



# Fostering Students' Speech Texts: A Thematic Progression Analysis on Senior High School Students' Speeches

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Received: 2026-03-18 Revised: 2026-03-26 Accepted: 2026-04-02</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Coherence; Speech competition; SFL, Thematic progression; Theme-rheme</p> <p><b>DOI:</b> 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.9974</p> <p><b>Corresponding Author:</b> Rachma Choirunnisa <a href="mailto:choirunnisarachma27@students.unnes.ac.id">choirunnisarachma27@students.unnes.ac.id</a> English Education, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Kota Semarang, Jawa Tengah</p>	<p><i>This research explores the themes and thematic development in high school students' speeches at a speech contest organized by one of Indonesia's prominent English tutoring centers in 2024. The research method employed in this research was descriptive qualitative using Systematic Functional Linguistics. Data in this research were obtained by observing YouTube videos of the respective speech contest. The videos were transcribed in the form of written text. Four videos were selected randomly and coded as ST1, ST2, ST3, and ST4. The results indicated that the four speeches realized most types of themes, with topical themes occurring most frequently. This suggests that students tended to focus on the specified topics and maintain coherence between sentences. The zig-zag pattern was the most frequently used in thematic progress. This indicates that the speakers tended to elaborate on the topic in the text more clearly by utilizing various available information. This research provides teachers with insight into the importance of students' knowledge of themes and thematic development in the construction of their speeches.</i></p>

## 1. Introduction

English competitions have become popular among many students in recent years, especially junior and senior high school students (Jiang et al., 2021). Various categories of competitions exist, such as speech, storytelling, essay writing, and debate. The aim is to boost students' confidence in their academic abilities while improving their English skills. These activities not only test linguistic abilities but also assess emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and creativity. (Knapp, 2024) argues that students' success in English competitions requires not only English skills but also consistency in their work, preparation, and maintaining motivation over time. These competitions train students to face real challenges and help them develop various skills (e.g., resilience, confidence, public speaking, etc.).

Many students are still reluctant to participate in such competitions. One of the issues is the difficulty in communicating in English. They have trouble arranging their thoughts in a cohesive and coherent order (Siregar et al., 2023). Various factors contribute to this, such as limited vocabularies (Trinh & Pham, 2021), lack of confidence, lack of experience (Canestra & Putra, 2023), perceived negative evaluation by others (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Canestra & Putra, 2023; Turner et al., 2021) and fear of making mistakes (Daymiel et al., 2022; Purwati et al., 2023; Rusdin & Purwati, 2023). Understanding effective ways of conveying ideas, thoughts, and opinions in a text helps them produce cohesive and coherent texts, helping to minimize those challenges.

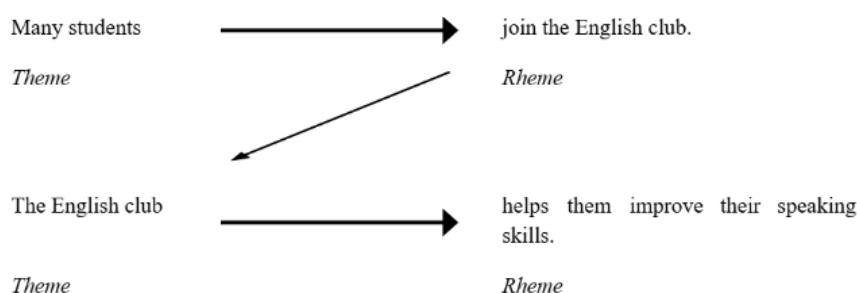
Alqasham et al., (2021) state that cohesion and coherence are two main factors in determining the quality of an essay text. A text lacking these two essential elements remains odd, leading to a disconnect in meaning (Aminova, 2022; Putra et al., 2022; Wakerkwa, 2024). Otherwise, texts meeting these two criteria present information logically (Islami et al., 2022), making them easy to understand. Cohesion and coherence perform an important role because they assist readers in comprehending and absorbing information effectively (Rizki et al., 2022). Nevertheless, students in Indonesia still struggle with composing cohesive and coherent texts (Utama et al., 2024). They find it difficult to connect sentences and even compose paragraphs with connected information (Hameed & Challob, 2022; Happy gusnar et al., 2021; Ngongo & Ndandara, 2024; Rizki et al., 2022; Rodliyah & Liani, 2022; Wijayanti et al., 2023; Zahra et al., 2021).

