THEME AND RHEME IN AN SPM STUDENT'S MALAY ESSAY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS PERSPECTIVE

TEMA DAN REMA DALAM KARANGAN BAHASA MELAYU MURID SPM: PERSPEKTIF ANALISIS WACANA KRITIS

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Abstract:

This study examines the use of theme and rheme in a Malay-language essay written by a secondary school student preparing for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination and interprets the ideological meanings constructed through these choices within the textual dimension of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Previous research on Malay student writing has concentrated on technical weaknesses, vocabulary, and discourse markers, and has rarely connected clause-level information structure to the construction of ideology and social awareness; the novelty of this study lies in its integration of the theme–rheme framework from Systemic Functional Linguistics with Fairclough's CDA to reveal both the linguistic quality and the ideological dimension of SPM writing. A qualitative document analysis design was employed. One essay, "Efforts to Prevent Landslides", was purposively selected according to four criteria, segmented into 35 clauses across six paragraphs, and coded for theme and rheme before being interpreted through the textual dimension of Fairclough's three-dimensional model. Coding was conducted independently by two researchers, reconciled through consensus, and reviewed by an expert. The findings show that themes function as points of departure that focalize the issue and sustain coherence through thematic progression, while rhemes elaborate causes, effects, and proposed actions. The analysis further reveals that the student's language is not neutral: generalized actors such as "various parties", recurrent modal necessity, and institutional themes normalize collective responsibility while obscuring specific accountability. The study contributes a discourse-level, ideology-sensitive lens for understanding and assessing SPM essay writing and underscores the pedagogical value of teaching theme–rheme organization. In conclusion, this integrated theme–rheme and CDA framework transforms the understanding of student writing from a mere object of technical assessment into discourse that constructs meaning, ideology, and social awareness.

Keywords: theme and rheme, thematic structure, critical discourse analysis, ideology, SPM essay writing

Kata Kunci: tema dan rema, struktur tematik, analisis wacana kritis, ideologi, penulisan karangan SPM

Abstrak:

Kajian ini meneliti penggunaan tema dan rema dalam sebuah karangan bahasa Melayu yang ditulis oleh seorang murid sekolah menengah sebagai persediaan menghadapi peperiksaan Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), serta mentafsir makna ideologi yang dibina melalui pilihan tersebut dalam dimensi tekstual Analisis Wacana Kritis (AWK) Fairclough. Kajian lepas tentang penulisan murid banyak menumpukan kelemahan teknikal, kosa kata dan penanda wacana, tetapi jarang menghubungkan struktur maklumat pada aras klausa dengan pembinaan ideologi dan kesedaran sosial; kebaharuan kajian ini terletak pada penyepaduan kerangka tema–rema Linguistik Fungsional Sistemik dengan AWK Fairclough bagi mendedahkan kualiti linguistik dan dimensi ideologi penulisan SPM secara serentak. Reka bentuk analisis dokumen kualitatif digunakan. Satu karangan, "Usaha-usaha Mencegah Tanah Runtuh", dipilih secara bertujuan berdasarkan empat kriteria, disegmentasikan kepada 35 klausa merentas enam perenggan, dan dikodkan bagi tema dan rema sebelum ditafsirkan menerusi dimensi tekstual model tiga

dimensi Fairclough. Pengekodan dijalankan secara berasingan oleh dua penyelidik, diselaraskan melalui perbincangan konsensus, dan disemak oleh pakar bagi memantapkan kebolehpercayaan. Dapatan menunjukkan tema berfungsi sebagai titik tolak yang memfokuskan isu dan mengekalkan kesinambungan wacana melalui perkembangan tematik, manakala rema menghuraikan sebab, akibat dan tindakan yang dicadangkan. Analisis turut mendedahkan bahasa murid tidak neutral: pelaku umum seperti "pelbagai pihak", modalitas keperluan yang berulang, dan tema institusi menormalkan tanggungjawab kolektif sambil mengaburkan akauntabiliti khusus. Kajian ini menyumbangkan lensa peka ideologi pada aras wacana untuk memahami dan mentaksir penulisan karangan SPM serta menegaskan nilai pedagogi pengajaran organisasi tema–rema. Kesimpulannya, kerangka bersepadu tema–rema dan AWK ini mengubah pemahaman terhadap penulisan murid daripada objek penilaian teknikal semata-mata kepada wacana yang membina makna, ideologi dan kesedaran sosial.

