

## Research Article

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## Stylistic Variations in Thematic Structure Across Academic Genres: A Case Study of EFL Graduate Students

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### Abstract

**Background/purpose.** Academic writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) poses challenges for graduate students, particularly in achieving coherence and organization. Thematic choices play a crucial role in guiding readers and ensuring textual cohesion. While Theme selection has been explored in various contexts, little research has examined how Saudi female graduate students use thematic structures across academic genres. This study investigates their thematic choices to understand how they adapt to academic writing conventions and genre expectations.

**Materials/methods.** The study analyzed 108 written assignments from Saudi female graduate students across different academic genres. Semi-structured interviews with 18 students provided further insights into their thematic choices and writing strategies. Using a content analysis approach based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory, particularly Martin and Rose's (2007) semantic approach, the study categorized thematic structures into topical, textual, and interpersonal Themes to assess their distribution and function.

**Results.** Findings reveal a dominant use of topical, unmarked Themes across all genres, with variations in marked, textual, and interpersonal themes. Research papers featured more topical, unmarked Themes, reinforcing subject focus and formality, while essays used more textual and interpersonal Themes for engagement and flow. Genre expectations influenced students' thematic choices, reflecting their awareness of academic writing norms.

**Conclusion.** This study underscores the importance of Theme selection in enhancing coherence and aligning with genre conventions. The findings contribute to SFL research by highlighting how Theme variation supports textual cohesion and communication goals, offering insights for improving EFL academic writing instruction.

## 1. Introduction

Academic writers with a high level of communicative competence tend to make several choices in various ways and for various reasons. These choices may be made in compliance with the writers' personal preferences, their view of the audience, and what they know and prefer about other similar texts in document collections. More specifically, various thematic choices — especially in written texts — tell the audience about these aspects of the communicative competence of those who utilize them alongside their preferences and perceptions. Such thematic choices may imply some linguistic properties that construct the organization of the social interactions at both global and local levels of discourse structure in which they are utilized.

It must be obvious that discourse in general, and written discourse in particular, has a constitutive role in the organization of a particular discourse community and, crucially, its people's knowledge and improvement. Writing involves numerous choices from a multitude of lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical patterns and from a number of different sequences of these choices in an orderly organized way.

Writers often have some proposed ideas that determine the formulation and organization of their texts in their heads before writing them down (Hayes, 2009). In many academic disciplines, the rhythm (i.e., the flow of information) of these ideas seems to be associated with certain patterns that are culturally identified as academic. This investigation takes a sociological view of language in an attempt to show how the realizations of particular semantic and contextual meanings underlying lexical and structural choices can result in stylistic variations in academic written discourse.

In general terms, the way language redounds with society, as Doran et al. (2024) highlighted, is "rich and multifaceted" (p. 251). Understandably, meanings, ideas, and knowledge writers seek to communicate within a particular academic discipline are encapsulated in their texts. In this sense, Halliday and Hasan (1985) asserted that the context in which a text unfolds is encapsulated in the text "through a systematic relationship between the social environment on the one hand, and the functional organization of language on the other" (p. 11). Thus, academic writers, in general, are expected to shape their conceptions and interpretations of certain ideas through various choices of content, organization, illustration, and language (Kain, 2005). Writing by graduate students is not an exception. In other words, graduate students construct their ideas in accordance with a number of conventionalized, recurrent patterns of discourse enacted within a particular academic community, following different norms.

Accordingly, academic writing is not only about the production of texts in a grammatically accurate manner, but also about the communication of ideas in analytical and sequential pieces of writing that reveal symmetry and logical thinking. Certainly, these dimensions of writing seem to be inseparable. That is to say, once the grammatical correctness of the text has deteriorated, the complexity of ideas will increase (Buell, 2018). It follows that academic writers, and more specifically graduate students, are expected to produce high-quality written texts to communicate clearly and appropriately with their audience. This also involves the ability to generate original and creative ideas that are expressed and realized in a sequence of anticipatory moves as texts unfold.

