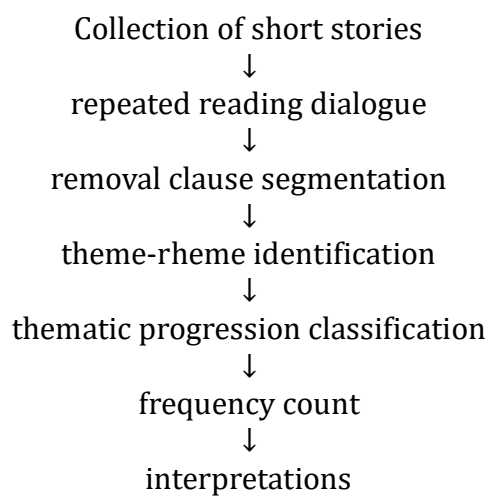
This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to examine pre-service teachers' ability to organize ideas in English short stories through thematic progression. This design focused on describing textual patterns and interpreting how those patterns represented students' writing ability (Creswell, W. John & Creswell, 2018; Miles, 2014). The data consisted of 23 English short stories written by fourth-semester pre-service teachers in the English Education Department of a university in Bogor, Indonesia. Each pre-service teacher was provided with the same writing assignment, instructions, and conditions. The sampling technique employed was convenience sampling, as the short stories were selected based on accessibility and availability.

Data were collected through documentation. This technique was suitable because the data were written texts produced by students (Bowen, 2016). First, ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Permission was obtained from the course lecturer. Students were informed that their written assignments would be used solely for research purposes. All data were anonymized by replacing participants' names with codes to protect confidentiality. Second, the researcher collected 23 texts and coded them anonymously. Third, the texts were read several times to understand their general narrative flow. Fourth, dialogues were separated from narrative sentences, the texts were selected because short stories require writers to organize characters, events, conflicts, and resolutions coherently. Dialogues were excluded from the analysis because the study focused on narrative sentences that reflected continuous written organization. Finally, the narrative sentences were divided into clauses for Theme–Rheme analysis.

The data were analyzed through thematic progression analysis. First, each short story was read repeatedly. Second, the narrative sentences were divided into clauses. Third, each clause was analyzed to identify its Theme and Rheme, theme was identified as the first

experiential element of each clause following Halliday & Matthiessen, (2013). Rheme consisted of the remaining information after the Theme.

In complex clauses, each independent clause was analyzed separately. Elliptical clauses were interpreted based on their implied grammatical structure within the surrounding context. Fourth, the relationship between clauses was classified into constant theme, linear theme, or split theme patterns. Fifth, the frequency of each pattern was counted to identify the dominant pattern. Sixth, the patterns were interpreted to explain students' ability to organize ideas. Constant theme patterns indicated topic maintenance, linear theme patterns indicated progressive idea development, and split theme patterns indicated more complex information management (Leong, 2019). To make it easier to understand the methodological process, the following flowchart illustrates this process.



Validity was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility was maintained through repeated reading and careful clause analysis. Transferability was supported by clear descriptions of the research context and data. Dependability was strengthened through a consistent coding guideline. Before the main analysis, the coding guideline was piloted using three short stories that were not included in the main analysis. The pilot test was conducted to ensure that the Theme–Rheme identification procedure was consistently understood by coders. Confirmability was ensured by grounding interpretations in textual evidence. Reliability was maintained through coding consistency and inter-coder checking. A second coder reviewed selected samples using the same coding guideline. Coding differences were discussed, and agreement was reached in 100% (McHugh, 2012; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

3. Results

The Distribution of Thematic Progression Patterns

The analysis was conducted by examining the relationship between Theme and Rheme across clauses. Each clause was analyzed to determine how the information was introduced, maintained, or developed in the following clause. Based on the analysis, a total of 148 thematic progression patterns were identified in the data in the form of a clause. These patterns were classified into three main categories: constant theme, linear theme, and split theme. The

frequency and percentage of each pattern are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. Distribution of Thematic Progression Patterns

Thematic Progression Pattern	Frequency	Percentage
Constant Theme	81	54.7%
Linear Theme	41	27.7%
Split Theme	26	17.6%
Total	148	100%

