

## ARTICLE

# Applying Theme Types and Thematic Progression to Cohesion and Coherence of IELTS Academic Writing Task 2: A Qualitative Descriptive Study

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## ABSTRACT

Due to the unsatisfied IELTS writing scores in the past decade, previous studies investigated the problems and solutions from lexical, syntactic, and task analysis perspectives. However, they ignored the influence of coherence and cohesion on the overall performance of IELTS Academic Writing Task 2. Hence, the research conducted a qualitative descriptive study to writing cohesion and coherence of 15 practice essays of Chinese undergraduates under theme types and thematic progression of Functional Grammar. It initially analyzed the distributing features of themes and thematic progression patterns. It further adopted theme- and thematic progression-based writing rubrics to evaluate the coherence and cohesion of IELTS writing essays separately. The research findings showed that as the writing level of learners rose, dominant topical themes and constant thematic progression decreased, whereas textual themes and simple linear progression following them increased. They also revealed that learners achieved a higher cohesion in conjunctions and reiterations than in references and presented higher coherence in body parts than in introductions and conclusions. These results suggest that theme types and thematic progressions effectively reflect and evaluate coherent and cohesive performance in IELTS writing.

**Keywords:** Theme Types; Thematic Progression Patterns; Coherence and Cohesion; IELTS Writing; Organization

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# 1. Introduction

IELTS is becoming more and more popular among EFL countries. Nevertheless, the average writing scores of EFL learners have remained below the global average during the past decade. Especially in China, the average IELTS writing score(5.80) remained below the global average of 5.94, though it slightly grew from 5.16 in 2012 to 5.80 in 2024<sup>[1]</sup>. This unsatisfying writing performance mainly originates from IELTS Academic Writing Task 2(AWT2) because it accounts for twice as much scoring weight as IELTS Writing Task 1 does<sup>[2]</sup>. Given the importance of AWT2, the research narrows its focus to investigating the problems and solutions in AWT2 writing performance.

Up to the present, numerous scholars have conducted their in-depth investigations into AWT2 writing performance. Some of them probed the problems of AWT2 task response from question types, cognitive complexity, task response templates, and model essays<sup>[3-5]</sup>. They attempted to implement a mind-mapping strategy and follow writing templates to address the above problems<sup>[4, 5]</sup>. However, as Liang<sup>[4]</sup> claims, task response also requires learners to arrange ideas and convert them into sentences and paragraphs. There is limited research on grouping ideas and transferring them into corresponding sentences and paragraphs.

Others explored the lexical problems from insufficient and incorrect lexical collocation, repetitive synonyms, improper vocabulary use, lexical density, and overvaluing advanced vocabulary<sup>[6-8]</sup>. Some studies have attempted to tackle these problems by utilizing the strategies of phraseological competence, lexical bundles, and lexical cohesion<sup>[9-11]</sup>, which enhances the accuracy of lexical usage and collocation to some extent. Nevertheless, the strategies mentioned in the above studies cannot guarantee lexical appropriateness in a sentence. Hence, there is another significant shortage of research investigating synthesizing proper lexical expressions into a sentence.

Sentence, as another important testing indicator in IELTS writing, also attracted much scholarly attention. Previous scholars found that writing learners often encountered the syntactic problems such as limited sentence complexity, ungrammatical complex sentences, and sentence distortions caused by negative transfer<sup>[12-14]</sup>. Some scholars suggest that learners can resolve syntactic problems by enhancing grammatical knowledge and mastering grammatical rules, in-

creasing sentence complexity and types by teaching sentence patterns, and utilizing the IELTS translation education corpus and model essays to enlarge sentence variety<sup>[12, 15-17]</sup>. Just as lexical strategies fail to organize words into a sentence, syntactic strategies also have the problem of organizing sentences in a paragraph or text. Thus, the study of syntactic connections in AWT2 writing is worth further exploration, too.

Given the three shortages or limitations mentioned above, the research further reveals that task response, lexical, and grammatical problems not only exist as independent problems but also overlap with each other and cause organizing problems. The overlapping parts are word-to-word, sentence-to-sentence, and idea-to-idea connections in a text. Improper connections between word-to-word and sentence-to-sentence easily lead to cohesion problems in IELTS writing because cohesion establishes the semantic links between the interdependent linguistic components in a text and applies grammatical and lexical cohesive devices to connect utterances<sup>[18]</sup>. By contrast, ineffective connections between ideas result in the coherence problem in IELTS writing for coherence connects the meanings between different linguistic components and promotes logical flow in a text<sup>[18]</sup>. In other words, there is limited research on the coherence and cohesion in IELTS writing.

Cohesion and coherence are so crucial in connecting words, sentences, and ideas that it is essential for this research to explore them in IELTS writing. After all, they enhance the logical flow and clarity of ideas, connect sentences and paragraphs, and ensure textual harmony and writing quality<sup>[19-21]</sup>. Ineffective coherence and cohesion lead to weak thesis statements, poor topic sentences, and grammatical errors, and influence overall writing effectiveness and readability<sup>[22, 23]</sup>. Given its importance throughout the writing process, a few scholars attempted to probe the coherence and cohesion in IELTS writing from cohesive devices and discourse markers, model essays, and thematic progression<sup>[3, 20, 24]</sup>. They applied themes and thematic progression to coherence and cohesion most frequently. This proves a significant connection between thematic progression, coherence, and cohesion. Nevertheless, the above studies did not clarify how thematic progression and themes reflect and evaluate writing coherence and cohesion. Therefore, it is still applicable for this research to implement theme types<sup>[25]</sup>

and thematic progression<sup>[26]</sup> to reveal coherent and cohesive features of AWT2 practice essays and adopted theme- and thematic progression-based rubrics to evaluate their coherence and cohesion differences from low-, middle- to high-achieving groups. Two crucial reasons further justify the plausibility of theme types and thematic progression (TP) in this research. For one reason, themes are conducive to organizing writing discourse, and thematic progression helps enhance textual coherence and cohesion<sup>[24]</sup>. For another, exploring writing from coherence and cohesion equals examining writing logical progression<sup>[27]</sup>. The most effective method of strengthening the writing flow is to apply various theme types and TP patterns<sup>[28]</sup>. Based on the above investigation, this research attempts to address the following three research questions:

(1) How are three theme types and four TP patterns distributed among AWT2 practice essays of low-, middle- and high-achieving groups?

