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Theme and Rheme Patterns in Diplomatic Discourse

Madina Nazarova¹

Abstract

This study examines **theme** and **rheme** patterns in diplomatic discourse, focusing on UN, EU, and ASEAN texts, to inform English for Specific Purposes (ESP) pedagogy for future diplomats. Using corpus-assisted discourse analysis, we identify thematic progression (TP) structures and their role in achieving coherence and diplomacy. An experimental intervention tests the impact of teaching these patterns on students' writing proficiency and engagement. Results reveal distinct TP patterns across organizations and significant improvements in students' diplomatic writing and motivation when taught explicitly. Tables summarize findings, and critical analysis highlights gaps in current ESP approaches.

Key words: *diplomatic speech, corpus, speech analysis, writing skills, text.*

1. Introduction

In the intricate arena of global diplomacy, where every word carries the weight of international relations, English emerges as the indispensable lingua franca, demanding unparalleled linguistic precision and strategic finesse from diplomats. The discourse of diplomacy – encompassing UN resolutions, EU press statements, and ASEAN memoranda – relies on sophisticated structures to balance clarity with ambiguity, authority with diplomacy, and assertiveness with cultural sensitivity (Kosovych et al., 2022). At the heart of this discourse lie **theme** and **rheme** patterns, fundamental constructs of systemic functional grammar (SFG) that orchestrate information flow to achieve coherence and persuasive impact. These patterns, through thematic progression (TP), enable diplomats to craft texts that navigate complex geopolitical landscapes while adhering to the principles of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961).

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English for Specific Purposes (ESP) offers a tailored approach to equip future diplomats with these critical skills, yet the integration of **theme** and **rheme** analysis into ESP pedagogy remains strikingly underdeveloped. Existing studies, such as Liu et al. (2023) and Afzaal et al. (2022), illuminate ideological and geopolitical dimensions of diplomatic discourse but fall short of addressing their pedagogical applications. Similarly, Rahardjo et al. (2021) explore TP in diplomatic writing but lack experimental evidence to validate teaching strategies. This research confronts these deficiencies head-on, employing corpus-assisted discourse analysis to uncover dominant TP patterns in UN, EU, and ASEAN texts and testing their pedagogical efficacy through a rigorous experimental intervention.

The urgency of this work lies in its potential to bridge the gap between linguistic theory and practical training, equipping diplomats to communicate effectively in an increasingly polarized world. By combining cutting-edge discourse analysis with empirical pedagogy, this study not only advances our understanding of diplomatic discourse but also redefines ESP as a vital tool for shaping the next generation of global leaders.

2. Literature Review.

2.1 *Theme and Rheme* in Discourse Analysis.

In discourse analysis, **Theme** is the sentence's starting point, establishing the context or topic (often known information), while **Rheme** follows, delivering new information or commentary about the **Theme**. They structure information flow, guiding meaning in communication [Kashyap, 2012].

On the other hand, **theme** and **rheme**, rooted in SFG, organize information in texts (Halliday, 1994). The **theme** is the starting point of a clause, providing context, while the **rheme** develops new information. Thematic progression (TP) describes how **themes** and **rhemes** connect across clauses to ensure coherence. Common TP patterns include:

- **Constant TP:** The **theme** remains consistent, with **rhemes** adding new details.
- **Linear TP:** The **rheme** of one clause becomes the **theme** of the next.
- **Derived TP:** **Themes** derive from a hyper-**theme**, often in complex texts [Wei, 2014].

McCabe-Hidalgo and Belmonte (1998) emphasize TP's role in academic writing, while Ridha (2014) notes challenges for EFL

learners in mastering these patterns.

2.2 Diplomatic Discourse and Linguistic Features.

Diplomats are masters of words, carefully choosing language to say just enough while keeping things vague enough to avoid trouble. It's like a chess game – every move counts. Kosovych and colleagues (2022) point out that diplomatic discourse strikes a balance between clarity (so everyone gets the point) and ambiguity (to leave wiggle room and avoid stepping on toes). This tightrope act helps diplomats communicate without sparking conflicts.

Take Chinese diplomatic speeches, for example. Liu and others (2023) found they often focus on collectivism and cooperation, using a linguistic trick called **TP**. This is a way of organizing sentences to spotlight shared goals and values, like teamwork and unity, which resonate deeply with Chinese culture. It's like setting the stage to make everyone feel they're on the same team.

On the flip side, Afzaal and team (2022) show how the U.S. plays the game differently, using **theme** selection to shape opinions about China's Belt and Road Initiative. By picking specific topics, U.S. diplomats frame the initiative in a way that aligns with their own interests, subtly steering how the world sees it. It's storytelling with a purpose.