Table 2. Pie Chart Distribution of Thematic Progression Pattern

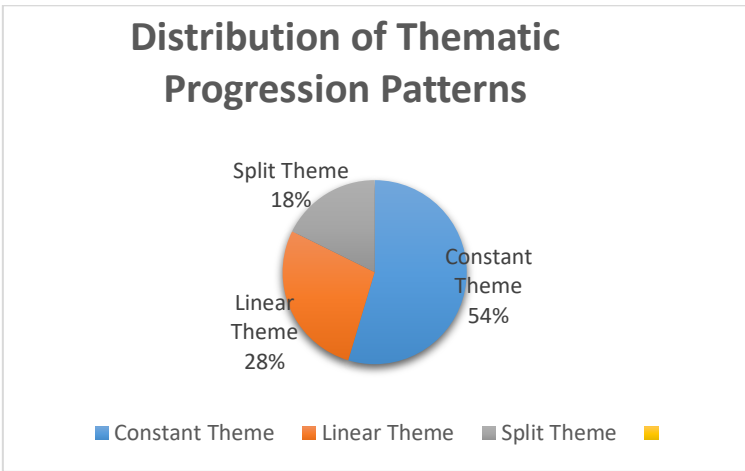


Table 1 and Table 2 shows that the constant theme pattern was the most dominant pattern in the pre-service teachers' English short stories. This pattern appeared 81 times, representing 54.7% of the total thematic progression patterns. The dominance of constant theme indicates that most pre-service teachers tended to maintain the same Theme across several clauses. In narrative writing, this pattern often appears when writers keep the same character, subject, or topic as the main focus of the story. This finding suggests that the students were able to maintain topic continuity and keep the narrative centered on a particular participant or event.

The linear theme pattern appeared 41 times, representing 27.7% of the total data. This pattern shows that some pre-service teachers were able to develop ideas progressively by using information from the Rheme of one clause as the Theme of the following clause. The presence of this pattern indicates that several students attempted to create a more dynamic flow of information. Through linear progression, the story does not merely repeat the same topic, but develops meaning step by step from one clause to another.

The split theme pattern was the least frequently used pattern, with 26 occurrences or 17.6% of the total data. This pattern requires writers to develop several pieces of information from one Rheme into different Themes in the following clauses. Its low frequency suggests that managing multiple related ideas within a coherent narrative structure was still challenging for many pre-service teachers. The findings indicate that pre-service teachers used all three types of thematic progression patterns. However, they relied more heavily on constant theme patterns than on linear or split theme patterns. This suggests that their ability

to organize ideas was generally marked by topic maintenance, while more complex forms of idea development appeared less frequently.

Distribution of thematic progression is not limited to clauses, the following table will show the number of pre-service teachers who use each of these patterns.

Table 3. Distribution of Individual Thematic Progression Pattern

Pattern	Frequency	Percentage	Students using it	Percentage
Constant Theme	81	54.7%	21	91.30%
Linear Theme	41	27.7%	23	100%
Split Theme	26	17.6%	14	60.9%

At the level of individual texts, most short stories contained more than one type of thematic progression pattern. Table 13 shows of the 23 short stories analyzed, the use of the linear thematic pattern was consistently by all pre-service teachers in their short stories, with 23 out of 23 pre-service teachers using this pattern. The constant theme pattern was used by 21 students, while the split theme pattern was the least distributed, appearing in only 14 pre-service teachers' texts. This distribution suggests that while all three patterns were present in the data, the ability to use more complex thematic structures was not evenly shared across the group. This also indicates that thematic progression patterns do not occur in isolation, rather, writers tend to combine patterns within a single text, with one pattern serving as the dominant organizational strategy while others appear in supporting roles.

The Dominance of Constant Theme Pattern

In this study, the constant theme pattern appeared 81 times, representing 54.7% of the total 148 thematic progression patterns identified in the data. This percentage shows that more than half of the thematic progression patterns used by the pre-service teachers relied on the repetition or maintenance of the same Theme. The dominance of this pattern indicates that most pre-service teachers tended to maintain one recurring participant or subject as the center of narrative development. This finding suggests that the students were able to keep their stories focused, although their development of ideas still tended to depend on a stable and repeated topic.

