

## **"CONSTANT, ZIG-ZAG LINEAR, OR MULTIPLE?": THEMATIC PROGRESSION PATTERNS ON EFL STUDENTS' RECOUNT TEXTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The main problem faced by EFL students in writing English texts includes the difficulties to produce a cohesive and coherent text that it seems necessary to show how the tools of Theme and Rheme can be used to help construct the students' good English writing. This study aimed to find out the types of thematic progression patterns in each clause of the recount texts written by students and the dominant pattern of thematic progression revealed from the texts. The research design of this study is a qualitative method which employed the study instrument of the students' recount texts at class IX of SMAN 2 Langsa, Aceh. A content analysis approach by using a Theme and Rheme framework generated from a theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) was used to analyze the thematic progression patterns on the students' recount texts, which included several steps: reading the student's texts, identifying the theme and rheme of every clause of the student's text, describing the thematic progression patterns of student's text and drawing the thematic progression pattern on student's text. The findings of the analysis indicated that there are three (3) thematic progression patterns found on the students' recount texts: the Theme Constant, the Theme Zig Zag Linear pattern and Theme Multiple patterns. The dominant type of thematic progression patterns constructed by the students into their recount texts was revealed mostly on 123 constant or reiteration patterns (76.8%), followed by zig-zag patterns of 35 times (21.8%) and 9 times (1.25%) of multiple patterns. The results of this study will be facilitative as the tools for English language teaching and learning classrooms particularly for writing English texts.

Keywords: theme-rheme, thematic progression pattern, students' writing, recount text

### **ABSTRAK**

*Masalah utama yang dihadapi oleh para siswa dengan Bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing yaitu termasuk kesulitan dalam menuliskan sebuah teks yang kohesif dan koheren sehingga dirasakan penting untuk memaparkan alat Theme dan Rheme yang dapat digunakan untuk membantu para siswa dalam menulis teks Bahasa Inggris yang bagus. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menemukan jenis-jenis pola tematik progresi pada setiap klausa teks recount yang dituliskan oleh para siswa dan jenis pola progresi tematik yang paling sering muncul dalam teks mereka. Pendekatan penelitian yang digunakan pada studi ini adalah metode kualitatif yang menggunakan instrumen penelitian berupa teks recount siswa pada kelas IX SMAN 2 Langsa, Aceh. Pendekatan analisis isi dengan menggunakan kerangka Theme dan Rheme yang diturunkan dari Sistemik Fungsional Linguistik digunakan untuk menganalisa pola progresi tematik yang terdapat pada teks recount siswa, yang termasuk beberapa langkah: membaca teks siswa, mengidentifikasi theme dan rheme dari setiap klausa teks para siswa, memaparkan pola-pola progresi tematik pada teks siswa dan menggambarkan pola progresi tematik pada teks siswa. Hasil dari analisis menunjukkan bahwa ada tiga (3) pola progresi tematik yang terdapat pada teks recount para siswa: pola konstan, pola zig zag, dan pola ganda. Jenis pola progresi tematik yang paling dominan digunakan oleh para siswa pada teks recount mereka adalah berjumlah 123 untuk pola konstan (76.8%), pola zig zag dengan jumlah 35 kali (21.8%) dan 9 kali (1.25%) untuk pola ganda. Hasil dari penelitian ini akan menjadi fasilitasi untuk kelas pengajaran dan pembelajaran bahasa Inggris terutama untuk penulisan teks dalam bahasa Inggris.*

*Kata kunci: theme-rheme, pola progresi tematik, penulisan siswa, teks recount*

## INTRODUCTION

The skill of writing an English text plays an important role for students who are in the process of learning a language when the skill itself is considered to be a difficult subject for many students. This is supported by (Harmer, 2004) stating that writing is an integral skill as like the other English language skills, such as reading, speaking, and listening. (Younes & Albalawi, 2015) further mentioned that writing an English text has been considered as a difficult subject for most language learners with English as a foreign language or second language. Therefore, it can be assumed that English writing skill is quite difficult for most English foreign language students with the conditions that require the solutions to the students' difficulties in writing English texts.

According to (Pertiwi, Ngadiso, & Drahati, 2018), in writing English texts, the students should understand clearly about the ways on how to create, build, express, and organize clear ideas into sentences and paragraphs. Also, to construct a robust paragraph, the students should strongly be encouraged to require adequate knowledge about creating and organizing the ideas into the meaningful language which aim to help the students express and manage the flow of ideas in an effective paragraph to the readers.