Politeness is another big piece of the puzzle. Rahardjo and co-authors (2021) explain how diplomats use **theme** progression to soften instructions in writing. Instead of blunt commands, they tuck directives later in sentences, making them feel more like friendly suggestions. This keeps things courteous and maintains good vibes, even in tense talks.

Then there's the sneaky use of passive voice, as Omenogor (2019) highlights. Diplomats often slip it into **rhemes**—the part of a sentence that adds new info—to dodge pointing fingers. Saying “mistakes were made” instead of “you messed up” lets them address issues without assigning blame, keeping the peace in heated moments.

In short, diplomats weave together clarity, ambiguity, polite phrasing, and strategic vagueness to navigate the tricky waters of international relations. It's a word game where every choice is deliberate.

2.3 Theme and Rheme in ESP Pedagogy.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) pedagogy targets profession-specific language skills, equipping learners with the linguistic tools needed for specialized fields like academia, politics,

or diplomacy (Friedrich, 2016). Central to effective communication in these contexts is the organization of information through **theme** (the starting point of a sentence, setting the context) and **rheme** (the new information that follows), which together enhance coherence and clarity in discourse.

Instruction in **theme** and **rheme** helps learners structure their writing logically, ensuring ideas flow naturally and align with professional expectations. For instance, Linda et al. (2017) demonstrate that teaching **theme-rheme** patterns in academic writing improves students' ability to produce cohesive essays. By selecting appropriate **themes** (e.g., known concepts) and developing **rhemes** (e.g., novel arguments), students create texts that are easier to follow. Similarly, Shame (2020) analyzes political texts, showing how politicians use **theme-rheme** structures to foreground key messages (e.g., policy priorities) while embedding persuasive details in **rhemes**, some skill ESP learners can emulate to craft compelling arguments in their fields.

Theme and **rheme** also play a role in language assessment and pedagogy design. Shieh and Lin (2011) advocate for TP analysis in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) testing, arguing that it evaluates how well learners organize information. TP refers to the way **themes** and **rhemes** link across sentences to maintain coherence (e.g., a **rheme** in one sentence becomes the **theme** of the next). By assessing TP, educators can gauge a learner's ability to sustain logical discourse, a critical skill in professional settings like business or law. Meanwhile, Trevisan and García (2019) propose using Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), which includes **theme-rheme** analysis, to design experimental language learning studies. SFG provides a framework to test how teaching specific linguistic structures, like **theme-rheme** patterns, impacts learners' writing or speaking proficiency, offering evidence-based insights for ESP curriculum development.

Despite these advances, diplomatic ESP - a field requiring nuanced, polite, and coherent communication - lacks tailored **theme-rheme** instruction [Ishihara, 2016]. Diplomats must balance clarity and ambiguity to navigate sensitive international contexts, and **theme-rheme** structures are ideal for this. For example, a diplomat might use a **theme** to establish common ground (e.g., "Shared goals of peace") and a **rheme** to introduce a proposal (e.g., "require collaborative efforts"). Teaching TP could help learners craft such messages, ensuring coherence while maintaining diplomatic tact.

The absence of such instruction represents a missed opportunity to enhance ESP training for diplomacy.

Incorporating **theme** and **rheme** into ESP pedagogy empowers learners to communicate effectively in their professional domains. Whether writing academic papers, delivering political speeches, or drafting diplomatic correspondence, understanding how to structure information using **theme** and **rheme** ensures clarity, persuasiveness, and professionalism. Future ESP curricula, especially in diplomacy, should integrate TP instruction to address these needs.

2.5 Critical Analysis and Gaps.

The study of **theme** (the sentence's starting point, setting the context) and **rheme** (the new information that follows) is pivotal in discourse analysis and language pedagogy, particularly in ESP. While existing research provides valuable insights into TP - the way themes and rhemes link across sentences to ensure coherence - it often falls short in addressing pedagogical applications, especially for diplomacy. This section critically analyzes key studies, identifies their limitations, and highlights gaps that this study aims to address by linking TP analysis to ESP pedagogy through experimental approaches.

Liu et al. (2023) and Afzaal et al. (2022) offer robust discourse analyses but prioritize geopolitical themes rather than educational applications. Liu et al. (2023) examine Chinese diplomatic speeches, identifying how TP emphasizes collectivism and cooperation to align with cultural values. Similarly, Afzaal et al. (2022) analyze U.S. discourse on China's Belt and Road Initiative, showing how theme selection shapes ideological narratives. While these studies excel in dissecting real-world discourse, they do not explore how TP could be taught to ESP learners, such as aspiring diplomats, to produce coherent and strategic communication. Their focus remains analytical, not pedagogical, limiting their relevance to classroom settings.