(2) How do the cohesion of AWT2 practice essays differ among low-, middle- and high-achieving groups when measured by the adapted theme-based cohesion rubric?

(3) How do the coherence of AWT2 practice essays differ among low-, middle- and high-achieving groups when measured by the adapted thematic progression-based coherence rubric?

## 2. Literature Review

As one of three metafunctions of language, textual metafunction focuses on the organization of written or spoken texts and mainly deals with creating textual cohesion and coherence<sup>[25]</sup>. Its two central concepts are theme types and thematic progression, which serve as the main indicators to embody textual coherence and cohesion. Thus, before investigating the application of theme types and TP patterns in IELTS writing coherence and cohesion, this research had to first review the existing literature on the definitions and classifications of theme types and TP patterns.

### 2.1. Theme and Rheme

#### 2.1.1. Definition of Theme and Rheme

According to Functional Grammar<sup>[25]</sup>, a sentence consists of “theme” and “rheme”. Unlike the theme in the Collins Dictionary, which refers to a central idea that runs through-

out a text, the “theme” in this study follows Halliday and Matthiessen’s definition. It denotes the point of departure in a clausal or syntactic message<sup>[25]</sup>. It guides readers to interpret the message. Halliday and Matthiessen defined “rheme” as the remaining part of the message in which “the theme is developed”<sup>[25]</sup>. The theme conveys the known information evident in a given situation, whereas the rheme expresses new or unknown information in the discourse<sup>[29]</sup>. Thompson later simplified the theme as “the first constituent of the clause” or the sentence and the rheme as “the rest of the clause” or the sentence<sup>[30]</sup>. Since an independent clause equals a sentence in analyzing theme and rheme, the following sections will use “sentence” to replace “a clause or a sentence” for simplicity.

#### 2.1.2. Classification of Themes

Under Functional Grammar, themes consist of topical, textual, and interpersonal themes<sup>[25]</sup>. Textual themes relate sentences to the context<sup>[31]</sup> and act as the linking and continuous means to organize the sentences and structure the text. They often appear in any combination of continuatives, conjunctions, and conjunctive adjuncts. Interpersonal themes indicate the elements that manifest various interactions among speakers in any combination of modal adjuncts, vocatives, and finite verbal operator elements<sup>[25]</sup>. As for topical themes, Halliday and Matthiessen<sup>[25]</sup> viewed them as new content that is unknown to the hearer and a new meaning constructed by combining a participant, a process, and circumstance.

Based on the markedness, topical themes encompass marked and unmarked Themes. If a theme in the beginning part of a clause commonly serves as the grammatical subject of the clause, it is labelled as an unmarked theme<sup>[25, 31]</sup>. On the contrary, if a theme in the clause acts as an adjunct and complement rather than the subject, it can be named as a marked theme.

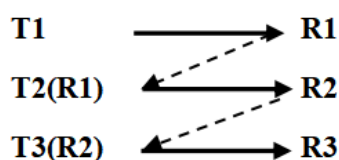
### 2.2. Thematic Progression and Its Four Patterns

To enhance the overall textual organization in AWT2, learners should strengthen writing coherence and cohesion on syntactic and discourse levels. On a syntactic level, themes and rhemes are crucial in linking learners’ known and unknown information and conveying a sentence message co-

hesively and coherently<sup>[25]</sup>. In the communicative process, the syntactic information flows from themes to rhemes and expresses the meaning within a sentence. On a discourse level, thematic progression patterns help learners promote the flow process of textual information. The patterns relate the current theme in one sentence to the theme and rheme of previous sentences in various forms, picking up or repeating the essential concepts and developing them further in the future themes of the following sentences<sup>[32]</sup>. In short, they promote the message to flow from one sentence to another and form “thematic progression”. Danes, the founder of thematic progression, defined it as the mechanism helping “choose and order utterance themes, their mutual concatenation, and hierarchy, as well as their relationship to the hyperthemes of the superior text units to the whole text, and to the situation”<sup>[26]</sup>.

To display the process of thematic progression throughout a text, Danes proposed four thematic progression Patterns<sup>[26]</sup>. The four patterns are “(1) Simple linear TP, (2) TP with a continuous (constant) theme, (3) TP with derived themes, and (4) TP with the exposition of a split rheme”<sup>[26]</sup>. Based on these four patterns, many scholars proposed their TP patterns, such as Liu’s five TP patterns<sup>[33]</sup>, Akinseye’s seven TP patterns<sup>[34]</sup>, and Wang’s four TP patterns<sup>[35]</sup>. Despite the variation in their TP patterns, they shared Danes’ four thematic progression patterns. Hence, this research chose these four TP patterns as its focus for analysis.

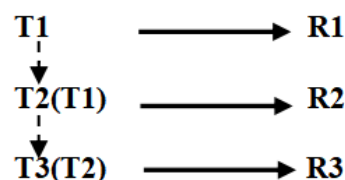
The first pattern is Simple Linear TP<sup>[26]</sup>. It is the most elementary thematic progression pattern. Akinseye also mentioned Simple Linear TP<sup>[34]</sup>. Nonetheless, this research refers to this pattern as Simple Linear Progression (SLP). Based on this pattern, the rheme of the first sentence will serve as the theme of the following sentence. As shown in **Figure 1**, the rheme in the first sentence (R1) also functions as the theme of the second sentence (T2). The rheme in the second sentence (R2) takes turns to become the theme of the following sentence (T3).



**Figure 1.** Simple Linear Progression (SLP).

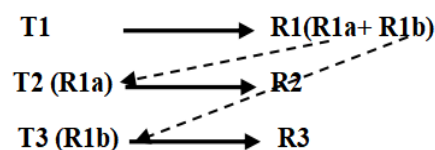
The second pattern is TP with a continuous (constant)

theme<sup>[26]</sup>. Wang described this pattern as the Parallel pattern. However, this research labels it as Constant Theme Progression (CTP)<sup>[35]</sup>. According to this pattern, the theme in the first sentence will serve as the themes of the following sentences. As illustrated in **Figure 2**, the theme in the first sentence (T1) replaces T2 and T3 in the following two sentences to become their themes while the rheme keeps changing from sentence to sentence.