INTRODUCTION

Essay writing occupies a central place in the Malay language curriculum and carries substantial weight in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination. Beyond grammatical accuracy and vocabulary, the quality of an essay depends on the organization of information at the level of the clause, where the writer decides what to place first as the point of departure of the message and what to present as its development. In Systemic Functional Linguistics, this organization is captured by the concepts of theme, the element that serves as the starting point of the message, and rheme, the remainder of the clause in which the theme is developed (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The selection of themes and the development of rhemes determine the focus of a text, sustain its coherence, and guide the reader through the writer's argument.

At the same time, student writing is more than an object of linguistic assessment. Essays produced in the classroom respond to socially significant topics, and the language used in them carries assumptions about responsibility, authority, and social order. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) conceptualizes language as a form of social practice in which texts both reflect and reproduce ideology (Fairclough, 2001). Viewed from this perspective, an SPM essay on a socio-environmental issue is a site where a young writer represents social actors, assigns or obscures accountability, and reproduces or resists dominant discourses.

Research on Malay student writing has, however, concentrated largely on surface and technical features. Previous studies have documented students' difficulties with writing techniques, vocabulary, and idea generation, and have described the distribution of discourse markers in student essays, but they have seldom examined the clause-level information structure of the essays or the ideological work performed by that structure. Consequently, little is known about the ways in which theme and rheme choices in SPM essays construct meaning, express social awareness, and position responsibility. The present study addresses this gap by integrating theme–rheme analysis with the textual dimension of Fairclough's CDA in the examination of an SPM student's Malay essay.

Accordingly, the study pursues two objectives: (1) to identify the patterns of theme and rheme use in a selected SPM essay entitled "Efforts to Prevent Landslides"; and (2) to describe the ways in which these patterns construct meaning, ideology, and social awareness. Consistent with these objectives, the study is guided by two research questions:

RQ1: What patterns of theme and rheme use characterize the selected SPM student essay?
RQ2: In what ways do these theme–rheme patterns construct meaning, ideology, and social awareness when interpreted through the textual dimension of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis?

The scope of the study is deliberately bounded. The analysis concentrates on a single, purposively selected essay and on the textual dimension of Fairclough's three-dimensional model; the discursive practice and social practice dimensions lie beyond the data available to the study and are recommended for future research. Within these boundaries, the study offers an in-depth, clause-by-clause account of one authentic piece of SPM writing and an interpretation of the ideological meanings embedded in it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within Systemic Functional Linguistics, the theme is defined as the element that serves as the point of departure of the message, and the rheme as the part of the clause in which the theme is developed (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Themes may be unmarked, typically realized by the grammatical subject, or marked, realized by circumstantial or textual elements that the writer foregrounds for rhetorical effect. Across clauses, the movement of information from theme to rheme produces patterns of thematic progression that give a text its method of development and its coherence.

A substantial body of international research has applied these concepts to student writing. North (2005) found disciplinary variation in the use of theme in undergraduate essays and showed that theme choice was related to essay grades. Wang (2007) demonstrated that attention to theme and rheme improves the organization of academic writing and argued for their explicit treatment in the writing classroom. Hawes (2015) compared thematic progression in the writing of students and professionals and reported that student texts rely more heavily on constant progression, whereas professional texts exploit linear progression to advance an argument. Wei (2016) showed that the thematic choices of Chinese college students in English essays were related to writing quality, with higher-rated essays displaying more varied and more purposeful theme selection. Collectively, these studies establish theme–rheme organization as a reliable indicator of writing proficiency; they are, however, concentrated on English academic writing in higher education, and comparable work on Malay-language secondary school writing remains scarce.

Critical Discourse Analysis provides the second pillar of the study. Fairclough (1992, 2001) conceptualizes discourse as a three-dimensional phenomenon comprising the text, the discursive practice through which it is produced and consumed, and the social practice in which it is embedded. Textual analysis, the first dimension, attends to vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and text structure, including the representation of social actors, the use of modality, and the distribution of agency. Through these features, texts naturalize particular ways of seeing the world; ideology, in this view, is most effective when it operates as common sense (Fairclough, 2013). CDA has been applied widely to media and political discourse, and increasingly to educational texts, where it reveals the values and power relations that school writing transmits.