Kosovych et al. (2022) provide a comprehensive theoretical overview of diplomatic discourse, emphasizing the balance between clarity and ambiguity. They argue that strategic language choices, including TP, are essential for effective diplomacy. However, their work lacks empirical data to substantiate these claims. Without experiments or case studies, their findings remain speculative, offering little guidance on how to operationalize TP in ESP pedagogy. This gap underscores the need for evidence-based research to bridge

theory and practice.

Rahardjo et al. (2021) investigate TP in diplomatic writing, focusing on how it softens directives to maintain politeness. For example, by placing instructions in rhemes (e.g., “Cooperation is essential, and joint efforts are requested”), diplomats make requests less direct, preserving harmony. While this study highlights TP’s role in diplomacy, it does not test pedagogical interventions, such as teaching strategies or curricula, to help learners master these skills. This omission is significant, as ESP pedagogy requires practical methods to train students in profession-specific discourse.

General studies on TP, such as Jing (2015) and Wei (2014), explore its role in academic and professional writing but overlook diplomacy’s unique demands. Diplomatic discourse requires not only coherence but also **politeness** and **ambiguity** to navigate sensitive international contexts (Ishihara, 2016). For instance, diplomats might use ambiguous rhemes (e.g., “Steps will be taken”) to avoid committing to specific actions. Jing and Wei’s focus on general coherence patterns fails to address these specialized needs, limiting their applicability to diplomatic ESP.

Experimental research on TP in ESP pedagogy is notably scarce. Most studies, including those above, are descriptive or analytical, focusing on existing texts rather than testing how TP instruction impacts learners’ performance. This gap is critical, as ESP learners—whether in academia, business, or diplomacy—need evidence-based teaching methods to develop profession-specific communication skills. Without experiments, it remains unclear how effectively TP can be taught or assessed in ESP classrooms.

Hoek (2018) notes that digital tools for TP instruction, such as software to analyze theme-rheme patterns or provide real-time feedback, remain underexplored. In an era where technology enhances language learning (e.g., grammar checkers or corpus analysis tools), the absence of digital TP resources hinders scalable, interactive instruction. For example, a tool that highlights theme-rheme structures in diplomatic texts could help learners practice coherent and polite writing, yet no such tools are widely developed or studied.

This study addresses these gaps by linking TP analysis to ESP pedagogy through *experimental research*. It proposes designing and testing TP-focused interventions in diplomatic ESP, such as workshops teaching learners to structure sentences for coherence, politeness, and strategic ambiguity. Additionally, it explores the

potential of digital tools to support TP instruction, such as software that visualizes theme-rheme patterns in real time. By grounding these interventions in diplomacy's unique needs, as highlighted by Ishihara (2016), this study aims to provide evidence-based strategies to enhance ESP training, ultimately helping learners communicate effectively in professional contexts.

3. Methodology.

To investigate theme and rheme in ESP pedagogy, this study employed a mixed-methods approach combining corpus-assisted discourse analysis and experimental design. For the corpus analysis, a dataset of 60 diplomatic texts was compiled, including 20 UN resolutions (2018–2023), 20 EU press statements (2020–2023), and 20 ASEAN memoranda (2019–2023), all sourced from official websites. These texts were analyzed using AntConc software to examine theme types (topical, textual, interpersonal, as per Halliday, 1994), theme progression (TP) patterns (constant, linear, derived, as per Jing, 2015), and linguistic features like passive voice, modals, and politeness markers (Omenogor, 2019; Rahardjo et al., 2021), with frequency counts and qualitative coding used to identify dominant patterns and organizational variations.

For the experimental component, 60 undergraduate international relations students (aged 18–22) at a European university were split into an experimental group (n=30) receiving a 12-week TP-focused ESP course and a control group (n=30) receiving standard ESP instruction. The experimental course used authentic texts (UN, EU, ASEAN documents), tasks like drafting resolutions and analyzing TP in speeches, and explicit instruction on theme types and TP patterns with corpus examples, while the control group used similar texts and tasks but focused on general writing skills without TP instruction.

Data were collected via pre- and post-tests, where students drafted diplomatic statements scored for TP coherence, diplomatic tone, and linguistic accuracy (0–100), an engagement survey using a validated 5-point Likert scale (Fredricks et al., 2004) to measure cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement, and post-intervention focus groups (n=12, experimental group) to explore perceptions of TP instruction. Corpus data were analyzed with frequency counts and qualitative coding, experimental data were evaluated using paired t-tests for test and engagement scores, and focus group data were thematically analyzed following Thompson

et al. (2014).

4. Results.

4.1 Corpus Analysis Findings.

Table 1 summarizes *theme* types and TP patterns.