**Figure 2.** Constant Theme Progression (CTP).

The third pattern is the thematic progression with the exposition of a split rheme<sup>[26]</sup>. This research renames this pattern as Split Rheme Progression (SRP). This pattern means that the rheme of the first sentence splits into several components, each of which serves as the theme of the following sentences. As demonstrated in **Figure 3**, the rheme in the first sentence (R1) splits into R1a and R1b. R1a, the first half of R1, becomes the theme of the second sentence (T2), whereas R1b, its second half, works as the theme of the third sentence (T3).



**Figure 3.** Split Rheme Progression (SRP).

The fourth pattern is TP with derived themes<sup>[26]</sup>. The research terms this pattern Derived Theme Progression (DRP). This pattern requires learners to derive the themes in the following sentences from a hypertheme in the previous sentence. Just as **Figure 4** shows, a hypertheme in the first sentence (T) is an umbrella term from which the theme in the second sentence (Ta) and that in the third sentence (Tb) have developed. The relationship between the hypertheme and other themes is that of inclusion and being included. For example, a hypertheme of “animal” includes two other themes of “dogs” and “cats”.

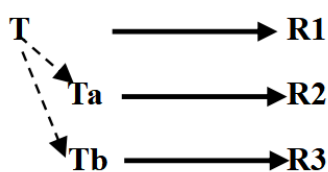


Figure 4. Derived Theme Progression (DTP).

### 2.3. Theme Types, TP Patterns, and IELTS Writing Coherence and Cohesion

As Sun<sup>[36]</sup> claims, theme types, and TP patterns are highly applicable in academic writing and testing writing genres. IELTS Academic Writing Task 2(AWT2), which integrates the features of the above two genres, attracted the maximum research interest, accounting for as high as 75% of TP-based EFL writing studies in the past decade<sup>[36]</sup>. Therefore, it is suitable for this research to adopt theme types and TP patterns to investigate AWT2 writing. After all, it has both academic and testing attributes. In the previous research, some scholars investigated the impact of themes and TP on overall IELTS writing performance and drew opposite conclusions. Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi's study<sup>[37]</sup> and Nguyen and Nguyen's study<sup>[38]</sup> claimed that the essays of AWT2 employing theme types and TP patterns were likely to score high on the test. On the contrary, Soleymanzadeh and Gholami<sup>[39]</sup> advocated that the grades of AWT2 did not significantly relate to theme types and TP patterns. To some degree, there is some truth in both views, but it is difficult to distinguish right from wrong. This is because themes and TP patterns do not directly relate to overall writing performance but directly correlate with cohesion and coherence, one of the IELTS writing criteria. In brief, themes and TP patterns establish direct connections with writing cohesion and coherence. They indirectly influence the improvement of overall writing performance.

Considering the strong mutual interaction between themes, TP, and writing cohesion and coherence, many scholars have devoted their papers to investigating coherence and cohesion in IELTS writing from theme types and TP patterns until now<sup>[24, 31, 40, 41]</sup>. Some researchers explored how theme types and TP patterns affected writing cohesion in AWT2 sample essays<sup>[31]</sup>, while others probed their influence on writing coherence<sup>[40]</sup>. There were still some researchers exploring the impact of theme types and TP patterns on writing coherence and cohesion<sup>[24, 41]</sup>. However, they did not clarify

how they reflected and evaluated coherent and cohesive levels in IELTS writing. In light of this, this research initially examined the distribution of theme types and TP patterns in AWT2 practice essays written by Chinese undergraduates. Subsequently, it assessed the coherence and cohesion of these practice essays, utilizing themes-based cohesion rubrics adapted from Struthers et al.'s cohesion checklist<sup>[42]</sup> and TP-based coherence rubrics adapted from Astuti et al.'s coherence table<sup>[43]</sup>.

## 3. Methodology

To address three research questions, this research employed a qualitative descriptive approach, which is defined as a research method that provides a detailed, straight, and comprehensive description of the phenomenon in a natural setting<sup>[44, 45]</sup>. The research carried out a qualitative descriptive approach to investigate AWT2 writing for three distinct rationales. In the first place, the approach enables researchers to provide an intensive, holistic, and in-depth overview of theme types and thematic progression patterns in the practice essays of AWT2. The initial rationale aligns with the nature of the qualitative descriptive approach. In the second place, it allows researchers to employ purposive sampling to gather documents pertaining to IELTS practice essays as representative samples. This second reason also conforms to the data requirements of this approach<sup>[44, 45]</sup>. In the third place, by integrating qualitative and descriptive quantitative data analysis<sup>[44, 45]</sup>, this study empowers the researcher with a comprehensive overview of how theme types and TP patterns distribute in the essays of AWT2 and evaluate their writing performance from coherence and cohesion. More importantly, Colorafi & Evans' descriptive analysis procedure<sup>[44]</sup> visualizes coherent and cohesive data in tables or figures quantitatively, which provides new angles to explore the nuisances of various themes in depth.

### 3.1. Research Design

This research design follows a five-step procedure. Initially, the research adopted a purposive sampling method to collect 15 practice essays of AWT2 and convert them into electronic documents in Word formats. Secondly, based on three theme types and four thematic progression patterns<sup>[25, 26]</sup>, the research identified, annotated, analyzed, cat-

egorized, and summarized various themes and patterns in all the essays. More precisely, it totally reflected the thematic distribution of topical, textual, and interpersonal themes, and the TP distribution of Constant Theme Progression, Simple Linear Progression, Split Rheme Progression, and Derivative Theme Progression patterns. Thirdly, it counted and converted the frequencies and proportions of these themes and TP patterns into **Figure 5** and **Figure 6**. The two figures offered statistical descriptions and changing trends of all these themes and TP patterns from low to high-achieving groups. Fourthly, a themes-based cohesion rubric (**Table 1**) was adapted from Struthers et al.'s cohesion checklist<sup>[42]</sup> and utilized to assess varying cohesion levels in AWT2 essays across low-, middle-, and high-achieving groups. Fifthly, a thematic progression-based coherence rubric (**Table 2**) was adapted from Astuti et al.'s coherence table<sup>[43]</sup> to assess various coherence levels of AWT2 essays among low-, middle- and high-achieving groups.