Studies of Malay student writing provide the local context of the present research. Aman Shah Syed Ali and Zamri Mahamod (2021) investigated the problems faced by non-native-speaking primary school pupils in writing Malay essays. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with eight experienced Malay language teachers in the Semporna district of Sabah, analyzed thematically with ATLAS.ti, they found that writing techniques, vocabulary, and idea generation posed the greatest challenges, and they recommended strengthening thinking skills, vocabulary acquisition, and knowledge of essay formats. Jobar et al. (2019) examined textual features in second-language student essays through the lens of Systemic Functional theory and Dewan Grammar, showing that causal discourse markers cluster in

introductory paragraphs, additive markers in content paragraphs, and temporal markers in conclusions. Complementing this line of work, Mohd Sufian Ismail et al. (2021) systematized the concepts, functions, and domains of Malay discourse markers and particles, demonstrating that such discourse-level elements operate as meaningful entities in communication. Related work underscores the stakes of writing instruction: Nurul Ashikin Md. Yatim et al. (2020) reported that the pedagogical content knowledge of primary school Malay language teachers directly shapes the quality of language teaching, while Izman and Mahamod (2023) demonstrated that the Malay language functions as a basis of identity and value formation among university students.

Closest to the present study, Tengku Shahrolnizam Tengku Yahya and Rohaidah Haron (2021) combined theme and rheme analysis with Fairclough's framework to interpret political ideology in Malaysian texts, arguing that theme operates as given information that captures the attention of readers and directs the interpretation of discourse. Their study confirms the analytic productivity of pairing theme–rheme analysis with CDA, but it was applied to political discourse rather than to student writing. Taken together, the literature reveals a clear gap: local studies of Malay student essays stop at technical and surface features, international theme–rheme studies concentrate on English academic writing in higher education, and no study has integrated theme–rheme analysis with Fairclough's CDA to examine ideology in SPM Malay essay writing. The present study addresses this gap.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative document analysis design within an interpretive paradigm. Document analysis was appropriate because the data consist of a naturally occurring written text, an SPM student essay, whose meaning must be interpreted in context rather than measured. The design enables a fine-grained, clause-by-clause description of the essay's thematic structure and an interpretation of the ideological meanings that the structure constructs.

Theoretical Framework and Rationale for the Textual Dimension

The analysis is grounded in Fairclough's (2001) Critical Discourse Analysis, operationalized through the concepts of theme and rheme from Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Fairclough's model comprises three dimensions: textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. This study confines itself to the textual dimension for three explicit reasons. First, the research questions concern the clause-level realization of meaning, which is precisely the domain of textual analysis: vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and text structure. Second, textual analysis constitutes the descriptive foundation of Fairclough's model; a rigorous account of the text is the prerequisite for any subsequent interpretation of discursive or social practice. Third, the data available to the study, a single written essay, do not include evidence of the conditions of text production and consumption, such as interviews with the writer or examiners, that the discursive practice dimension requires; analyzing that dimension without such data would risk speculation. The remaining two dimensions are therefore acknowledged as directions for future research rather than claims of the present analysis.

Data and Sampling

The data comprise one Malay-language essay entitled "Efforts to Prevent Landslides", written by an SPM-level student. The essay was selected purposively according to four criteria: (1) it was produced under authentic SPM essay-writing conditions in the extended essay format; (2) it addresses a socio-environmental issue, which makes it suitable for ideological interpretation within a CDA framework; (3) it displays a complete rhetorical structure, consisting of an introduction, four body paragraphs, and a conclusion; and (4) the

full text is available and legible, permitting exhaustive clause-level analysis. The logic of the sampling is that of the information-rich single case: the essay was chosen not to represent all SPM essays statistically but to permit a deep and complete analysis of one authentic instance of the genre. The corresponding limitation of a single-text design is discussed in the final subsection of this section.

Data Collection and Preparation

The essay was obtained with permission and anonymized; no information identifying the student or the school is reported. The text was transcribed verbatim, and the transcription was checked against the original to ensure accuracy. The text was then segmented into clauses, yielding 35 clauses across the six paragraphs. Each clause was assigned a code combining its paragraph and sentence number (for example, P1A2 denotes the second clause of the first paragraph), and the coded clauses were compiled into analysis tables.

Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis proceeded in six steps. First, each clause was examined and its boundaries were confirmed. Second, the theme of each clause was identified following Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) and classified as unmarked, where the theme coincides with the grammatical subject, or marked, where a circumstantial or textual element occupies initial position. Third, the rheme of each clause was delimited as the remainder of the clause in which the theme is developed. Fourth, the themes and rhemes were tabulated by paragraph, and the movement of information across clauses was mapped to identify patterns of thematic progression. Fifth, the tabulated patterns were interpreted within the textual dimension of Fairclough's model, attending to lexical choice, modality, the representation of social actors, and the distribution of agency, including the use of generalized actors and passive constructions. Sixth, the interpretations were synthesized across paragraphs into overarching analytic themes that answer the second research question.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to establish the trustworthiness of the analysis. The identification of themes and rhemes was carried out independently by two researchers; discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached, and the agreed coding was recorded in the analysis tables. The coding scheme and the interpretations were then reviewed by a senior academic in the field of Malay linguistics whose expertise encompasses Systemic Functional Linguistics and critical discourse analysis, and refinements were made in response to the review. An audit trail consisting of the segmented text, the coding tables, and analytic memos was maintained throughout the study so that the path from data to interpretation remains transparent. Finally, the findings are reported with extensive verbatim evidence, allowing readers to evaluate the interpretations against the data.

Limitations of the Study

The principal limitation of the study arises from its single-document design. The analysis of one essay provides depth rather than breadth: the findings describe the thematic and ideological organization of this text and are not statistically generalizable to the population of SPM essays. The study also confines itself to the textual dimension of Fairclough's model, so claims about the production, consumption, and wider social embedding of the essay are deliberately withheld. Because the study does not examine the conditions of text production and consumption, such as interviews with the student writer or the examiners, it cannot ascertain whether the ideological patterns identified were constructed intentionally or absorbed from textbook phrasing and rehearsed examination templates; the analysis therefore characterizes the discourse of the text rather than the intentions of its writer. A further boundary concerns genre: the selected essay addresses a socio-environmental

topic that naturally invites normative discourse, institutional themes, and appeals to collective responsibility, so the patterns reported here may not extend to other common SPM genres such as personal narratives, descriptive writing, or literary responses. In addition, although coding was performed independently by two researchers and reconciled through consensus, no formal intercoder reliability statistic, such as Cohen's kappa, was computed, given the small number of clauses involved. These boundaries are accepted as the price of analytic depth, and the concluding section recommends larger corpora, additional genres and contexts, the full three-dimensional framework, and formal reliability measures for future research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion are reported in an integrated manner. The first part answers the first research question by presenting the theme–rheme patterns identified in the essay, paragraph by paragraph, in Tables 1 to 6, followed by a summary of the dominant patterns in Table 7. The second part answers the second research question through a critical synthesis of the patterns under four analytic themes. Throughout, clauses are cited by their codes (for example, P2A5 denotes the fifth clause of the second paragraph).

Theme–Rheme Patterns in the Essay

Table 1
Theme–rheme identification for Paragraph 1 (introduction)

Data	Clause	Theme	Rheme
P1A1	Landslide disasters are a serious phenomenon, such as the landslide in Bukit Antarabangsa, Kuala Lumpur in December 2006 and the recent incident that claimed the lives of orphans in Hulu Langat, requiring a dynamic and comprehensive approach.	Landslide disasters	are a serious phenomenon, such as the landslide in Bukit Antarabangsa, Kuala Lumpur in December 2006 and the recent incident that claimed the lives of orphans in Hulu Langat, requiring a dynamic and comprehensive approach.
P1A2	This phenomenon is a result of the failure of various parties to act on the effects of nature and human actions.	This phenomenon	is a result of the failure of various parties to act on the effects of nature and human actions.
P1A3	Various reactions were shown: some threw stones, some hid their hands.	Various reactions	were shown: some threw stones, some hid their hands.
P1A4	Some parties do not bother with the early signs that an incident may occur.	Some parties	do not bother with the early signs that an incident may occur.
P1A5	Therefore, more pragmatic efforts need to be made to prevent incidents like this from happening again.	Therefore, more pragmatic efforts	need to be made to prevent incidents like this from happening again.

Table 2
Theme–rheme identification for Paragraph 2 (causes of landslides)

Data	Clause	Theme	Rheme
P2A1	Forest destruction and uncontrolled logging activities are commonly associated with this landslide phenomenon.	Forest destruction and uncontrolled logging activities	are commonly associated with this landslide phenomenon.
P2A2	Human greed in exploiting the jungles and hills has disrupted the ecosystem and natural sustainability.	Human greed	in exploiting the jungles and hills has disrupted the ecosystem and natural sustainability.
P2A3	The soil on the hillsides is dug up, exposing it to the risk of landslides.	The soil on the hillsides	is dug up, exposing it to the risk of landslides.
P2A4	The trees that bind the soil texture have been cut down and removed.	The trees that bind the soil texture	have been cut down and removed.
P2A5	When it rains, the flowing water becomes a burden on the loose and unstable slopes.	When it rains	the flowing water becomes a burden on the loose and unstable slopes.
P2A6	This can cause land to collapse, as happened in the highlands of Genting Highlands and Pos Dipang some time ago.	This	can cause land to collapse, as happened in the highlands of Genting Highlands and Pos Dipang some time ago.
P2A7	Therefore, control over deforestation and logging activities is hoped to be a decisive effort in saving slopes and land from collapsing and threatening lives.	Therefore, control over deforestation and logging activities	is hoped to be a decisive effort in saving slopes and land from collapsing and threatening lives.

