

An Investigation into the Textual Meaning in Academic IELTS Sample Essays

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Abstract: The textual meaning, which is embodied in the structure of a clause as a message, is one of three types of meaning that all natural languages possess. Textual meaning relates to the construction of text, the organization of ideas in a coherent text. The research is intended to identify the textual meaning manifested in Academic IELTS sample essays with band scores of 7 - 7.5 in the light of Functional Grammar. The linguistic components realizing the textual meaning include cohesion and thematic structure. A descriptive method accompanied by qualitative and quantitative approaches is used to give a detailed description of the textual meaning in relation to the IELTS band descriptors. 90 sample essays with band scores of 7.0-7.5 from published books and official IELTS websites are selected as data for text analysis. The findings reveal that cohesive devices are properly used and information is logically arranged in different thematic patterns in the sample essays. It is noticeable that the prevailing types of Themes deployed in the essays are multiple Themes, demonstrating high levels of English proficiency of IELTS writers in constituting a message. It is hoped that the findings of this research will provide insights into salient thematic patterns of Academic IELTS sample essays and appropriate use of cohesive devices, whereby IELTS test-takers can make good use of appropriate strategies in order to produce concise and coherent pieces of writing.

Keywords: Academic IELTS Essays, Textual Meaning, Cohesion, Theme, Thematic Patterns

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) has been considered as the preferred test to assess English language proficiency of non-native English speakers. With a view to improving the quality of IELTS candidates' answers to the academic writing test, the paper addresses the textual meaning in the Academic IELTS essays based on Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) developed by Halliday [16], and Halliday and Matthiessen [17, 18].

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), a social theory of language views language not as a system of rules but as a resource for meanings [8, 9, 11, 15-18, 31]. In SFL, language is primarily considered as a function. The functional approach looks at how people use language with each other in accomplishing certain social purposes with the language. In

Halliday's view, we use language to talk about our experiences and to describe events and state the entities involved in them; that is the experiential metafunction. We also use language to interact with other people, to establish and maintain relationships with them, to express our own point of view on things the world over, and to elicit or change theirs; that is the interpersonal metafunction. Besides, we organize our messages in ways that indicate how they fit in with other messages around them and with the wider context in which we are talking or writing; that is the textual metafunction.

Textual metafunction or textual meaning, relating to the construction of text builds up sequences of discourse, organizes the discursive flow, and creates cohesion [18]. Textual metafunction is associated with the register variable mode. The parts of discourse realizing textual meanings include cohesion and the thematic structure.

In this paper, the main focus is the analysis of textual meaning in high-scoring Academic IELTS essays written by

successful test-takers in the light of functional grammar in relation to the IELTS band descriptors. The study identifies what element in an English clause to be selected as Theme, how the information in a clause is effectively distributed as well as what cohesive devices are used to make connections between ideas in the text. The findings will provide insights into prominent thematic patterns of Academic IELTS sample essays and the appropriate use of cohesive devices, whereby IELTS test-takers can acquire a sensitivity for the textual meaning demands in order to produce an effective and coherent piece of writing.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Previous Studies

Under the umbrella of academic writing, the analysis of textual meaning has been a topic of interest for language researchers and educators. In particular, there has been a growing body of studies related to Theme-Rheme employment in Academic Writing [7, 12, 13, 19, 20, 26, 32].

In addition, a significant number of studies have examined the relationships between writing scores in the IELTS test and the linguistic as well as discourse features of the writing tasks [1, 2, 5, 22, 25, 30].

Mayor et al. [22], for example, found that text length, formal error rate, and thematic structure are among the strongest predictors of high-scoring scripts. They also pointed out that the scripts with higher band scores are found to be more complex.

Banerjee et al. [1] compared the linguistic characteristics of scripts written by Chinese and Spanish L1 candidates in response to IELTS Academic writing tasks 1 and 2 and scored at bands 3 to 8. From the analysis of several linguistic features including type-token ratio (lexical diversity), word frequency (lexical sophistication), cohesive devices, syntactic complexity, and grammatical accuracy, they found that scripts rated at higher band scores display greater lexical variation and sophistication and more syntactic complexity. In addition, grammatical accuracy is also a significant predictor of proficiency level.

In a similar vein, Riazi and Knox [30] conducted an analysis of the linguistic characteristics of IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 scripts written by three L1 candidate groups (Arabic, Hindi and European), assessed at three different band scores of 5, 6 and 7. The results of their study showed significant differences of linguistic characteristics across the three band score texts. The scripts rated at higher band scores (6 and 7) were found to be complex, using a higher proportion of low-frequency words, greater lexical diversity, and more syntactic complexity than low-scoring scripts. However, high-scoring scripts with higher levels of linguistic complexity are not necessarily more cohesive than low-scoring scripts.

Barkaoui [3] conducted a study on the scripts written by 78 candidates who took the IELTS test three times in order to examine changes in the linguistic characteristics of IELTS

repeaters' writing Task 2. The findings revealed that scripts with higher writing scores tend to be significantly longer with greater lexical density and sophistication, greater syntactic complexity, cohesion, more self-mentions, more formal features and fewer informal features.