Thus, it is usually not enough to select words and produce a number of sentences in separate paragraphs. The flow of information (i.e., the rhythm) has to be taken into consideration. Indeed, the textual sequences of the words, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, and other parts of the texts have to be chosen and arranged carefully according to the requirements, the recipients, the contents, and, unquestionably, the writer's linguistic and communicative competencies.

Notably, academic communities are multidimensional in nature. They may involve several genres of written texts communicated among different groups. These multidimensional aspects contribute

to constructing the linguistic and social features of such communities. In a more specific sense, several academic genres function at both global and local levels of discourse structure. These academic genres shape and orient the patterns of academic discourse. As Bruce (2018) noted, social genres “are conventionally recognised categories of whole texts that occur in particular contexts for certain audiences, and sometimes involve formulaic patterns in the selection and staging of content” (p. 8).

Therefore, as Bazerman (2012) demonstrated, genre taxonomies can be regarded as useful, classificatory tools that “define widespread functional patterns in robust social systems” (p. 230). Martin (2015) described the genre as “an additional level of context, above and beyond tenor, field, and mode” (p. 72). Given the fact that language is systematically associated with contexts, various types of genres seem to be purposeful and interactive in nature. Perhaps more importantly, a fairly high level of familiarity with the genre as a “staged, goal-oriented social process,” (Martin, 1992, p. 505) can constitute fertile ground for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) graduate students to frame the layers of information within and across the phases of their assignments. In doing so, they can achieve various social and communicative purposes in various academic spheres.

As demonstrated above, genres are social processes because members of a certain culture interact to achieve them; they are goal-oriented because they have evolved to achieve things (i.e., certain communicative goals); and they are staged because meanings are made in systematic, organizational steps. It usually “takes writers more than one step to reach their goals” (Hyland, 2004, p. 25). As Martin (2000) perfectly described it, genre theory is a theory of the borders of language users’ social world, and thus their familiarity with what to expect. Hence, genre provides the basis of what to anticipate finding in several types of texts; it provides a systematic organization of the sequences of moves (i.e., how moves are organized in relation to one another). The rhetorical situations — which usually determine the sequential moves — faced by graduate students are often unique to their learning context, which is professional as well as academic (Summers, 2016).

The lack of sufficient research on the stylistic variations of academic, written texts promoted this study to investigate graduate students’ thematic choices and their effect on the flow of information as texts unfold (Dakka & Wade, 2019; Graves, 2019; van Rijt et al., 2021). The major objective of this study is to explore how the thematic choices of female Saudi EFL graduate students vary across different academic genres.

In particular, this study examines the following research question:

- How do the thematic choices of female Saudi EFL graduate students vary across different academic genres?

The study makes a major contribution to research on thematic choices in academic writing by exploring the effect of academic genres on choosing thematic choices. It offers some important insights into Saudi EFL graduate students’ perceptions of the importance of their thematic choices on the quality and fluency of their writing. Most interestingly, this study contributes to the field of systematic functional linguistics (SFL). The findings of this study should make an important contribution to the field of style education, which is considered a crucial deficit in academic writing learning and teaching research.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Academic Writing in EFL Contexts***

Writing skill has particular significance in most academic fields and EFL teaching classes (Alsehibany, 2021; Piamsai, 2020; Thongyoi & Poonpon, 2020). In the field of EFL, as Al-Qahtani (2021) pointed out, good writing is progressively realized as an essential need for success in the 21st

century. Specifically, academic writing “takes many different standard forms based upon the ubiquitous essay, and research paper” (Peters, 2008, p. 824). In Khazaal’s words, academic writing “is necessary for all students, academics, and researchers, and no one can deny its importance” (2019, p. 416). Burgos (2017) noted that written production “demands continuous exchange of information and negotiations of ideas conveyed between the writer’s own personal experience and the target reader” (p. 143).

