
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Writing Tasks and Learners' Textual Theme Choices: An Analysis of First-year Non-English Majors' Routine English Writing

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| ABSTRACT

This study is designed to analyze the use of Textual Themes in three different writing tasks, namely Dos and Don'ts in China, A Movie Review, and Introducing a Hotel. The data consist of 24 English compositions written by first-year non-English majors at a university in Guangdong Province. Adopting a mixed-method approach, the study uses UAM CorpusTool 6 to annotate Textual Themes and their subtypes. Then SPSS 27.0.1 is used to conduct descriptive statistical analysis and one-way ANOVA on the Textual Theme Ratio across the three tasks. Representative sentences are further discussed to illustrate the functions of different Textual Themes in different writing tasks. The results reveal a statistically significant difference in Textual Theme Ratio between Dos and Don'ts in China and Introducing a Hotel. In addition, Contextualising and Addition are subtypes frequently used across all three tasks, whereas different tendencies are observed in the use of Consequence, Adversative, Concessive, and Sequencing. To some extent, these differences are associated with the communicative purposes and discourse requirements of the writing tasks. The findings of this study may serve as an exploration for future research with larger corpus and more clearly differentiated genres.

| KEYWORDS

Textual Theme; Writing task; EFL writing.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Writing is not only a process of generating sentences by correct grammar, organizing information into a coherent text, but also a process of realizing different tasks' communicative purposes through appropriate linguistic choices. From the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the Theme–Rheme system plays an important role in realizing textual and communicative meaning. Theme functions as the start of a message, while Rheme provides information that develops from Theme. Through appropriate thematic choices, writers can connect ideas, establish logical relationships, and contribute to the coherence of a text.

Among the three major types of Theme, Textual Theme is particularly important for textual organization. The choice of Textual Themes reflects the requirements of different propositions and how writers establish logical connections. Previous studies on EFL writing have examined Theme choices in different contexts and have found that learners tend to rely on particular types of Theme. Other studies have also suggested that thematic choices may be associated with factors such as writing experience, topic familiarity, proficiency, and the discourse requirement of a writing task.

However, relatively limited attention has been paid to Textual Theme and its subtypes. Most studies analyze Theme as a whole or consider Textual Theme together with other types of Theme. In addition, the majority of studies are carried out under controlled conditions. They provide less evidence of how learners use Textual Themes in their regular course writing. For some mixed method studies, quantitative differences in Theme use lack adequate explanations for how and why such differences emerge. Therefore, examining frequency and statistical differences together with representative examples from actual texts can provide a more comprehensive interpretation of the relationship between writing tasks and Textual Theme choices.

To expand related studies, this study analyzes the use of Textual Themes in three different writing tasks finished by the same group of EFL learners. It combines quantitative and qualitative methods: the distribution of different Textual Theme subtypes is calculated through UAM CorpusTool 6, while SPSS 27.0.1 is used to determine whether significant differences exist in Textual Theme Ratios across the three tasks. Representative examples are further discussed to illustrate how the identified differences function in context. In this way, this study aims to provide a preliminary account of the relationship between writing tasks and Textual Theme choices in EFL writing.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following questions:

- 1) What are the distributional patterns of Textual Themes across the three writing tasks?
- 2) Are there significant differences in the choices of Textual Themes across the three writing tasks?
- 3) Why do Textual Theme choices vary across different writing tasks?

2. Literature Review

For the applications of Theme-Rheme, the topic ranges from translations to continuation writing and academic writing, among others. Yuan (2025) conducts a study analyzing Xi Jinping: The Governance of China IV, concluding that the reduction of marked themes in the Chinese-English translation is an efficient strategy to enhance coherence, and summarizes the factors influencing the adjustment of Thematic structure in translation. Zhang (2023) examines the application of Theme-rheme theory to continuation writing. The results revealed a positive correlation between the scores and the types of Themes used. Suharsono, S., Ashadi, A., & Feri, Z. O. (2024) focus on the Theme-rheme theory and conduct a comparative analysis of 50 academic papers by undergraduate, master, and doctor students. It reveals the similarity in the use of Thematic structure across students of different levels, providing empirical evidence and teaching insights to enhance the coherence of academic texts.

As for research methods, most studies use both quantitative and qualitative methods. For quantitative methods, according to Chen (2022), the most commonly used NLP-based text analysis tools are IBM SPSS Statistics and the UAM Corpus Tool. Li (2025) uses UAM Corpus Tool 6 to calculate the use of Theme-Rheme in text and compare the data between two groups. For qualitative methods, textual analysis oriented by Systemic Functional Linguistics are widely conducted. For instance, Abdel Fattah and Al-Shara'h (2026) carried out a descriptive qualitative analysis on university students' motivational letters, identifying different Theme categories and illustrating how thematic choices shape textual organization. Similarly, Ngongo et al. (2023) adopted purely qualitative text fragmentation procedures to reveal the construction and functions of Textual Themes in public speeches, drawing on clause-level examples to demonstrate how Textual Themes organize information in discourse.

