

## *Developing the Message: Thematic Progression and Student Writing\**

서식 있음: 글꼴: 기움임꼴  
없음

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In the Hallidayan framework, theme and rheme form the message structure of the clause (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 64). The patterning of theme and rheme in the text accounts for how the main ideas are structured and developed. The pioneering work of Daneš (1970, 1974) on thematic progression (TP) has been particularly valuable in showing how thematic patterning affects the flow and development of the message in various ways.

Using the Hallidayan framework (incorporating Daneš's TP), 20 essays written by upper secondary school students in Singapore are analyzed for theme and rheme. The good and weak essays in the corpus are compared to find out if there are differences in the way the two groups of writers organise the message structure of their writing. The results show that there is little difference in the selection of theme between the two groups of essays. In terms of TP, however, a striking difference is noted. The good essays are characterised by elaborated developments of theme and rheme. The developments in the weak essays, in contrast, are thin.

**Key words: theme, rheme, thematic progression, Halliday, student writing**

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## INTRODUCTION

While the present emphasis on the process of writing (eg., Clark & Ivanič, 1997; Flower & Hayes, 1981) has rightly heightened awareness of the complex considerations facing any writer, it is still the end product, the finished text, that bears testament to how well the writer has juggled these constraints. The text, in other words, is the visible product of an internal, hidden composing process. And it is this product that is read and assessed by the reader. Indeed, in many books on (the teaching of) writing, reference is frequently made to what a 'good' essay should look like. Shoemaker & Larsen, for instance, give this simple advice to students of English as a second language:

In order to finish the composition so it is interesting and pleasing to the reader, you must write it in a form that is neat and easy to understand. The form of a composition is important because it shows the reader what you want him or her to know. (Shoemaker & Larson, 1998, p. 6)

This, however, raises two issues. The first has to do with the notion of *form* itself. Specifically, what does one mean when one talks about the form of a text? Some scholars view form in terms of the typical components or segments of a particular text type (eg., Allen, 1999; Derewianka, 1990, 1996; See also Görlach, 2004, for a diachronic study of text types). An expository (or argumentative) text, for instance, typically contains a thesis statement of the writer's position and arguments in support of that position (Derewianka, 1990, p. 76). Similarly, a personal narrative contains segments that are expected of that text type. The pioneering work of Labov and Waletzky (1967) gave us the now-familiar labels to describe these typical segments of the personal narrative – orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, and coda. This appears to suggest that students who are familiar with the typical segments of a range of text types are able to write in a way that is coherent and easy to comprehend (Allen, 1999, p. 2).

I would like to suggest that this view may be an oversimplification. The

mere inclusion of the typical segments of a text type in an essay may not result in a final product that is coherent or comprehensible. The ideas within each segment still need to be presented and sequenced in a logical and coherent way. It is entirely possible for a text to contain all the segments expected of that text type and yet fall short of what most people would deem an acceptable piece of writing. The presentation and development of ideas in a text, to my mind, is a more fundamental concern to student writers and should be explicitly addressed. For the purposes of this paper, my proposal is that we interpret *form* narrowly in terms of *thematic structure*, which is concerned with the organisation and development of the main ideas in the text.

The second issue follows from the first. Given the narrow interpretation of form as thematic structure, what then does the structure of a good essay look like? Further, how does it compare with that of a weak essay? These are important questions as the answers can help educators intervene and give directed feedback at appropriate stages of the writing process.

Curiously, studies on the differences between good and weak essays – structural or otherwise – have received only modest attention through the years. This study takes this less trodden path and addresses the two broad issues raised above. It presents the findings of a comparative study on the thematic structure of good and weak essays written by upper secondary students in Singapore. The analysis is based on the theme-rheme framework of Michael Halliday's systemic functional grammar (Butt *et al.*, 2000, pp. 135-146; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, pp. 64-105; Thompson, 2004, pp. 141-178), focusing on the development of the overall message and the main ideas in each essay. The results of the analysis are represented in the form of a schematic diagram to clearly show the structural differences between the two groups of essays.

This paper is divided as follows. The theme-rheme framework is first outlined and exemplified in Section 2. Related studies are discussed in Section 3, followed by a description of the research methodology in Section 4. The findings of the study are presented and discussed in Section 5. The pedagogical implications and the main points of the study are summarised in

the concluding section.

## **THEME AND RHEME**

### **Basic Notions**

Theme is the starting point of the message in the clause, and rheme is the development of that starting point. These notions were first suggested by the French linguist, Henri Weil, in his thesis of 1844:

There is [...] a point of departure, an initial notion which is equally present to him who speaks and to him who hears, which forms, as it were, the ground upon which the two intelligences meet; and another part of discourse which forms the statement (*l'énonciation*), properly so called. This division is found in almost all we say. (Weil, 1844, p. 29)

These terms, *point of departure* and *enunciation*, are refined in the Hallidayan framework as *theme* and *rheme*, respectively. Halliday's views on (the analysis of) theme and rheme were extensively presented in a series of seminal papers in the 1960s (Halliday, 1967a, 1967b, 1967c, 1968). His position since then (in Halliday, 1985, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) has remained largely unchanged.

According to Halliday, theme in English is a position-bound, clause-initial element. Whatever is selected as theme is always positioned first in the clause. Rheme, as the development of theme, always comes after theme (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 65). Conceptualised this way, theme serves an anchoring function. It is, in Weil's terms, the point of departure in the sense that everything else in the same clause is dependent on what is expressed as theme. This starting point, that is to say, constrains what can come after it (Leong, 2000, 2004). The clause-initial element in (1), for instance, can take various developments (1a-c) in normal context but not others (1d-e) (the asterisk indicates unacceptability).

- (1) This presentation ...
- (1a) This presentation is very interesting.
- (1b) This presentation should be banned.
- (1c) This presentation has been going on for hours.
- (1d) \*This presentation smiled at me.
- (1e) \*This presentation is extremely tall.

The initial element *This presentation* is thematic in (1a-c) but not (1d-e). The ‘developments’ in (1d-e) are unacceptable in normal context and do not therefore count as proper rhemes. This mismatch results in an odd or entirely unacceptable construction.

We see here the importance and relevance of the Hallidayan framework in writing. Careful attention to starting points and appropriate developments play a significant role in organising the message in the text. As Halliday & Matthiessen (2004, p. 105) note, the “thematic organization of the clauses [...] is the most significant factor in the development of the text.”