Despite its importance, as demonstrated by several scholars, writing is generally considered a difficult and complex task that necessitates mastering multiple skills (Al-Qahtani, 2021; Banaruee, 2016; Banaruee et al., 2018; Fareed et al., 2016; Hyland, 2003; Mustofa & Kurniawan, 2023). The complexity of the skills involved in writing becomes more noticeable when EFL learners’ proficiency level is not high (Banaruee, 2016; Banaruee et al., 2018). More precisely, writing in a foreign language, as Alanazi (2020) pointed out, seems to be one of the most challenging skills for language learners in many academic contexts as it involves “various mental activities, including organizing thoughts into sentences, transforming sentences into written text, reviewing written material, detecting errors, and rewriting” (p. 669).

Learning how to write effectively in EFL academic contexts may encapsulate numerous factors that affect learners’ performance (Alharbi, 2019; Alhojailan, 2019, 2021; Deb, 2018; Han & Hiver, 2018; Obeid, 2017). It is one of the most challenging aspects as it is linguistically, rhetorically, and strategically different in many ways from the learners’ writing experiences in their native language. As Shukri (2014) put it, EFL learners need to take meta-language and the pragmatic values of grammar, vocabulary, rhetorical patterns, and mechanics into consideration. This is highlighted in Alnufaie and Grenfell’s (2012) study, which concluded that “the nature of EFL writing might be more dynamic, complex and probably more sophisticated” (p. 425).

## **2.2. Academic Genre Knowledge**

Genre, according to Hyland (2017), is a term for “grouping texts together, representing how writers typically use language to respond to recurring situations” (p. 2359). Genres are “made up of a number of rhetorical moves or stages, and there are often constraints on the sequence in which they can occur and the forms which comprise them” (p. 2360). In describing genres, Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) stated that genres are “inherently dynamic rhetorical structures that can be manipulated according to the conditions of use” (p. 3).

Several scholars (e.g., Bazerman, 2004; Kress, 1999; Paltridge, 1999; Reid, 1987) investigated the significant role genre knowledge plays in textual production. The studies of these scholars imply that students’ awareness of what is involved in genre writing may empower them to communicate effectively across academic disciplines. According to Tardy (2009), genre knowledge may help writers communicate “actively, appropriately, and successfully within a specific domain or disciplinary community” (p. 19). Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) argued that genre knowledge refers to language users’ repertoires of situationally appropriate responses to recurrent social situations.

Perhaps most importantly, genre knowledge has been described as “an individual’s repertoire of situationally appropriate responses to recurrent situations — from immediate encounters to distanced communication through the medium of print” (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995, p. 3). It can also be described as the resources one has to utilize “to respond appropriately to the recurrent demands of a particular discourse community” (Uzun, 2017, p. 154). This is supported by McGrath and Kaufhold (2016) who proposed that “genre knowledge enables authors to frame messages according to the expectations of target readers” (p. 936). It “requires adherence to both register and meaning-making conventions of the community, following common practices in both structural and contextual levels” (Uzun, 2017, p. 154).

Dostal and Wolbers (2016) examined student writing proficiencies across taught and untaught genres and found remarkable evidence that emphasized the effectiveness of genre knowledge in carrying out several writing tasks. Their study revealed that students with higher-language proficiencies “were able to extend and generalize knowledge about genre-related features to new genres and make connections between conventions across genres” (p. 166-167). While students with lower language proficiencies demonstrated improvement in an untaught genre. However, their improvements “were not as dramatic as those of the higher-language proficiency group” (p. 167).