However, existing research has mainly focused on overall Theme patterns across genres or learner groups. Comparatively little attention has been paid specifically to Textual Themes, and few studies have investigated their use in authentic classroom writing tasks produced by Chinese EFL learners. The qualitative functions of different textual Theme subtypes across task types also remain underexplored.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

This research was conducted at a university in Guangdong province, with participants being first-year non-English majors. The data were derived from their daily English writing tasks in the College English course, which included three kinds of writing tasks: Task 1: Dos and Don'ts in China; Task 2: A Movie Review; Task 3: Introducing a Hotel. The three tasks differed in both their communicative purposes and content requirements. Task 1, Dos and Don'ts in China, was mainly explanatory and instructional, requiring students to introduce particular customs or etiquette, explain what and how they should behave, and provide reasons behind. Task 2, A Movie Review, was combined with narrative and evaluative writing, requiring students to describe the plot of a film while also expressing their evaluations of the movie. Task 3, Introducing a Hotel, was mainly descriptive and promotional, requiring students to introduce the hotel's features and services and explain why it would be worth recommending.

24 valid compositions were extracted from their daily English writing tasks, with 8 samples for each task. All compositions have been deleted unrelated information, such as teacher annotations and names, and then were transformed from Doc. to text.

Table 1 introduces the size of the corpus.

Table 1 Overview of the Corpus

Task	Sample	Total Words
Task 1	8	7718
Task 2	8	8105
Task 3	8	7209

3.2 Research Instruments

This study used UAM CorpusTool as the main research instrument to identify and classify Textual Themes in students' writings. The software was used to annotate the Textual Theme subtypes and obtain their frequencies across the three writing tasks. The resulting data were then organized and analyzed statistically using SPSS (27.0. 1) to examine the distributional patterns and significant differences in Textual Theme use.

3.3 Research Procedures

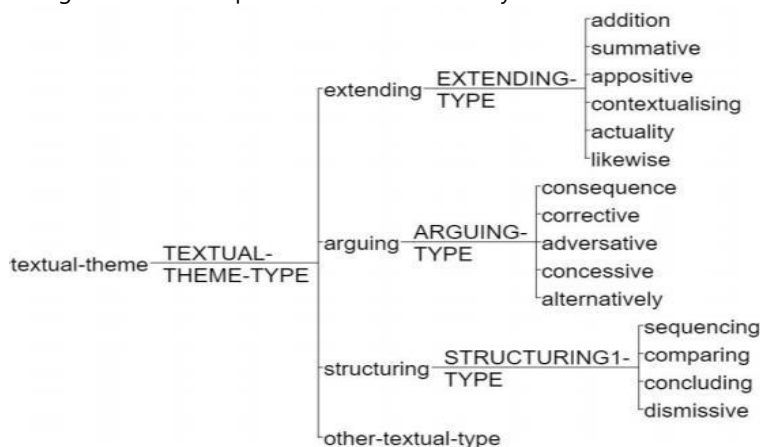
(1) Data Collection

The texts are from daily English writing tasks in the College English 1 course. There are three writing tasks, and 8 compositions are randomly selected for each task, so there are 24 compositions in total.

(2) Text Annotation

24 plain texts are imported into UAM Corpus Tool 6 for annotating, based on the Halliday-Theme layer. After that, the annotating results will be checked manually. The annotating layer of Textual Theme is listed in the followings, which is employed in this study.

Figure 1. UAM Corpus Tool 6 Annotation Layers of Textual Theme



(3) Describing and Comparing Data

UAM CorpusTool was used to identify and classify the occurrence of Textual Themes and different Textual Theme subtypes among the three writing tasks. The results were then reorganized in Excel and imported into SPSS for statistical analysis. In SPSS, the Textual Theme Ratio across the three tasks was compared and described. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether the differences in Textual Theme use across the three tasks were statistically significant. When significant differences were found, post-hoc comparisons were further conducted to identify which tasks differed from each other. To compare the use of Textual Themes across texts of different lengths, the Textual Theme Ratio was calculated as the number of Textual Themes divided by the total number of Themes in each text, multiplied by 100: Textual Theme Ratio = Number of Textual Themes / Total Number of Themes × 100%.