Table 3
Theme–rheme identification for Paragraph 3 (replanting and restoration)

Data	Clause	Theme	Rheme
P3A1	In addition, efforts to replant vegetation after development activities are a fairly efficient measure to minimize landslides.	In addition, efforts to replant vegetation after development activities	are a fairly efficient measure to minimize landslides.
P3A2	Humans cultivate the environment and living things to obtain basic necessities of life such as food, clothing, and housing, and to establish recreational areas.	Humans	cultivate the environment and living things to obtain basic necessities of life such as food, clothing, and housing, and to establish recreational areas.
P3A3	In an effort to meet their needs, humans have cleared forests for agriculture, housing, industry and mining, built dams, and drained mangrove forests.	In an effort to meet their needs, humans	have cleared forests for agriculture, housing, industry and mining, built dams, and drained mangrove forests.
P3A4	These human activities are changing the environment and	These human activities	are changing the environment and eliminating natural

Data	Clause	Theme	Rheme
	eliminating natural habitats, destroying many plant species.		habitats, destroying many plant species.
P3A5	Therefore, the cooperation of all parties involved removes all evasiveness by shouldering full responsibility to compact the loose soil caused by development.	Therefore, the cooperation of all parties involved	removes all evasiveness by shouldering full responsibility to compact the loose soil caused by development.
P3A6	In essence, this effort can strengthen land that has undergone the development process.	In essence, this effort	can strengthen land that has undergone the development process.

Table 4
Theme–rheme identification for Paragraph 4 (strategic development planning)

Data	Clause	Theme	Rheme
P4A1	To avoid this unfortunate incident, the country needs to face development competition strategically and wisely.	To avoid this unfortunate incident	the country needs to face development competition strategically and wisely.
P4A2	Strategic and systematic action on each development plan is very important to practice to ensure that development does not invite trouble.	Strategic and systematic action on each development plan	is very important to practice to ensure that development does not invite trouble.
P4A3	Planned development must be people-friendly, taking into account the safety and well-being of the people.	Planned development	must be people-friendly, taking into account the safety and well-being of the people.
P4A4	For example, land development needs to be given proper licensing, taking into account the type of soil and area as well as weather and natural factors.	For example, land development	needs to be given proper licensing, taking into account the type of soil and area as well as weather and natural factors.
P4A5	Development planning needs to consider the symbiosis of nature with the project to be developed.	Development planning	needs to consider the symbiosis of nature with the project to be developed.
P4A6	This effort is expected to prevent unwanted incidents.	This effort	is expected to prevent unwanted incidents.

Table 5
Theme–rheme identification for Paragraph 5 (law enforcement)

Data	Clause	Theme	Rheme
P5A1	Landslides may also be avoided if the country enforces the law.	Landslides	may also be avoided if the country enforces the law.
P5A2	Only the law can prevent human stubbornness and greed in making	Only the law	can prevent human stubbornness and greed

Data	Clause	Theme	Rheme
	profits without regard for social welfare.		in making profits without regard for social welfare.
P5A3	Offenders must be punished according to the law.	Offenders	must be punished according to the law.
P5A4	Corruption and favoritism must be completely set aside in making the national agenda a success so that the effectiveness of actions can be seen in the results.	Corruption and favoritism	must be completely set aside in making the national agenda a success so that the effectiveness of actions can be seen in the results.
P5A5	The enactment of acts such as the Development Act, land acts, and forestry acts can protect rights and save critical situations.	The enactment of acts such as the Development Act, land acts, and forestry acts	can protect rights and save critical situations.
P5A6	Development carried out with caution can certainly minimize this incident.	Development carried out with caution	can certainly minimize this incident.