### ***2.3. Stylistic Variations and Thematic Choices***

In the SFL theory, the structure of a clause embodies three strands of meaning: a clause as a message, a clause as a representation, and a clause as an exchange (Halliday, 2004). In a more specific sense, this study focuses on the first meaning. To be clear, the structure which carries the first meaning (i.e., a clause as a message) is known as the thematic structure. Generally speaking, the thematic structure contributes to “the logical progression of information significantly” (Park & Nam, 2015, p. 68). The thematic structure of a clause, according to Halliday’s approach, is said to encompass two functional parts: Theme and Rheme. In Halliday’s (2014) words, the Theme is “the point of departure for the message. It is the element the speaker selects for ‘grounding’ what he is going on to say” (p. 83). As Thompson (2014) suggested, the Theme can be defined as the major aspect of how language users (be it speakers or writers) construct their messages in a particular way that makes them fit smoothly into the unfolding language events. It is the starting point of the clause that tells the readers “what the text is about” (Thompson, 2014, p. 165).

Subsequently, the Rheme is the rest of the clause or message. It is called New in Martin and Rose’s (2007) concepts as noted below. In this sense, Potter (2016) remarked that management of information can include “selecting certain linguistic terms as Themes or Rhemes and presenting certain information as Given or New” (p. 4). Potter further added that “the default, unmarked, sequence of information is that of Given followed by New. When a unit of information only consists of the New element, it is then considered as marked” (p. 6). This accounts for the markedness of the Themes of a particular clause within a particular field.

As Potter (2016) asserted, the order of “Theme and Rheme and their organization in the clause as a message are not arbitrary or value-free” (p. 1). What comes first (i.e., in Theme position) in a particular English clause is “vital for how readers view the text as message” (Wei, 2016a, p. 60). Through this, writers can create a rhythm for their texts (i.e., manage the flow of information in certain expected/unexpected ways). According to Halliday (2014), the Theme can locate and orient the clause within a particular context. Wei (2016) stated that the Theme “orients the listener/reader to the message that is about to be perceived and provides a framework for the interpretation of the message” (p. 61). Marked Themes, in particular, have “a facilitative effect as they render the message unambiguous by setting the scene for the clause carrying that message” (Alyousef & Alzahrani, 2020, p. 117).

The organization of thematic choices can be manipulated along with certain linguistic constructions of information, Given and New, to achieve a rhetorical purpose (Potter, 2016). Therefore, the complexity of stylistic variations of the texts can be explored as the texts unfold through the Themes as they are progressively chosen. It follows that thematic choices servers to maintain cohesion within and beyond the clause as Alyousef (2016) and Alyousef and Alzahrani (2020) claimed. The critical role of rhetorical arrangements and language style has been further emphasized by Mustofa and Kurniawan (2023) who noted that all genre-based texts should be written in a coherent and cohesive manner by employing proper thematic structures.

These thematic choices, however, may be influenced by the writers’ perceptions of the requirements of the assignments (or writing tasks) at hand (Al-Reshaid & Alhojailan, 2023). Kim

(2020) emphasized the notion that the way learners perceive a task may “shape and reshape their various rhetorical choices as well as their selection of resources and strategies” (p. 3). This assumption seems to be in agreement with Tardy’s (2009) definition of writing tasks as “specific goal-oriented, rhetorical literacy events in both disciplinary and classroom domains” (p. 11). Then, the perception of a particular writing task (i.e., task representation, see Kim, 2020) may orient the students’ attention to a particular set of rhetorical patterns which, in turn, affect their linguistic choices. In this sense, Wolfersberger (2007) noted that, when performing academic writing tasks, students tend to “make a plan of action that will lead to a written product that appropriately fulfills the writing task” (p. 73). Practically, the findings of Kim’s (2020) study indicated that L2 writers “engage with guessing and develop their network of resources to get feedback to adjust their interpretations of the task assigned, and negotiate these task representations accordingly” (p. 15). Thus, in addition to explicit instructions, students may need implicit instructions “to address academic challenges, including multiple conceptualizations of a task, unfamiliarity of academic genre and content, and vague requirements” (Kim, 2020, p. 15).