In addition to the organization of the ideas, the students also should deepen their understanding of the coherence of the text. Coherence means as a credible and obvious connection between one parts to other parts of a sentence connected in a smooth and rational order (Butt, Fahey, Feez, Spinks, & Yallop, 2000). (Lock, 1996) argued that students' text analysis should be performed by English teachers to assess the students' ability in writing and to analyze the students' obstacles in writing. The teachers can help students' difficulties in English writing by knowing the students' difficulties and their capability in writing a text so that their written texts can be understood by the readers. One of the ways that can be performed by the teachers is by giving feedback to the students' writing through a textual analysis of the students' thematic progression writing.

(Eggs, 2004) stated that "the significance of cohesion and coherence from a text is made by thematic progressions". It means that cohesion and coherence are important parts of the thematic progressions related to each other. The thematic progression shows several kinds of pattern of Theme and Rheme constructed in the students' writing.

(Wang, 2007) explained that in delivering the information through sentences, a knowledge of the theme and rheme of texts is needed. (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) also mentioned that the theme is a significant part in delivering the message that provides information about the topic or clause. Rheme can be understood as part of the clause produced by Theme. The theme addresses the main content of the text (clause) while the rheme explains the rest of the information in the content. The interactions of these two parts of theme and rheme organize how the information of each clause in the text is constructed (Eggs, 1994, p.275). Hence, the knowledge of

organizing Theme and Rheme is significant to be introduced and promoted by English teachers to create good writing by the students.

Moreover, main problems faced by EFL students in writing English texts including the difficulties in cohesion and coherence of writing, such as creating the ideas and managing the flow of ideas into organized sentences (Pertiwi et al., 2018). As also explained by (Lengsfeld et al. 2004) and (Devira, 2017), the cohesion in writing can be highlighted as the main problem faced by the students when they are learning to write English texts. This problem should be a focus of attention to be resolved since the cohesion and coherence are mainly required for paragraph writing. Therefore, it is needed to conduct a study focusing on the use of the salient tools of Theme and Rheme of *Systemic Functional Linguistics* in both studying the students' writing thematic progression patterns and showing its knowledge functions in writing.

Regarding the text type being focused in this present study, there are two main reasons: (1) there was no previous study about the analysis of senior high school students' recount text in Aceh school context by using the Thematic Progression analysis; (2) the recount text was the genre frequently introduced to the students at the high school level but the tools of Theme-Rheme on SFL theory had been never exposed to the writing skill teaching approach in Aceh school context

Based on the explanation above, the following questions are formulated as the research questions of this study: what kinds of thematic progression patterns are found in the recount texts written by EFL students at grade XI of senior high school? And what is the dominant pattern of the thematic progressions revealed in EFL students' recount texts at grade XI of senior high school?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Writing

According to (Brown, 2001), the writing skill comprises two processes that need to be undertaken by the writers. In the first process, the writers should learn how to comprehend the meaning and secondly, they are expected to transfer their meaning and understanding into language. Regarding the students' English writing skill learning, it means that the students should require the capability of ideas organisation and sufficient knowledge of mechanics writing and writing production.

Moreover, at present, the demand for writing assignments (projects) in academic areas is increasing due to the impact of globalization. As a consequence, EFL students become more motivated to own a capacity of good writing to continue their education in offshore universities, to participate in the academic world, and to apply for a good job. Considering the fact that the majority of Indonesian students' skill in English writing is still low, encouraging the students to learn how to build and manage a good English paragraph should take precedence.

Turning to the definition of writing, it can be defined as a skill for writing sentences and paragraphs correctly based on the proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation. It is also understood as the process of converting ideas coherently and cohesively into a written text. Hence, the ability of students in understanding the ways about how to manage and combine the meaning of ideas into the coherent and cohesion of paragraphs is quite significant in the writing process.

Cohesion exists between two or more linguistic units in a piece of discourse that refers to the formal grammatical and lexical relations. According to (Halliday and Hasan, 1976) define "cohesion as a part of meaning relations between elements in discourse that are fundamental to the interpretation in a text". Cohesion can be said as an organization process like aim that helps to connect sentences, paragraphs and sections coherently in writing a text. According to (Tarnyikova, 2009) "the cohesion presents a beginning structure linkage between elements of a text". It can be said that grammatical and lexical connect in a text or sentence that keep a text together and gives the meaning or purpose of a text. It is related to the significant concept of coherence.