Data 1a (17th Respondent)

He didn't move. Just stared, blank, as if I were nothing more than background noise. And in that silence, I finally understood. I didn't beg. I didn't explain. I just walked to the door. And this time, I slammed it shut behind me... Not because I stopped loving him. But because I finally started loving myself.

The pattern Analysis

Theme 1: He → Rheme 1: didn't move

↓

Theme 2: He → Rheme 2: just stared, blank

Theme shift:

And in that silence, I finally understood

Theme 3: I → Rheme 3: didn't beg

↓

Theme 4: I → Rheme 4: didn't explain

↓

Theme 5: I → Rheme 5: just walked to the door

↓

Theme 6: I → Rheme 6: slammed it shut behind me

↓

Theme 7: I → Rheme 7: stopped loving him

↓

Theme 8: I → Rheme 8: finally started loving myself

Data 1b (3rd Respondent)

Now Marie's in Australia... She's safe. She's happy. She sends me memes... She's living the life I used to wish for. She did not know that our parents in jail... And me? What about me? What about ben? Do i like him? He's soo Wilson... And, I do like Wilson. But we could never work, right?

The pattern Analysis

Theme 1: Marie's → Rheme 1: in Australia

↓

Theme 2: She → Rheme 2: is safe

Theme 3: She → Rheme 3: is happy

↓

Theme 4: She → Rheme 4: sends me memes

↓

Theme 5: She → Rheme 5: is living the life...

↓

Theme 6: She → Rheme 6: did not know that...

Data 1a was collected from the 17th respondent's writing, the excerpt mainly applies a constant theme pattern because the same Theme is repeated across several clauses. In the first part, the Theme *He* is maintained in two consecutive clauses. The second clause does not explicitly mention "*He*," but the subject is understood from the previous clause. This elliptical structure keeps the focus on the male character's silence and emotional distance.

After that, the clause *“And in that silence, I finally understood”* creates a thematic shift. The narrative focus moves from He to I. This shift is important because it changes the center of the story from the man’s passive behavior to the narrator’s emotional realization. The repeated Theme I in the following clauses shows that the narrator becomes the central participant of the narrative. Each Rheme adds a new action or realization: *didn’t beg, didn’t explain, walked to the door, slammed it shut, stopped loving him, and started loving myself*. This pattern helps the writer maintain a strong personal focus and build emotional progression through repeated self-reference.

This excerpt shows that the constant theme pattern functions to strengthen character focus, emotional agency, and narrative coherence. The repetition of **I** makes the narrator’s decision appear firm and progressive. It also shows that the writer can maintain topic continuity while developing different actions and emotional meanings in each Rheme.

On the other hand, Data 1b was collected from the 3rd respondent’s writing and also shows the same pattern, with recurring themes that continue to center on “she” who was named Marie. Theme She is maintained across four consecutive clauses: *is safe, is happy, sends me memes, and is living the life*. Each of these clauses keeps the same grammatical subject while changing the Rheme, which shows that the writer sustains a single point of reference, Marie, before moving toward a new development in the narrative. The repeated Theme She functions to keep the narrative focus fixed on Marie’s condition and circumstances. Each Rheme adds a different piece of information: her location, her emotional state, her actions, and her unawareness of the family’s situation. This pattern allows the writer to build a cumulative picture of Marie’s life from multiple angles while the subject itself remains stable, creating a sense of continuity and coherence in how Marie is being described.