(4) Qualitative Analysis

After the quantitative analysis, a qualitative analysis was conducted to further explain the differences observed in the data. Based on the distributional patterns of Textual Theme subtypes, representative sentences were selected from the three writing tasks for closer analysis. These examples were examined to illustrate how different Textual Theme subtypes function in organizing ideas and expressing logical relationships.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Distribution of Textual Themes Across the Three Tasks

Table 2 presents the distribution of Textual Themes across the three writing tasks. The mean Textual Theme Ratio was 21.18% for Task 1, 14.40% for Task 2, and 12.85% for Task 3. The results also show differences in the variation within each task. Task 1 shows a standard deviation of 4.97%, while Task 2 and Task 3 are of larger standard deviations of 5.73% and 7.31% respectively. The Textual Theme Ratio ranges from 15.38% to 28.81% in Task 1, from 4.35% to 21.67% in Task 2, and from 0% to 23.01% in Task 3. The results indicate that the use of Textual Themes varied more significantly among the texts in Task 3 than in Task 1.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Textual Ratio

Task	N	Mean (%)	SD (%)	Minimum (%)	Maximum (%)
1 (Dos and Don'ts in China)	8	21.18	4.97	15.38	28.81
2 (A Movie Review)	8	14.4	5.73	4.35	21.67
3 (Introducing a Hotel)	8	12.85	7.31	0	23.01
Total	24	16.14	6.89	0	28.81

4.2 Differences in Textual Theme Use across The Three Tasks

Before conducting the one-way ANOVA, the assumptions of normality (Shapiro-Wilk) and homogeneity of variance (Levene's test) were satisfied (all $p > .05$). The ANOVA revealed a significant difference in Textual Theme Ratios across the three writing tasks, $F(2, 21) = 4.249$, $p = .028$, $\eta^2 = .288$, indicating a moderate effect of task type. Bonferroni post hoc comparisons showed that only Task 1 ($M = 21.18\%$, $SD = 4.97\%$) and Task 3 ($M = 12.85\%$, $SD = 7.31\%$) differed significantly ($p = .037$), whereas the other pairwise comparisons were not significant. These results suggest that writing task is associated with learners' use of Textual Themes.

4.3 Distribution of Textual Theme Subtypes

4.3.1 Distribution of the Four Major Types

Overall, the three tasks showed a similar pattern: Extending and Arguing mainly constitute the whole Textual Themes, while Structuring and Other-textual-type are used much less frequently.

Table 3. Four Major Textual Theme Types

TEXTUAL-THEME-TYPE	Task 1		Task 2		Task 3	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
- Extending	84	56.38%	47	53.41%	56	64.37%
- Arguing	48	32.21%	31	35.23%	28	32.18%
- Structuring	15	10.07%	10	11.36%	2	2.30%
- Other-textual-type	2	1.34%	0	0.00%	1	1.15%
TOTAL:	149	45.99%	88	27.16%	87	26.85%

4.3.2 Distribution of Major Subtypes

For Extending, Contextualising and Addition were the two most common subtypes in all three tasks. For Arguing, the main subtypes were Consequence and Adversative. For Structuring, Sequencing was the most frequent subtype in Task 1 and Task 2, but it did not occur in Task 3.

Table 4. Major Textual Theme Subtypes

Major Category	Subtype	Task 1N (%)	Task 2N (%)	Task 3N (%)
Extending	Addition	30 (35.71%)	24 (51.06%)	20 (35.71%)
	Summative	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)
	Appositive	11 (13.10%)	5 (10.64%)	3 (5.36%)
	Contextualising	39 (46.43%)	17 (36.17%)	32 (57.14%)
	Actuality	3 (3.57%)	1 (2.13%)	1 (1.79%)
	Likewise	1 (1.19%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)

Major Category	Subtype	Task 1N (%)	Task 2N (%)	Task 3N (%)
Arguing	Consequence	22 (45.83%)	7 (22.58%)	6 (21.43%)
	Corrective	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)
	Adversative	18 (37.50%)	16 (51.61%)	17 (60.71%)
	Concessive	3 (6.25%)	6 (19.35%)	5 (17.86%)
	Alternatively	5 (10.42%)	2 (6.45%)	0 (0.00%)
Structuring	Sequencing	10 (66.67%)	7 (70.00%)	0 (0.00%)
	Comparing	0 (0.00%)	1 (10.00%)	1 (50.00%)
	Concluding	5 (33.33%)	2 (20.00%)	1 (50.00%)
	Dismissive	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)

5.3.3 Task-related Differences in Textual Theme Use

The commonness of the three tasks is that Contextualising and Addition are the two most frequent subtypes. However, two task-related differences were identified. Consequence was the third most frequent subtype in Tasks 1 and 3, whereas Adversative ranked third in Task 2. In addition, Concessive emerged as a major subtype only in Task 3, while Sequencing was characteristic of Tasks 1 and 2. Representative clauses are presented below to illustrate these functional differences.