Table 6

Theme–rheme identification for Paragraph 6 (conclusion of the essay)

Data	Clause	Theme	Rheme
P6A1	In conclusion, a responsible attitude from all parties is essential in preventing landslides.	In conclusion, a responsible attitude from all parties	is essential in preventing landslides.
P6A2	Every safety measure and regulation should not be taken lightly because such an attitude often leads to disaster.	Every safety measure and regulation	should not be taken lightly because such an attitude often leads to disaster.
P6A3	To overcome this problem, only synergy from all levels of society can make this noble mission and vision a success.	To overcome this problem	only synergy from all levels of society can make this noble mission and vision a success.
P6A4	Indeed, our actions should be like pulling a strand of hair from flour: the hair does not break and the flour does not scatter.	Indeed, our actions	should be like pulling a strand of hair from flour: the hair does not break and the flour does not scatter.
P6A5	Meticulous work will certainly yield good results.	Meticulous work	will certainly yield good results.

Across the 35 clauses, three regularities stand out. First, the essay opens each paragraph with a theme that names the concern of that paragraph, from the disaster itself (P1A1) to its causes (P2A1), remedial measures (P3A1), planning (P4A1), law (P5A1), and collective attitude (P6A1), so that the sequence of paragraph-initial themes alone reconstructs the skeleton of the argument. Second, the student alternates unmarked topical themes, which keep participants such as “Humans”, “Offenders”, and “The trees that bind the soil texture” in focus, with marked themes realized by textual and circumstantial elements, such as

"Therefore" (P1A5, P3A5), "When it rains" (P2A5), "In an effort to meet their needs" (P3A3), and "To overcome this problem" (P6A3), which signal cause–effect reasoning and shifts in the direction of the discourse. Third, thematic progression combines constant progression, in which successive clauses retain related themes, with linear progression, in which material introduced in a rheme is taken up as the theme of a following clause, as when the failures elaborated in P1A2 are resumed by "Various reactions" in P1A3. Table 7 summarizes the dominant theme choices of each paragraph and their discourse functions.

Table 7
Summary of dominant theme choices and their discourse functions by paragraph

Paragraph	Dominant theme choices	Discourse function
1 (Introduction)	Issue-naming and anaphoric themes ("Landslide disasters", "This phenomenon")	Focalizes the issue, establishes its seriousness, and shifts attention to responsibility
2 (Causes)	Cause-oriented and circumstantial themes ("Forest destruction and uncontrolled logging activities", "Human greed", "When it rains")	Constructs cause–effect chains and assigns agency to human action
3 (Restoration)	Solution-oriented marked themes ("In addition, efforts to replant vegetation…", "Therefore, the cooperation of all parties involved")	Legitimizes restoration and frames remediation as a collective duty
4 (Planning)	Planning and management themes ("Strategic and systematic action…", "Planned development", "Development planning")	Builds a normative, technocratic discourse of controlled development
5 (Law)	Institutional and legal themes ("Only the law", "Offenders", "The enactment of acts…")	Positions the law and the state as the primary problem-solvers
6 (Conclusion)	Collective and moral themes ("In conclusion, a responsible attitude from all parties", "Meticulous work")	Normalizes collective responsibility and closes with moral evaluation

Taken together, Tables 1 to 7 provide the structural evidence on which the remainder of the analysis rests: they establish which elements the student consistently selects as themes, the manner in which rhemes are developed, and the progression patterns that bind the paragraphs. The following section moves from this structural description to critical interpretation, drawing repeatedly on the clauses catalogued in the tables so that every ideological claim advanced below can be traced back to the coded evidence presented above.

Critical Analysis of Theme and Rheme

The second research question asks in what ways the theme–rheme patterns construct meaning, ideology, and social awareness. Rather than proceeding sentence by sentence, the analysis is synthesized under four analytic themes, each illustrated with representative clauses from Tables 1 to 6.

Theme Selection and the Focalization of the Issue

The essay's opening clauses show the student using theme selection to control what the reader attends to. In P1A1 the theme "Landslide disasters" places the social problem itself at the point of departure, and the rheme grounds its seriousness in two real incidents, Bukit Antarabangsa and Hulu Langat, before demanding a dynamic and comprehensive approach. In P1A2 the anaphoric theme "This phenomenon" sustains the focus without

repeating the lexical item, while the rheme reorients the discourse from the event to "the failure of various parties", so that responsibility, rather than the disaster, becomes the developing concern of the paragraph. The theme "Various reactions" in P1A3 then evaluates public responses through the idiom of throwing stones and hiding hands, and the deliberately vague theme "Some parties" in P1A4 criticizes negligence while withholding the identity of the negligent. Within Fairclough's textual dimension, this sequence demonstrates that the student does not merely report an issue; through theme choice the student assembles an object of concern, assigns blame in general terms, and prepares the ground for the normative appeal of P1A5, "Therefore, more pragmatic efforts need to be made".