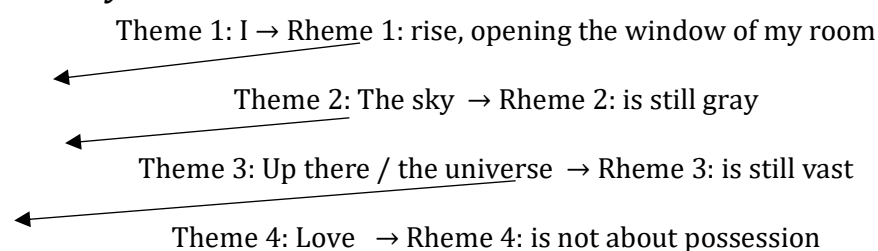
Linear Theme Pattern for Idea Development

In this study, the linear theme pattern appeared 41 times, representing 27.7% of the total 148 thematic progression patterns. Although this pattern was less frequent than the constant theme pattern, its presence is important because it indicates a more developed ability to organize ideas. Linear theme pattern shows that some pre-service teachers were able to develop ideas progressively from one clause to another. This means that the students did not merely repeat the same Theme, but also used previous information as a basis for continuing the narrative flow.

Data 2a (14th Respondent)

“I rise, opening the window of my room. The sky is still gray... Up there, the universe is still vast... Love is not about possession...”

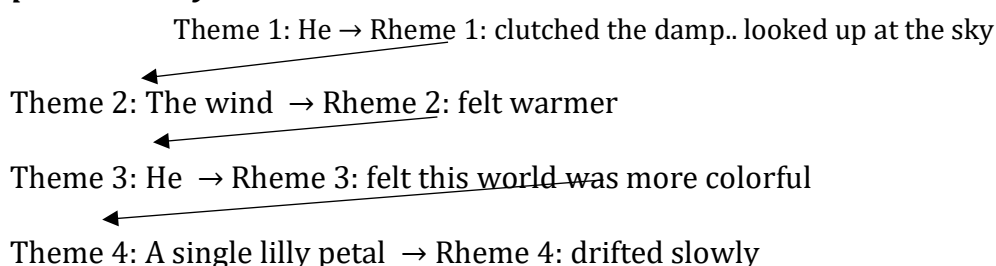
The pattern Analysis



Data 2b (16th Respondent)

"He clutched the damp grass on the ground and looked up at the sky. The wind felt warmer, and the sounds of nature seemed to welcome him back. For the first time, he felt that this world... was more colorful. And amidst the wind and the rustling of the meadow, a single lily petal drifted slowly, floating like an answer that needed no explanation."

The pattern Analysis



Data 2a was collected from the 14th respondent's writing, the analysis shows that the ideas develop gradually from physical action to visual observation, and then to emotional reflection. The first clause begins with the Theme "I," while the Rheme introduces the action of opening the window. This Rheme creates a visual space that allows the next Theme, "The sky," to appear. The second clause then develops the image of the sky, which becomes the basis for the following Theme, "Up there / the universe." The final Theme, "Love," emerges as a reflective interpretation of the previous visual and emotional context.

This example shows a semantic linear progression. The exact wording of the Rheme is not always repeated as the next Theme, but the meaning develops continuously. The movement from "window" to "sky," from "sky" to "universe," and from "universe" to "love" shows that the writer connects each clause through related meanings. This pattern helps the narrative move beyond simple topic repetition.

The function of the linear theme pattern in the story is to build a progressive flow of ideas. It allows the writer to move the narrative from an action to a setting, then from a setting to a broader reflection. Through this pattern, the story becomes more dynamic because each clause contributes new information that grows from the previous clause. Overall, the use of linear theme pattern indicates that some pre-service teachers had developed a stronger ability to connect ideas logically and construct a more coherent narrative sequence.

The next is Data 2b was collected from the 16th respondent's writing, the analysis shows that the ideas develop through a combination of linear progression and returning focus, moving from physical action to environmental sensation, back to personal feeling, and finally to a symbolic image.

This example shows a combination of linear and returning theme progression, where the movement from "He" to "the wind," back to "He," and then to "a single lily petal" demonstrates that the writer connects each clause through related sensory and emotional meaning rather than strict topical repetition. The function of this pattern in the story is to build an immersive, layered flow of ideas, weaving the setting and the character's emotional state together before the narrative closes on a symbolic image, so that each clause contributes new sensory or emotional information that grows from, or returns to, the previous focus.

Overall, the use of this combined theme pattern indicates that the writer was able to connect environmental description with emotional interiority to construct a coherent and symbolically resonant narrative sequence.