In Task 1 and 3, Consequence is used to establish a cause-result relation between the information, which ranks third in the frequency list:

"Therefore, a price ranging between 150 and 800 is recommended, within which there are numerous cost-effective room options."

This sentence appears in Task 3 when introducing room reservation at Orange Hotel. After explaining that rooms under 150 yuan are unavailable, the writer uses "therefore" to recommend the 150–800 yuan price range. Here, "therefore" links the preceding information to a practical recommendation, guiding the reader from available room options to a logical conclusion.

In contrast, Adversative is the third most frequent subtype in Task 2. Its function can be illustrated by the following sentence from a movie review of La La Land in Task 2:

"Initially, they do not see eye to eye. However, destiny repeatedly brings them together, and they gradually fall head over heels in love with each other."

This sentence appears in a review of La La Land. After describing the characters' initial conflict, the writer uses "however" to mark a contrast and signal a turning point in the plot. Unlike "therefore", which introduces a logical result, "however" foregrounds the shift from disagreement to romance. The frequent use of Adversative Themes "however" reflects the contrastive and conflict plot of the film.

Task 3 shows a distinctive pattern in its use of Concessive Themes. A representative example is:

"Although the rooms are generally less than forty square meters, they are filled with delightful surprises."

This sentence occurs in the description of the interior facilities of Treehotel. Before this sentence, the writer introduces the distinctive tree houses and their natural surroundings. The content then shifts from the size of the rooms to their interior qualities. In this context, "although" enables the writer to acknowledge a limitation without denying the overall positive evaluation of the hotel. The use of Concessive therefore helps combine description with evaluation, which is particularly a feature of Task 3, an expository writing.

5.4 The Explanations to Task-related Differences in Textual Theme Use

The most important finding is the significant difference in Textual Theme Ratio between Task 1 and Task 3. A possible explanation lies in their different organizational requirements. Task 1 requires students to explain what, how, and why of Chinese etiquette, so procedural organization and explanation are both necessary. In contrast, Task 3 mainly focuses on introducing a hotel and explaining why it is worth recommending, requiring less procedural organization and consequently fewer Textual Themes.

There are also differences in Textual Theme subtypes. Tasks 1 and 3 both show a relatively high frequency of Consequence, because writers need to explain reasons and draw conclusions. By contrast, Adversative is more frequent in Task 2, where movie reviews describe conflicts and plot changes. Another difference concerns Sequencing and Concessive. Sequencing is common in Tasks 1 and 2 because both require information to unfold chronologically, either as behavioural procedures or plot development. Task 3, however, contains more Concessive Themes, as hotel introductions often balance strengths with minor limitations. These patterns suggest that Textual Theme choices are closely related to the communicative purposes of different writing tasks.

5.5 Writing Tasks and Choices of Textual Themes

The results indicate that writing tasks influence rather than determine students' choices of Textual Themes. While Contextualising and Addition remain the two most frequent subtypes across all three tasks, the variation of other subtypes reflects differences in communicative purpose and discourse organization. Nevertheless, task type is not the only factor affecting thematic choices. Individual writing style, English proficiency, topic familiarity, and the relatively small corpus may also contribute to the observed variation. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as task-related tendencies rather than fixed characteristics of each writing task.

5.6 Implications for EFL Writing Instruction

This study suggests that Textual Themes should be taught in relation to communicative purpose rather than as isolated cohesive devices. Different writing tasks require different discourse relations, such as causal explanation in instructional writing, contrastive organization in film reviews, and evaluative concession in recommendation writing. Classroom instruction can therefore guide students to choose appropriate Textual Theme subtypes according to the organizational demands of a task, helping them improve discourse coherence instead of merely increasing the use of linking expressions.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the use of Textual Themes across three EFL classroom writing tasks. The results indicate that writing tasks are associated with students' choices of Textual Themes. A significant difference in Textual Theme Ratio was found between Dos and Don'ts in China and Introducing a Hotel. While Contextualising and Addition were the most frequent subtypes in all three tasks, Consequence, Adversative, Concessive, and Sequencing showed distinct task-related patterns, reflecting different communicative purposes and discourse organization.

This study has several limitations. The three writing tasks were randomly selected from classroom assignments rather than representing clearly defined genres, and the corpus was relatively small, with only eight texts in each task. In addition, the thematic annotation was completed by a single researcher without inter-rater validation. Therefore, the findings should be regarded as a pilot study of Textual Theme use in authentic Chinese EFL classroom writing. Future research could employ larger corpora, include more representative writing genres, and strengthen annotation reliability to improve the generalizability of the findings.

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