Coherence is achieved when sentences and ideas are connected and flow together smoothly and it allows the reader to move easily throughout the essay from one idea to the next, from one sentence to the next, and from one paragraph to the next. According to (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004:309) "coherence is the eternal resource for structuring the clause as a message, including the notions of theme and information". Writing without coherence can inhibit a reader's understanding of the ideas and main points of the writing. Coherence means a clear and reasonable connection between parts and all the parts in a sentence are connected in a smooth and logical order.

### **Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) Theory**

Systemic Functional Grammar or Linguistics (SFL) was firstly introduced by Michael Halliday and also deployed by (Matthiessen, 2004). Halliday's theory views the language is part of a semiotic system (structure) organized systematically as a significant resource of meaning for the utters, then can be produced in a written form. This theory has enabled the writers to use textual tools which included both Theme and Rheme in creating a meaningful written text.

(Gerot and Wignell, 1994) explains that the purpose of a language is mostly described in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), a text-based theory of language. The origin of this theory is achieved from a deliberate analysis of oral and written language and its use to the contexts. Regarding the contexts, therefore, the concern of SFL theory focused more on the notion of the language functions rather than on the description of the language structures which were composed (Matthiessen & Halliday, 1997).

### **Theme and Rheme**

Theme and rheme are functional linguistic tools generated from the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) that mostly analysed the purpose of the language use.

According to Halliday and Mathiessen (2004), the thematic structure of the sentence consists of two parts: Theme and Rheme. The theme, in English text, can be defined as the first position of the clause while rheme is the remaining development of the clause, as the second position (Halliday, 2004). (Butt et al, 2001) states that Theme is as part of the sentence signifying the main point of the message and Rheme is the other part conveying the temporary purpose of the message.

In addition to the nature of Theme and Rheme definitions, Theme as the first position of the clause can be divided into three elements: (1) topical (experiential or ideational), (2) textual, and (3) interpersonal (Halliday, 1985; Astuti, Suryani, & Kurniati, 2010). Firstly, a topical theme acts as participant, process, or circumstance standing as a constituent of the clause. A textual theme refers to the creators or any of their combinations constructing the meanings of the text itself, consisting of continuatives, conjunctions, and conjunctive adjunct. The position of the textual theme also can be found before the topical theme. Further, the interpersonal theme is a part that may include the finite before the subject in interrogative clauses, vocatives, modal adjunct, and polarity adjunct. Lastly, Rheme position is also as important as the function of the Theme tool which works consistently to create a meaningful clause or sentence (Halliday, 1985; Marfuaty & Wahyudi, 2015).

### **Thematic Progression**

The theory of a Theme/thematic Progression was first proposed by Frantisek Danes in 1974, who described the limited borders within a paragraph referring to the paragraph's boundaries and its coherence on the contents (Marfuaty & Wahyudi, 2015). According to Eggins (2004), Thematic progression theory focuses on tracking the development of ideas presented by the writers into a text so that it discusses how the part of Theme is developed in a clause and can be repeated from the similar meaning of the previous theme and rheme. Hence, (Paltridge, 2006) argued that the theory of thematic progression based on the Theme-Rheme can be used as an approach to develop the flow of continuous information for maintaining a coherence and cohesion of the writing system of the text.

According to (Paltridge, 2006) there are three kinds of thematic progression patterns : (1) a Theme reiteration (constant theme pattern), (2) a zig-zag linear theme pattern, and (3) a multiple themes (split rheme pattern). In theme reiteration (constant theme pattern), *Theme 1* is picked up and repeated at the beginning of the next clause. The merit of applying this first type of thematic progression is to allow the writers to create a straight point of the text purpose. In the zig-zag linear theme pattern, the Theme of the second and further clause or sentence *Theme 2, 3, and...* was borrowed from the content of the previous Rheme. Lastly, multiple themes (split rheme pattern) covers varied meanings contained within a Rheme in the first clause (sentence), then picked to be the main idea in each Theme of next clauses.

### **Previous Studies in Thematic Progression**

While the previous sections focused on the nature of theory, this review considers previous studies on thematic progression undertaken to analyse written texts by EFL students.

For example, the study by (Yunita, 2018), it investigated the Theme and Thematic progression patterns of recount texts written by vocational students, the patterns' dominance constructed by the students in their writing, and the representation of the Theme elements to the relation of students' writing ability. Furthermore, another study about the Thematic Progression was also conducted by (Rakhman, 2013) on High School students' exposition texts. The purposes of his study were to investigate the process of the students with different level writing skill achievement in managing their writings into the exposition texts and to what level their writings were in line with argumentative language features as described in the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL).