In the framework, clause-initial elements are categorised as textual, interpersonal, and topical themes. The components of each type of theme are listed in Table 1. The arrows indicate that the *wh*-relative pronoun and the *wh*-question word have dual status – the *wh*-relative pronoun is a textual/topical theme and the *wh*-question word is an interpersonal/topical theme:

**TABLE 1**  
**Textual, Interpersonal, Topical Themes**

| Type          | Components  |
|---------------|---|
| Textual       | Continuative<br>Conjunction<br>Conjunctive adjunct<br>wh-relative pronoun |
| Interpersonal | Modal adjunct<br>Finite verb<br>Wh-question word                          |
| Topical       | First circumstance, process, or participant                               |

(from Halliday, 1994, p. 54; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 79)

These descriptive labels (textual, interpersonal, topical) capture the essential functions of the various themes. A textual theme, for instance, serves basically a linking function, connecting clauses or larger segments of text. Similarly, an interpersonal theme serves essentially to establish interpersonal relations or to express subjective opinions.

The topical theme is the most important of the three types of theme. It comprises only one experiential element and ends the thematic portion of the clause. As shown in Table 1, these experiential elements are clause-initial circumstantial adjuncts (eg., *in the afternoon, hurriedly*), processes represented by main verbs (eg., *kick, be*), and participants realised as subjects, objects, or complements. Halliday (1994, p. 53) argues that unless one of these constituents appears, “the clause still lacks an anchorage in the realm of experience.”

The thematic portion extends from the beginning of the clause up to and including the topical theme (the rest of the clause after the topical theme constitutes the rheme). Any element occurring before the topical theme is analysed as a textual or an interpersonal theme, depending on whether it performs a linking or subjective function. There need not, however, be a textual or an interpersonal theme in the clause as these themes are optional. If all three types of theme do appear, they typically follow the textual-interpersonal-topical order, as in (2):

(2)

|  |                                       |   |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|
| Well                                   | but                                   | then  |
| Textual theme<br><i>(continuative)</i> | Textual theme<br><i>(conjunction)</i> | Textual theme<br><i>(conjunctive adjunct)</i> |

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| surely,                                       | Jean,                                    | wouldn't                                    |
| Interpersonal theme<br><i>(modal adjunct)</i> | Interpersonal theme<br><i>(vocative)</i> | Interpersonal theme<br><i>(finite verb)</i> |

|                                       |                |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|
| the best idea                         | be to join in? |
| Topical theme<br><i>(participant)</i> | Rheme          |

(from Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 81)

Theme identification is also closely related to the choice of mood. The different mood structures allow marked instances of themes to be easily distinguished from unmarked ones. The unmarked themes of declaratives, interrogatives, and imperatives are as follows. (All examples are taken from Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, pp. 71-79. In the examples below, and all subsequent examples in the rest of the paper, the non-topical themes are in italics and the topical themes are in bold.)

- (a) *Declaratives* The grammatical subject is the unmarked theme of declaratives.  
(3) **A wise old owl** lived in an oak.
- (b) *Polar interrogatives* The unmarked theme is a two-part element embodying the expression of polarity (the finite verb) as the interpersonal theme and the grammatical subject as the topical theme.  
(4) *Shall I* make some toast?  
(5) *Are they* still together?
- (c) *Wh-interrogatives* The unmarked theme is the wh-question word.  
(6) **Who** wants a glass of white wine?
- (d) *Imperatives* The unmarked theme is the instructional verb.  
(7) **Turn** it down.

In all instances where the theme is not realised as above, it is said to be marked (or unusual). Examples of marked themes are illustrated below (all examples are taken from Halliday, 1994, pp. 42-48):

*Declaratives*

- (8) **Merrily** we roll along.  
(circumstance as topical theme)

*Interrogatives*

- (9) **After tea** will you tell me a story?

(circumstance as topical theme)

(10) **In your house** who does the cooking?

(circumstance as topical theme)

*Imperatives*

(11) **You kids** keep out of the way!

(subject as topical theme)

(12) **Don't you** argue with me.

(subject as topical theme)

By their very marked nature, these themes draw attention to themselves and, if used appropriately, are capable of framing or steering the development of the message in specific ways. In (10), for instance, the request is contextualised in location. The reader is drawn to the circumstantial element *In your house* as the starting point; it frames the development of the request in the rest of the clause. Similarly, in (11), attention is drawn to the marked choice of the subject *You kids* as theme, leaving no doubt as to whom the imperative is directed.

### **Thematic Progression**

The division of the clause into theme and rheme makes it particularly helpful to show the development of theme and rheme throughout the text. The theme and rheme of each clause can be compared with the same of previous clauses to find out how they are related. These inter-clausal theme-rheme connections, also known as *thematic progression* (TP) in the literature, can be represented schematically to show the general thematic structure of the text.

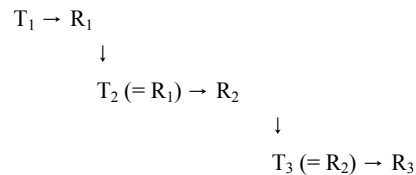
TP is attributed to the early work of the Czech linguist Daneš (1970, 1974), who refers to it as “the choice and ordering of utterance themes, their mutual



concatenation and hierarchy” (Daneš, 1974, p. 114). Daneš identified certain basic TP patterns, of which two – simple linear TP and constant TP – are most relevant for the purposes of this study. These are illustrated below with examples from the corpus.

(a) *Simple linear TP*

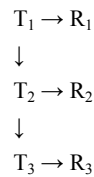
- (13) **My nomination for the Most Predictable Character** is Wong Zi Cheng. **He** is my choice due to several reasons. **The first reason** is he always eats quickly. (Essay 4, weak essay)



**FIGURE 1**  
**Simple Linear TP**

(b) *Constant TP*

- (14) **If a person** does not have a hobby **they** will be bored, **they** will not have interest in anything, **and they** will not be able to cope with stress. (Essay 15, good essay)



**FIGURE 2**  
**Constant TP**

Texts, whether spoken or written, typically display a complex combination of these and other patterns. Dubois (1987), for example, makes mention of

gapped patterns where the progression of a theme is interrupted by a sentence or a collection of sentences, and multiple development patterns where a theme is multiply developed in the text. These and other patterns are also explored in Leong (2005) in relation to spontaneous conversation.