Split Theme Pattern for Complex Information Management

In this study, the split theme pattern appeared 26 times, representing 17.6% of the total 148 thematic progression patterns. Its low frequency indicates that most pre-service teachers rarely used this pattern in their short stories. The limited use of split theme pattern suggests that managing several related ideas within a narrative structure remained challenging for many pre-service teachers.

Data 3a (12th Respondent)

"The glory days of the kingdom had been restored under Lyra and William. The economy improved, the kingdom's business outside the region boomed, and the people prospered."

The pattern Analysis

Theme 1: The glory days of the kingdom → Rheme 1: had been restored under Lyra and William

Theme 2: The economy → Rheme 2: improved

Theme 3: The kingdom's business outside the region → Rheme 3: boomed

Theme 4: The people → Rheme 4: prospered

Data 3b (4th Respondent)

"Nawa walked forward. Touched the edge of Finn's box, once. Then stepped back. No hugs. No prayers. Just grey skies. Two friends. And a goodbye they never planned. Since that day, Nawa sometimes sits alone under the tree. Not waiting. Just remembering. Because some love doesn't stay forever. Sometimes it arrives... as the final step. As a breath that fades. As a small body that traveled so far, just to keep one promise."

The pattern Analysis

Theme 1: Then stepped back → Rheme 1:-

Theme 2: No hugs/no prayers → Rheme 2: -

Theme 3: Just remembering → Rheme 3: -

Theme 4: Some love → Rheme 4: doesn't stay forever

Data 3a was collected from the 12th respondent's writing, the analysis shows that the first clause introduces a general idea through the Rheme, namely that the kingdom's glory had been restored under Lyra and William. This general information is then expanded into several related Themes in the following clauses: "the economy," "the kingdom's business outside the region," and "the people." Each Theme develops one aspect of the restored kingdom. The economy shows material recovery, the kingdom's business reflects external growth, and the

people represent social prosperity.

This example shows a semantic split theme pattern. The following Themes do not repeat the exact words from the first Rheme. Instead, they elaborate the meaning of “restoration” through several concrete indicators. This makes the narrative more informative because the writer does not only state that the kingdom was restored, but also explains how that restoration appeared in different areas.

The function of the split theme pattern in this excerpt is to expand one central idea into several supporting details. It helps the writer present complex information in an organized way. Through this pattern, the story develops from a general statement into specific narrative evidence. However, because this pattern appeared less frequently than the other patterns, the finding suggests that most pre-service teachers were still more comfortable maintaining one topic or developing ideas linearly than managing several related thematic elements at once.

Meanwhile, Data 3b was collected from the 4th respondent's writing show that the excerpt develops through fragmented, elliptical Themes that elaborate a single emotional idea, namely the quiet, unceremonious nature of the farewell between Nawa and Finn. After the opening action (Nawa walked forward, touched the box, then stepped back), the following clauses shift into a series of minor, verbless Themes, “no hugs, no prayers, just grey skies, two friends, and a goodbye they never planned”. Each of these fragments functions as a Theme without an explicit Rheme, listing different facets of the same underlying idea: the absence of ritual, warmth, and closure. Later in the excerpt, a similar pattern appears around the statement “some love doesn't stay forever”, which is then split into three parallel elaborations, “as the final step, as a breath that fades, and as a small body that traveled so far”, each expressing a different image of how that love departed.

The function of the split theme pattern in this excerpt is to expand one central emotional idea into several fragmented, resonant details rather than explicit factual ones. It allows the writer to convey grief and quiet loss through accumulation rather than direct explanation, giving the passage a poetic, fragmented rhythm. Through this pattern, the story moves from a general emotional state into a series of specific, symbolic evidences of that state, showing that the writer is able to use split progression not only for informational elaboration but also for emotional and stylistic effect.

Comparative Interpretation of the Three Patterns

This section presents a comparative interpretation of the three thematic progression patterns found in the pre-service teachers' English short stories. The comparison is important because each pattern reflects a different way of organizing ideas in narrative writing. Constant theme pattern shows how students maintain topic focus, linear theme pattern shows how students develop information progressively, and split theme pattern shows how students manage several related ideas within one narrative sequence. Therefore, the three patterns do not only represent linguistic structures, but also indicate different levels of writing ability.