Realizing the crucial essence of textual meaning in academic writing, the purpose of this study is to uncover the linguistic features of Academic IELTS sample essays with band scores of 7.0 - 7.5 in terms of thematic progression and cohesion. The findings of this study are expected to enable language learners in general and IELTS test-takers in particular to take into account the prominent linguistic features of high-quality sample essays so that they can reach the perceived and desired IELTS band score.

2.2. Theoretical Background

2.2.1. Types of Themes

Theme is defined as 'the first group or phrase that has some function in the experiential structure of the clause' [18] serving as a starting point of clause from the perspective of SFL. For Halliday, Theme 'provides the environment for the remainder of the message, the Rheme.' [26]

(i). Marked and Unmarked Theme

Based on the structural make-up of clauses, Theme is classified into marked and unmarked Theme. When the Theme overlaps with the grammatical subject of the clause, it is named an unmarked Theme, according to Halliday and Matthiessen [18]. Marked Theme, on the other hand, is something other than the subject, namely adjunct and complement.

(ii). Simple and Multiple Theme

Theme is divided into two subtypes, namely simple Theme and multiple Theme on the basis of their internal structure. A simple Theme is formed when the Theme of a clause consists of just one single structural element [18]. It means that in this type, only a topical Theme occupies the thematic position. A multiple Theme, however, is created when other elements such as interpersonal and/or textual Themes occur before the topical Theme in the clause.

(iii). Topical, Textual and Interpersonal Theme

Based on the thematic content and its function, Theme is divided into three categories: topical Theme, textual Theme, and interpersonal Theme corresponding to the three metafunctional structures of the clause in Halliday's model.

A topical Theme can be identified when 'an element of the clause to which a Transitivity function can be assigned occurs in first position in a class' and 'every clause must contain one and only one topical Theme' [9].

A textual Theme is the element which relates the clause to its context [9]. There are three types of textual Themes: Continuative, Conjunction, and Conjunctive Adjunct [18].

Interpersonal Theme can be identified when the first constituent of the clause to which a Mood label can be assigned [9].

2.2.2. Thematic Progression

Thematic progression refers to the way Themes relate with each other and with Rhemes in organizing the whole text. When Theme and Rheme are viewed on a larger scale of the entire discourse, the link between Theme-Rheme structures can be expressed in three main patterns, namely linear pattern, constant pattern, and derived pattern according to McCarthy [23]. In linear pattern, an element from the Rheme of the previous clause becomes Theme of the subsequent clause. In constant pattern, several clauses can share the same Theme but have different Rhemes. In derived pattern, elements of Rheme from the previous clause are taken up as Themes in separate subsequent clauses like a hierarchical pattern.

2.2.3. Cohesion

Halliday and Hasan [14] maintained that cohesion encompasses the semantic relation in a text which makes the text hold together: 'It refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text.' Cohesion, referring to the particular linguistic devices, is expressed partly through the grammar and partly through the vocabulary. Thus, it can be categorized into two basic types: *Grammatical*, including reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunctions and *Lexical*, consisting of reiteration and collocation.

3. Research Methodology

Drawing on SFL developed by Halliday [16], and Halliday and Matthiessen [17, 18] as an analytical tool, the study explores how textual meaning is employed in IELTS sample essays. It attempts to identify linguistic features in two main perspectives of the textual meaning including thematic structure and cohesion. For this purpose, the study combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches. It is the qualitative approach that enables the work to identify linguistic features of the textual meaning and to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of Academic IELTS writing while the data are quantitatively analysed. The quantitative approach is applied to present the percentages and frequencies of the linguistic features in the data, which facilitates the generalizations from the findings and drawing conclusions.

The data for the study is 90 IELTS sample essays with band scores from 7.0 to 7.5, equivalent to level C1 of the Common European Framework for Reference, which most candidates, especially Vietnamese undergraduates majoring in English are to achieve as the target outcome required by Vietnam's National Foreign Language 2020 Project. IELTS samples belong to exposition and discussion genres which are viewed as common types found in the IELTS Academic Module [4, 30] of six different topics namely: education, environment, family, work, social issues and health with at least 250 words and no more than 400 words. The reason for choosing the essays ranging from 250 minimum word limit to a maximum of 400 words is that in Task 2 requirements of Academic IELTS Writing test, the candidates have to write at least 250 words within the recommended time limit of 40 allocated minutes.

In terms of unit analysis of the sample, there are 3,581

clauses including 620 clause simplexes, 764 clause complexes and 1,030 embedded clauses. Among the 764 clause complexes, there are 475 two-clause complexes, 203 three-clause complexes, 64 four-clause complexes, 17 five-clause complexes, 4 six-clause complexes and 1 seven-clause complex.