The TPs of the essays analysed in this study display the same level of complexity. Although the labels *simple linear TP* and *constant TP* are helpful in the case of short texts, a broader and more general approach is needed for longer texts. As I will show in Section 5.3, I have found it more useful to view the TPs of student essays in terms of how the themes and rhemes are clustered to develop the main ideas of the essay.

## RELATED STUDIES

Much has been advanced in the study of the thematic structure of English. From the work of the Prague circle linguists (eg. Daneš, 1970, 1974; Firbas, 1992) to the more recent developments based on the Hallidayan framework (eg. Ghadessy, 1995; Leong, 2000, 2004), we now have a clearer understanding of the message structure of the clause and, beyond it, the text. Such knowledge has been extremely insightful in helping us understand how the message in the text is presented and developed. This has in turn led various scholars and educators to incorporate the notions of theme and rheme into the teaching of writing (eg., Bloor & Bloor, 1992; Butt *et al.*, 2000).

Given the importance of theme and rheme as a resource for constructing textual meaning, however, interest in examining the thematic structure of student writing has been modest at best. There are a handful of studies that focus on the problems of thematisation faced by individuals learning and using English as a foreign language (EFL) (eg., Fontaine & Kodratoff, 2002; Mauranen, 1996; Smits, 2002). These studies show that EFL learners and users often have trouble organising their essays thematically. In their analysis of the published papers of French scientists writing in English, for instance, Fontaine and Kodratoff (2002) found deviations and ruptures in the text,

making them difficult to follow.

In contrast, comparative studies, which specifically examine the differences in the thematic structures of good and weak essays, are few and far between. A survey of the literature reveals only one such relevant study by Hawes and Thomas (1997), who looked at 100 essays written by Malaysian tertiary students from lower intermediate level to advanced level. The essays were analysed for both theme choice and TP.

They found that writers in the advanced classes used fewer themes that described concrete entities. Such 'concrete' themes accounted for only 31.9% of all themes used by advanced writers. The figure for the intermediate writers, on the other hand, was 72.7%. The weaker writers, the researchers observed, tended to focus on "concrete entities, in a sense the 'obvious players' of the context" (Hawes & Thomas, 1997, p. 38).

The use of marked themes in the essays also revealed significant results. Advanced writers used more marked themes (20.8% of all themes) than intermediate writers (11%). The researchers hypothesised that this could be due simply to the latter's unfamiliarity with the different types of marked themes, limiting them to the unmarked options.

In the area of TP, there was a tendency for intermediate writers to rely on constant TP. The sub-groups within the intermediate category had figures ranging from 37.9% (of all progressions in the sub-group) to 65%. In contrast, advanced writers only used constant TP 22.7% of the time. These findings appear to suggest that the intermediate writers in the study were less able to develop their ideas and push the discourse forward.

The intermediate writers' reliance on a 'safe' mode of writing – in this case the use of unmarked options, 'concrete' themes, and constant TP – led the researchers to propose the use of newspapers "as models of various discourse subgenres and of the ways thematisation can be employed rhetorically" (Hawes & Thomas, 1997, p. 53). They further propose the following:

We suggest presenting classes with lists of several thematic choices realising the same basic proposition and discussing differences in meaning/message. Students could be asked to find the questions to which a variety

of thematic choices provide the answers. They could discuss the best choice as Theme for a sentence to follow a given stretch of text. Also, to get practice in progression strategies, they could be asked to supply the preceding sentence/text for a given extract. (Hawes & Thomas, 1997, p. 53)

The study by Hawes & Thomas (1997) raises at least two areas that require further and more careful consideration. The first has to do with the corpus itself. For the percentage figures cited in the study to make sense, the text type(s) and content of the essays need to be controlled. It is unclear whether the researchers examined only a particular text type or whether they took steps to ensure that the content of the essays were comparable. It is entirely possible, for instance, for an information report on, say, the wombat to exhibit a constant TP (with the wombat or attributes of the animal as themes). The constant TP, that is to say, may be quite typical of texts of this nature and does not suggest in any way that the writers of such texts are less capable of pushing the discourse forward.

The second issue concerns the analysis of TP. The methodology employed by Hawes & Thomas (1997, p. 37) is as follows: “identify the progression type between each pair of consecutive independent clauses.” The choice to compare only consecutive pairs of independent clauses is, of course, a matter of preference. In the context of their study, this is perhaps a sensible option since it allows the findings to be easily classified and quantified.

Such an approach, however, tends to hide the global (or macro) thematic structure of the essay. The advantage of showing the global structure is that it allows one to easily see the clustering of themes and rhemes in specific areas of the text and, importantly, to make sense of the patterning. For instance, the portion of an essay that introduces various concepts may display a simple linear TP while another that focuses on a particular concept may display a constant TP. This patterning reveals the rhetorical choices employed by the writer to develop the message in the text.

This present study builds on the work of Hawes and Thomas (1997) but differs from it by taking a more global approach in the interpretation of TP.

This is felt to be more insightful although the obvious consequence of this is that only a qualitative description (rather than a quantitative one) can be made. A background description of the corpus and the methodology employed in this study are described in the following section.

## **CORPUS AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Overview of the Singaporean Education System**

Students in Singapore begin their secondary education at the age of 12 or 13, immediately after six years of primary education. Depending on their performance, a student is placed either in the *normal* or *express* secondary education route. Students in the normal route take a four-year course leading to the General Certificate of Education (GCE) normal level examinations (or GCE 'N' levels, as they are commonly called), with the possibility of a fifth year followed by the GCE ordinary level examinations (GCE 'O' levels). Those in the express route take the GCE 'O' levels directly at the end of the fourth year.<sup>1</sup>

The Singaporean English Language syllabus at the secondary level places emphasis on grammatical accuracy and familiarity with text types. It outlines the major text types and lists the grammatical features of each type. Through this emphasis on text types, students, it is hoped, will be able to see language as a grammatical system which can be used to create various texts to suit the audience, context, and purpose of the discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> There are also a few elite schools in Singapore that offer the integrated programme (IP). The IP was introduced in 2004 to allow students to bypass the GCE 'O' level examinations and take the advanced level (or GCE 'A' level) examinations directly after six years of secondary education. The essays used in this study are not taken from these IP schools.