#### **2.4. Martin and Rose’s (2007) Semantic Approach**

In addressing the regularity of information flow, Martin and Rose (2007) pointed out that periodicity as an unfolding process of discourse structure is mainly concerned with “the way in which meanings are packaged” to make it easier for readers to take them in (p. 187). It follows that the text can be seen as logically organizing discourse as waves of information. Drawing on their semantic approach, it could be argued that clauses are waves of information that usually involve prominent parts which are known as their Themes. As Hawes (2015) explained, the linguistic term for “the structuring of given and new information is thematisation” which “involves the positioning of information in a clause” (p. 94).

It seems appropriate to note here that, as Halliday (1985) argued, Themes can be classified into topical, textual, and interpersonal Themes depending on their metafunctions. As demonstrated by Chang and Lee (2019), the Theme is the first ideational component that can be a participant, a process, and/or a circumstance. Specifically, topical Themes can be headed by textual or interpersonal Themes or both. Textual and interpersonal Themes have been described as natural Themes; that is to say, they are “thematic by default” (Potter, 2016, p. 4). Thus, textual and interpersonal Themes seem to be optional, whereas topical Themes seem to be obligatory. Based on this, a Theme of a clause, as Potter (2016) pointed out, contains “only one topical Theme functioning as a Subject, a Complement or an Adjunct and one or more textual and interpersonal Themes” (p. 4). A topical Theme can function as “a full Theme”, whereas textual and interpersonal Themes function as “part of a Theme” (p. 4).

Textual Themes usually “constitute the first part of the Theme coming before any interpersonal Theme” (Ahangari, 2015, p. 4). These Themes may be used to connect the discourse structure and organize the texts (Alotaibi, 2020). They enhance “connectivity between ideas in the text” (Ahangari, 2015, p. 20). They, as Alyousef (2016) and Chang and Lee (2019) noted, comprise conjunctions (and, or, etc.), continuatives (already, still, even, just, etc.), conjunctive adjuncts (e.g., moreover, therefore, however, because, although, etc.), or WH-relatives (e.g., who, which, etc.). It seems imperative to point out here that there is a distinction to be made between external and internal conjunctions. The former refers to the linguistic resources that can be used to construe a particular field beyond the text whilst the latter refers to the linguistic resources that can be used to organize the text (Martin & Rose, 2007). They are used to refer to the same four types of logical relations: adding, comparing, sequencing, and/or relating a particular set of information causally (Martin & Rose, 2007).

On the other hand, interpersonal Themes may precede the topical Themes to express the writers’ attitudes, characterized by vocatives, comment adjuncts (e.g., probably, frankly, etc.), finite



elements (such as modal auxiliaries and ‘be’ auxiliary), WH-question words (where, how, why, etc.), mood-making Themes, and interpersonal metaphors (Alyousef, 2016; Chang & Lee, 2019). They can be used to “highlight the speaker’s stance” (Alotaibi, 2020, p. 2). In doing so, the writers may use certain expressions such as: importantly, interestingly, and certainly, to name a few.

Specifically, topical Themes can be classified into marked and unmarked Themes. Unmarked Themes (the typical use of language) are the Subjects of the clauses which may be preceded by a marked Theme. The unmarked Themes can be defined as the departure of the clause. Indeed, they are not especially prominent parts in texts because they are considered recurrent uses of language within a particular academic genre. Contrarily, the marked Themes (the atypical use of language) seem to be more prominent in the sense that they could be used to signal new phases in discourse (Eggins 2007; Martin & Rose, 2007). Based on Halliday’s (2014) assumptions, the marked Themes can be classified into: spatial, temporal, manner, cause, and contingency.