### 3.2. Sampling and Data Collection

The sampling process breaks into two phases. In the first phase, twenty undergraduates participated in the study. They were from the faculty of translation studies at one of the Chinese universities in Xi'an, China, with their major in English. Among them, there were 12 female and 8 male participants ranging from 19 to 21 years old. To ensure data validity, the selection of participants should comply with two criteria. One criterion is that they must prepare for IELTS exams, hope to improve their IELTS writing, and intend to participate in IELTS exams. Another criterion is that they have passed CET 4, one of the Chinese English Tests for university students, and have sufficient English proficiency to finish a writing essay above 250 words within 40 minutes.

In the second phase, twenty participants engaged in a simulated writing examination with Academic Writing Task 2 of IELTS Test Paper 2022. (*It has been suggested that everyone in the world wants to own a car, a TV, and a fridge. Do you think the advantages of such a development outweigh the disadvantages?*). This test requires participants to complete an essay no less than 250 words within 40 minutes. After the exam, the research collected twenty practice essays of AWT2 removed five essays because the word counts of these essays did not satisfy the requirement of above 250 words. It finally chose the remaining 15 essays as its research data.

Research raters further marked all 15 essays and classified them into low-, middle-, and high-achieving groups based on three score ranges (4.0–5.0, 5.0–6.0, and 6.0–7.0), with each group containing five essays. The average word count of these 15 essays was between 260 and 270 words, their average sentence length was between 14 and 16, and their mean number of paragraphs was around 4.

### 3.3. Analyzing Unit

The analyzing units of research samples vary in three research questions. In the first research question, words and phrases are the chief analyzing units, but they take various grammatical forms in different themes. Specifically, the analyzing units of textual themes appear in any combination of continuatives, conjunctions, and conjunctive adjuncts. In contrast, those interpersonal themes are often in any combination of modal adjuncts, vocatives, and finite verbal operator elements<sup>[25]</sup>. In addition, topical themes view the lexical or phrasal element representing a participant, a process, or a circumstance as their analyzing units<sup>[25]</sup>. Besides, TP patterns in the first research questions choose independent clauses or sentences as their fundamental analyzing units. In the second research question, the theme-based cohesion rubric mainly applies textual themes to evaluate cohesion levels. Therefore, the analyzing units followed the phrases or words related to textual themes (conjunctions), references, and reiterations. In the third research question, though the TP-based coherence rubric mainly implements TP patterns to measure the coherence throughout the text, the analyzing units have specified into a paragraph, such as the introduction, body, and conclusion paragraphs.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

The whole study went through three rounds of data analyses for three research questions. The first round of data analysis starts with the first research question, followed by the second and third rounds of data analysis in the remaining two research questions. The first round of data analysis follows the analyzing procedure of Colorafi and Evans<sup>[44]</sup>. It begins with collecting data, familiarizing data, initial coding of theme types, organizing codes to develop TP patterns, visualizing the data with tables or figures, and forming descriptive summaries. The coding examples of theme types

**Table 1.** Cohesion Rubrics Based on Theme Types Adapted from Struthers et al.'s Cohesion Checklist<sup>[42]</sup>.

Number	Level of Cohesion	Cohesion Descriptors
1	Excellent	If the effective utilization of References, conjunctions, and reiterations reaches 81%–100%.
2	Good	If the effective utilization of References, conjunctions, and reiterations reaches 61%–80%.
3	Fair	If the effective utilization of References, conjunctions, and reiterations reaches 41%–60%.
4	Poor	If the effective utilization of References, conjunctions, and reiterations reaches 21%–40%.
5	Very Poor	If the effective utilization of References, conjunctions, and reiterations reaches 0%–20%.

**Table 2.** Coherence Rubrics Based on Thematic Progression Adapted from Astuti et al.'s Coherence Table<sup>[43]</sup>.

Number	Level of Coherence	Coherence Descriptors	Proportions
1	Excellent	If the type of thematic progression is constant in each paragraph.	81%–100%
2	Good	If the type of thematic progression is constant every three sentences or above.	61%–80%
3	Fair	If the type of thematic progression changes from one type to another in a paragraph.	41%–60%
4	Poor	If new theme(s) is/are created in the middle of a paragraph.	21%–40%
5	Very Poor	If there is no thematic progression used.	0%–20%

and thematic progression are illustrated below in **Table 3** and **Table 4**.

The second round of data analysis extracts textual themes, references, and lexical cohesions in the 15 practice essays to evaluate their cohesion under the modified cohesion checklist (**Appendix A**). The evaluating checklist has 15 items, 3 for references, 8 for conjunctions, and 4 for reiterations, with one score attributed to each item. The research later calculates the scores and percentages of references, conjunctions, and reiterations across low-, middle- and high-achieving groups. Under the cohesion rubric of **Table 1**, it further determines the cohesion levels of references, conjunctions and reiterations based on the percentages of various cohesive devices (very poor, poor, fair, good and excellent).

The third round of data analysis extracts thematic progression patterns to assess the coherence performance in the 15 practice essays under the coherence raw scoring rubric (see **Appendix B**). The raw rubric has five coherence levels (1- very poor, 2- poor, 3- fair, 4- good, 5-excellent). Based on the descriptions of the raw rubric, each paragraph is marked from 1 to 5. The research calculates the coherence raw scores and percentages in the introduction, body, and conclusion paragraphs across the three achieving groups. Under the coherence rubric of **Table 2** it further determines the coherence levels of the introduction, body, and conclusion paragraphs based on the coherence percentages (very poor, poor, fair, good, and excellent).