Meanwhile, (Safitra, 2013) focused on a narrative text and applied a similar concern of Thematic progression in exploring the types of Theme realized in the Thematic patterns of the students' narrative texts. The findings showed that three elements of Themes: Topical, Textual, and Interpersonal were incorporated in their writings with the topical Theme as the most frequently used one. Besides, through a longer written text from an undergraduate university students' thesis, a previous study was also conducted by Astuti, Suryani, and Kurniati (2010). Their study focused on an analysis of coherence in the English Education students' thesis section of background by using the tools of Theme-Rheme of Thematic Progression. The study's findings showed that a lack of coherence was revealed on their background theses and the theory of the system of Theme-Rheme should be provided for students to improve their thesis writing quality.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The research design employed in this study was a qualitative method by applying a content analysis approach. The approach was used to analyze the thematic progression patterns on the students' writings of recount text. The texts, as the data of the present study, were taken from the class of XI of SMAN 2 Langsa, Aceh. Based on the theoretical perspectives of Thematic Progressions Theme-Rheme of SFL previously described, it is appropriate to use the theory to examine the types of the thematic progression patterns on recount text incorporated by twenty-four (24) participant students.

Using the theories above and a content analysis approach (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007), the researchers studied the thematic progression patterns on students' texts by involving several steps. Firstly, the researchers formally asked permission for the school and the English class teacher. After getting permission, all the students' texts on recount texts were collected and read to do further analysis. Further, the sentences within a paragraph were divided into clauses. Then, each of the clauses was identified in terms of Theme and Rheme which aimed to describe the thematic progression patterns within the students' paragraph. Finally, the types of pattern were classified to find the number of frequently used patterns on the students' texts.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

After analyzing twenty-four (24) students' texts, there are three thematic progression patterns found in their recount texts. The thematic progression patterns revealed consist of: (1) the constant or reiteration theme pattern, (2) the zig-zag linear pattern, and (3) the multiple or split theme pattern.

The types of thematic progression patterns used by the students are presented in the table below:

Table 1. Types of thematic progression patterns on the students' texts

Text	Thematic Pattern (TP)		
	Constant theme	Zig-zag Linear Theme	Multiple (Split) Theme
1	2	2	-
2	4	1	-
3	3	5	-
4	6	-	-
5	7	3	-
6	11	1	-
7	6	-	2
8	-	6	-
9	4	-	-
10	3	-	-
11	4	2	-
12	6	-	-
13	12	2	-
14	2	4	-
15	4	1	-
16	6	-	-
17	8	-	-
18	5	-	-
19	9	-	-
20	6	-	-
21	-	5	-
22	4	1	-
23	4	2	-
24	7	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>2</b>

From the table above, the findings showed that one or two Theme patterns (TP) were constructed by the students in their recount texts to manage the ideas and there was no text produced by the student including all three types of Theme pattern (TP). Based on these findings, clearly, the most dominant TP occurred in the students' recount text of the eleventh grade in SMAN 2 Langsa is constant theme pattern (123 or 76.8% of the total), followed by zig-zag linear theme pattern with a frequency of 35 or 21.8%, and the multiple (split) theme

pattern as the least frequent (2 or 1.25%).

Based on the results presented above, three points will be discussed in the following section:

1. The more unconnected the links are from the Rheme of one clause to the Theme of the next clause, the more incoherent the paragraph is. Text 1 presented some instances of unconnected theme resulting in a less coherent paragraph among the other students' recount texts which were analyzed.