Understanding the three functions of language (Emilia & Hamied, 2015) becomes the primary foundation for addressing those issues. One of the functions is the textual function, which involves understanding the role of language in text cohesion and coherence. In creating text cohesion and coherence, students need to understand the types of themes and the thematic progression patterns.

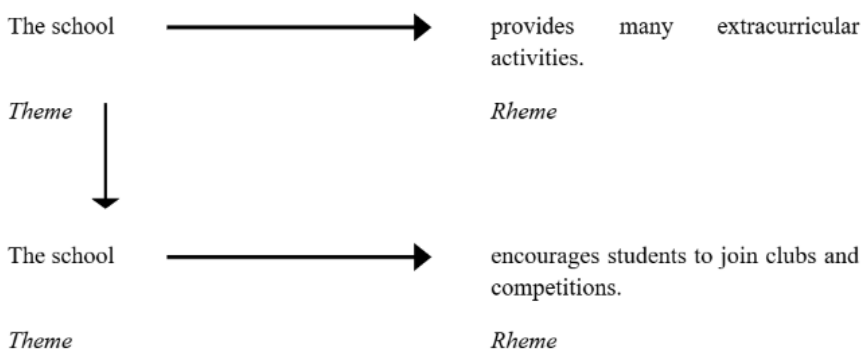
Theme is the initial element in each clause. The theme serves as the centerpiece of a clause. The theme conveys the main topic of each clause. The rheme, on the other hand, is additional information that explains the theme (Eggins, 2004; Gerot & Wignell, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). There are three types

of themes, topical, interpersonal, and textual. Topical themes typically introduce participants, circumstances, or processes. Interpersonal themes are themes which give a personal touch, such as calling someone's name or the start of a question (e.g., do you think..., Hey, Bennie!).

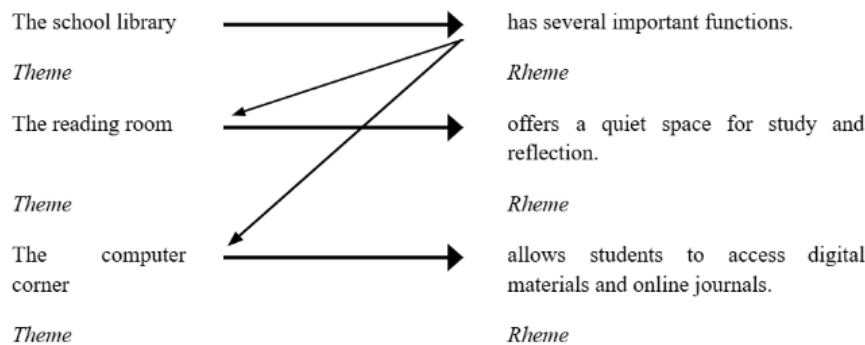
Textual themes are commonly used to connect the preceding sentence with the following sentence (e.g., however, but moreover). Otherwise, the process of theme development is known as thematic progression (Utama et al., 2024). Brian Paltridge (2022) in his book reintroduces and adapts three thematic progression patterns by Eggins (2004): zig-zag themes, constant themes, and multiple/split rhemes. This framework aims to provide a useful tool for researchers in this study. A zig-zag theme, also referred to as a simple linear theme, is a clause pattern in which the rheme of the preceding clause becomes the theme of the next clause (Brian Paltridge, 2022; Eggins, 2004). This aims to maintain a logical flow of new ideas from the previous ones, enabling the audience to comprehend the complex meaning of the text. The analysis of a zig-zag theme is portrayed below:



A constant theme, more commonly recognized as a reiteration theme, is a clause pattern where the theme of the preceding clause becomes the theme of the subsequent clause (Brian Paltridge, 2022; Eggins, 2004). The purpose of this pattern is to enhance cohesion within a text and maintain focus on a specific topic. Below is an analysis of the constant theme pattern:



Eggins (2004) and Brian Paltridge (2022) assert that multiple/split rhemes are thematic patterns created from a single rheme that subsequently becomes the theme in several other clauses. The analyses of multiple/split rhemes are as described below:



Due to the importance of understanding the use of different types of themes and thematic progression patterns, many researchers have studied these two aspects. Himphinit & Astia, (2023) found that third-semester students at a university in Surabaya, Indonesia, had already implemented these three types of themes, and some students even combined all three types of themes in a single sentence. In Charles Perrault's short story *Sleeping Beauty*, it was discovered that the themes frequently used were topical and textual themes. The researcher did not identify any interpersonal themes in the short story (Dashela, 2021). Al-reshaid & Alhojailan (2025) also analyzed 108 written assignments of various academic genres from female graduate students at a university in Saudi Arabia. The results revealed that these students tended to use unmarked topical themes more frequently. However, marked topical, textual, and interpersonal themes were also found.