Table 4. Comparative Interpretation of Thematic Progression Patterns

Pattern	Linguistics Features	Main Function	Writing Ability Reflected
Constant Theme	Repeated or elliptical Theme; same referent across clauses	Maintains topic focus	Basic control of narrative focus
Linear Theme	Rheme of clause N becomes Theme of clause N+1; semantic or lexical continuity	Develops information progressively	Better ability to connect ideas
Split Theme	Multiple Themes derived from one Rheme; semantic elaboration across clauses	Manages several related ideas	More complex organization skill

Table 4 summarizes the three patterns based on their linguistics features, main functions, and the writing ability that each thematic progression pattern has a different function in organizing ideas. The constant theme pattern functions to maintain topic focus by repeating the same Theme across several clauses. In the context of narrative writing, this pattern helps the writer keep the story centered on a particular character, subject, or event. This pattern reflects basic control of narrative focus because the writer can maintain continuity and prevent sudden changes in topic. However, excessive use of this pattern may also make the text less dynamic because the writer depends on repeated Themes rather than varied idea development.

The linear theme pattern reflects a more progressive form of idea organization. This pattern allows the writer to use information from the previous Rheme as the starting point of the next clause. As a result, the text develops step by step. This pattern shows a better ability to connect ideas because the writer does not merely repeat the same topic, but builds new information from previous information. In narrative writing, linear theme pattern helps create movement, continuity, and logical development in the story.

The split theme pattern reflects the most complex form of information management among the three patterns. This pattern allows one Rheme to be developed into several related Themes. Through this pattern, the writer can expand one central idea into several supporting details. In a short story, this pattern is useful for explaining events, describing consequences, or presenting several aspects of a situation. However, its low frequency in the data suggests that many pre-service teachers still found it difficult to manage multiple related ideas coherently.

Despite the general pattern described above, a small number of short stories showed thematic complexity that was not initially anticipated. In particular, several writers demonstrated, in addition use of split theme progression not for informational elaboration but for emotional and stylistic effect, as seen in Data 3b, where fragmented Themes were used to convey grief and loss through accumulation rather than direct statement. Similarly, two or three clauses showed semantic linear progression where the connection between Rheme and the following Theme was not lexically identical but carried forward through related imagery and emotional meaning, as illustrated in Data 2b. These unexpected findings suggest that some pre-service teachers have developed an intuitive sense of information flow and narrative voice that goes beyond simple topic repetition, although this ability was not evenly distributed across the group.

4. Discussion

The findings show that pre-service teachers used three types of thematic progression in their English short stories, i.e., constant theme, linear theme, and split theme. The constant theme pattern appeared most frequently, with 81 occurrences or 54.7% of the total data. The linear theme pattern appeared 41 times or 27.7%, while the split theme pattern appeared 26 times or 17.6%. This distribution indicates that pre-service teachers relied more on maintaining a stable topic than on developing ideas through more varied and complex thematic structures. This finding supports previous studies showing that EFL learners often depend on constant theme patterns to maintain coherence in writing, especially when they are still developing control over textual organization (Feri et al., 2023; Fitriati & Gayatri, 2021; Rahayu et al., 2020).

The dominance of the constant theme pattern suggests that most pre-service teachers were able to maintain topic continuity in their narratives. In English short stories, this pattern helps writers keep the reader's attention on a central character, event, or situation. This finding is relevant to narrative writing because stories often require a stable participant as the center of development. Rahayu et al. (2020) found that constant theme patterns are common in Indonesian EFL learners' narrative texts because they help writers maintain focus on specific participants. Similarly, Feri et al. (2023) reported that thematic structure reflects students' ability to organize and develop ideas in writing. In this study, the frequent use of constant theme pattern shows that the students had basic competence in maintaining coherence through repeated Themes.

This is also related to the perspective of Writing Process Theory from (Flower & Hayes, 1981), this preference may also reflect the cognitive strategies employed by novice EFL writers during the writing process. Repeating the same Theme reduces the cognitive demand of continuously introducing new points of departure while writers are simultaneously generating ideas, selecting appropriate vocabulary, and constructing grammatical clauses. As a result, maintaining the same Theme becomes a manageable strategy for preserving coherence, particularly in narrative writing where attention is often centered on a main character or event.