## 4. Results

The results of this study highlight four significant findings based on the above three research questions. The first two findings in Research Question 1 uncovered the distribution of three theme types and four TP patterns in the practice essays of AWT2. The third finding in Research Question 2 revealed different cohesion levels among low-, middle- and high-achieving essays under the evaluation of theme-based cohesion rubrics. The fourth finding in Research Question 3 displayed different coherent levels among low-, middle- and high-achieving essays under the assessment of TP-based coherence rubrics.

### 4.1. Distribution in Theme Types and TP Patterns

To address the distribution of theme types in the first research question, the research thoroughly investigated topical, textual, and interpersonal themes in AWT2 practice essays and revealed the first finding. As demonstrated in the bar chart of **Figure 5**, topical themes accounted for the maximum of the total themes in all the essays, representing more than two-thirds of the total. Moreover, textual themes in all the essays took up the second largest percentage, with an average of over 20%, except in low-achieving essays. By contrast, interpersonal themes only accounted for the smallest proportion, and the percentage of all three groups kept below 10%. As shown in the line graph of **Figure 5**, topical themes continued to decline from 75.91% to 60.15% across low-, middle- and high-achieving groups. The oppo-



**Table 3.** Coding Examples of Three Theme Types.

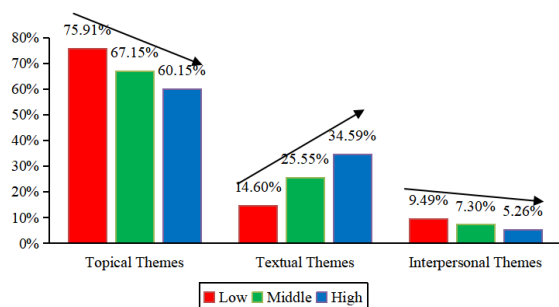
	Interpersonal Theme	Textual Theme	Topical Theme	Rheme
S1	As far as I am concerned,	Firstly,	owning a car	does more harm than good.
S2			It	has several disadvantages.
S3			the exhaust given off by cars	does harm to people's health.

**Table 4.** Coding Examples of Four TP Patterns.

TP Types		Theme	Rheme
Derivative Thematic Progression	S1	Cars, fridges, and TV	are the most popular choices.
	S2	Cars	provide the flexibility of autonomous travel.
	S3	Televisions	are used as convenient sources of news.
	S4	Refrigerators	help to preserve food to offer a wider range of diet choices.
Constant Theme Progression	S1	To protect the environment,	we must reduce the use of high-power electrical appliances.
	S2	Protecting the environment	is the responsibility of each of us.
Simple Linear Progression	S1	Technology	helps us to communicate better.
	S2	We	can talk to people far away from us through the Internet.
Split Rheme Progression	S1	Owning a car	has two obvious benefits.
	S2	One benefit	is that everyone has more private space in travel
	S3	The other benefit	is that the market of automobile will be more prosperous

S = Sentence.

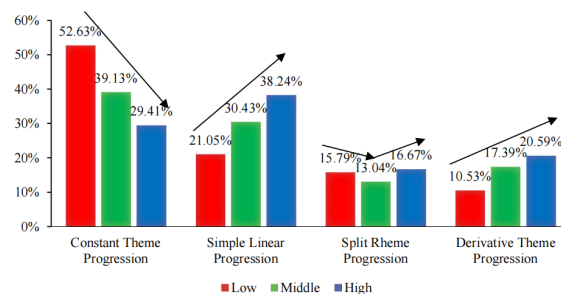
site was true of textual themes, which increased from 14.60% to 34.59%. Besides, the percentages of interpersonal themes remained unchanged below 10% across the three groups, though their figure displayed a gradual decline from 9.49% in the low-achieving group to 5.26% in the high-achieving group.



**Figure 5.** Three Theme Types Distributing in AWT2 Practice Essays.

To address the distribution in TP patterns in the first research question, the research also explored Constant Theme Progression, Simple Linear Progression, Split Rheme Progression, and Derivative Theme Progression patterns in the practice essays and unveiled the second finding. As reflected in the bar chart of **Figure 6**, Constant Theme Progression patterns occupied the maximum in all the essays, which accounted for one-third and even one-half of the total. Nevertheless, their percentages decreased from 52.63% in the

low-achieving group to 29.41% in the high-achieving group. Simple Linear Progression patterns followed the TP patterns. Though their percentage started at 21.05% in the low-achieving group, those in middle- or high-achieving groups began to increase to 38.24%. Besides, the percentages of Split Rheme Progression patterns and Derivative Theme Progression patterns throughout all groups constituted around 20%. The curves in **Figure 6** also revealed that from low- to high-achieving groups, the percentages of Constant Theme Progression patterns in all the essays continued to decline. In contrast, those of Simple Linear Progression and Derivative Theme Progression patterns experienced an upward trend. Interestingly, the percentages of Split Rheme Progression patterns dropped from the low-achieving group (15.79%) to the middle-achieving group (13.04%) but later began to fluctuate around 16.67% in the high-achieving group.



**Figure 6.** Four TP Patterns Distributing in AWT2 Practice Essays.



## 4.2. Cohesion Evaluation under Theme-Based Rubrics

When tackling the second research question, the study obtained the third finding. As illustrated in **Table 5**, the overall cohesion of all the essays reached a good level (64.00%). Nevertheless, among different groups or cohesive devices, cohesive levels differ. From low-, middle-, to high-achieving groups, cohesion increased from a fair level (53.33%) to a good level (76.00%). Among three cohesive devices, references and reiterations arrived at a fair level of cohesion (60.00% and 46.67%). By contrast, conjunctions peaked at a good level of cohesion (74.17%).

When comparing the cohesive levels of references, conjunctions, and reiteration among low-, middle- and high-achieving groups, the research further discovered that they developed at different paces in different groups or cohesive devices. The cohesion of references and reiteration started at the same poor level in the low-achieving group (40.00% and 35.00%) but experienced different upward trends. Specifically, the cohesion of references reached a good level (73.33%), whereas that of reiteration only arrived at a fair level in the high-achieving group (60.00%). That of conjunctions underwent a vigorous upward trend from 67.5% in the low-achieving group to 85.00% in the high-achieving group. It grew from good to excellent levels.