As Martin and Rose (2007) explained, News are usually located at the end of the clause. Apparently, the writers’ linguistic choices of News seem to be more varied than that of unmarked Themes. Writers can use various linguistic recourses to structure the rhythm of their texts by shaping their waves in a hierarchal manner. To orient their readers’ expectations, writers tend to state their thesis (topic sentences) at the beginning of the paragraphs that function as hyperThemes. Simply put, hyperThemes “tell us where we’re going in a phase,” whereas hyperNews “tell us where we’ve been” (Martin & Rose, 2007, p. 195). It seems appropriate to note here that the waves of Theme and New might be extended to construct a much larger phase of discourse that functions as macroThemes and macroNews. These semantic layers of discourse seem to be heavily associated with the types of the assigned academic genre.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Research Design and Instruments***

This study employed a social constructionist perspective to answer the research question, which holds assumptions that “individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences-meanings directed toward certain objects or things” (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). Drawing on the social constructionist approach, a qualitative research approach is probably the most suitable approach to explore people’s linguistic choices as they interact with other people.

The researchers adopted a content analysis method to examine the students’ assignments. Content analysis involves “a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a specific body of material with the aim of identifying patterns, themes, or biases” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015, p. 275). Additionally, grounded theory was integrated into the content analysis to gain insights into students’ perceptions, as grounded theory explores “a process, including human actions and interactions, and how they influence and result from one another” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015, p. 276).

The study is inspired by the process-genre writing instruction model which was introduced by Badger and White (2000). This model, as Huang and Zhang (2019) pointed out, incorporates the insights of the product, process, and genre approaches to writing pedagogy.

#### ***3.2. Textual Analysis***

A total of 108 written assignments across various academic genres were analyzed using Martin and Rose’s (2007) semantic approach. Stratified random sampling was used to collect various types of assignments that have been written by Saudi EFL graduate students who enrolled at different academic levels in two master’s degree programs—Theoretical Linguistics and Applied Linguistics—at a large university in Saudi Arabia. All participants were native Arabic speakers. The study examined not only the micro-level discourse structures, such as sentence-level lexical and grammatical choices,

but also macro-level structures. This was inspired by Beck and Jeffery (2009), who argued that generic structures include "macro-level stages that fulfill key functions within a genre, such as introductions, thesis statements, supporting paragraphs, and conclusions" (p. 233).

### **3.3. Interviews**

A semi-structured interview protocol was implemented, guided by the principles of grounded theory. This method was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive and contextualized understanding of students' writing (Heron & Corradini, 2019).

### **3.4. Participants**

The researchers employed convenience and purposive sampling techniques to elicit participation among female Saudi EFL graduate students. As for participant recruitment, thirty-eight potential participants received an email that adequately explained the study and the nature of the participation in this study. Only eighteen eligible participants agreed to be orally interviewed.

Eighteen female Saudi graduate students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) from different academic levels were randomly selected for the interviews. First-level students were excluded due to their limited experience in academic writing.

### **3.5. Interview Questions**

The interview questions were designed to align with the primary objectives of the study, addressing topics such as the importance of rhetorical decision-making in academic contexts, the relationship between thematic choices and stylistic variations in academic writing, and the communicative functions and effects of thematic choices.

To determine and maximize the validity and reliability of the interview questions, a piloting study was conducted. To elicit accurate and consistent information regarding the graduate students' perceptions of the importance of their thematic choices, the piloting study was conducted with one of the writing instructors whose experience in teaching academic writing is approximately more than ten years. A number of suggestions have been discussed regarding the deletion and/or addition of some research questions to gain the most related information.

### **3.6. Transcribing and Coding the Collected Data**

The interviews were analyzed in stages. Initially, the data were transcribed and translated from Arabic to English. Subsequently, the data were coded into thematically cohesive groups. To ensure accuracy, the transcriptions were reviewed three times, and the translations were verified by two translation specialists.

## **4. Results**

The current study examines the thematic choices made by female Saudi EFL graduate students across different academic genres in their written assignments. The analysis is grounded in the semantic approach to SFL developed by Martin and Rose (2007). The study analyzed 108 written assignments from graduate students across various academic genres, such as essays, reports, and research papers, and conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 female graduate students. The analysis focused on the different types of Themes used by the students. The Theme is a crucial element in SFL that represents the point of departure for the message and helps structure the flow of information in a text.