Despite many researchers studied thematic progression in texts, but most have focused on written texts. Himphinit & Astia (2023) analyzed patterns of thematic progression in 15 papers written by third-semester students at a university in Surabaya, Indonesia, on the topic of the impact of COVID-19. The results indicated that the students managed to apply the three thematic progression patterns in their writing. Zamroni et al. (2023) investigated the thematic progression patterns utilized by students in their research backgrounds, aiming to determine the significance of thematic progression patterns in enhancing text coherence. Sulastri (2022) examined thematic progression in students' short stories.

The results indicated that most students applied multi-rheme thematic progression pattern. Meng (2022) compared the differences in thematic progression patterns applied by Chinese and foreign linguistics students at the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels in writing their thesis abstracts. The researcher analyzed 30 English thesis abstracts by Chinese linguistics undergraduate and master's students and 10 English thesis abstracts by foreign linguistics doctoral students. The results showed that Chinese linguistics students frequently used constant patterns, while foreign students frequently used simple linear patterns.

This situation is potentially due to the influence of abstract writing requirements in China. However, in their final reports, students frequently employed a zigzag pattern of development over other patterns. They believed an intensive use of the zigzag pattern could significantly contribute to the cohesion and coherence of the text (Hendrawan et al., 2021). On the other hand, several researchers examined the thematic progression of oral texts, among them (Larasati et al., 2022) analyzed the thematic progression of speeches by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson have also been analyzed. Johnson more often uses constant thematic progression patterns in his speeches with the aim of focusing on the topic being discussed. Furthermore, speeches by Joe Biden, President of the United States, were also analyzed. Speeches about the ongoing wars, Israel-Hamas and Russia-Ukraine, also use constant thematic progression patterns by reiterating the themes of these sentences (Asep Saepuloh et al., 2023).

The previous studies revealed a gap in research on the implementation of thematic progression in students' speeches on competition. Previous studies tended to analyze written texts and famous speeches, while student speeches are still very limited. Therefore, this study was conducted to analyze the theme types and thematic development pattern of senior high school students' speeches in an English speech competition conducted by an Indonesian tutoring center in 2024. The aims of this study are to determine the types of themes employed, the realization of thematic development in each participant's speech, and to evaluate the coherence of the participants' speeches.

## **2. Method**

### ***Research Design***

This study employed a Systematic Functional Discourse Analysis approach using qualitative content analysis research methods. This approach was used to identify the ideational, textual, and interpersonal functions of language (Wang, 2021) in the contestants' speech videos. The focus of this study constitutes a meta-functional analysis of texts through thematic examination according to Halliday & Matthiessen's (2014) theory and the thematic progression of students' speeches using Brian Paltridge's (2022) Paltridge's (2022) theory within the SFL framework.

### ***Data Collection***

The data for this research consists of four YouTube videos of speeches by senior high school students participating in a speech competition organized by a reputable tutoring center in Indonesia in 2024. In this study, four videos out of seven were randomly collected with the aim of determining the implementation of thematic types and thematic progression in each participant. The four videos consisted of three winners' videos and one non-winning contestant's video. The videos are labeled Student 1 (ST1), Student 2 (ST2), Student 3 (ST3), and Student 4 (ST4).

**Data Analysis**

After labelling the videos, the transcripts were dissected into clauses. These clauses were analyzed in terms of theme and rheme using Halliday & Matthiessen's (2014) theory to determine the type of theme employed. The collected data were utilized to analyze the realization of thematic progression patterns using Brian Paltridge's (2022) theory. The data on the realization of theme types and thematic development patterns in the four videos were tabulated in Excel to organize and quantify the data systematically and to prevent research subjectivity.

**3. Result**

**Themes Realization**

Based on an analysis of four transcribed student speeches, the use of topical, textual, and interpersonal themes was observed. In addition, it was identified that students utilized either marked or unmarked topical themes. Table 1 depicts the occurrence and percentage of respective themes as presented in the four texts.