## 4.3. Coherence Evaluation under TP-Based Rubrics

In response to the third research question, the research derived the fourth finding. As demonstrated in **Table 6**, the total coherence of all the essays reached a fair level (53.00%). Nevertheless, among different groups or paragraphs, coherent levels vary. From low-, middle-, to high-achieving groups, the coherence increased from poor (32.00%) to good levels (74.00%). In terms of paragraphs, the body paragraphs arrived at a good level of coherence (64%). The introduction and conclusion paragraphs followed them, and their coherence amounted to a fair level (45.33% and 41.33%). In other words, the body paragraphs achieve higher coherence than the introduction and conclusion paragraphs do.

When comparing the coherence of the introduction, body, and conclusion paragraphs among low-, middle- and high-achieving groups, the research clearly figured out that

they developed at different paces in different paragraphs. The coherence of body paragraphs started at a fair level in the low-achieving group (42.00%). It gradually increased to an excellent level in the high-achieving group (82.00%), doubling the original figure. In addition, though the introduction and conclusion paragraphs commence with poor and very poor levels in the low-achieving group (24% and 20%), they finally reached the same good level in the high-achieving group (68% and 64%).

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Discussion on the Distribution in Theme and Thematic Progression

The first finding in the first research question suggested that topical themes dominated all the practice essays, followed by textual themes. The outcome is in line with that of the studies of Trung and Hoa<sup>[46]</sup>, Okta et al.<sup>[40]</sup>, and Nguyen<sup>[47]</sup>. In their studies, topical themes took the first place in the IELTS writing model essays, accounting for more than 50%, whereas textual themes followed them and took up between 20% and 40%<sup>[40, 46, 47]</sup>. This kind of theme distribution further suggests that the dominant topical themes allow learners to introduce the topics of sentences and inform readers of related participants, processes, or circumstances<sup>[30]</sup>. In addition, the increasing adoption of textual themes means that the higher the writing level of learners is, the more skillfully they apply these themes to connect their clauses or sentences with the context<sup>[29]</sup>. By contrast, interpersonal themes only accounted for the lowest proportion of the total, less than 10%. This is also corroborated by the above three studies<sup>[40, 46, 47]</sup>. However, there were some differences in the proportional changes of topical, interpersonal, and textual themes from low- to high-achieving groups. Though two studies confirm that the percentage of topical themes declines while that of textual themes increases from low-, middle-, to high-achieving groups, they contradict in the proportion of interpersonal themes. That is, the percentages of interpersonal themes in this study displayed a downward trend, while those in Okta et al.'s study rose slightly across three achieving groups. The reason behind this is that the high-scoring essays in that research contained more mental clauses such as "it is necessary," "it is obvious," or "it is no doubt" than the low-scoring essays so that the percentages

**Table 5.** Writing Cohesion Evaluation from Themes-based Rubrics.

Cohesive Devices	Low	Level	Middle	Level	High	Level	Cohesion-Total	Level
Reference	40.00%	Poor	66.67%	Good	73.33%	Good	60.00%	Fair
Conjunction	67.50%	Good	70.00%	Good	85.00%	Excellent	74.17%	Good
Reiteration	35.00%	Poor	45.00%	Fair	60.00%	Fair	46.67%	Fair
Group-Total	53.33%	Fair	62.67%	Good	76.00%	Good	Total: 64.00% (Good)	

**Table 6.** Writing Coherence Evaluation under TP-based Rubrics.

Paragraphs	Low	Level	Middle	Level	High	Level	Para-Total	
Introduction	24.00%	Poor	44.00%	Fair	68.00%	Good	45.33%	Fair
Body	42.00%	Fair	68.00%	Good	82.00%	Excellent	64.00%	Good
Conclusion	20.00%	Very Poor	40.00%	Poor	64.00%	Good	41.33%	Fair
Group-Total	32.00%	Poor	54.00%	Fair	74.00%	Good	Total: 53.00% (Fair)	

of interpersonal themes grew higher. Hence, future scholars should devote in-depth research to probe the differences in interpersonal themes among low-, middle- and high-achieving groups.

When comparing the existing literature with the second finding in the first research question, the research discovered that Constant Theme Progression took the lead in AWT2 practice essays, followed by Simple Linear Progression. This can be justified to align with the studies of Trung and Hoa, and Yang<sup>[31, 48]</sup>. Nevertheless, the above two findings contradict the other three studies of Trung and Hoa, Nguyen and Nguyen, and Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi, because they pointed out that Simple Linear Progression dominated the IELTS model essays with Constant Theme Progression as follows<sup>[37, 38, 46]</sup>. Their contradiction does not indicate that their research outcomes are inconsistent. Instead, the problem lies in the fact that two groups of studies adopted different materials for IELTS writing essays, which leads to the alternation of dominance between Constant Theme Progression and Simple Linear Progression. In other words, this study chose IELTS practice essays below 7.0, and their writing levels determined that they rely on Constant Theme Progression. By contrast, other studies selected the IELTS writing samples (Band 9), sample or model essays, and these essays tended to apply more Simple Linear Progression. When learners have limited capacity to write in IELTS, they tend to apply Constant Theme Progression to avoid staying out of the topic so that they will not lose writing scores because this pattern is responsible for maintaining the focus of writing<sup>[38]</sup>. However, if they reach the writing level where they do not need to worry about maintaining the topic, they are inclined to employ Simple Linear Progression more frequently. This

pattern allows learners to develop the body paragraphs under the topic sentences and construct a fluent textual flow<sup>[38]</sup>. Therefore, the dominant interchange of the above two TP patterns depends on the writing levels of essays. Moreover, this finding about Derivative Theme Progression and Split Rheme Progression patterns also corroborates those of the other two studies<sup>[31, 37, 38]</sup>. Nevertheless, the above studies failed to prove that the percentage of Split Rheme Progression patterns declined from low to middle levels but rose slightly to a high level. Thus, future scholars can study Split Rheme Progression in multiple EFL countries or writing genres to reveal the change of this TP pattern.