In order to examine the textual meaning of the IELTS essays, the study identified three aspects of Themes: first, what types of Themes were employed in terms of marked or unmarked; second, whether they are topical, interpersonal and textual, and third whether they are simple or multiple. In order to have a clear picture of the Themes and thematic progressions used in the IELTS Task 2 essays, the essays were segmented into clauses as previously mentioned. In addition, minor clauses lie outside the scope of this study due to the fact that minor clauses have no thematic structure [18]. Then, the thematic progression was analysed and classified according to three main patterns: linear patterns, constant patterns and derived patterns.

Regarding cohesion analysis, a series of statistical analyses were carried out. First, all of the essays were carefully read to identify all the cohesive devices, then they were classified according to the cohesion categories proposed by Halliday and Hasan [14]. This covered the examination of the grammatical ties including reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction and the lexical ties, that is, reiteration including repetition, synonym, super-ordinate, general words and collocations. Finally, the number of each type of cohesive devices used in the essays was counted, followed by the determination of the frequency of the cohesive devices in each category and generalisation from the findings.

Based on the results of the textual meaning analysis, a comparison was made in the light of the IELTS Task 2 Writing band descriptors.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Thematic Structure

4.1.1. Types of Themes

(i). Marked and Unmarked Theme

As can be seen from Figure 1, unmarked Themes are the most popular in order to make the clauses in the IELTS essays grammatically. However, it is remarkable that marked topical Themes represent approximately 18.5 per cent of the total topical Themes with 361 instances, which is relatively high, compared to those found by Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi [7] and Gunawan and Aziza [13]. When a marked Theme is employed, it can be interpreted that successful IELTS writers have a tendency to draw the reader's attention to a particular group or phrase in order to build a coherent piece of writing. Indeed, Eggins [9] demonstrated that skillful writers use marked Themes to add coherence and emphasis to their texts. For example,

(1) Education also broadens the horizons and the increased creativity may open new avenues for innovation in business process.

(2) In any field of art, hardworking and skilful artists have successful life with enough fame and money.

(3) Nowadays, [learning a new language for the purpose of working in other countries] seems to become more and more popular.

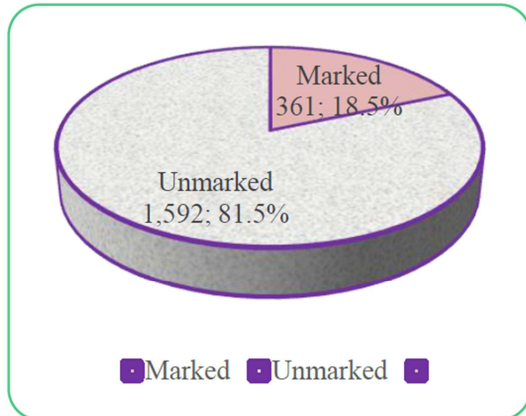


Figure 1. Distribution of marked and unmarked Themes.

The Themes in Extract (1) are unmarked Themes as the thematic position is indicated by participants *education* and *the increased creativity* functioning as grammatical subjects. Meanwhile, Examples (2) and (3) consist of a marked Theme, namely the prepositional phrase *In any field of art*, *Nowadays*.

(ii). Topical, Interpersonal and Textual Theme

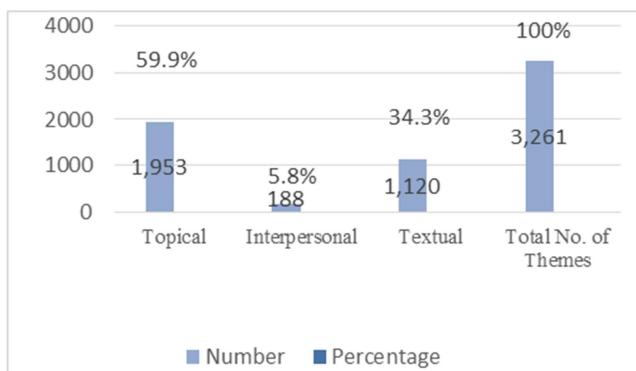


Figure 2. Distribution of topical, interpersonal and textual Themes.

As can be seen from Figure 2, topical Themes are the most frequently employed with 1,953 instances, representing 59.9%. Textual Themes are the second most common type used in the essays with 1,120 cases, equal to 34.3%, followed by interpersonal Themes (5.8%). The writers tend to utilize few interpersonal Themes in order to give their texts an objective style. This is in line with the position taken by Oshima and Hogue [29] that Academic Writing is formal in tone; that is, the style is objective rather than subjective, formal rather than colloquial. As a result, only a small proportion of interpersonal Themes (188 instances) are found in the study. The following excerpts exhibit interpersonal Themes employed in the sample essays.

(4) On the one hand, I think [settling down early] can be extremely beneficial to one's career.

(5) No doubt, economic growth and building infrastructure area are a precursor to a sustained prosperity for the developing world.

(6) Unfortunately, lack of face to face interactions hurts relationships and leads to social alienation.

In the above extracts, the writers employ modal adjuncts such as *I think*, *no doubt*, *unfortunately* to express their own angle on the topic.