Table 1. Themes presented in students' speech texts

Theme		ST1		ST2		ST3		ST4		TOTAL	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Topical	Unmarked	88	51.16%	47	60.26%	79	58.09%	96	56.80%	310	55.86%
	Marked	16	9.30%	6	7.69%	4	2.94%	1	0.59%	27	4.86%
Textual	Continuative	1	0.58%	1	1.28%	2	1.47%	6	3.55%	10	1.80%
	Conjunction	38	22.09%	9	11.54%	23	16.91%	43	25.44%	113	20.36%
	Conjunctive Adjunct	23	13.37%	15	19.23%	6	4.41%	15	8.88%	59	10.63%
Interpersonal	Vocative	2	1.16%	-	0%	7	5.15%	-	0%	9	1.62%
	Modal/ Comment Adjunct	2	1.16%	-	0%	3	2.21%	8	4.73%	13	2.34%
	Finite	2	1.16%	-	0%	12	8.2%	-	0%	14	2.52%
TOTAL		172	100%	78	100%	136	100%	169	100%	555	100%

As illustrated in Table 1, a total of 555 themes were identified, with 310 (55.86%) unmarked topical themes and 27 (4.86%) marked topical themes. In addition to topical themes, there were also occurrences of textual, with the continuative occurring 10 times (1.80%), the conjunctive occurring 113 times (20.36%) which made it the most common in the textual theme category, and the adjunctive conjunctive occurring 59 times (10.63%). In contrast, the interpersonal theme is the least frequent, with the lowest occurrence in the vocative type at 9 times (1.62%), followed by the modal/comment adjunct type occurring 13 times (2.34%), and the finite type occurring 14 times (2.52%), making it the most

frequent type within the interpersonal theme category. According to the data, the unmarked topical theme emerged as the most dominant among the other themes in this study.

Table 2. Unmarked Topical Theme Realization

Theme		ST1		ST2		ST3		ST4		TOTAL	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Topical	Unmarked	8	28.39	4	15.16	7	25.48	9	30.97	31	100
		8	%	7	%	9	%	6	%	0	%

Furthermore, the thematic realization in these four texts reveals a dominant presence of unmarked topical themes. Sequentially, unmarked topical themes in texts ST1, ST2, ST3, and ST4 appeared 88 times (28.39%), 47 times (15.16%), 79 times (25.48%), and 96 times (30.97%). Hence, the frequency of unmarked topical themes in the ST4 speech text is the highest, while ST2 has the lowest.

### **Thematic Progression Realization**

In a speech, each clause must be connected to the others to achieve cohesion within the text. The relationships between clauses can be identified through their thematic progression. Thematic progressions are categorized into three types: constant, zigzag, and multiple/split rhemes.

Table 3. Thematic Progression Realization

Thematic Progression Pattern	ST1		ST2		ST3		ST4		TOTAL	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Constant	29	28.43%	7	14.00%	15	18.75%	18	18.75%	69	21.04%
Zig-zag	69	67.65%	39	78.00%	56	70.00%	78	81.25%	242	73.78%
Multiple / Split	4	3.92%	4	8.00%	9	11.25%	-	0%	17	5.18%
TOTAL	102	100%	50	100%	80	100%	96	100%	328	100%

The table above shows the zig-zag pattern dominates all four texts, appearing 242 times (73.78%), followed by the constant pattern, which appears 69 times (21.04%), and the multiple/split pattern, which appears 17 times (5.18%).

## **4. Discussions**

### **Themes Realization**

According to preceding results, the realization of topical themes was the most dominant in ST1, ST2, ST3, and ST4. Participants frequently employed unmarked topical themes as subjects, such as the use of the words "I" and "we", this usage indicates that the speakers sought to convey their perspective and persuade

the audience to embrace their position regarding the speech (Asep Saepuloh et al., 2023). Participants occasionally used proper nouns as subjects (e.g., This challenge, The Russian, Indonesia, etc.) to support their opinions with facts. The dominance of unmarked topical themes indicates similarities with the findings of (Utama et al., 2026) regarding speech contest by Erlangga English Speech Contest 2021.