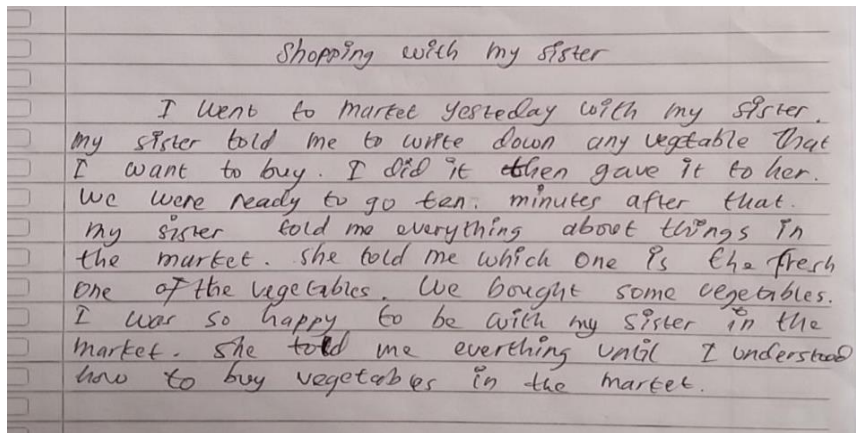


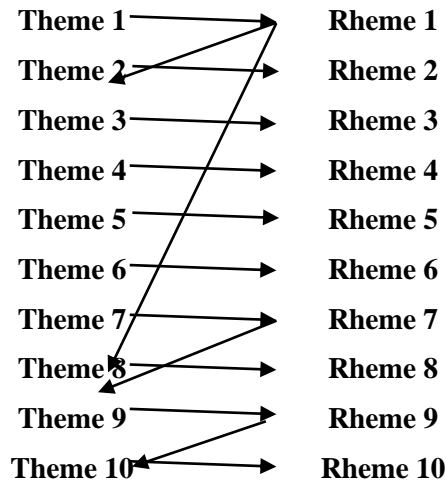
Image 1. Text 1 by the student

Table 2. Theme and rheme pattern of Text 1

Clause	Theme	Rheme
1	I	went to market yesterday with my sister
2	My sister	told me to write down any vegetables
3	I	want to buy
4	I	did it then gave it to her
5	We	were ready to go ten minutes after that
6	My sister	told me everything about things in the market
7	She	told me which one is the fresh one of the vegetables
8	We	bought some vegetables
9	I	was so happy to be with my sister in the market
10	She	told me everything until I understand how to buy vegetables in the market

Thematic progression pattern of text 1:





From the analysis of text 1 above, the thematic patterns revealed low incidence with a few of unconnected links of rheme to theme. The patterns resulted included the constant theme pattern (2) and the zig zag linear pattern (2). There were not relations among a few of Rheme (R) units to the Theme (T) units. Several T units jumped to another new T unit. For example, the T-3 'I' has no relation to the T-2 'My sister' or R-2 'any vegetables'. It also occurred in T-5, 8, and 9 which had no relations to the Rheme and Theme of their previous clauses. Therefore, there were some clauses within the paragraph that were not really correlated to the ideas in previous sentences, such as in the clause (C) 4, 5 and 6.

According to (Marfuaty & Wahyudi, 2015), one of the reasons determining the level of coherence of the text is the frequency of new themes found in the text, which means that the lower the new themes are found in the text, the higher coherence of the text is. Also, the higher the new themes "a lack of derived theme" (Marfuaty & Wahyudi, p.119), the lower coherence of the text is. Further they argued that a high frequency of unconnected links through the themes within a paragraph will be related to the characteristics of a spoken text. Following this argumentation, through the text 1, it can be seen from C-3 and C-4 which look attributed to the nature of spoken text.

2. The more consistent the thematic patterns are used, the more coherent of the paragraph is. This finding can be seen from the results presented through Table 1 and from an analysis through the students' recount texts in each of the clauses. The highest majority of thematic patterns which were consistently constructed by the students was the constant theme pattern (76.8%), and then followed by the zig zag theme pattern at only around a third of the constant percentage (21.8%).

As an evidence of all, it can be observed through the Text 13 below showing how a clear focus of the paragraph was constructed by the students through the constant theme pattern and how a consistence of the thematic pattern was used and crossed from the Rheme of one clause to the Theme of next clause.

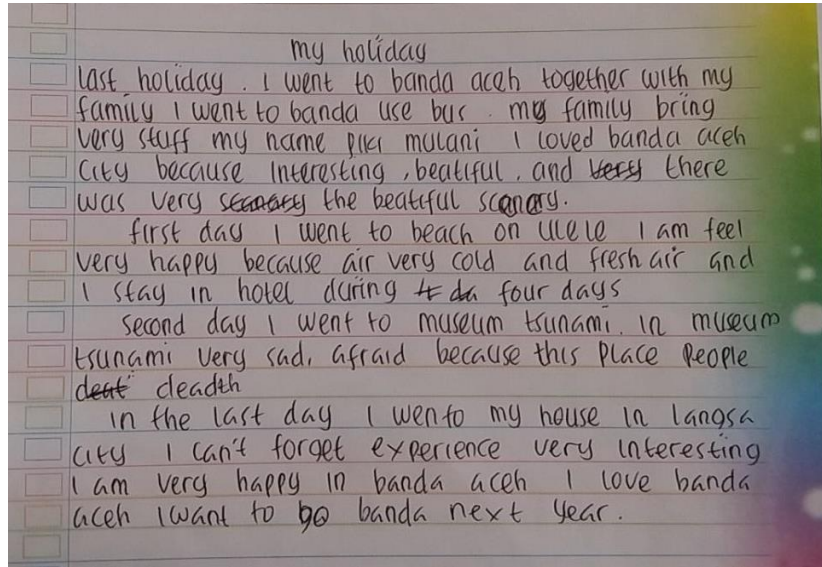
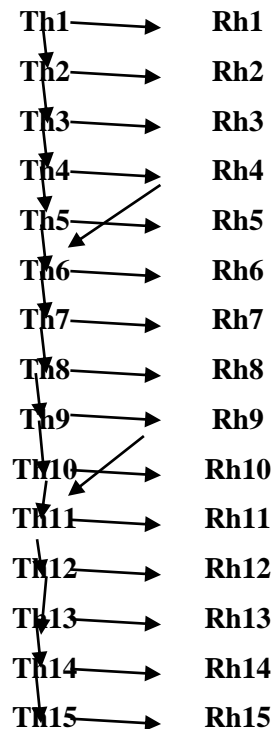