## 5.2. Discussion on Theme-Based Cohesion Evaluation

The result obtained from the second research question (the third finding) revealed that conjunctions dominated all the essays, contributing the largest proportion of cohesion to AWT2 practice essays, followed by references. However, this result is inconsistent with the studies of Tuan et al.<sup>[49]</sup> and Mei<sup>[50]</sup>. They claimed that references took up the largest proportions. This happened because the cohesion checklist adopted in this research did not merely measure the frequency and calculate their percentages but also weighed whether these references related to the sentences before and after them. Given that reference misuses (56.17%) occurred more often than conjunction misuses (38.19%), as shown in Deip and Le's study<sup>[51]</sup>, the proportion of effective references might lag behind that of conjunctions. As shown in **Table 7**, "this" in the low-achieving example has no apparent connection with "everything" or "two sides," leading

to demonstrative misuse. In the middle-achieving example, “this” confuses readers because the example provides two possible references of “owning a car” or “the advantage is hard to ignore.” Readers need to spend much effort to derive the correct reference to “owning a car”. On the contrary, “this” in the high-achieving example relates to the overall meaning of the previous sentence, “Most cars in the world still burn fuel.” and establishes a strong syntactic relationship. Many occurrences of these misuses in references often force this cohesive device to give up its leading position to conjunctions.

In addition, reiterations constructed the lowest proportion of cohesion. This complies with the findings of Tuan et al.<sup>[48]</sup> and Mei<sup>[49]</sup> in the proportion of reiterations. The difference is that the figure for reiterations in their studies was below 10%, but that in my study is above 30%. The reason behind this is that if a topic word repeats frequently, its frequency will be calculated many times, and its proportion tends to be high, too. In fact, if it appears in the same form many times and its frequency is only calculated once, its proportion is likely to decline. For example, in the following sentences, “People can enjoy TV in the living room” and “People can entertain themselves through various TV programs,” the theme “people” in this example occurs twice. However, it should not be calculated twice to increase their proportions. A high proportion of reiterations requires an extensive range of synonym expressions.

In the third finding, this research also demonstrated an increase in the percentages of references, conjunctions, and reiterations from low-, middle- to high-achieving groups. This result is in accordance with the study of Lyu<sup>[52]</sup>, who claimed that good essays displayed a higher proportion of these cohesive devices than weak essays. However, they contained no intermediate essays, and there is limited research in discussing the changes of the above three cohesive devices from low-, middle- to high-achieving groups. In addition, like the misuses appearing in references, those in conjunctions and reiterations still exist, as stated in the study of Deip and Le<sup>[51]</sup>. Evaluating all the cohesive devices depends on both percentages and effective usage. Therefore, it is hoped that further evaluation tools will be designed to not only calculate all the cohesive devices but also measure their effectiveness in displaying cohesion.

### 5.3. Discussion on TP-Based Coherence Evaluation

The outcome derived from the third research question (the fourth finding) revealed that the coherence of the body paragraphs boasted a good level, while that of the introduction and conclusion paragraphs still maintained a fair level. This result is inconsistent with the study of Wang et al.<sup>[52]</sup>, which also claimed that both the introduction and conclusion paragraphs have weak coherence. However, there is limited research discussing the changes in the coherence of body paragraphs. Therefore, future scholars are suggested to explore the coherence changes in IELTS writing body paragraphs. Moreover, they should take into consideration the length and logical connections of paragraphs. The fourth finding also indicates that across three achieving groups, the overall coherence of all the paragraphs increased steadily. As illustrated in **Table 8**, there is an obvious increase in the coherence from low-, middle- to high-achieving groups. In the low-achieving example, learners connect the first theme of “The situation of owning a car” with the second theme of “it” and create a Constant Theme Progression pattern to construct their coherence but leave the third theme unsolved. However, when applying Split Rheme Progression in the middle-achieving example, it builds a coherent structure to link the first rheme of “people” with its two sub-rhemes of “some” and “others” which in turn serve as the second and third themes. The coherent structure establishes the coherence among three sentences. By contrast, in the high-achieving example, learners produce two layers of coherence by employing both Simple Linear Progression and Constant Theme Progression. One layer of coherence, utilizing Simple Linear Progression, associates the first rheme of “a car, a TV and a refrigerator” with the second theme “These products” whereas the other layer of coherence connects the second theme “These products” with the third theme “they”, realizing Constant Theme Progression.

Despite this interesting result, there is limited relevant research to probe the changes of coherence among three levels of IELTS writing essays because many related studies just investigated the overall changes of themes or thematic progression patterns in the IELTS sample essays<sup>[24, 31, 40, 41]</sup>. Moreover, the studies of Saeed et al.<sup>[41]</sup> and Nhung and

**Table 7.** Comparing AWT2 Writing References.

Group	Low-Achieving Example	Referring Words or Phrases
Low	Everything has two sides, and <b>this</b> is not an exception. (Excerpts of Text 2)	This has no clear reference.
Middle	The advantage of owning a car is hard to ignore, but I still think this is necessary for me. (Excerpts of Text 6)	It may refer to “owning a car” or “the advantage is hard to ignore” grammatically.
High	Most cars in the world still burn fuel. <b>This</b> is directly related to carbon emissions. (Excerpts of Text 14)	This refers to the previous sentence.

**Table 8.** Comparing AWT2 Writing Coherence among Three Achieving Groups.

Group	AWT2 Writing Coherence Examples	TP Patterns
Low	The situation of owning a car (theme 1) will make people’s lives more convenient, but it (theme 2) will also cause a series of serious problems such as pollution. Therefore, I think the disadvantages (theme 3) outweigh the advantages. (Excerpts of Text 1)	1. Constant Theme Progression
Middle	As to the suggestion that everyone should have a car (theme 1), views vary among the public (rheme1). Some (theme 2=rheme1a) view it to be necessary. However, others (theme 2=rheme1b) regard it as a non-essential choice. (Excerpts of Text 9)	1. Split Rheme Progression
High	Some people (theme 1) claim that everyone should have a car, a TV, and a refrigerator (rheme 1). These products (theme 2) benefit our lives a lot, but they (theme 3) contain some drawbacks. (Excerpts of Text 14)	1. Simple Linear Progression 2. Constant Theme Progression

Hiep<sup>[24]</sup> adopted pre-tests and post-tests to prove the effectiveness of TP in improving the coherence of IELTS writing, which empirically justified the value of the TP-based coherence rubrics. Therefore, it is advised that further scholars conduct an in-depth empirical investigation into the coherent changes from low-, middle- to high-achieving IELTS writing essays.