However, it is interesting to find that the authors of band 7-7.5 essays have a tendency to use more quantities of textual Themes with 1120 instances, indicating that the clauses are connected, providing a cohesive tie to the previous clauses in the text. Here are some examples:

(7) By contrast, emission from fossil fuels is very hazardous to environment and they contribute to 65% of carbon footprints around the world.

(8) Moreover, states should provide funds [which would support gifted students].

(9) To sum up, environmental problems should be handled by local and international authorities as well as individuals.

In the above extracts, the writers use *by contrast* in the Theme position to indicate adversative relationships, *moreover* to signal an extension of information to the previous clause, and *to sum up* to construe summation. These resources enable the authors to manipulate the flow of information and to organize the text by indicating relationships between clauses.

(iii). Simple and Multiple Theme

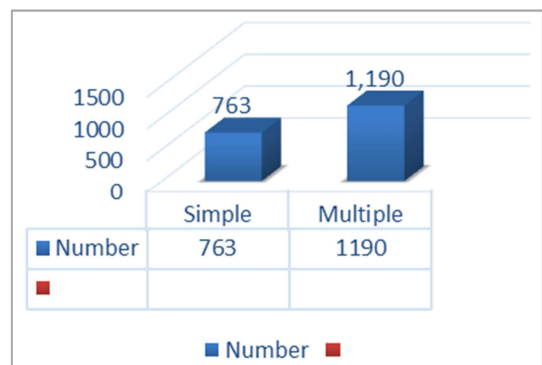


Figure 3. Distribution of simple and multiple Themes.

As can be observed in Figure 3, it is apparent that the essay writers make use of much more multiple Themes (61%) than simple Themes (39%). It is clear that the beginning of clauses with simple Themes is not academic enough at the level of Academic Writing and multiple Themes are seen to play an important role in indicating the writer's point of view and in helping the writer to organize the message as well as to connect ideas in the text.

(10) In conclusion, financial education is important for both the individual and the society.

(11) In my view, if salaries are high, the country will progress faster.

(12) However, in my opinion, the chances of success grow manifold with the higher education.

The multiple Theme in Example (10) consists of the textual Theme *in conclusion* signaling the concluding paragraph of the text and the topic Theme *financial education* while in Example (11), the modal adjunct *in my view* functions as an interpersonal Theme, preceding the topical Theme *if salaries are high*, which together constitutes a multiple Theme.

In Extract (12), the conjunctive element *however* acting as a textual Theme and introducing a contrastive point, and the modal adjunct *in my opinion* functioning as an interpersonal Theme are placed before the topical Theme *the chances of success* to form a multiple theme.

4.1.2. Thematic Progression

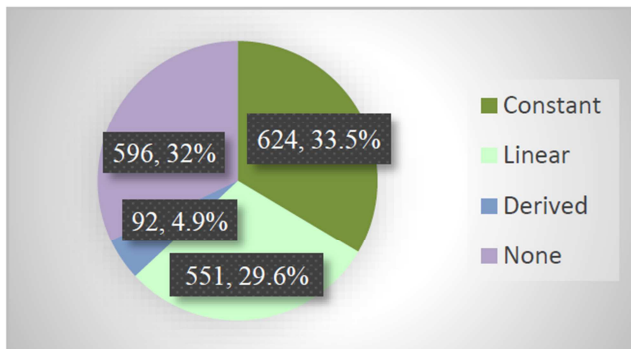


Figure 4. Thematic progression.

As indicated in Figure 4, constant patterns are the most popular thematic progression strategy in the sample essays with 624 instances, accounting for 33.5%, followed by linear patterns with 551 cases, making up 29.6%. Derived patterns are the least common, representing 4.9%. The following are some examples of thematic progression patterns.

(13) The constant pattern

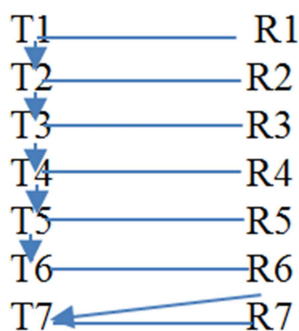
Furthermore, teenagers often develop a closer relationship with others of similar age or status.

First, they are able to relate to these people [who are under similar circumstances].

They do not feel intimidated by them and hence they are willing to accept their views.

Second, they feel the need [to maintain close bonds with those in their social realm].

Therefore, they exert additional effort [to understand their friends' mentality], which strengthens their friendship and hence their influence towards one another.



(14) The constant pattern

Furthermore, these plastic wastes are non-biodegradable; hence they remain in the environment for an indefinite period of time.

They also pose a great risk to all the animals and fishes [that might feed on them].

Overall, plastic is a source of hazard for the ecosystem.



In Example (13), Theme 1 takes the element *teenagers* as the point of departure. Themes 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, the third person plural pronoun *they* is used as the Theme of the clauses in the constant thematic progression pattern. The writer reiterates the same element made Theme to keep the text focused, creating cohesion.