The findings revealed that the topical, unmarked Theme was the most common type of Theme used by graduate students across the different genres. Topical Themes typically consist of a nominal group that represents the main subject of the clause. In addition, the study found that the graduate



students used other types of Themes, such as textual Themes (e.g., conjunctions like "and", "but", and "however") and interpersonal Themes (e.g., modal adjuncts like "unfortunately" and "hopefully"). These different types of Themes served to create cohesion and guide the reader through the text.

In this sense, some of the participants demonstrated that their style may vary depending on the type of the assignment. This is highlighted by S 5.

(Excerpt 1)

S 5:

"استخدم Theme marked عشان ادم نقطه معينه ببحي وغالبا يكون لما أكتب research papers ."

Translation: "I used unmarked Themes to support a certain idea, especially, while writing my research paper." (Interview Transcript, p. 9)

This is also supported by other participants as the following excerpts suggest.

(Excerpt 2)

S 11:

"استخدامي لأنواع الخيارات المواضيعية يختلف حسب نوع النص اللي أكتبه ."

Translation: "The thematic choices vary according to the type of text we are writing." (Interview Transcript, p. 21)

(Excerpt 3)

S 16:

"التنوع باستخدام الخيارات المواضيعية راح يكون مقيد بنوع المهمة اللي موكله لي إني أسويها . . . لما يطلب مني كتابة رأيي الشخصي راح يختلف أسلوب بالكتابة مثلاً عن لما أكتب بس ما راح أضيف أفكار من عندي . . . لما أكون أكتب annotated bibliography أو . . . summary يعني أنا بس جالسة أخص. أو مثلاً لما تكون كتابة خاصة فيني أنا زي مثلاً الـ articles والأشياء هذه".

Translation: "The diversion of the thematic choices usage is determined by the type of tasks assigned to me. For example, when I am asked to write about my opinion about something, the way I write will be different from when I write without taking into consideration my own opinions such as writing an annotated bibliography or a summary." (Interview Transcript, p. 31)

(Excerpt 4)

S 17:

"بال reflection راح يبرز صوتي أكثر بخلاف أنواع النصوص الأخرى".

Translation: "In writing the Reflections, the echo of my own opinions and way of thinking will be noticed unlike any other type of text." (Interview Transcript, p. 33)

Interestingly, the analysis revealed variations in the students' use of Themes across the different genres. For example, in more formal genres like research papers, the students tended to use more topical, unmarked Themes to establish the main subject of the text. In contrast, in less formal genres like essays, the students used more textual and interpersonal Themes to create flow and engage the reader.

In summary, the findings suggest that female Saudi EFL graduate students' thematic choices vary across genres based on their communicative purposes and the rhythmic complexity they aim to achieve, which is shaped by their individual characteristics and experiences. The analysis of their

thematic choices provides insights into how they organize information in their written assignments across different academic genres.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Genre-Based Variation in Thematic Choices

The variations in thematic choices across genres suggest that graduate students are able to adapt their writing style to meet the expectations of different academic contexts. This indicates that students are cognizant of the genre-specific conventions, and adjust their linguistic choices accordingly. This aligns with the concept of genre theory (Martin & Rose, 2008). For instance, in genres that prioritize objectivity, coherence, and impersonality, such as research papers and reports, the students tended to rely more heavily on topical, unmarked Themes. This allows them to foreground the subject matter and convey information in a direct, formal manner.

In contrast, genres that allow for more personal expression, like reflective essays and opinion pieces, prompted the students to utilize a greater number of textual and interpersonal Themes. The textual and interpersonal Themes enable the students to guide the reader, signal their stance, and create a more engaging, interactive text (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

These findings suggest that graduate students possess a nuanced understanding of genre conventions and can strategically manipulate their thematic choices to meet the communicative goals of different academic writing tasks. Their ability to adapt their style highlights the sophisticated literacy skills required for success in graduate-level studies.