Clause 1

I	'm a social media intern at a sustainability organization.
Unmarked Topical	RHEME
THEME	

Clause 10

This challenge	presents a good opportunity for us, the younger generation, especially those of us in Generation Z or Gen Z.
Unmarked Topical	
THEME	RHEME

Clause 27

The Russians	have one the strongest militaries in the world right now
Unmarked Topical	
THEME	RHEME

Figure 1. Unmarked Topical Theme Realization in ST1 and ST2 text

Conversely, clause 73 in ST1 uses a marked topical theme to indicate its focus on a specific time as the main point of the message.

Clause 73

Monthly,	we hold 'Beach Cleanups'
Marked Topical	
THEME	RHEME

Figure 2. Marked Topical Theme realization in ST1 speech text

Textual themes appeared in all four texts. In clause 15 of ST4, the speaker employed the conjunction "but" to indicate a contradiction with the preceding clause.

Clause 15

But,	you know,	even diamonds	have their own imperfection.
Textual (conjunction)	Interpersonal (comment adjunct)	Unmarked Topical	RHEME
THEME			

Figure 3. Textual theme realization in ST4 speech text

Furthermore, in clause 18 of ST3, the speaker utilized the conjunction “and” to indicate that the clause provided additional and complementary information to the preceding clause.

Clause 18

and	it	's not just any culture.
Textual (conjunction)	Unmarked Topical	
THEME		RHEME

Figure 4. Textual theme realization in ST3 speech text

The utilization of these textual themes demonstrates that the speaker aims to produce a coherent speech. On the other hand, the interpersonal theme realization is presented in clause 16 of ST3. The use of “Is” as a finite verb indicates the speaker’s intention to encourage the audience to participate in the discussion or to engage in thinking about the topic being presented.

Clause 16

Is	this	what makes us great? No?
Interpersonal (finite)	Unmarked Topical	RHEME
THEME		

Figure 5. Interpersonal theme realization in ST3 speech text

Clause 29

Ladies and gentlemen,	how many of us	go on Instagram every day
Interpersonal (vocative)	Marked Topical	
THEME		RHEME

Figure 6. Interpersonal theme realization in ST1 speech text

These choices influence the intended meaning of a speaker's message (Larasati et al., 2022).

### ***Thematic Progression Realization***

As shown in Table 3, the zig-zag pattern was the most dominant of all the thematic progression patterns. This finding shares similarities with the results of Utama et al. (2024) research on high school students participating in a speech contest in 2021.

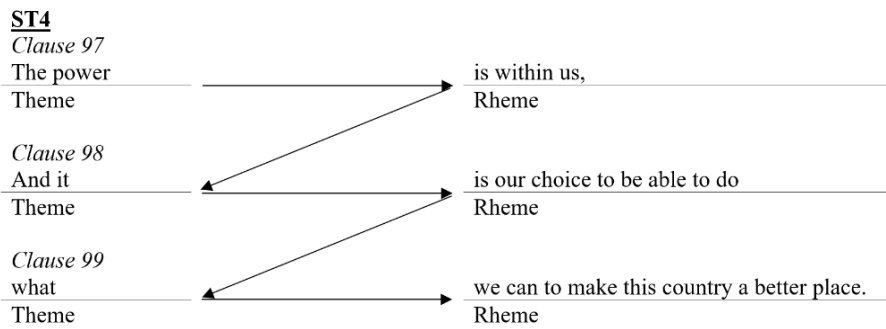


Figure 7. The realization of zig-zag pattern of thematic progression in ST4

In the rheme of clause 97 in ST4, the speaker states “is within us,” referring to the power that lies within us. This information develops in the next clause through the use of the pronoun “it,” which refers to the control we possess.

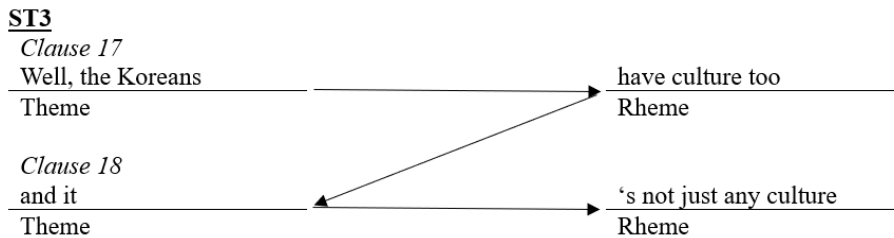


Figure 8. The realization of zig-zag pattern of thematic progression in ST3

In the rheme of clause 17 in ST3, the speaker said, “have culture too,” which refers to Koreans cited as an example in the speaker’s topic. This information is developed in the next clause using the pronoun “it,” which refers to Korean culture. The dominance of the zig-zag pattern in the fourth participant’s speech indicates the speaker’s intention to create cohesion within each clause by elaborating on the rheme of the preceding clause.