## **Corpus**

With the help of a colleague, 20 exposition-type essays were collected from five middle-ranked secondary schools. These essays were written by upper secondary school students (aged 15 to 16) in the express stream. Teachers at these schools were asked to provide samples of essays submitted during the year by what they considered to be good and poor writers, based on the students' performance in class. A corpus of 20 essays was eventually collected for analysis.

The essays cover a variety of topics. The topic areas of the essays are listed below:

- (a) Are fully-automated houses desirable?
- (b) Trip to Tioman
- (c) Who or what should be your class icon?
- (d) The importance of total defence
- (e) The computer is more of a menace than a blessing – what do you think?
- (f) School uniforms are unnecessary
- (g) Handphones should be banned in school – do you agree?
- (h) Why do we need hobbies?
- (i) Should the whistle-blower be punished?
- (j) Do you agree with the government's initial decision to raise charges for public sports facilities?

## **Methodology**

For each topic area, two essays – a good and a weak one – were analysed. Each essay was first broken up into major clauses (main and subordinate) and analysed for theme and rheme. This approach differs from that promoted by Fries and Francis (1992, p. 47), who consider only main clauses in the belief that it makes it “easier to discern the method of development and thematic progression of a text.” I take the view, however, that subordinate clauses

should also be included in the analysis as they develop the main clauses and so perform an important role in developing the message in the text.

The topical themes and rhemes of the clauses in each essay are next compared with each other in a clause-by-clause fashion to determine if a semantic and/or referential relationship exists between them. All connected elements are linked by a solid line in a schematic diagram. Two analysed essays and the schematic diagrams of their global thematic structures are included as samples in Appendices A to D.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Choice of Theme

The distribution of textual and interpersonal themes in the two groups of essays is presented in Table 2. (Topical themes, being obligatory, are present in all major clauses.)

**TABLE 2**  
**Use of Textual and Interpersonal Themes**

|             | No. of clauses | Textual themes  | Interpersonal themes |
|-------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Good essays | 419            | 179<br>(42.72%) | 23<br>(5.49%)        |
| Weak essays | 334            | 136<br>(40.72%) | 19<br>(5.69%)        |

The observed differences in the choice of theme between the two groups of essays are not statistically significant ( $\chi^2=0.06$ ). Although the good essays contain more clauses (419) than the weak ones (334), there is little difference on the whole in either group's choice of textual or interpersonal themes.

Following Hawes & Thomas (1997), the use of 'concrete' and 'non-concrete' topical themes was also examined. The figures are summarised in Table 3. Topical themes that do not properly enter into the concrete and non-concrete categories are placed in the *others* column. These include empty

pronouns (eg. anticipatory *it*) and verbs as topical themes (in imperatives).

**TABLE 3**  
**Use of Concrete and Non-concrete Topical Themes**

|             | No. of clauses | Concrete        | Non-concrete    | Others         |
|-------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Good essays | 419            | 246<br>(58.71%) | 122<br>(29.12%) | 51<br>(12.17%) |
| Weak essays | 334            | 198<br>(59.28%) | 96<br>(28.74%)  | 40<br>(11.98%) |

The observed differences are again not statistically significant ( $\chi^2=0.03$ ). The majority of the topical themes in both groups, in fact, are concrete themes (57.51% and 58.38% for the good and weak essays, respectively). This runs against the result obtained in the study by Hawes & Thomas (1997, p. 38), who found that the weak writers tended to concentrate on concrete participants (see Section 3 above).

The finding in this present study may of course be attributed to the fact that many of the topics (eg. automated houses, computers, school uniforms, handphones) require the students to describe concrete participants. However, the preference for concrete themes is also observed in other topic areas involving non-concrete phenomena. For instance, approximately two-thirds of the topical themes in the essays on the government's decision to raise charges for sports facilities are concrete (61.36% and 65.12% for the good and weak essays, respectively).

This returns us to the point I raised earlier in Section 3. By controlling the text type (in this case, exposition) and the content (where good and weak essays on similar topics are compared), the figures here suggest that there may in fact be very little difference in the choice of theme between good and weak writers. While it may be true that good writers are better able to handle abstract themes, the eventual selection of theme types is still very much constrained by the topic area.



## Marked Themes

Where marked themes are concerned, the analysis reveals that the good essays contain markedly higher occurrences of marked themes than the weak essays (see Table 4). In the good essays, marked themes constitute 5.49 per cent of all topical themes; the figure for the weak essays is 2.99 per cent. This difference is statistically significant ( $\chi^2=19.27$ ).

**TABLE 4**  
Use of Marked Themes

|             | No. of clauses | Marked        |
|-------------|----------------|---------------|
| Good essays | 419            | 23<br>(5.49%) |
| Weak essays | 334            | 10<br>(2.99%) |

The use of marked themes in both groups of essays fit the purposes suggested by Butt *et al.* (2000, p. 139), who note that marked themes are generally used to “draw the addressee’s attention to a particular group or phrase ... [or] to build a coherent text that is easy to follow.” Both types of marked themes are found in the good as well as weak essays. (In the examples below, the marked topical themes are boxed. The grammatical errors in the weak essays are left uncorrected.)

### *Drawing reader’s attention*

(15) First, I managed to almost leave my luggage at the terminal. This brought hoots of laughter from the class. Then, during the sea journey to Tioman, I was bouncing all over the boat ... (Essay 3, good essay)

(16) We also needs computer to supply us with entertainment and dealing with school work. Without computer our lives would be very boring ... (Essay 10, weak essay)

In (15), the writer lists a series of amusing incidents. He starts out by

describing what he did at the terminal. In order for him to move on to tell the reader what else he did during the sea journey, he has to set the proper context for it. The marked theme *during the sea journey to Tioman* does precisely this and draws the reader's attention to the shift in context.

Notwithstanding the grammatical errors, this same strategy is employed in (16) as well. The final clause in (16) signals a shift in the writer's message, moving from the uses of the computer to what life would be like without it. The marked theme *Without computer* [sic] helps the reader to understand this change in direction.