### 5.2. Task-Driven Thematic Diversification

The participants' remarks about the impact of assignments on their topic choices imply that students' writing is influenced by the unique needs and aims of each assignment. Task-based language training (TBLT) (Ellis, 2003) argues that the type of the task has a substantial impact on how language is utilized. Writing duties such as annotated bibliographies, summaries, and research articles frequently emphasize factual correctness and objectivity, resulting in more unmarked Themes that focus on the topic matter. Personal reflection or opinion writing projects, on the other hand, promote the use of more distinct topics and interpersonal Themes to express the writer's voice, ideas, and interaction with the reader.

This distinction is especially significant in EFL settings because genre-based writing requirements may differ from those in the students' first language (L1). The shift in thematic choices based on task type reflects students' improving understanding of how language use across genres must fit with communicative goals. Then, different writing requirements may match different sets of options for semantic and contextual meanings to be expressed.

### 5.3. Reflections and the Expression of Writer's Voice

Participant S17's observation regarding the predominance of their voice in reflection writing emphasizes the significance of authorial voice in academic genres. According to Hyland (2005), the writer's identity and voice are important in academic literature, especially reflective writing, which emphasizes personal experience, views, and assessments. Interpersonal Themes are more prevalent in these writings because they allow the writer to connect with the reader on a personal level and represent their unique perspective.

The distinction between reflections and more formal academic writing, which emphasizes objectivity and impersonality, is congruent with studies on position and participation in academic discourse (Hyland, 2002). In formal writing, such as research papers, unmarked Themes are more

common since they maintain the reader's attention on the facts being presented, whereas marked and interpersonal Themes are employed in reflections to stress the writer's perspective.

#### **5.4. Individual Characteristics and Experiences Shaping Thematic Choices**

The findings also indicate that students' personal experiences and writing traits impact their choices, particularly in genres that allow for greater personal expression. This may be explored using sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which stresses the role of social and cultural experiences in learning and language usage. As the participants negotiate various academic genres, they rely on their backgrounds, past knowledge, and experiences to influence their writing styles.

The differences in Theme choices across genres indicate students' growing genre understanding, a notion explored in academic literacy research (Lea & Street, 1998). As students get more familiar with numerous genres, they learn to tailor their thematic choices to each genre's demands while still inserting their own voice when appropriate.

#### **5.5. Rhythmic Complexity and Information Organization**

The rhythmic complexity and arrangement of information presented in the findings are consistent with the cohesion and coherence theory (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Thematic choices contribute to a text's overall coherence by directing how the material is presented, developed, and related to the audience. In formal genres, the emphasis is often on maintaining a logical flow of ideas through unmarked Themes that establish clear subject-predicate relationships, whereas in less formal genres, marked Themes and interpersonal elements contribute to a rhythm that reflects the writer's engagement with the reader. It is worth noting that a particular thematic choice at one level of discourse structure may open up further choices at other levels. This contributes to enhancing the textual and stylistic variations of academic writing.

### **6. Conclusion**

The outcomes of this study highlight the importance of Theme selection in encouraging excellent academic writing among female Saudi EFL graduate students. Variations in Theme patterns between genres demonstrate students' understanding of and adaptability to genre-specific requirements, indicating their ability to negotiate the complexity of academic discourse. This adaptability reflects their growing literacy skills and comprehension of rhetorical methods required for success in graduate courses. Overall, the study underscores the relevance of genre knowledge in academic writing education, implying that more targeted pedagogical techniques might improve students' writing abilities.

Future studies might broaden the participant pool to include male students as well as people from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds in order to explore Theme choices across a wider spectrum of EFL learners. Longitudinal studies might also be done to investigate how students' topic preferences change over time as they gain more expertise in academic writing. Furthermore, investigating the impact of specific genre-based training on students' writing abilities may yield significant insights into effective pedagogical techniques. Additionally, qualitative research into the cognitive processes behind topic selections during the writing process might improve our knowledge of EFL learners' writing methods.

### **Declarations**

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