## 6. Conclusion

By adopting a qualitative descriptive study, this study investigated the distribution of various theme types and TP patterns in the practice essays of AWT2 among Chinese undergraduates. It modified the original TP-based coherence and theme-based cohesion rubrics to assess the coherence and cohesion of IELTS practice essays. It has drawn three conclusions. To begin with, topical themes and constant thematic progression dominate all the practice essays to inform readers of essay content and maintain the focus of essays. Moreover, textual themes and simple linear progression allow them to link the sentences and generate ideas in the essays. More importantly, the higher the writing levels of essays are, the more textual themes they apply, but the fewer topic themes they maintain. Secondly, evaluating coherence and cohe-

sion from two theme-based and TP-based rubrics reflects that coherence and cohesion develop asynchronously among low-, middle-, and high-achieving essays. Thirdly, IELTS learners achieved a higher cohesion level in conjunctions and reiterations than in references and presented a higher level of coherence in body paragraphs than in Introductions and Conclusion paragraphs.

The research findings indicate that coherence and cohesion are two important factors influencing IELTS writing organization. Moreover, it is suitable to implement theme types and TP to reveal coherent and cohesive features appearing in IELTS writing and evaluate the coherent and cohesive performance in IELTS writing. Teachers can open a module of coherence and cohesion in their IELTS writing classes to enhance the overall writing capability of their students. They can also apply theme-based cohesion and TP-based coherence rubrics to evaluate the performances of students’ essays, locate their problems, and propose corresponding tactics to improve their writing cohesion and coherence. Learners can implement theme types and TP to develop a new writing strategy, which enables them to enhance linguistic expressions, coherence and cohesion together. In addition, the IELTS writing authority can adopt these two modified writing rubrics of AWT2 to offer more precise and well-defined evaluation

criteria in the IELTS cohesion and coherence rubrics.

The study outcomes attach considerable value to IELTS writing instruction in the following aspects. To start with, they provide researchers with two modified writing rubrics to assess the coherence and cohesion of IELTS writing in a targeted manner. Secondly, they enable policymakers to reconsider the coherence and cohesion rubrics of IELTS writing and explore the possibility of dividing this rubric into two new sub-rubrics to evaluate coherence and cohesion separately. Thirdly, they clarify the interaction between theme types and cohesion and between TP patterns and coherence so that teachers and students can adopt corresponding themes-related strategies to enhance them when they prepare for IELTS writing.

Notwithstanding several advances mentioned above, this research could not be immune to limitations. One prominent limitation of the research is that it only selects 15 practice essays to analyze theme types and TP patterns because of the massive analytical load. It influences the generality of this research in the EFL writing field. In addition, the existing body of literature confined its research focus to IELTS model essays from theme types and TP patterns. It takes little notice of how practice essays differ from model ones. Thirdly, there is a significant lack of research to delve deeper into the ratio between topic themes and textual themes, as well as that between Constant Theme Progression and Simple Linear Progression patterns. Given the limitations mentioned above, the following studies should expand the sample size to enlarge its universality. Furthermore, more scholars in this field are encouraged to investigate theme types and TP patterns in the practice essays of IELTS participants rather than model essays. Lastly, more research should shift its focus from general themes-related concepts to the interaction among various themes and TP patterns.

## Author Contributions

Conceptualization, G.D.S. and N.K.A.; methodology, S.S.S.; analysis and interpretation, G.D.S.; resources, G.D.S.;

data curation, N.R.C.N.; writing—original draft preparation, G.D.S.; writing—review and editing, N.K.A. and G.D.S.; visualization, N.R.C.N.; supervision, N.K.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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## Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

## Informed Consent Statement

All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were guaranteed, and participation was voluntary.

## Data Availability Statement

Data will be made available on request.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Appendix A

Raw Cohesion Calculation Checklist Based on Themes

Thematic Cohesive Markers	Yes	No
1. All pronouns refer to some previously mentioned noun or clause.		
2. All demonstratives (e.g., this, these, that, those, here, there) have a clear referent in the previous text.		
3. Each sentence is connected to the one preceding it by at least one form of reference.		
Reference Sub-score		
4. 'And' or 'Also' is used to connect independent clauses.		
5. Other coordinating conjunctions are used to connect independent clauses (e.g., or, another, as well as, etc.).		
6. 'If', 'Which' or 'That' is used to connect clauses.		
7. Other subordinating conjunctions are used to connect clauses.		
8. Adverb or adverbial phrases are used to mark sequence or shifts in time (e.g., First, last, all of a sudden, etc.).		
9. 'So' or 'Because' is used to connect sentences and/or clauses.		
10. Other causal conjunctions are used to connect sentences and/or clauses (e.g., consequently, therefore, etc.).		
11. Adversative conjunctions (e.g., but) are used to connect clauses.		
Conjunction Sub-score		
12. Super-ordinates, synonyms or near-synonyms are used for the same referent in adjacent sentences.		
13. Super-ordinates, synonyms or near-synonyms are used for the same referent across the text.		
14. Complementary terms appear in adjacent sentences.		
15. Converses or antonyms appear in adjacent sentences.		
Lexical Cohesion Sub-score		
Participant ID:	Overall Score:	

Number	Level of Coherence	Descriptors	Band Score
1	Excellent	If the type of thematic progression is constant in one type each paragraph.	5
2	Good	If the type of thematic progression is constant in one type every three sentences or above	4
3	Fair	If the type of thematic progression is inconstant or change from one type to others type each paragraph.	3
4	Poor	If new theme(s) is/are created in the middle of paragraph.	2
5	Very Poor	If there is no thematic progression used.	1

## Appendix B

### Raw Coherence Rubrics Based on Thematic Progression

#### Raw Coherence Calculation Table

Text ID:

Group:

Paragraphs	Very Poor	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Introduction					
Body					
Conclusion					

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