*Establishing coherence*

(17) ... **we** will always feel safe and secure because of our excellent defence. **With security**, investors will be confident to invest in Singapore ... (Essay 7, good essay)

(18) **Social and Psychological Defence** help the nation gel, **in order to preserve** racial and religious harmony for a peaceful community. **With a close-knitted community**, the danger of having civil conflict within the country is eliminated. (Essay 8, weak essay)

Here, the marked themes perform a somewhat different function. They do not really signal a shift in the direction of the message but a connection with what has been mentioned before. In (17), the marked theme *With security* provides the link between excellent defence and investor confidence. This theme is related to the rheme of the previous clause (safety, security, and excellent defence) and provides the context for investor confidence. Similarly, in (18), the marked theme *With a close-knitted* [sic] *community* shows how peace and harmony can eliminate the danger of civil conflict.

Comparatively, then, the weak writers in this study tended to use fewer marked themes to signal shifts in the textual message or to establish coherence. The preference for the unmarked option could be due simply to the weak writers' struggle to come to grips with the language while writing.

The quality of many of the weak essays resemble that in (16); they contain various grammatical errors and awkward expressions. Such language problems are arguably foremost on the writers' minds, leading them to fall back on the perceived 'safety' of using unmarked themes. This, unfortunately, may create further problems – the weak writers may just end up producing disconnected texts, coupled with the usual grammatical errors and awkward expressions.

### Thematic Structure

The difference in the thematic structures of the good and weak essays is best exemplified in (19–20) below.

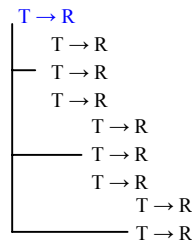
- (19) *In my opinion*, **such a house** will provide improved safety and security. **The house** is protected with close-circuit cameras *and* **the police** is alerted *when the house* senses any intruder. **This** keeps away any possible burglaries or thefts. (Essay 1, good essay)
- (20) **A doctor** can also be summoned in an emergency. **The police** are alerted *when it* senses any intruder. **A special code** is needed **to open** the electronic front-door lock. (Essay 2, weak essay)

In (19), the writer begins the paragraph by introducing the ideas of safety and security that automated houses provide. The rest of the paragraph builds on this by describing how such houses are protected against burglaries. The themes and rhemes in this paragraph cluster around the (automated) house.

The paragraph in (20) shows no such clustering. Each clause has a different description, giving it a disconnected feel. There is mention of a doctor, the police, and a special code as themes, but the relationship among them is not clear. These come across as three separate ideas with hardly any elaboration.

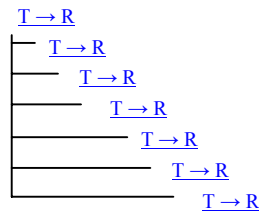
This difference – the elaborated development of good essays vs. the thin

development of weak essays – is mirrored in the global structures of the essays. The TPs of the good essays tend to take a ‘clustered’ shape whereas those of the weak essays are less clustered and more outward-expanding. This may be represented [schematically](#) as follows:



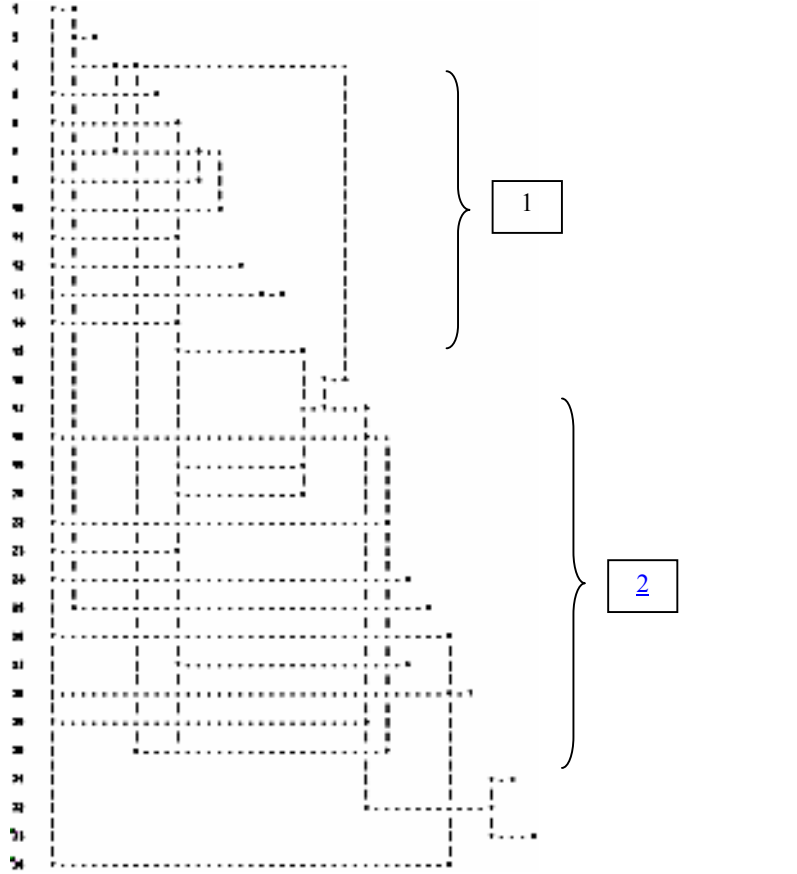
**FIGURE 3**  
**Clustered TP**

삭제됨:

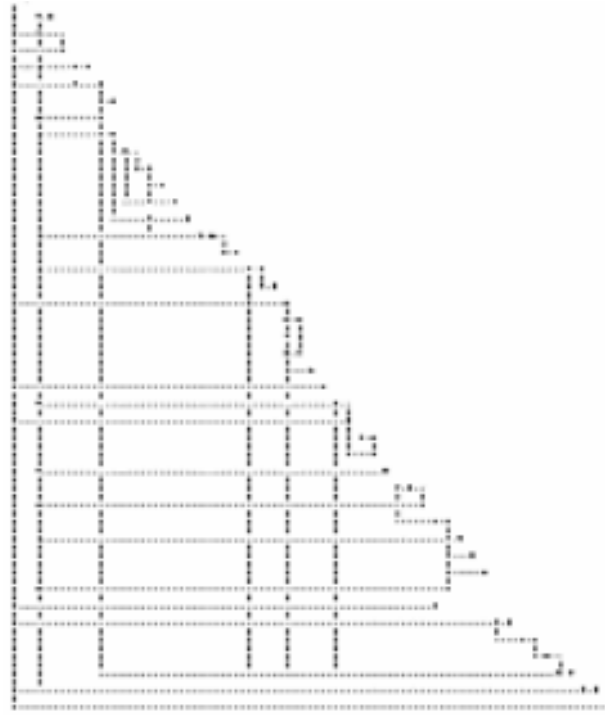


**FIGURE 4**  
**Outward-expanding TP**

This structural difference is captured in the TP diagrams in Appendices B and D. Another example is given below for the essays on a suitable class icon.