However, the high frequency of constant theme pattern also indicates a limitation. When students rely too much on the same Theme, the text may become repetitive and less dynamic. Constant theme pattern can maintain focus, but it does not always support progressive development of meaning. Fitriati & Gayatri (2021) noted that overuse of constant theme pattern is one common problem in EFL writing because it may limit variation in idea development. This condition also appeared in the present study. Many students were able to keep their stories focused, but fewer students showed strong control in moving ideas forward through more complex Theme–Rheme relations.

Therefore, the dominance of constant theme pattern reflects both strength and weakness: it supports topic stability, but it may also reveal limited flexibility in organizing information. From a genre-based pedagogy perspective by Hyland (2007), this finding suggests that students have begun to understand one important characteristic of narrative writing, namely maintaining continuity around central participants and events. However, effective narrative writing also requires students to gradually expand and elaborate ideas, indicating that instruction should support not only topic maintenance but also the development of richer thematic progression across the stages of a story.

The linear theme pattern appeared as the second most frequent pattern. This finding is important because linear theme pattern reflects a more developed ability to connect ideas. In this pattern, information from the Rheme of one clause becomes the Theme of the next clause. This movement helps the writer develop ideas progressively from one clause to another. Chang et al. (2020) found that linear thematic progression predicted stronger writing organization because it supported effective information flow. Saeed et al. (2021) also showed that Theme–Rheme progression instruction improved textual coherence and cohesion in L2 writing.

In the present study, the use of linear theme pattern indicates that some pre-service teachers were able to build a logical connection between clauses and develop their narratives step by step. This pattern is also consistent with the recursive nature of writing described by Flower & Hayes (1981). When writers revise and reorganize their ideas, information mentioned earlier can naturally serve as a starting point for subsequent clauses. In this case, linear development not only represents a textual feature but also serves as evidence that the writer is able to develop ideas gradually throughout the writing process.

The presence of linear theme pattern also suggests that several students had moved beyond simple topic repetition. They were able to transform previous information into a new point of departure. This ability is important in short story writing because narratives require movement from action to consequence, from setting to reflection, and from event to emotional response. Pavavijarn (2022) found that higher-quality EFL writing tends to include more varied thematic progression patterns, while weaker texts often show less coherent thematic development. In this study, the linear theme pattern shows that some students had begun to use more effective strategies for organizing ideas. This pattern helped them create a smoother narrative flow and clearer relationship between events.

The split theme pattern was the least frequently used pattern. This result suggests that managing several related ideas within one narrative structure remained challenging for many pre-service teachers. Split theme pattern requires writers to develop one Rheme into several different Themes. This pattern is more complex because it involves branching information while maintaining coherence. Linguistically, split theme progression requires writers to maintain cohesive links while simultaneously expanding several related ideas from a single Rheme.

Cognitively, this process places greater demands on planning and working memory because writers must keep multiple strands of information active while ensuring that each development remains connected to the overall narrative (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Such demands may explain why novice EFL writers tend to rely more on constant and linear progression than on split progression. Sun et al. (2024) reported that thematic progression patterns vary across genres and contribute to writing performance by strengthening organization, content, and language use. The low frequency of split theme pattern in this study indicates that most students had limited ability to manage multiple strands of information simultaneously. They were more comfortable maintaining one topic or developing ideas linearly than expanding one idea into several connected details.

The limited use of split theme pattern may also reflect students' developing writing proficiency. Complex information management requires stronger control of narrative structure, lexical choice, and clause relation. Kim Nhung & Huu Hiep (2023) found that EFL students often experience difficulties in applying thematic progression due to limited ideas and inflexible grammatical structures. This explanation is relevant to the present findings.

Although the students could produce short stories, many of them may not yet have sufficient control to develop multiple related ideas in a coherent way. As a result, split theme pattern appeared less frequently than constant and linear patterns.