In Excerpt (14), it can be observed that the pattern takes the same element *these plastic wastes* as the point of departure for all the clauses, and the Rheme for each clause provides further information and explanation about the Theme. The use of the personal reference *they* does not imply a change in Theme, but only to avoid repetition. It is obvious that the flow of information in the thematic pattern is iterative, focusing on *plastic wastes*.

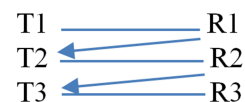
The findings reveal that the writers make use of reiteration patterns to make a consistent focus of their messages [9]. The trend of using constant Theme patterns as the most dominant thematic shifts is in accordance with most English texts in general [28].

(15) The linear pattern

Moreover, punishment proportionate to crime gives a sense of justice for the bereaved family.

Most of the grief-stricken families, who have lost their near and dear ones, hope that offenders should be punished in a similar way.

Thus, it brings confidence among them regarding the unbiased nature of judicial system.



(16) The linear pattern

To begin with, one of the main reasons [why too much time is given] for [studying facts] at schools and universities is that [facts are very crucial for our life].

Facts give us knowledge about ourselves, our planet and our environment.



In Example (15), the Rheme *gives a sense of justice for the bereaved family* becomes the Theme of the subsequent clause. The thematic structure shows the writer's good control of the

information in which the subsequent Themes are taken from the previous Rhemes, ensuring that the readers can constantly follow them in chains of the argument.

In Example (16), the Rheme *facts* of the second clause becomes the topical Theme of the following clause, constituting chains of the argument. This kind of pattern offers new information in continuous progression in order to achieve cohesion in the text and gives the text what Eggins [9] called 'a sense of cumulative development'. Therefore, this recurrence makes the writing more compact in structure, creating cohesion and coherence in a written text.

(17) The derived pattern

(17) In my opinion, I don't agree with it for three reasons.

(17a) Firstly, these subjects such as music and art are very important to children because when they are brought up they need to study different subjects to improve their IQ and EQ.

I think the best way [to improve their EQ] is [learning some subjects like art, music and competitive sport.]

.....

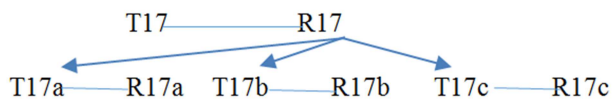
(17b) Secondly, for children, art, music and competitive sports are more fun than other subjects such as IT.

Especially in primary school and middle school, the ages of those students are quite young.

.....

(17c) Thirdly, a society needs not only scientist and politics, but also artist, musicians and sportsmen.

.....



(18) The derived pattern

(18) In my opinion, it is the responsibility of both the teachers and parents.

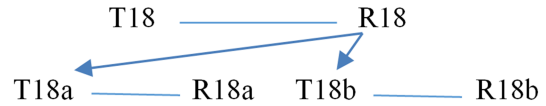
(18a) On one hand, teachers have a moral obligation [of imparting knowledge as well as discipline to their students].

.....

(18b) On the other hand, parents play a fundamental role [in moulding a child].

They are the first persons [to instill values, morals and discipline in their child].

.....



Instance (17) is extracted from an essay about education. The element *three reasons* is introduced in the Rheme 17, and each of the reasons becomes a Theme in the subsequent clauses. That means the Themes in the clauses are different from each other. In Clause 17a the Theme is *these subjects such as music and art*, while in Clause 17b the Theme is *for children*, and in Clause 17c it is *a society*. In spite of their differences, the Themes are all related to the Rheme *three reasons* in Clause 17.

Excerpt 18 shows that Rheme 18 is made up of two items, namely *teacher* and *parents*. Each of the items is taken up as the Theme in the subsequent clauses. In this case, *teacher* constitutes the Theme of the Clause 18a and *parents* becomes the Theme in Clause 18b. In this case, the thematic pattern indicates that the method of development of the text is clearly planned and thus shows the writer's investigation strategy conducted prior to the writing activity [10].

4.2. Cohesion

Cohesion refers to the use of cohesive devices to make a connection between ideas in the text, which, in turn, contributes to the coherence of the text as a whole. The tables below present the number and percentage of the different subcategories of grammatical and lexical ties identified in the IELTS sample essays. They also indicate the total of appropriate use and inappropriate use of each kind.

Table 1. Cohesive ties.

	Grammatical ties		Total	Lexical ties		Total
	appropriate use	inappropriate use		appropriate use	inappropriate use	
No.	2,265	28	2,293	1,925	17	1,942
Rate	53.5%	0.7%	54.2%	45.4%	0.4%	45.8%

As shown in Table 1, grammatical ties (2,293 instances) are used slightly more than lexical ones (1,942). The table also makes it clear that there is a correlation between the number of appropriate grammatical and lexical ties and the proportion of inappropriate ones in the data. A small minority of errors are found in the study, of which more errors are made by IELTS writers in using grammatical ties (28 instances) than using lexical ties (17 instances). The appropriate use of each type will be discussed in detail as follows.