**FIGURE 5**  
**TP of Essay 5 (good essay)**



**FIGURE 6**  
**TP of Essay 6 (weak essay)**

The clustering feature in the TPs of the good essays is reflective of the effort of the writers to substantiate the main points in their essays. In Figure 5, for instance, we see two main clusters of themes and rhemes (these are numbered in the Figure 5 for convenience). Each cluster contains a number of clauses developing the main idea(s) of the segment. The good essays in the study, in other words, generally display an elaborated development of the textual message.

삭제됨: n

In contrast, the TPs of the weak essays do not display this clustering feature. Instead, as Figure 6 shows, there is little substantiation of the points

made, resulting in an outward-expanding shape. The weak essays in the study therefore generally display a thin development of the textual message (as opposed to the elaborated development generally found in the good essays).

This is perhaps reflective of the misguided belief of some students who think that a 'good' essay is one that contains the most number of points. The problem may be compounded by the brainstorming activities that most students do during writing lessons. Such activities are capable of producing a number of points, but students need to be guided, and be discerning enough, to know which points to include and which to exclude. It is evident from this small study that the quality of an essay has more to do with how the relevant points are substantiated (cf. elaborated development) than the number of points themselves (cf. thin development).

## **IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The major findings of this study are summarised as follows:

- (a) There is little difference in the choice of theme (textual and interpersonal) or the use of concrete themes between the good and weak essays.
- (b) There is a greater use of marked themes in the good essays as compared to the weak essays.
- (c) The TPs of the good essays take a 'clustered' shape. The development of the textual message in such essays is an *elaborated* one.
- (d) The TPs of the weak essays take a non-clustered, outward-expanding shape. The development of the textual message in such essays is a *thin* one.

Admittedly, the exploratory nature of this study, and the small size of the corpus, makes these findings tentative. A more detailed analysis with more essays of different text types is clearly needed for a better understanding of the issues raised here. Notwithstanding this, these findings have implications for the teaching of writing and the direction of future studies. These are

outlined below.

- (a) In line with theme as a notion of initialness and rheme as the development of that initial element, students should be led to see the importance of establishing good starting points in their essays so that the rest of the message can be appropriately developed. The idea behind theme and rheme need not be confined to the clause only, but can be extended to the paragraph, section, or entire text, depending on the number of layers in the text (Martin, 1992, p. 156). Indeed, we may think of the topic sentence as the theme of the paragraph, the first paragraph as the theme of the section, and so on. These starting points are important because they contextualise the development of the message in the rest of the paragraph, section, or text. The emphasis here is on helping students to learn to form appropriate starting points so that they are naturally led to develop them appropriately, thus avoiding the problem of thin development.
- (b) The importance of conferencing cannot be over-emphasised (Romano, 1987). While planning their writing, some students may be tempted to include as many points as possible in their essays. As shown in Section 5.3, this may not necessarily result in a good grade. To help these students decide for themselves which points to include, teacher feedback and guidance is crucial. Teachers need to ask the students whether they honestly feel that certain points are truly needed: *Are all of the points really relevant? What are the main ideas you are trying to bring across? Would it sound better if you omitted this point but included this other one instead?* Probing questions such as these in a conferencing session are tremendously helpful in drawing the student's attention to certain areas in the writing that may have escaped him or her. They are also useful in dispelling myths about what teachers are looking out for in a good essay. In the case of the expositions analysed in this study, it is not about the number of points that matter, but how the relevant ones are substantiated.
- (c) The analysis here has given us a glimpse of the choice of themes and the thematic structure of expositions at the upper secondary level. We can build on this by examining the thematic structure of other text types (procedures, information reports, explanations, persona/factual narratives) at different educational levels. This will give us an indication of the structural norms or problems in student



writing and point us to ways in which they can be specifically addressed.

Writing is a process of constructing a message, and the challenge facing all writers is to get the message right. While this certainly involves paying close attention to the purpose of the writing and the expectations of the readers, it is also, at the very basic level, a matter of fleshing out the details. This study has shown that the weak essays in the corpus suffer from a general lack of substantiation.

The decision to focus and elaborate only on a few key ideas may not come easily to some students, but it does not have to remain out of reach. An awareness of the message components of language (ie. theme and rheme) and how they can be applied at the clause and text level can go some way to ease this struggle. Crucially, perhaps, it directs the students' attention to the message structure of their texts and heightens their awareness of that which truly matters in writing – getting the message right.

## THE AUTHOR

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(1978). Amsterdam: John Benjamins B V.

**APPENDIX A**

**Topic title: Are fully automated houses desirable?**

**Essay 1 (good essay)**

*Note: Embedded clauses are marked off using [[...]]. Recovered elements are bracketed and in italics.*

|   | <b><u>Textual</u></b> | <b><u>Interpersonal</u></b> | <b><u>Topical</u></b>                   | <b><u>Topical (marked)</u></b> | <b><u>RHEME</u></b>  |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------------|---|--------------------------------|--|
| 1 |                       |                             | The fully automated house of the future |                                | will be a highly efficient computerized machine.   |
| 2 |                       |                             | Designed                                |                                | for safety and convenience,  |
| 3 |                       |                             | It                                      |                                | is equipped with devices [[which turn off all switches when not in use and turn on lights automatically when a room is occupied and let you check your house when you are in the office.]] |
| 4 |                       |                             | It                                      |                                | is also designed with an electronic front-door lock,   |
| 5 | (which)               |                             | which                                   |                                | can only be opened by a special code,  |
| 6 | and                   |                             | it                                      |                                | even keeps an eye on elderly folks and babies.   |
| 7 | In short,             |                             | such a house                            |                                | will be able to assist the owner in [[running the house.]]   |
| 8 | Although              |                             | it                                      |                                | has been argued  |

|    | <b><u>Textual</u></b> | <b><u>Interpersonal</u></b> | <b><u>Topical</u></b>   | <b><u>Topical (marked)</u></b> | <b><u>RHEME</u></b>                        |
|----|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| 9  | that                  |                             | a fully automated house |                                | is impractical and costs dearly,           |
| 10 |                       |                             | I                       |                                | tend to disagree with this view.           |
| 11 |                       | In my opinion,              | such a house            |                                | will provide improved safety and security. |
| 12 |                       |                             | The house               |                                | is protected with close-circuit cameras    |
| 13 | and                   |                             | the police              |                                | is alerted                                 |