Thematic Progression and the Construction of Cause and Effect

The second paragraph shows the clearest exploitation of thematic progression to build an explanatory chain. The paragraph-initial theme "Forest destruction and uncontrolled logging activities" (P2A1) names the causes; "Human greed" (P2A2) intensifies the moral evaluation; and the succeeding themes move from agent to affected environment, "The soil on the hillsides" (P2A3) and "The trees that bind the soil texture" (P2A4), so that the consequences of the actions named earlier become the new points of departure. The marked circumstantial theme "When it rains" (P2A5) sets the scene for the triggering event, and the summarizing theme "This" (P2A6) gathers the entire chain into a single anaphor whose rheme supplies documented outcomes, Genting Highlands and Pos Dipang. The paragraph closes with the marked theme "Therefore, control over deforestation and logging activities" (P2A7), which converts the explanatory chain into a warrant for intervention. The progression realizes, at the level of information structure, a complete argument from cause through mechanism to consequence and remedy, and it confirms that coherence in the essay is achieved by the systematic redeployment of rhematic material as subsequent themes.

Marked Themes, Modality, and Normative Discourse

Across the third, fourth, and fifth paragraphs the student's discourse becomes increasingly normative, and the normativity is carried jointly by marked themes and modality. Marked themes such as "In an effort to meet their needs, humans" (P3A3) frame the exploitation of the environment as need-driven and thereby partially legitimize it, while "To avoid this unfortunate incident" (P4A1) presupposes the negative outcome and converts it into a premise for action. Modal expressions of necessity dominate the rhemes: development "must be people-friendly" (P4A3), land development "needs to be given proper licensing" (P4A4), offenders "must be punished according to the law" (P5A3), and corruption "must be completely set aside" (P5A4). The emphatic "Only the law" (P5A2) and the certainty marker in "can certainly minimize this incident" (P5A6) leave little space for alternatives. Technocratic lexis, "strategic and systematic", "proper licensing", and "planned development", frames the problem as one of management, and passive constructions such as "is very important to practice" (P4A2) state obligations without specifying who must discharge them. In Fairclough's terms, the text constructs an authoritative, prescriptive discourse in which action is obligatory, manageable, and institutional, yet the bearers of the obligations remain largely unnamed.

Actor Representation, Obscured Accountability, and Ideology

The most consequential ideological work of the essay lies in its representation of social actors. Human beings appear as the dominant agents of environmental change: "Humans" (P3A2) and "In an effort to meet their needs, humans" (P3A3) position people as active subjects and the environment as the object of their needs, an anthropocentric arrangement in which the exploitation of nature is normalized as natural and necessary. When accountability is at issue, however, the essay retreats into generalized actors: "various parties" (P1A2), "Some parties" (P1A4), "the cooperation of all parties involved" (P3A5), and "a responsible attitude from all parties" (P6A1) distribute responsibility so widely that no

specific party can be held to account. Institutional actors fill the space left vacant: “the country” (P4A1, P5A1), “Only the law” (P5A2), and “The enactment of acts such as the Development Act, land acts, and forestry acts” (P5A5) position the state and the legal system as the primary and legitimate problem-solvers. The concluding paragraph completes the pattern by collectivizing duty, “only synergy from all levels of society” (P6A3), and by moralizing it through the proverb of pulling a strand of hair from flour (P6A4) and the maxim that “Meticulous work will certainly yield good results” (P6A5). Read through Fairclough’s framework, the essay reproduces a dominant discourse of development and governance: development is to be managed rather than questioned, responsibility is collective rather than attributable, and authority resides in institutions. The student displays genuine environmental awareness, but the awareness is articulated within, and thereby reinforces, the common-sense ideology of the surrounding society.