Table 1: Theme Types and Thematic Progression in Diplomatic Texts

Feature	UN Resolutions (% of clauses)	EU Press Statements (% of clauses)	ASEAN Memoranda (% of clauses)
Theme Types			
Topical	60	55	65
Textual (e.g., conjunctions)	25	30	20
Interpersonal (e.g., modals)	15	15	15
TP Patterns			
Constant	50	40	55
Linear	30	45	25
Derived	20	15	20
Linguistic Features			
Passive Voice	40	35	30
Modals (e.g., “should”)	35	30	25
Politeness Markers	25	30	40

Theme Types

Topical *themes* dominated all texts, grounding clauses in context (e.g., “The Security Council”). Textual *themes* (e.g., “Furthermore”) ensured cohesion, while interpersonal *themes* (e.g., “We urge”) softened directives, aligning with Rahardjo et al. (2021).

TP Patterns

Constant TP was prevalent in UN and ASEAN texts, maintaining focus on key entities (e.g., “The UN... The UN...”). EU texts favored linear TP, linking new information for persuasive flow (e.g., “Cooperation enhances... Enhanced cooperation...”). Derived TP appeared in complex texts, supporting Liu et al. (2023).

Linguistic Features

Passive voice (e.g., “Actions are urged”) was frequent in UN texts, obscuring agency (Omenogor, 2019). Modals softened tone, and politeness markers (e.g., “mutual respect”) were prominent in ASEAN texts, reflecting cultural norms.

4.2 Experimental Findings

Writing Performance

Table 2 presents writing test scores.

Table 2: Pre- and Post-Test Writing Scores

Group	Pre-Test (M, SD)	Post-Test (M, SD)	t-value	p-value
Experimental	63.5 (8.2)	81.2 (7.1)	11.23	<0.001
Control	62.8 (8.0)	69.7 (7.8)	4.89	<0.01

The experimental group outperformed the control group ($t(58)=8.12, p<.001$), excelling in TP coherence and diplomatic tone.

Engagement

Table 3 summarizes engagement scores.

Table 3: Pre- and Post-Intervention Engagement Scores

Group	Dimension	Pre (M, SD)	Post (M, SD)	t-value	p-value
Experimental	Cognitive	3.6 (0.6)	4.5 (0.5)	8.34	<0.001
Experimental	Emotional	3.4 (0.7)	4.3 (0.6)	7.56	<0.001
Experimental	Behavioral	3.5 (0.6)	4.4 (0.5)	8.01	<0.001
Control	Cognitive	3.5 (0.6)	3.7 (0.6)	2.23	0.03
Control	Emotional	3.3 (0.7)	3.5 (0.7)	1.98	0.06
Control	Behavioral	3.4 (0.6)	3.6 (0.6)	2.01	0.05

The experimental group showed significant engagement gains, unlike the control group.

Focus Group Insights

Themes included:

1. **Coherence:** “Learning TP helped me organize my writing clearly” (Participant A).
2. **Diplomacy:** “Using modals in *themes* made my statements polite” (Participant B).
3. **Engagement:** “Analyzing real texts was motivating” (Participant C).

The study highlights a lack of TP-focused ESP curricula for diplomacy. Digital corpus tools, while promising, are underutilized [Hoek, 2018]. Experimental studies in diverse cultural contexts are needed to address learner variability [Liu et al., 2023]. Spoken diplomatic discourse remains underexplored.

Conclusion

This study elucidates *theme* and *rheme* patterns in diplomatic discourse, demonstrating their integration into ESP training enhances writing proficiency and engagement. Tables and exercises provide practical tools for educators, while critical analysis

reveals gaps in context-specific and digital TP instruction. Future research should explore spoken discourse and diverse settings to refine ESP pedagogy. By equipping diplomats with TP skills, ESP can foster effective global communication, aligning with the Vienna Convention's (1961) principles of diplomatic relations.

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Diplomatik diskursda *tema va rema* modellari

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Abstrakt

Ushbu tadqiqotda bo'lajak diplomatlar uchun maxsus maqsadlarda BMT, EI va ASEAN matnlariga e'tibor qaratgan holda diplomatik nutqdagi mavzu va shakl qoliplari o'rganildi. Korpus yordamida nutq tahlilidan foydalanib, tematik progressiya (TP) tuzilmalarini va ularning izchillik va diplomatiyaga erishishdagi rolini aniqlandi. Eksperimental aralashuv ushbu shakllarni o'rgatishning o'quvchilarning yozish malakasi va faolligiga ta'sirini tekshiradi. Natijalar tashkilotlar bo'ylab o'ziga xos TP modellarini va aniq o'rgatilganda talabalarning diplomatik yozishlari va motivatsiyasining sezilarli yaxshilanishini ko'rsatadi. Jadvallarda topilmalar umumlashtirildi va tanqidiy tahlil asosida joriy ESP yondashuvlaridagi kamchiliklar ta'kidlandi.

Kalit so'zlar: *diplomatik nutq, korpus, nutq tahlili, yozuv ko'nikmasi, matn.*

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