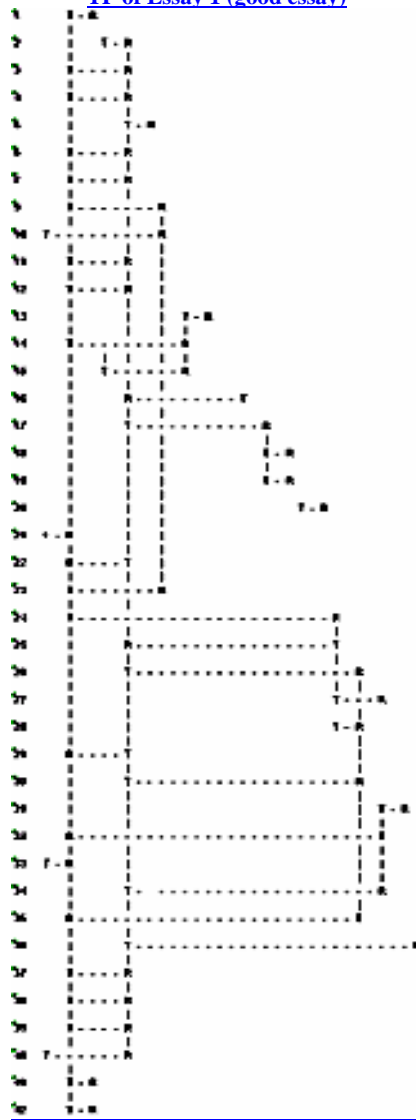
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|           |                |  |  |
|-----------|----------------|--|--|
| <u>14</u> | <u>when</u>    | <u>the house</u>   | <u>senses any intruder.</u>  |
| <u>15</u> |                | <u>This</u>  | <u>keeps away any possible burglaries or thefts.</u>                                   |
| <u>16</u> |                | <u>Equipped</u>  | <u>with a device,</u>  |
| <u>17</u> | <u>(which)</u> | <u>which</u>   | <u>notifies the fire department immediately</u>  |
| <u>18</u> | <u>when</u>    | <u>a fire</u>  | <u>is detected,</u>  |
| <u>19</u> |                | <u>cases such as the delayed arrival of fire engines</u> | <u>might never happen.</u>   |
| <u>20</u> |                |  | <u>In any case of the doctor will be summoned</u>                                      |
| <u>21</u> | <u>and</u>     | <u>one</u>   | <u>emergen-cy,</u><br><u>is even able to check on the house when in the office.</u>    |
| <u>22</u> |                |  | <u>With all these the 'smart house' can be said designs to be totally danger-free.</u> |

|           | <u>Textual</u> | <u>Interpersonal</u> | <u>Topical</u>                                    | <u>Topical (marked)</u> | <u>RHEME</u>   |
|-----------|----------------|----------------------|---|-------------------------|--|
| <u>23</u> |                |                      | <u>One advantage of the fully automated house</u> |                         | <u>compensates for its high construction costs.</u>  |
| <u>24</u> |                |                      | <u>It</u>   |                         | <u>is energy efficient.</u>  |
| <u>25</u> |                |                      | <u>Energy consumption</u>                         |                         | <u>will drop with the introduction of a new device.</u>  |
| <u>26</u> | <u>(which)</u> |                      | <u>which</u>                                      |                         | <u>turns off all switches not in use.</u>  |
| <u>27</u> |                |                      | <u>Considerable energy</u>                        |                         | <u>is conserved</u>  |
| <u>28</u> |                |                      | <u>compared</u>                                   |                         | <u>to manually activated switches [[which people tend to leave them on, even when its not in use. ]]</u> |
| <u>29</u> |                |                      | <u>The level and comfort and convenience</u>      |                         | <u>upgrades in a 'smart house'.</u>  |
| <u>30</u> |                |                      | <u>The atmosphere</u>                             |                         | <u>will be automatically adjusted in terms of the brightness of the lights and temperature.</u>          |
| <u>31</u> |                |                      | <u>Household chores</u>                           |                         | <u>can also be forgotten</u>   |
| <u>32</u> | <u>as</u>      |                      | <u>they</u>                                       |                         | <u>are taken care of by the house.</u>   |

|           | <u>Textual</u>    | <u>Interpersonal</u> | <u>Topical</u>                              | <u>Topical<br/>(marked)</u>         | <u>RHEME</u>   |
|-----------|-------------------|----------------------|---|-------------------------------------|--|
| <u>33</u> |                   |                      |   | <u>In this way,</u>                 | <u>the house will definitely be a place</u> [[ one longs for after a hard day's work. ]] |
| <u>34</u> |                   |                      |   | <u>Following the automa-tion of</u> | <u>time consuming household chores are a thing of the</u>                                |
| <u>35</u> |                   | <u>Even</u>          | <u>[[ turning on and off of switches ]]</u> | <u>the houses,</u>                  | <u>past.</u><br><u>are controlled by the house.</u>                                      |
| <u>36</u> |                   |                      |   | <u>With much time saved,</u>        | <u>more time can be spent on purposeful work on hobbies and leisure.</u>                 |
| <u>37</u> | <u>To sum up,</u> |                      | <u>fully automated houses</u>               |                                     | <u>are energy efficient,</u>   |
| <u>38</u> |                   |                      | <u>(fully automated houses)</u>             |                                     | <u>saved time,</u>   |
| <u>39</u> |                   |                      | <u>(fully automated houses)</u>             |                                     | <u>improved safety and security, comfort and convenience.</u>                            |
| <u>40</u> | <u>With</u>       |                      | <u>the society</u>                          |                                     | <u>turning towards high technology,</u>  |
| <u>41</u> |                   |                      | <u>fully automated houses</u>               |                                     | <u>will soon be a common sight.</u>  |
| <u>42</u> |                   |                      | <u>It</u>                                   |                                     | <u>is thus considered desirable.</u>   |