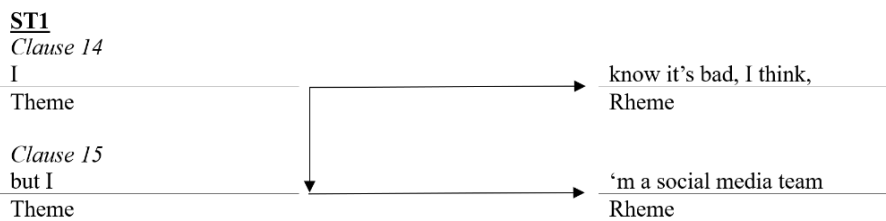


Figure 9. The realization of constant pattern of thematic progression

From Figure 9 above, it is clear that ST1 uses the theme “I” in clause 14, which is reused in clause 15. The consistent use of this theme indicates the speaker’s willingness to preserve cohesion among these sentences.

The multiple/split rheme pattern is the rarest pattern among speakers, similar to the findings in Utama et al. (2026). This pattern was not even found in the ST4 in this study. In contrast, Sulastri’s (2022) study differs in its results, which are dominated by the multiple/split pattern.

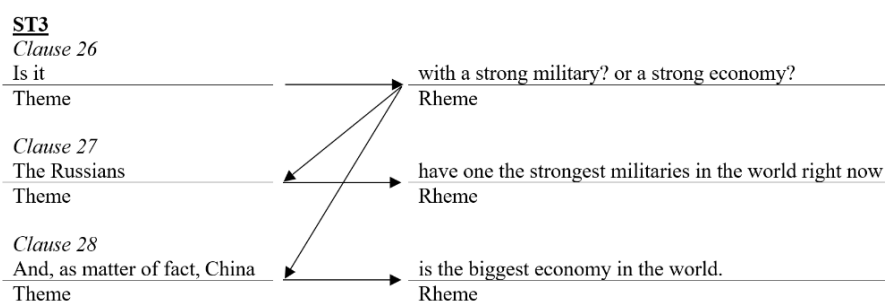


Figure 10. Multiple/split rheme realization of thematic progression

In the rheme of clause 26 in ST3, the speaker questions “with a strong military? or a strong economy?”, referring to the factors that determine whether a country is considered powerful. This information is elaborated in the following two clauses (clauses 27 and 28). The speaker's use of this pattern demonstrates their ability to elaborate their ideas in a logical and clear manner. The speaker's purpose in using this pattern is to enable the audience to comprehend the message more easily.

Despite the fact most of the themes and thematic progression have been realized, there are still empty clauses in all four speeches. This phenomenon occurs due to grammatical errors and students' limited understanding of how to use certain conjunctions (Utama et al., 2024). When this happens, the flow of information between clauses is disrupted, leading to a decrease in coherence among the clauses in the speech.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis of thematic patterns revealed that all four speeches dominated by topical themes, with the highest frequency observed in Speech ST1. This indicates that these speeches tend to be longer and more grammatically complex. The presence of topical themes was observed to influence inter-clause coherence by shifting the topic's focal point under special circumstances. Furthermore, the use of textual and interpersonal themes was employed by the speakers to ensure their speeches were structured cohesively. This study also reveals the purpose of using interrogative words to interact more with the audience and encourage them to engage more deeply with the topic presented by the speaker.

In terms of thematic development, the four speakers tended to employ the zig-zag pattern more frequently. This indicates that the four speakers are sufficiently capable of developing texts in a cohesive and coherent manner. However, this dominance also suggests that the speakers have not sufficiently explored other types of themes, particularly the phenomenon of one speaker not using the multiple/split pattern at all, and the presence of several clauses with empty themes, indicating that attention is still needed to improve the quality of students' speech texts. Teachers need to be able to teach students the use of various

types of themes and thematic progression patterns. Additionally, it is important to train and teach students how to compose coherent speeches. This study provides additional research on the application of SFL in spoken discourse, a field that remains relatively under-explored. It is expected that this study may assist future researchers when examining meta-functional texts in English speech contexts.

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