Image 2. Text 13 by the student

Table 3. Theme and rheme pattern of Text 13

Clause	Theme	Rheme
1	Last holiday I	Went to Banda Aceh together with my family
2	I	Went to Banda use bus
3	My family	Bring very stuff
4	My name	is Piki Mulani
5	I	Loved Banda Aceh city because interesting, beautiful, and there was very beautiful scenery.
6	First day I	Went to beach on Ulele
7	I	Feel very happy because air very cold and fresh air
8	And I	Stay in hotel during four days
9	Second day I	Went to museum tsunami
10	In museum tsunami	Very sad, afraid because this place people death
11	In the last day I	Went to my house in Langsa city
12	I	Can't forget experience very interesting
13	I	Am very happy in Banda Aceh
14	I	Loved Banda Aceh
15	I	Want to go to Banda Aceh next year

Thematic progression pattern of Text 13 :



Through Text 13 above, it can be seen as a representative which is similar with other texts presenting the dominant consistency of the constant theme and the linked relations from the Rheme of C-4 and C-10 to the next of their clauses. As explained by McCabe (1999 cited in Marfuaty and Wahyudi, 2015), the constant (linear) theme is the basic kind of theme which frequently appears in the thematic patterns of writing. However, crossing the links from the Rheme to the next Theme was also considered significant as a nature of the academic text types despite the importance of thematic pattern consistently constructed in the texts (Marfuaty and Wahyudi, 2015).

3. The thematic patterns which revealed in the findings of the students' written texts support the character as coherent texts even though there were some unconnected relations among themes and rhemes within the paragraph.

It can be seen from a clear focus of all the students' texts involving the constant theme as the highest thematic pattern. This finding is also following Abed (2010 cited in Marfuaty & Wahyudi, 2015) and (Paltridge, 2006) explanation describing the reason of high occurrence of the constant theme as a writing technique by the writers to describe and give a simple explanation. Referring to their opinion, it can be understood that the constant theme mostly preferred by the students within their recount texts has able reflected them as a beginner in English writing texts. Further, the finding of this present study regarding the constant theme as the most dominantly used within the students' texts is in line with other results' studies as conducted by other previous researchers (Sugijarto, 2010) and (Yunita,

2018). (Yunita, 2018) confirms that this high incidence reflected the students' higher ability in strengthening and maintaining a focus of the text consistently by referring to the previous rheme for the next theme of the clauses, mostly found in the middle achiever category of the students' texts.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis on twenty-four of the students' recount texts at the eleventh grade of SMAN 2 Langsa, the findings show that there are three types of thematic patterns (progression) revealed, comprising: the constant theme, the zigzag linear theme, and multiple (split) theme. The constant theme has resulted dominantly with 123 frequencies (76.8% of the total), followed by the zigzag linear theme (35 times or 21.8%) and the multiple/split theme (2 times or 1.25%). Although the dominant pattern found in the students' texts of this present study look monotonous, the students can write the texts coherently and consistently by using the constant theme without exposing a lot of new (unconnected) themes. It is suggested to English teachers to understand and apply the concept of thematic patterns in Systemic Functional Linguistics at their English writing teaching and learning classrooms. The concept will help the students to write a cohesive and coherent English text and guide the teachers to assess the coherence of students' writings. The future researchers are recommended to continue this study into a deeper analysis of thematic patterns by exploring the types of Themes and their representation into the students' writing ability.

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