**APPENDIX B**  
**TP of Essay 1 (good essay)**





**APPENDIX C**

**Topic title: Are fully automated houses desirable?**

**Essay 2 (weak essay)**

*Note: Embedded clauses are marked off using [...]. Recovered elements are bracketed and in italics.*

|    | <b>Textual</b>    | <b>Interpersonal</b>  | <b>Topical</b>                                 | <b>Topical<br/>(marked)</b> | <b>RHEME</b>   |
|----|-------------------|-----------------------|--|-----------------------------|--|
| 1  |                   |                       | <u>The fully automated house of the future</u> |                             | <u>will be highly efficient and computerized.</u>  |
| 2  |                   |                       | <u>It</u>                                      |                             | <u>contains a few computers and many video screens.</u>  |
| 3  |                   |                       | <u>It</u>                                      |                             | <u>can be called by telephone</u>  |
| 4  | <u>and</u>        |                       | <u>anything in the house</u>                   |                             | <u>can be checked, like the temperatures of the rooms and where the people in the house are.</u> |
| 5  | <u>Therefore,</u> |                       | <u>the fully-automated house</u>               |                             | <u>is useful in many ways.</u>   |
| 6  |                   |                       | <u>I</u>                                       |                             | <u>agree</u>   |
| 7  | <u>that</u>       |                       | <u>a fully-automated house</u>                 |                             | <u>is desirable.</u>   |
| 8  |                   | <u>In my opinion,</u> | <u>such a house</u>                            |                             | <u>is energy-efficient.</u>  |
| 9  |                   |                       | <u>It</u>                                      |                             | <u>can save electricity</u>  |
| 10 | <u>as</u>         |                       | <u>all the switches</u>                        |                             | <u>are turned off automatically when not in use.</u>   |

|    | <b>Textual</b> | <b>Interpersonal</b> | <b>Topical</b>                      | <b>Topical<br/>(marked)</b> | <b>RHEME</b>  |
|----|----------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| 11 |                |                      | <u>Lights and heating</u>           |                             | <u>can also be self-adjusted to the correct brightness and temperature.</u> |
| 12 |                |                      | <u>Improved safety and security</u> |                             | <u>can help to make the house more secured and safe.</u>                    |
| 13 | <u>When</u>    |                      | <u>a fire</u>                       |                             | <u>is detected,</u>   |
| 14 |                |                      | <u>the fire department</u>          |                             | <u>is notified immediately.</u>   |
| 15 |                |                      | <u>A doctor</u>                     |                             | <u>can also be summoned in an emergency.</u>                                |
| 16 |                |                      | <u>The police</u>                   |                             | <u>are alerted</u>  |

삭제됨: -----페이지 나누기-----

Developing the Message: Thematic Progression and Student Writing

|           |             |                       |                          |                                     |
|-----------|-------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <u>17</u> | <u>when</u> |                       | <u>it</u>                | <u>senses any intruder.</u>         |
| <u>18</u> |             |                       | <u>A special code</u>    | <u>is needed</u>                    |
| <u>19</u> |             |                       | <u>to open</u>           | <u>the electronic front-door</u>    |
| <u>20</u> |             |                       | <u>Strange noises in</u> | <u>lock.</u>                        |
|           |             |                       | <u>the night</u>         | <u>can be checked on the</u>        |
| <u>21</u> |             |                       | <u>It</u>                | <u>video screen in the bedroom.</u> |
| <u>22</u> |             |                       | <u>who</u>               | <u>decides</u>                      |
| <u>23</u> | <u>and</u>  | <u>(who)</u>          | <u>who</u>               | <u>who can be let in</u>            |
|           |             | <u>(which part of</u> | <u>part of the</u>       | <u>is accessible to them.</u>       |
|           |             | <u>the house)</u>     | <u>house</u>             |                                     |
| <u>24</u> |             |                       | <u>An eye</u>            | <u>is kept on elderly folk</u>      |
|           |             |                       |                          | <u>and babies</u>                   |
| <u>25</u> | <u>and</u>  |                       | <u>a back-up power</u>   | <u>will ensure [[that there</u>     |
|           |             |                       | <u>supply</u>            | <u>will be no electrical</u>        |
|           |             |                       |                          | <u>failure.]]</u>                   |

|           | <u>Textual</u> | <u>Interpersonal</u> | <u>Topical</u>  | <u>Topical<br/>(marked)</u> | <u>RHEME</u>  |
|-----------|----------------|----------------------|---|-----------------------------|---|
| <u>26</u> |                |                      | <u>Another advantage</u>                                    |                             | <u>is that of improved<br/>comfort and convenience.</u>   |
| <u>27</u> |                |                      | <u>All telephone<br/>messages</u>                           |                             | <u>are recorded<br/>immediately</u>   |
| <u>28</u> | <u>and</u>     |                      | <u>lights</u>   |                             | <u>are switched on<br/>automatically</u>  |
| <u>29</u> | <u>when</u>    |                      | <u>a room</u>   |                             | <u>is occupied.</u>   |
| <u>30</u> |                |                      | <u>These</u>  |                             | <u>will make it convenient<br/>for the owner.</u>   |
| <u>31</u> |                |                      | <u>Saving in time</u>                                       |                             | <u>is another advantage.</u>  |
| <u>32</u> | <u>as</u>      |                      | <u>the routine house-<br/>hold chores</u>                   |                             | <u>are done automatically.</u>  |
| <u>33</u> |                |                      | <u>time</u>   |                             | <u>is saved</u>   |
| <u>34</u> | <u>by</u>      |                      | <u>(us)</u>   |                             | <u>not doing them manually.</u>   |
| <u>35</u> |                |                      | <u>The locations of<br/>the people in the<br/>house</u>     |                             | <u>can also be checked<br/>by video screens</u>   |
| <u>36</u> | <u>and</u>     |                      | <u>the owner</u>  |                             | <u>does not have to look<br/>for them personally.</u>   |
| <u>37</u> | <u>thus</u>    |                      | <u>saving</u>   |                             | <u>time.</u>  |
| <u>38</u> |                |                      | <u>People [[ who like<br/>luxury and<br/>convenience ]]</u> |                             | <u>will be able to accept<br/>the idea [[that a fully-<br/>automated car is<br/>desirable]]</u> |
| <u>39</u> | <u>as</u>      |                      | <u>it</u>   |                             | <u>can be useful in many<br/>ways.</u>  |

**APPENDIX D**  
**TP of Essay 2 (weak essay)**