4.2.1. Grammatical Ties

With regard to grammatical cohesion, among the four sub-categories of grammatical ties, conjunction takes up the largest proportion (50.37%) with 1,152 instances, followed by reference (49.28%) with 1,127 instances. Ellipsis and substitution account for a relatively small percentage with 0.3% and 0.04% respectively.

Table 2. Grammatical ties.

GRAMMATICAL TIES	Types	Cohesion subcategories	Appropriate use	Rate	Inappropriate use	Rate	Total	Rate
	Reference	Personal	646					
		Demonstrative	321	48.31%	22	0.97	1,127	49.28%
		Comparative	138					
	Substitution	Nominal	1					
		Verbal	0	0.04%	0	0%	1	0.04%
		Clausal	0					
	Ellipsis	Nominal						
		Verbal	7	0.3%	0	0%	7	0.3%
		Clausal						
	Conjunction	Additive	434					
		Adversative	160	50.37%	0	0%	1,152	50.37%
		Causal	279					
Temporal		279						
Total			2,265	99.03%	22	0.97%	2,287	100%

(i). The Use of Reference

In the view of Halliday and Hasan [14], items that have the property of reference are personal, demonstrative, or comparative. As can be seen from Table 2 above, 646 instances of the appropriate use of personal reference and 321 instances of demonstrative reference are found in the IELTS sample essays. The comparative reference has the lowest percentage with 321 instances. The following examples extracted from the sample essays illustrate the appropriate use of reference.

(19) For instance, many scientists have received money for education in my country.

Afterwards, they have discovered and invented a variety of things [which have been beneficial for the society.]

(20) It is always beneficial if government can support and motivate individuals [to pursue healthy life style.]

This can be done in several different ways like [organizing health camps], [subsidizing healthy food], [imposing heavy taxes on un healthy food etc].

(21) In my opinion, the government can take better decisions than students because they have the guidance of experienced teachers and other experts.

In Example (19), the item they in the second clause can be interpretable only by reference to *many scientists* in the first clause. By using such a pronoun, the writer maintains the relationship between the clauses without having to repeat the phrase again.

In Extract (20), the demonstrative reference *this* functioning as Head refers to *to pursue healthy life style*, creating a link between clauses.

Comparative reference expresses identity, similarity, or difference between things, or expresses a qualitative or quantitative comparison. In Example (21), the comparative reference used is a particular comparison, which expresses comparability between things in respect of a particular property is comparison of quality, with a comparative adjective *better*.

(i) The Use of Substitution

Substitution, which refers to replacement of one item by another within a text, has three types: nominal, verbal and clausal [14, p. 90]. As can be seen from Table 2, only 1

instance of substitution is employed in the sample essays as follows.

(22) So the older employees are invaluable to any company and they are the guides for the young ones.

In Example (22), ones points forward to employees, and they are coclassificational. Ones is used to replace employees, which enables such repetition to be avoided.

(ii). The Use of Ellipsis

Ellipsis is interpreted as a form of substitution in which the item is replaced by nothing. The purpose of using this device is not to burden the reader with unnecessary substitution or repetition. Ellipsis not only creates difficulties in learning what structural omissions are permissible, but also does not seem to be readily used even by proficient learners in situations where native speakers naturally resort to it [22]. As a result, few instances of ellipsis are found in the corpus, with only 7 out of 2,287 instances of grammatical ties. The instances below illustrate how ellipsis is employed in the academic IELTS essays.

(23) According to a recent report in Britain close to 3,500 people are killed each year in road accidents and 120,000 are killed by smoking.

In Example (23), the item people is left after 120,000. These missing elements can be supplied by reference to the presupposed items present in the previous clause. In fact, ellipsis is like substitution, since both involve referring back to something earlier in the text whereas in substitution a particular word refers back, in ellipsis there is a “gap” in the text which refers back. As a result, knowing how to exploit ellipsis will help IELTS candidates to avoid unnecessary wordiness in producing a text.

(iii). The Use of Conjunction

Conjunction signals a systematic connection between what is about to be said and what has been mentioned before. Perhaps the clearest type of explicitly cohesive bonds that bind one clause with another in a text is established by conjunctive elements. They are like traffic signs that tell the readers when to go forward, turn, slow down or stop. In other words, conjunctive elements show whether the relationship between the following clause and the preceding one is additive,

adversative, causal or temporal. As can be seen from Table 2, additive conjunctions are used most with 434 appropriate instances. Causal and temporal conjunctions occupy the second largest proportion with 279 cases, followed by adversative with 160 instances. Here are some examples of conjunctions used in the sample essays.

(24) Natural resources are considered as a god's gift and if we continue to exploit fossil fuels they will be exhausted in near time.

(25) For instance, many scientists have received money for

education in my country.

Afterwards, they have discovered and invented a variety of things [which have been beneficial for the society.]

In Example (24), the second clause is connected with the previous one by *and*, adding more information about natural resources while in Example (25), the use of *afterwards* can supply a temporal relation to the previous clause, establishing the surface marking of semantic links between clauses in the written discourse.