This study should also be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the analysis was limited to English short stories written by pre-service teachers from one educational context, which may restrict the transferability of the findings to other student populations or writing contexts. Second, this study examined students' final written products rather than the writing process itself. Consequently, the analysis could identify how ideas were organized in the completed texts but could not directly observe how thematic progression developed during planning, drafting, or revising. These limitations provide opportunities for future studies to examine thematic progression from both textual and process-oriented perspectives.

Future research may adopt experimental or longitudinal designs to examine how students' thematic progression develops over time or changes following explicit instruction. Such approaches would provide a deeper understanding of how thematic progression evolves throughout the writing process and how pedagogical interventions contribute to students' ability to organize ideas more effectively.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings highlight the need for explicit instruction on thematic progression in EFL writing classes. Pre-service teachers need to understand how Theme–Rheme patterns affect coherence and idea development. In creative writing courses, for example, students can be guided to identify Theme and Rheme in model short stories before analyzing how ideas develop across clauses. They may then revise their own narratives by examining whether Themes maintain narrative focus, whether Rhemes introduce meaningful new information, and whether different thematic progression patterns contribute to a coherent storyline.

Such activities allow thematic progression to be taught as part of the writing process rather than as an isolated linguistic concept. They also should not only learn how to write correct sentences, but also how to connect clauses and develop information across the text. Studies have shown that explicit attention to thematic progression can improve students' coherence, cohesion, and writing quality (Kim Nhung & Huu Hiep, 2023; Saeed et al., 2021; Tarigan & Zahiri, 2025). Since the participants in this study are future teachers, this instruction is even more important. They need strong awareness of textual organization so that they can later teach writing more effectively.

The findings also support the view that writing development is closely related to strategy use and instructional support. Bui et al. (2023) found that EFL pre-service teachers use rhetorical, metacognitive, and cognitive strategies in academic writing, and these strategies influence their writing quality. Collaborative and technology-supported writing studies also show that students' writing organization can improve when they receive structured support, feedback, and opportunities to revise their texts (Anshu & Yesuf, 2022; Hoang & Hoang, 2024; Marzuki et al., 2023). Therefore, thematic progression can be integrated into writing instruction as a practical tool for helping pre-service teachers evaluate and improve their own texts.

5. Conclusion

This study examined pre-service teachers' ability to organize ideas in English short stories through thematic progression. Using Systemic Functional Linguistics as the analytical framework, the study identified three types of thematic progression patterns in the students' writing: constant theme, linear theme, and split theme. The analysis showed that the constant theme pattern was the most dominant, with 81 occurrences or 54.7% of the total data. This finding indicates that most pre-service teachers tended to maintain the same Theme across clauses to keep the narrative focused on a central character, subject, or event. The linear theme pattern appeared 41 times or 27.7% of the data. This pattern shows that some pre-service teachers were able to develop ideas progressively by using information from the previous Rheme as the Theme of the following clause. The presence of this pattern indicates a more developed ability to connect ideas and build a logical narrative flow.

Meanwhile, the split theme pattern appeared 26 times or 17.6%, making it the least frequently used pattern. This suggests that managing several related ideas within a coherent narrative structure remained challenging for many pre-service teachers. Overall, the findings indicate that pre-service teachers' ability to organize ideas through thematic progression is still developing. Most students demonstrated basic control of narrative focus through the frequent use of constant theme patterns.

However, fewer students showed more advanced control through linear and split theme patterns. This means that the students were generally able to maintain topic continuity, but they still need more support in developing ideas progressively and managing complex information. The study implies that thematic progression should receive more explicit attention in EFL writing instruction, especially in teacher education programs. Pre-service teachers need to understand how Theme–Rheme patterns help construct coherence, develop ideas, and improve text organization. Since they will later teach writing, their awareness of thematic progression can support both their own writing development and their future teaching practice.

This study has several limitations. The data were limited to 23 English short stories from one class, so the findings cannot be generalized to all pre-service teachers. The analysis also focused only on narrative sentences and excluded dialogues. Future studies are recommended to involve more participants, compare different genres of writing, and examine how explicit instruction in thematic progression affects students' writing development over time.

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