Discussion of the Findings

With respect to the first research question, the analysis confirms that theme functions as the point of departure that focalizes the issue and that rheme carries the elaboration of causes, effects, and proposed actions, in line with the account of Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). The student’s reliance on paragraph-initial themes to announce the concern of each paragraph, and the redeployment of rhematic material as subsequent themes, parallels the finding of Tengku Shahrolnizam Tengku Yahya and Rohaidah Haron (2021) that theme operates as given information that captures the reader’s attention and steers interpretation. The combination of constant and linear progression observed in the essay is also consistent with international evidence on student writing: Hawes (2015) reported that student texts favor constant progression while more mature writing exploits linear progression, and the essay analyzed here occupies an intermediate position, deploying linear progression effectively in its explanatory second paragraph while relying on constant, participant-oriented themes elsewhere. The association between purposeful theme selection and writing quality reported by North (2005) and Wei (2016), and the pedagogical argument of Wang (2007) that theme–rheme organization can and should be taught, are both borne out by the present data, in which the strongest paragraphs are precisely those whose thematic organization is most deliberate.

With respect to the second research question, the study extends the local literature in a direction it has not previously taken. Aman Shah Syed Ali and Zamri Mahamod (2021) and Jobar et al. (2019) examined Malay student writing at the level of technique, vocabulary, and discourse markers; the present analysis shows that the same kind of essays can be read as discourse in which ideology, responsibility, and social values are constructed. The essay examined here produces an ideology of collective responsibility and environmental concern, but it does so through linguistic strategies, generalized actors, modal necessity, and institutional themes, that simultaneously obscure specific accountability and normalize institutional authority. This finding gives concrete, clause-level substance to the argument of Tengku Shahrolnizam Tengku Yahya and Rohaidah Haron (2021) that student texts are not neutral records of proficiency but discourse that reflects perceptions of social reality, and it aligns with Fairclough’s (2013) contention that ideology is most effective when it operates as common sense.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The implications of the study are threefold. For pedagogy, the findings indicate that theme–rheme organization is a teachable resource with direct consequences for coherence, and that instruction should extend beyond mechanics to critical language awareness, so that students learn to recognize the manner in which their own lexical and thematic choices assign or conceal responsibility; teacher readiness for such instruction depends on the pedagogical content knowledge highlighted by Nurul Ashikin Md. Yatim et al. (2020). For

assessment, the findings suggest that discourse-level criteria, thematic progression, actor representation, and modality, capture qualities of SPM writing that surface-level marking overlooks. For the curriculum, the demonstration that an ordinary examination essay reproduces dominant discourses of development and governance underscores the role of language education in shaping, and potentially diversifying, students' representations of social reality, consistent with the identity-forming function of the Malay language reported by Izman and Mahamod (2023).

Before the directions for future research are outlined, the limitations of the study warrant restatement so that readers can plan subsequent work with these boundaries in view: the analysis rests on a single, purposively selected essay on one socio-environmental topic; it is confined to the textual dimension of Fairclough's model and therefore cannot determine whether the ideological patterns reflect the writer's intention or the reproduction of rehearsed templates; and the coding, although double-coded to consensus, was not accompanied by a formal intercoder reliability statistic. Four directions for future research follow directly from these boundaries. First, the analysis should be replicated on larger datasets, namely corpora of SPM essays across achievement bands, schools, and states, so that the transferability of the patterns identified here can be assessed and quantified. Second, different educational contexts merit examination, including other genres of school writing, other levels of schooling, and tertiary academic writing in Malay. Third, future studies should incorporate all three dimensions of Fairclough's framework, complementing textual analysis with interviews with student writers and examiners to capture discursive practice, and with analysis of curriculum and assessment policy to capture social practice. Fourth, larger studies should formalize the coding of themes, rhemes, and progression patterns with intercoder reliability measures, supported by qualitative data analysis software, following the systematic ATLAS.ti procedures demonstrated for Malay-language educational texts by Mohd Sufian Ismail et al. (2025), so that discourse-level features can be integrated systematically into writing research and assessment.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the theme–rheme structure of an SPM student's Malay essay, "Efforts to Prevent Landslides", within the textual dimension of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis. The analysis of 35 clauses showed that themes serve as points of departure that focalize the issue of each paragraph and sustain coherence through constant and linear progression, while rhemes elaborate causes, effects, and proposed actions. Interpreted critically, the essay's thematic organization performs ideological work: generalized actors and collective themes normalize shared responsibility while obscuring specific accountability, modal necessity and technocratic lexis construct a prescriptive discourse of managed development, and institutional themes position the state and the law as the primary problem-solvers. The study thereby demonstrates that theme–rheme analysis, embedded in a CDA framework, illuminates both the linguistic quality and the ideological dimension of student writing, and it contributes an analytic procedure that researchers and educators can apply to other texts. Mastery of theme and rheme, in the end, equips students not only to write coherently but also to recognize the values and responsibilities that their own language constructs.

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