Table 3. Lexical ties.

	Types	Cohesion subcategories	Appropriate use	Rate	Inappropriate use	Rate	Total	Rate
LEXICAL TIES	Reiteration	Repetition	906	46.6%	2	0.1%	908	46.7%
		Synonym	122	6.3%	0	0%	122	6.3%
		Super-ordinate	4	0.2%	0	0%	4	0.2%
		General words	18	0.9%	0	0%	18	0.9%
	Collocation		878	45.1%	15	0.8%	893	45.9%
Total			1,928	99.1%	17	0.9%	1,945	100%

4.2.2. Lexical Ties

Along with grammatical cohesive devices, lexical cohesion makes a great contribution to the creation of cohesive and coherent texts with precision, unambiguity and tightness.

(i) The Use of Reiteration

As can be seen in Table 3, the IELTS writers tend to use a lot of reiteration with 1,050 appropriate instances found in their essays. Reiteration is either restating a word in the following sentences of the discourse by direct repetition or reasserting its meaning by using such lexical relation as synonymy, super-ordinate, or general words. It is worth mentioning here that almost all the lexical reiteration ties are repetitions of the same lexical items with 906 instances, taking up 46.6% followed by synonyms with 122 instances, accounting for 6.3%, general words with 0.9%, and super-ordinates with 0.2%. Here are some examples:

(26) Schools make it necessary for a pupil [to be punished] if the pupil has not followed the rules and regulations of the school.

(27) However, we need trees and plants [to provide us with the oxygen] [we breathe].

So the destruction of trees is a threat to our survival.

(28) Even though there are some advantages of [leaving school early] [to find a job], I would say that kids should study the certain subjects at school since the disadvantages are pointed out and because so many ways can train children [to learn independent and social skills].

(29) Despite fossil fuels being the prominent source of energy in the world people are motivated to replace them with wind energy, solar energy etc.

It is a positive development because alternative energy is cheap, affordable, and convenient and emission from these sources is not as harmful as fossil fuel emissions.

(30) Students have to pay a great deal of money for various things such as accommodation, student fees or books.

The importance of this is that majority of students cannot

afford these things.

The words *pupil* and *school* are repeated twice in Example (26) and *trees* is repeated in Example (27) since *pupil*, *school*, and *trees* are the key words in the text. Repetition of key words is good in the sense that it keeps the eye of the reader on the writer's main point. This technique draws the reader's attention to the threads-the important ideas as they move through the essay to make up the fabric of discussion. It seems that in writing, such lexical repetitions can help tie together the flow of thoughts in an essay. However, when repetition is over abundantly used, it is likely to become monotonous and less academic. It is obvious that when everything is emphasized, no emphasis is achieved. Therefore, the writers use another way of using lexical devices such as synonyms, super-ordinates and general words

In Excerpt (28), the word *children* which has the same meaning as *kids* is used to link with the previous clause instead of repeating the same word. In Excerpt (29), *alternative energy* is the super-ordinate of *wind energy*, *solar energy*. And in Example (30), *things* is the general word of accommodation, student fees, or books. As the example shows, a general noun is cohesive function is almost always accompanied by the reference item *these* or *the*.

(ii) The Use of Collocation

Collocation shows a significant presence in IELTS Academic Writing as it enables the writers to compose a potentially native-like piece of writing. In fact, the Oxford Collocation Dictionary (2002) defines collocation as a "means of combining words in a language to produce natural-sounding speech and writing". As indicated in Table 3, the use of collocation contributes the highest percentage of 45.1% of all appropriate lexical ties. The following is an example of proper application of collocation used in the sample essays.

(31) However, I believe that it is a less effective way because when people are about to *commit a crime*, they are *not in a sober mood* [to think about the consequences].

(32) As a result, I argue that states and students should *reach a compromise* regarding this issue.

(33) In conclusion, plastic wastes are accumulating all around the globe and *posing a great threat to* the flora and fauna.

As shown in Examples (31), (32) and (33), the writers use different kinds of collocations such as verb-noun collocations (*commit a crime, be in a sober mood, reach a compromise, pose a threat to*) in their writing. It is obvious that collocations occupy a crucial part in second language learning as they enable language users to impress people with their natural and accurate use of language, thereby gaining more marks in English exams [24]. Good writers use a greater number of collocations and appropriate collocation use is an indicator of quality writing [21]. In fact, collocations have been widely recognized as an important aspect that helps learners of English to speak and write in a more natural and accurate way [6, 23, 27].

4.3. Textual Meaning in Relation to the IELTS Band Descriptors

As indicated in the IELTS Task 2 Writing band descriptors, coherence and cohesion is one of the four marking criteria of

the IELTS Academic writing test. In order to obtain a band score of 7 for this criterion, IELTS test-takers are required to organize their information and ideas logically, to have a clear progression throughout, and to use a range of cohesive devices appropriately in spite of some under-use or over-use.

The analysis of the textual meaning shows that a small minority of errors related to cohesive devices are found in the study, demonstrating greater linguistic accuracy and there are a few inappropriate uses of cohesive devices, which is in line with the descriptors. Regarding types of Themes, test-takers with high scores employ more marked Themes as well as more multiple Themes making their writing more academic. It is noted that the essays rated 7 use slightly more textual Themes and less interpersonal Themes. The findings from the cohesion analysis also indicate that successful IELTS writers use a greater number of collocations, thus displaying closer performance to native speakers, mapping onto the lexical resource criterion.

To gain a clearer picture of the textual meaning in relation to the band descriptors, Table 4 compares the detailed description of all items with the lexical grammatical realization found in the study.

Table 4. Textual meaning in relation to the IELTS band descriptors.

IELTS band descriptors		The textual meaning	
Band 7		Band 7	Lexical grammatical realization
COHERENCE & COHESION	logically organizes information and ideas; there is clear progression throughout	uses more multiple Themes a greater quantity of textual Themes are restricted to less marked themes	<i>Marked Themes:</i> prepositional groups, adverbial groups, complement <i>Textual Themes:</i> - conjunction (but, or, and, since, because...) - conjunctive adjunct (as a result, in other words, furthermore, in addition, actually...)
	uses a range of cohesive devices appropriately although there may be some under/over-use presents a clear central topic within each paragraph	uses appropriate arrangements of Theme - Rheme frequent employment of linear patterns with occasional no thematic progressions makes good use of cohesive devices although there may be some inappropriate use	<i>Interpersonal Themes:</i> probably, possibly, perhaps, generally, of course, to my mind, in my opinion, no doubt, surprisingly... <i>Cohesive devices:</i> Reference (Personal; Demonstrative: this, that, these, those, then, now...; Comparative: same, identical, similar, different, better, more, less; Substitution: one, the same, do, so... Ellipsis Conjunction (Additive: and, and so, and...too, nor, moreover, furthermore, in addition, besides, alternatively, incidentally, by the way, that is, I mean, in other words, for instance, thus, likewise, similarly, in the same way; Adversative: yet, though, only, however, nevertheless, on the other hand, on the contrary, in any case...; Causal: because, because of, for, hence, since, therefore, consequently, as a result, in consequence, that being so, otherwise, in this aspect, with this intention...; Temporal: when, while, during, after, then, after that, previously, thereupon, meanwhile, finally, from now on, up to now... Reiteration: Same word/Repetition; Synonymy; Superordinate; General words
LEXICAL RESOURCES	uses a sufficient range of vocabulary to allow some flexibility and precision	uses a number of collocation with occasional errors in word choice	<i>Collocation</i> <i>Nominal groups</i>
	uses less common lexical items with some awareness of style and collocation may produce occasional errors in word choice, spelling and/or word formation	topical themes with heavily nominal groups	

5. Conclusion

In the present study, the aim is to scrutinize the textual meaning under two perspectives: thematic structure and

cohesion. The findings reveal that successful IELTS authors prefer multiple Themes to simple Themes, indicating high language proficiency. In particular, the writers of band 7 - 7.5 essays have a tendency to employ a significant number of textual Themes. The findings also indicate that the constant

patterns are the prevailing thematic progression strategy in the sample essays followed by linear patterns and derived patterns.

With regard to cohesion, the analysis of the essays demonstrates that grammatical ties are utilized marginally more than lexical ones. It also shows a small minority of errors related to cohesive devices are found in the study, demonstrating greater linguistic accuracy. The findings from the cohesion analysis also indicate that successful IELTS writers use a great number of collocation, thus displaying closer performance to native speakers, mapping onto the lexical resource criterion.

In order to gain high scores in the Academic essay writing, close attention should be paid to the following points.

First, IELTS test-takers are encouraged to deploy more marked Themes in their writing as marked Themes make writing more persuasive and coherent. In addition, more multiple Themes than simple Themes should be applied in the writing as multiple Themes can provide structural resources in order to establish logical connections between experiential events, and make the writing more appropriately academic.

IELTS test-takers are also recommended to use textual Themes to express the logical relationship between two clauses of equal structural status or to relate one clause to another in a modifying or dependency relationship, thus enhancing connectivity between the different parts of their writings.

To convey information effectively, IELTS test-takers should employ different thematic progression patterns, namely linear patterns, constant patterns, and derived patterns to organize the information in a text. It is clear that writing with better awareness of thematic progression may enable IELTS writers to manipulate the flow of information effectively, producing more cohesive and coherent IELTS essays, thereby resulting in highly successful IELTS essays.

As for cohesion, successful IELTS writers should be able to use cohesive devices effectively to connect ideas in an essay. IELTS test-takers need to acquire a large number of collocations to be able to express their ideas accurately, fluently and naturally, making their texts more readable.

It is obvious that IELTS test-takers with better insights into the salient linguistic features of IELTS essays in terms of thematic structure, cohesion can formulate good quality IELTS Academic essays.

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